

JOHN BURROW

# A History of Histories

*Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from  
Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century*

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2

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Introduction: A History of Histories?</i>	xiii
<i>Prologue: Keeping Records and Making Accounts: Egypt and Babylon</i>	i

## PART I

### Greece

1 Herodotus: The Great Invasion and the Historian's Task	11
2 Thucydides: The <i>Polis</i> – the Use and Abuse of Power	29
3 The Greeks in Asia	52
Xenophon: <i>The Persian Expedition</i>	52
The Alexander Historians: Arrian and Curtius Rufus	58

## PART II

### Rome

4 Polybius: Universal History, Pragmatic History and the Rise of Rome	67
5 Sallust: A City for Sale	83
6 Livy: <i>From the Foundation of the City</i>	94
7 Civil War and the Road to Autocracy: Plutarch, Appian and Cassius Dio	117
8 Tacitus: 'Men fit to be slaves'	128

## CONTENTS

9	A Provincial Perspective: Josephus on the Jewish Revolt	148
10	Ammianus Marcellinus: The Last Pagan Historian	157
11	General Characteristics of Ancient Historiography	167

## PART III

### Christendom

12	The Bible and History: The People of God	179
13	Eusebius: The Making of Orthodoxy and the Church Triumphant	188
14	Gregory of Tours: Kings, Bishops and Others	197
15	Bede: The English Church and the English People	213

## PART IV

### The Revival of Secular History

16	Annals, Chronicles and History	229
	Annals and Chronicles	229
	Pseudo-History: Geoffrey of Monmouth	232
	Secular History and Chronicle: William of Malmesbury's <i>Modern History</i> and the Scurrilities of Matthew Paris	239
	Two Abbey Chronicles: St Albans and Bury St Edmunds	248
17	Crusader History and Chivalric History: Villehardouin and Froissart	258
	Villehardouin's <i>The Conquest of Constantinople</i>	258
	Froissart: 'Matters of great renown'	264
18	From Civic Chronicle to Humanist History: Villani, Machiavelli and Guicciardini	274



# CONTENTS

## PART V

### Studying the Past

19	Antiquarianism, Legal History and the Discovery of Feudalism	299
20	Clarendon's <i>History of the Rebellion</i> : The Wilfulness of Particular Men	320
21	Philosophic History	331
	Hume: Enthusiasm and Regicide	331
	Robertson: 'The State of Society' and the Idea of Europe	339
	Gibbon: Rome, Barbarism and Civilization	352
22	Revolutions: England and France	367
	Macaulay: The Glorious Revolution	367
	Carlyle's <i>French Revolution</i> : History with a Hundred Tongues	377
	Michelet and Taine: The People and the Mob	388
23	History as the Story of Freedom: Constitutional Liberty and Individual Autonomy	405
	Stubbs's <i>Constitutional History</i> : From Township to Parliament	405
	Modernity's First-born Son: Burckhardt's Renaissance Man	414
24	A New World: American Experiences	423
	The Halls of Montezuma: Díaz, Prescott and the Conquest of New Spain	423
	Outposts in the Wilderness: Parkman's History of the Great West	433
	Henry Adams: From Republic to Nation	442
25	A Professional Consensus: The German Influence	453
	Professionalization	453
	German Historicism: Ranke, God and Machiavelli	457
	Not Quite a Copernican Revolution	462

## CONTENTS

26 The Twentieth Century	467
Professionalism and the Critique of 'Whig History'.	
History as a Science and History as an Art	467
'Structures': Cultural History and the <i>Annales</i> School	478
Marxism: The Last Grand Narrative?	486
Anthropology and History: Languages and Paradigms	494
Suppressed Identities and Global Perspectives:	
World History and Micro-History	500
 <i>Select Bibliography</i>	 520
 <i>Index</i>	 537

## Philosophic History

### *Hume: Enthusiasm and Regicide*

Crucial to the emergence of the Enlightenment genre of the history of customs, manners and opinion was what was coming to be seen as an indisputable fact of European history: 'the progress of society'. The growth of commerce and the end of the 'feudal anarchy', the 'revival of learning and the surpassing of the ancients' in the discovery of the New World and the printing press and the improvements in the art of war (something that Guicciardini had been one of the first to note) all contributed to this perception. To this came to be added a conception of the improvement of 'manners' over the previous two centuries, from the rough, pedantic, fiercely intolerant religious zeal and polemics of the time of the Reformation to the eighteenth-century cultivation of a polite, tolerant sociability as the mark of a refined society which was mild, humane and rational.

The ghost at the feast of reason and self-congratulation, in England at least, was the seventeenth-century revolution, the brief but forgotten reign of the sectaries under the general characterization of 'enthusiasm', and the menace of an egalitarian republicanism. It had apparently been exorcized, but events from the late eighteenth century onward could sometimes give it the appearance of a precedent as well as a warning. Revolution, in relation to progress, came to play something like the role earlier played by luxury and enervation in the classical and civic humanist paradigm: that of a nemesis. 'The great cause of revolutions', Macaulay told the House of Commons in the debates before the first Reform Act in 1832, 'is this, that while nations move onwards, constitutions stand still.' Marx was to say much the

same, though from a revolutionary stance, and Hume would say something similar (below, p. 335) of the government of Charles I. So salient was the revolutionary experience to become, and the fear and hope of it, that we have to attend to how historians rose to the challenge this represented to their comprehension and their art.

David Hume is now famous as a philosopher; as a historian he is scarcely known. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was the reverse. Then he was primarily the author of a monumental, authoritative, though much contested six-volume *History of England* (1754–62). Hume was one of the key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, and his history is a characteristic product of it, applying to a long tract of political, constitutional and social history some of its most basic ideas: the association of fundamental changes in manners and opinion with the decline of feudalism and the growth of commerce, and a consideration of the influence of religion on social and political life. William Robertson, his contemporary, applied these to the safer ground of sixteenth-century Europe, though his location of John Knox and the Scottish Reformers in a rude age whose characteristics they shared was not without polemical point. But Hume, in taking up the seventeenth century in England as his initial challenge (it was a peculiarity of his history that it was written and published backwards in terms of historical chronology), was confronting some of the most contentious issues in modern English political life. The political labels ‘Whig’ and ‘Tory’ derived from the two great factions of the seventeenth century, and even the more sophisticated modern labels ‘Court’ and ‘Country’ paralleled to a significant extent the seventeenth-century divisions. Hume’s history of the seventeenth-century revolution, the first part of his English history, was published in 1754. In deference to James VI of Scotland’s accession to the English throne in 1601 as James I, it was entitled *The History of Great Britain, Containing the Reigns of James I and Charles I*. For three-quarters of a century it came to dominate the field, though it was one of many histories of the English revolution, published from all points on the political spectrum, during that period. G. O. Trevelyan’s life of Macaulay shows the latter clearly gratified as well as amused to find Hume’s *History* in a bookseller’s window, a century after its publication, labelled ‘valuable as an introduction to Macaulay’.

Hume's offences to contemporaries' pieties were several, but the chief was his refusal to accept the Whig notion of an enduring 'ancient constitution' subverted by the Stuarts. To him, English constitutional precedents, by the early seventeenth century, were chaotically contradictory, reflecting the shifting balance between Crown and nobility over the preceding centuries: the constitution was 'unintelligible' (p. 111). The early Stuarts could find precedents for most if not all of what they did, and the Tudors had ruled much more absolutely while avoiding theoretical claims. Essentially it was the parliamentary leaders in the 1640s who became the innovators, and there was for Hume in principle nothing wrong with that: the country needed a 'regular system of liberty', which eventually became established. But, though Hume was prepared to welcome the outcome, he offended the more radical Whigs by his obvious distaste rather than admiration for most of the leading parliamentarians, who were unpolished and fanatical. Hume's terms for seventeenth-century English Puritanism and Scottish Presbyterianism were uncompromising. In them 'the genius of fanaticism displayed itself in its full extent', and their inflamed imaginations poured themselves out 'in wild, unpremeditated addresses to the Divinity' (p. 72). Abuse of the seventeenth-century sectaries was common enough in eighteenth-century Britain, but Hume's own notorious religious scepticism, which had prevented him from obtaining, like Robertson, an Edinburgh or Glasgow academic chair, was offensive to many. With so much weighted against it, the dominance exerted by Hume's *History* and its publishing success – it made him rich – are striking.

With some exceptions we shall come to, it is not picturesque: its power is intellectual, in the quality of the reflection and the cogency of the narrative. For, despite the disquisitions with which it is interspersed – Adam Smith, a traditionalist in such matters, objected to the obstruction of the linear narrative flow – it is not an Enlightenment sociological essay but a detailed and full-bodied history, classical in its sense of decorum and annalistic in its arrangement. The convention of invented speeches was falling into disrepute, and Hume prefers to summarize, often representing the opinions of many rather than an individual. Otherwise, however, despite the disquisitions – the longest of which, on changes in society, was in subsequent editions relegated

to an appendix – Hume's history is recognizably within a classical tradition of dealing with public affairs and public men. Of course the eighteenth-century genres of the essay on customs and the history of civil society form part of the intellectual inspiration.

One of the most controversial features of Hume's *History* seems at first sight at odds with the sociological concerns of the Enlightenment and Hume's habitually detached and ironic authorial stance. It is the extent of the sympathy accorded to the victims, history's prominent losers – above all, of course, Charles I. There is in fact a conscious exploitation of the pathetic, the 'sentimental' (a technical, rather than a pejorative, term), in the description of the King's captivity, trial and execution.

It is confessed that the King's behaviour, during this last period of his life, does great honour to his memory; and that in all appearances before his judges, he never forgot his part, either as a prince or as a man. Firm and intrepid, he maintained, in each reply, the utmost perspicuity and justness, both of thought and expression: Mild and equable, he rose into no passion at that unusual authority which was assumed over him. His soul, without effort or affectation, seemed only to remain in the situation familiar to it, and to look down with contempt on all the efforts of human malice and iniquity. (p. 678)

The cultivation of sentiment in eighteenth-century historical writing was taken up both by Hume and by his contemporary Robertson, notably in their treatments of the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots. (On this, see Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*.) The pathos of Hume's account of Charles's end was often seen as a proof of Hume's 'Toryism'. Hume was not a Tory or a Jacobite, but he did sit loosely to traditional Whig pieties, and in his essays he revealed a position not common in eighteenth-century Britain. He had lived in France, and he set out a sharp distinction, based not only on the study of the ancient republics but also on the position of a subject of the absolute French monarchy, between public and private liberty. The antique republics had not understood private liberty at all, but, given an ordered monarchy, ruling through the law, it was not incompatible with the absence of public liberty. The life and interests of the individual could be as secure as under a representative system. Indeed,

Hume, in Britain, feared the prospect of anarchy, as a result of unrestrained factionalism, more than absolute monarchy; he described the latter as the 'easiest death, the true euthanasia of the British Constitution'; he was predictably alarmed by the riots on behalf of the radical John Wilkes at the beginning of the reign of George III.

But the issue with 'sentimental' history is not a matter of party labels or liberty or absolutism. One of the objects of Hume's *History* was to abate the violent spirit of faction by the play of an enlightened reason over the contentious recent past. Sentimentalism, in that context, was not partisan but eirenic. Sentiment as an item in the historian's repertoire developed in relation to manifestations of the later-eighteenth-century exploration of sensibility generally, including an increasing value attached to immediacy of representation and empathy in historical narrative. (On this see Phillips's perceptive discussion in *Society and Sentiment*.) Such exercises in empathy and concrete immediacy in historiography have more usually been placed in the nineteenth century (where they sometimes gave a pretext for denigrating the eighteenth for lacking them). Their earlier appearance was related not only to the cult of sensibility, but to attempts to encourage a wider readership for history, notably among women, of which Hume was certainly aware. Pathetic effects are not incongruous with the enlightened detachment to which Hume also aspires, but are actually in a sense part of it. It is *because* Charles is to be seen not as a would-be despot seeking to subvert an established and inherited constitution but as a victim of historical changes, in manners, opinion and the balance of power and property, which he cannot understand or adjust to, that it is appropriate for the enlightened historian, who can understand them, to 'shed a generous tear' for him.

This, indeed, though here turned to purposes of pathos, is the central message of Hume's early Stuart history. Charles could not be expected to have the long perspective, requiring hindsight and the appropriate conceptual equipment, of the philosophic historian. He was not, Hume says, 'endowed with that masterly genius, which might enable him to perceive, in their infancy, the changes that arose in national manners, and know how to accommodate his conduct to them' (p. 381). He was a man lost between two worlds and two roles: 'Had he been born an absolute prince, his humanity and good sense

had rendered his reign happy and his memory precious: had the limitations on prerogative been, in his time, quite fixed and ascertained, his integrity had made him regard, as sacred, the boundaries of the constitution' (p. 684). His fatal flaw, humanly venial but politically disastrous, was a failure to read the signs of the times.

What those signs were is set out by Hume in a number of disquisitions, including a whole chapter (VI), subsequently made into an appendix, which strongly anticipates the famous Chapter III on 'social' history in Macaulay's *History*, which aroused criticism from the fastidious for the triumphalism of its insistent contrasts of 'then' and 'now'. Hume's chapter also uses this device, though without the fanfare for modernity. It is not perfunctory, and, exceptionally, it incorporates some statistics. But the central contention is twofold: Hume, like Robertson, sees a new spirit of liberty and independence of thought developing from the sixteenth century especially in association with the rise of commerce (he is explicit about why the greater towns favoured the parliamentary side). And like Harrington and the 'Country Party' polemicists of the earlier eighteenth century, particularly Bolingbroke, he sees power passing from the Lords to the Commons as feudalism ends and landed property is diffused:

The first rise of commerce and the arts had contributed, in preceding reigns, to scatter those immense fortunes of the barons, which rendered them so formidable to both king and people. The farther progress of these advantages began, during this reign, to ruin the small proprietors of land, and, by both events, the gentry, or that rank which composed the house of commons, enlarged their power and authority. The early improvements in luxury were seized by the greater nobles, whose fortunes, placing them above frugality or even calculation, were soon dissipated in expensive pleasures.

The Commons was discovering its power, assisted by the unwisdom of the first two Stuart monarchs in making a theoretical issue of their prerogatives. For Hume, all authority rested ultimately not on right but on opinion, which it was therefore essential to manage. The chief support of established authority was habit and tradition. It was fatal to encourage a disputatious inclination on the part of subjects by theoretical assertions, in religious or political matters.

