

# Métayage, farm productivity, and the money economy: some lessons from farm account analysis<sup>\*</sup>

by Annie Antoine

This chapter challenges the idea that French agriculture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was fundamentally different from English agriculture, and that it was condemned to underperform because of its different social structure. It is not English historians we have to blame for tarring French agriculture with this poor reputation, for it was the physiocrats who first enunciated it and their views were then adopted and disseminated by French rural historians.

According to this long-established perception, the causes of the divergence between French and English agriculture lay in the structure of landed property and of farming. While English farming typically took place in a context of large landlords administering their estates and tenant farmers who farmed them, French farming was in the hands of peasant proprietors who lived on small family farms where they employed primitive methods and were satisfied with achieving self-sufficiency. I do not wish to question the English stereotype, but will show that this idea of the French agrarian system is only partly true. French peasants were not all landowners, but neither were all farms owner-occupied.

French historians are agreed that on the eve of the Revolution, peasants were in possession of 40 per cent of the land overall, but with considerable regional variation.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, eighteenth-century France is often considered to be a land of small landowners. This is true in so far as where peasants were landowners, they usually owned only very small and fragmented plots. The 40 per cent of the land owned by the peasants was therefore split between very large

\* Translated by John Broad. Throughout this chapter French terms are used for the share farming arrangements that have no precise English equivalent. *Métayage* denotes the contract between landowner and farmer; *métairie* is used to denote the farm for which this is the tenurial arrangement, but in the west of France was confusingly also a common term for a farm whether or not held on such an arrangement; *métayer* is used for the farmer working the land under such a contract. The author's research funding reference is CERHIO, UMR CNRS 6558.

<sup>1</sup> G. Béaur, *Histoire agraire de la France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Inerties et changements dans les campagnes françaises de 1715 à 1815* (2000), pp. 25–30.

numbers of individuals. But it is also likely that it was only in wine-producing districts that small units of peasant ownership went hand-in-hand with small-scale peasant production by the owner. While French historians have done much research to establish the share of the land in peasant ownership on the eve of the Revolution, they have done much less work on the proportion of peasants who owned land, and particularly on the percentage of those who were owner-occupiers. The sixty per cent of the land area owned by the bourgeoisie, clergy, and nobility was held in a quite different way. Here the land was not fragmented but held in the form of leasehold farms.

There certainly were many small landowners in France, but we should nevertheless recognize that, except perhaps in wine-growing areas, the majority of farming enterprises were tenanted farms. Tenancies were of two broad kinds: leases which paid fixed money rents, and *métayage*, where the crop itself was divided between landlord and tenant. The reality was far more complex, with every kind of mixed and intermediate system in use. Nationally, leases dominated, and undoubtedly the most prosperous farmers in pre-revolutionary France, those of the Île-de-France, were leaseholders.<sup>2</sup> There were also large numbers of leaseholders paying cash rents who were much poorer than those of the Paris region. At the opposite end of the scale there were farms held under tenurial conditions that appear onerous and limiting, such as *métayage*, but which nevertheless performed well. It is these farms that are the subject of this chapter.

*Métayage* is a means of apportioning profits that requires close landlord involvement in the administration and management of the farm. For this reason, the regions with significant numbers of *métayers* are also those regions where landlords' farming accounts survive more commonly than elsewhere. Analysis of one particular case study helps explain the practical workings of a farm held by *métayage* in the Maine region in the first half of the eighteenth century. Findings from the case study will then be used to modify existing general views of the social and economic significance of *métayage* in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France.

## I

Pierre Duchemin du Tertre (1691–1755) was a cloth merchant in Laval. He also held public office, notably as Treasurer of the Poor House in Laval. He wrote much, and kept voluminous accounts, including a large number of accounts covering *métayage* enterprises: those he owned himself, those he rented on leases but then sublet on *métayage* contracts, and the accounts for the Laval Poor House. He has also left us masses of commercial accounts.<sup>3</sup> On 22 April 1718 Duchemin purchased from his mother, Anne Gigault, demesne lands at Châtelier in the parish of Vaiges, some 20 kilometres east of the town of Laval, 'stocked with seeded land and livestock, and with a furnished manor house', for some 14,500 *livres*.<sup>4</sup> In a stock inventory

<sup>2</sup> J.-M. Moriceau, *Les fermiers de l'Île-de-France. L'ascension d'un patronat agricole, XV<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (1992; new edn, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Published in A. Antoine (ed.), *Les comptes ordinaires de Pierre Duchemin du Tertre, marchand*

*de toile et seigneur dans la première moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1998). The data in the first part of this chapter is derived from this volume unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Today, Vaiges is a commune in the *département* of Mayenne.



FIGURE 5.1. The *métairie* of Châtelier (Mayenne) in 1998.

Photography: A. Antoine.

drawn up in 1719, he reckoned these lands were worth 20,000 *livres*. To judge by the repairs he proceeded to undertake, the three *métairies* lying on the estate (Le Châtelier, La Massuardière and L'Homelet) were not in good condition when he bought them.

The 'manor house' at Châtelier was a substantial building as may be seen in Figure 5.1. It was made up of an entry hall, a kitchen and washhouse, an underground cellar, two upper chambers, and a study with an attic above. At one end of this house was another building comprising a large room with a cellar beneath, a stable with a grain store above it, latrines, and a pigsty. Beside it was a garden 'enclosed with hedges and ditched'. This complex all lay around a courtyard secured by a gatehouse.

