

The year was 778. Charlemagne, starting homeward after an expedition onto the Iberian Peninsula, left his nephew, Count Roland, in command of a rear guard. As Roland and his troops moved through the Pyrenees, a fierce enemy swooped down and annihilated them. Whether the attackers were Moors, Basques, Gascons, or Aquitainians is still disputed. The massacre soon passed into legend, preserved but at the same time expanded and interpreted in oral tradition and written accounts. Dormant after the late Middle Ages, the legend began to inspire literary works even before the discovery and publication of the Oxford manuscript *Chanson de Roland* in 1837. The French Revolution and Empire, temporarily relieving Roland of his religious aura, hailed him as a patriot belaboring his country's foes. The Romantics made him either a dauntless, irrepressible extrovert or a noble victim struck down while making the world a better place. As the twentieth century dawned, a few authors scoffed at hero worship but others held up Roland as a heroic example that might help his countrymen live with the humiliation of their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and then, as World War I approached, retake their lost territories. Fascinating as the Roland legend is in itself, no one has looked into the nonacademic French literature to which it has given rise in modern times. Harry Redman now shows how writers, with varying outlooks and approaches and divergent purposes, drew upon the legend from 1777 to the end of World War I. A monumental enterprise based on primary research, the book is of extraordinary value to scholars interested in the Old French epic and to all those concerned with more recent literary periods.

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