Quel pôle répulsif?

In the early 1970s I was asked to write a geographical booklet on the Massif Central for the ‘Problem regions of Europe’ series of the Oxford University Press. This request was on the strength of research that I was doing on the countryside of the Auvergne, with the welcome support of André Fel. One of the challenges that I encountered was the relative lack of overview material rather than the abundance of place-specific studies. That space has been filled admirably by the present volume that has been written by members of the Centres d’Études et de Recherches Appliquées au Massif Central. The book is presented in a clear and direct style and is illustrated copiously by full-colour maps and photographs. Editor and main contributor Laurent Rieutort is sole author of the first three chapters that deal with the diversity of ‘nature’ within this complex assemblage of fragile territories long characterized by depopulation, low income levels, poor service provision in remote areas, and economic uncertainty. However, with the current quest for ‘sustainable development’ these challenges may be seen as ‘potentialities’ as grass, trees and fresh air are valued in a way never known before. Of course the Massif Central has been opened to important innovations through construction of motorways and improvement of existing roads; on a recent visit I was genuinely amazed at the ‘space/time compression’ in evidence in some areas by comparison with 35 years previously. Higher education, research centres and cultural facilities have been boosted, contributing an appeal to new residents and to tourists that was previously unknown. Population increase since 1990 has not only been in the immediate commuting hinterlands of large towns but also – for a multitude of reasons – in certain more remote locations. The attractive ‘green’ image of the Massif Central is boosting the importance of tourism in its economy where, as Daniel Ricard shows, agricultural and industrial employment is undergoing recomposition, and the service sector is expanding. Despite rising rate of car ownership, most communes of the Massif Central may be classified as ‘espace rural’ (Eric Bordessoule) whose internal diversity is displayed admirably by L. Rieutort in a long chapter, ‘la revanche des “pays”’, which examines western, southern and eastern fringes as well as the heartlands of the Auvergne and the Limousin. From being unknown territory, the Massif Central is gradually acquiring a place in international perceptions. This fine text is a pleasure to read and to behold, with 105 photographs (including some taken by Philippe Arbos ca 1930 included for comparison) and 34 maps in colour, many of which show conditions at commune scale.

Hugh Clout