The fiscal situation, too, favoured Parliament. The Crown was still



expected to live on its traditional revenues, though expenses were increasing. Parliament was unable to grasp this, but was very ready to try to take advantage of the King's financial difficulties to exact concessions. Charles's government was driven to resort either to the revival of archaic sources of revenue or to the exploitation of new ones, both of which were bitterly resented. In one respect James and Charles were simply unfortunate, though they unwisely fanned the flames rather than seeking to dampen them. The spirit of religious fanaticism, stemming from the Reformation, had reached a high point. Hume drew on a concept which he had worked out in a well-known essay ('Of Superstition and Enthusiasm'). His name for it – not original, but turned from a pejorative term into a theoretical category – was 'Enthusiasm'. Enthusiasm could arise at any time, being essentially random (rather like Max Weber's 'charisma'), defying all calculations of prudence and considerations of individual interests: 'The fanatical spirit, let loose, confounded all regards to ease, safety, interest, and dissolved every moral and civil obligation' (p. 502). For Hume the opposite of Enthusiasm in the dynamics of religious belief was Superstition. Superstition was irrational also, but arose from the impulse to propitiate and to curry favour. It was therefore servile, and a support of religious and civil establishments; its historical embodiment was Catholicism. But Enthusiasm, filled with antinomian intimations of unique, individual possession by the Spirit, was bold, aggressive, zealous and destructive; it was Puritanism which, with its remembrances of the terrible fanaticism of the seventeenth-century sectaries, could still bring a shiver of anxiety to the Age of Reason. It was encouraging to stress the historical distance between seventeenth-century fanaticism and what Hume called 'the mildness and humanity of modern manners' (p. 98), but the historical examples were still admonitory. James I, according to Hume, was not wrong to see fanaticism as a threat to civil as well as religious authority, but was misguided in challenging it directly.

Hume's own accounts frequently resort to irony – for example on the zeal of the Scots for transplanting abroad their system of church government: 'Never did refined Athens so exult in diffusing the sciences and liberal arts over a savage world ... as the Scotch now rejoiced, in communicating their barbarous zeal and theological

fervour, to the neighbouring nations' (p. 449). Hume's distaste was not reduced by his recognition that, in a manner to which the eighteenth century was becoming accustomed, Enthusiasm's historical function was something other than its intrinsic nature. Without the pernicious 'epidemical frenzy' (p. 446), the defence of parliamentary freedoms could not have been sustained and the eventual 'regular system of liberty' (p. 283) would have been aborted. The more 'natural' outcome of the decline of the power of the feudal baronage, seen on the Continent as the rise of monarchical absolutism, would have been consummated. In the circumstances of the time, only a pious fanaticism, regardless of consequences, could have braced men to the necessary hazards and sacrifices to resist this. Behind 'that singular and happy government, which at present we enjoy' (p. 204) lay a dark and fierce irrationality. In the case of the Scots, Hume is particularly explicit on the moral disjunction between the cause and the outcome: 'The Scotch nation were first seized with that frenzy of reformation, which was so pernicious during the time, and which has since proved so salutary in the consequences' (p. 145). Historical causation is another thing than moral quality, and the connection between virtue and liberty is heavily qualified. It was a lesson which, applied by Hume to the Reformation and the political crisis of the seventeenth century, was, as we shall see, applied by his younger contemporary Gibbon to the history of Christianity as such and to the long-term relations of Barbarism and Civilization.

Hume's distaste for 'Enthusiasm' was common in his century, and he expressed it with particular force. In the next century it was to become more muted, as the religious zealotry of the seventeenth century receded further into the past, and as a religious revival brought it greater respect. But Hume's other main preoccupation in relation to the English revolution, the long-term movement of society, was to remain one of the major themes of the history which was to be hailed as the great successor to and replacement for it, Macaulay's *History of England*.

*Robertson: 'The State of Society' and the  
Idea of Europe*

'The state of society' was to be a key conception for the most important historical writing of the eighteenth century. There were other innovations too. Some of these are well exemplified by *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769) by William Robertson (1721–93), which has a claim to be regarded as the first modern work of history. Of course the criteria of modernity are multiple; others would point to different examples, but the claim is defensible.

Modernity is in fact an idea relevant to Robertson's book, in a double sense: the book is about it – about, that is, the emergence of 'modern' Europe in the sixteenth century – and it could not have been written but for other kinds of modernity. In Robertson's view, modernity was a secular cosmopolitanism, both cultural and political (in the latter sense expressed as the idea of 'the balance of power'), which in the sixteenth century was making Europe modern and also making it, for the same reasons, an entity whose history could be written. But Robertson's book is also cosmopolitan – that is, European – not only in its viewpoint but in its genesis and its intention. He had made his name with a successful *History of Scotland*, ten years earlier. *Charles V* was a deliberate bid for wider, in fact for European-wide, attention in the literary market; Robertson arranged for its translation into French as soon as it was published.

It is difficult to think of a precedent for Robertson's book. Hitherto historians had been drawn chiefly to write the histories of their own nations or cities, which needs no special explanation, or to narratives of events in which they had been personally involved or of which they could at least claim some special knowledge and interest. Sarpi's history of the Council of Trent might be claimed as an exception, but he was nevertheless investigating the most significant recent episode in the history of the Church to whose clergy he belonged. Hume's *History of England*, which Robertson considered emulating, before he thought better of it, is not really an exception to this, despite Hume's Scottish perspective. But Robertson had nothing at all to draw him to write of Charles V's empire – nothing, that is, except its

centrality to early modern Europe, and the intrinsic interest and importance of the latter as a historical period (which is how Robertson saw it). Robertson's book in fact ranges considerably wider than even the extensive territories of Charles's empire, to encompass the whole history of Europe, and it was the possibility of doing this that made him choose his focal point.

This free range of choice of subject was new, and made possible only by the deluge from the printing presses over the previous two hundred years, including the printing of historical documents. Robertson maintained a network of foreign correspondents in writing his books, notably in Spain, and he lists them in the preface to his subsequent *History of America* (1777), for which he adopted the highly modern expedient of a questionnaire. Even for the *History of Scotland* he lists his main debts in his preface, as well as identifying important sources in appendices, as a modern scholar would characteristically do. Travel was not yet normally part of a historian's working practice: Gibbon, for example, never returned to Rome after his first, fateful, visit. Robertson never travelled on the Continent, but libraries, the book trade and helpful correspondents made it possible for him to write a detailed history of Charles V's empire from Edinburgh, where he was a minister of the Church of Scotland and for thirty years principal of Edinburgh University. There was nothing superficial about his way of writing history: he was a scholar as well as a literary historian.

But it was possible to write for the market, and Robertson did, receiving for *Charles V* a sum from the publisher which awed his contemporaries. He had a patron, Lord Bute, George III's Scottish prime minister, who procured for him the revival of the office of historiographer royal for Scotland, but his clerical living was also important. Though he presided over an academic institution, he was not of course a 'professional' historian in the modern sense of teaching history for a living. History was still not, never had been, and would not for another century be part of the academic curriculum, though there were a small number of endowed professorships. It was easy in the Scottish system to lecture on historical subjects from chairs of rhetoric and belles-lettres, moral philosophy, and law, as Adam Smith and John Millar did, though Robertson did not do so. But published

history could pay well. The Earl of Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion* had made unprecedented amounts; Hume's *History of England* had brought him the rewards he had vainly sought from philosophy. The move from dependence on a patron to the independence achieved by production for the market was a theme in eighteenth-century Scottish thought; it was also being achieved in literary men's lives. Robertson was a tolerant, self-consciously modern Scottish cleric – one of the self-dubbed 'Moderates' – and a modern literary man as well as an improving university administrator.

In using the word 'modern' so freely, I am, of course, not travestying but at least semantically simplifying. The eighteenth century was more copious in its terminology: 'polished', 'polite', 'refined'; 'civil', 'civility' and 'civilized' (quite common) and even 'our enlightened age' (Gibbon). We get 'Enlightenment' only toward the end of the century and in German, and 'civilization' (first available in French) also in the second half of the century. But if our own utility word 'modernity' was not in use, the concept certainly was, with its antitheses: 'that rude age', 'illiterate ages', 'superstitious ages', 'barbarism' and 'the feudal anarchy'. The contrast focused Robertson's attention, and it is impossible to explain what he was trying to do in *Charles V*, and even in much of the *History of Scotland*, without invoking it. The antitheses were contrasts of, in another key term, 'manners', which included customs and conventions, values and characteristic conduct – in French, *mœurs*. The relation between an idea of modernity expressed in these terms and an idea of Europe is reciprocal. The history of Europe – and more widely of mankind – could be categorized in terms of manners, changing over time. Modernity could also be characterized in terms of what Robertson in *America*, in a startlingly prophetic phrase, calls the 'mode of subsistence': as the supersession of 'the feudal system' by commerce, which is the hallmark of modernity, and by the associated softening and refinement of manners compared with the military spirit of feudalism. In politics – and this is what above all focuses attention in *Charles V* – feudalism is replaced by 'one great system' governing the relations of the European states, which is 'the balance of power'.

The eighteenth-century sense that the state of society and manners passed through successive stages gave rise over the course of the

centrality to early modern Europe, and the intrinsic interest and importance of the latter as a historical period (which is how Robertson saw it). Robertson's book in fact ranges considerably wider than even the extensive territories of Charles's empire, to encompass the whole history of Europe, and it was the possibility of doing this that made him choose his focal point.

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But it was possible to write for the market, and Robertson did, receiving for *Charles V* a sum from the publisher which awed his contemporaries. He had a patron, Lord Bute, George III's Scottish prime minister, who procured for him the revival of the office of historiographer royal for Scotland, but his clerical living was also important. Though he presided over an academic institution, he was not of course a 'professional' historian in the modern sense of teaching history for a living. History was still not, never had been, and would not for another century be part of the academic curriculum, though there were a small number of endowed professorships. It was easy in the Scottish system to lecture on historical subjects from chairs of rhetoric and belles-lettres, moral philosophy, and law, as Adam Smith and John Millar did, though Robertson did not do so. But published

history could pay well. The Earl of Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion* had made unprecedented amounts; Hume's *History of England* had brought him the rewards he had vainly sought from philosophy. The move from dependence on a patron to the independence achieved by production for the market was a theme in eighteenth-century Scottish thought; it was also being achieved in literary men's lives. Robertson was a tolerant, self-consciously modern Scottish cleric – one of the self-dubbed 'Moderates' – and a modern literary man as well as an improving university administrator.

In using the word 'modern' so freely, I am, of course, not travestying but at least semantically simplifying. The eighteenth century was more copious in its terminology: 'polished', 'polite', 'refined'; 'civil', 'civility' and 'civilized' (quite common) and even 'our enlightened age' (Gibbon). We get 'Enlightenment' only toward the end of the century and in German, and 'civilization' (first available in French) also in the second half of the century. But if our own utility word 'modernity' was not in use, the concept certainly was, with its antitheses: 'that rude age', 'illiterate ages', 'superstitious ages', 'barbarism' and 'the feudal anarchy'. The contrast focused Robertson's attention, and it is impossible to explain what he was trying to do in *Charles V*, and even in much of the *History of Scotland*, without invoking it. The antitheses were contrasts of, in another key term, 'manners', which included customs and conventions, values and characteristic conduct – in French, *mœurs*. The relation between an idea of modernity expressed in these terms and an idea of Europe is reciprocal. The history of Europe – and more widely of mankind – could be categorized in terms of manners, changing over time. Modernity could also be characterized in terms of what Robertson in *America*, in a startlingly prophetic phrase, calls the 'mode of subsistence': as the supersession of 'the feudal system' by commerce, which is the hallmark of modernity, and by the associated softening and refinement of manners compared with the military spirit of feudalism. In politics – and this is what above all focuses attention in *Charles V* – feudalism is replaced by 'one great system' governing the relations of the European states, which is 'the balance of power'.

The eighteenth-century sense that the state of society and manners passed through successive stages gave rise over the course of the

century to a characteristic genre: schematic abridgement of human history into 'stages', with speculative accounts of the reasons for the transitions. In some cases, if the taxonomic element prevailed over the sequential, as in Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), the result was more a set of sociological categories, which was neither detailed narrative nor necessarily overtly historical scholarship, though evidence from different parts of the world and different historical eras was cited. History as a sequence of stages, of states of society or of the human mind, was in a sense the 'enlightened' successor to the long-lived Christian universal history, derived from the Bible, Augustine, Orosius and the historical sequence of the Four Empires. The most obvious examples of such hostile rivalry between Christian and Enlightenment universal history were Voltaire's *Essay on Customs* (*Mœurs*) (1756) and, at the end of the century, Condorcet's anticlerical *Sketch for an Essay on the Progress of the Human Mind* (1794). In France we have also Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755). Scotland was a notable contributor, with some of David Hume's *Essays*, Adam Ferguson's *The History of Civil Society* (1767), Adam Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, John Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771), Lord Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774) and James Dunbar's *Essays on the History of Mankind in Rude and Cultivated Ages* (1780). Robertson contributed to the genre with parts of his *History of America*, on the manners and beliefs of the indigenous peoples, and also, in a more limited and strictly European fashion, with the 'View of the Progress of Society in Europe from the Subversion of the Roman Empire to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century' which he prefixed to *Charles V.*

The motives for the creation of these schematic overviews were to some extent diverse. The most obvious was a general desire to make history 'philosophic'; that is, to uncover its underlying causes and make it a basis for useful generalizations. Montesquieu's enterprise was partly conditioned by what has been called a 'feudal reaction' against the absolutism of Louis XIV in France. By identifying 'despotism' (exemplified particularly by the Ottoman state) as a category distinct from monarchy, and based on the principle of fear, he left the way open to a characterization of monarchy as embedded in the rule of law and checked and supported by a vigorous aristocracy actuated



by the principle of honour. Voltaire's and Condorcet's works were attacks on priestcraft and superstition. For the Scots the focus was on the forms assumed by civil society and manners, as in Montesquieu, and the forms of property-holding, as in Harrington. In Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, in particular, we get a clear delineation of the so-called 'four stages' of society: hunting-and-gathering savagery; pastoral nomadism, with the beginnings of property rights; agriculture (which in Europe after the barbarian invasions was held as property by the institution of the *feud*); and, the latest stage, commerce.

The Scottish focus on civil society, rather than, as was still to some extent true of Montesquieu, on forms of political constitution, was understandable. After the Act of Union (1707) Scotland was no longer a polity, and Edinburgh no longer a political capital. On the other hand the growth of Scotland's prosperity and the concomitant refinement of manners were very obvious. The concept of a polite and progressive civil society offered another form of self-assessment and of possible emulation. The half-jocular but competitive conversations between Johnson and Boswell on the relative merits of English and Scottish society are good informal examples of this.

It was also relevant, however, that within Scotland there were vast differences in characteristic forms of society, not only in the urban-rural contrasts which all Europeans knew, but geographically. North of the Highland line was, so to speak, Indian territory, which during the '45 rebellion had terrifyingly erupted into the civilized streets of Edinburgh. Highland clan society was assimilated by Robertson into his grim picture of Scottish feudalism as an additional source of strength and independence for the feudal warlords, enhancing their ungovernability. Clan society does not seem in general in the eighteenth century to have been carefully distinguished as a category, as it was to be in the nineteenth, when Marxists, in particular, adopted the term 'gentile society' (from the Latin *gens*) as a stage distinct from and prior to feudalism. (Hume came nearer to recognizing this than Robertson, distinguishing sharply between the Scottish version, which, with primogeniture, reinforced feudalism, and the Irish one, with equal division of land among siblings, which was more barbarous.) Similarly, where anthropologists in the later nineteenth century found kinship systems to be the organizing principle of primitive

societies, eighteenth-century commentators like Robertson tended to regard such societies as wholly sexually promiscuous, and so as mere hordes. Without property, why would they need to trace descent or identify kin?

