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Edited by Henry Duff Traill

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The Works of Thomas Carlyle

VOLUME 2:
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
A HISTORY I

EDITED BY HENRY DUFF TRAILL



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CENTENARY EDITION
—
THE WORKS OF
THOMAS CARLYLE
IN THIRTY VOLUMES
—
VOL. II
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
I

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THOMAS CARLYLE

THE
FRENCH REVOLUTION
A HISTORY

*Μέγας ὁ ἀγὼν ἔστι, θεῖον γὰρ ἔργον· ὑπὲρ βασι-
λείας, ὑπὲρ ἐλευθερίας, ὑπὲρ εὐροίας, ὑπὲρ ἀταραξίας.*

ARRIANUS

*Δόγμα γὰρ αὐτῶν τίς μεταβάλλει; χωρὶς δὲ δογ-
μάτων μεταβολῆς, τί ἄλλο ἢ δουλεία στενόντων καὶ
πείθεσθαι προσποιουμένων;*

ANTONINUS

IN THREE VOLUMES

I

THE BASTILLE

LONDON
CHAPMAN AND HALL
LIMITED
1896

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Diesem Ambos vergleich' ich das Land, den Hammer dem Herrscher,
Und dem Volke das Blech, das in der Mitte sich krümmt,
Wehe dem armen Blech, wenn nur willkürliche Schläge
Ungewiß treffen, und nie fertig der Kessel erscheint!

Goethe.

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INTRODUCTION

EVERYBODY knows what befell the original manuscript of *The French Revolution*: a fate unexampled in the history of the world's great literature. It is true that in the case of one great but non-literary production of the human intellect it had a parallel which, though not exact, is close enough to entitle Newton's dog Diamond to share a sinister immortality with the nameless housemaid of Mr. John Stuart Mill. But the disaster which the illustrious astronomer bore with such heroic patience, must, after all, have seemed less irreparable to him even at the moment of its accidence, than his own calamity may well have appeared to Carlyle. To have the ms. of a mathematical process destroyed is, after all, but to lose something which you can send the trustiest of retrievers to hunt for, and that, too, along a road every step of which is familiar to him. Sir Isaac could, and probably did, despatch faithful Reason to recover for him his lost calculations; Carlyle had to depend mainly upon treacherous Memory or capricious Imagination for the reconstruction of his destroyed History. That, after a brief interval of stunned despair, he braced himself to the heart-breaking task, and without complaint accomplished it—generously, the while, concealing from his friend how terribly he felt the blow—was a feat of noble fortitude which may well atone for many an outburst of querulous impatience under minor ills.

It seems a feat, too, the more remarkable, because, of all historians, Carlyle, one must think, would be likely to suffer most from such a hideous mishap. No man's completed work is likely to have differed more widely from its rough notes than that of this splendid Impressionist, whose laboriously accumulated materials

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will, to any one who through his references traces them to their sources, seem little else than the mere massed colours on a painter's palette. Every portrait, every incident, every scene and situation in the lurid drama has the air of having been dashed off 'at a heat' from a hand of marvellous swiftness, directed not only by an imagination on fire, but by a soul with every emotion responsive, and an intellect with every faculty alert. If *Sartor Resartus* shows Carlyle at his greatest in dealing with the deeper things of the individual consciousness, it is in *The French Revolution* that his outlook on the world of his fellow-men is the widest, and his mastery of the mighty and everlasting drama of their actions and passions the most assured. It is here, too, beyond doubt, that he displays more impressively than in any other of his writings, the astonishing wealth and variety of his powers. The book, to begin with, is a monument—second only in importance, if second, to his *Frederick*—of his untiring industry in the collection of his materials, and his unerring artistic instinct for their effective use. To the first of these qualities those only can do partial justice who have explored for themselves some small portion of that vast mass of authorities—good, bad, and indifferent, romantic and prosaic, Royalist, Republican, and neutral—among which Carlyle seems not to have left the obscurest document, or shred of a document, unexamined. Times out of number it must have happened to the student wading through one or other of the scores of volumes which make up the *Histoire Parlementaire* to light on some vivid touch of character, some momentary flash of picturesque description, some casual phrases of dramatic narrative, and to have turned straightway to *The French Revolution* in the full assurance, seldom if ever disappointed, that the touch, the flash, the phrase, has not escaped the master's eye. It may be the only memorable, the only notable or quotable thing in the writer under examination, the one gleam of light or breath of life in a dull and inanimate chronicle of events; but there, sure enough, it is, rescued for ever from the heaped-up rubbish of its surrounding pages, and the long, long

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labour of their wearisome overhauling represented often as not, perhaps, by a single illuminating line.

