The Old Cévenol

The Old Cévenol

Or, Anecdotes of the Life of Ambroise Borély

Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Étienne

North Pass Press

2026

The Old Cévenol; or, Anecdotes of the Life of Ambroise Borély
First Edition

Published by North Pass Press, 2026
https://northpass.press

All rights reserved.
The original text of this work is in the public domain.
Original material © 2026 North Pass Press.

Translated from the French by Alfred E. Seddon (1911).

Contents

A Note On This Edition	1
Notice On Rabaut-Saint-Etienne	5
Chapter One	23
Chapter Two	29
Chapter Three	31
Chapter Four	39
Chapter Five	45
Chapter Six	51
Chapter Seven	57
Chapter Eight	61
Chapter Nine	65
Chapter Ten	73
Chapter Eleven	79
Chapter Twelve	83
Chapter Thirteen	93
Chapter Fourteen	95
Chapter Fifteen	99
Chapter Sixteen	101
Chapter Seventeen	113

A Note On This Edition

Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Étienne wrote *The Old Cévenol* not as a historian, but as an advocate. The year was 1778, and the Protestants of France had lived for nearly a century under the shadow of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes—stripped of legal marriage, denied civil burial, barred from trades and offices, and subject at any moment to the forced baptism of their children. Rabaut Saint-Étienne, himself the son of a pastor who had ministered illegally in the wilderness for decades, knew this history not as an abstraction but as the condition of his own family and community.

His answer was a work of fiction: the biography of one Ambroise Borély, a Huguenot of the Cévennes who was born in 1671 and died in London in 1774 at the remarkable age of one hundred and three years, seven months, and four days. Through this single long life, Rabaut Saint-Étienne arranged the entire machinery of French Protestant persecution to pass in review. Borély is present at the Dragonnades, witnesses the destruction of his family under the soldiers of conversion, is refused legal marriage, sees his children declared illegitimate by law, watches friends condemned to the galleys, and observes with patient, ironic clarity the full extent of what a Christian kingdom was willing to do to its own people in the name of religious uniformity.

The tone is deliberate and distinctive. Rabaut Saint-Étienne was a satirist in the tradition of Voltaire, whom he had read carefully, and the irony of *The Old Cévenol* is dry, sustained, and sometimes sharp to the point of severity. He praised the edicts of persecution as wise policy. He commended

the ingenuity of their enforcers. He reported atrocities with the calm voice of a man recording admirable achievements. The effect, for any reader not entirely without feeling, is devastating.

The work appeared anonymously in Geneva in 1779 and went through several editions in Rabaut Saint-Étienne's lifetime. The definitive edition—the one he personally prepared and saw through the press—was published in 1788, the year before the Revolution. It was this edition that restored the author's original title, *Le Vieux Cévenol*, and that presented the text as Rabaut Saint-Étienne himself had written it, without the additions supplied by his Geneva editor Jacob Vernes in the first edition. This is the edition on which the present volume is based.

The English translation reproduced here was made by Alfred E. Seddon and published in 1911. It is faithful, fluent, and captures something of the ironic distance that makes the original so effective. Seddon's text has been lightly corrected where necessary but is otherwise presented as he left it.

A biographical notice on Rabaut Saint-Étienne, written by his friend François-Antoine de Boissy d'Anglas and prefixed to the collected works of 1821, follows this preface. Boissy d'Anglas had lived alongside Rabaut Saint-Étienne in Nîmes for ten years and was himself present at the Revolutionary Tribunal on the day Rabaut was condemned. He survived the Terror. His account is that of a friend writing from memory, and it preserves something that no historian's reconstruction can quite recover.

The Old Cévenol is not, in the end, merely a document of eighteenth-century religious controversy. The persecutions it describes belong to a specific time and place, but the question it poses is perennial: what becomes of a people when the law of the land declares them to have no legal existence? Borély's life is a long, patient answer. He endures because he must, remembers what he has seen, and at the last sets down his account in

a foreign country, among people who gave his people refuge when their own country would not.

