Shaping records on the farm: agricultural record keeping in France from the nineteenth century to the Liberation

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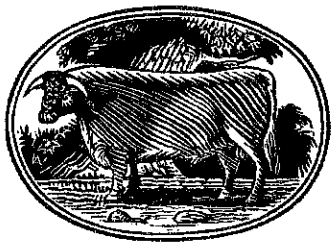

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Shaping records on the farm: agricultural record keeping in France from the nineteenth century to the Liberation*

by Nathalie Joly

Abstract

The practice of record keeping on French farms and the forms taken by farm records have not been widely studied. If *livres de raison* have attracted some recent discussion, little interest has been shown in the day-to-day writings contained in *agendas* (diaries). This article shows that persistent efforts were made throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to introduce onto farms accounting management tools and the media needed to keep records. The movement provided an organised body of resources: their use was advocated by authority figures such as *agromanes*, schoolmasters and agricultural masters.

Diary keeping is a widespread practice on French farms. The daily writing that fills the pages of the *agenda*, or diary, reminds us of the characteristics of the *livre de raison*, or domestic account book. All daily writing records everyday life 'in its rhythm, in its most prosaic material aspects and in its most ordinary activities'.[1] But, while the *livre de raison* focuses on the domestic household, lineage, and experience (the '*livre de raison, livre de maison*' as Sylvie Mouysset wrote in the introduction to her remarkable analysis of *papiers de famille*[2]), the *agenda*, with which I am concerned here, is primarily used to record agrarian activities. The materials I studied over the course of an ethnographic investigation – a series of *agendas* kept between the 1950s and 1990s in a region of eastern France[3] – all contained notes taken and structured in the same way. (An example is shown in Figure 1.) In these records, a few words were enough to describe the fieldwork undertaken, when and where it was undertaken and the equipment used. Depending on the writer, these descriptions of

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1 A. Farrell, 'L'écriture du for privé', in P. Ariès and G. Duby (eds), *Histoire de la vie privée. De la Renaissance aux Lumières* (first edn, 1985, 1999), III, p. 334.

2 S. Mouysset, *Papiers de famille. Introduction à l'étude des livres de raison (France, XVe-XXe siècle)* (2008).

3 N. Joly, 'Écritures du travail et savoirs paysans. Aperçu historique et lecture de pratiques. Les agendas des agriculteurs' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Paris-X Nanterre, 1997) and N. Joly, 'Chroniques du travail agricole et livres de compte: la diffusion des pratiques d'écriture en milieu paysan', in *Les enjeux de la formation des acteurs de l'agriculture* (2000), pp. 239–46.