

# Prosper Mérimée and the Rescue of France's Architectural Heritage

by

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Visitors to Laon Cathedral in 2002 could read, at the east end, a series of display boards recounting the programme of repair that is now being undertaken. Tribute is paid to the nineteenth century work, without which the cathedral would probably no longer be here, but no mention is made of the fact that, uniquely, all the first three Inspectors General of Historic Monuments were involved in the work for over fifty years: Ludovic Vitet, Prosper Mérimée and Emile Boeswillwald. Two world wars, increased atmospheric pollution and the crevassed nature of the rock on which the cathedral is so spectacularly built have made it necessary to review what they did sooner than might have been expected.

Of the three Mérimée is now much the best known, but I remember my father and John Betjeman wondering, when visiting Conques in 1950, how the elegant man of letters had gained the renown of having rescued that abbey. At that time Mérimée was most frequently remembered as a courtier at the side of the Empress Eugenie, a writer who had sold out and perhaps as the patron of Viollet-le-Duc, who had destroyed so much in the cause of restoration. A few years later the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth was celebrated with an exhibition which revealed a delightful and faithful letter writer and a man responsible for saving a huge proportion of the buildings and other works of art that we all go to France to see. Like Laon cathedral, his reputation has survived the crevasses.

Monique Chatenet has recounted in these *Transactions*, 39 (1995), how the appointment of an Inspector General in 1830 was an event whose time had come. For some two centuries the medieval architecture of France had been scorned as barbaric and the Revolution had added politically motivated destruction to decay. Even in the Convention, however, other voices were to be heard and the Abbé Grégoire in 1794 coined the word vandalism to describe what was happening and

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Fig. 1  
Conques c. 1952



Fig. 2

Conques c.1980

‘One could not find a more melancholy place or one better suited to the pious soul wanting to escape from the world’

gained some acceptance for the concept that ancient buildings were part of the inheritance of everyone, not just of the Church or their titular owner.

The Abbé's was not the only voice. The superb church and monuments at Brou were saved by a mayor who held office under the revolution and Thomas Jefferson, while ambassador in Paris, loudly criticised the destruction of the Roman amphitheatre at Orange to provide paving for a road. Vandalism was not an invention of the Revolution and it may be that a desire to conserve the symbols of the nation was as good an impediment as any to the exercise of arbitrary power.

Legislation was passed in 1793 to halt the destruction and to encourage local enthusiasts to compile inventories of important and threatened buildings. Nonetheless, destruction continued, but there were some significant rescues and further encouragement was given in 1810 to the compilers of local inventories. The first state budget for ancient monuments came in 1819. In 1802 Chateaubriand

had published *Le Génie du Christianisme*, contrasting ruins caused by time with those more effectively destroyed by man. This was in tune with the romantic movement with its delight in ruins. A wider public was reached through books like Hugo's *Nôtre Dame de Paris* (1832). The lithographs in *Voyages Pittoresques et Romantiques de l'Ancienne France*, published by Nodier, Cailleux and Taylor between 1820 and 1878 not only emphasised the decay but recorded buildings that it became impossible to save. So did the more scientific drawings being done by members of regional societies of antiquaries, particularly that founded by Arcisse de Caumont in Normandy, who first tried to formulate ideas about how medieval architecture had developed as well as a language for describing it.

This is one of the great achievements of these pioneers. Up to this point there was effectively no generally accepted language to describe medieval buildings. There were no architects trained in their care. There was no recognition that the way building methods developed could be analysed historically. Boeswillwald's unfortunate predecessor at Laon, Van Cleemputte, a man so disabled that he had to rely on his pupils' drawings to decide what to do, seemed to Mérimée to think of late medieval arches as a decorative finish, not as a potential structural solution.