On the other hand the perception of the ways in which feudalism was superseded had become much more sophisticated, compared for example with Harrington – particularly in Adam Smith. This marked a characteristic and important shift in the approach to historical causality more generally. The notion of a sequence of stages or forms of society (rather than politics) and of manners had implications for the understanding of the transitions from one to another. Despite the seventeenth-century English enthusiasm for customary law and the idea of an immemorial (and unchanging) constitution, laws and constitutions generally sounded like the kinds of thing that would, and certainly could, be deliberately enacted. Manners, however, seemed unlikely to be legislated into or out of existence. Their progress could be artificially retarded, but it seemed likely that when they changed for the better they did so gradually and, to use a favourite word of Gibbon's, also employed by Robertson, 'insensibly'. The mythic reputations of the great lawgivers – Lycurgus, Solon, Numa – at last began to be dismissed. As Adam Ferguson significantly wrote, 'Nations stumble upon establishments which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.' In *The Wealth of Nations* (III.iii and iv) Smith gave his classic account of the gradual erosion of feudalism not by legislation but simply by human nature presented with the opportunities of the market. Given the increasing availability of goods as a result of the productivity of the towns and of commerce, the great feudal lords are drawn to expend their agricultural surplus on these rather than converting it into military and political power by keeping armed retainers and by imposing military obligations on their tenants; instead these obligations are increasingly commuted for money rents.

Robertson in his *Scotland* gave an account of the ending of feudalism in France and England largely along Harringtonian lines: it was the result of the deliberate policy of Louis XI of France, implemented by cunning manipulation, and of deliberate legislative action by the English Henry VII, and his son's dissolution of the monasteries, which

diffused the ownership of property. The failure of Scotland to emerge from the feudal era was a failure, for various reasons, of the Scottish kings. But in his 'Progress of Society' essay Robertson proposes a more elaborate set of reasons, including the exposure of the European aristocracy to the refinements of Constantinople and the East in the Crusades, and the rise of the commercial city republics of Italy as a rival social and political model to the dominance of the feudal lords. His belief in the benign effects of the Crusades, born though they were in fanaticism and superstition, was an example of another sophistication in the notion of historical causality: the idea of 'unintended consequences', of which Smith's chapters in Part III of *The Wealth of Nations* provide a particularly vivid example. Vices could have desirable consequences; virtue was no guarantee of them. Robertson makes the point explicit in the case of Henry VIII's extravagance, vanity and wilfulness, which had the Dissolution and the English Reformation as its consequences. It was a mismatch of intention and outcome whose natural treatment in historical writing was as irony; Gibbon was to take profuse advantage of it.

Robertson's two introductory-survey chapters in his *Scotland*, devoted to the enduring pernicious power of the Scottish feudal nobility and the weakness of the monarchy, made in a sense a more restricted and bleaker counterpart to the optimistic, European, version he provided ten years later in the 'Progress of Society' preamble to *Charles V*. But whether entrenched or overcome, feudalism, intellectually speaking, would not go away. Scholarship continued to be assiduous in its attention to it. Only two years before Robertson's *Scotland*, in which feudalism played such a leading part, Sir John Dalrymple, the Scottish antiquary to whom Robertson acknowledged debts in his preface, had published *An Essay towards a General History of Feudal Property in Great Britain*. In his highly negative view of the historical role of the Scottish feudal nobility, Robertson set his face against the 'ancient constitutional' tradition fostered by Buchanan in the sixteenth century, in which the nobility were the guardians of liberty. For Robertson, liberty was modern not ancient, while about the ancient history of Scotland before the Romans nothing at all could be known. The introductory survey completed, the narrative part of Robertson's *Scotland* begins with the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots, and the book

ends with the accession of her son James VI to the throne of England on the death of Elizabeth in 1603. From then on, as king of England as well as Scotland, James disposed of force and resources which dwarfed those of the Scottish nobility; the history of Scotland as a modern, i.e. post-feudal, society could begin. Like Hume in an English context, Robertson was not an ancient-constitutionalist but a modern Whig. Feudalism had meant anarchy.

It was in *Charles V*, dealing with a period he had chosen for this purpose, that Robertson was able to narrate the consequences of the decline of the feudal nobility on a European scale. Because of this decline, and because of the consequent concentration of power in the major European monarchies, the European states system was created; Robertson's debt to Guicciardini is very obvious. The history of Europe as a whole could be treated in narrative terms, and not merely in a survey or as the histories of individual states. One is reminded of Polybius on the consequences for historical writing of the emergence of Roman power as a unifying theme, but in Robertson the unification was not that of a European-wide empire, which would have been a disaster for mankind. (Robertson, like Polybius, invokes Providence – but not to explain the rise of empire but to give thanks for its failure.) What made Europe an entity, for Robertson, was the balance of power. The unity of Europe, in this paradoxical way, strikes one as rather similar to Smith's account of the creation of the market: each individual (seller, purchaser, statesman) seeks only his own profit/security, but the outcome is an order. Robertson enthusiastically calls it 'one great family' and 'that grand system' (*Charles V*, XI). Gibbon would later compare it to 'one great republic' (*Decline and Fall*, 'General Observations').

Robertson, of course, does not just generalize, but densely narrates the incessant shifts in relative power, the recalculations of advantage by kings and the German princes, the constant reshuffling of alliances, as well as the occasional irruptions of overconfidence (usually from Charles), and of vanity in pursuit of honour rather than interest (Francis I). Resentment and the desire for revenge also impair the operation of the sober estimates of interest and the policies they prescribe. The latter constitute the distinctive quality of modern statecraft, so that Francis's chivalric notions of honour represent a kind of cultural lag.

The greatest intrusion, however, because it involves zeal and intransigence, is the distinctively modern one of the Reformation, which Robertson, in a standard move, associates with the new 'spirit of inquiry' and which wrecks Charles's chances of consolidating still-feudal Germany into a unified modern state. Robertson's treatment of the Reformation is notably political: the corruptions of the Church are condemned, but theological issues are marginalized. But if the Reformation is in a sense an aspect of modernity, it is also, as in the *History of Scotland*, carefully culturally distanced from Robertson's own time. Luther and Knox, both performing a necessary task and fitted for it even by their defects on the scale of civility (another example of private vices, public benefits), are also figures firmly located in the past; they belong to a ruder, fiercer, more intransigent age than the present. In this they have some of the same traits as the Scottish nobles who butchered the royal secretary and favourite David Rizzio in the presence of their terrified, pregnant Queen, and who 'fill us with horror at the manners . . . of that age' (*Scotland*, IV). But 'in passing judgement on the characters of men we ought to try them by the principles and maxims of their own age, not those of another. For although virtue and vice are at all times the same, manners and customs vary continually' (*Scotland*, VIII). There is as yet for Robertson no established periodizing terminology, for example between 'Early Modern' and 'Enlightenment', but the way he holds the former period at arm's length is of more than academic significance. It has been pointed out that by his historical contextualizing of the Reformers, the ancestors of the rigid eighteenth-century Calvinist opponents of Robertson's kind of tolerant modern Presbyterianism, he was tacitly depriving them of their claim to be uniquely and authentically scriptural in all their characteristics. The concept of at least two periods since the revival of learning is already present. Even academically this was important. Part of the experience of reading history is constituted by such cultural distancing, just as much as its converse, the sense that what lies on the other side of the gulf can be made intelligible by historical imagination and scholarship. Robertson is as sensitive to such issues as any writer in the eighteenth century, and his commitment to studying a period as close as the sixteenth century makes this particularly evident.

The contrasting 'politeness' of the eighteenth century is established not only by assertion but also by the deployment of what his age was beginning to term 'sensibility' – imaginative sympathy or 'feeling' indulged even to lachrymosity – and also by the polished, calm equability of the prose which enforces Robertson's interpretations and opinions. The former is chiefly in evidence in his treatment of Mary, Queen of Scots, who, morally, femininely, frail and politically misguided, is made pitiable in her misfortunes by her conjectured feelings, as in the scene of her enforced abdication: 'Mary, when she subscribed these deeds, was bathed in tears; and while she gave away with her own hands, the sceptre which she had swayed so long, she felt a pang of grief and indignation, one of the severest, perhaps, which can sway the human heart' (*Scotland*, V). Implacable Buchanan, who knew her, merely says that she 'reluctantly agreed to name guardians for her son, and that procurators were sent to arrange that the king should be crowned at Stirling'.

For the moral and aesthetic effect of Robertson's prose one has to take an example, more or less at random. It is said that when Robertson read through one of his own letters he did so beating time, as though hearing a piece of music. It is quite credible. Consider this, from *Charles V*:

Even Melancthon, whose merit of every kind entitled him to the first place among the Protestant divines, being now deprived of the manly counsels of Luther, which were wont to inspire him with fortitude and to preserve him steady amidst the storms and dangers that threatened the church, was seduced into unwarrantable concessions by the timidity of his temper, his fond desire of peace, and his excessive complaisance towards persons of high rank. (X)

Even such a small change as inverting 'timidity of his temper' and 'fond desire' would impair the calculated euphony of Robertson's sentence, but much more damaging – like the omission of a bar in a sonata – would be the semantically relatively harmless excision of 'excessive', 'of every kind', 'manly' or 'unwarrantable'. Robertson's syntax would be rendered insistent and staccato instead of calmly controlled and seemingly inevitable – more like Guicciardini, in fact. Reading Robertson is smooth, easy and reassuring; Guicciardini is abrupt, disturbing and, as a literary experience, a rugged and challeng-

ing one. Gibbon spoke no more than the truth when he paid tribute in his *Memoir* to 'the perfect composition, the nervous language, the well-timed periods of Dr Robertson'.

One of Robertson's Edinburgh pupils was Walter Scott. To say this is not particularly to claim that Scott's view of history was influenced more by Robertson than by the historical ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment generally, though it is true that it was Robertson who most focused on Scottish history. But the point is a more general one, about what could and could not be thought and articulated at a given historical moment. Scott learned to be intensely self-conscious about this from the Scottish Enlightenment's understanding of national changes in ideas and manners. Distance in time was also distance in prevailing ideals and modes of conduct. Scott's novel *Waverley* (1814), the first of the series that came to bear its name, set in the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, originally bore the subtitle 'tis Fifty Years since', amended to 'tis Sixty Years since' a decade later to retain accuracy. As the novel's eponymous hero travels north, from England to Scotland and from Lowlands to Highlands, he also travels backwards in time, to a partially inadvertent participation in the rebellion. The English manor house in which he is reared is, as Scott makes clear, itself an anachronism: Cavalier, High Tory, Jacobite in sympathies. The uncle who brings him up is obsessed with family tradition and genealogy. When Waverley joins the army, his uncle regrets that it is no longer the fashion for him to take with him a retinue of followers from the estate. His tutor is a non-juring clergyman (i.e. one who has refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Hanoverian sovereign), who writes unreadable High Church Jacobite tracts. His aunt is obsessed with the visit to the house by Charles II seeking shelter after the battle of Worcester. The house is a seventeenth-century time capsule with earlier feudal residues.

In the Scottish Lowlands, Waverley lodges with an even earlier version of the past. The Baron of Bradwardine seems to belong roughly to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He is learned in feudal terms and in heraldry, and deeply attached to the symbols of feudalism. He has no thoughts of a warlord kind of semi-independence, but is loyal (to the Stuarts) even to subservience, being a pedantic antiquary who

sets much store by his family's hereditary office, attached to his tenure, of removing the sovereign's boots after a battle, which he supports with copious quotation in barbarous Latin. But the genuine feudal article as a contemporary military reality is the Highland chieftain Fergus Mac-Ivor, whom Waverley meets next. He is a clan leader and warlord who engages in the rebellion not so much out of loyalty as out of self-interest, aspiring to become a great man at a restored Jacobite English court and prepared to use his clansmen's loyalty to himself to achieve this by augmenting Prince Charles Edward's army. But he is a divided figure, and knows it. In acting the part of chief at a clan gathering that Waverley attends, complete with a Gaelic bard, he remains detached, half-apologizing to Waverley for its barbarism. The clan world, it is hinted, is in a sense older than feudalism; Scott makes several Homeric parallels. The contrast with Bradwardine, who is mocked by Fergus as a pedant, reinforces this. But Fergus is also a polished modern gentleman, brought up at the French court. Scott, sensitive as always to period, characterizes him as possible only at that particular point: 'Had Fergus Mac-Ivor lived *Sixty Years* sooner than he did, he would, in all probability, have lacked the polished manner and knowledge of the world which he now possessed; and had he lived *Sixty Years* later, his ambition and love of rule would have lacked the fuel which his situation now afforded.' His anachronisms are calculated and manipulative: he maintains the lavish hospitality of a clan chief and crowds his estate with a largely redundant tenantry as a recruiting ground – all in pursuit of a peerage from a restored Stuart dynasty.

Fergus is half-modern, or inwardly almost wholly so; but modernity has two other main faces in the novel. One is Waverley's father, who has reconciled himself to the Hanoverians and become a parliamentary follower of Sir Robert Walpole – a byword for corruption – for the rewards of place and profit. Abandoning the family principles, he seems freed from all principle; in the novel he is only an offstage presence. But modernity has a more honourable face: a military one. Waverley's English prisoner, Colonel Talbot, though able, in the eighteenth-century phrase, to 'make an interest' to procure Waverley's pardon, is wholly devoted to the service of his country. His sense of duty and clear-eyed (Whig) perception of the nation's best interests



are contrasted with the unthinking loyalty of the humbler Highlanders and with Fergus's self-interested independence, half military, half political. Robertson, who approved of professional armies, would surely have approved of Talbot, as he would have recognized the characterization of Mac-Ivor.

But the general point here is that Scott's own delineation of his characters and his sense of the significance of their spiritually diverse historical locations could hardly have been presented in that way a century earlier. More than a century of historical awareness and reflection lay behind Scott's ability to see them as he did. Scott was thoroughly self-knowing about this. He was an antiquary who made fun of antiquaries; a modern Tory with a fundamentally Whig view of British history, who knew imaginatively what it was to be a Jacobite; a Romantic who knew how to domesticate his Romanticism, knowing that the point about the Sublime, as in Burke's famous essay, was that it was to be enjoyed from a distance. History, offering as it did, in modern representations of it, a gallery of manners or, as Scott's contemporary Sir James Mackintosh put it, a museum of mankind, now afforded a variety of vicarious experiences and even partial identifications which contemporary life could not match. Scott's own house, Abbotsford, was made into such a museum. Fergus's passionately Jacobite sister, with whom Waverley falls temporarily in love, draws an ironic picture of Waverley's future of domestic happiness and lettered indolence; he is not made, as she is, for the cruelty and heroism of a civil war: 'And he will refit the old library in the most exquisite Gothic taste, and garnish its shelves with the most valuable volumes; – and he will draw plans and landscapes, and write verses, and rear temples and dig grottoes . . . – and he will be a happy man.' This was at least a partial ironic self-portrait by Scott, with history transmuted into an epicurean, imaginative antiquarianism. The Victorians loved this trait in him, but remained oblivious that its enabling condition was the Scottish Enlightenment's conception of the history of manners.

