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978-1-107-62642-3 - The Collected Historical Works of Sir Francis Palgrave, K. H.: Reviews, Essays and Other Writings: Volume II

Edited by His Son Sir R. H. Inglis Palgrave

Excerpt

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PROGRESS OF HISTORICAL ENQUIRY IN FRANCE.

1. RECUEIL DES HISTORIENS DES GAULES ET DE LA FRANCE; CONTENANT LA PREMIÈRE LIVRAISON DES MONUMENTS DES RÈGNES DE SAINT LOUIS, DE PHILIPPE LE HARDI, DE PHILIPPE LE BEL, DE LOUIS X., DE PHILIPPE V., ET DE CHARLES IV., DEPUIS 1226 JUSQU'EN 1328. Par MM. DAUNOU et NAUDET, Membres de l'Institut. Tome Vingtième. Folio. A Paris, de l'Imprimerie royale, 1840.
2. RÉCITS DES TEMPS MÉROVINGIENS: PRÉCÉDÉS DE CONSIDÉRATIONS SUR L'HISTOIRE DE FRANCE. Par AUGUSTIN THIERRY, Membre de l'Institut. 2 tom. 8vo. A Paris, 1840.
3. LES GRANDES CHRONIQUES DE FRANCE, SELON QUE ELLES SONT CONSERVÉES EN L'ÉGLISE DE SAINT DENIS EN FRANCE: publiées par M. PAULIN PARIS, de l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. 5 tom. 8vo. A Paris, 1837.

REPRINTED FROM THE "EDINBURGH REVIEW" OF APRIL 1841.

THE brilliant production of M. Thierry consists of two portions, not only quite distinct, but bearing very little relation to each other, except in their common character as illustrations of French history. The *Récits des Temps Mérovingiens* are portions detached from the early annals of the Franks, worked up into a semi-dramatic form. The basis of these narratives, each of which centres round some one individual, is taken almost exclusively from the venerable Chronicle of Gregory of Tours, the Froissart of the age of the Merovingian kings. The minor details, especially those relating to manners and customs, are sought by M. Thierry with great diligence in contemporary authorities. Poets and Hagiologists, Fortunatus¹ and Saint Cæsarius², the laws of Arbogast and Widogast³, and the formularies of Marculphus⁴, are all put in requisition. Gregory furnishes the web, of which they constitute the rich embroidery. Yet upon this portion of the work, however attractive it may be, we shall not enlarge; for the promised continuation may better enable us to bring it before the English reader. And we shall on the present occasion confine ourselves to

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the *Considérations sur l'Histoire de France*; an essay in which M. Thierry gives a rapid but very profound review of the constitutional writers of France—writers by whom, as he says, the national annals have been constantly misapplied, for the purpose of truckling to political party. From Gregory of Tours down to Comines, French history has been considered little else than a repository of texts for political sermons. All ranks and orders (as he states) in their turn—Aristocracy and *Bourgeoisie*—Church and Law—surplice and long robe—cloth of gold and cloth of frieze—have constantly, by an appeal to the past, endeavoured to support the justice of their claims to political power; and laboured to establish, upon historical grounds, the truth of the theories by which the scattered fragments of evidence, supporting, or supposed to support, their claims, have been grouped into systematic order. And thus has arisen a class of works almost peculiar (as he assumes) to French literature—“half pamphlet, half history; and in which “erudition, more or less solid, more or less ingenious, is enlisted “in the service of political passion, and in which the spirit of “historical system is only a reflection of the spirit of party. And “amongst us,” he continues, “abstract and speculative history, “thus rendered subservient to the conflicts of political discussion, “has, from the revival of literature until the present day, acquired “a most undue importance—domineering detrimentally over “researches which ought to be impartial, and over narrative “history.” The various historico-political theories to which M. Thierry alludes, and which he examines, criticizes, opposes, or refutes—always with much talent, often with success—constitute a living and instructive commentary upon the exertions, made by the French, to promote the study of that national history which has been so employed, or, if we agree with M. Thierry, so perverted. The existence of these party works is not doubtful. Their complexion is not to be disguised. Yet, with great submission to so high an authority, it appears to us that his tone of complaint is scarcely well founded. Surely, it is only from the practical application of the facts of history that they derive their real value. Of what use are they in the abstract? A hoarded treasure not brought into circulation—an armoury, in which the weapons hang idly against the wall. But for the lessons which they try to teach, or the opinions which they labour to diffuse, Sismondi or Hume would be of as little importance in historical science as Amadis of Gaul or Palmerin of England¹.

