

ENGLISH HISTORIANS
ON THE
FRENCH REVOLUTION

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CHAPTER I
THE FIRST DECADE

CURRENT HISTORY

In England, even more than in France, the history of the French Revolution was being written before the story of it was completed; more writings on the subject were produced in this country before 1800 than in any decade of the nineteenth century. Attempts at judgment and interpretation were made before the Revolution had shown the course it was to take, and only the *Annual Register*, at first, urged that it would be a better service to future historians to collect the facts. The first decade of writings is therefore a period of chaos when anything connected with the French Revolution—propaganda or imaginative literature in prose and verse—went under the name of history. The diversity of the early writings is due to the nature of the Revolution itself whose many aspects called forth journalistic, political, biographical and sentimental reactions.

The practical effect of the Revolution on the political attitudes and activities of English government and society has proved a fascinating subject to many historians. The voluntary reaction of a relatively free and disinterested country to the Revolution seemed a useful vantage point from which to view that eventful period. The study of English political history under the effect of the Revolution also provides an abundance of data on the questions so many historians posed concerning England's apparently traditional dislike of revolution. Again, in the course of the contemporary debate on the Revolution Burke, Paine, Mackintosh, Godwin, and later Malthus and Coleridge produced writings which remained classics in English political theory. The period moreover provided the literary historians with some prominent examples of political literature as well as literary politics.

All this makes the history of England in the last decade of the eighteenth century a fruitful field of study. The actual history of the period has been reconstructed with attention to foreign and theoretical influences, and the philosophy and literature produced during these years have been studied in relation to political and literary history. The one aspect of the period relatively neglected is the early growth of the historical study of the Revolution. The place of Burke or Paine in political theory has so transcended the actual events of the early 1790s that it seemed perhaps trivial to examine their great writings in relation to the precise stage in revolutionary history in which they were produced; and yet we know how strong and decisive the immediate effect of certain revolutionary

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moments was on observers. In later generations historians of political theory could conveniently treat the political writings of the whole decade of revolution as if they all existed simultaneously as complete entities each presenting a separate and complete attitude to the whole Revolution. But the attitudes of contemporaries were formed under the daily influence of news, fears, historical and journalistic accounts. The theoretic disquisitions could only affect people in conjunction with concrete notions about day-to-day events in France and in England. This is where the neglect of the contemporary historical activity as distinguished from the political theory has left a certain gap in our understanding of the period.

The historical self-consciousness of the Revolution—its loud acclamations of its own importance and of its projected consequences—hurried on the process by which the Revolution was to be transformed from politics into history. The revolutionaries had strong though not consistent feelings about their place in history. The idea recurs among them that the Revolution would wipe out the past and inaugurate a new era in the story of humanity. The revolutionaries, by their supreme confidence in their power to turn history where they will, supplied their later enemies with their strongest weapon against the heritage of the Revolutionary ideas. The view of Condorcet, that history provided warning rather than guidance, raised in the course of the Revolution efforts to abolish the study of the past and to burn libraries and archives. It was, significantly, the greatest enemy of the Revolution who rose to the challenge of this historical self-consciousness; in accordance, as it were, with the Revolution's own wishes, he raised early, clearly and provocatively the question of the connection between the Revolution and history. This was Burke's contribution to historiography. He thus brought to the fore at once a fundamentally historical, almost academic approach which historians normally awaken to long after the event. The introspection of the Revolution and the philosophy of Burke together geared the contemporary debate to the great historical questions of whether the Revolution was a normal development or a catastrophe, a stage in political progress or the release of infernal forces.

There were other causes which combined to produce an early appearance of historically minded writings on the French Revolution in England and perhaps a more professional approach. The uneven quality of works produced before 1800 is evident from any comparison of Burke's *Reflections* with the sermon which provoked them or with most of the replies which they in turn provoked. Apart from the political debate in writings of which some remained classics of politics, there were also writings like Young's *Travels* and Moore's *Journal* which contained authentic information, and also descriptions and accounts which constitute early attempts at historical narratives, like the anonymous *Impartial History*, Adolphus's *Biographical Memoirs* or the accounts in