*Gibbon: Rome, Barbarism and Civilization*

Gibbon fascinated scholars in the later twentieth century as he did not, in Britain at least, in the nineteenth, and the interest shows no sign of abating. The bicentenary of Gibbon's death in 1794 was impressively celebrated; the festivities, suitably inaugurated by a superb new edition of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by David Womersley (1994), included a conference at Magdalen College, Oxford, so memorably denounced by Gibbon for its neglect of him as an undergraduate. One of Gibbon's predictions in his *Memoir* of his life is clearly falsified: the University of Oxford 'will as cheerfully renounce me for a son as I am willing to disclaim her for a mother'. Our modern understanding of the rich archaeology of his mind has been enhanced not only by studies of him but by copious work on the Enlightenment, on the Machiavellian-humanist tradition, on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholarship and antiquarianism, and on the Scottish Enlightenment in particular, to which his debt is at various points apparent and which to the nineteenth century was not even a concept, much less an object of study. Arnaldo Momigliano, in his classic account of the division of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historical writing into elegant but unscholarly narratives and miscellaneous antiquarian learning, made Gibbon a kind of synthesis, the climax and resolution of the story, as a historian who was also a scholar and a scholar who was an unsurpassed narrator.

Gibbon himself was aware of the situation that Momigliano analysed, and confronted it in his first published essay, originally in French, entitled an *Essay on the Study of Literature* (1761). This was a defence of literature in the wide sense – humane learning, including history – against the contempt often and fashionably expressed in the eighteenth century for mere erudition. In the wake of Descartes's method of philosophical doubt, all facts about the past seemed dubious; the more antiquaries sought to ascertain such facts, the more disconnected and even trivial many of their findings seemed to be and the more uncouth, pedantic and otiose antiquarian learning appeared when judged by the 'philosophic' standards of clarity, system and utility. In his preliminary discourse to the French *Encyclopedie* the

mathematician d'Alembert relegated history to the faculty of mere memory. Mathematics, not humanist erudition, was the esteemed paradigm; the ancients had been decisively surpassed, and there was little or nothing more to be learned from them.

Against this Gibbon, already conscious of a vocation as a historian, protested. He himself did not mind teasing the antiquarian 'mere compiler' with charges of pedantry and obsessive, wasted effort, as the footnotes to *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* later made clear, but in his essay he invoked the possibility of a synthesis of the old and new models of intellectual achievement in the 'philosophic historian' – someone who would be learned in the literature of antiquity, devoted to factual accuracy, but also capable of seeing in history a tissue of events connected by deeper causes than those most apparent, and able to present them coherently and perspicuously. Montesquieu was one model: learned but also intellectually probing and systematic. Among the ancients Gibbon above all invoked Tacitus, 'who employs the force of rhetoric only to display the connection between the links which form the chain of historical events, and to instruct the reader by sensible and profound reflections' (*Study of Literature*).

Gibbon did not himself work with manuscript sources, though he was indebted to and appreciative of those who did, particularly the French Benedictine scholars of the Congregation of St-Maur, who, from the later seventeenth century, had produced massive and deeply learned critical editions of the works of the Fathers of the Church – extensively used by Gibbon – and documents of early medieval history. But though Gibbon did not work in archives he was a natural scholar, to whom erudition was a pleasure and not merely an adjunct to literary composition. In his *Memoir* he wrote gleefully of his acquisition for twenty pounds of the twenty volumes of the *Mémoires* of the French Academy of Inscriptions, 'nor would it have been easy, by any other expenditure, to have produced so large and lasting a fund of rational amusement.' The work of the Academy was a testimony to the antiquarian passion devoted, particularly, to the study of ancient artefacts – coins, medals, funerary inscriptions and the like: the kind of material on which historians of the ancient world still heavily rely. The study of it was one way in which Gibbon was later able to go beyond his

ancient literary sources, including the historians whom the humanists had been content to recover, imitate and follow. Superficially regarded, Gibbon might seem only a late example of them, with his own narrative depending in the first instance, as among the classical historians themselves, on following and sometimes criticizing or seeking to reconcile the work of earlier historians. But thanks to the scholarship of his own day and of the previous century (much of it denigrated as antiquarian), his own amazingly wide erudition, and his sharply critical approach to his sources, far exceeding the rather reluctant occasional criticisms by ancient historians of the accounts of their predecessors, Gibbon massively transcended them.

It is difficult now to recognize how innovative was Gibbon's choice of his life's work. It was not the practice to write histories of the ancient world (though Adam Ferguson had published a history of the Roman republic), because the ancient historians were thought unsurpassable, both through merit and through superior access. Instead one wrote commentaries – at which Gibbon, as exercises, tried out his apprentice hand on Sallust and Livy – or imitated them on other periods. Half a century later, in the early nineteenth century in England, the topicality of democracy as a contentious political issue gave rise to rival histories of Greece by William Mitford and George Grote. But in its time Gibbon's work was unique, and not only in its scale. To attempt it was undoubtedly a bold step, which Gibbon came to take only gradually. It is noticeable that even when committed to it he chose to begin with the period half a century after Tacitus' work, in the middle of the second century AD. He uses, and sometimes expresses gratitude to, or dissatisfaction with, Dio and Ammianus as well as a number of lesser or epitomized historians, but he had avoided any direct challenge to the author he regarded as the greatest of the ancient historians. Later, of course, as he emerged into the Christian, medieval western and Byzantine era – his history ends only in the fifteenth century, with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks – he was into another world, for the authorities for which he had often as much contempt as regard. But to go there was not originally his intention, for Gibbon's history far outgrew its origins.

Though it is well known, and for that matter somewhat imaginative, it is impossible not to quote Gibbon's account in the *Memoir* of the

moment of its conception, though it took many years to bring it to birth: 'It was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted fryars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started to my mind.' Two points need to be made at once. One is that the original idea was to write the history of the city – a more antiquarian kind of enterprise – not the empire; it is to the ruins of the city that Gibbon returns only at the end of the vast work which came to range so far beyond it. The history expanded to include Russia, Persia, Mongolia and China, as well as to the limits of the empire in North Africa, Britain and the Near East. It includes the Christian theological controversies before and after the conversion of Constantine, the history of Byzantium to 1453, and the earlier history of its Turkish conquerors; before this Gibbon gives us the rise of Islam and the Crusades. The other point is that the mood of exaltation, clearly evident in his letters at the time, on this, his only, visit to Rome, was aroused in Gibbon chiefly by reminiscences of the *republic*: 'Each memorable spot where Romulus stood, or Tully [Cicero] spoke, or Caesar fell, was at once present to my eye.' Gibbon did not lament the fall of the empire, though he deplored some of its aspects: the lamentation was, though only occasionally explicitly, for an earlier catastrophe – the supersession of the republic. Gibbon was as hostile to the idea of universal empire as Robertson, and as enthusiastic about the modern balance of power: empire 'drained vitality, which was promoted by independence and rivalry. Rome, for Gibbon, at the outset of his history was already on a gradient of decline, even before Christianity and barbarism began their work. In the first chapter we hear again, as it were, the chanting of the friars: the Campagna, Rome's hinterland, was 'the theatre of her infant victories [an echo of Livy]. On that celebrated ground the first consuls deserved triumphs; their successors adorned villas, and *their* posterity have erected convents.'

Meditation on, and in, the ruins of former greatness was, in the wake of the Romans themselves, an eighteenth-century English classical taste, and one to which Gibbon was always susceptible. Nor was the elegiac note offered only to the Romans of the classical age: it could be sounded even in a context with which Gibbon had no

sympathy. The great church of St Sophia in Constantinople, after it has been, for the Byzantine Greeks, polluted by the introduction of the Latin rite, stands deserted 'and a vast and gloomy silence prevailed in that venerable dome, which had so often smoked with a cloud of incense, blazed with innumerable lights, and resounded with the voice of prayer and thanksgiving' (*Decline and Fall*, LXVIII).

After three introductory survey chapters, and with frequent excursions to the provinces, almost all of Gibbon's first volume (of six), before its conclusion with two notorious chapters on early Christianity (XV, XVI), is focused on Rome itself and the failure to solve the problem of peaceful imperial succession, bedevilled by the indiscipline and venality of the standing army and especially the Praetorian Guard, which at one point puts the empire up for auction. In these dozen chapters Gibbon is very close to the moral world and understanding of historical dynamics of Sallust, Livy and Tacitus. It was a cliché of the nineteenth century that eighteenth-century historians had no ability to empathize with past times or recognize their distinctive moral characters. This is nonsense. But what is true is that, in speaking of Rome before the conversion of Constantine, Gibbon's work exists in an easy community of values with the historians of the late republic and with Tacitus, and this is sometimes a handicap in approaching the Christian Church (we remember Tacitus' contempt) and Byzantium. It matters much less in his dealings with the barbarian invaders (where the Tacitus of the *Germania* was actually a sympathetic guide), which are not coloured by republican nostalgia and by Gibbon's regretful respect for the purely politic endorsement by the educated of a generally graceful and tolerant civic polytheism.

It is not surprising that in his presentation of Rome's decline in the third, fourth and fifth centuries we often hear echoes or explicit endorsements of the Machiavellian diagnosis of the nemesis of conquest in the form of corruption followed by loss of liberty – a diagnosis itself grounded in ancient Roman moralizing and satire. It had also been adopted by one of Gibbon's early models, Montesquieu, in his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness and Decadence of the Romans* (1734). Elements of it, focusing on the threat to freedom represented by professional standing armies and the dangers of corruption, became embedded in the English rhetoric of political oppo-

sition to the executive from the early eighteenth century. Gibbon summarizes it in the appendix to his third volume (Ch. XXXVIII), which at one time looked like being the conclusion to the whole work (with the conversion of Clovis to Catholicism as the groundwork of Charlemagne's 'new' western empire), and which he entitled 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West':

The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest . . . The victorious legions, who in distant wars acquired the vices of strangers and mercenaries, first oppressed the freedom of the republic, and afterwards violated the majesty of the Purple. The emperors, anxious for their personal safety and the public peace, were reduced to the base expedient of corrupting the discipline which rendered them alike formidable to their sovereign and to the enemy . . .

We should beware of taking the 'General Observations' as a short cut to Gibbon's thinking. In fact he offers a number of causes of decline, though still within the neoclassical, civic-humanist frame of reference. In Chapter II he tells us that it was the long peace and uniform government of the Romans that undermined spirit and energy; in Chapter VII it is the mingling of the Romans with the servile provincials and in Chapter XXVII, inevitably, luxury and effeminacy. He also sees the transfer of its seat to Constantinople as marking the empire's definitive orientalizing, epitomized as effeminacy and servility, for which he has a Catonic contempt going back, ironically, to the ancient Greeks – the court ritual of the emperors' 'slaves' (there is a reminiscence here of Montesquieu's model of despotism ruling by fear and identified with the Orient) replacing the senatorial dignity which had been at least outwardly observed in Rome itself. All this, apart from the reference in Chapter II to the 'long peace and the uniform government of the Romans, [which] introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire', would have seemed common sense to the Romans themselves: that peace presented dangers was a thought which went back at least to Sallust; but the danger of 'uniform government' signals modern ideas of a mixed constitution, national governments and the balance of power.

Gibbon also gave, as Montesquieu in the *Considerations* did not, a

role in decline to Christianity; the ancient pagans too, when they became aware of it, had blamed Christianity, though on account of its impiety towards the gods. For Gibbon, theological controversies – on which he had made himself expert – promoted civil strife, while Christian ethics, and particularly monastic asceticism, detracted from the martial virtues. Although it does not stand alone, the humanist formula of decay left deep marks on Gibbon's history and outlook: the fatal sequence of virtue, conquest, luxury, corruption, loss of freedom, and ultimate surrender to hardy barbarian conquerors is taken by Gibbon as something like a universal law, for the barbarian conquerors themselves are, inevitably, launched into the same sequence. It was something the Roman historians had at least hinted at, as in Livy's account of the devastating effect on Hannibal's victorious troops of the enervating luxury of Capua. In Gibbon, Goths, Vandals, Arabs, even the Mongol conquerors of China, succumb to the same civilized virus: 'Alaric [the Goth conqueror of the city of Rome] would have blushed at the sight of his unworthy successor, sustaining on his head a diadem of pearls, incumbered with a flowing robe of gold and silver embroidery, and reclining on a litter or car of ivory, drawn by two white mules' (LI). Power and even civilization itself seem locked into a self-defeating cycle.

After the fractiousness and venality of the professional soldiery – Gibbon's account often reads like a sequel to Tacitus' *Histories*, including the use of irony – the next major theme announced in *The Decline and Fall*, in Chapters XV and XVI but recurring thereafter as a continuous and highly influential presence in both East and West, is Christianity. Gibbon, though he deprecated the fiercer attacks on religion by the French *philosophes* – he calls Voltaire a fanatic – approached it, of course, with the rational and humane distaste of his age for blind superstition and 'enthusiastic' zeal, which Hume had distinguished as the two poles between which the religious mentality oscillated. Much of the eighteenth century's hostility to religious fanaticism derived from a sense of gratitude that the era of religious wars, persecutions and massacres which had characterized the two previous centuries seemed effectively over, if perhaps only dormant. Gibbon's 'our enlightened age' is, among other things, a sigh of relief, and at the outbreak of the French Revolution he immediately saw, in the



French 'patriotic' zealots, the swarms of monks whose fanaticism he had so often castigated in *The Decline and Fall*.

His principal weapon against religion was, notoriously, irony. This takes a number of forms. Sometimes we have a phrase which, depending on the preconceptions of the reader, can be read either devoutly or sceptically, as in St Augustine's 'progress from reason to faith', or a sentence like 'The laws of nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the church.' There were precedents for this in a scholarly work of the previous century that Gibbon admired, Pierre Bayle's *Philosophical Dictionary*, but Gibbon's examples are much more polished and economical. Much of the mischief, too, is in the diction, especially the employment of an urbane, even prim, eighteenth-century vocabulary for the passionate and often eccentric zeal of early Christian asceticism and belief: 'prudent', 'singular', 'experience'. Origen, the Church Father who was alleged to have embraced chastity to the point of self-castration, had 'judged it the most prudent to disarm the tempter'. St Simeon Stylites, living on top of a pillar as a gesture of withdrawal, had achieved fame 'by the singular invention of an aerial penance'. Again, 'In the primitive church, the influence of truth was very powerfully strengthened by an opinion which, however it may deserve respect for its usefulness and antiquity, has not been found agreeable to experience. It was universally believed, that the end of the world, and the kingdom of Heaven, were at hand' (XV, XXXVII, XV). It was not empathy, though it was magnificent.

There was nothing perfunctory, however, about Gibbon's treatment of Christian theology and practice or the Christological controversies of the Fathers and the great church councils of the age of Constantine. He is as magisterial, precise and detailed about these as he is about Byzantine court politics or the conquests, manners and new kingdoms of the barbarian invaders. For these last he had some contemporary monographs, chiefly French, such as the history of the Huns by des Guignes – with, of course, the late antique and medieval historians, Jordanes, Priscus, Paul the Deacon and Gregory of Tours. The garrulous charm and weak or non-existent concept of high politics of Gregory were met by Gibbon with stern Ciceronian disapproval: 'in a prolix work . . . he has omitted almost everything that posterity

desires to learn. I have tediously acquired, by a painful perusal, the right of pronouncing this unfavourable sentence' (XXXVIII).