The three *métayage* enterprises, Le Châtelier, La Massuardière and L'Homelet, together made up the demesne of the small manor of Châtelier, which took its name from the largest of the farms. Around this demesne stretched a manorial jurisdiction that cannot have been more than 500 hectares (1250 acres) in extent and which made Châtelier one of the smallest manorial estates in the Bas-Maine. The *métairies* took up just over 100 hectares (250 acres): 51 hectares for Le Châtelier, (24 plots and a garden, with 43 hectares of arable and 8 hectares of meadow); 27 hectares for La Massuardière (16 plots and garden land, with 23 hectares of arable and 4 hectares of meadow) and 27 hectares for L'Homelet (18 plots and a garden with 21 hectares of arable and 6 hectares of meadow). All three farming units were *métayage* enterprises.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The lease to halves, or *métayage* contract, is often called '*bail à colonie partiaire*' and the *métayer* called a '*colon*' in Mayenne.

Châtelier avendu a chemise une saché  
pour 36<sup>es</sup> deis ay veu pour manoir de la  
ferme de \_\_\_\_\_ 18<sup>es</sup> :

Le 23<sup>e</sup> d'août 1728 j'ay mesuré au  
Châtelier j's alevé de semence de  
froment rouge \_\_\_\_\_ 28<sup>es</sup> vel  
de meteil \_\_\_\_\_ 22  
de merlot \_\_\_\_\_ 14  
\_\_\_\_\_ 64<sup>es</sup> vel

J'ay eü de froment \_\_\_\_\_ 35<sup>es</sup> vel  
de meteil \_\_\_\_\_ 120  
de merlot \_\_\_\_\_ 23  
d'orge \_\_\_\_\_ 17  
j's y avoit 11<sup>es</sup> vel de j'orge de la  
semence qu'il en avoit fournie  
j's y avoit en reprise, mais j's  
m'ela a demandé d'mie donne  
en la place 11<sup>es</sup> vel d'orge qu'on a pris  
de semence au cornu cy \_\_\_\_\_ 11  
d'avoine \_\_\_\_\_ 10

fait 18 Chargé \_\_\_\_\_ 216<sup>es</sup> vel  
j'ay eü le boisseau de la fouace  
j's alevé de 2<sup>es</sup> de venté ainsi j's  
me d'adde de \_\_\_\_\_ 3<sup>es</sup> 6<sup>es</sup> vel

FIGURE 5.2. Extract from the accounts between Pierre Duchemin and the colon at Châtelier (1728–36).

Source: Archives départementales de la Mayenne, Fonds Duchemin 34 J 5.

Duchemin was a cloth merchant who applied the same rules to his business, his personal expenditure, and agricultural enterprises. Everything was recorded. Balance sheets were calculated to establish income, expenditure and profit. Several of his ledgers give details of the manor of Le Châtelier, and specifically the *métairie* of the same name (Figure 5.2).<sup>6</sup> They make it possible to assess the income from the property and reconstruct the farming activities reasonably precisely. The income from Châtelier was largely composed of the landowner's share of the produce of the three enterprises in *métayage*. There were also a few small feudal dues which in this context are unimportant. The landlord's expenditure was of two kinds: his share of the costs of the share-cropping business, and improvements and major repair of the farm and its buildings.

<sup>6</sup> These documents are preserved in the Archives départementales de la Mayenne: Livre journal de la Terre du Châtelier (1717–33 and 1746–54), Fonds Duchemin 34 J 5; Revenus du Châtelier, comptes faits entre Pierre Duchemin et le colon du Châtelier (1728–36), Fonds Duchemin 34 J 5; Mémoire du revenu annuel de ma terre du Châtelier en Vaiges et au dos du présent livre sont les remarques faites à cette occasion (1733–43), Chartrier de Villiers, 242 J 14; Comptes de la métairie de la Chopinière (Bonchamp) (1747–54), Fonds Duchemin 72 J 5.

The income from the three *métairies* for the period 1718–43, with deductions for running expenses but not for major repairs, amounted on average to 620 *livres* a year for Le Châtelier, 410 *livres* for La Massuardière, and 160 *livres* for L'Homelet, in all almost 1200 *livres* a year. The manorial dues, by contrast, were worth about 100 *livres* a year.

Annual expenditure for the combined lands was on average 286 *livres* from 1718–33 and 144 *livres* for 1746–54. Most of this came under three headings: repairs to buildings made up 49 per cent in the first period, 35 per cent in the second; extraordinary agricultural work such as the construction of fences or the bringing into cultivation of fields made up 9 per cent in the first period and 17.5 per cent in the second; money spent on 'journeys' around the Vaiges estates made up 13.5 per cent in the early period, but 44 per cent later. At first, Duchemin invested in improvements on his estates, while in the later years of his life much more of his expenditure went on what might be called leisure (mainly on food). Duchemin increasingly treated his estate at Châtelier as a country retreat. On average he visited it six times a year, spending a total of about a month a year in the country. On two or three occasions members of his family would accompany him. In the early years he went more frequently on short visits to supervise works and improvements. After 1745 he spent longer periods in the country with his family, in spring and particularly early autumn (late August to early October). His periods there also help us understand how he kept his accounts. He made a comprehensive list of all his expenditure, but did not differentiate between repair works on the buildings, the wages of day labourers repairing fences, payments to neighbours helping to set up a day's shooting party or the costs of his wife's jam making.

Pierre Duchemin drew up an annual summary of expenditure for the whole of his estate, the three *métairies* and the manorial rights. This matches the figures in the individual ledgers perfectly. For the period 1718–37, what he called his '*revenant-bon*' ('good return') and what we would describe as profit, came to 20,530 *livres*, averaging 1026 *livres* a year, after deducting his investment in the enterprise and building maintenance. In twenty years Duchemin received in income what he had paid for the land.

