Conclusion: Heritage? What Heritage?  
The Transformation of Townscape and Landscape

Les monuments anciens sont pour les pays ce que sont les ossemans des aieux pour les individus; aussi c'est un précieux devoir pour toute contrée, d'honorer les ruines et de préserver de dégradation les moindres édifices, auxquelles se rattachent des souvenirs historiques ou qui ont été consacrés par la vénération des siècles.[1] [1813]

This book has studied nineteenth-century French attitudes toward its past, detailing a chronicle of destruction and of largely ineffectual attempts to salvage at least some vestiges of their heritage. The survivals are sparse because of the lure of modernization, the juggernaut of the centralized State, and the usually spurious demands of national defence, executed thanks to the destructive energy of the French army engineering corps. If scholars fought and wrote passionately to try and salvage monuments, general indifference to the past was widespread, allowing the local pressures of mayors and contractors to expand and “improve” their towns. Over the long term, scholars and archeologists placed objects in museums to “save” them, but the separation of artefacts from their sites usually doomed the latter to neglect or redevelopment. There is both irony and contradiction in the dismal fact that attempts to save France’s archeological heritage by housing it in museums thereby condemned so many sites to obliteration and redevelopment. Thus well-meaning solicitude sometimes proved to be almost as destructive as the vandalism of builders and military engineers.

We may sometimes picture France as an efficient state governed from Paris, with the provinces all dancing to the same tune, but this was far from the case in the 19th century, because of communication problems and the inevitable campanilismo. As the Chinese proverb has it, “The mountains are high and the emperor far away.” And if the protection of monuments and the establishment of museums increased as communications improved throughout the country, few heeded the homily of Veran, cited above. It was the remoteness of town councils from the policy-forming, questionnaire-issuing centre of Paris which rendered easy and without retribution the destruction of France’s heritage on an enormous scale. Regional learned societies hoped they had influence, but their concern for the past was shared by few others. The detailed accounts throughout this book offer an essential antidote to the official narrative, which proclaims that France generally treasured and conserved her important
monuments. The Wars of Religion and the Revolution often appear as an alibi or excuse for whatever was lost, yet the destruction they wrought was minor in comparison with later losses.

19th-century France did not always treasure surviving monuments – but why not? There are several answers. Central authority did not know exactly what monuments France possessed, and even when protection was desirable was in any case leery of encroaching on the touchy question of private ownership. Attempts to discover just what was out there were weakened by psephological puerility, and the inability of most administrators central and local to grasp the extent of the cataloguing problem (a moving target), let alone to conceive of who could possibly answer the quirkish questions posed in floods of questionnaires.

We might even surmise that, as France became more democratic, it became less interested in its past as opposed to its future. With such debates over modernity, the preservationists would nearly always be on the losing side, and their movement was largely ineffective in deflecting the new modernist orientation to the future. The unsatisfactory results of “preservationism” underline that, centralised bureaucracy though France might be, nobody seemed to believe that the various questionnaires issued from Paris should be answered by people known to be qualified and directed from the centre of government. And who might these be? Certainly, the few inspectors of monuments. But then? The proceedings of local societies contain much information about the work to be done; but there was apparently no official attempt to place all the work of cataloguing in the hands of such qualified people, even though they evidently combined organisation, knowledge and publishing ability, and their publications were sometimes accompanied by illustrations (engravings, lithographs, photographs, maps).

One index of the uncertain nature of cataloguing, documentation and conservation was the lack of any nation-wide plan for what to do with conserved monuments and, especially, extensive sites. Bylaws stipulating what towns and railway companies should do when they came across antiquities simply did not exist (although they did in Asia Minor during the same period). There was no planning for discoveries, and no uniform policy for the establishment of museums to hold finds, this being left to local initiatives. In other words, the concept of national heritage, while enunciated here and there by local societies, and echoed by authorities, did not occasion a national policy (or funding) for such protective institutions, let alone any clearly defined steps to be taken from discovery to protection of monuments and their antiquities.

The thirst for modernity was, as we have seen, part of the problem, because to most people the new was more attractive than the old. But the benefits of