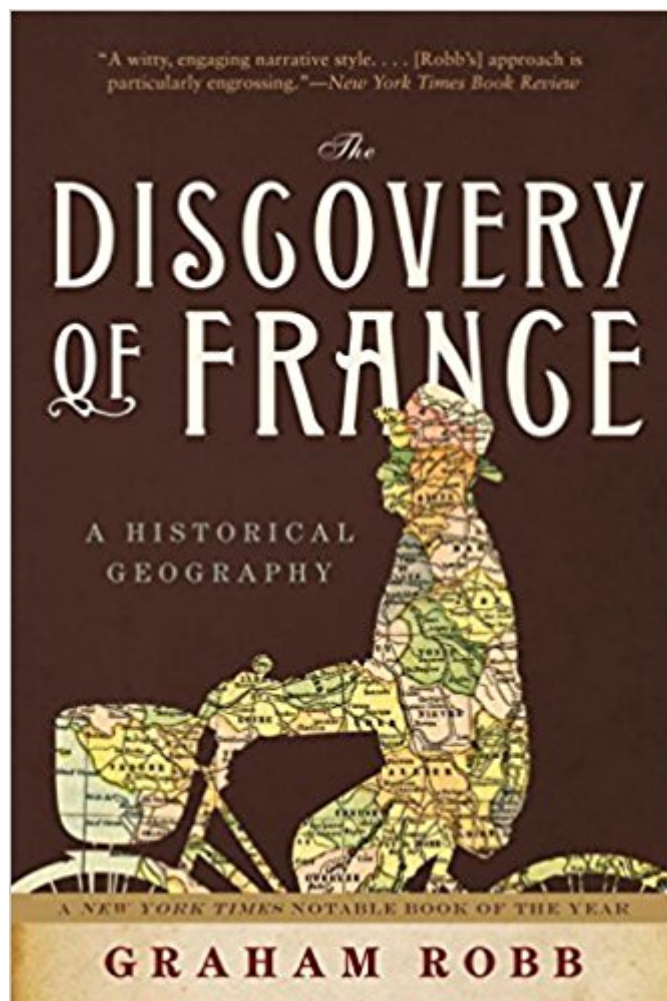


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# The Discovery Of France: A Historical Geography



## Synopsis

"A witty, engaging narrative style—[Robb's] approach is particularly engrossing."  
—New York Times Book Review  
A narrative of exploration—full of strange landscapes and even stranger inhabitants—that explains the enduring fascination of France. While Gustave Eiffel was changing the skyline of Paris, large parts of France were still terra incognita. Even in the age of railways and newspapers, France was a land of ancient tribal divisions, prehistoric communication networks, and pre-Christian beliefs. French itself was a minority language. Graham Robb describes that unknown world in arresting narrative detail. He recounts the epic journeys of mapmakers, scientists, soldiers, administrators, and intrepid tourists, of itinerant workers, pilgrims, and herdsmen with their millions of migratory domestic animals. We learn how France was explored, charted, and colonized, and how the imperial influence of Paris was gradually extended throughout a kingdom of isolated towns and villages. The Discovery of France explains how the modern nation came to be and how poorly understood that nation still is today. Above all, it shows how much of France's past and present remains to be discovered. A New York Times Notable Book, Publishers Weekly Best Book, Slate Best Book, and Booklist Editor's Choice. 16 pages of illustrations

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. France is often regarded as the center of elegant civilization, so it's surprising to find that as late as 1890, most of the population was far from civilized—outside the confines of sophisticated Paris, as noted biographer Robb explains in his riveting exploration of France's

historical geography, great swathes of countryside were terra incognita: dark places inhabited by illiterate tribes professing pre-Christian beliefs and lethally hostile to outsiders. They spoke not French but regional dialects; much of the country had not been accurately mapped; and many in the rural areas lacked surnames. The author himself embarked on a 14,000-mile bicycle tour of the France passed over in tourist guides. The result is a curious, engrossing mix of personal observation, scholarly diligence and historical narrative as Robb discusses the formation of both the French character and the French state. Robb's biographies of Victor Hugo, Rimbaud and Balzac were all selected by the New York Times as among the best books of the year, an accolade that assures a select readership will be eager to pack his newest alongside their Michelin guides. 8 pages of b&w illus, maps. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

“Brilliant. Robb, who writes beautifully has accomplished quite a feat. He has reintroduced France to itself.” - William Grimes, New York Times  
“Scintillating and resourceful.” - Harper's

This book, in just a few days has given me answers I was searching for...Human beings are evolutionary and this book gives some of the European history...if the history of our African beginnings. That being said, I have out the library copy, after hearing Rick Steves and Graham Robb on a Sunday morning talk show. I have just bought a copy on , because I want to be able to write in my personal copy. A question I held for so long about how humans in America could do what they did to so called human African Slaves.? This is not new history. "You have to be carefully taught". Why are the Parisians today so afraid of communities? depends on what it took to unite all the tribes to form FRANCE. So, thanks to Rick Steves and Graham Robb and .... You have all been a blessing to me this week, Merci, Jacquelyn Goudeau

This book combines history, map-making and exploration, linguistics, and ethnography with a real story-teller's flair. History was never as neat as we tend to think; it's grubby, filled with discomforts, and very strange (and more often than not, hostile) people. Reading this book gives you an armchair tour of centuries of migration and rural life in Gaul without the fleas, mud, or hunger. I couldn't put it down.