It is the exposition, the doctrinal elucidation of the historical

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text, by the philosophical or political historian, which makes it tell. This value, considering history as an exercise of intellect, is as appreciable by those who are of contrary opinions to the historian, as by those who adopt them; and if a decided political tendency be, as M. Thierry laments, a violation of the laws which govern historical disquisition, no one is a more successful culprit than he. M. Thierry does not fight in ambush, and there is no reason why he should. If Boulainvilliers¹ endeavoured to cut down the *tiers état* by wielding the glittering battle-axe of Clovis, has not Thierry completely routed him by sounding the pealing tocsin from the civic *beffroi*? M. Thierry dispels the talismanic power of the heraldic bearing by the more powerful magic of the merchant's mark. If the advocate of aristocracy deduces the title to social sovereignty from the long-haired warriors of Germany, M. Thierry annuls the pretensions of the pedigree by opening the communal character. Nay, he is so absorbed in the political application of his pursuits, that his spirit breaks out in his official Reports. He is now employed in the truly great work of publishing the Records of the Municipalities of France; and whilst he is covered with the dust of the archives which he is exploring, he joyfully points out the triumphs of the principles which the ancient charters involved. Let it be recollected that it is not we who quarrel with M. Thierry for this mode of expounding history. We do not think it an unfair mode of giving a substratum for his doctrines. But it is he who is at variance with himself—it is he who objects to the very source of the impulse of his successful labours. We do not say that an historian must be a politician, or that he cannot be laborious except as the expounder of a doctrine or a creed, or energetic without speaking as the organ of a particular party; but it is a great help to him if he is. It gives him a motive the more. No writer can express himself clearly unless he feels forcibly; and there is hardly any influence which will impel anyone who really deserves the name of an historiographer so energetically, as the earnest desire of advocating or recommending religious or political opinions which (whether erroneously or not) he thinks it his duty to promulgate, to propagate, to proclaim. All that we can require from the historian is truth and fairness; and that he should not wilfully or perversely mistake the authorities, or corrupt the evidence, upon which his reasonings are grounded.

Furthermore, it is hardly necessary to remind the English historical reader, that M. Thierry is anything rather than precise in supposing that the works which he designates as histories and

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historical disquisitions—“moitié histoire, moitié pamphlet, où “ l’érudition, plus ou moins solide, plus ou moins ingénieuse, est “ mise en quelque sorte au service d’une passion politique,”—are at all peculiar to France. For, amongst us, if we try to recollect the names of any historical writers who are in anywise worth recollecting—whether for industry or capacity—we can hardly name any of a different description. Tyrrell and Brady¹, Carte and Oldmixon, Hume and Smollett, Burnett and Collier, have produced nothing but pamphlets in M. Thierry’s sense of the word. All have compelled their erudition to put on a party uniform—High Church or Low Church, Whig or Tory. Prynne with his ears, and Prynne without his ears, was a pamphleteer according to the definition of M. Thierry. Selden was a pamphleteer, neither worse nor better. Of our own times we will not speak. All that we can concede to M. Thierry is, that the writers of this class began earlier in France, and perhaps form a more continuous and effective series than our own.