## II

As well as the accounts for the whole property, Duchemin has left us another document of great interest: a ledger containing his accounts with the *métayer* of Châtelier for the years 1728–36.<sup>7</sup> This document differs from the usual farm accounts from regions of *métayage*, which normally include only that part of the crop harvest and animal produce that was due to the landowner. In this account, everything is itemized: the total volume of the harvest; deductions to pay rent charges and manorial dues on the 'common stock'; seed held back for sowing, purchases and sales of livestock; loans to the *métayer*; and the deliveries to the owner's town house at Laval of cooked or raw fruit, of *pommé*,<sup>8</sup> and of sweet chestnuts. In fact, this is not so much a set of

<sup>7</sup> Comptes faits entre Pierre Duchemin et le colon du Châtelier (1728–36), Archives départementales de la Mayenne, Fonds Duchemin 34 J 5. These accounts are published in full in the edition mentioned above.

<sup>8</sup> *Pommé* is a kind of jam made with apples that is cooked over a gentle heat for a very long time and becomes very concentrated.

accounts as a notebook in which Duchemin notes every transaction in which his *métayer* is involved. The great interest in this document lies in how it allows us to view a working farm on an almost daily basis, enabling us to read from it the fine detail of the relationship between the landowner and his share-cropping tenant or *colon* (the local phrase for a *métayer*). In strictly accounting terms, the document is less exact than the ledgers in which Duchemin noted down and quantified his landowner's share, but it offers the opportunity to reconstruct the farming activities of the partnership.

As we have noted, the *métairie* at Châtelier was made up of 25 fields, which we were probably all hedged. The total area of just over 50 hectares (125 acres) meant that it was a large farm, for the mean size of a *métairie* was normally between 20 and 30 hectares (50–75 acres). The farm was held by a lease to halves (that is, *bail à moitié, contrat de métayage*), evidence that Duchemin did not think this type of tenancy was either old-fashioned or unproductive. Such leases were nominally for nine years, but easily renewable, and often passed from father to son, or son-in-law, but there was also an active market in *métairies*. Larger farms of 20–40 hectares (50–100 acres) were much in demand and leases were sometimes signed a year or more in advance. The *métayer* had a garden planted with cabbages to feed to his cattle in winter, and a great number of fields, some under the plough, some fallow, or laid to grass, while others were planted with fruit trees or sweet chestnuts; the smallest fields were half a hectare in size (1.25 acres), the largest, two or three hectares (5–7.5 acres). The farm also included eight hectares (20 acres) of meadow, about fifteen per cent of the area: there were three such fields, the largest of which was exceptionally large, at about 4 hectares (10 acres). The farm buildings lay besides the 'manor house'. There were two rooms on the ground floor; storage lofts above; barns and stabling for the beef cattle, cows and ewes; three pigsties; and a small building containing a cider press.

At Châtelier the *colon* was Jean Mansais. His name appeared only rarely in Duchemin's jottings, since – as with the other *métayers* of La Massuardière and L'Homelet, La Motte, Mouette, Grasselinières, and so on – the *métayer* took the name of his farm and we follow this practice here. Châtelier's was a classic lease to halves. Besides the land and buildings, Duchemin provided his *métayer* with all the livestock, for which an inventory (*une prisee*) was made at the point of entry. The cost of seed was evenly divided between landowner and *métayer*, having been pre-emptively set aside from the 'common stock' at harvest, or bought in later. Two-thirds of the cost of purchases of fertilizer (*cherré*<sup>9</sup>) was paid by the landlord. Finally the landlord also paid the wages of a farm servant to the tune of 20 *livres* a year. The farmer paid for minor repairs costing just a few *livres* a year, but building upkeep was entirely the landowner's responsibility. When building works were taking place, the farmer had to provide food for the day labourers, and assist by carrying building materials. The 50:50 division applied to everything produced on the farm. In the case of cereal crops, fruit, flax and hemp, the landowner took his share in kind. The profits of the livestock enterprise were taken in cash. The half share rule also applied to all the running costs of the enterprise: the purchase of stock, veterinary remedies for cows and bullocks, purchase of additional fodder

<sup>9</sup> The term *cherré* was used for the ashes used by the cloth bleachers in Laval, which were then sold on to farmers to use as fertilizer and to lighten soil texture.

or oats if what was produced on the farm was unable to feed the animals through the winter. Accidental losses, such as the death of an animal, were also split. Châtelier also had to provide some 'subsidies' – a lamb at Easter, a bushel of girdle-cake (*fugasse*) on the day when harvest was divided, as well as the manorial dues for the *métayage* (the *rentes*) which came to 3 *livres* 6 *sols* and 6 *deniers*.

Even without stock inventories, it is possible to gauge livestock numbers on the farm: 30 or 40 sheep, a boar and three or four sows, a horse and a foal, four to six cows, one or two heifers, six to eight bullocks and oxen, to which we should add their young each summer: 15–20 lambs, four piglets for fattening, four to six calves. Typically for the Bas-Maine, cattle had an important place on the farm, particularly on the larger farms of 50 hectares and more. In value terms, the product of the farm at Châtelier was divided between cereals (49 per cent), livestock (33 per cent) and 'other' products including fruit, textile plants, and chestnuts (18 per cent).