North Pass Press
2026

Notice On Rabaut-Saint-Etienne

Jean-Paul Rabaut, called Saint-Étienne, author of the work you are about to read, was born in Nîmes around 1742: he was the eldest son of Paul Rabaut, so famous in the history of the Reformed churches of France, and whose name could not fail to attract upon him, from his very cradle, a cruel persecution. His mother had obtained only through a generous friendship the obscure refuge where she was to give birth to him. A price was put on Paul Rabaut's head[1] his wife was forced to hide like him, to escape captivity in the Tower of Constance, to which were delivered without judgment, not only the wives of Reformed ministers, but also those of the same sex who granted them refuge; and if her child had not been saved, during his early years, by maternal tenderness and by generous friendship, from the searches being made for him, he would have been taken from his parents and placed in some ecclesiastical educational institution, in accordance with the laws of those barbarous times, to receive the first principles of the Catholic religion, in the name of which his family was outlawed. He often told me that he never knew, during the day, where he would be taken

[1]And yet in his sermons and in his writings, he never lost the opportunity to defend the fidelity due to the King, and to calm the minds that might be embittered in those times by the persecutions taking place; one can see what I said of this so commendable man in the work entitled: Essai sur la vie et les opinions de M. de Malesherbes; since its publication, the editor of the Works of Rabaut-Saint-Étienne has recovered the Pastoral Letter of Paul Rabaut on the assassination attempt against Louis XV by Damiens; he has just published it in 18mo format; it reveals, better than anything I could say, the principles and conduct of this man so worthy of esteem.

to sleep at night; his father alone held the secret of the shared plan; and when they wanted to move him to a new location, he was carried off, at dusk, to the place where he was to be received. Despite this, he was able to find, in the secret care his father gave him and in the lessons of a few friends, the means to acquire the first elements of science and literature, which were to honor his name and console him in his misfortunes. But it is impossible not to remark here upon the fatality that pursued him all his life. He was born in outlawry and died its victim: though events changed greatly, misfortune never ceased to pursue him; and his final days flowed by, like his first, in the obscure refuge that generous friendship granted him at the risk of the greatest perils; but his last persecutors, it must be said, were even more cruel than the first.

As soon as he was a little advanced in age, he went to continue his studies in Switzerland, where foundations due to the munificence of the Protestant powers of Europe ensured young Frenchmen who devoted themselves to theological studies, the means to subsist abroad in a suitable manner. He brought to this task that constant and diligent application, the taste for which he owed primarily to the earliest habits of his life and to the forced isolation in which he had lived until then. His first teacher in Switzerland was the famous Court de Gébelin, who had retired there while waiting until he could gather, on a larger stage, the glory of his immense knowledge. Student and master formed from then on a bond of friendship that lasted forever. Rabaut-Saint-Étienne, who survived his former master, who had become his intimate friend, published at the time of his death a sort of analytical eulogy that met with success, and which the editor of his works placed at the head of the *Lettres à Bailly*.

Court de Gébelin initiated the young Rabaut into the principles upon which he himself later founded that historical system, of which his work titled *Le Monde primitif* presented only a part, and which was undoubtedly not given to the

brevity of a single man's life to develop in full and to display as a whole.

He taught him the scholarly languages and guided him in the study of historical facts that were tied to the very principles of those languages, so as to modify their spirit and, in a sense, create or alter their character.

Rabaut-Saint-Étienne hastened to embrace the perilous calling of his father, and to return among his compatriots to share his dangers and brave the religious persecution, which, although softened in some places, was nonetheless still very cruel. He often told me that the first news he learned of his province upon returning to France was that of the execution of the man named La Rochette, condemned to death by the Parliament of Toulouse for having, *in defiance of the ordinances, preached, administered the Lord's Supper, and solemnized baptisms and marriages…* This event did not discourage him at all; and soon after, within the jurisdiction of the same court of justice, he gave himself over to the duties of the ministry he was about to fulfill, and to preaching, which was its principal duty.

He was not long in achieving great success in this career. The gentleness of his manners, the goodness of his character, and the charms of his mind soon earned him a great number of supporters and an honorable renown. His eloquence was unctuous, and nourished by the principles and spirit of the sacred books, which Protestant orators always make very great use of: following his father's example, he constantly preached submission and fidelity to the King, and the most touching and pure morality. It can be said that never a single word of bitterness, nor a single provocation to revolt, defiled the speeches of either the one or the other; and their influence, which was great, was constantly employed in inspiring patience and resignation, in avoiding unrest, and in maintaining order and peace in regions that had so often been stained with blood—and were to be stained with blood again in so cruel a manner—by the errors of intolerance and fanaticism.