The arrival of the July Monarchy in 1830 changed everything. The historian Guizot was given the key appointment of Minister of the Interior. In October of that year he gained acceptance by the new king, Louis Philippe, of his report on the need for an Inspector General of Historic Monuments who would travel throughout France and record the importance of each building, its state of repair, the whereabouts of relevant documentation and the building's ownership. This was to be done involving prefects and municipalities, so that neither ignorance nor hasty action would add to the list of casualties and also to ensure that local effort was not wasted on the unimportant. The prefects' 1837 lists were an essential basis for the work of the Commission for Historic Monuments. By then a patchy but increasingly active and scholarly regional network was developing and a perhaps over romantic and elegiac public sensibility had been created, which could be mobilised when the allocation of funds for conservation was challenged by the demands of commercial progress or the need for new churches to be built as the population shifted away from the country.

Both Vitet and Mérimée were part of the literary and political world that brought about the July Monarchy. Vitet married the daughter of the Prime Minister, Casimir-Perier, and was only twenty-eight when appointed. His was a roving commission, supported neither by law or a significant budget. All the same he saved the cloister at Moissac from the railway company whose preferred route it blocked and rescued the ancient baptistery of St John at Poitiers. He set the pattern of travelling throughout France to see the buildings at first hand and meet the people who could help (or hinder) and in 1833 he achieved the passage of a law which gave his office some authority against unwilling proprietors. Himself a scholar and the historian of Noyon cathedral, he established the twin roles of forming an inventory and saving the buildings. He wrote that the great merit of a repair was that it should be unnoticeable, not what the SPAB would come to approve, but at

least a first step towards a philosophy in an area where previously little thought had been applied.

Elected a deputy in 1834, Vitet was subsequently appointed Secretary-general of Commerce and resigned as Inspector General. He remained a member of the Commission for Historic Monuments, soon becoming its chairman. In the minutes of its meetings one is constantly aware of his influence: for example, the common sense view that buried objects tend to be safely preserved, the focus must be on what's above ground. He was conciliatory and probing and always seeing that there was agreement to take action.

The Commission argued over whether to do a few major repairs or many minor ones, especially in areas where political support could be won. The latter prevailed because it was vital to retain cross-party support, in a largely indifferent legislature, for the steadily increasing amounts of money needed. They argued about where objects discovered should be displayed, locally or centrally. Taylor and others were keen to encourage local responsibility, the cynical Mérimée was a centraliser.

It was Vitet who saw to it that the principles behind decisions were established. For instance, the impoverished village at Namps-au-Val should be supported, but new work, such as the decoration and archaeologically questionable repairs to capitals at Billom should not. At Ligugé, architecturally unimportant but significant in monastic history, there should be a token contribution. English precedents were quoted when deciding to save the unroofed ruin at Silvacane, too remotely situated to be a parish church, a seminary or a school. Mérimée, whose basic concern was that the remains of the past should be honoured, has been described as the 'animateur'; but behind it all was Vitet's vision of history, like a skilled sculptor, returning to monuments the liveliness of their youth, reviving the memories that decorated them, revealing their lost meaning and provoking scorn for the vandals who planned their ruin.

Thiers, who had succeeded Guizot, replaced Vitet with Prosper Mérimée, who retained the post until he became a Senator nineteen years later. Mérimée had been a civil servant since 1830 and welcomed the appointment because it suited his tastes, his love of travel and his idleness. The last certainly remained unsatisfied and there are moments in his correspondence when he wearied of the ceaseless travel (he made fourteen major tours of mainland France and Corsica) by whatever form of transport was available, staying as often as not in dirty accommodation with poor food. In his account of La Charité-sur-Loire one almost senses his sympathy with the Zouave billeted in the ruins who was reported to have smashed off the head of a carving of God the Father because he had created bedbugs as well as man.

Born in Paris in 1803, Mérimée was the son of two artists. His father was also a teacher and very interested in the chemistry of pigment, a scientific concern he bequeathed to his son. His mother, with whom Mérimée lived until her death in 1852, taught him the motto 'Souviens-toi de te méfier', helpful in dealing with municipal officials and architects, but a prescription for a lonely life. Both parents



Fig. 3 (*left*)  
La Charité-sur-Loire  
in the 1950s.  
The commercial use  
Mérimée deplored has  
now been replaced by  
the Tourist Office

