

**Sébastien RICHEZ, “Postal service in Calvados in the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (“La Poste dans le Calvados au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Dominique Barjot, Caen / Basse-Normandie, 1997, 178 p. + annexes.**

The subject area of this master’s thesis is the immersion of the Calvados region at the core of one of the most powerful 19<sup>th</sup>-c. administrations, namely, the French Post Office. We measure the vital importance of postal service both to the population and as an important source of revenue for the State, measured on the scale of a rich coastal department. With its unique features – rich agricultural and industrial resources, budding tourist attractions, a dynamic coastline, and political conservatism – the Calvados department was emblematic against all odds of a national Post Office whose activities, services, and personnel were clearly on the rise.

How did these characteristics manifest themselves? In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Calvados became covered with different types and levels of post offices, and a multitude of new offices were set up along its abandoned coastline. Economic growth fueled postal allowances and fomented the flow of the mail; the department is located in an area of northeastern France, on a direct line between Saint-Malo and Geneva that pulsed with more business, correspondence, and circulation activity than the rest of the country.

Postal employees provided support for these observations; they were unified by name but highly diversified with respect to the services they provided. Despite the professional prestige of the work sector, hiring was not easily accomplished across the board: the mail carrier’s job was exhausting, with daily rounds often exceeding 30 km; the postmaster’s occupation was all encompassing – this civil servant often sacrificed his personal life to his profession -; postal workers were badly paid but observed and judged by everyone, from the prefect, who was the real boss of the postal service in the department, to customers who tended to appropriate the mail carrier or the post office for themselves.

The rural mail carrier had become the cornerstone of postal service since 1830. He was the Good Samaritan, the messenger, bearer of news, public writer or reader, a “civil servant as a Jack-of-all-trades.” The position of postmaster, or rather post mistress, since women usually occupied these positions in the countryside, was held by important local individuals because of the professional patina associated with the occupation and not because of financial or familial status.

The study of the working Post Office in the Calvados, its development, dysfunctions, and interactions allows us to look more deeply at everyday operations of power, institutional exchanges, and local struggles of competing influences all involved in obtaining, preserving, or growing a public service that was already considered to be of vital importance by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.