

***Defying the Nazis:*
A Review Article**

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Village of Secrets: Defying the Nazis in Vichy France

Caroline Moorehead

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In its remote position high up in the relative isolation of the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon, in the Auvergne region, le Chambon sur Lignon is a small, arguably nondescript French village. It might easily be overlooked. It is, however, the ‘Village of Secrets’ of distinguished biographer Caroline Moorehead’s most recent book, the *Sunday Times* Top Five Bestseller, *Village of Secrets: Defying the Nazis in Vichy France*.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once suggested, ‘there is properly no history; only biography’.¹ Moorehead was encouraged to conceive her previous book, the *New York Times* bestseller, *A Train in Winter* (2012), as a biography of a group of French women of the Resistance carried by train to Auschwitz.² In a similar vein, *Village of Secrets* could be understood as a biography of the people of le Chambon sur Lignon and the surrounding villages and countryside and of those whose lives they touched. According to Moorehead, among the overall population of 24,000, the community in question comprised some 9,000 Protestants of Huguenot extraction. Of these, some 2,000 were ‘Darbyists’ or ‘an even smaller and more obscure sect, the Ravenists’ (104). Moorehead characterises the Darbyists as

1. R. W. Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (New York, 2010), 6.

2. ‘Caroline Moorehead on writing, biography and research’; Interview for the Sydney Writers’ Festival, May 2012. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A140_G8UOFQ>, accessed Sept. 2014.

‘followers of a nineteenth-century English preacher, John Darby, sober, austere, very private people sometimes likened to Quakers and the Amish’ (104).

We might be forgiven for thinking that in such a rural, arguably backward, place, nothing much might happen. Appearances, however, are not always what they seem. Moorehead charts in this book a complex map of the experiences of a network of individuals and families united by their relationships to the Plateau. Particularly under her focus are the years just before and throughout the Second World War, set against the canvas of France and the wider backdrop of wartime Europe. The events that unfolded in le Chambon itself and in the surrounding area, as presented by Moorehead, fall into two periods; the first characterised by a distinctive pacifism, espoused by the leaders of the Protestant community, the second, from late 1943 onwards, increasingly militant. Moorehead reflects, finally, on the complex residues left by the events of this time in collective and individual memory, both on the Plateau itself, and across the world.

In the early twentieth century, the people of le Chambon and its hinterland had become accustomed to providing hospitality for tourists seeking the peace and quiet of the unspoilt countryside and the respite of the healthy mountain air. Their hospitality was extended, in time, to refugees of the Spanish Civil War. This was, however but a prelude to a period of great significance that is the focus of this book. Throughout the Second World War, the people of the Plateau opened their homes and lives to many Jewish refugees, particularly but not exclusively children, who sought refuge from the horrors they faced elsewhere in France. On the quiet Plateau they found help in a time of unspeakable need. The book is testament that, for an acclaimed biographer such as Caroline Moorehead, with an interest in human rights, pacifism, terrorism and refugees, le Chambon sur Lignon’s story proves to be a fitting and worthy subject. As Pierre Bloch, one of the Jewish survivors of the period put it: “‘We lived a very big adventure, an exceptional moment of time and place. ... There was something in the air, in the spirit of the people, that none of us ever forgot. All my life I have tried to live up to that moment’” (340).

Moorehead paints a graphic picture of the humiliating and harrowing experiences Jewish people and other persecuted minorities faced in France at the time. She uncovers the hunger and squalor of the refugee camps at Rivesaltes and Gurs, in Southern France, in which dispossessed families and individuals were housed when expelled by the Germans from Occupied France. She explains how families were separated, how individuals were deprived of their freedom and dignity, and how many were sent to hard labour or to death by gas. Moorehead's eye for detail makes the incredible all too real. She notes that in the refugee camp in Gurs, for example, 1,000 people died in 1941 alone. She notes too that one little girl, whose name was Sylvia Menker, was gassed on her first birthday in February 1943, 'a murderous month' (208).

