

The Ecole Des Chartes¹

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IN 1807, in the midst of his campaign in Prussia, Napoleon Bonaparte stopped to meditate on the plight of historical studies. He wrote of the "lost art of distinguishing original source materials from the work of secondary commentators, good and bad." He wanted to found a school of history to revive this art. Bibliography was also to be taught, so that the "young man should not spend months lost in a maze of inadequate or unreliable reading, but instead would be directed to better books, and would thus acquire better information more easily and more quickly." Unfortunately this dream of Napoleon's was not to be fulfilled until fifteen years later, just before the Emperor's death at St. Helena, and then by the order of a ruling Bourbon king.

The great libraries and archives of France are depositories of the culture and learning of the past, rather than reference centers of a type more familiar to Americans. They are the heirs of those medieval monasteries whose monks devoted themselves to the preservation and study of manuscripts. The curators of such collections require a kind of training not needed by those whose work leads them into a modern field and to recently printed books. They must have facility, not just a "reading knowledge," of the Latin and French languages of the middle ages, no small order, since

¹ The facts in this study and all of the quotations have been taken from the following works:

Maurice Prou, *Livre du centenaire, 1821-1921*, 2 vol. Paris, 1921.

Ecole des Chartes, *Centenaire de la réorganisation de l'Ecole des Chartes. Compte rendu de la cérémonie du 17 mai, 1947*. Paris, 1947.

Ecole des Chartes, *Notice sur l'Ecole des Chartes*. 10th ed. Paris, 1947.

G. Hanotaux, "Le Centenaire de l'Ecole des Chartes," in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Feb. 15, 1921, p. 788.

C. Jullian, "L'Ecole des Chartes dans notre histoire nationale" in *Revue de Paris*, Aug. 1, 1927, p. 481.

The writer is grateful for the generosity of a number of French scholars who took time to discuss various aspects of this paper with her. Some of the opinions quoted have come from them, but it was thought best to avoid direct quotation. These scholars include Professors Ferdinand Lot and Robert Fawtier, Membres de l'Institut; Marcel Bouteron, Membre de l'Institut, retired director of the Bibliothèque de l'Institut; Charles Braibant, Directeur des Archives de France; and Guy Dubosc and Régine Pernoud, archivists at the Archives Nationales.

both languages were constantly changing. For some work, additional languages are necessary. And still more complicated than the language problem is that of the handwriting, the deciphering of which requires special training in paleography. The identification of much medieval material calls for a detailed knowledge of the history of legal and epistolary formulae and of much intricate detail about the history of France and her rulers.

The monks of the middle ages acquired these skills much as apprentices learned their trades, by working with older scholars. Some orders, such as the Benedictines, gained an enviable reputation for editing of manuscripts and for scholarly work based on a study of them. The Benedictines of Saint-Maur, established at Saint-Germain-des-Prés, in Paris, produced many famous scholars and supplied numerous librarians and keepers of manuscripts to the Court of France. The French Revolution emptied the monasteries of both scholars and their books, and manuscripts were distributed to centers in distant parts of France. Many valuable records were lost or deliberately destroyed. On one occasion a bonfire was made in the Place Clichy in Paris, and the flames consumed all the family archives and genealogical manuscripts which the authorities had been able to get into their hands. Some confiscated manuscripts found their way into the great libraries taken over by the State. For many years the only persons capable of handling them were former members of the clergy who survived the débâcle, some lay officials of the old royal collections, and a small number of self-taught scholars. The creation of the Institut de France by Napoleonic order furnished a stimulus for the study of the past through the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, but no school for the training of young scholars developed either out of the Institut itself or out of Napoleon's own plans for a school.

In 1821, the situation was called to the attention of Louis XVIII:

In former days the studious Congregation of Saint-Maur devoted itself successfully to this branch of science [history]. Today . . . these studies which are sustained neither by tradition nor by public education, and to which no one devotes himself with profit, are dying out completely.

The result was the royal decree of February 22, 1821, founding the first Ecole des Chartes.