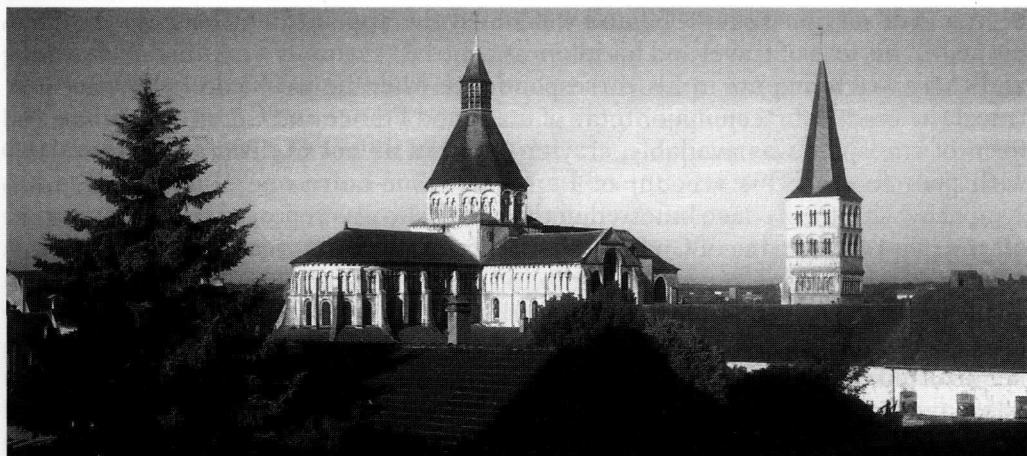


Fig. 4 (*below*)  
La Charité-sur-Loire  
2002

were unbelievers and anti-clerical, as was Mérimée himself except perhaps at the very end. This did not prevent him from admiring the churches of France or the few clergy, as at St Maximin and Souvigny, who went to great lengths to care for the buildings entrusted to them. He would probably not have dissociated himself from Maurice Barrès' words in 1912: 'la moindre église rurale enrichit la vie locale et constitue pour ceux-là mêmes qui la regardent du dehors, une valeur spirituelle'.

His parents also bequeathed a great affection for Britain. Hazlitt, Copley Fielding and Fuseli were all friends of the family. In the years when Mérimée was growing up, Hazlitt was at the peak of his reputation as a radical critic. He did much to give the Romantic poets a sense of being a party within the literary world, he attacked conservatism wherever he found it and he struggled with 'how writers reconcile their commitment to the external and political world with their immersion in the imagination'. All of this could have been written of Mérimée. Again it was to England that he turned as he was about to set out on his first tour of France, asking Sutton Sharpe to bring him the essays on medieval architecture of Warton, Bentham, Grose and Milner, published in 1806.

By 1808 these essays were already into a third edition. They were expressly intended to meet 'the want of a convenient manual'. Bentham undermined the idea that the pointed arch was imported by Crusaders who had seen Saracenic work, but it was Milner, with examples (many illustrated) from Winchester Cathedral and St Cross, who started to demonstrate how the date of a building could be ascertained from looking at it. Other illustrations were of Westminster Abbey, Norwich Castle and Durham Cathedral ('by Mr. Turner') and of details from parish churches in Kent, Norfolk and Suffolk. Mérimée would have been uneasy with the statement that the size of the cathedrals was 'closely connected with our ideas of the grand and sublime' but would have endorsed the essays' purpose to ensure 'that the skill and taste of our ancient builders will be handed down to posterity in defiance of the destroying hands of time, or modern innovators'.

This change in taste was captured in the recent Thomas Girtin exhibition in London, work of only a few years earlier than Warton's book. The market was basically for romantic ruins, into which Girtin introduced powerful feelings. This approach Mérimée was to criticise in Taylor and Nodier's work, but the protest is also beginning to make itself heard: the agricultural use of Lindisfarne Abbey and the recording of at least some details of the Savoy Chapel, just before it was too late. Girtin visited France during the brief respite given by the Peace of Amiens. After Waterloo there seems to have been a frenzied rush, in both directions, British visitors to Normandy being shocked by the condition of many of the buildings and so contributing to the initiative started by Arcisse de Caumont.