Pierre Duchemin's accounts outline the rhythm of farming activities, changing cash flow, and deliveries of farm products to Laval. Early autumn was the point when the cereal harvest was divided, and when Duchemin travelled to Châtelier ('I've measured at Châtelier'): the buckwheat, which was not harvested until mid-October, was also divided, but Duchemin did not always travel to supervise this personally. As autumn progressed, deliveries of fresh and cooked fruits, cider and chestnuts were made to Laval. In November, the division of pigs took place: Pierre Duchemin had one or two sent to Laval where he fattened them, either for sale, or for salting down in early January. The sheep were sold between October and March: Duchemin added them to the accounts at the point at which he received his share of the wool. The oxen and young bullocks were normally sold or exchanged between April and August.<sup>10</sup>

These documents also show how the work of managing the farm was split between the landowner and the *métayer*. Pierre Duchemin was always present at the division of the summer-harvested cereals (wheat, rye, barley and oats) but not always when the buckwheat was divided. He often took part in the division of wool in June, when he also took stock of the number of ewes and lambs on the farm, and at the division of pigs in November. But these were not his only journeys to the farm.

All the livestock dealing – purchases, sales, and exchanges – was undertaken by the *métayer* unsupervised. We cannot be completely certain from the documents whether decisions about livestock were taken jointly or unilaterally, or after a discussion, but it was that farmer who executed all livestock transactions. Duchemin does not seem to have attended livestock fairs. Although the livestock was provided by the landowner, it is always described as if belonging to the *métayer*: 'Châtelier has lost a mare, which died, and the wolf has eaten two of his sheep' (1730); 'Châtelier has sold his old mare for 25 *livres*, and owes me half of that' (1731); 'Châtelier has lost his best bullock' (1731) – in fact the loss was divided between the two men. It is also Châtelier who seems to have taken the initiative in the decision to plant Moscow flax seed in 1728, although Duchemin contributed half the cost. The farmer also made all the purchases of fertilizer (*cherré*) and probably had complete freedom to choose his suppliers. In some instances it is fairly clear that he took the initiative in making a purchase for which

<sup>10</sup> For the seasonality of livestock sales, A. Antoine, 'Les bovins de la Mayenne (1720–1820). Un modèle économique pour les campagnes de l'Ouest?', *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales* 4 (1995), pp. 105–36.

Duchemin later decided to split the cost, such as manure purchases, work on hedges, or on soil preparation. Châtelier sold fruit and cider produced on the farm just as often as Duchemin, and when the market closed, whichever of them had made the sales, the profit was always split 50:50. Lastly, Châtelier the *métayer* acted as intermediary in paying the day labourers working on the farm, and was paid substantial sums for this purpose. Looking at the overall pattern of Châtelier's payments, we can see that the *métayer* on this kind of farm had significant cash sums in hand to disburse, whether on his own account, or for his landowner.

### III

We now need to put this case study into a wider context, first by trying to estimate how widespread *métayage* was in quantitative terms, then by addressing the closely linked question of how such *métayage* contracts were perceived, first by contemporaries, then by historians. Then we will use that understanding to contextualize the case study.

How prevalent was *métayage* in France? No statistical sources have survived with good data on the national or even regional importance of *métayage* before the second half of the nineteenth century. Even these can only be used with caution.<sup>11</sup> The reality of *métayage* is difficult to make generalizations about, and there are possible errors of every kind, which derive partly, on the one hand, because we cannot take into account the many verbal agreements which we know existed, and on the other hand because statistical enquiries frequently confuse a *métairie* (the farm itself) with *métayage* (the means of accounting between farmer and landowner) just as elsewhere they confuse farms and tenancies. The figures derived from these statistical enquiries, as much as those drawn up from ledger entries, are bound to be sprinkled with errors.

The 1851 enquiry was the first to provide statistical coverage of the whole country, but does not seem to be reliable on *métayage*.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the report into the nature of *métayage* produced by the French Agricultural Society (*Société des Agriculteurs de France*) in 1879 at the instigation of the Comte de Tourdonnet is much better.<sup>13</sup> This employed a very precise questionnaire, answered for each *département*, and it is clear that what is described as *métayage* there is the way of accounting, and not the type of farm. At a national level, the enquiry shows that of tenant farms (that is to say 30 per cent of all farms), 38.5 per cent were held in *métayage*, and 61.5 per cent on money-rent leases. In terms of land area, *métayage* took 36 per cent, and leases 64 per cent. These figures may be inflated, since Tourdonnet's aim in setting up the enquiry was to show the superiority of *métayage* over leasehold, but his respondents seem to have taken the work seriously. Their knowledge of local conditions (respondents were often landowners themselves) made it possible for them to take into account