Rabaut-Saint-Étienne published several sermons delivered during political circumstances: the one on the marriage of King Louis XVI, the one on his coronation, and on the death of Louis XV, are full of gentleness and piety, and sometimes of that eloquence which touches and persuades through the feelings it expresses, rather than astonishing by the grandeur of its imagery and the speed of its movements, or convincing by the force of logic….. There was in his way of thinking and writing something of the precious talent of Massillon, whom he greatly admired and studied unceasingly. I have never heard anything more touching than the exhortations that, following the custom adopted in the Protestant church, he would bring to the sick and dying who called for his consolations.

He composed several writings in favor of tolerance, which his personal character, like his position and his religious principles, led him above all to desire, and to support the claims of Protestants to obtain it.

He conceived the idea of placing within a historical framework the laws issued since the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and he composed a sort of novel[2] quite biting in the manner of Voltaire, in which these laws are set in motion, which enjoyed considerable success when it appeared: it has been reprinted three times since, in 1820, 1821, and 1825. It has no doubt lost much of its merit, since the laws whose injustice and dangers it exposes no longer exist, and are not even, I believe, defended by those who would most desire to see them revived;[3] but it is always good to make known the errors of our fathers, as it is the surest way to safeguard our children from them; and the work in question is written in such a way as to be readable with pleasure at all times.[4]

---

[2] *Le Vieux Cevenol, ou Anecdotes de la vie d'Ambroise Borely, etc.* 1 vol. in-18 adorned with portraits. - The Old Cevenol, or Anecdotes of the life of Ambroise Borely, etc.

[3] Author's note: Oh yes; not long ago, the persecutions of Louis XIV and the horrors of St. Bartholomew's Day were called *necessary rigors*.

[4] I do not know for what consideration he did not insert the following anecdote, of which he nevertheless had knowledge, and which proves how

It was around the same period that the diocese of Nîmes lost its bishop, the dean or vice-dean of the bishops of France, M. de Becdelièvre, a venerable old man whose memory his diocesans long cherished with touching affection. He possessed none of the talents of his illustrious predecessor Fléchier, but he possessed his episcopal and sacred virtues, beneficence, and charity. He had occupied, for more than forty years, the difficult see of Nîmes, and his death was a general calamity, felt equally by Protestants and Catholics. He had indeed, at the beginning of his episcopate, given some proofs of intolerance, strongly supporting the erroneous opinion of those who wished to forcibly rebaptize, and into the Catholic Church, the children of Protestants who had only been baptized by their ministers according to the ceremonies of their religion; but he was not long in abandoning these principles of persecution, so opposed to the true character of the religion of Jesus Christ, and even to the decisions of the Catholic Church; and when he died, the generation then living could only be struck by his evangelical virtues, and could feel for his loss nothing but deep regret. Rabaut-Saint-Étienne was its touching interpreter, and composed his eulogy. The author of this *Notice*, who was then living in the city of Nîmes, sent it to M. de La Harpe, with whom he was connected. *You have sent me an excellent piece of*

much Louis XIV, so eager to honor glory and merit even among foreigners, became ungrateful toward his own subjects when it came to rewarding the services of those he regarded as heretics.

"Admiral Duquesne was a Protestant: he presented himself before the King toward the end of his brilliant career to ask for a reward to which he believed he was entitled; he barely made him understand that, not being Catholic, he could not obtain what he desired: 'When I served Your Majesty,' replied Duquesne, 'in a manner deserving of your approval, I did not inquire whether you professed a religion other than my own'; and he withdrew without pressing the matter further. He died shortly thereafter, and could only be buried at night and in a secretive manner in a field not far from his residence. After a few years, his son, who had taken refuge in Switzerland, came secretly to remove his remains and had a tomb built for him in his new homeland. He placed an inscription upon it stating that Admiral Ruyter had received a magnificent mausoleum from the Dutch, while Duquesne, who had always defeated him, had been unable, despite his services, to find in his own country the humblest asylum where his ashes could rest……."