English was one of the half-dozen or so languages (including Spanish, Russian and Romany) in which Mérimée was fluent. Taine commented on his English style and demeanour. He first visited England in 1826 and returned many times. One of his close friends was the barrister, Sutton Sharp, and another the Whig politician Edward Ellice, Grey's brother-in-law. After Mérimée became a senator the two were sometimes an informal bridge between their countries' administrations.

In 1835 Mérimée expressed uneasiness about the principles of repair followed by English architects. In the previous year, he had written to Arcisse de Caumont 'les réparateurs sont peut-être aussi dangereux que les destructeurs'; a year later he was to write in his report on the Baptistery of St John at Poitiers that 'we should add nothing to what time has left to us'. Later, in 1837, in connection with repairs to Jacques Coeur's house in Bourges, he wrote 'In a word, one must restore what has been damaged, but not replace what has been completely lost'. Seven years later he was to write 'You may only reproduce what manifestly already exists'. There was to be no room for invention. It would be interesting to explore what formed such views and what if any cross fertilisation there was across the Channel in relation to ideas about architectural conservation. He took violently against Robert Smirke's 1828 restoration of the Temple church; he would have been even more

horrified by what followed in 1840-2. A few years later he saw Barry and Pugin's House of Commons and found it monstrous.

In terms of these proto-Morris principles Mérimée did not end where he began. His early sponsorship of Viollet-le-Duc in particular is held against him. The appointment of Leduc (as he is often spelt in Mérimée's letters) at Vézelay in his late twenties gave the young architect an amazingly early break. The need was urgent, stones falling around Mérimée's head as he sketched the building, and architects with an understanding of medieval building almost non-existent. The municipality was poor, often hostile, so funding would have to

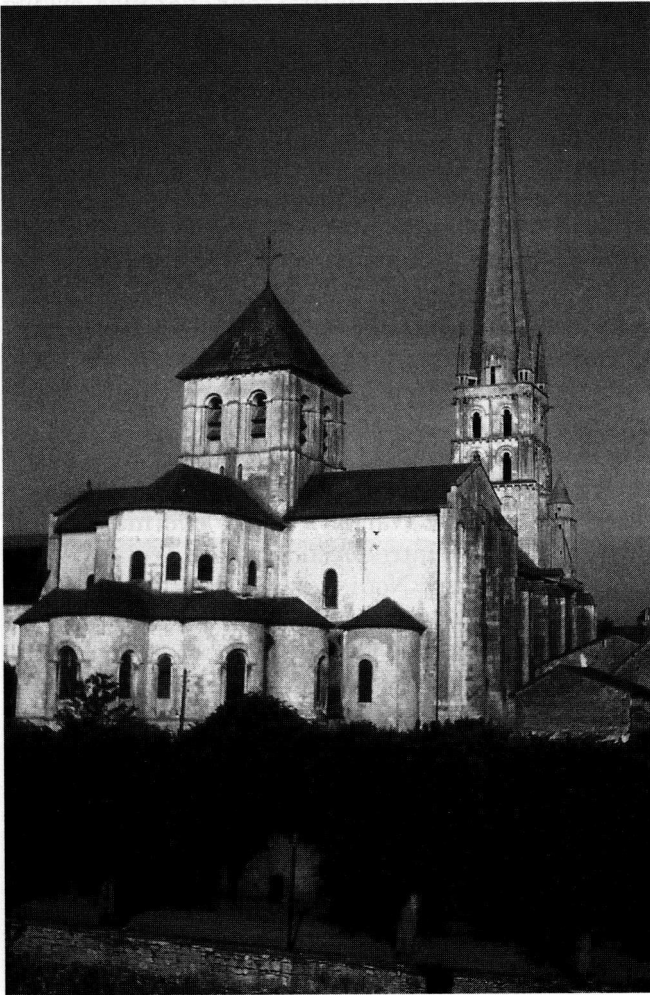


Fig. 5  
St Savin-sur-Gartempe 2003



come from the state which gave it power to over-rule the appointment of a local man. Mérimée was uneasy about much of what was done at Vézelay but with all of France to cover he had to trust the man on the spot. With Segrétain in Deux Sèvres he was fortunate, but even Joly-Leterme, who commended himself by his work at Cunault, let some things go at St Savin, which he should not have done. Gradually the Commission became bolder in introducing Paris-based architects; even more gradually local men emerged who could be relied upon.