What, moreover, is a still stronger proof of exhaustive research, it is not only upon these touches of the dramatic and the picturesque that Carlyle's unescapable artistic eye has seized, but in cases where the total effect of a long and uninspired *memoire pour servir* is, on the whole, informing, though no single passage of it be worthy of literal citation, we here too find evidence not to be mistaken that Carlyle has been carefully over the ground. If the fashion of a later time had prevailed in the Thirties, and historians had been in the habit of prefacing the text of their works with a marshalled list of all the authorities whom they had consulted, the introductory pages of this volume would have not only exhibited a long string of names (scores of them now concealed in the foot-notes under the modest reference '*Hist. Parl.*'), but would have shown incidentally how nothing was too heavy, or too light, for Carlyle's consultation, no cranny of his subject too minute, no corner too remote, for his indefatigable investigations.

Industry of this description and degree is, of course, no unfamiliar virtue in these days. Every student who publishes a 'monograph' on some infinitesimal fraction of his narrowly circumscribed 'period,' possesses it nowadays, in more or less ample measure. Exhaustive treatment is indeed his only excuse for the excessive limitation of its scope; to 'scamp' the work in so small a canvas would indeed be unpardonable. But the trouble with the contemporary student is that, though he leaves no single document of all Dryasdust's voluminous collection untouched, he is a little too apt to use them in the spirit of Dryasdust himself. No one since Carlyle—as no one assuredly, save Gibbon, before him—has in equal measure combined industry in the study of authorities, accuracy in their citation, and fairness in their use, with anything approaching to Carlyle's artistic faculty and literary power. For the requirement of the third of the above-mentioned qualities will as effectually exclude one of the two famous historians, his contemporaries, as

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insistence on the second would disqualify the other. Macaulay was as industrious and as accurate a student as he was a brilliant writer, but what about his fairness? Froude collected his materials laboriously, and intended to use them fairly; but he was, without excessive exaggeration, credited with 'a constitutional inability to quote even the shortest and simplest document correctly.' And in sheer power of 'visualising' scenes and persons, the describer of the Fall of the Bastille, and the Insurrection of Women, the delineator of Mirabeau and Marat surpasses them both.

The French Revolution: A History. That is Carlyle's own name for his work, the name which he gives it on its title-page. *The French Revolution: A Drama*, would, some think, be a truer description of it, and one which, while accounting for its powerful impression on a reader, would at the same time indicate, and in a manner justify its limitations. For it is the privilege of the drama to present its own 'motive' from the outset, to postulate the past life and present disposition of each one of its personages, and to set in motion, as though from a previous state of inertia, those forces of human action, conditioned by external circumstance, which must inexorably determine the evolution of its plot. We do not—or we should not—'go behind' the argument of the drama, or seek for causes of those causes which the dramatist asks us to assume as operating. These being given, it is enough for him if we are unable to detect any incredibility in their represented action—enough for him if the persons of the drama behave in accordance with the characters assigned to them, and if event beget event according to a law of sequence which we recognise as inevitable. To have accomplished this is for the dramatist to have achieved complete success on the constructive side of his art: we have neither the right nor the desire to ask more of him. And it is thus, *mutatis mutandis*, that we must read Carlyle's *French Revolution*. It is true, of course, that since it is a historical and not an imaginative work, we have a right to insist that its data and motive must conform to the facts of history, or