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the *Annual Register*.¹ This was not at all due to greater political objectivity. The connection between politics and history which had long been significant in this country was accentuated at this time, and in its way advanced the writing of history. In England knowledge of the events could not be so readily assumed as in France. The story, therefore, had to be told. Even for political purposes the actual narrative method was useful, and criticism of historical inaccuracies was useful propaganda.² A suitable version of revolutionary history did half the political work. Although professions of impartiality and pretensions to the use of original materials were lip service paid to historical conventions of long standing, the importance of the early writings is precisely in the extent to which proper history and criticism were attempted in spite of political controversy, distorted perspective and defective methods. As outsiders the English had to write from written sources rather than from memory, so that from the start they had to look for authorities and establish their trustworthiness. This was one of the reasons why, for example, the *Annual Register* for 1791 was delayed until 1795. Having 'copied from the best English channels of information', the letter which Louis XVI left in Paris on 20 June 1791, the editors realized that the document had been mutilated 'for the worst purposes of fraud'. They then found the original, made a new translation and printed both texts. They ascribed much importance to the affair and wrote that fabrications of this kind 'are more injurious to truth than volumes of misrepresentations and partial narratives, for it is by the test of documents that the merits of discordant accounts must be ultimately tried'. The editors add 'Introductory Remarks on the Falsities of the Common Translations', in which they analyse the motives of the falsifiers. It is alleged that they have omitted accounts of actions which are 'not altogether congenial to the old fashioned prejudices of Englishmen'. On the whole a comparison of the texts shows that the editors read perhaps too much into the alterations, but it is significant how strongly they felt the need to warn the public against 'a treacherous and malignant warfare by poisoning the springs of history'.³

Politicians soon became aware that the Revolution had created a wider reading public for political affairs and that there was a need to control the subject. The revolutionary generation itself had no doubt concerning the much debated question of the theoretic causes of the Revolution. The extraordinary outburst of political theory as well as the immediate reaction of the government and all parties attest to the widespread recognition of the great power of words over politics, and

¹ Probably written by R. Laurence. Also histories by Wollstonecraft, Gifford, Playfair, etc.

² 'To judge the information of those who have undertaken to guide and enlighten us' is the declared purpose of Burke's translation of Brissot's *Letter* (Brissot, *Letter*, p. xxxi). 'Realizing the truth will induce loyalty to England's rulers' (p. xxxiii).

³ *The Annual Register* for 1791 (London, 1795), pp. v-vi, 131-5, 220, 217-20, 221-32.

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of the nature of the Revolution as a 'philosophical' event. The government ran papers (like *The Sun* and *The Briton*) which offered suitable interpretations of events in France and went to great expense to procure news and maps.¹ Both sides knew the value of mere authoritative news. *Hog's Wash* (so named to remind people of Burke's contempt for the 'swinish multitude') wrote that a war against French principles would be useless without a law against 'the importation of News into Great Britain'.² The government also employed writers to explain, for instance, that the Revolution was a movement against religion, and it is well known that the most vigorous anti-Jacobin action was taken against booksellers and publications, i.e. against the bearers of revolutionary ideas.

BEFORE THE 'REFLECTIONS'

The writings which appeared before Burke's *Reflections* show that his influence on the historical understanding of the outbreak was not in proportion to his influence on the political attitude.³ The reaction to the Revolution did not begin, like most accounts of it, in the summer of 1789, but in the previous year. The assumption that Englishmen were taken by surprise has to be modified by the evidence of the year 1788. The press reported French events regularly, sometimes complaining of the difficulty of procuring information. They quoted documents concerning the constitutional struggles in France and thought that these struggles would lead to a constitution like that of England. They wrote for instance that if, in assembling the States General the King of France succeeded in substituting for the silence of the old documents, the 'general opinion of his subjects', then the 'envied constitution of Great Britain will be transferred to France'. One of the comments of the *Gentleman's Magazine* was that a constitutional attitude had become prevalent in France, and it had given rise to hopes that could never again be vanquished. The reports in the periodicals of 1788 clearly detect an aristocratic revolt against the reforming measures of the King; they speak of insurrections produced by 'revolutionary writings', and of rumours of a bankruptcy, insidiously and 'industriously circulated'.⁴ We thus have, before 1789, a scheme of the immediate causes of the outbreak in which the role of the reactionary *parlements* is not unjustly assessed.

The natural calamities of that year figure largely in the news and show that the element of 'fatality' in them, made much of later, was not entirely an afterthought. The *Annual Register* for 1790 wrote that the eclipse and hurricane of 1788 changed the character of the French nation; and again

¹ E.g. *The Sun*, 6 July 1792.

² *Hog's Wash*, No. 2, 14 Sept. 1793.

³ It is commonly accepted that Burke 'turned the tide' (Gooch, *C.M.H.*, VIII, 755).

⁴ E.g. *G.M.* (July-Dec. 1788), LVIII, 448, 646, 736, 749, 1016, 1020, 1111.