writing, replied this illustrious critic; *this is true eloquence, that of the soul and of feeling. One sees that everything coming from the author's pen is inspired by the virtues he celebrates. I pray you to thank your worthy friend.* This extremely brief work was rediscovered; it is printed following *Le Vieux Cévenol.*

Rabaut-Saint-Étienne had very extensive literary and scientific knowledge; he even possessed a quite real poetic talent, which, if perfected by study and labor, could have brought some honor to his name. He wrote several odes, and undertook an epic poem, whose subject was *Charles Martel.* I do not think he finished it, nor even that he preserved the fragments of it that I read. He had also worked on a sort of prose poem, modeled after *Télémaque*, which brought to life the ancient institutions of Egypt. He intended to publish it when other, more important labors and the Revolution turned him away from it. Finally, I received from him, over more than fifteen years of a constant and cloudless friendship, many letters full of sentiment, literary merit, and philosophy, several of which would be worthy of being printed. I will speak a little further on of a few other writings of which he was the author, and which deserve to be mentioned.

Toward the end of his ecclesiastical career, he enjoyed great esteem in Nîmes; he was visited there by most of the distinguished foreigners brought to the city by the mildness of the climate and the ancient monuments found there. It was there that he had the advantage of meeting M. de La Fayette upon his return from America, in the early days of his glory, and was encouraged by him to execute the resolution he had taken to claim from the King the granting of a civil status for Protestants. The Parlement of Paris had received proposals on this subject from several of its members, most of them known for their religious sentiments, and had not rejected them; in the King's Council, there were magistrates distinguished by their talent and influence who appeared disposed to support this noble cause, already won in public opinion by the writings of the most famous philosophers and men of letters: the impulse

was given; and it seemed that there was nothing left to do but let oneself be guided by it. The advice and protection of M. de La Fayette, to whom his noble actions, his character, and his brilliant courage assured—far more than his rank and birth—a great influence over the custodians of royal authority, determined Rabaut-Saint-Étienne to come to Paris to request this great act of justice. This was also demanded at the same time, with all the influence of his renown and virtue, by the most generous man of his century, the wise and immortal Malesherbes. It was with these noble supports that truth was able to present itself to the foot of the throne and succeed in making itself heard, despite the efforts of fanaticism and self-interest to stifle its voice. Louis XVI was worthy to welcome it, and he did welcome it: the justice demanded by so many justly famous and honored voices, on behalf of two million unfortunate and persecuted Frenchmen, was finally granted through philosophy, power, and authority; and the edict of 1788 came to begin absolving the nation of the great error of Louis XIV. This was not everything, to be sure, and it took the Revolution to establish all that equity might still demand; but it was an immense step taken along the path of that same equity, which had been so cruelly violated for more than a century. Protestants were recognized by the new law, protected, placed on the same footing as the King's other subjects, and removed from outlawry: they could legally become husbands and fathers; and all they still had to claim—freedom of worship and admission to all public offices—was an inevitable consequence of what they had just obtained, which could not long be pushed back.

Rabaut-Saint-Étienne found in these very events the noble reward for his courageous conduct during the time of his brothers' outlawry; he was honored with the enlightened and glorious goodwill of the illustrious Malesherbes, of whom I have already spoken. Ministers, and men of the highest rank in the State and in society, received him with distinction. He took advantage of his stay in Paris to meet and cultivate the most famous men of letters and scholars, and he placed himself

among them by publishing his *Lettres à Bailly sur l'histoire primitive de la Grèce*. This work, as ingenious as it was scholarly and well written—drawn all at once, as to its principles, from the writings of Court de Gébelin and Bailly—sheds great light on the earliest periods of Greek history, and enjoyed much success. Rabaut-Saint-Étienne also composed around the same time another book on Hesiod, which he did not publish, and whose manuscript, unfortunately, was lost along with most of the author's other papers.