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to a reasonable conception of those facts ; but this condition it fully satisfies. ' Given ' (we may suppose its author saying), ' a political system rotten to the core, and a social organism so dangerously diseased and weakened in one or more of its vital parts as to be powerless to resist the malady of its institutions ; given a bankrupt treasury, a corrupt fisc, a system of taxation cruel in its burdens and shamefully unequal in its incidence, a starving peasantry, a non-resident noblesse, an army officered by rigidly exclusive privilege, and a middle-class honeycombed with discontent—given such things and such men, and you have the plot of a tragedy which must necessarily, and which did in fact, evolve itself thus and thus.' Agree to start from these data, which, as every student of the period will acknowledge are in substantial accord with the state of things existing at the date of Louis xv.'s death, and you will not be able to deny to *The French Revolution* the merit of strict historic accuracy in addition to its more generally recognised claims as a work of unrivalled dramatic force. You will have, in short, to admit that the drama which Carlyle calls ' a history ' does within these limits deserve the title he gave it, and that, if we consent to look no further back than 1774, and no further forward than 1793, the drama is in fact a history in the fullest sense of the word.

It is only when one ' goes behind the argument ' of the monstrous tragi-comedy—only when one turns to Carlyle for that sort of *recherche sur les causes* which has become so dear to the historian of a later day—that one begins to find inadequacy. Not that even here it is inadequacy of the kind which is due to defective handiwork. Dangerous indeed would it be to impute to so sternly conscientious an inquirer that he had insufficiently investigated the more remote historic causes of the great upheaval. For aught I know, he may have studied the last hundred years of the *ancien régime*—or, say, the political and social condition of France from Richelieu onward—as industriously as he shows himself to have studied the twenty years immediately preceding its fall ; but if so, his habit of the preacher and the moralist was too strong for his

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instinct of the historian. He is too ready to lay all the sins and sufferings of the Revolution at that particular door at which he wishes to knock, too anxious to bring home its guilt and misery to those particular sinners whom he conceived it to be his main mission to indict. He cannot bring himself to assign their due weight to those already predetermined causes which are not directly traceable to individual wrongdoing. How many and how potent these causes were, and how defective are all those theories of the great catastrophe which seek to explain it solely by the action of human selfishness, frivolity, and falsehood in high places, has often been pointed out since Carlyle's time, and has been demonstrated once for all in the masterly study of M. Taine. Carlyle's inquiries yielded him a much simpler result. 'Nay, answer the courtiers,' he says, describing (Book II. Chapter viii.) their superficial explanation of the 'general overturn,'

'it was Turgot, it was Necker with their mad innovating; it was the Queen's want of etiquette; it was he, it was she, it was that. Friends! it was every scoundrel that had lived and quack-like pretended to be doing, and been only eating and *misdoing* in all provinces of life, as Shoebblack and Sovereign Lord, each in his degree from the time of Charlemagne and earlier. All this (for be sure no falsehood perishes but is as seed sown out to grow) has been storing itself for thousands of years, and now the account day has come. And rude will the settlement be: of wrath laid up against the day of wrath.'

This, no doubt, is a more satisfying theory than that of the courtiers; but is it adequate? Are the conscienceless misdoings of men a more potent factor in the calamities of nations than their conscientious errors? Did the selfish sloth and profligacy of Louis xv. do more harm to France by hastening the advent of the Revolution, than the narrow and cruel, but perfectly honest, laborious, and disinterested fanaticism of Robespierre in driving it by the bloody ways of the Terror to the Napoleonic reaction, and in thereby arresting the political development of the nation for nearly a hundred years? It is a question not easily to be answered. It is easier to see that both conscienceless misdoers

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and conscientious blunderers may often count for little in the sum of causes as compared with those great secular forces—social, economical, industrial—which have operated through successive ages to the shaping of the political material, intractable it may be, or even ultimately and inevitably explosive, with which the ruler for the time being is, with or without a conscience, compelled to deal.