Conceptually, however, Gibbon was indebted above all to the 'histories of civil society' produced in the Scottish Enlightenment, for his characterization of what he calls (XXVI) the 'Manners of the Pastoral Nations'. Gibbon has derived from these a general concept of the way of life and accompanying manners of pastoral nomadism exemplified by the Huns, Arabs and Mongols and, a little doubtfully, the Germans. Gibbon shows these peoples' peculiar aptitude for war and conquest. His marshalling of the barbarian nations as they successively sweep over the Roman world may recall to us Herodotus' introduction in successive ethnographic and geographical digressions of the nations conquered by the Persian Great King, which are then mustered by him (and Herodotus) for the invasion of Greece. Gibbon clearly enjoys and takes pride in his historian's role of impresario of the nations: 'I shall lead the Arabs to the conquest of Syria, Egypt, and Africa, the provinces of the Roman empire; nor can I check their victorious career till they have overthrown the monarchies of Persia and Spain' (XLVIII). But his own characterizations of barbarian manners offer much more than the lists of barbarian customs and beliefs given by ancient historians. Through the organizing concept of economic 'stages', with their appropriate manners, unfolded in the history of civil society, he makes these traits intelligible as related aspects of a whole way of life. But he remains a historian, not just a sociological categorist, tracing the impact of the barbarians on the settled peoples and the interactions between them, and attending to their special characteristics, such as the formation of the creed of 'Mahomet'.

Gibbon's relations with leading members of the Scottish Enlightenment, as well as his intellectual debts, are worth attending to for a moment, for the influence was also literary and personal. As a pendant to his famous musing on the steps of the temple of Jupiter we may add another, much less well-known, quotation, for together they represent the two intellectual poles, neoclassical moralizing and modern sociological sophistication, between which his work stands. On 8 April 1776 David Hume wrote to the printer William Strachan saying that he was much taken with the new work by Mr Gibbon which Strachan's firm had published, adding that 'Dr Smith's is

another excellent work that has come from your press this year.' To have published in the same year the first two volumes of *The Decline and Fall* and Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was indeed a publishing double-first deserving congratulation. The conjunction was apt, for aspects of Gibbon's work are as much an offshoot of the Scottish Enlightenment as Smith's work is its most famous literary monument. Gibbon was on cordial terms of intellectual comradeship with Smith, Ferguson, Robertson and Hume; with the last two, the great historians, even of discipleship. In recounting proudly in his *Memoir* the successful reception of his first two volumes, it was to them that Gibbon gave pride of place: 'The candour of Dr Robertson embraced his disciple; a letter from Mr Hume overpaid the labour of ten years.' Contemplating their achievements as historians had at one time filled him, as he said, 'with a mixed sensation of delight and despair', and this was, as he makes clear, mainly a matter of their mastery of narrative. In them he found what he had looked to in the *Essay on the Study of Literature*: elegance, fluency and lucidity combined with learning devoid of pedantry or ungainliness. His own prose is manifestly related to, say, that of Robertson in *Charles V*, which we have seen that he admired, but more mannered, pointed and memorable. Antithesis is a favourite device, and the syntax is often artfully balanced or cumulative, as when a triad of assertions forms a cumulative series, rounded off with a climax or the false climax of bathos. We have already seen several examples of this. An amusing inversion of bathos is his well-known description of the Roman conquest of Britain, where three ignominious adjectives are concluded with a genuine climax: 'After a war of about forty years, undertaken by the most stupid, maintained by the most dissolute, and terminated by the most timid of all the emperors, the far greater part of the island submitted to the Roman yoke' (I).

Another notable feature of Gibbon's writing which has become famous or notorious is the footnotes, which do far more than just identify sources. Robertson and Hume had used footnotes as a way of bringing erudition to the support of the text without cluttering it with documents. Gibbon made them into an idiosyncratic art form, a commentary in which he gives rein to a relaxed, garrulous intimacy which acts in counterpoint with the tautly controlled formality of the

text. They evoke the community of historians, scholars and antiquaries, ancient and modern, in a kind of camaraderie of admiration, scorn and sometimes smut. It is best just to quote a few random examples: 'See an excellent dissertation on the origin and migrations of nations in the *Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions* . . . it is seldom that the antiquarian and the philosopher are so happily blended' (IX). On the eternal damnation of the pagans: 'The Jansenists who have so diligently studied the works of the Fathers, maintain this sentiment with distinguished zeal; and the learned M. de Tillemont never dismisses a virtuous emperor without pronouncing his damnation' (XV). 'The modern Greeks [he means historians] . . . have displayed the love, rather than the talent, of fiction' (XXXII). 'I have somewhere heard or read of the confession of a Benedictine abbot: "My vow of poverty has given me a hundred crowns a year; my vow of obedience has raised me to the rank of a sovereign prince." I forget the consequences of his vow of chastity' (XXXVII). On the execution of a heretical bishop: 'The bishopric is now worth 20,000 ducats a year . . . and is therefore much less likely to produce the author of a new heresy' (XXVII).

Irony is, of course, a distancing device, as when Gibbon contrasts Roman imperial decadence with the virtues of the republic, or holds up with tweezers for enlightened contemplation the eccentricities of Christian ascetics. It can also be turned inward, with an effect of equivocation. This is a frequent feature of Augustan English writing generally, as well as common in Gibbon, as when a pair of contrasting motives is assigned as the cause of an action: 'the credulity or prudence', 'the avarice or humanity' and so on. Equivocation can also become unease and paradox. The sequence of virtue, conquest, luxury, corruption is a frequent generator of such paradoxes. Perhaps virtue and even civilization are self-doomed. The unease as well as the positive weight attached to the word 'civilized' appears in the first paragraph of the history. The opening is proud: 'In the second century of the Christian *Æra*, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind.' But what does it mean to be civilized? Three sentences later we find that 'Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury.' Perhaps to enjoy *was* to abuse. Gibbon's irony feeds not

only off the paradox of conquest turning apparently inexorably into servitude – the Roman and civic-humanist paradox – but also off the rather different paradoxes generated by the history of civil society, particularly its concept of ‘unintended consequences’, which could be benign as well as disastrous but all the more morally equivocal for leaving ill-conduct unpunished or even rewarded. The extreme form of this paradox, which in its formulation was almost universally condemned as well as borrowed, occurred in Bernard de Mandeville’s satire *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), whose message was summarized as ‘private vices, public benefits’. It was a thought highly familiar to Gibbon, and was even used by him to subvert the language of republican virtue: ‘The historian Sallust, who usefully practised the vices which he has so eloquently censured . . .’ (XXXI, n. 105). In his presentation of Christianity Gibbon inverts the paradox and bends it to his ironic purpose. The Christian virtues such as piety and zeal must be acknowledged to be virtues, yet their consequences often seem highly regrettable: private virtues, public detriment.

Gibbon, of course, finds this unsurprising, but the double-edged character of civilization was disturbing. He finds hope in the ‘modern’ thought, announced by Montesquieu and fostered by Hume, that it is only luxury procured by conquest that is enervating, but that the ‘opulence’ – a neutral word – obtained by industry is innocuous, since it requires a sustained output of energy and discipline.

*The Decline and Fall* in fact has in a sense two conclusions, one of which at least hints at optimism. The most obvious one is the fall of Byzantium to the Turks and the extinction of the last embers of the Roman empire, by the last of the barbarian invasions. But is it the last? Gibbon in his ‘General Observations’ had invoked the notion of the revival of European civilization at the Renaissance. The other climax, in Chapter LXX, is the return, as promised, to the city of Rome, where we see the republican revival and the symbolic inauguration of the Renaissance by the coronation of Petrarch as poet laureate. It is a false dawn, however. Republicanism is crushed; the Renaissance itself was timidly imitative rather than a new beginning. Really to infuse his narrative with optimism Gibbon would have had to take it beyond the fifteenth century, to the eighteenth. Schematically and only in a survey, this is what he has done in the ‘General Observations’. If it

had stood, as originally intended, at the end of the entire work the optimistic trajectory would have been clear, for Gibbon's view of the Europe of his own day, until the outbreak of the French Revolution, is one of undiluted approval. The arts of life have been improved. The fatal uniformity of the Roman empire and the passivity it encouraged have been replaced by a beneficial fragmentation into a diversity of nation states and the energy generated by their rivalry. Under the auspices of the balance of power, Europe can be regarded as 'one great republic' (a significant word): tense, energetic, diverse, but also a partnership in the arts of peace. Civilization has not merely survived the fall of the Roman empire which had for so long been its chief home, but has improved itself. At the end of *The Decline and Fall* as we have it, something like this thought is at least obliquely alluded to. The ruins of the city, left by the decline and fall of the empire, which Gibbon referred to as 'the greatest, perhaps, and most awful scene, in the history of mankind', are now 'devoutly visited by a new race of pilgrims from the remote, and once savage, countries of the North' (LXXI). The pilgrims are civilized or they would not be devout, and their savage past is far behind them. Rome's fall can be contemplated as from a balcony, as an eighteenth-century connoisseur of the Sublime might enjoy its terrors from a secure distance. Gibbon's history is such a balcony, and is therefore part of the victory of civilization in surviving the fall of Rome.

It is useless to look, in Britain at least, for Gibbon's immediate successors. There are none. In France and the United States (below, pp. 429-31, 452) matters were different. The great Anglophile nineteenth-century French historian François Guizot annotated and translated Gibbon's work. In America, Gibbon was revered by the outstanding historians Prescott, Parkman and Henry Adams. But in England there was on the whole neglect and hostility. This is symptomatic of something wider. It is a fairly safe rule that any general Victorian pronouncement on the historical sense or the historiography of the eighteenth century will be dismissive, ignorant and distorting. The mentality of that century which, more than any other, has established the categories of the modern understanding of the history of Europe is habitually characterized in nineteenth-century England as

'unhistorical'. The reasons for this nonsense would make a good subject for the history of ideas. One has the impression that, having been so categorized, the eighteenth-century historians were little read. Denigrating clichés were passed unexamined from pen to pen, even among serious scholars. Leslie Stephen's pioneering *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) was notably deficient in appreciation of the period's historical writing. One can still hear echoes of this denigration; it is time they died away.

Partly it seems to derive from taking as representative of the eighteenth century the expressions of hostility to history that Gibbon tried to answer in his *Essay*. Partly it seems to derive from an unsubtle reading, as in the case of some ancient historians, of affirmations of the existence of a common human nature, ignoring the fact that these were often followed by reminders of the very different forms this nature could assume under different historical circumstances. One relevant consideration is surely the cultural fault line created by the French Revolution, which made some eighteenth-century pronouncements seem complacent and which retrospectively, in England, tainted the whole French Enlightenment. (The Scottish Enlightenment, as a concept, was of course established only in the later twentieth century.) Voltaire, rather than Montesquieu, though criticized by Robertson and Gibbon as unscholarly and superficial, was taken as epitomizing the age. In the nineteenth century, too, the categories of 'race' and 'nation' were reified and taken with extreme seriousness as bearers of precise and indelible qualities; eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism such as one finds in Hume and Gibbon could be regarded as more evidence of superficiality, whereas we would be inclined to see a sensible scepticism. Against Gibbon, too, as a notorious scoffer and sneerer, stood Christian earnestness. So, for that matter, did agnostic earnestness. The Victorians, as Nietzsche noted, expected critics of Christianity to go about their business with a proper solemnity. It was axiomatic for most that the Catholic Church was wrong. That it might also be funny was a thought not entertained. The literary appreciation of Gibbon in Britain had to wait for Lytton Strachey and Winston Churchill (an odd couple), both of whom admired and in different ways imitated him in the early twentieth century. In the world of scholarship Gibbon's revenge has been comprehensive, and he is now

securely installed in the historians' pantheon. This is caught by the phrase used of himself and his colleagues by the outstanding contemporary historian of 'Late Antiquity' – a concept we largely owe to him – Peter Brown: 'In Gibbon's Shade'.



## Revolutions: England and France

### *Macaulay: The Glorious Revolution*

Interest in England's seventeenth-century constitutional crisis, which had been central to English historiography in the eighteenth century, remained so in the nineteenth. It is true that the later period saw an awakened appreciation of the medieval in cultural contexts, and that the Saxons, partly owing to the sponsorship of Sir Walter Scott, enjoyed a renewed popularity. Towards the end of the century, too, imperialist enthusiasm prompted something of a cult of the age of Elizabeth. But the conflicts of Cavaliers and Roundheads continued to provide political reference points, and inspired a popular iconography. Foreign historians were also drawn to them. Two of the greatest nineteenth-century historians, François Guizot and Leopold von Ranke, wrote on the English Civil War period. In England, two of the leading proponents of a new professionalization in the study of history, Samuel Gardiner and Sir Charles Firth, devoted themselves to setting the seventeenth-century record straight and correcting the errors of their unprofessional predecessors. By far the most popular of these historical accounts, from the mid-century onward, when the *History of England from the Accession of James II* was published (1848–61), was by a Whig Member of Parliament and minister and retired Anglo-Indian official, Thomas Babington (Lord) Macaulay (1800–59).

Macaulay's *History*, which ends with the death of William III in 1702, is centred on the 'second' seventeenth-century revolution, the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, by which the Catholic and allegedly tyrannical James II had been overthrown and the crown conferred on

William of Orange and his wife, James's daughter Mary. In the early nineteenth century three Whig politicians, including a subsequent prime minister, had written histories of this Revolution: Charles James Fox, Lord John Russell and Sir James Mackintosh (who bequeathed Macaulay a valuable collection of documents, particularly strong in the pamphlet literature of the period). It was not a surprising interest. Parliamentary reform became the Whig policy in Opposition, leading to the Reform Act of 1832; the constitution to be reformed was that established by the Revolution in 1688 and its confirming legislation, which some regarded as definitive for all time. The Revolution had to be resituated in the Whig canon. It had to be a matter of separating the spirit from the letter. The best way of respecting the achievement of the men of 1688, according to reformers, was not to enshrine their work in constitutional marble, but to do as they had done and make the constitutional adjustments necessary to meet new circumstances. The necessary resituating was the task that Macaulay, drawing on the work of the Whig constitutional historian Henry Hallam, carried through to extraordinary popular acclaim, for where Hallam was dry Macaulay was vivid, dramatic, eloquent and exhilarating.

Two contemporary events helped to shape Macaulay's *History*. One was the 1832 Reform Act. In supporting it, Macaulay, as a Whig parliamentary spokesman, scored a spectacular oratorical success. Macaulay's speeches on the Reform Bill still resound on the page. They have an irresistible brio, and they are informed throughout by a sense of history. Macaulay compares the crisis of his times to that confronting Charles I and the Long Parliament, and his diagnosis is essentially the same as Hume's:

[Charles] would govern, I do not say ill, I do not say tyrannically; I only say this: he would govern the men of the seventeenth century as if they had been the men of the sixteenth century; and therefore it was, that all his talents and all his virtues did not save him from unpopularity, from civil war, from a prison, from a bar, from a scaffold. These things are written for our instruction. Another great intellectual revolution has taken place; our lot has been cast on a time analogous, in many respects, to the time which immediately preceded the meeting of the Long Parliament. There is a change in society. There must be a corresponding change in the government.

