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978-1-108-02551-5 - An Historical Sketch of the French Revolution

James Mackintosh

Excerpt

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HISTORICAL SKETCH.

OF THE

FRENCH REVOLUTION.

AMIDST the innumerable Publications which the French Revolution has occasioned, I have long wished to see a concise historical statement of the principal facts, and of the Constitutional questions and disputes which led to that awful and unparalleled event. But as I have wished and waited in vain, and as most of the ingenious writers who have lately addressed themselves to the English nation, have preferred eloquent declamation or metaphysical discussion of abstract Rights to plain history and chronology

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logy, I have at last been tempted to take up the pen, and engage for the first, and probably the last time, in that field of literary warfare, to which my temper and my situation are equally opposite, and in which I think myself obliged to seek the protection of inviolable concealment: an impulse—perhaps, too romantic—but an impulse of duty has urged me on, and I have thought that there were some periods so momentous, that the weakest and most retired member of society was called forth into action, and was particularly obliged to draw away the veil of illusion from the eyes of the multitude.

If my strict secrecy with regard to myself should excite doubts of my sincerity, I shall endeavour to prove it, by composing this sketch chiefly of extracts from the most approved French writers, and by advising my readers not to trust to Mr. Burke, or to me, or to Dr. Priestly, or to Dr. Towers, but to study the French accounts himself, or else to suspend his opinion on this dubious transaction.

But that I may not assume the praise of more impartiality than is really my due, I must

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muſt confeſs, that after following with attention the progreſs of the Revolution, I do heartily eſpouſe the greateſt part of Mr. Burke's ſentiments, although ſome of them are carried a little too far.

It has happened unfortunately in this buſineſs, that the private enmity which Mr. Burke has drawn upon himſelf by former political quarrels, has indispoſed many againſt the moſt evident truths, if they fall from his pen, or from one of his adherents. I too, have frequently diſapproved his ſentiments; I too, could enter into perſonal conteſt; I could aſk Mr. Burke whether he does not ſee that this Revolution which he abhors, is the natural offspring of that *American Revolution*, which he approved and patronized? But all perſonal conſiderations, all needleſs retroſpect ought to be baniſhed from a diſpute of ſo extenſive and ſerious a nature. The feelings of individuals ought to be ſpared; it is their public writings, not their private actions, which lie before the tribunal of the public. Since I began this pamphlet, Dr. Price has paid the debt to nature, but his famous ſermon and its appen-

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dix remain behind, and I hope it will not be thought ungenerous sometimes to criticise them.

The French writings which I shall often have occasion to quote, are as follows :

“ *Essai Historique sur l’Histoire des Comices de Rome, des Etats-Generaux de France, et du Parlement d’Angleterre.*”

A book written with a portion of learning and philosophy, but with an evident partiality to the *monied* above the *landed* interest. The author endeavours frequently to prove, that great landed proprietors are the most vicious of mankind, and that the vices of men possessed of great personal wealth become trifling in comparison. From various passages it may be collected that his moral and religious principles are not very sound. But this discussion is foreign to the present subject. I have particularly mentioned this book because it confirms Mr. Burke’s system, that the jealousy of *monied men* against *landed proprietors* has had a great share in this Revolution. To me, one half of the new French laws prove that unhappy jealousy ; especially the introduction

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roduction of *gavel kind*, or equal division of all property, *real* as well as *personal*, which, if ever carried to the height that was first proposed in the Assembly, *will make it almost impossible for the same estate to remain two generations in the same family.* But to return to the list of authorities :

“ Histoire de la Revolution et de la Constitution Françoise.” A book violently democratic.

The “ Procedure Criminelle du Chatelet,” on the transactions of the 5th and 6th of Oct. 1789.

“ Calonne’s pamphlets in favour of the “ Ancient Government.”

“ L’Ami du Roi,” a history violent and partial to the Court, and intolerant towards Calvinists, but full of curious facts as far as it goes.