Mérimée should not be blamed because Viollet-le-Duc turned himself from practitioner into law-giver, a Mosaic temptation to which architects elsewhere have succumbed. What is important is that Mérimée did not leave a philosophical strait-jacket as part of his legacy. On the contrary, he started a debate which is still lively, not just in France and Britain; and yet did not allow the joy of debate to prevent him from taking action. Evidence of the debate is to be found in Monique Chatenet's article, where she expresses alarm about architects 'playing games with the ancient heritage'.

On recent visits to France we have seen plenty of evidence of this debate. At Blécourt, north of Chaumont, we were told that some shards by the wallbases had been used as justification for re-roofing in full Burgundian diamond fig and through the scaffolding at Neuilly-en-Donjon one glimpsed a lot more gold than one would expect. Our French was not up to challenging the architect, who happened to be on site, but what was encouraging was the methodical way in which the lovely churches of the Brionnais were being repaired one by one. Mérimée would have approved the thoroughness of the approach and one can only hope that rescue will soon come to the collapsing church at Les Riceys and to the domed church at Pargues near by. Monique Chatenet probably would not approve of the delightful repairs at Glaine Montaignut, reproducing the Auvergnat colour scheme on the columns of the nave, using natural pigments which would have been available at the time of the original construction; and on the reverse of the tympanum above the west door there is now a mural reproduction of a well-known Millet. As Lutyens wrote in a different context 'Very naughty but in the right spirit'.

What Mérimée did leave was a tally of some four hundred buildings that were saved or on the way to being so and a budget multiplied fourteen times in as many years. The unicorn tapestries now in the Musée de Cluny were rescued from Boussac, though not before one had been made into domestic napery. His most famous monument is St Savin, with its wallpaintings, and there are also the glass at St Urbain in Troyes, the sculptures and tower at Charroux, the theatres at Arles and Orange, the abbey at Le Thoronet, which Le Corbusier admired, a house at St Gilles, as well as the church and a roll-call of wonderful buildings: La Charité-sur-Loire, Conques, where local pride contributed a large proportion of the funding, St. Benoît, Vézelay, Issoire. How many times one finds oneself in a rue Prosper Mérimée!

These were also the years of the books for which he is best known: *La Vénus d'Ille* in 1837, *Colomba* in 1841 and *Carmen* in 1845. In later years he complained that writing the descriptions of the churches and the long journeys had prevented

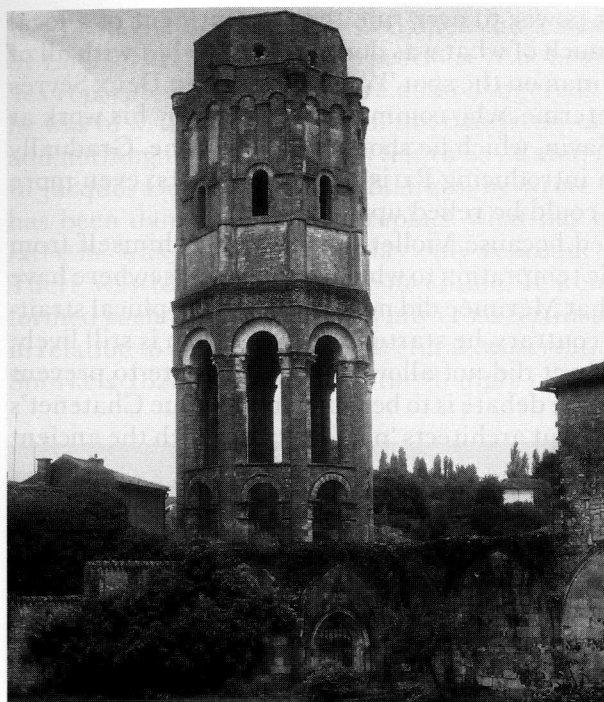
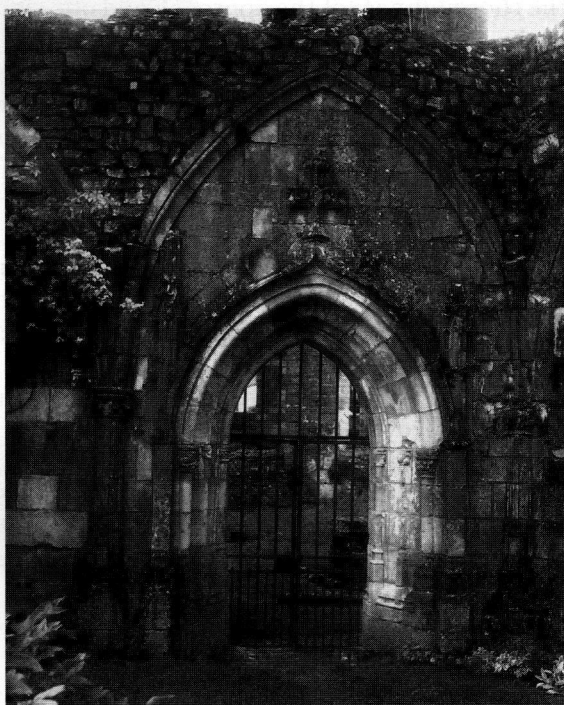