The progress of society had created a large, newly prosperous and politically self-conscious class which must be admitted to the franchise and included in the political nation by constitutional change, or revolution would follow, as it had in seventeenth-century England, as it had in France. Macaulay's political convictions were suffused by history and by political reminiscence. He had a strong feeling for the great parliamentary occasions, and they always recalled for him those of the past. He saw contemporary political events as though they were already historical: writing to his sister, he compared being present at the crucial vote on the Reform Bill to seeing Caesar stabbed in the Forum or Cromwell taking the mace from the table of the House of Commons when he expelled the Members and inaugurated his personal rule.

The second, recent, event by which Macaulay's mind and political ideas were decisively shaped was the French Revolution of 1848. The publication of his *History* had been immediately preceded by the wave of revolutions which spread all over Europe in 1848, and he alluded to them as a dire warning, but also as a contrast to the English 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, which formed the centrepiece of his *History*. England had remained tranquil when, as he wrote in his preface, 'the proudest capitals of Western Europe have streamed with civil blood.' Macaulay had no doubt that it was the 'preservative' Revolution of 1688 and the timely and peaceful passage of the Reform Act of 1832 which had saved England from the revolutions experienced on the Continent, above all in France. The connection in Macaulay's mind between 1688 and 1832, 'between the Revolution which brought the crown into harmony with the Parliament, and the Revolution which brought the Parliament into harmony with the nation', would have been clearer had his *History* run its planned course up to 1832, instead of finishing, because of its author's death, at the beginning of the eighteenth century. As it is, we have some inkling of what the eighteenth-century volumes might have been like in the published collections of his essays, including those on eighteenth-century statesmen.

Reconciliation is a recurring theme of the *History* itself. Its hero is William of Orange, the Deliverer, who, James having fled, presides over the restoration of order and liberty. But the nation, though

corrupted by the reigns of the last two Stuart kings, is also an accomplice in its own deliverance, not only through the lords who risk their necks in summoning William, but in the stiffening of constitutional and Protestant resolve in the later stages of James's reign. There is, in Macaulay's account, a rallying in defence of law and liberty and in resistance to James's arbitrariness which foreshadows the moment of (temporary) near-unity in the Revolution itself, when, the King having fled and the Prince of Orange not yet having taken control, Whigs and Tories momentarily sink their differences in defence of law and order and in an impressive show of unity by the respectable part of the nation.

It is natural to take the essay Macaulay wrote on 'History' in 1828 as his definitive statement on the historian's task. This can be misleading as a guide to his achievement. It is sometimes taken as a call for 'social history' (a promise fulfilled only in one chapter (III) of the *History*), as well as for historians to take lessons from the techniques developed in the novel, and especially by Scott. History should discard some of its dignity and descend into the common haunts of men, the exchange and the coffee house. How steep a descent this indicated is open to question: one can go a good deal lower and wider than either of these. Macaulay may have thought he was fulfilling his prescription by his frequent attempts, like Hume's, to summarize the state of public opinion. He certainly succeeded in imparting to historical narrative an unprecedented vividness and dramatic and emotional intensity, for which he saw Scott as a model, but he was not a 'social historian'. His *History* remained chiefly focused on royal policies, parliamentary debates and state trials, and the appraisal of the intentions and qualities of public men.

Macaulay himself was born, not indeed into the Whig aristocracy where he found his early patrons, but into the comfortable middle class, and also in an atmosphere of great public causes. His father, Zachary, was a leading member of the Anti-Slavery League. At Cambridge in the early 1820s Macaulay shone as a debater, shedding the family Toryism and evangelical Christianity. He became an advanced Whig and reformer, but never a Radical. After winning a reputation as a reviewer and essayist and after his success in Parliament, he went in the 1830s to a lucrative post in India, from which he returned with

an independent income. He later returned to Parliament and became a minister, but the last part of his life was really devoted to his *History*.

He can, in fact, be seen as in many ways the last great neoclassical historian, writing history after a successful public career. His own culture was above all classical, broadened by a love of eighteenth-century novels and drama, as well as by his reading of Burke, whom he revered, and Scott. Where he was exceptional was not in being a social historian, which he certainly was not, but in the emotional range and depth, the almost pictorial vividness and concreteness, and the dramatic intensity of his historical writing. None of this was exactly new – it was foreshadowed in Robertson and Hume – but in no other historian was it so copiously and even extravagantly displayed. His own model historians were Tacitus and Thucydides, but he had an enduring distaste for Plutarch, on whom he wrote an early essay, and for the tradition of heroic – Macaulay would say posturing – classical republicanism which looked back to him, in late seventeenth-century England and above all in the French Revolution. He was not unmitigatedly hostile to the latter, thinking it productive of good in the long run, but he detested its strain of Plutarchian demagoguery.

Though the Scottish Enlightenment did much to shape his view of the progress of society, he was a modern English Whig who (unlike Hume) cherished the pieties of his political tradition with an eloquence unique except in the work of Burke. In the essay on Plutarch, noting the political rootlessness of his French admirers, he wrote that 'Senate has not to our ears a sound so venerable as Parliament. We respect the Great Charter more than the laws of Solon. The Capitol and the Forum impress us with less awe than our own Westminster Hall and Westminster Abbey, the place where the great men of twenty generations have contended, the place where they sleep together.' Macaulay's frequent invocations of earlier English history are eirenic more than partisan. A typical example (in Chapter V of the *History*) is the reference to the chapel in the Tower of London where the remains of the Duke of Monmouth were interred after his unsuccessful rebellion and his execution in 1685, which Macaulay has described in detail:

The head and body were placed in a coffin covered in black velvet, and were laid privately under the communion table of St Peter's Chapel in the Tower. Within four years the pavement of the Chancel was again disturbed, and hard by the remains of Monmouth were laid the remains of [Judge] Jeffreys. In truth there is no sadder spot on the earth than that little cemetery. Death is there associated not, as in Westminster Abbey and St Paul's, with genius and virtue, with public veneration and with imperishable renown; not, as in our humbler churches and churchyards, with everything that is most endearing in social and domestic charities; but with whatever is darkest in human nature and in human destiny, with the savage triumph of implacable enemies, with the inconstancy, the ingratitude, the cowardice of friends, with all the miseries of fallen greatness and of blighted fame.

Examples follow of the disgraced and inglorious dead.

This was a melancholy set piece, but Macaulay was a high-spirited man who responded to glitter, energy and bustle, without qualms. One example occurs in James's reign with the King's attempt to overawe the capital with a military camp at Hounslow. Civil society is too much for his coercive intentions:

The Londoners saw this great force assembled in their neighbourhood with a terror which familiarity soon diminished. A visit to Hounslow became their favourite amusement on holidays. The camp presented the appearance of a vast fair. Mingled with the musketeers and dragoons, a multitude of fine gentlemen and ladies from Soho Square, sharpers and painted women from Whitefriars, invalids in sedans, monks in hoods and gowns, lacqueys in rich liveries, pedlars, orange girls, mischievous apprentices and gaping clowns, was constantly passing and repassing through the lower lines of tents. From some pavilions were heard the noises of drunken revelry, from others the curses of gamblers. In truth the place was merely a gay suburb of the capital. (VI)

It is a Hogarthian scene, or, if we look for a mid-Victorian parallel, one like Frith's *Derby Day*, full of animation, variety and small vignettes. But there is a significance too, though Macaulay's conscious awareness of it is perhaps not certain. It is a kind of parody of a familiar topos from the stern classical republican tradition: the army suborned and corrupted by the luxury of the capital (above, p. 139).

But Macaulay, though perhaps not used to hailing painted women as agents of the unintended benefit of constitutional liberty, approved of luxury, the fruit of peaceful industry and commerce. The army is not so much corrupted as reabsorbed by the civil society which James had hoped to use it to coerce, assimilated to the nation socially if not yet constitutionally.

The pictorial quality of Macaulay's narratives could also be given a more domestic or melodramatic tone, evoking pity and intimacy. There is, for example, his account of the flight of James's queen from Whitehall by river. James entrusts her and her baby to two French gentlemen:

Lauzun gave his hand to Mary; Saint Victor wrapped up in his warm cloak the ill-fated heir of so many kings. The party stole down the back stairs and embarked in an open skiff. It was a miserable voyage. The night was bleak; the rain fell; the wind roared; the waves were rough; at length the boat reached Lambeth; and the fugitives landed near an inn, where a coach and horses were waiting. Some time elapsed before the horses could be harnessed. Mary, afraid that her face might be known, would not enter the house. She remained with her child, cowering for shelter from the storm under the tower of Lambeth Church, and distracted by terror whenever the ostler approached her with his lanthorn. (IX)

It is a perfect Victorian genre scene of 'Beauty in Distress', shaped by the heritage of eighteenth-century 'sentimentalism': the wild night, the open boat and the heaving dark river; the young woman with her child, cowering for shelter beneath the dark tower of the church, shrinking from the ostler's lantern, the source of light in the picture.

The two rebellions – the abortive one by Monmouth and the successful invasion by William three years later – provide, of course, other pictorial and dramatic opportunities. For Macaulay the crushing of the Monmouth rebellion was the end of the ranting, fanatical aspects of radical Whiggism, republicanism and Puritanism, as well as a tragedy for the Protestant peasantry of the West Country who supported it. Its worst aspect was epitomized in the old intriguer Robert Ferguson, who drafted Monmouth's justificatory declaration. Macaulay's character study is as vehement as his often were:

Violent, malignant, regardless of truth, insensible to shame, insatiable of notoriety, delighting in intrigue, in tumult, in mischief for its own sake, he toiled during many years in the darkest mines of faction. He lived among libellers and false witnesses. He was the keeper of a secret purse from which agents too vile to be acknowledged received hire, and the director of a secret press whence pamphlets, bearing no name, were daily issued. (V)

In 1688 Ferguson attempts to join William's expedition, but is cold-shouldered. Macaulay uses him to make the contrast between William's enterprise and Monmouth's earlier one: 'He had been a great man in the knot of ignorant and hotheaded outlaws who had urged the feeble Monmouth to destruction: but there was no place for a lowminded agitator, half maniac and half knave, among the grave statesmen and generals who partook the cares of the resolute and sagacious William' (IX).

Monmouth's rebellion had been an amateur affair. It was part of Macaulay's distaste for classical republicanism and its revival from the Renaissance onward that he despised its cult of the citizen army as anachronistic in an age of commerce and specialization. He sometimes refers to the armed West Country peasantry as 'clowns'; they were no match for James's professional army. As a follower of the Scottish Enlightenment and a Victorian patriot, Macaulay could be enthusiastic about professional armies – in the right cause and properly subjected to civilian authority. Robertson would have agreed (above, p. 351). Macaulay uses the parade of William's troops through Exeter, the first city to fall to him, further to underline the contrast with Monmouth's pathetic rabble. In its stressed exoticism William's army recalls – and is quite probably meant to – the multi-ethnic composition of Xerxes' great host as reviewed by Herodotus (above, p. 15). Potentially barbaric and terrible, it is made benign, as well as effective, by discipline and by William's firm, controlling hand.

From the West Gate to the Cathedral Close, the pressing and the shouting on each side was such as reminded Londoners of the crowds on the Lord Mayor's day. The houses were gaily decorated. Doors, windows, balconies, and roofs were thronged with gazers . . . the people of Devonshire, altogether unused to the splendour of well ordered camps, were overwhelmed with delight and awe. Descriptions of the martial pageant were circulated all over



the kingdom. They contained much that was well fitted to gratify the vulgar appetite for the marvellous. For the Dutch army, composed of men who had been born in various climates, and had served under various standards, presented an aspect at once grotesque, gorgeous, and terrible to islanders who had, in general, a very indistinct notion of foreign countries. First rode Macclesfield at the head of two hundred gentlemen, mostly of English blood, glittering in helmets and cuirasses, and mounted on Flemish warhorses. Each was attended by a negro brought from the sugar plantations on the coast of Guinea. The citizens of Exeter, who had never seen so many specimens of the African race, gazed with wonder on those black faces set off by embroidered turbans and white feathers. Then, with drawn broadswords, came a squadron of Swedish horsemen in black armour and fur cloaks. They were regarded with a strange interest; for it was rumoured that they were natives of a land where the ocean was frozen and where the night lasted through half the year, and that they had themselves slain the huge bears whose skins they wore. (IX)

The last great scene of 1688 is provided by the debates on a constitutional settlement in the Convention Parliament, at which James was declared to have abdicated and, after much wrangling, the crown was offered to William and Mary jointly (X). Oratory is one of the great themes of Macaulay's history, though it is presented in summarized form, not ostensibly verbatim. He has a reverential sense for the great parliamentary occasion, and, as we have seen in his description of the passing of the Reform Act (above, p. 369), gives it additional solemnity by historical reminiscence and prospect. In describing the Convention Parliament he makes space to record the presence of William Sacheverell, 'an orator whose great parliamentary abilities were, many years later, a favourite theme of old men who lived to see the conflicts of Walpole and Pulteney'. House folklore is an aspect of enduring institutions, and it was especially cherished by Macaulay, who in this case was himself a member of the club.

The debates in the Convention Parliament are, of course, given full measure. Macaulay stresses how little they had to do with political philosophy, how much with English law and its stretching to an unprecedented situation: 'If it were a legal maxim that the throne could never be vacant, it was also a legal maxim that a living man

could have no heir. James was still living. How then could the Princess of Orange be his heir?' And so on. In 1828, in an essay on Hallam, Macaulay had deplored the petty-mindedness of the parliamentarians of 1688. Now, two French revolutions later, he endorsed their pragmatism. The declaration which gave the throne to William and Mary was illogical and contrary to fact, but it worked, and the settlement it created endured. By a benign fiction that no revolution had taken place, the work of the revolution, once done, continued to be ballasted by precedent. The account of the manner of the Parliament's deliberation is not just description for description's sake, as the subsequent words make clear. It is a lesson and an endorsement:

As our revolution was a vindication of ancient rights, so it was conducted with strict attention to ancient formalities. In almost every word and act may be discerned a profound reverence for the past. The Estates of the Realm deliberated in the old halls and according to the old rules . . . The sergeant with his mace brought up the messengers of the Lords to the table of the Commons; and the three obeisances were duly made. The conference was held with all the antique ceremonial. On the one side of the table, in the Painted Chamber, the managers of the Lords sate covered and robed in ermine and gold. The managers of the Commons stood bareheaded on the other side. The speeches presented an almost ludicrous contrast to the revolutionary oratory of every other country. Both the English parties agreed in treating with solemn respect the ancient constitutional traditions of the state. The only question was, in what sense those traditions were to be understood . . . When at length the dispute had been accommodated, the new sovereigns were proclaimed with the old pageantry . . . To us who have lived in the year 1848 it may seem almost an abuse of terms to call a proceeding, conducted . . . with such minute attention to prescriptive etiquette, by the terrible name of revolution. And yet this revolution, of all revolutions the least violent, has been of all revolutions the most beneficent . . .

One of Macaulay's contemporaries, Thomas Carlyle, had a puritanical contempt for all ceremonious shams and pretences, as well as a considerable contempt for Parliament. It is not surprising that he chose to become a historian of the French Revolution, which to him was the vengeance of history on outworn forms pretending still to be realities. His sensibility and Macaulay's, respectively puritanical and

Burkean Whig, represent two facets of the early nineteenth-century mind confronting history.