Hotman² is placed by Thierry at the head of his political array. This writer, a Silesian by descent, his grandfather having entered the French service under Louis XI., undertakes in his *Franco-Gallia* (1574) to prove, that the fundamental laws of France establish an elective monarchy, conjoined, or rather subordinate to, the States-general of the Realm. He assumes that the Franks were the deliverers of the Gauls from the Roman yoke of bondage. Fused into one nation, the Franco-Gallic commonwealth is founded upon the sovereignty of the two races, united into one people. Of the king-deposing power, Hotman finds a sufficient number of examples in the annals of the two first dynasties. The fact becomes a right. The dry and legal deductions which he makes from particular precedents, must have been more convincing to many minds than any argument upon general principles. And it is hardly too much to say, that there is no one dictum which we term constitutional, whose germ may not be found in this now forgotten treatise; which, so late as the reign of Queen Anne, was considered even here as a powerful vindication of the principles upon which our Revolution was founded.

Hotman, a banished man, and during the full fury of the League, could give full scope to such soul-stirring topics. A calmer era ensued, and in which the prevailing feeling was still the attempt to preserve the national honour, by veiling the antagonism of the two races, amongst whom power was so unequally divided.

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Adrian de Valois¹ (1646) tranquilly transforms into Bourbons the kings of the Merovingian dynasty—embracing the comforting hypothesis that the Franks were Gauls, returning home from their migrations; and their conquest, therefore, is a kindly government, and not the source of dependence and servitude. In bold defiance of all history, this theory became popular, nor need we wonder—no food is too gross for vanity, whether national or individual. A tribe of *savants* and *demi-savants*, of whom the one class may be represented by Chantereau le Fevre² (1668) and the jesuit Lacarry³ (1677) and perhaps Mézeray⁴, and the other by Audigier⁵ (1667), all adopted the same theory; but the last-named writer carried it to the utmost verge of extravagance—Goths and Vandals, Burgundians and Heruli, are all own brothers to the Celtic Gauls, all of one blood and lineage. These Celtic reveries bear the closest analogy to the patriotic dreams of the Hibernians, whether native or adopted, from the M.R.I.A.⁶, who gives you the Milesian version of the speech in Plautus, down to the “news-writer” in Felix Farley’s *Journal*; who, when Thamas Kouli Khan⁷ begins to make a noise in the world, proves that he is a boy from county Tipperary, one Thomas O’Callaghan.

The modern Germans were roused by this bold attempt to deprive the ancient Teutonic race of its supremacy; but, as usual, they reasoned by appealing to their imagination for facts, and by substituting one theory for another. Leibnitz⁸ was their champion; but it was reserved for Fréret⁹ (1714) then merely “*élevé en titre*” “de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres,” to demonstrate the fallacy of the advocates of the Gauls in his first dissertation, never followed by a second. Some of the positions in his essay excited the jealousy of the government. It is difficult to discover what was the precise cause of the offence; but it seems that the Germans had incorporated in their disquisitions certain invectives against the supposed pageant of an universal monarchy; and Fréret’s agreement in his results with them, may have been deemed a breach of his allegiance due to the “Grand Monarque.” As far as questions so obscure are capable of demonstration, Fréret proved that the Franks were a league of the German tribes of the Netherlands, probably the Sicambrians of Cæsar. The reading of the paper excited great discussions in the Académie des Inscriptions. A *lettre de cachet* transferred the young historian to pursue his studies in the Bastille; and, when released from his seclusion, he sought refuge in the safer territories of Greece, Asia Minor and Assyria; and France was left to other hands.