Fig. 6  
Charroux, where precious sculptures  
were buried under the faggots for a  
baker's oven

Fig. 7  
The cloister at Charroux.  
Mérimée enjoyed the worldly conversation  
of the school's headmistress



him from doing as much creative work as he wished. He is also quoted as saying that he was so wrapped up in doing detailed descriptions of the buildings that he failed to register their poetry; one thinks of his meticulous and eventually baffled unpicking of the building history of Souvigny. Very occasionally the poetry breaks through even in his official reports, as at the Pont du Gard, the approaches to Conques or Vézelay, proudly on its hill above the morning mist. One is reminded of the late Donald Finlay, another beautiful writer and meticulous describer of churches for the Council for the Care of Churches, whose feelings about the buildings and their settings only occasionally break through the formality of his reports, as at Stapleford or when walking down the long track through seven gates to Ninekirks in daffodil time.

As well as the books there is the correspondence. Mérimée wrote hundreds of letters. Many were to Vitet to whom he reported officially and also unofficially. There are the letters to Jenny Dacquin, which she published after his death. Her letters to him, and everyone else's, were lost when his apartment was burnt during the Commune. There are also the letters to the Countess of Montijo, whom he had encountered by chance on a coach in Spain, the country he preferred even to



Fig. 8

Pont-du-Gard

'The wild situation, the complete solitude, the roar of the torrent: all added a sublime poetry to the imposing architecture before my eyes'

England. He acted as an uncle to her daughters when they came to Paris. When the younger became Napoleon III's Empress, Mérimée became a courtier. Friendship with Hugo did not last, but Stendhal travelled with him on part of his 1837 journey to the Auvergne and in later years he was close to and a translator of Turgenev. An unhappy one night stand with George Sand did not stop her seeking or him providing help with the wall-paintings at Vicq in 1849.