### *Carlyle's French Revolution: History with a Hundred Tongues*

Thomas Carlyle was born in 1795, the year that signalled the end of the French Revolution, though not, of course, of its effects: the Parisian rising against the new, moderate and corrupt government of the Directory was put down by the cannon commanded by 'Artillery Officer Buonaparte', as Carlyle calls him. It is the last episode in Carlyle's book on the Revolution, published over forty years later. To reach that point in the book leaves the assiduous reader with something of the same emotional exhaustion as must have been felt by the survivors of the Revolution, with all the ideals and most of the leading actors in the six years since 1789 dishonourably buried: 'The Notabilities of France disappear, one after one, like lights in a Theatre, which you are snuffing out' (Volume III, Book VI.III). Carlyle inimitably recognizes the shared fatigue: 'O Reader! Courage. I see land!'

Carlyle was born into a poor, Bible-reading, Calvinist family in south-west Scotland. He received a good education, both classical and scientific, at the University of Edinburgh: geology, chemistry and astronomy provided him with a stock of metaphors. Losing his Christianity while retaining a good deal of his Calvinism, he was unable to make a career as a minister of the Kirk, and had to establish himself as a man of letters, which led to his migration to London. He first displayed his highly individual literary idiom – biblical, Germanic, burlesque and hectoring – in his personal philosophical statement in *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4). *The French Revolution* (1837) was his great bid for literary recognition, and it succeeded. It was, among other things, like all his works in some way or other, an admonition. The Revolution was for him the advent of Democracy (always capitalized), terrible and sublime, in the modern world. It was a demonstration of divine justice, passed on a corrupt aristocracy which believed in nothing.

The Revolution had naturally encouraged apocalyptic speculation.

Carlyle was not, of course, a literal believer in the Christian Apocalypse, though he was a close friend of the millenarian preacher Edward Irving, but the imagery of apocalypse as conflagration and destruction always came readily to him, as we see in the extraordinary concluding page of the book (see above, p. 187) and in the account of the taking of the Bastille. The book was written in the early years of the liberal 'July Monarchy' in France, which was brought into being by a second revolution in 1830. In Britain there had been fears of revolution (not altogether extravagant) not only in the 1790s but in the period following the Napoleonic Wars and at the time of the campaign for the Reform Bill in the early 1830s. The decade in which Carlyle's history was written, the 1830s, saw the growth of Chartism, which aroused much apprehension and on which Carlyle wrote a long essay in 1839.

Carlyle responded to the French Revolution with a mixture of awe and complicity and grim enthusiasm, combined with horror and pity. He never really adjusted to the more tranquil period of the 1850s and '60s, which he viewed, with a kind of baffled impatience, as stagnation. The French Revolution, though he was condescending to its sentimentalities and appalled by its atrocities, appealed to his Old Testament and Calvinist sensibilities, as a divine scourging. Carlyle's ambivalence comes out most clearly in his treatment of what he calls 'Sansculottism' – fuelled by hunger and desperation, capable of heroism and atrocious cruelty. Carlyle at his most abstract – and he is rarely abstract for long – presented the Revolution as the clash of such personified abstractions: 'Sansculottism', 'Patriotism', 'Respectability', 'Philosophism', 'Clubbism'. But his rhetoric is often highly concrete, and these abstractions are sometimes given physical characteristics reminiscent of allegory; those of 'Sansculottism' (sometimes also personified as the poverty-stricken Parisian suburb of 'Saint-Antoine') are almost tangible: 'many-headed, fire-breathing'. The Paris mob is sometimes 'sooty Saint-Antoine', just as the courtiers are 'the Œil-de-Bœuf' (a salon of assembly in the palace of Versailles). In reintroducing characters – in a useful mnemonic but also a deliberate evocation of epic convention, for Carlyle saw the Revolution as epic – he tags them with a repeated adjective or phrase in Homeric fashion: 'Usher Maillard, Méry of the Thousand Orders' (said to have been

written by him in the Hôtel de Ville on the day of the fall of the Bastille), 'Old-Dragoon Drouet'. Marshal de Broglie, whom the court relies on vainly for a royalist military coup, is 'Mars', while the court usher, the Marquis de Brézé, is 'Mercury' (he carries messages), and several times the source of excellent but also symbolic comedy. It is he who carries to the National Assembly the King's command to disperse, which the Assembly defies with the Tennis Court oath. De Brézé, who also acts as a kind of doorkeeper, and stands for the *Ancien Régime* and etiquette, by which he lives, is trying to shut the door on world history (I.V.II). Brézé has his symbolic moment, but some of the most frequent, memorable and ominous reappearances are those of Jean-Paul Marat – to Carlyle 'horseleech' or 'sooty' Marat – who croaks his messages of hatred and at whose entrance, Carlyle says, the lamps in the room turn blue.

Marat, squalid and malevolent, is something like the evil genius of the Revolution, responsible for the massacres in the prisons in September 1792, but in embodying the hatreds and fanaticism of his Sanculottic followers, he has for Carlyle a kind of authenticity and power which the 'Anglomaniac' National Assembly and later the 'respectable' republican faction of the Girondins do not. The great men of the Revolution, Mirabeau and Danton, have this quality of authenticity or, in Carlyle's word, 'Reality', and even Marat, without any finer qualities, has it. Carlyle respected fanaticism. 'Reality', wherever found, is a kind of divine emanation, while frivolity and shams and theories are mere historical debris, to be shovelled away by men who are in earnest. He has no sympathy with middle-class, respectable constitutionalism – monarchist or republican – equating it with pedantry and legalism. The crowd scenes in the Revolution, which wind up his rhetoric to an extraordinary pitch of intensity and almost delirium, are for him sublime because spontaneous, whereas the commemoration of the fall of the Bastille on 14 July 1790, by an immense national festival and by oath-swearing on an 'altar of the fatherland', is sentimental play-acting because prearranged. Mobs, however, *are* authentic:

Your mob is a genuine outburst of Nature; issuing from, or communicating with, the deepest deep of Nature. When so much goes grinning and grimacing

as a lifeless Formality, and under the stiff buckram no heart can be felt beating, here once more, if nowhere else, is a Sincerity and Reality. Shudder at it; or even shriek over it, if thou must; nevertheless consider it. Such a Complex of human Forces and Individualities hurled forth, in their transcendental mood, to act and react, on circumstances and on one another; to work out what it is in them to work. The thing they will do is known to no man; least of all to themselves. It is the inflammablest immeasurable Fire-work, generating, consuming itself. With what phases, to what extent, with what result it will burn off, Philosophy and Perspicacity conjecture in vain. (I.VII.IV) \_

The French revolutionary mob is a portent, and the Revolution itself is still active in the world, 'the crowning Phenomenon of our Modern Time' and a lesson to Carlyle's contemporaries. Feudal aristocracy is everywhere being replaced by a moneybag aristocracy, but 'That there be no second Sansculottism in our Earth for a thousand years, let us understand well what the first was; and let Rich and Poor of us go and do *otherwise*' (III.VII.VI). The French Revolution is both the epic of Democracy and an admonition.

It must be apparent by now that Carlyle is no ordinary historian. John Stuart Mill called him a poet, though it is worth remembering that Lord Acton, not a man to underrate the historian's responsibilities, paid tribute to Carlyle's book as 'the volumes that delivered our fathers from thralldom to Burke'. The book is slow to start, and the reader has to use the early books, dealing with the *Ancien Régime*, to get used to Carlyle's peculiar authorial manners and his experiments with diction and syntax, the frequent vocatives addressed to both the reader and the historical characters, and the occasional use of Gallicisms to convey the flavour of a translation (e.g. 'there to consider himself'). A decadent society on the verge of extinction is depicted through a kind of collage of symbolic vignettes, held together by a rumbling, Calvinistic authorial sermon. There is an occasional welcome touch of grotesque humour or bathos. The colourful dresses at a kind of *fête champêtre* to watch a balloon ascent (the chapter is significantly entitled 'Windbags') are like banks of flowers, so, by a piece of surreal logic, the coaches in which their wearers sit are flowerpots:

Manifold, bright-tinted, glittering with gold; all through the Bois de Boulogne, in longdrawn variegated rows; – like longdrawn living flower-borders, tulips, dahlias, lilies of the valley; all in their moving flower-pots (of new-gilt carriages): pleasure of the eye, and pride of life! So rolls and dances the Procession: steady, of firm assurance, as if it rolled on adamant and the foundations of the world; not on mere heraldic parchment, – under which smoulders a lake of fire. Dance on, ye foolish ones; ye sought not wisdom, neither have ye found it. Ye and your fathers have sown the wind, ye shall reap the whirlwind. Was it not from of old written: *The wages of sin is death?* (I.II.VI)

The narrative really picks up with the summoning of the Estates General to deal with the public bankruptcy (which Carlyle views with grim complacency), leading to the election of a National Assembly in which the nation's hopes become invested, and are, of course, doomed to disappointment. Carlyle, as a narrator of extraordinary idiosyncratic power, needs events, the more rapid and momentous the better, to give the reader his best.

One has to accept Carlyle as a historian, if at all, for what he is; it is no use expecting what he did not attempt to be: a lucid purveyor of linear narrative and careful analyses of cause and effect. These things can be found in the midst of Carlyle's accounts, but his stranger effects were entirely deliberate, made largely out of epic precedent, an Old Testament style of vision, a fierce pulpit manner, and an idiosyncratic cosmic view: a metaphysics made concrete through symbolism. The effect on narrative is a rapid cutting from individuals, often humble and seen only momentarily, and highly particular situations, rendered in full concrete circumstantiality, to cosmic and world-historical perspectives, with many intermediary points between.

Carlyle had meditated much on the writing of history, producing two essays on the subject, and to more penetrating effect than in Macaulay's parallel reflections. Carlyle's view and its effects on his chosen rhetorical strategies are summarized in two notable quotations: 'History is the essence of innumerable biographies' and 'Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*.' The former warns us to expect no restrictions imposed by 'the dignity of history'; the latter not to expect

straightforward chains of cause-and-effect explanation and accounts of the pursuit of considered, purposive politics. Everything in history is multiply determined; the actors scarcely see beyond their feet, and in every moment an immensity of different events is occurring, any of which may be significant. Our observations have to be successive though the things done were often simultaneous, and 'shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements.' Narrative, therefore, though it strive against its own linear nature, must try, as it were, to move sideways as well as forwards.

Carlyle's devices for bringing this about are essentially two: the selection of certain events, characters and actions as symbolic of larger realities, and extraordinarily innovative experiments in what may be called multi-voiced narrative, where the authorial voice, so often peremptory, intrusive and bullying, sometimes seems temporarily suspended in favour of a cacophony of other voices, of which he is the impresario, making a babble of catchphrases out of quotations from the newspapers, pamphlets, placards and memoirs he has consulted. This imagined babble in the midst of the revolutionary crowd, where Carlyle aims to place the reader – always, of course, in the present tense – is, to use his own term, combustible. A particular word or incident can ignite it into action and almost randomly determine its direction: to the Bastille, to Versailles, to the palace of the Tuileries, and hence to some of the central events of the Revolution. The combustibility is made up of hunger and hatred, suspicion and rumour. Suspicion, for example, of a royalist military coup, which leads to the storming of the Bastille. On 12 July

the streets are all placarded with an enormous-sized *De par le Roi*, 'inviting peaceable citizens to remain within doors', to feel no alarm, to gather in no crowd. Why so? What mean these 'placards of enormous size'? Above all, what means this clatter of military; dragoons, hussars, rattling in from all points of the compass towards the Place Louis Quinze . . .

Have the destroyers descended on us then? From the Bridge of Sèvres to utmost Vincennes, from Saint-Denis to the Champs-de-Mars, we are begirt! Alarm, of the rogue unknown, is in every heart . . . Are these troops verily come out 'against Brigands'? Where are the Brigands? What mystery is in the wind? – Hark! a human voice repeating articulately the Job's-news: *Necker*,



*People's Minister, Saviour of France*, is dismissed. Impossible; incredible! Treasonous to the public peace! . . . (I.V.IV)

Carlyle gives a similar preamble/explanation for the march to Versailles, involving the market women of Paris, which in the following October brings the royal family as virtual prisoners back to Paris and inaugurates the next act of the Revolution. There are rumours of a disloyal banquet held at Versailles to celebrate the arrival of a new regiment, where the nation has been insulted and its new tricolour cockade trampled underfoot:

Yes, here with us is famine; but yonder at Versailles is food; enough and to spare! . . . bloody-minded Aristocrats, heated with excess of high living, trample on the National Cockade. Can the atrocity be true? Nay, look: green uniforms faced with red; black cockades, – the colour of Night! Are we to have military onfall; and death also by starvation? . . .

In one of the Guardhouses of the Quartier Saint-Eustache, 'a young woman' seizes a drum, – for how shall National Guards give fire on women, on a young woman? The young woman seizes the drum; sets forth beating it, 'uttering cries relative to the dearth of grains'. Descend, O mothers; descend ye Judiths, to food and revenge! – All women gather and go; crowds storm all stairs, force out all women: the female Insurrectionary Force, according to Camille [Desmoulins] resembles the English Naval one; there is a universal 'Press of women'. Robust Dames of the Halle, slim Mantua-makers, assiduous, risen with the dawn; ancient Virginity tripping to matins; the Housemaid, with early broom; all must go. Rouse ye, O women; the laggard men will not act; they say, we ourselves may act!

And so, like snowbreak from the mountains, for every staircase is a melted brook, it storms . . . (I.VII.III–IV)

The idiom here, of course, is that of epic, but the narrative technique is also an interpretation, right or wrong.

Interpretations of the French Revolution began almost as early as the Revolution itself. Conspiracy was the initially preferred explanation, attributed first to manipulation, using his vast wealth, by the radical head of the younger branch of the royal house, Philippe, duc d'Orléans, who later adopted the name Philippe Egalité and voted for the death of Louis XVI. In the later 1790s the French Catholic exiles,

notably the Abbé Barruel, produced a rival conspiratorial version which attributed the Revolution to the Freemasons. In Britain, explanations in terms of 'deeper' causes, particularly economic, soon replaced these early versions, but the conspiratorial view had life in it, at least at the popular level, for a long time. An example is Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which is sometimes cited as a case of Carlyle's influence. This may be true of the crowd scenes, but in their interpretations of the Revolution the two authors diverged widely. Dickens dwells on an entirely imaginary network of plotters, organized as a secret society, with mysterious signs and passwords for mutual recognition; this reflects conditions in Europe in the mid nineteenth century, particularly in Italy and France, but has nothing to do with either the actual French Revolution or Carlyle. Carlyle presents the French as stumbling from phase to phase of the Revolution, without clear intention, driven by events, by suspicion and fear, as well as by idealism and fanaticism, and arriving where no one had intended or foreseen. Carlyle's originality consisted most of all in the ways he dramatizes this view and enacts it before the reader's eyes – and ears, for one imagines Carlyle's narrator, as he invites one to do, as a heard voice.