Moorehead brings the period under her focus to life by tracing the personal stories of a number of individuals, listed as 'Principal Characters' at the start of the book. These include the pastors of the Protestant congregations who lived out in such an exemplary way the compassion they preached in their sermons in their *temples protestants*. Of these, the resourceful André Trocmé and his wife Magda, together with their children, stand out. So, too, does Daniel Curtet who wrote many letters to his parents detailing the efforts to save the Jews, using elaborate code to protect identities, referring to the operation of finding homes for them in terms of the collection of rare books, or using Biblical references as an allegorical cover. The protagonists also include local people and residents—teachers, young people and politicians to name a few—who played instrumental roles in the saving of lives. Families like the Bards, for example, a Darbyist couple, recently bereaved of a daughter, who took in Simon Liwerant and shared their lives with him. The energetic and compassionate young village doctor, Le Forestier, taken with a group of 120 prisoners to an abandoned house and shot at the orders of Klaus Barbie, just days before the liberation. The abandoned house was then doused in petrol and set alight. Concealing Jewish refugees was not easy; the cost was, for some, the ultimate sacrifice. The Principal Characters include, too, the refugees themselves, many of whom were children. Max and Hanne, who fall in love, survive the

war and enjoy a long marriage. Simon Liwerant, the boy taken in by the Darbyist Bard family, aged 13 and-a-half when he arrived at the Plateau, and his little brother Jacques, aged only 2 years and 4 months. Simon being the older of the two shouldered a heavy responsibility. Separated physically from their parents, the brothers were to become irreparably separated emotionally from each other as a consequence of their trauma. Finally the Principal Characters include the Jewish rescuers, the Germans and the collaborators, all with their parts to play. Many stories are woven together into a complex, at times dizzying, tapestry.

At pains to put the record straight in this book concerning the 'crucial' contribution of the Darbyists and Ravenists to the sheltering of Jews on the Plateau, Moorehead appears determined to redress imbalances in previous accounts of the period (104). As she points out in her Afterword, in Philip Hallie's book *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed* (1979), for example, 'The Darbyists are nowhere to be seen' (332). Moorehead puts this down, partly at least, to the 'Habitual modesty and silence' of the people themselves (337). She notes too, that due to the self-effacement she encountered in her own research amongst the contemporary Darbyist community 'there are very few Darbyists among the Justes' recognised by Israel (339). 'There was not just one village, le Chambon', she writes, 'but half a dozen others across the whole of the Plateau of the Vivarais-Lignon, as well as many outlying hamlets, and not one Protestant pastor, but 24, along with members of other Protestant faiths, like the Darbyists and the Ravenists, descendants of followers of the Plymouth Brethren, as well as Catholics and many who professed no religion at all' (10).

With this in mind perhaps, Moorehead dedicates the final section of Chapter 5, 'Walking near the Lord', to an exploration of the history of the Brethren groups on the Plateau, tracing their roots to the influence of John Nelson Darby himself, who preached, in the Haute Loire area in 1837, and on the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon specifically, in 1849, to 'crowds gathered from all over the region to hear him speak' (108). Referenced sources Moorehead draws on in this section include Coad's *A History of the Brethren Movement* (1967), Maillebois's *Un Darbyste au XIXième siècle. Vie et Pensées*

de A. Dentan (1990), and Nicole and Cuendot's *Darbyisme et Assemblées Dissidentes* (1962). Moorehead argues that in the Huguenot and Camisard people of the Plateau, John Nelson Darby 'found fertile ground' (106). As a figure, she characterises Darby as 'a fine looking man with intense, deep-set eyes', an excellent linguist and prolific writer, but by nature 'irascible and disputatious' (107). His sermons she deems 'Essentially mystical rather than theological'. She notes that he taught his 'devoted and zealous' audiences that 'God ... was a covenant keeping God, whose honour and integrity were linked to Israel, where Jews should be returned to their own land' (107). Noting too, however, that the Brethren groupings were 'prone to schisms and jealousies', Moorehead concludes that Darby 'remained a complex, enigmatic and authoritarian figure, thriving on ceaseless controversy, and he seems to have believed that he personally had been granted unique insight into the scriptures and appointed by God as an emissary to battle the forces of evil' (108). Moorehead's careful biographer's eye is not neglectful of Frederick Edward Raven and his role in the shaping of Brethren groups on the Plateau, although the picture she paints here is altogether more limited.

Both the Darbyists and the Ravenists of the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon, one of the largest Brethren communities in Europe at the time according to Moorehead, 'settled into parallel lives of quiet piety largely unaltered by the advent of war' (109). They are characterised in this book as morally conscious, staunch, and pious, but austere. 'What Darbyist children would remember as they grew up', writes Moorehead, 'was the silences, the lack of laughter'. 'True Darbyist or Ravenist faith', she argues, 'meant no cafés, cinemas, bars, alcohol, dancing, hotels, parties, or even church festivals. It also meant being alive to the fate of the Jews, the chosen people, whose salvation was implicit for their own' (110). Moorehead depicts the Brethren of the Plateau as self-contained, even 'dour' (188), going about their lives in an 'orderly, separate, silent way' (163).