But even if we are to consider men alone, and to leave their surroundings out of account, it seems as perverse as it is depressing to hold, that the service rendered to a state by the faithful discharge of civic duty should compare so unfavourably in amount of enduring effect with the disservice done them by selfish neglect of civic obligation. From Sully to Richelieu, and from Richelieu to Turgot and Necker, France had never wanted able servants whose whole lives were dedicated by ambition or patriotism to the public good; and to believe that all the efforts of these devoted, highly-placed, and powerful men were defeated not by their own misdirection or by the inherent difficulties of the work, but by the sheer prepotence for evil of certain obscure *fainéants* and impostors among their contemporaries, is enough to make one despair of the future of mankind.

Surely, too, apart from all questions of the potency of their individual influence, the Quacks and Charlatans, the men 'who had pretended to be doing, and been only eating and *misdoing*,' come in for a far larger share of Carlyle's denunciations than their numerical importance warrants. It has been observed, ere this, that in spite of the denunciations aforesaid, the whole Carlylean gallery of lifelike revolutionary portraits contains hardly any (and absolutely no considerable) figure which can fairly be described as that of a 'Quack.' Cynics there are in plenty, like Talleyrand and the Abbé Maury, and 'Goose Gobel,' men whose frank avowal of disbelief sets them at the opposite pole to the hypocrite, of whose very essence it is to feign faith in principles or institutions in the sanctity or stability of which he has ceased to

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believe. But for the rest, for the other representatives of that Church, that monarchy, that social order, which Carlyle declares to have degenerated into a 'sham,' the nobler part of them manfully enough upheld their cause and laboured for it, fought for it, died for it, without apparently the faintest suspicion that a sham it was; while as for the baser sort among them, surely the unfrocked priest who 'rallied' or 'ratted' to the Revolution wrote himself down, not charlatan, but rather timeserver, and the recreant noble who tried to save his skin by deserting his order did so not because he was a Quack but because he was a Sneak.

Carlyle, however, like many another preacher of his nationality, was far more charitable than his preachments. That is to say, he comes into far closer contact with the realities of life, and, in judging men's actions, approaches much nearer to that standard of the all-comprehending which is the all-forgiving when he descends from the pulpit. Once he has descended, the rich humanity of the man and his Shakespearean breadth of sympathy assert themselves; he forgets his Radical or Tory-Radical crotchets, his Puritan prejudices; and the partisans of either cause, the lofty and the base alike, take life upon his pages, portrayed for us not only with a touch of magic but with a just and equal hand. Once in the swing of his narrative, and his moralisings for the time abandoned, Carlyle does not find Quackery or look for it. He writes, as has been said, with all his quick sensibilities responsive to the subtlest impressions, and all his wonderful array of intellectual faculties on the alert. The shadows, of necessity, fall thick and heavy over his sombre subject; but every ray that is shed upon it from any quarter is caught instantaneously on the mirror of his artistic genius, and flashed back upon us with redoubled brilliancy from the broken facets of his style. Bravery, beauty, dignity, devotion—the noble, the tragic, the pathetic, the grotesque,—these things never appeal to him in vain. The charm, the courage, and the fate alike of Marie Antoinette and of Charlotte Corday, attract him irresistibly, and make him almost forget that

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the one was only a lovely mischief-maker and the other only a beautiful assassin. Wherever there is heroism, fidelity to duty, calmness in the face of death, it inspires him; he has sung the dirge of the Girondins as movingly as the requiem of the Swiss. But all aspects, all moods of the great Revolution are reflected in his pages. The pity of it, the terror of it, is always with us, and the mad folly of it is never far off. From the Fall of the Bastille to the Capture of the Tuileries, to the September Massacres, to the deaths of Louis and Marie Antoinette; to Madame Momoro as the Goddess of Reason, to Anacharsis Cloutz appearing before the Convention 'with the Human Species at his heels,' and thence to the wild confusion, the breathless struggle of Thermidor, and Robespierre's hideous end—through what scenes of horror and of heroism, through what moods of ruth, and wrath, and scornful laughter have many of us passed in those days when the wonderful History was in the early splendour of its fame, and we ourselves in the first freshness of our enthusiasm! And for how many more of us has it given to that terrible drama in the life of a foreign people as vivid and imperishable a reality as any passage of our own history that has received the breath of life from Shakespeare or from Scott!

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