Twelve students were to be appointed by the Minister of the Interior on the nomination of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres. There were to be two professors, one from the manu-

script section of the Bibliothèque Royale (Nationale), and the other from the Archives Nationales. The course, which was to include one year in the Library and one in the Archives was to be a practical one. It had the somewhat vague objective "To read the various manuscripts and study the French dialects of the middle ages." This program was not successful and died out after two years, for many reasons, but particularly because each professor, working independently, tended to duplicate the work of his colleague; secondly because there were no examinations, no diploma, and no arrangements for employing people who completed the course.

The school was revived in 1830 and has been in existence ever since, on more or less the same basis as in 1830, — a course of three years planned carefully to include in succession the various techniques and disciplines necessary for work with medieval manuscripts. Like the first school, the new one was established in the Bibliothèque Royale and the Archives Nationales, but this time the first, or elementary year, was to be spent at the Archives and the last two years at the Bibliothèque Royale. The quarters were inadequate, notably at the Library, where students suffered from heat or cold, depending on the season, in their cramped quarters up under the roof.

In 1847 the Ecole des Chartes moved all its courses to the Archives. This beautiful building, once the home of the Soubise family, situated in the Marais, is one of the few magnificent residences which have been saved from decay in this formerly fashionable quarter. It is entered today from the spacious court opening on the rue des Francs-Bourgeois. Before the Soubise family acquired it and remodelled it in the eighteenth century, the house had been the Paris residence of the Guise family, who in turn had acquired it from the Clisson family which had possessed it since the fourteen hundreds. The turrets of the fourteenth century entrance are still to be seen today in the rue des Archives, to the left of the main building. The Ecole des Chartes was given quarters near this old entrance, which was now to become the entrance for the school. The classes were held in the Salle Ovale on the ground floor. The windows reach from floor to ceiling and the narrow wall space between them is covered with carved panelling. A hundred years ago there was a low circular enclosure within which the lecturer and students were seated close together. Outside this barrier auditors and visitors were allowed to listen to the classes without disturbing

the busy *Chartistes* within. Through the windows one looks out on one of the beautiful courts of the palace. After visiting this room, even on a cold winter's day, one is led to wonder what prompted Gabriel Hanotaux to write as he did in 1921 of his life there as a student years before, referring to:

. . . les bâtiments lépreux de la rue des Francs-Bourgeois au fond de cette cour humide assombrie par les hauts murs de l'Hôtel de Soubise dans cette salle obscure si mal faite pour la lecture des manuscrits . . .

In 1897 the school was moved to the Sorbonne, to a separate part of the building next to Richelieu's chapel. It is still there today. There are several classrooms and offices as well as the library. On the wall of one of the rooms, where the course in paleography is given, there is an enormous mural painting of the old monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Près, where the predecessors of the modern *Chartistes* once lived and worked.

The Ecole des Chartes is one of a group of what the French today call the Grandes Ecoles. These are schools of university rank to which students are admitted by competitive examination, the successful candidates receiving a completely free education. In most of these schools, although not at the Ecole des Chartes, they get their living expenses as well. Among these Grandes Ecoles are the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris for men looking forward to a teaching career on the university level, and the Ecole Normale de Sèvres for women in the same category; the Ecole Polytechnique for engineers and officers of the technical branches of the army; St. Cyr for infantry and cavalry officers; the Naval School, the Agronomy Institute, a number of specialized engineering schools and a few others less well-known abroad. Students preparing to enter these schools prepare for the competitive entrance examinations in post-graduate classes in certain Paris lycées, where they spend at least one year. The examinations are very difficult and students rarely pass the first time, but return for another year of tutoring. Probably the most difficult of all, and therefore carrying the greatest prestige, are the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Ecole des Chartes.

The examination for the Ecole des Chartes is open to candidates of French nationality who have completed the baccalaureate, the examination which terminates one's secondary school career and admits to the usual university courses. Frequently candidates have more than this, a university degree, or some work towards one. The examination includes:

Written examination

1. Translation from Latin without a dictionary
2. Latin essay without a dictionary
3. Essay in French on a subject assigned from French history, prior to 1500
4. Essay in French on a subject assigned from French history 1500-1815

Oral examination (for those who have passed the written examination)

1. "Explication d'un texte" (This is a meticulous interpretation, word by word, of a Latin passage)
2. Discussion of a question from each of the two periods of history listed above
3. An examination in the historical geography of France
4. An examination in German and one in English
5. Extra credit is given to candidates who present in addition one or more of the following languages: Classical Greek, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic.