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The depression of the nation in the last years of the reign of Louis XIV., had created an obscure and yet earnest desire for the means of imparting new vigour to the body politic. Many began to deem that the traditions of the past would give lessons for the future. Fénelon, “believing equally in the natural rights of man, “and in the power of history” (1689), had wished to restore the States-general to their constitutional power. For this renovation, Conventions of Notables were to be the preliminary, as a transition from the past to the existing circumstances of the monarchy. Fénelon therefore planned, for the instruction of the Duke of Burgundy, what may be termed a general constitutional survey of the French Empire; we use this term advisedly with respect to the dominions united under the *ancien régime*. In 1695, circulars were addressed to the Intendants, requiring them to transmit reports or *mémoires* upon the ancient policy and forms of government of the provinces united to the crown. These *mémoires* are now in manuscript in the royal library. It is said that the *rédacteurs* have in general slurred over the evidence of the institutions which limited the power of the crown; but, judging from the abstracts which are published, and the extracts which we have seen, they seem, nevertheless, to contain important particulars of the practice of the constitutions (however impaired) of the *Pays d'états*¹; besides many archæological and statistical facts, of which it is probable that, in many cases, no other details are preserved. They provoked discussion and enquiry; but none of the learned of the age answered to the call; and the pen was taken up by an heraldic antiquary, a man of marriages and descents, of crests and quarterings, but who had studied hard, and was gifted with great clearness of intellect, the Count de Boulainvilliers. He began (1727) by an abridgment, or rather compression, of the *mémoires* of the intendants, accompanied by several historical treatises. This was followed or accompanied by his celebrated *Histoire de l'Ancien Gouvernement de la France*, planned, as he informs us in his preface, to form a general introduction to the *mémoires* of the intendants,—a history, not of wars and battles, but of the political destinies of the monarchy. Boulainvilliers is singularly neat and methodical as an historical analyst; and he was also a diligent and a conscientious enquirer. In his manner, there is a species of military frankness and *disinvoltura* which place his productions amongst the most lively and interesting in their class. He has all the good and pleasant qualities of an *ancien gentilhomme*; but then he is a *gentilhomme* in every way, an aristocrat to the very

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marrow of his bones. The internal sentiment of this writer was grounded upon the American principle of the utter impossibility of communicating equal rights to different races;—a thing no more to be thought of than making horses charge on two legs, or dragoons gallop on four. “Depuis la conquête, les Français “originaires ont été les véritables nobles, et les seuls capables de “l’être.” The Franks, or the real “noblesse,” are his whites; all the rest, the ennobled, the “*tiers état*,” the “*roturiers*,” are his coloured men, transmitting the strain, the “lick of the tar brush,” from generation to generation, from ever to ever. According to his views, the ruin of the ancient constitution was effected by the attacks made upon the nobility in front and in rear—by the enfranchisement of the commons and the usurpation of the crown.

“Deux grands événements arrivés dans la monarchie ont amené la ruine “graduelle de cet ordre de choses. Le premier fut l’affranchissement des serfs ou “gens de main-morte, dont toute la France était peuplée, tant dans les villes que “dans les campagnes, et qui étaient, ou les Gaulois d’origine assujétis par la “conquête, ou les malheureux que différents accidents avaient réduits en servi- “tude. Le second fut le progrès par lequel ces serfs s’élevèrent, contre tout droit, “à la condition de leurs anciens maîtres. Depuis six cents ans, les roturiers “esclaves, d’abord affranchis, puis anoblis par les rois, ont usurpé les emplois et les “dignités de l’état, tandis que la noblesse, héritière des privilèges de la conquête, “les perdait un à un et allait se dégradant de siècle en siècle.

“Tous les rois de la troisième race ont voulu son abaissement, et travaillé, “comme sur un plan formé d’avance à la ruine des lois primitives et de l’ancienne “constitution de l’état; ce fut pour eux une idée commune d’anéantir les grands “seigneurs, de subjuguier la nation, de rendre leur autorité absolue et le gouverne- “ment despotique. Philippe-Auguste commença la destruction de la police des “fiefs et des droits originels du baronage; Philippe-le-Bel poursuivit ce projet “par la ruse et par la violence; Louis XI. l’avança près de son terme. Leur “postérité est parvenue au but qu’ils s’étaient proposé, mais, pour l’atteindre “pleinement, l’administration du Cardinal de Richelieu et le règne de Louis XIV. “ont plus fait, en un demi-siècle, que toutes les entreprises des rois antérieurs “n’avaient pu faire en douze cents ans.”