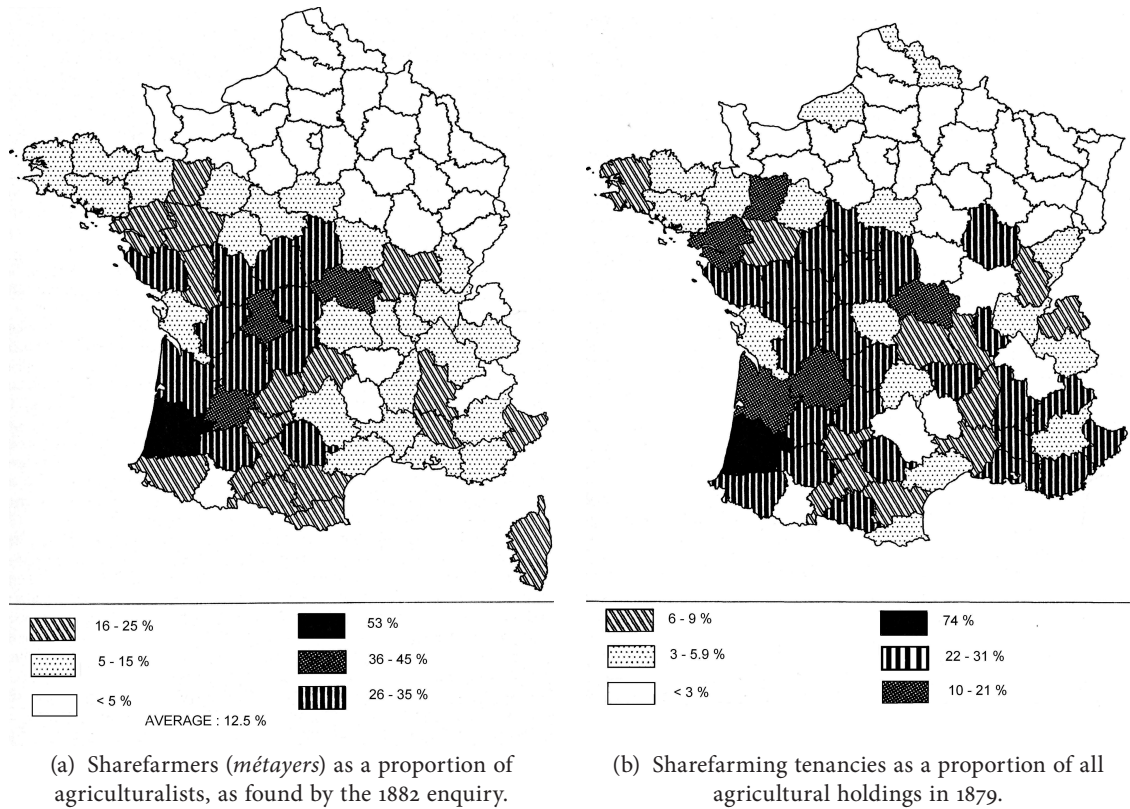
<sup>11</sup> For more detail on these matters, A. Antoine, 'Les propriétaires fonciers: conservatisme ou modernité? L'exemple des contrats de métayage, XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles', in F. Pitou (ed.), *Élites et notables de l'Ouest, XVI<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Entre conservatisme et modernité* (2003), pp. 165-92.

<sup>12</sup> M. Demonet, *Tableau de l'agriculture française au*

*milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'enquête de 1852* (1990), p. 304.

<sup>13</sup> Comte de Tourdonnet, *Situation du métayage en France, rapport sur l'enquête ouverte par la Société des agriculteurs de France, par M. le Comte de Tourdonnet* (1879-80). Tourdonnet was also the author of *Traité pratique du métayage* (1882).





Source: Chantal de Crisenoy, *Propriétaires, fermiers et métayers au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. 1- Les Enquêtes décennales, mode d'emploi, 2- Les modes de faire-valoir en 1882* (INRA seminar paper, 1982).

Source: M. le Comte de Tourdonnet, *Situation du métayage en France, rapport sur l'enquête ouverte par la Société des agriculteurs de France (1879-80)*.

FIGURE 5.3. Sharefarming in France at the end of the nineteenth century.

verbal contracts. Farms in *métayage* were almost absent from France north and east of a line from St. Malo to Geneva; they were particularly important in western France (excluding Brittany) and in the south west; they could also be found in the south east of the country – in Provence and the southern Alps (Figure 5.3a). The maps derived from another enquiry of 1882 showing *métayers* as a proportion of the farming population and of *métairies* as a proportion of agricultural land, confirm the importance of the system in the *départements* of west and south-west France (Figure 5.3b).<sup>14</sup> The highest concentration, whichever method of calculation is used, was in the *département* of Landes in this period. In the *département* of Mayenne, in which the manor of Châtelier lay, lands in *métayage* covered about a fifth of the cultivated area in 1882, and *métayers* represented about one third of farmers.

We do not have equivalent sources for eighteenth-century France. Looking at the region

<sup>14</sup> C. de Crisenoy, *Propriétaires, fermiers et métayers au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. 1- Les Enquêtes décennales, mode d'emploi, 2- Les modes de faire-valoir en 1882* (INRA seminar paper, 1982).

around Laval in the Bas-Maine, an area where the phenomenon seems to have been important, 60 per cent of contracts were leases to halves as opposed to money leases, in the first half of the eighteenth century, but these proportions had been reversed by 1789.<sup>15</sup> Taking the country as a whole, *métayage* seems to have been in long-term decline, indeed it had all but disappeared by the end of the Second World War. But decline was not a linear process, and included periods of revival as well as decline, while regional differences were considerable. In some regions, *métayage* seems to have increased in the course of the nineteenth century before declining later.

The 1879 enquiry confirms the scattered evidence from the eighteenth century that this type of contract is typically found in peripheral regions, which did not imitate the typical tenurial arrangements found in the dominant cereal-growing regions of the Paris basin. In several regions *métayage* went hand-in-hand with mixed grain and stock rearing farm types. This is evident in Mayenne, the Vendée, but also in such regions as Burgundy, Combraille, and Brionnais.<sup>16</sup> In fact we may adduce this as a general rule. *Métayage* seems to have been particularly important in regions of 'petite culture' – mixed husbandry – as opposed to those practising the 'grande culture' of cereal monoculture. Historical studies have often passed a very negative judgement on these peripheral regions, and associated them with old-fashioned production techniques and impoverished farmers constrained socially and politically by the power of great landowners over 'their' *métayers*. One analysis of *métayage* links it to great estates with absentee landlords. This is the basic tenet of Paul Bois, for whom the west of France was a region of great estates managed by stewards who were harsher towards the *métayer* than their employers.<sup>17</sup> However, the most prevalent view amongst historians is that which associates *métayage* with poverty and dependency. For Abel Poitrineau, the *métayer* in the Lower Auvergne is a 'poor devil' completely dependent on the landowner.<sup>18</sup> His heavy indebtedness and the narrow constraints under which he farmed were a formidable brake on agricultural innovation.