The twenty candidates with the highest rating are admitted. This means in practice that two thirds to three fourths fail. It is to be remembered that all the candidates have had roughly the same preparation, and that all have spent at least one year in a post-graduate lycée to prepare. The examinations are therefore a good test of ability.

Students at the Ecole des Chartes have four to six classes weekly, each class lasting an hour and a half to two hours. They may also register for work at the Sorbonne if they have time. For courses requiring reading of manuscripts, sets of fac-similes are kept in the school library. The students know in advance which texts are to be covered in class, and they swarm in the library many hours each day to prepare for their classes. The classes combine recitation and discussion, but students are not graded on their recitations, although contrary to the usual custom in France, constant attendance and satisfactory participation are required for admission to the final examinations. The final grades each year depend entirely on the final examination. This is a general examination on all fields covered during the year, and a list is published in order of merit. Students who fail once may repeat the year, but only once in the course of their careers at the school. Those who do, lose their right to places on the merit list, and their names are published at the end in all subsequent lists. Very few fail, but some drop out.

The courses include:

First year: Paleography, Romance Philology, Bibliography, Library Service

Second year: Diplomatics, History of French institutions, French archives, archives service, Primary sources in French history and literature

Third year: History of Civil and Canon Law, Medieval archeology, Primary sources in French history and Literature

In the course of the work, each student selects a subject for a thesis which must be directly related to his work at the school. Sometimes this choice is made because of special interest in the topic. Occasionally students choose something on which they can work during vacations at home or in archives near their homes, for example the editing of the cartulary of a local monastery or the study of some phase of local history for which extensive original sources are available. The theses tend to emphasize the use of documents rather than the search for them, but most subjects require both processes. The theses demonstrate the student's ability to work with manuscripts in a non-contemporary language, and in this they are usually more difficult than the theses for the American doctor's degree, if the latter is based on American sources. On the other hand, the Ecole des Chartes theses are ordinarily much shorter and the field is more limited since there is a time limit, about six months after the last final examinations. There is an oral examination or "defense of the thesis." The grade on the thesis is combined with the grades obtained in all previous final examinations to determine the candidate's standing on the graduation list. The method by which this figure is reached is intricate and difficult to explain in terms of American practice, but it is fair to say that the thesis accounts for something over 80% of the grade, and the last final examination makes up most of the rest. Graduates have the title of "archiviste-paléographe" and are popularly known by the name which applied to them as students, *Chartistes*. Most of them have another diploma, that given in the competitive examinations for library positions, for which they prepare in some of their courses.

In addition to the regular students at the Ecole des Chartes, there are usually a number of persons who are admitted by special permission as "auditors." They now take no part in recitations or discussions and take no examinations, and they are not entitled to call themselves "élève de l'Ecole des Chartes." This group includes students enrolled in the Sorbonne or the Institut Catholique, who wish to learn paleography or attend the lectures in advanced

courses. The number of auditors varies from two to twenty or more. At present it is very high, because among the British and American veterans studying in France with government aid, there are a number of medievalists and a considerable number of clergy who expect to work in that field. From time to time, a few of these people have been admitted to the school as "élèves," and for the whole course. They must satisfy the entrance requirements, almost impossible for foreigners except the clergy, and they take examinations, receiving the degree of "archiviste-paléographe" on graduation. They are not considered as competing with the French students and their names do not appear on the merit lists. There are several such scholars in the United States at present, mostly Catholic clergy.