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that the severity of the winter hardened the people and made them cruel. Lecky, much later writes, 'Another agency, more terrible and more powerful than . . . political propagandism, was . . . hastening the Revolution . . . A great famine . . . a long drought . . . and a hailstorm . . . It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of this famine among the causes of the French Revolution. It gave the movement its army . . . and savage earnestness.'¹

The fact that 1788 was the centenary year of the Glorious Revolution had a lasting effect on the English attitude to the events in France after 1789. But preoccupation with 1688 was in itself the effect of a state of mind in England on the subject of reform. Most of those taking part in the debate on the French Revolution, on both sides, were reformers. Though the term radical was unused or used in abuse, Pitt had held radical principles on the subject of reform. On the other hand Cartwright and even Horne Tooke were conservative in the sense that they believed either that they were following the dictates of English history, or that they were restoring the constitution. It was thanks to the campaign for Parliamentary reform that societies for the commemoration of 1688 were formed mainly by Dissenters whose political and religious education and their roots in seventeenth-century political theory prepared them for the ideas, especially those of popular sovereignty and natural rights, proclaimed by the French. While the principles of a just Revolution were foremost in men's minds, events in France were easily and happily accepted. It was the entrance of the organized mob factor which later caused some reconsideration of the attitude in many people.

At first the general agreement about the Revolution existed which was to emerge again when the storm was over. The press of 1788 and 1789 on the whole accepted the need for changes in France and welcomed the attempts at reform, thus dissociating itself from the extreme anti-revolutionary view. The *Monthly Review* praises Calonne's proposal of reform which 'from its extraordinary spirit a Briton or American might be proud to own'. Some periodicals consistently supported the innovations proposed in the constitution of the States General, and some showed an enthusiasm which one would not have expected to find before the fall of the Bastille.² The numerous orations and sermons which celebrated the English Revolution mostly expressed political contentment. One, at the London Tavern, is notable for wishing success to France 'for the recovery of their liberty', and for its hope for an alliance in the interests of world freedom.

The account of the year 1789 in the *Annual Register*, written while Burke was still connected with it, presents a moderate view, and one

¹ Lecky, *A History of England* (new ed. 1892), VI, 344-6.

² E.g. *M.R.* (Jan.-June 1789), Appendix. 'May success attend the friends of freedom in every part of the globe.'

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similar to that which emerges from the press of 1788. The struggles of the *parlements* appears as a revolt of the nobility against the King's innovations which, it is said, instead of strengthening his position, weakened his defences. The story of 1789 is the one which was to recur endlessly, a story of fatal concessions, the Orleanist faction, Necker's inactivity, the violent temper of Paris, the clumsy handling of 23 June, the folly of the court in attempting to use force. This basic pattern, and the more or less equal distribution of blame, did not undergo violent changes for some time. It was the contemporary English view of events in France. It is only when we reach the period of republican agitation in England that the nation seems split from top to bottom over French history. For there was a deep rift over practical political affairs, and the Revolution brought the views of irreconcilable extremes to the surface. Contemporaries described the dispute between Burke and Fox as a 'public schism, involving public principles of the first magnitude'.¹ But extremism remained an exception in political theory as it was in political life.² Most people's initial reactions to the French Revolution were mainly affected by the English reform movement which preceded the Revolution and by the French liberal presentations of their revolutionary aims in 1789. The violent voices soon to be heard were fierce reactions to two strong and new influences—the excesses in France and the awareness of a new situation for England in her foreign relations. They did not represent the beginnings of basically antagonistic historical schools. As long as the Revolution in France lasted the English view was still in the making.

The debate on the French Revolution took place on many different levels, as is clearly shown in Cobban's selection, and the Parliamentary debates contain as much historical thought as is to be found outside Parliament. The great and well-known speeches of Burke, Fox and Sheridan crystallize attitudes to be met with again and again.³ It was mainly Fox's attitude which was to become common in England. It grew from pre-revolutionary English principles and not from the Revolution itself, and it was unhistorical in denying anything new in the principles of the French Revolution. When Burke spoke of anarchy in France Fox replied by balancing the crimes against past sufferings and future benefits. Sheridan claimed that the principles of the French Revolution were those of 1688 and that there had been no French constitution to overthrow. Some days later Burke spoke against the notion that the French were having an 'English' Revolution, Fox disclaimed any wish for a purely democratic government, Sheridan defended

¹ *Annual Register* (1791), pp. iv–v.

² 'They who do not dread it, love it', Burke wrote of the Revolution in his introduction to Brissot's *Letter*.

³ E.g. *Parl. Hist.* xxviii, 353–67, 367–70; xxix, 366–88.

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the *Assemblée* against Burke, and Pitt concluded the debate with hope for liberty and order in France.