This is a modern recycling of much older views. Since the time of the physiocrats, there has been an entrenched view that the peasant should ideally be an owner-occupier and therefore independent. It may be acceptable for him to be a tenant farmer paying a fixed rent without the landowner determining the way in which the land is farmed, but the situation of the *métayer* is unacceptable. The classic nineteenth-century ideological position was that the French Revolution gave the peasants the opportunity to gain access to land ownership. Owner-occupation was presented as a social, economic, and political victory for the French

<sup>15</sup> A. Antoine, *Fiefs et villages du Bas-Maine au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1994), p. 352.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, L. Merle, *La métairie et l'évolution agraire de la Gâtine poitevine de la fin du moyen âge à la Révolution* (1958); C. Perronin, 'À partir des baux de métairies dans la région de Montaignut, en Combraille, au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', in *L'élevage et la vie pastorale dans les montagnes de l'Europe au moyen âge et à l'époque moderne* (1984), pp. 367–76; Serge Dontenwill, 'Les baux à mi-fruits en Roannais et Brionnais aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup>

siècles: une approche des conditions socio-économiques de la mise en valeur du sol sous l'ancien régime', in *Lyon et l'Europe: hommes et sociétés: mélanges d'histoire offerts à Richard Gascon* (2 vols, 1980), I, pp. 179–208.

<sup>17</sup> P. Bois, *Paysans de l'Ouest. Des structures économiques et sociales aux options politiques depuis l'époque révolutionnaire dans la Sarthe* (1960; new edn, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> A. Poitrineau, *La vie rurale en Basse-Auvergne au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle (1726–89)* (2 vols, 1965).

peasantry. Some of the inaccuracies of the enquiries made during the second half of the nineteenth century, notably that of 1882, lay in the implicit wish of those making the returns to see the Revolution as the point at which the peasantry gained property rights, turning France into a nation of small landowners. This view was clearly articulated by Gambetta in 1872. 'It was the Revolution alone that made the peasant a landowner and citizen of France.'<sup>19</sup>

However, a quite contrary literature from the 1840s onwards developed a more optimistic view of *métayage*.<sup>20</sup> It was those nobles and great landowners who recovered their lands at the restoration of the monarchy who invented this positive model. They needed to do so because they wanted to re-establish pre-revolutionary social structures. Running through the conservative analysis of *métayage* is praise for a particular social and economic model combining traditional and modern elements. Traditional social structures embodying paternalism, a submissive peasantry, and élites composed of landowners, went hand-in-hand with modern economic structures and improved agriculture. The association of two apparently incompatible positions gave landowners control of the peasant vote. In western France throughout the nineteenth, and for much of the twentieth century, it allowed them to retain the status of lord of the manor that had belonged to their ancestors, and shore up their status as local leaders.

#### IV

There are then, two distinct discourses around *métayage*, one critical and the other supportive. They arose out of quite different ideas of rural social relations. *Métayage* was far more than simply a choice of tenure: it was symbolic of a particular set of economic and social relationships. We can re-examine the Châtelier case study to illustrate this.

The accounts kept by Duchemin illustrate the advantages of the system for the landowner. Not only was it profitable (income from the three farms covered the purchase cost of the estate in 20 years), but it also brought the satisfactions of landownership. We are undoubtedly using imaginative insights to interpret it thus, but we can imagine Duchemin writing up his ledgers, contentedly reflecting on his management of the three joint farming enterprises. He knew what went on at all three, and – although we cannot say whether he took decisions with his *colon*, or made them himself, or left them to the *métayers* – as the landowner he had a finger in everything and seems to have enjoyed his involvement. The estate also provided him with a second home, 20 kilometres away from his main residence in the town of Laval. He organized trips and country parties, even shooting parties during which he could play the part of lord of the manor. He invested significant sums to rebuild some of the fabric of the three farms, and he was perfectly prepared to supervise the workforce personally.

His family made ready use of fruit and vegetables from the garden, and his wife came to the country to make jam. For Duchemin du Tertre, ownership of these farms was the life-style choice of a gentleman farmer in western France. We know that it was commonplace for merchants and professionals in Laval to take leases of land and then sublet them as share farms, which suggests that Duchemin's activities were typical.<sup>21</sup> In this way, urban

<sup>19</sup> Cited by P. Barral, *Les agrariens français de Méline à Pisani* (1968), p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Antoine, 'Les propriétaires fonciers', pp. 184–91.

<sup>21</sup> Antoine, *Fiefs et villages*, p. 400 ff.

merchants and professionals could adopt the lifestyle of a landowner, splitting the cereal crop with the *métayer*, eating fresh garden produce, making trips to the estate, establishing long-term relationships involving both trust and interdependence. It was this pattern of life that nineteenth-century aristocrats pictured as their social ideal.

We know rather less about how it felt from the *métayer's* side. Should he be portrayed as a downtrodden poor devil, or rather as a happy tiller of the soil? We know what his share was of the proceeds of the enterprise – half or slightly less of the profits. This was made up partly in cash, from sales of livestock, and partly of cereal crops, but we do not know what proportion of those were sold, and what part consumed by the household. He also received an unknown income from minor products such as fruit, cider, textile plants, lesser livestock, and so on. He was able to support himself from the enterprise, pay his taxes on time, and live comfortably with his family from his endeavours. Could he also accumulate capital? This is a difficult question, and touches on the limitations of the system for the *métayer*. An important point to remember is that the *métayer* could only take profits from a single farm. This prevented him from expanding his enterprises and is a much more important brake on progress than the oft-quoted statement that the *métayer's* share of the profits was slightly less than the owner's.