The author cites an 1880 survey that revealed that nearly 80% of the population of France could not

communicate fluently in the French. This is not your school book history of the France of Louis XIV, the Revolution, Napoleon, Victor Hugo and Claude Monet - basically, Paris. This is an eye-opening history of the French provinces, which was essentially a foreign country to Parisians. The author takes some senseless swipes at Christianity and the Catholic Church, but that doesn't detract too much from this book overall.

For those who have visited, studied, and reflected on that immensely fascinating country called France, Robb's book provides a truly unique and informative view of the country's recent history that stands alone when compared to other recent histories of France. The book categorizes its own genre as "historical geography," but even if you've never read one of those, just dive in and watch the story unfold. Much of France's mystique is based on the rich and iconographic legends surrounding the country's rise and development. It's perhaps easy to think that, once we have learned the main themes, we have "learned" the country. These main themes are indeed incredibly interesting in their own right: the rise of Charlemagne and the establishment of the Carolingian Empire, the development of educational institutions such as the cathedral schools and the university, the creation of premier architectural forms such as Early, High, Rayonnant, and Flamboyant Gothic styles, the rise of the Napoleonic Empire, the many artistic contributions of persons from all parts of the country, and the undeniable scientific advances made by the French in last three centuries. And yet, we find upon reading Robb's book that it is possible to know a little about all these things and perhaps not still have an understanding of how the France that we know today really came to be. It's a story interesting, surprising, and unusual, but it's a story worth telling, and it helps make all the rest of the story make even more sense. Robb's text deals with the period between the French Revolution and the emergence of the 20th century. As such, the author particularly focuses on how the governmental programs initiated immediately after the Revolution impacted the lives of virtually every person in the country. Indeed, much of Robb's book argues that, prior to these events, France existed in a set of disparate and non-standardized "pays," with even such basics as language and weights and measures existing in unique forms in virtually every region. The text helps us hypothesize why the French people feel the way they do about their language, their way of life, and even their political and educational institutions. The entire book is consistently fascinating, but those who have travelled to France over the years should find the later part of the book of special and curious interest, for it is here that Robb describes the rise of tourism in France, and the effect that these new creatures called "tourists" had on the country. It's a cart-before-the-horse story, where we see the country adapting to tourism, rather than tourists

adapting to the county. In a way, we can see that the tourist played his own special role in the preservation of France's historical and cultural sites, and it is simply engrossing to read the symbiotic relationship France and its tourists had, and still have today. If you speak French, or if you're just an armchair admirer of the French language, reading Robb's description of how the French language came to be the established standard tongue all over the country is surely one of the greatest highlights of this book. For the historian, this story is one that is rarely told, and holds a set of people, places, and governmental programs not normally considered in more traditional French history books. For the educator, the ability to follow the story of how the government worked in concert with local educational centers to advance and stabilize all regions in France into French speaking domains must surely rank as one of the premier examples of the power of educational programs. Don't miss it. Every Francophile will wish to consider this new entry into the historical collection of French history books. Don't be surprised if you end up with a renewed interest in what is already a fascinating history. Highly recommended.

I loved *The Discovery of Middle Earth: Mapping the Lost World of the Celts* by Graham Robb, so it was natural for me to flow into this book. A wonderful adventurous book, ride, walk, and just encounter the hinterlands of France and the adventure of becoming a country, united by a language. It was not easy, nor was the unification of a country and its language. All roads led to Paris, and thus the unification began. A story of the turmoil of becoming, well fed with fodder, tidbits, and appetizers to keep you interested as you journey through a huge country separated by peaks and valleys that were dividing the locals as well as the country. I could not help but think of the parallels of the United States becoming a country of many States during the same period of time, as also the unification of Italy. It was a time when unification made sense, so people could be accounted for and the State could grow and be responsible. Crossing the Alps was an adventure and although the Grand Tour may or may not have been mentioned it was easily alluded to in the crossing of the Alps. The horses could not make some of the steep inclines, so a donkey was brought along. The coach would be taken apart, and the donkey would haul it on a travois over the top of the incline, where it would be reassembled for the harrowing ride down the mountain. Robert Louis Stevenson and others took the Grand Tour in this manner, across the Alps to Italy, and back. Tid bits.... Superstition and lack of communication led to the death of one of Cassini's map makers. Spas grew up where people came to take the waters and fed by towns anxious for income more business grew up around the spas. Gossip could travel faster than man, one wondered how that could happen? Today we think that everyone needs what civilization has to offer, but one is

startled back to a one room cottage, with firepit, outside accommodations and uncleanness. This was life for many of us before the advent of industrialization. Finally, I learned about the start of the Tour de France and I learned why, when I was in Paris in the 1950's the French would seem rude when they barked at me, "Speak French!" I did struggle to speak French, and wondered why they were so rude, after all I was only a "kid", struggling to make myself understood, (as though I could just spout out French) The railroads, the coach roads, the many people that walked from the outlying areas, all came together in the glittering city of Paris, uniting the languages, the cultures and the ideals, until, we had ...Vive La France! An interesting journey, worth the time for armchair travelers, that like to accumulate knowledge about the world and its people. Graham Robb is one to follow.

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