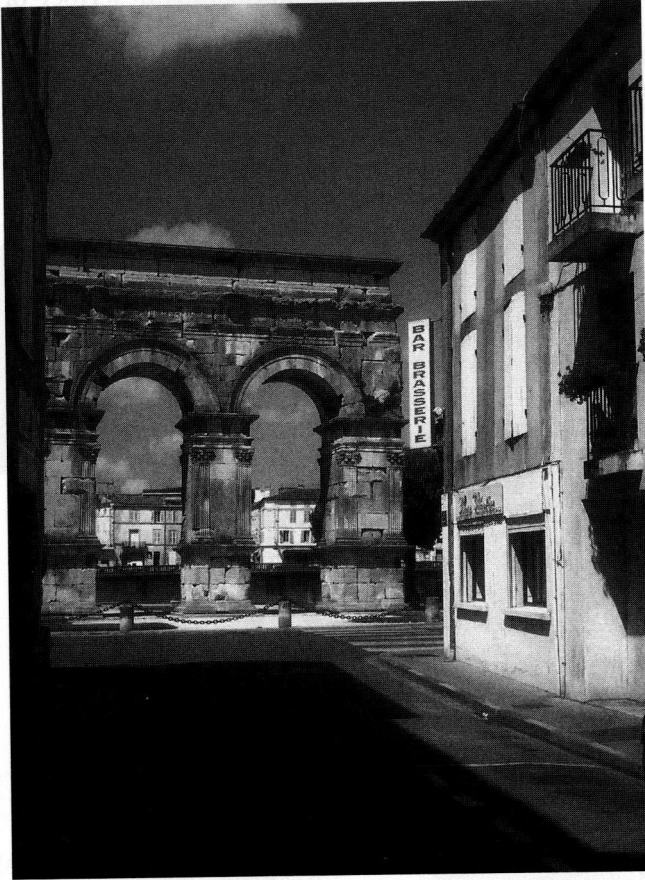


Fig. 9  
Saintes, the Arch of Germanicus, subject of one of  
Mérimée's great battles

The letters give a feel for what he was doing in a way that official reports cannot, even though in many of them there is little detail about the buildings. He would complain of bumpy roads, lousy inns, inadequate meals and the obligation to attend provincial functions when he would have preferred to spend an evening with a Marseillaise or Arlesienne. (He noted the none too penitent Magdalen in the church at Oiron.) At Avignon he would fight against another railway company wanting to take the most direct route, at the expense of the old walls and to the profit of some of the City Fathers. At St Jouin-des-Marnes he despaired, for the stone was like lumps of sugar that had been steeped in water and repairs would cost the whole national budget for a year (it was done in the end). He fought the army for buildings at Saintes and for once he lost but a later generation succeeded. He

fought the prison service over St Savinien at Melle where sculptures were to be destroyed because they would give handholds for prisoners trying to escape.

His invective is as ferocious as Betjeman's. If he had had the arranging of the Inferno, the priests at Chauvigny and Nôtre Dame du Port (painting the crypt like a beer cellar) would have been in the lowest circle of all. He found five hundred soldiers barracked with their horses in the Dominicans' church in Toulouse 'drawing

what I dare not describe to you' on the walls, and in a Nevers latrine he found a fine sculpture of Christ giving the keys to St Peter. Occasionally his descriptions of early carvings would be in Latin (another language!), for fear of upsetting readers – Gibbon's 'decent obscurity of a learned language', a phrase he may well have known and would have loved. Time, pollution or prudery have subsequently effaced some of the images.

Deteriorating health led him to spend more and more time at Cannes, but he lived to see the defeat of France in 1870. His friends were expecting his death that June but he summoned the energy to get to Paris for the debates in the Senate. He tried to reach the Tuileries to see his beloved Eugénie, but the crowds prevented him. On September 10th he returned to Cannes and died on the 23rd, two hours after finishing his last letter to Jenny Dacquain.

Monique Chatenet's article is a reminder that the protection of the heritage has two hundred years of history of its own and I hope it will encourage further work, with a particular emphasis on the influences on repair philosophy, to and fro, across the Channel. There is something to be learnt, using experience in totally different areas, about what brings an idea whose time has come to fruition. The emergence of the Victorian Society and the Redundant Churches Fund are other examples. In both cases the pioneers had difficulty getting their voices heard, but the critical mass of support needed for their survival was in existence and alert. To survive is one thing, to grow can be much harder. Here we can learn from the Guizot, Vitet, Mérimée model, so similar to the IBM model of the 1970s for encouraging innovation: the high level umbrella holder, the supervisor who could obtain budgets and fix most territorial disputes and the innovator with hands and mind free.

When we were at Conques John Betjeman was beginning to sensitise a wider public to how precious are our buildings and, particularly, their settings. In France in the second quarter of the nineteenth century that role had been played by Hugo and others; but it was Mérimée whose passion, scholarly reports and political dexterity enabled funding to be secured, a formidable combination of Betjeman, Pevsner and Bulmer-Thomas. With all the current anxiety about a new wave of church redundancies, perhaps we need to find a Mérimée for the twenty-first century.

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Hugh Haughton and Kate Weaver have substantially improved this article with their advice and comments.

All photographs illustrating this paper are by the author.