The period to which what I have just said belongs was that of the first Assembly of Notables, and consequently that of the dawn of our political regeneration. Why was this dawn so quickly surrounded by clouds and storms, and why could it enlighten so soon only days of terror and mourning? The divisions among the Notables—some of whom wished to correct the numerous abuses surrounding the government, while others sought only to defend them or to substitute even greater ones in their place; the shortsightedness of a thoughtless minister, who believed he could repair everything by exposing the court's embarrassments; the parlement's opposition to everything the ministry proposed; and the multiplied mistakes of the new ministers to remedy those their predecessor had just committed; abuses of authority without sufficient cause, a tyranny without perseverance or strength, and a general discontent that was aggravated rather than appeased, soon made the convocation of the Estates-General inevitable: it was the court's only remaining recourse, but its success depended on its skill in using it.[5] Rabaut-Saint-Étienne was named a member of this assembly, and his appointment was yet another homage paid to the new ideas of justice and reason that had just prevailed in the King's heart; it was the effect of the gratitude of a class of citizens and the well-founded esteem of all others: he was

[5]It lacked this skill, and found its ruin in that which ought to have ensured its salvation at the same time as that of France; thus, in the ordinary course of things, the most wholesome remedies sometimes become poisons by the manner in which they are used.

named first among the eight deputies to be elected by the Third Estate of the sénéchaussée of Nîmes. The elections of this sénéchaussée, which has since been the scene of so much turmoil and crime, were conducted with great harmony and were not driven by any intrigue; but there was regret at not seeing named alongside the other bishops, the one d'Alais,[6] today Cardinal de Beausset, already so commendable back then for the qualities of his excellent mind, his superior knowledge in administrative matters, and the great talents as a writer that he has since demonstrated in such a brilliant manner. Three Protestants were counted among the eight deputies of the Third Estate, and this was roughly the proportion that existed in the general population.

Rabaut-Saint-Étienne had published, shortly before his election, *Considérations sur les droits et sur les devoirs du tiers-état*, which achieved widespread success. They have just been reprinted along with his *Question de droit public* and his *Commentaire de l'arrêté du parlement de Paris, du 5 décembre 1788*. In them one finds the principles of a friend of liberty, founded upon public order and the laws; and, having thus proclaimed in advance the principles he was to defend, he went to fulfill the duties intended for him, invested with public confidence. I dare say he never ceased to deserve that confidence. He wanted the regeneration of the kingdom: but at that time everyone wanted it, and it was inevitable. He desired great changes: they were demanded by all of France; and the *cahiers* [grievance books] carried by the deputies, and of which no one has dared to say that they were not the result of the general will, are the irrefutable demonstration of it. Yet he was targeted by the reproaches of all factions, as always happens to those who, following their opinion with frankness and loyalty, and

[6]The prefect of Bouches-du-Rhône, M. de Villeneuve, in an interesting Notice on Cardinal de Beausset, his relative, says that this prelate, then bishop of Alais, left the Estates-General at the moment they changed their title to that of National Assembly..... This is an error: the fact is that M. de Beausset was not elected deputy at all.....

relying courageously on the purity of their principles, remain strangers, as he was, to all the intrigues of ambition. He attached himself constantly to principles rather than individuals, preferring substance over persons; but his own example proved all too clearly how dangerous this conduct is: he was targeted by every party for refusing to share the extremism of any: one brought him to the scaffold, and the other still outrages his memory.

Be that as it may, he was not long in demonstrating conciliatory and moderate principles within the assembly of the Estates-General. Division set in between the estates from the very first day: those who possessed privileges demanded their preservation; those who possessed none wanted them to remain for no one: the court proposed nothing to prevent or end the struggle; it seemed to take only a weak interest in the events about to unfold, the most dangerous of which for itself was perhaps the one it feared least—the dissolution or inactivity of the Estates. The struggle was about to begin, and everything indicated it would be terrible; its cause appeared slight, but it was the first question to be resolved, and no one was duped by the difficulties that were to serve as its pretext. The first battle was to determine by whom the credentials of each deputy would be verified; but it was clear that this was to decide next, by analogy, how and in what manner the three estates would proceed with respect to one another when it came to deliberations to be submitted to the assembly of the Estates-General. It was therefore important for the Third Estate, which did not want the separation of the estates, not to back down on this first point, so as not to set a precedent against itself.

Rabaut proposed conciliatory measures from the very first day, and the principle was accepted: conferences were established between commissioners appointed by each estate, in the presence of the Keeper of the Seals; but they served only to give a few deputies from the two recalcitrant estates the means to display their alleged erudition, and resulted only in souring minds further and further: the commissioners separated with-