The first woman student was admitted in 1906. The French have always been more generous in these matters than either Americans or British, and their laws do not ordinarily exclude women. It is therefore rarely necessary that a fight be made to nullify a law before women can receive certain appointments. The first woman who applied was admitted. It has been difficult for women to prepare for the entrance examinations, however, since the girls' lycées taught less Latin than did the boys' schools. At least one boys' lycée always offered a post-graduate year for preparing the Chartes examinations, but no girls' lycée had enough demand for such a course. A very fine semi-private school for girls in Paris, the College de Sévigné, was founded to meet this need, and women who expect to enter the Ecole des Chartes still go there to prepare. It is particularly strong in Classics, unlike the girls' lycées, which tend to emphasize the more modern fields. Recently, girls have been allowed to attend the "Chartes" classes in the boys' lycées. At the present time, the women sometimes outnumber the men at the Ecole des Chartes, and many of them have won high places on the lists. A woman took first place on the graduation list last year, and won the Prix de Rome, — for research at the French School in Rome.

What becomes of the graduates? Many years ago, there were always among the *Chartistes* a few men of means, often the bearers of names famous in the world of scholarship, who, after graduation, became private scholars. Pierre Champion, who died during the war at an advanced age, is often spoken of with sorrow and nostalgia as the "last" of these. There are no private fortunes left in France which will permit this type of luxury. Today the *Chartistes* are all interested in jobs. The most frequent procedure is to

seek appointment as archivist in the provincial archives, in the Archives Nationales, or in the manuscript section of the Bibliothèque Nationale. These posts are reserved by law for *Chartistes*, but there are few vacancies, only three this year. While they do not enjoy exclusive rights in other libraries, their training makes them very much sought after for library posts, in the big state libraries such as Sainte-Geneviève and the Mazarine, and in the provincial libraries, particularly those of the universities. They are also preferred in many of the archives of the various government ministries in Paris. Some have immediately or eventually entered other fields. Count Bastard d'Estaing and Gabriel Hanotaux won brilliant reputations as diplomats, and Hanotaux, also well-known as an historian, became a member of the French Academy. A number have become famous as teachers of medieval history or literature, including Gaston Paris, Charles Bémont, Ferdinand Lot, Petit-Dutaillis, Abel Lefranc, Funck-Brentano, and Halphen, all at the University of Paris. One *Chartiste*, Alexandre Coville, was Rector of Clermont-Ferrand and director of higher education in the Ministère de l'Instruction Publique. Many have gone into editorial work or journalism immediately after graduation. A few have positions with dealers in rare manuscripts and books. One *Chartiste* now owns and operates a long established firm which specializes in autographs and rare literary manuscripts. Naturally, many have returned after years in archives or in teaching, to positions in the Ecole des Chartes itself. This list, too long to give here, includes the entire staff of the school for almost a hundred and twenty years. The directors of the Archives Nationales during the same period, have come for the most part from among the former pupils of the school, as have also a large majority of the heads of departments and the directors of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The names of Charles-Victor Langlois of the Archives and Léopold Delisle and Henri Omont of the Bibliothèque Nationale stand out among hundreds in this category.

While the older generations of *Chartistes* view with alarm the extent to which the creation of a library diploma with more general training has offered successful competition to *Chartistes* seeking library posts, many younger graduates have expressed themselves as being satisfied with present opportunities and do not give the impression of fearing unemployment. A *Chartiste* is still a *Chartiste* in France, and he is spoken of with respect equalled only by that enjoyed by the *Normaliens*.

The great problem today, which worries everybody, is the effect which war conditions have had on the careers of the graduates. A departmental archivist is an important civil servant and enjoys much local prestige. The standard procedure before the war was to make initial appointments to small, uncomplicated libraries, and to advance the best men to the larger, more important, and more difficult archives. Now all this is changed due to the housing crisis which has reached incredible proportions in France. The archivists were formerly given houses or apartments in the archives buildings, for housing is usually provided in France for the heads of schools, libraries, museums, and other important public institutions. Now all the state can do is to grant a rent allowance, except in the places where the old apartments are still available. The result is that the older, more experienced men will not accept new appointments because they know that they will have no roof over the heads of their families. This stops the normal promotion process, for instead of beginning at the bottom, a young, unmarried man is frequently the only possible candidate for an important post. This, in the opinion of the central administrative authorities, has resulted in a decline of the importance of such posts. As a result the morale of the archivists suffers seriously in a country like France where every civil servant in the professional categories thinks of himself as entitled to promotion at frequent intervals.