On the other hand, the system of leases to halves provided the farmer with an easy entry point into farming. He needed to bring only his farm implements, and probate inventories suggest these were of no great value. The livestock was either shared to halves or paid for by the proprietor. The system had other advantages for the *métayer*: it limited how much of the crop the landowner took at harvest, provided the *métayer* with assistance in difficult times, or at least allowed him to benefit from small cash advances left in his hands when he sold his livestock. He brought his own labour and his wife's to the farm and perhaps also that of a resident farm servant, partly or wholly paid for by the landowner. It was therefore a system that perfectly fits the ideal of a family farm.

What was the social position of the *métayer*? Historians have often portrayed him as an impoverished figure, the most dependent of rural workers, because he owned neither land nor livestock in most cases, and had to provide very detailed accounts to a landowner who was always watching him. This is supposed to have prevented him from developing his agricultural techniques. However the accounts of the Châtelier enterprise and other documentary evidence suggest we should substantially modify such a view.

It was the largest farms, those with a single tenant, and carved out of the seigneurial demesne lands, which were most often held on *métayage* contracts.<sup>22</sup> *Métayers* had a privileged place in the village hierarchy, with a plum place at the head of tax lists. For example, in the *taille* rolls for the parish of Vaiges in 1730, Châtelier was taxed at 92 *livres*, so ranked as one of the chief farmers in the parish: Jacques Berger, *métayer* at Ébaudière was also taxed at 92 *livres*; widow Mathurin, who, with her son's help, farmed Petit Rocher, paid 93 *livres*; Pierre Guillois, *métayer* at Haut Coyet paid 106 *livres*. The top half-dozen richest farmers in the parish were all *métayers*. In Poitou, Jacques Péret talks about the 'fiscal bludgeoning' of the *métayers*.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.365: 'les métairies' (farms of 20 to 40 hectares) were more often held in *métayage* than 'les closieries' (farms of 5 to 10 hectares) in Mayenne in the

eighteenth century.

<sup>23</sup> J. Péret, *Les paysans de Gâtine au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1998).

Yes, they may have been more heavily taxed than village craftsmen, but they managed to pay significant amounts, proof that their farms provided them with a cash income. And amongst the farmers (presuming that they were all taxed on the same basis) it was always the *métayers* who paid the biggest proportion.

Finally, probate inventories suggest that *métayers* lived in relative comfort. Comparing the inventories of *métayers* and tenant farmers, we find the *métayers* with a smaller proportion of their wealth under the heading 'tools and livestock' because the landowner paid for all or part of the stock. To balance this, the *métayer* had a wider range of goods under the heading 'home furnishings', suggesting that he had a slightly higher level of comfort in his house (notably in terms of bedding). This finding is not specific to Mayenne, but was also found by Francis Brumont for the *métayers* of south-west France, and by Pierre Jarnoux in Finistère.<sup>24</sup>

*Métayers* were able to achieve this accumulation of household goods precisely because they were not engaged in subsistence farming. Farms in the west of France were based on mixed farming with three production components: cereals, livestock rearing, and other products, essentially fruit and textile plants. Cereals were basic to this economy: they kept the farmer and his family in food (probably entirely so), but there is nothing to suggest that the *métayer* did not sometimes sell part of his share. Things were quite different with the other farm products, which were normally sold. This is particularly the case with livestock. Fattened pigs were eaten at home by both *métayer* and landowner, but surplus piglets were sold. It is true that on special occasions lamb or kid was eaten on the farm, but cattle, which represented the heaviest money investment, were always sold. We can see in this a form of specialization in the rural economy of *métayage*, which went far beyond the subsistence economy generally associated with this form of tenure.

Livestock transactions in the accounts show that commercial strategies were employed by the *métayer*, with or without the landowner's participation. A multitude of entries in Châtelier's accounts enable us to understand the commercial logic. During the nine years of surviving accounts, Châtelier sold animals on 62 occasions, on average seven times a year, and bought on 23 occasions, that is to say two or three times a year. Some of these sales were effectively exchanges, where a sale was immediately followed by a purchase. For instance, in 1730 Châtelier sold two oxen for 212 *livres* and bought two others for 126 *livres*; in 1731 he followed the same pattern: two oxen sold for 148 *livres* and two new ones bought for 114 *livres*. In 1733 a sick cow was sold for 45 *livres* and another cow bought for 35 *livres*. In 1735 the sale of a fat bullock for 39 *livres* was followed by the purchase of a young steer for 10 *livres*, and the sale of a fat bullock for 97 *livres*, was followed by the purchase of a two-year old bullock for 14 *livres*. These examples help us understand the strategies employed by a *métayer*: the principle is always to sell an older and buy a younger – and therefore lower-priced – animal while realizing some of the sale price as profit. This demonstrates two things very clearly: firstly that money circulated on a far greater scale than is shown by the profits divided between the proprietor and the *métayer*. Secondly, that the commercial strategies

<sup>24</sup> P. Jarnoux, 'Des paysans riches dans la France de l'Ouest sous l'ancien régime. Bilan et perspectives' and F. Brumont, 'Le métayer et son maître', both in A. Antoine (ed.), *Campagnes de l'Ouest, stratigraphies et relations sociales dans l'histoire* (1999), pp. 361–92.

set in place by the *métayer* were not based on raising the same animals for six or seven years before taking all the profit on the fat animal. Instead the *métayer* accumulated large profits through a regular turnover of stock, without having to wait until an animal was fully mature.