The counter-revolutionary views in England did not all start in Burke's mind¹ and American alienation—it is interesting to note—had started even earlier. Franklin was alarmed by the news of July 1789; Washington, Jefferson and Morris thought the Revolution had gone far enough about the same time. Opinion in England was also changing in several ways. Burke himself, according to Lord Holland, turned against the Revolution after the suppression of the ecclesiastical revenues. Romilly left Paris in September 1789 already disappointed, though his final conversion was caused by the September massacres of 1792. On the other hand, the Birmingham mobs were activated by a fear of revolution in England which was widely considered excessive. The bulk of the people, including Pitt, had confidence in England's security and still judged France by the reports, more or less favourable, which most of the travellers brought back.

It was after the Parliamentary debates of February 1790, and against a background of still wide sympathy for the Revolution, that the *Reflections* came out in November 1790, and the heated war of writings burst forth in 1791.

BURKE AND THE CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS

It is necessary to distinguish between Burke's influence on politics and that on historiography. In the contemporary debate the political differences are much more striking than those on points of historical interpretation.² (Though in fundamental political views too, Burke's opponents did not consciously cross the lines which separated liberal reform from social revolution. Not even Paine, as later English socialists realized.) The one important historical point which was deeply controversial was that of the degree of novelty in the French Revolution and the corollary question of the degree of similarity between the French and English revolutions. Both questions were connected with that of the interpretation of the Glorious Revolution. No other differences in historical opinion—whether France had a constitution, whether its priests were God-fearing, whether the Queen was a modest woman or the court extravagant—none of these could raise a national storm of

¹ Brown shows that in Manchester, e.g., anti-revolutionary activities were organized before revolutionary ones.

² An anonymous contemporary in 1793 compiled *A Comparative Display of . . . British Writers on . . . the French Revolution*. His chapter headings are those of the *Vindiciae Gallicae* and Burke's opponents are given the last word. He quotes mainly from Burke, Mackintosh, Christie, Boothby, Belsham, Lofft, Priestley, Paine. There is no attention to chronology. Opinions are grouped on topics like: I. The State of France previous to the Revolution; II. The Excesses; III. The National Assembly; IV. The New Constitution, etc.

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controversy in England. But the comparison with England—this was not an academic question but a vital problem involving a practical policy toward reform and change. It was a worthy cause for a thoroughgoing inquiry which was only ostensibly a debate on the French Revolution. It explains why the English debate started so early, so heatedly and, in a sense, so theoretically, on the signal given by Price's innocent provocation, 'Behold the light you have struck out, before setting America free, reflected in France, and then kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes.'

To defend the French Revolution on the ground of its similarity to the English Revolution was to adopt a revolutionary interpretation of 1688. The implications are well known. In 1688 Parliament deposed one king and chose another and yet attempted to minimize whatever revolutionary notions the deed implied. The novel pattern was woven into the old fabric. The conservative interpretation said that the extraordinary measure had no precedent and was no model; it was forced by unique circumstances unlikely to be repeated; it did not mean that a right of deposition existed in the constitution. In this spirit Burke attacked Price's interpretation. In later editions of his *Discourse*, Price elaborated his claim that the Act of Settlement had laid down safeguards against future tyrants. Price interpreted the Act as a constitutional change giving new powers to Parliament. 'First; The right to liberty of conscience. . . . Secondly; The right to resist power when abused. And, Thirdly; The right to choose our own governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves.'¹

On this interpretation the French seemed worthy though mild pupils of England. Burke's point of departure was his insistence on the absolute novelty of French principles. This question of novelty seemed the great problem in practical politics as well as in historical evaluation. Throughout a century of historical thinking the comparison between France and England penetrated English thought. It is posed again and again in increasingly complicated ways, dictated by new circumstances and new social theories, but always as a vital point of interpretation. The habit of thinking simultaneously on three distinct problems, the French Revolution, the Glorious Revolution, and the current question of reform, could never be dislodged. It is in this sense that Burke had the most far-reaching influence on the historiography of the Revolution. He 'set the terms of the whole subsequent discussion', as Cobban says, but he did not prescribe the English view.

The contemporary English writers on the Revolution prove the hopelessness of generalizing on any logical connection between practical attitudes to the Revolution and the philosophies behind those attitudes. There is no logical pattern in the way philosophical and historical ideas

¹ Price, *A Discourse* (5th ed. 1790), p. 34; Cobban, *Debate* (2nd ed. 1960), p. 61.