In spite of his doctrine of the unalienable prerogatives of the descendants of the first conquerors, Boulainvilliers wrote under a strong parliamentary feeling. He admired and venerated the system which calls each rank and order to co-operate in the government of the state. He never condescends to praise England; still it is evident that the example of England was always before him. Much of his stern theoretic disdain of the *tiers-état* is humanized

^a *Histoire de l’Ancien Gouvernement de la France*, etc. t. I. pp. 191, 210, 291, 309, 310, 322; t. II. p. 1; t. III. pp. 135, 152 [quoted by Thierry, *Considérations*, t. I. pp. 57, 58].

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when he beholds them in their place in the States-general of the realm; and, like the many honest intolerants who draw logical conclusions from moral premises, but in whom the right reasoning of the head is happily set wrong by the inconsistency of the heart, he would have shrunk from the realization of his own syllogisms. What he most fully yields to, is the dislike which he entertains to the jurists. Between them and the old noblesse there existed, to the last, a bitter feud. It is the strong grasp of order and reason, which has always rendered the ascendancy of the law so distrustful to the proud nobility and the prouder rabble.

Boulainvilliers was perhaps the first who clearly made known the antagonism of the two races; and, as an historical analysis, his positions must always remain unshaken; but he failed morally, as all do who push a theory to extremes. The tone gave more offence than the matter; and the *tiers-état* soon found an energetic champion for their liberties. This was the Abbé Dubos^a, the son of a tradesman of Beauvais, a worthy burgess and *échevin* of the town; and whose talents, with perhaps as small a portion of court intrigue as was compatible with any species of advancement, had raised him to the very honourable position of perpetual secretary of the Academy. With few writers has Fame dealt more unfairly. For forty years and more, Dubos enjoyed the most commanding reputation; and now, who quotes his name? Probably there is no one of our readers who has not read Montesquieu¹, or one who has read Dubos; and whoever is in this predicament, considers the latter as nothing but a superficial visionary. But the work of Dubos, the production of a practical diplomatist, keen, subtle, and deeply learned, is the development of palpable fallacy, incorporated by him with an immutable historical truth. First, as to the fallacy, it lies in the supposition, that the first settlement effected by the Franks in Gaul, was the result of a voluntary alliance with the Roman or Romanized inhabitants, treating upon equal terms, and rejoicing in each other's aid and friendship.

“L'époque de l'établissement des Francs sur les bords du Rhin
 “est celle du premier et du principal traité d'alliance entre ce
 “peuple et les Romains. Dès-lors les deux nations furent unies
 “par une amitié constante, à peu près de la même manière que
 “la France et la Suisse, depuis le règne de Louis XI. Les Romains
 “ne déclarèrent jamais la guerre à toute la nation des Francs, et
 “la masse de celle-ci prit souvent les armes en faveur de l'empire

^a *Histoire Critique de l'Etablissement de la Monarchie Française dans les Gaules* (1734).

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“ contre celle de ses propres tribus qui violait la paix jurée. Il
 “ était de l’intérêt des Romains d’être constamment alliés des
 “ Francs, parce que ces derniers mettaient la frontière de l’empire
 “ à couvert de l’invasion des autres Barbares; c’est pour cela qu’à
 “ Rome on comblait d’honneurs et de dignités les chefs de la nation
 “ Franque. Les anciens traités d’alliance furent renouvelés au
 “ commencement du cinquième siècle par Stilicon, au nom de
 “ l’empereur Honorius, vers 450, par Aétius, au nom de Valen-
 “ tinien III., et vers 460, par Aegidius, pour les Gallo-Romains,
 “ alors séparés de l’Italie, à cause de leur aversion contre la tyran-
 “ nie de Ricimer. Childéric, roi des Francs, reçut de l’empereur
 “ Anthémius le titre et l’autorité de maître de la milice des Gaules;
 “ son fils Clovis obtint la même faveur après son avènement, et il
 “ cumula cette dignité romaine avec le titre de roi de sa nation.
 “ En l’année 509, il fut fait consul par l’empereur Anastase, et
 “ cette nouvelle dignité lui donna dans les affaires civiles le même
 “ pouvoir qu’il avait déjà dans les affaires de la guerre; il devint
 “ empereur de fait pour les Gaulois, protecteur et chef de tous
 “ les citoyens romains établis dans la Gaule, lieutenant et soldat
 “ de l’empire contre les Goths et les Burgondes. Vers l’année 540,
 “ ses deux fils Childebert et Clotaire, et Théodebert, son petit-fils,
 “ obtinrent, par une cession authentique de l’empereur Justinien,
 “ la pleine souveraineté de toutes les Gaules.” (Thierry, *Considéra-
 tions*, t. I. 69, 70.)^a