When seen from this perspective, the system of *métayage* clearly did not stand outside the cash economy.<sup>25</sup> Over the period 1728–36, the average annual revenue from the *métairie* of Châtelier was, as previously noted, around 1200 *livres*, of which around 580 *livres* went to the landowner, and much the same amount to the *métayer*. But these 1200 *livres* should not be regarded as the sole profit of the farm divided up at the end of the year between the landowner and his partner. Within this 1200 *livres* there were the various cereals, which were not necessarily turned into cash by the farmer, while all the ‘other’ crops – the flax, hemp, apples, pears, cider, and so on – produced by a *métayer* in a mixed farming district, and also the 320 *livres*, the profit element of dealing in livestock, were divided throughout the year between *métayer* and landowner after each transaction. The *métayer* received on average 160 *livres* a year in specie from livestock. But, even if we leave out of picture any other products he might sell from the cereal and ‘other’ crops, these 160 *livres* were far from being the only monetary transactions the *métayer* took part in.

These figures relate to a medium-size *métairie* in the first half of the eighteenth century. Figures extracted from slightly larger *métairies* in the second half of the century – farms with a total profit of 1200–1600 *livres* a year, in which the livestock component represented a slightly higher proportion of the enterprise than at Châtelier (25–35 per cent), but for which the accounts are insufficiently detailed to give a breakdown individual purchases and sales – suggest that the *métayer* might see considerably larger sums pass through his hands. As an example, in the final decades of the eighteenth century, the share farm at Vaujuas, had a total turnover of 2500 *livres*, of which 40 percent (1000 *livres*) was derived from livestock transactions. The *métayer* there may well have had considerably more than 1000 *livres* in his hands as a result of his dealings.<sup>26</sup> We may conclude that we can no longer consider the *métayer* to be a farmer who was not fully integrated into either the market or money economy. It really made no difference whether the farming business was based on rent in kind or money rent.

The final question relates to the ability of the *métayer* to adopt progressive farming methods. Studies of *métayage* contracts shows that the owner could insert any clauses he wished. He might require the tenant to sow a small amount of clover, to use a particular bull, to bring into cultivation some waste ground, or to spread a particular amount of manure. Owners evidently often seized the opportunity to do so. Moreover, a landowner who decided to let a holding as *métayage* – a system with heavy time overheads because he had to sell the part of his profits he received in kind – must have had a taste for involvement in farming, even if he did not run his own home farm. It seems hardly likely that his activities acted as a brake on innovations suggested by the *métayer*. On the contrary, a reading of Duchemin’s daybook shows that he

<sup>25</sup> A. Antoine, ‘La circulation de l’argent en pays de métayage’, in P. Minard and D. Woronoff (eds), *L’argent des campagnes. Échanges, monnaie, crédit dans la France rurale d’ancien régime* (2003), pp. 9–40.

<sup>26</sup> Antoine, *Fiefs et villages*, p. 317. This *métairie* was situated to the north-east of the Bas-Maine, in the township of Marcillé-la-Ville.

was particularly concerned with improving his farms. It may have been the landowner, rather than the *métayer*, who was driving agricultural progress.

The lease to halves is thus at the heart of particularly close social contact between landowners and farmers. We can be reasonably certain that this type of contract helped ensure the continuation of rural social structures that were later judged to be conservative, and characteristic of traditional society; but, on the other hand, it seems highly unlikely that they constituted an obstacle to agricultural progress. This was René Musset's view in the early twentieth century: 'we can still find this very distinctive trait in the farming life of the Bas-Maine: rapid agricultural progress but social conservatism'.<sup>27</sup> For Musset the unique feature of the Bas-Maine was that *métayage*, a farming system recognized as a social throwback, had survived and served as a springboard for the agricultural take-off of this region in the nineteenth century. It was a social framework within which landowners, 'because they had intelligence and capital', supported agricultural modernization much more effectively than they could have with fixed-rent leases, which allowed much less freedom to intervene.<sup>28</sup> Those nineteenth-century landowners who defended *métayage* were obviously conservatives, and their social conservatism was all the more effective (and acceptable) because it ran in parallel with progressive attitudes in the economic sphere during the decades of agricultural modernisation. On the other hand, during the century that followed, more general social changes inevitably left this system beyond the pale, because *métayage* remained associated with an old-fashioned way of life, rather than for any economic reason. We should be cautious about seeing share-cropping only through the eyes of the physiocrats and their successors.

## V

In the end though, *metayage* seems more like English systems of tenancy than is usually allowed. The share-cropper was a substantial figure holding by lease. He was far from a subsistence farmer: rather, he engaged in a range of market-orientated activities. His relationship with his landlord, often seen to be disadvantageous to him and even humiliating, might work to his advantage, giving him access to capital and transferring some of the risk of the farm to the proprietor in poor years. The *métayer's* contract might allow a committed owner to press forwards with agricultural improvements by using covenants in exactly the way it is maintained that English landlords pressed agricultural rotations and improvements on their tenants. There are distinctions to be drawn between English leasehold practice and *métayage*: but it does not seem that one is all good, and the other all bad.

<sup>27</sup> R. Musset, *Le Bas-Maine. Étude géographique* (1917; new edn, 1978), p. 388.

<sup>28</sup> Remarques sur les modes de faire valoir dans

l'arrondissement de Château-Gontier, 1855, Archives départementales de la Mayenne, 7 M 96.