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affected political views. More went into the making of individual attitudes than can be logically analysed. From the beginning there were not two opposite and consistent constructions, and theoretic confusion reigned in all political camps. At the root of Burke's anti-Revolutionism was what he hated as the intellectual presumption of the revolutionaries, their confidence that their wills and brains can direct world history. This went of course with Burke's deep reverence for the mysterious and accumulating wisdom of past ages, manifesting itself in the hallowed present, the ripe and natural fruit of history as designed by Providence. This is a common systematization of Burke's philosophy, but it is not because of it that men followed his banner. Educated men had been brought up on the enlightened belief in the beneficent powers of reason and philosophy. The words liberal and philosophical have almost synonymous connotations in the popular writings of the period. Most intelligent people shared Burke's belief that philosophy had its share in causing the Revolution, but where he saw a conspiracy of socially uprooted intellectuals allied to soulless financiers, they saw philosophy, reason, and moral principle brought to bear on politics. And this to them was a great thing. 'The genius of philosophy is walking abroad', people said with Mrs Barbauld, and the motif is often repeated. Both Mackintosh and Mary Wollstonecraft stressed the attempts of the Revolution to redress real grievances but they also celebrated the happy union of politics and philosophy. Arthur Young, who had no love for visionary ideas, admitted that the existence of the grievances would not alone have brought about their redressing. The English revolutionaries living in France, toasting the Revolution and addressing the Convention, often said, 'You have taken up arms solely to make reason and truth triumph.' Miss Williams wrote with admiration of the revolutionaries that they were putting theory to practice and shaping the future on the principle that 'nothing which is morally wrong can be politically right'. This rationalist principle recurs endlessly in the writings of the period and is acclaimed by all sides as the greatest philosophical lesson of history. It is found in writers as late as Smyth and Alison. It is the essence of the belief in the power of reason to enthrone on earth the rule of moral good.

The same writers, however, also abandoned themselves to the impact of other sentiments. Even such a revolutionary as Miss Williams praised the French for what appear like Burkian qualities, such as distrusting reason alone and building on the sound foundations of men's habits.¹ The charges of 'political atheism' and cold rationalism, which later

¹ In 1792 she writes that living in France is living in a romance, that the age of chivalry has returned. She praises the French for wallowing in enthusiasm whereas the English are ashamed to weep during the performance of a tragedy (Williams, *Letters* (1792), pp. 4-5).

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became the rallying point for Burke's converts, were scorned at the time. Both sides appealed to both reason and emotion, as did the revolutionaries in France. Miss Williams is a particularly apt example for this confused, romantic and rationalist revolutionism.

Miss Williams was like the popular image of a Girondin, without the violence and without the pessimism. Hers was the poetic brand of revolutionary sympathy, and she always stressed its emotional more than its rational basis. It is in the name of stark nature that others too, like Mary Wollstonecraft, Boothby, Parr, Paine, rebuke Burke in endless variations of Paine's deathless phrase: 'He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird.' In early revolutionary writings romanticism, which was to gain force from the anti-revolutionary sentiment, was at first favourable to the Revolution. It is amusing to trace the commonplaces of the time change hands between the pro- and anti-revolutionaries. The romantic notion, for instance, as Miss Williams put it in 1790 ('beauty rising out of confusion'), William Blake in 1791 ('to plant beauty in the desert craving abyss') and Hannah More in 1793 ('from the ruins of tyranny, and rubbish of popery a beautiful and finely framed edifice would in time have been constructed'), of good coming out of evil, was used for the defence of doubtful revolutionary phenomena.¹ The opposite view can be found, for instance, in Burke's preface to his son's translation of Brissot's *Letter to his Constituents*. It is the classical notion that beauty is achieved through orderly means. Another current coin was the phrase that, 'nothing which is morally wrong can be politically right'. The revolutionaries often quoted it at the idealistic outbreak of the Revolution. Their enemies later felt it had more appropriately become their weapon when the period of violence and terror set in. The sides changed ground and the revolutionaries were now defending the need for coercion and even for the shedding of blood. Miss Williams was credulous and muddled, but she exhibited prevalent feelings, and she shared the self-importance of the revolutionaries. Having spent much time in France she is an English example of that revolutionary mentality which various and incompatible ideals were firing with a restless and muddled enthusiasm during the early years of the Revolution. There was hero-worship for the King or Necker or the members of the States General; there was on the other hand the assertion of the common individual; there were horror and elation intensifying each other; there was the fascination with all that was 'new', and, at the same time, the idyllic belief in the restoration of man's ancient paradise. Miss Williams also represents the warring emotions of love for 'humanity' and hatred for its enemies, creating an inner tension which sometimes made for cruel fanaticism and sometimes, as with Miss Williams and other

¹ H. M. Williams describes a ceremony in which a twisted tree was burned and a tall straight one was made to rise from the ashes.