

Mistral: Environment and Society in Nineteenth-Century France

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When the mistral's cold, blustery, and fast-moving air sweeps across Provence, the region's tranquil landscape undergoes a dramatic transformation. Wheat fields begin to swirl like ocean waves, cypress trees tilt violently from side to side, and the peaceful Mediterranean waters become frothy and tempestuous. So powerful is this southern French wind that locals have called it a curse equal to the seven plagues of Egypt. The very name "mistral" derives from the Latin word for "master," a sign of the humility that human beings have felt toward this imposing force of nature. Indeed, the mistral has a long history of mastering the land and people of Provence by overturning trees, sending medieval bell towers crashing to the ground, ripping trains off their tracks, sweeping tourists off mountain peaks, destroying crops, and crushing boats like toys against the cliffs of the Mediterranean shore. But the mistral is not just a destructive force. It is what gives Provence its signature clear blue skies, its bright light, its distinctive agricultural plots lined with protective cypress trees, and its unique folklore and cultural traditions. The mistral has been blowing, usually in increments of three or seven days, for thousands of years. Until recently, however, historians have overlooked the mistral's impact on Provence over time, dismissing the wind as part of the passive, atmospheric setting in which the region's human-driven history unfolded. But what if we decided to take the mistral's role in history more seriously? What connections might we uncover between Provence's iconic wind and the transformation of French society over time?

Adopting the wind as its main protagonist, my book project, entitled *Mistral: Environment and Society in Nineteenth-Century France*, joins a growing number of histories that seek to reorient and reinvigorate the story of Europe's past by focusing our attention on the environment. Challenging traditional human-focused models of history, the book will explore how the mistral shaped the geography, society, and culture of southern France between 1789 and 1914. During this transformative period, a time of rapid industrialization and shifting human relationships with nature, the mistral came under newfound scrutiny from a range of actors in French society who interpreted the wind's power and meaning in different ways. Each chapter in the book will investigate the daily mental and physical relationships between the mistral and diverse social groups in Provence, including sailors, fishermen, wine growers, farmers, meteorologists, doctors, writers, and painters. Ultimately, the book aims to tell the story of how people in Provence learned to coexist with a powerful force of nature by producing new scientific knowledge, adapting their agricultural and energy industries, and producing creative works of art and literature.

My identity as a historian is rooted in building bridges among the humanities, the arts, and the sciences to better understand the dynamic relationship between the natural and human worlds. This is why I take pleasure in analyzing an invisible force of nature like the wind—a subject traditionally under the purview of scientists—through a humanistic lens. Rather than limiting ourselves to the distinct categories of "nature" and "culture," we are better off thinking of places like Provence as hybrid landscapes where environments and human beings are deeply entangled. The Rachel Carson Center provides an ideal place for writing an innovative book that reimagines the mistral wind's impact on the past.