The war has had other results. Because of the destruction of some of the most interesting collections, there is no longer any inducement for scholars to take posts in places where they handle little except contemporary administrative documents. And finally, the enormous increase in the teaching load and the infinitesimal adjustments of salaries in the French schools have considerably decreased the number of elementary and secondary school teachers who once spent leisure hours in research in the local archives, where they became the friends and allies of the archivist. There are occasional exceptions. In one small town the elementary school teacher works in a lignite mine to eke out his pitifully small income for his family. He recently applied for permission to work in the archives at night. He is writing a history of the mine.

What have been the contributions of the Ecole des Chartes? Since the reorganization in 1830, the school has published a journal, the *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes*. In 1921, on the occasion of the centennial of the school, the director, Maurice Prou, published a book containing a study entitled "L'oeuvre de l'Ecole" which he interpreted to mean the publications, especially the mono-

graphs, of its graduates. This record covers 189 printed pages, largely lists. There is in addition a list, covering seventeen pages, of the literary and historical prizes won by former students. The nineteenth and twentieth century printed catalogs of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Archives, and the remarkably valuable inventories and catalogs of the departmental archives are all the work of *Chartistes*. Prou's list includes hundreds of well-known standard works, to mention only two, — Langlois's part in Langlois and Seignobos, *Introduction à l'histoire*, and Delisle, *Cabinet des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Impériale*.

Less tangible, but quite as extensive and important has been the influence through the work of those who have been trained at the school. The so-called "method of the *Chartiste*" is one of orderly arrangement and documentation. It has influenced scholarly writing in France, and has contributed to the clear and logical style in documentation for which the French have gained an enviable reputation, especially in the field of history. The classification and cataloging of innumerable collections of documents have made accessible to scholars and officials what were once piles of unlabelled, disordered boxes. This achievement has been particularly significant in the case of the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other departmental collections. Many valuable documents have been saved for posterity by donors who were glad to present them to active and intelligent custodians. The accessibility of manuscript sources has encouraged the use of these sources in historical research and has placed historical writing on a very high level.

The Ecole des Chartes is not without its critics. Voices are heard from time to time accusing the school of inadequacy in fulfilling its purpose and of producing in our own day a disproportionately long list of undistinguished graduates. This is attributed to a variety of causes ranging from old fashioned conservatism to the practice of admitting women. The causes of the criticism are probably two in number, first the greater number of present-day training opportunities once found only at the Ecole des Chartes, thus dissipating the group of medievalists; second, the heavy burden of paper work and other aspects of present-day administration, which influences the amount of individual attention students get, as well as the amount of leisure for study among the graduates.

There is at the present time a difference of opinion among scholars and administrators, including *Chartistes*, as to the scope of the work today. Until a few years ago, it was the only school at which archivists and librarians were trained. Today a great many com-

petent librarians, some holding important administrative positions, were trained in the various universities in France. Their education is more general, and in the opinion of some, more adequate than that of the *Chartistes*. These people have university degrees, technical library training, and a diploma obtained by competitive examination. The Ecole des Chartes now includes a course of lectures in preparation for this diploma, which its students must now obtain if they wish to enter libraries rather than archives. The university training probably offers some advantage, since the examination does not include the elaborate techniques connected with the reading and analysis of documents, to which the Ecole des Chartes is devoted. The school is therefore criticized at times for not providing a more varied course. The present administration of the school has resisted efforts to enlarge the scope. In a speech made in 1947 on the occasion of an anniversary celebration, the present director said:

Nous fûmes, nous restons une école d'érudition dans le domaine de l'histoire de France. Nous fûmes et demeurons des hommes d'études . . . nous fûmes et demeurons principalement des médiévistes . . .