The proof of the theory from which he deduces the primitive equality of the noblesse and the *tiers-état*, occupies what Montesquieu calls “trois mortels volumes.” But with all their length, they are anything rather than tedious—exhibiting, as they do, a remarkable combination of literary and forensic talent; for in fact the Abbé’s work is a *plaidoyer* on behalf of his clients, executed with profound erudition. As an argument, the book fails from its too manifest art; to use the colloquial phrase, it is overdone. Dubos destroys the dignity of his truths by their dexterous combination with delusions. He gains the victory without producing conviction; you know you are beat, but you do not know whether it is by strength or by stratagem; you are entrapped into admissions by a hint, and after staggering you on some collateral point by a quotation which is just short of the mark, he overwhelms you by another which is nothing to the purpose. All this is parodied admirably, though not quite fairly, by Montesquieu, in the passage

^a [*Histoire Critique de l’Etablissement de la Monarchie Française dans les Gaules*, books II. III. IV. and V. quoted by Thierry.]

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in which he engages to prove, by reasoning *à la Dubos*, that Persia never was conquered by the Greeks: “D’abord je parlerais des traités que quelques unes de leurs villes firent avec les Perses: je parlerais des Grecs qui furent à la solde des Perses, comme les Francs furent à la solde des Romains. Que si Alexandre entra dans le pays des Perses, assiégea, prit, et détruisit la ville de Tyr, c’était une affaire particulière comme celle de Syagrius. Mais voyez comment le pontife des Juifs vient au-devant de lui: écoutez l’oracle de Jupiter Ammon: ressouvenez-vous comment il avait été prédit à Gordium: voyez comment toutes les villes courent, pour ainsi dire, au-devant de lui, comment les satrapes et les grands arrivent en foule. Il s’habille à la manière des Perses; c’est la robe consulaire de Clovis. Darius ne lui offrit-il pas la moitié de son royaume? Darius n’est-il pas assassiné comme un tyran? La mère et la femme de Darius ne pleurent-elles pas la mort d’Alexandre? Quinte-Curce, Arrien, Plutarque, étaient-ils contemporains d’Alexandre? L’imprimerie de nous a-t-elle pas donné des lumières qui manquaient à ces auteurs? Voilà *l’Histoire de l’Etablissement de la Monarchie Française dans les Gaules.*”^a But with all his mistakes and sophisms, or rather in spite of them, Dubos dispelled, and for ever, the thick clouds which concealed the true form of medieval history; whilst Montesquieu, floating on the surface of historical enquiry, has scarcely left a page which really advances historical knowledge. Dubos discovered the great truth of the continuance of the Roman people, the Roman institutions, all the identity of ancient Roman society, subsisting among the barbarians and beneath their domination; and surviving until the departing empire became the basis of the medieval states;—a truth which, since developed with greater force and clearness by Savigny, Guizot, and Thierry, and by some in our own country, has become the cardinal doctrine in the investigation of modern history. Whatever works may have been since produced, no one who wishes to study the history of France, can dispense either with Boulainvilliers or with Dubos. In the latter there is a peculiar cleverness in bringing out the characteristics of nations, particularly the barbarian tribes. This is not done by minute particulars of manners and customs, or by striking descriptions; for he was singularly unimaginative. This is amusingly shown in one of his similes. He compares the rapidity with which the compilers of French history passed over the dull annals of the early Merovingians, to the traveller, who, obliged

^a Montesquieu, *Esprit des Loix*, v. 77, 78.