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978-1-108-08101-6 - A Narrative of Three Years' Residence in France,; Principally in the Southern Departments, from the Year 1802 to 1805; Including Some Authentic Particulars Respecting the Early Life of the French Emperor, and a General Inquiry into his Character: Volume 1

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A Narrative of Three Years' Residence in France

The writer and translator Anne Plumptre (1760–1818) and her sister Annabella, also a writer, divided their time between Norwich and London, where they moved in radical and dissenting circles. Anne also travelled abroad, publishing this three-volume description of three years' residence in France in 1810. (Her 1817 volume on Ireland is also reissued in this series.) Like many other Britons, Plumptre took the opportunity of the Peace of Amiens to visit post-revolutionary France, and she stayed in the country until hostilities recommenced in 1805. Sympathetic to the revolution, she intended to examine for herself the state of the country and its people, and compare her first-hand impressions (especially of Napoleon) with the generally hostile information about France then currently available in Britain. Volume 1 describes her stay in Paris (where she was accidentally locked in the ruins of the Bastille at nightfall), and her journey to Marseilles via Lyons.

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VOLUME 1

ANNE PLUMPTRE



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BY ANNE PLUMPTRE.

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“ Such is the patriot’s boast where’er we roam,
His first best country ever is at home.—
And yet, perhaps, if countries we compare,
And estimate the blessings which they share,
Though patriots flatter, still shall wisdom find
An equal portion dealt to all mankind;
As different good by art or nature given
To different nations makes their blessings even.”

GOLDSMITH.

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P R E F A C E.

MANY years ago an observation was made by an eminent writer, “ that if a hundred men of “ parts should travel over Italy, and each se- “ parately write an account of what he saw and “ observed, a hundred excellent compositions “ might be produced, of which no two should “ be alike, yet all should be new, and all admi- “ rable in their kind.”—If such a remark might be thought just when applied to Italy under any circumstances, it appeared by no means inap- plicable to France, under the very novel and ex- traordinary circumstances in which she stood at the conclusion of the peace of Amiens. It was this consideration which principally en- couraged me to think of undertaking the fol- lowing work. I flattered myself that although nearly ninety-nine works on France had ap- peared between the conclusion of peace in 1801 and my return to England in 1805, yet that

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gleanings might still remain, sufficient to form a hundredth, not wholly destitute of interest, or altogether unworthy of the public attention.

These volumes are not offered as the substance of letters written to my friends during my absence. I cannot readily conceive how persons in a foreign country, where so many new objects of description, and so much new matter for observation are daily crowding upon them, can find time to write the numerous and voluminous compositions which we often see published under that real or assumed character. For myself, I acknowledge that I was a very bad correspondent to my friends while I was abroad. If I had descanted to them upon every topic that I thought worthy of notice, my pen would scarcely ever have been out of my hand: and amid this multiplicity of materials, not knowing what was best selected so as to restrain my correspondence within moderate bounds, the matter was commonly cut short by merely giving them an assurance of my welfare. But from the time of my first landing on the French territory, it was my constant practice to take down notes of whatever I saw, heard, or observed, that appeared worthy of being remembered. This was originally done only with a view to my own

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amusement and satisfaction ; but as I proceeded, I thought the notes might furnish some things not undeserving of being laid before the public; and from the moment that I entertained this idea, I was much more particular in my remarks, both upon the moral and physical state of the country.

Another consideration which encouraged me to think of submitting my remarks to the public was, that I had perhaps better opportunities of forming an accurate opinion upon the state of society in France than the far greater part of my fellow-countrymen who visited it during the same period. Going in the company of natives of the country, I was of course introduced to the acquaintance of all their friends and connexions, was received by them upon the same footing of intimacy that they were themselves, and became so domesticated among the French, that I was for three years almost like one of the same nation. Thus circumstanced, it cannot surely be denied that I was better enabled to form a correct judgement of their habits, sentiments, and dispositions, than those who have only casually associated with them for perhaps a few weeks, and that in a way which necessarily placed them under a certain degree

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of restraint, and prevented their hearts being laid open in the free and unconstrained manner that I often saw them. Indeed, the strong propensity which prevails among the English of seeking out the society of each other in foreign countries, rather than that of the natives, is extremely adverse to the acquisition of correct notions respecting the state of society and manners in the countries they visit*. Though I can

* Two English travellers, young men, who spent a part of the winter that I did at Marseilles, used to occupy themselves principally, during the whole time of their stay there, with playing at the dull arithmetical game of Casino. Even in a morning, when the bright sun of Provence shone upon the south quay of the port, presenting the most cheering and enlivening scene that could be imagined, still their favourite Casino retained them in their own hotel: these were certainly not *curious* travellers. The utmost improvement they can possibly be supposed to have gained by their tour was to have become thorough adepts in the first rule of arithmetic, Addition. They must by dint of travelling some hundreds of miles have perfectly convinced themselves that six and three make nine, and that five and four make nine, and that seven and two make nine; but they can scarcely be considered as having qualified themselves particularly well to judge of the state of the country or of any thing relating to it. The account they would give of their travels must no doubt be very entertaining, if they could be prevailed upon to present it to the world.

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truly say that while I was in France I was always happy in meeting with a fellow-countryman or countrywoman, whether previously acquainted with them or not, yet it was far from my ideas to seek their company exclusively. It was with the French character, and with French customs and manners, that I wished to make myself acquainted; and I knew that this was not to be done without making the society of the French my principal object, that of the English only a secondary one.