Later in the book, however, she argues that 'The famous Darbyist silence was shared by them all, Catholics and Protestants alike; none of them, as she said, were talkative people' (238). It is hard to know,

then, if the said silence was ecclesiological or simply cultural. Moreover, there is evidence in the book of at least some degree of integration with the wider community. Le Forestier, a much loved young doctor, one of the key figures in the Protestant community on the Plateau, married the granddaughter of a Darbyist. In the village of Fay, 'As long as the children married within the Protestant faith, mixed marriages were accepted' (178). Moorehead notes that Pastor Curtet, who came to live and minister on the Plateau in 1942, and who admired the Darbyists as discrete and reliable, developed close relationships with them and 'noted with pleasure that in his regular congregation there were now as many Darbyists as Protestants' (183).

Accordingly perhaps, Moorehead suggests the Darbyists were not in the end immune from the more militant tendencies in the growing resistance movement on the Plateau towards the end of the war, nor from the human cost it entailed. A café in Yssingaux in the north of the Plateau, owned by daughter of a Darbyist, Dorcas Robert, became a hiding place for Service de Travail Obligatoire (STO) evaders, for example (201). In time, another café and grocery store, in the village of Mazet, became an arms depot for the armed resisters. The violent joint Vichy-France and German military response to this resulted in two young men losing their lives. On 24 April 1943 'Pastor Jeannet, Pastor Besson and a Darbyist preacher together officiated at the funeral of the dead men in the temple in Mazet; the congregation overflowed into the square outside' (280).

The much anticipated end of the war and liberation of France eventually came for the people of the Plateau, bringing with it both relief and further complication. The relationships host families had established with the children they had been sheltering were altered, often painfully, as attempts were made to reunite Jewish children with their birth families, or to place them into Jewish contexts once again. Not all of the children wanted to leave, and not all of the families wanted to let them go.

Moorehead's historical research is meticulous and diligent. As a result the book is highly informative, a must-read for anyone wishing to understand the events of this period of French history better. As a

skilled biographer, though, she goes further. By focusing on the details of peoples' lives, personalities and relationships, the reader comes to understand that suffering, far from being abstract, operates on the level of the individual, the family and the community. The only disappointment is that, although Moorehead's portrayal of the Darbyists and the Ravenists as a group is comprehensive, she offers relatively limited information about their individual lives and personalities, due, in all likelihood, to the self effacement she emphasises. They do seem less vibrant, less colourful as people for this.

On the whole, however, the overarching tragedies and triumphs of French and European history are depicted here as inextricably interwoven with the psychology and experience of the individual; the actions of each individual we are introduced to are seen to have implications for others. Perhaps this is why Moorehead returns to the figure of Darby himself in her Afterword, imagining him returning to the Plateau and finding that in many ways little had changed. The influence of Darby's life and teaching, on the other hand, turned out, in this case, in Moorehead's view, to be 'crucial' to the course of history.

This is a wonderful book. It lays before the reader, in sharp contrast, both the capacity for human kindness and the darkness of man's inhumanity to man. It testifies that amidst the bleakest of historical landscapes, faith, hope, and charity remain. As Caroline Moorehead explained in a recent interview: "I've always been drawn to the dark side of life ... I think life is a tough and difficult place and people have a difficult time in general and I'm interested in that ... this new book ... is a good story. It's a story about people being saved".³

As we encounter in this book the lived lives of men and women, children and families, congregations and communities, we gain a weighty sense of personal responsibility. Each life matters; even in a

3. 'Interview with Caroline Moorehead OBE, FRSL', <<http://www.newyorksocialdiary.com/social-history/2012/interview-with-caroline-moorehead-obe-frsl>>, accessed 18 Sept. 2014.

small, remote place like le Chambon. Caroline Moorehead went to interview Max and Hanne, two of the surviving Jewish children who later married, in their home in New York. By then, the couple had reached their nineties. For Max and Hanne, and surely for us, the challenge of the story of le Chambon so lucidly told in this book is this: 'which of us would have done the same' (340).