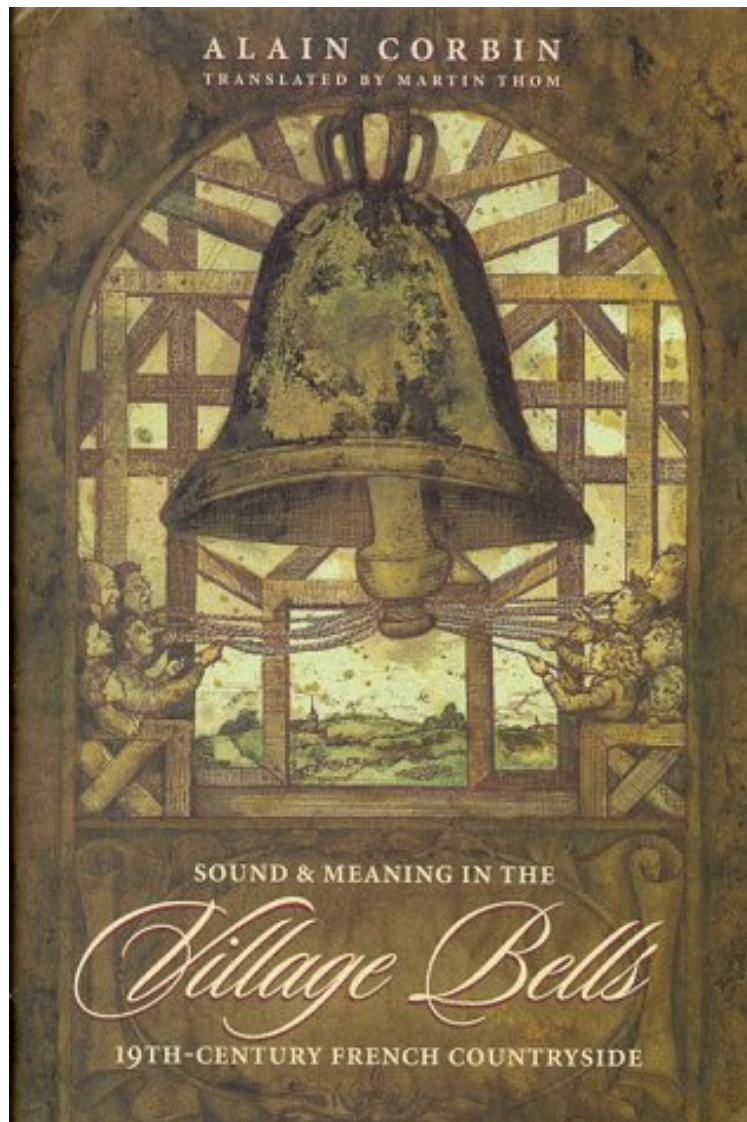


## Village Bells

*Alain Corbin*

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**Alain Corbin : Village Bells** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Village Bells:

In the French canton of Brienne in November 1799, local authorities were scandalized when a crowd of girls broke through the doors of the church and rang the bells in order to mark the festival of St. Catherine. Religious use of the

bells was forbidden by law, but the villagers boldly insisted on their right to celebrate with peals the feast of a beloved saint. So begins *Village Bells*, Alain Corbin's exploration of the "auditory landscape" of nineteenth-century France, a story of lost sensory experiences and forgotten passions. In the nineteenth century, these instruments were symbols of their towns and objects of both ecclesiastic and civic pride. Bell-ringing served practical purposes of communication, marking both religious and secular time, as well as calling citizens to pray, assemble, take arms, or beware of danger. As Corbin shows, the bells also reflected the social, political, and religious struggles of the time. To control the bells was to control the symbolic order, rhythm, and loyalties of French village and country life. Using church archives and local documents, Corbin forges a unique history of the role of bells from the aftermath of the Revolution to the dawn of the twentieth century. He charts how the First Republic (1792-1804) moved toward a more secular society, turning many bells into coins and cannonballs and seizing others as property of the state. A gradual return to the religious use of bells occurred in the nineteenth century, even as their new secular roles were maintained. Corbin describes the battles over the marking of religious versus secular time, as calls to prayer, the celebration of religious feasts, and the marking of rites of passage—baptism, marriage, and death—competed with tolls indicating the passing hours or marking assemblies, elections, or republican holidays. Thoroughly documented and recounted with intriguing narratives, *Village Bells* provides an original approach to nineteenth-century French cultural, social, and political history. As Corbin notes, the bells are no longer essential to our lives; their qualitative, sacred time and space replaced by the quantitative, secular measures of the clock. But by understanding their lost symbolic and practical importance we open a window onto the age in which they rang.

Since the Renaissance, France has been known as the country of ringing towns. By the 19th century, according to Alain Corbin, a renowned professor of contemporary history at the Sorbonne, a French village community could not live without its bells. Village peals were symbols and objects of both ecclesiastic and civic pride, and played such an integral role in town life that, according to Corbin, community leaders frequently allocated more money to their acquisition and maintenance than to relieving poverty or promoting education. Bell-ringing not only served practical purposes of communication, it also reflected the social, political, and religious struggles of the time. To control the bells was to control the symbolic order, rhythm, and loyalties of French village and country life. Furthermore, Corbin argues, possessing a peal of bells was a prerequisite of modernity in a society increasingly subject to haste but as yet without any other means of transmitting information instantaneously. Examinations of the social imagination have traditionally neglected materials pertaining to auditory perception, making Corbin's exploration of his thesis all the more original. --Bertina Loeffler Promises to open new avenues of historical research and reflection. (Lynn Hunt, *UCLA The New Republic*) One of France's most original historians, Alain Corbin has set himself the task of documenting the 'culture of the sense' in nineteenth-century France. *Village Bells* addresses the 'auditory landscape,' looking at the crucial place of sound as a means of communication in the lives of ordinary people: bells sounded alarms and celebrated joyous occasions, they spread news of individuals and men of state, announced arrivals and departures, summoned villagers to religious and civic ceremonies, and marked the passing of the hours of the day. The place of bells and the practice of bell-ringing could be a source of conflict and great political tension. Beautifully written, brilliantly interpreted, full of the stories that reveal the strange difference of the past, the book is at once a rich cultural history and a meditation on the craft of the historian. Corbin practices in startlingly imaginative and pleasingly unconventional ways. (Joan W. Scott, *Institute for Advanced Study*) Alain Corbin is in my opinion the most original and interesting historian now writing about modern France..... After enjoying this tour de force, you will never listen to church bells or think of *l'esprit de clocher* in the same way again. (John Merriman, *Yale University* )