It was also true, in former days, that medievalists, including those who entered teaching rather than archival work, were trained only at the Ecole des Chartes. The few distinguished scholars in this field who did not begin as *Chartistes* were likely to have attended as auditors, especially in the courses in paleography and diplomatics. Such eminent scholars as Christian Pfister, the Alsatian medievalist who returned to his native province as Rector of the University of Strasbourg after World War I, got their training in this way. During the past thirty years or more, the universities in the provinces, as well as the University of Paris, trained medievalists through the teaching and guidance of former *Chartistes* such as Ferdinand Lot in Paris, Halphen in Bordeaux and later Paris, and at Strasbourg under the leadership of Pfister, who had once listened from outside the barrier in the Hotel de Soubise. At the Sorbonne, Langlois had established a series of lectures on auxiliary sciences before the turn of the century. Joseph Bedier, a *normalien*, had profited by this training. The monopoly once firmly established in the Ecole des Chartes has disappeared. It is now more usual for one interested in medieval history or literature to plan a university education, leaving a higher proportion than formerly of people with more limited technical interests at the Ecole des Chartes. This has inevitable results as far as impressions of distinction are concerned. One hears more about the brilliant lec-

turers and producers of monographs than one does about those who facilitate their work by providing excellent catalogs and scholarly editions of difficult manuscript sources. While the *Chartistes* cannot be accused of devoting their energies entirely to catalogs or minutiae, it is probably true that more and more of them tend to do this, if only because their positions require it. The university men, on the other hand, are forced by competition to emphasize other aspects.

Those who blame the lack of distinction on the advent of women take the debatable position that women succeed more easily than men of equal or superior ability in passing examinations, thereby winning a large number of the available twenty places each year. They do not themselves become distinguished, it is said, but have reduced the number of men who might have done so, had they been admitted. The women *Chartistes* have a very high record of achievement in the school. Some of them have done excellent research, "crowned by the Academy." Some have been prevented by marriage from competing for good appointments which family responsibilities have made impractical for them. The archives positions are not, like those in teaching, won by competitive examination. The women therefore sometimes suffer from the fact that when appointments are to be made, superficial qualifications may receive more weight in their case than in that of their male competitors. Public duties connected with some of the positions seem, in the minds of many, to call for men, regardless of technical qualifications. These factors have undoubtedly reduced the ratio of distinction for the women.

If it is true that the school's reputation for distinction is not what it was in the nineteenth century, the explanation is to be found in the conditions of modern life, rather than in the factors described above. It was once true that the scholar, whether he was an archivist or a university teacher, was expected to devote a large part of his time to his own research, which presumably would result in publication and in some cases, fame. The number of archivists in state positions in France today is still what it was under Louis Philippe. It would be impossible to estimate the expansion in document production which has come during the past century, with the typewriter, the mimeograph machine, and the telegraph. The archivist must provide for the enormous volume of useful and useless paper which comes to him from government offices. He must also worry about their preservation, a matter which gave him less concern when the documents arrived written in ink on good

paper, or even parchment. All this takes time. In addition, he now has a telephone, which results in a vastly increased number of inquiries, invitations, visits, and unanticipated interruptions of all kinds. Like the university professor, the archivist now has to do his research at night or during hours which the administration does not claim. This is a different picture from that of a hundred years ago when Delisle produced his *Cabinet des Manuscrits* or even fifty, when Langlois managed to be so brilliantly prolific. Contemporary production of scholarly works has of necessity slowed down.

Unlike their monkish predecessors, *Chartistes* have not led cloistered lives, rather have they found satisfaction, as special custodians of the history of France, in taking part in events which we today might call "history in the making." There is an amusing account of the day in 1848, when the whole school decided to parade to the Hôtel de Ville, a quarter of a mile away, to congratulate the government on the reestablishment of a republic. One of the students composed a Latin oration on the theme "He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek." This was rejected in favor of one in French saluting the "culmination" of the historic struggle for liberty in France. In 1870-1872 both professors and students left for active service and some never returned. In 1914-1918, fifty-one *Chartistes* were killed in action. In one of the class-rooms today, opposite the mural depicting Saint-Germain-des-Près, marble tablets list the names of those who lost their lives in the last war, many of them "died in deportation." This is a grim reminder of the bravery of so many of the student generation during the Resistance.

It is interesting to note in Paris today, that although there is much talk of the need for government economies, there is never even a whispered suggestion that the country might get on without what in some quarters might be considered an expensive luxury. There will always be hope for a country in which everyone is proud of the Ecole des Chartes.