The “ Mercure de France,” the literary part of which is carried on by Marmontel, la Harpe, Chamfort, Berquin, and Framery ;

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some of whom are men of great distinction in the literary world, and this half is exceedingly anti-aristocratic. The other half of this compound work, the historical and political part, is written by a M. Mallet-du-Pan, a native of Geneva, born a republican, but partial to a limited monarchy. At the first opening of the States, he was also an anti-aristocratic, but since the complete triumph of the democratic party he has espoused the cause of the vanquished, and censures the behaviour of the conquerors almost as strongly as Mr. Burke,

All the works of M. Mounier and of Lally-Tolendal, principal leaders of the moderate party, especially their respective *Exposés de leur Conduite*, and Mounier's *Observations sur les Etats Generaux*.

From some of these books may be collected the little that is now to be known of the ancient Constitution of France, and it appears to be a subject involved in greater obscurity than the Constitution of most other European nations. It is only clear that the States-General, whenever they did assemble,
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were composed of three chambers, who had a right to deliberate separately, although they might sometimes forego it; the deputies from the Clergy, the *Noblesse* or Nobles, and the *Tiers-Etats* or Commons. Once for all it is necessary to observe, that whenever the word *Nobles* is used, I shall include under that denomination those two classes whom we are accustomed to separate by the words *Nobility* and *Gentry*; and that although I shall often use the word Commons as more intelligible to English ears, yet it is not the proper technical French term. It is certain that the Nobles and Clergy composed the General Assembly long before the Commons were admitted under the name of *Tiers-Etat* or *Third Estate*. The first clear evidence of the admission of the Commons is in the reign of Philip le Bel, about the year 1301.

The original rulers of Europe, after the destruction of the Roman Empire, were independent soldiers, who held lands by the tenure of military service performed to a chief whom they elected, and whom they obeyed no farther than suited their own

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convenience. From this root are derived, even to this day, our European ideas of nobility. Mirabeau has told us in a pamphlet called "A Letter to the Bishop of Langres," that *Kings created Nobility*. The contrary position is the truth. *Nobles first elected Kings*: take as an instance the form of inauguration of the old Kings of Arragon by their Nobility; "We that are your equals, "chuse you for our King, on condition "that you maintain our Rights."

The ages of this military aristocracy bear the name of feudal times, and were so fruitful in violence and disorder, that some corrective quickly grew necessary. The clergy profiting by the religious fears of their masters, were soon admitted to a share in their Legislative Assemblies. The elective chief grew insensibly into hereditary absolute Kings, whilst their turbulent Nobles deeply felt that regal power was an invasion of their ancient independence. The Kings, jealous of Nobility, endeavoured to raise the people from that oppression in which merchants, farmers, artificers, had long been held by a haughty and victorious fol-

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foldiery ; and to Kings in most countries (though perhaps not in England) is owing the first admission of the Commons into Legislative Assemblies. But throughout Europe the idea remained fixed in the breasts of the Nobles, that *they* were as the parent stock from whence all other power was derived, and whenever they did meet in general Assemblies, a distinguished and an independent share in the government was always claimed on their side, and ceded by the other branches of society. Such a form of government and such prejudices cannot, perhaps, be justified by the strict rules of philosophy, but the error (if it be one) has prevailed from the Euxine to the Atlantic, from the shores of the Mediterranean to the limits of the Polar Circle. Therefore I confess it to be my general system, that the Revolution of France, which aims *at once* to extirpate this wide-extended prejudice from the minds of Frenchmen, nay of Europeans, is a most rash, precipitate, and dangerous measure. Philosophers should have been contented at first with the extirpation of despotism ; and in these days of commerce, expence, debt, credit, and paper-money,

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Nobility would soon have descended quietly to its proper level.

That Constitution of three independent chambers who have each (to use an ancient word new vamped up) a *veto* on each other, that Constitution so detested by the French and vilified as a political monster, is or has been the constitution of almost every country in Europe, even of those that hitherto had thought they enjoyed freedom. I am far from bestowing praise on so complicated a government, but I must doubt whether it was lawful to overturn it by calumny, sedition, rapine, and murder, for the sake of establishing a Constitution of very dubious tendency. Four *vetos* (including the royal veto) are certainly too many, but a Constitution so simple as to admit of *no veto* is thought by many to be much worse, and by none more so, than by the author of the “*Essais Historiques*,” that vehement enemy of Clergy and Nobles: he says,* “What-
“ ever be the Constitution of the political
“ body, that machine stands in need of a

* *Essais Hist.* vol. ii. p. 212.“ *regu-*