A further reason to be urged as an apology for assuming to myself to be a better judge of French manners than many who have written upon them in these latter times is, the different light in which the same manners and customs appear after we become habituated to them, from that in which they appear when they are entirely new. The first impression made upon us by habits and manners to which we are unaccustomed, is almost of necessity unfavourable to them; nor can we wholly reconcile ourselves to the change, till a sufficient time has elapsed to familiarize us with them. This we even feel in the slight shadings of difference to be found in only changing from one place to another, in our own country. Among strangers every thing for a time appears

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awkward, and the further the new habits are removed from our own the more awkward they appear; use only can reconcile us to them. This feeling must then be very strong in the great change experienced in going into a foreign country, where time even is wanting to bring us to a ready understanding of the great medium of intercourse between man and man, the language. I should certainly have left France with a much less favourable impression of the country at the end of three months than I felt at the end of three years. Not that I did not receive as much polité attention from those to whom I was introduced at my first going over, as from those with whom I subsequently became acquainted; but I felt a stranger to the habits and customs, and a consequent awkwardness which time and habitual intercourse only could wear off. And the same I have little doubt would be the case with many who now make the strongest exception to French society and French manners.

Finally, I was induced to pursue the idea of preparing for the press the materials I had collected, by the consideration that, how numerous soever were the publications which had recently appeared respecting France, to describe Paris

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was almost the sole object of them: none of these annotators seemed to have thought of extending their observations to the provinces remote from the capital. But though I resided at Paris eight months, yet as I passed a much longer time in the south of France, and consequently my Narrative would treat principally of that part of the country, I thought that this opened a source of novelty which might assist in giving it interest. I was besides, by particular circumstances, led to visit some spots in these parts which are not included in the canonical route, if I may be allowed the expression, generally chalked out to travellers; which I have consequently never found mentioned by any of them; but which future ones, if induced by my report to seek them out, will, I think, consider themselves as obliged to me for having recommended to their notice.

Many persons indeed seem to consider Paris as all France, and to suppose that in describing that city they have given a description of the whole French territory; but this is a great mistake. The inhabitants of different parts of France differ as widely from each other, both in customs, manners, and language, as they all do from the English, or as the face of one part of

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the country differs from another. I have heard French emigrants, who had never been ten miles out of London, contend that in seeing London they had seen all England; but will any Englishman, unless it be a Cheapside Cockney, allow this to be a just conclusion?—No: he knows that the inhabitant of London is a being totally dissimilar to the inhabitant of Yorkshire, and that both are equally dissimilar to the inhabitant of Devonshire. So it is in France: the Parisian, the Provençal, and the Bréton, are in every respect three very different descriptions of persons;—scarcely less so than the Spaniard, the German, and the Italian.

If some things should here be found in contradiction to the reports made by other writers, I can only say that, as different persons fall into different scenes and societies,^e the impressions they receive on many subjects may not unnaturally be expected to differ from each other. To obtain truth has been my aim. I know that it is a thing very difficult to be obtained, but that has not prevented my seeking it earnestly. I can safely say that I have asserted nothing which I have not good reason to believe fact; and where I differ in opinion from those who have gone before me, I trust that I have at least

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given strong reasons for the view I take of things. I may be mistaken, but I have never been guilty of wilful misrepresentation. I have always thought for myself, not employed others to think for me; and in the judgement I have formed, I have anxiously endeavoured to divest myself of all partialities and prejudices.

It was not till after my return to England that I began to draw out my notes into a form for publication; but when a sufficient portion was arranged for a fair judgement to be formed of it, the papers were laid before a very good judge, by whom I was much encouraged to proceed in my undertaking. I had therefore resolved to do so, but my progress was soon interrupted; and, owing to a variety of circumstances, all of a private and family nature, therefore unimportant, or even obtrusive here to detail, the prosecution of the work was so much retarded, that more than two years had elapsed from the time of my return before it was in sufficient forwardness to have been sent to the press. I then thought that the time when it might have excited interest was so far gone by, that I had nearly abandoned the idea of its ever being published, and became negligent and indifferent upon the subject.

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It may perhaps appear somewhat paradoxical that, such being at that time my sentiments, I should, after the lapse of a much longer period, when the objection seemed still more forcible, resume the idea of publishing the work. My apology is to be found in the encouragement to do so which I have received from several friends by whom the complete manuscript has been perused. Knowing that I had such a thing in my possession, and wishing to see in a collected form the scattered anecdotes and observations which they had at various times casually heard from me in conversation, the manuscript was in consequence submitted to their inspection. The result was, that they assured me even when proper allowance was made for the disadvantages to be encountered from the lateness of its appearance, they yet thought the work had sufficient novelty and interest to justify its being offered to the public; and they therefore strongly urged its being printed without further delay. Thus encouraged, I may say stimulated, I determined to submit to their judgement, and consign it to the press, resting in the hope that the reasons here alleged would be admitted as my sufficient excuse for the publication being so long retarded.

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The subject must not be finally dismissed without returning my grateful acknowledgements to those friends who have obligingly promoted the publication of the work by favouring me with their names, as subscribers to it, without which I must still have hesitated in taking upon myself such an expense as attends a publication of any length, at the present immoderate price of paper and printing. To these friends the work is respectfully inscribed,

by their obliged and obedient

humble servant,

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