The kind of voice it was can be sharply appreciated by the contrast with Macaulay, whose own mode of address was often oratorical. Take, for example, Macaulay's account of what he sees as the moment when the Revolution of 1688 might have descended into anarchy, with William not crowned, the army disbanded, James in flight, and the anti-Popish mob in full cry:

It was a terrible moment. The king was gone. The prince had not yet arrived. No regency had been appointed. The great seal, essential to the administration of ordinary justice, had disappeared. It was soon known that Feversham had, on receipt of the royal order, instantly disbanded his forces. What respect for law or property was likely to be found among soldiers, armed and congregated, emancipated from the restraints of discipline, and destitute of the necessities of life? On the other hand, the populace of London had, during some weeks, shown a strong disposition to turbulence and rapine. The urgency of the crisis united for a short time all who had any interest in the peace of society. (*History*, X)

It is a situation report from the historian, but the manner, in diction and the measured ordering of the sentences, is also the parliamentary manner. By converting the verbs to the present tense, and inserting 'Mr Speaker' or 'My Lords' at intervals, it is easy to imagine it as delivered by a minister to Parliament (not then sitting). 'My Lords, the king is gone. The prince is not yet arrived. The Great Seal has disappeared. We understand that Lord Feversham, on receipt of an order from His Majesty, has . . .' etc. The voice, whosoever's it is, is in control, and so, the reader infers, is the institution for which it stands. There is nothing like Carlyle's tormented, fractured syntax, just as there is no voice with this kind of authority in Carlyle's *French Revolution*. In England we understand from Macaulay that Rationality and Respectability, however much under stress, are ultimately in control and will win. In Carlyle there is no such reassurance on behalf of either.

Both Macaulay and Carlyle stood at the apex of a long movement, from the eighteenth century, before austere professionalism spoiled the game, to render history for the reader in its full sensuous and emotional immediacy and circumstantiality. But their perspectives are different. The emotions in which Macaulay mainly involves the reader are parliamentary ones, or at least could have been expressed in Parliament – and none the worse for that. Carlyle said that the great element missing from our attempted entry into the past is Fear; he set himself to re-enact it, and succeeded extraordinarily well. His syntax is designed to embody a distracted groping for certainties in a fog of rumour and of events at best only half-understood, in moods of acute anxiety, rage and sometimes dangerous exaltation.

Carlyle's effects to this end were not to be exceeded until the twentieth century and in a different medium. To read Carlyle now is to be reminded of Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic technique in the handling of crowd scenes in another revolution, with the camera panning in and out from the most highly individualized close-up moments to the widest perspectives. Very Eisensteinian, as it were, is not only the intimacy Carlyle achieves but also the sudden shifts of perspective, so that we see the crowd as though from a camera high above, as a river to which each doorway and staircase is a tributary. Another such sudden shift, this time to a cosmic perspective, is achieved by a

focusing, very cinematic in anticipation, on an indifferent non-human witness. As the siege rages, 'the great Bastille clock ticks (inaudible) in its Inner Court there, at its ease, hour after hour; as if nothing special, for it or the world, were passing' (I.V.VI). It is part of the infinity of simultaneous events in history, which are also events in infinite space and time. On the evening the Bastille is taken the July sun falls 'on reapers amid peaceful woody fields; on old women spinning in cottages; on ships far out in the silent main; on Balls at the Orangerie of Versailles, where high-rouged Dames of the Palace are even now dancing with double-jacketed Hussar-Officers' (I.V.VII). World history itself is dwarfed by the omnipresence and persistence of the repetitions of daily life and the enduring natural world. The peasant in Breughel's picture who ploughs his field while a distant Icarus falls from the sky is a very Carlylean emblem. At the height of the Terror in Paris twenty-three theatres play nightly and sixty assembly rooms for dancing are open: 'In startling transitions, in colours all intensified, the sublime, the ludicrous, the horrible succeed one another; or rather, in crowding tumult, accompany one another.' The historian, he says, would be glad of a hundred tongues. Lacking them, he must snatch for the reader 'this or the other significant glimpse of things, in the fittest sequence we can' (III.V.I).

In contrast to Macaulay, Carlyle sometimes excuses himself from attending the tedious sessions of the National Convention, making its irrelevant constitution. He visits it, for preference, only in the moments when parliamentary decorum breaks down and the Convention becomes itself a kind of mob – as when the women from Paris, wet, bedraggled, famished and angry, break into its orderly session in Versailles and the President has to order in food for them from neighbouring cookshops, which Carlyle greets, after many allusions, with a genuine Homeric quotation: 'nor did any soul lack a fair share of victual': loaves, wine and 'great store of sausages' (I.VII.VIII). Sausages do not generally appear in national assemblies, nor in history. For Carlyle the Insurrection of Women was both burlesque and sublime. The confrontation of the desire for a constitution with the desire for sausages was an encapsulation of much that the Revolution was about. Always the mundane, the quotidian and the domestic reassert themselves, and Carlyle is as complicit with them as he is roused to

celebration of the world-historical moment. Even then, in the epic of Democracy, the heroes are of course ordinary men: 'On then, all Frenchmen that have hearts in their bodies. Roar with all your throats of cartilage and metal, ye Sons of Liberty; stir spasmodically whatever of utmost faculty is in you, soul, body or spirit; for it is the hour! Smite, thou Louis Tournay, cartwright of the Marais, old-soldier of the Regiment Dauphiné; smite at that Outer Drawbridge chain . . .' (I.V.VI). The main inspiration, it is clear, is Homer; the rhapsodic attempt to render the multitudinous, and the vast energy of the mass, hint for the modern reader also at Walt Whitman.

Carlyle's use of bathos is not only funny but humanizes his narrative, which is not, of course, always at full stretch. When the Goddess of Reason, having been worshipped on the altar, returns home, 'ungoddessed', to her husband, what do we imagine they talk about that evening over supper? It is a question one can imagine no other historian asking, then or perhaps since, and for it one can forgive him much pulpit rhetoric – and has to. History, we are vividly reminded, is the essence of innumerable biographies. Bathos occurs too in the account of the defence of the frontiers by the revolutionary armies, which was for Carlyle another epic of the Revolution. The threat of the invasion by the reactionary powers rouses him to the same helter-skelter mimetic narrative as the storming of the Bastille or the march to Versailles, the rapid concatenation of names and nouns matching the urgency of the hour:

Does not the Coalition, like a fire-tide, pour in; Prussia through the opened North-East; Austria, England through the North-West? . . . On Toulon Arsenal there flies a flag, – nay, not even the Fleur-de-lys of a Louis Pretender; there flies that accursed St. George's Cross of the English and Admiral Hood . . . Beleaguer it, bombard it, ye Commissioners Barras, Fréron, Robespierre Junior; thou General Cartaux, General Dugommier; above all, thou remarkable Artillery-Major, Napoleon Buonaparte! (III.IV.V)

But there is pathos as well as comic bathos in the expostulation of the municipality of Verdun, known for its *pâtisserie*, at finding itself reluctantly implicated in world history and expected to be heroic: 'Resist him [the Duke of Brunswick] to the death? Every day of retardation precious? How, O General Beaurepaire (asks the amazed

Municipality) shall we resist him? . . . Retardation, Patriotism is good; but so likewise is peaceable baking of pastry and sleeping in whole skin' (III.I.III). Verdun, ironically in view of its later status as an icon of resistance, capitulates tamely.

Carlyle, to the modern reader, is a paradox, an extraordinary compound of the archaic, or, worse, the deeply unfashionable, and elements we think of as distinctly modern. Swift and Rabelais before him suggest parallels, as does Whitman after. Carlyle's classmates nicknamed him 'the Dean' in recognition of a Swiftian quality. Relations to earlier historiography are harder to see, though Carlyle greatly admired Schiller and came towards the end of a long period of erosion of the idea of the dignity of history. Carlyle has much time for the sublime, none for dignity. It is not surprising that the classical republican historians make no figure in his work, despite the French revolutionaries' devotion to them. The chief borrowing is, rather surprisingly, from Florence: Carlyle a number of times employs the *carroccio* (above, p. 281) as an image of a symbolic rallying point. For the rest, no humanist he, or *philosophe*, but an Old Testament-nurtured Puritan, at home with the mundane and the transcendental. Humorous, hectoring and at times almost frenzied, he found one guide to his monumental task in Homer's epic realism, and for the rest he went his own way. At his best – and he has more than one kind of best – his history and his prose have enormous imaginative energy, whose degenerations into bombast are the price the reader pays.

### *Michelet and Taine: The People and the Mob*

In France itself, the serious study of the French Revolution began in the 1820s and has never ceased. Interpretation of the Revolution was central to current political attitudes and conflicts throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. The political factions which fought, politically, polemically and sometimes violently, for their different versions of France found the Revolution an inescapable point of reference. The principle of hereditary monarchy continued to be upheld by those spoken of as Legitimists or Ultras (i.e. ultra-royalist) and prevailed during the Restoration of the Bourbon monarchy from 1814

to 1830. The liberal, junior, Orléans branch of the family ascended the throne in 1830 after the July Revolution of that year in the person of King Louis-Philippe, whose father had voted for the execution of his cousin Louis XVI. After the Revolution of 1848, this 'July Monarchy', which was supported by moderate liberal and generally Anglophile constitutionalists like the historian François Guizot (below, p. 405), who became minister of education and later leader of the government, was replaced by the Second Republic, in which class conflict soon produced a second, abortive, insurrection of the Parisian working class, whose leader, Louis Blanc, was himself a historian of the first French Revolution. As Karl Marx ironically noted, the overthrow of the Republic by Louis Napoleon, nephew of the Emperor, in 1851 recapitulated the supplanting of the first Republic by Napoleon. The Second Empire lasted until 1871, ending in military defeat by Prussia, followed by the violent suppression of the Paris Commune, whose methods had aroused vivid recollections of the revolutionary Terror of 1793-4. The Third Republic, liberal, anticlerical but mainly antisocialist, was led by another historian of the Revolution, Adolphe Thiers.

French nineteenth-century history often seemed engaged in recapitulating the different phases of the first Revolution: a partly revived *Ancien Régime*, a liberal-constitutionalist phase echoed in the July Monarchy, the establishment of a Republic, a revolutionary Terror focused on Paris, with Bonaparte always waiting in the wings. The historiography of the Revolution could thus hardly be other than heavily politically charged. All political factions could find historical correlatives for their political allegiances and fears in the events of 1789-97. The continued strife over the status and role, particularly in education, of the Catholic Church, which had been one of the early targets of the Revolution, would alone have kept the divisions which had opened up then in the forefront of politics. Anticlericalism was an article of faith for most republicans.

The political prominence of the past ensured also the prominence of historians. Guizot was an eminent liberal historian, though he did not write on the Revolution. Thiers published one of the earliest histories of the Revolution, in the 1820s, before going on to hold high office under the July Monarchy, when he became Guizot's rival. He

was eventually elected as the first president of the Third Republic, established in 1871. Another historian of the first Revolution, the poet Alphonse de Laustine, was one of the leaders of the Second Republic. Louis Blanc's substantial history of the Revolution has already been mentioned. Under the Third Republic, France's leading socialist, Jean Jaurès, produced a *Socialist History of the French Revolution*.

It was not uncommon in the nineteenth century for politicians to write history: as we have seen, in Britain, early in the century such prominent politicians as Charles James Fox, Sir James Mackintosh, Macaulay and a future prime minister, Lord John Russell, all wrote histories of the English revolution of 1688. In no case, however, was immediate political influence attributed to their histories. By the early nineteenth century, though there were nuances of interpretation, the 1688 Revolution had become in England a symbol of consensus. In the case of France, endorsement or denunciation of the leading actors of the Revolution – Mirabeau, the Girondins, Danton, Robespierre, the Commune of Paris and, for that matter, Bonaparte – immediately established one's contemporary political identity. The word 'Jacobin' itself fell out of contemporary political usage, presumably for lack of overt claimants, though the Jacobins were not without admirers, but the Revolution still provided symbols of allegiance and a political vocabulary, including 'Left' and 'Right', referring to the seating of the factions in the Chamber.

By general consensus the outstanding history of France of the first half, perhaps of the whole, of the nineteenth century is that of Jules Michelet, which eventually grew to twenty-three volumes (1833–67). Into it, out of chronological sequence, was interpolated his two-volume *History of the French Revolution* (1847–53). Though he did not take up a political career, Michelet's political commitment was unmistakable. His lectures at the Collège de France were suspended on the orders of Guizot, his patron and predecessor, now minister; this was a double irony, for Guizot's own lectures from the same chair had earlier been suspended by government order during the Restoration. Under the Second Empire Michelet lost his chair permanently, and the position in the National Archives that Guizot had procured for him, and retired into exile in Brittany, where he con-



tinued to work in local archives as well as writing his history and some other, highly idiosyncratic, works.

Before he came to the French Revolution he was known and admired for the medieval volumes of his *History of France*. All Michelet's work was deeply personal and emotional, but one early intellectual influence is noteworthy. In 1827 he translated the *New Science* (1725) of the early-eighteenth-century Neapolitan thinker Giambattista Vico. The extent of Vico's influence on the thought of late-eighteenth-century Germans, most notably Herder, with whom he has a lot in common, and who also impressed Michelet, has never been easy to trace, but Vico's influence on Michelet is clear. To Vico, culture was a collective product of whole peoples. Mythology, in particular, gave a key to the mentalities of 'the first peoples, who were everywhere naturally poets' (*New Science*, 352). Through it we can trace 'a history of the ideas, the customs and the deeds of mankind' (368), because they were 'the manner of thinking of entire peoples' (816). These, lacking the ability to form abstract concepts, expressed their ideas through personifications (209). Lacking the faculty of abstraction, they apprehended and felt particular perceptions all the more vividly, which explains their sublimely poetic mentality (819). In this way Vico establishes what were later to become almost a set of commonplaces, which were certainly subscribed to by Michelet, namely a set of antitheses not only between earlier and later times but between the popular and the educated mentality, in which the former is poetic and sensuous, the latter metaphysical and abstract. The populist Romanticism current in France in the 1830s and '40s, in which Michelet was immersed, was highly sympathetic to such ideas, but in his own case the influence of Vico was direct. *The History of France*, with its emphasis on the life, experiences, thoughts and sentiments of the French people, reads at times like a massive embodiment of Vico's ideas. Michelet's manners as a writer were, as we shall see, declamatory and exclamatory in the Romantic fashion, carried, as in Carlyle, to idiosyncratic extremes, in a way that is now highly unfashionable. But the ways in which his attention as a historian is focused, and his passion for imaginative re-creation – he called writing history 'resurrection' – find an echo in the interests of modern French historians.

In one respect Michelet's injunction to himself to bring about 'resurrection', and his interest in the popular mind, overrode other personal predilections. He was heir to the anticlericalism of the French Enlightenment and the Revolution, but the medieval volumes of his history were admired by the Catholic Right. His treatment of Joan of Arc – whom he regarded as incarnating the self-consciousness of France as a nation – was particularly acclaimed. Michelet's history was thickly textured as well as dramatic; he worked assiduously in the National Archives, to which his post there gave him easy access. He has been called 'the Victor Hugo of history'; Hippolyte Taine compared him with the painter Delacroix. His identification with France and its people was so close that he regarded the *History* as his spiritual autobiography: 'It is through personal sorrows that the historian feels and reproduces the sorrows of nations.' He rejoiced that in his vocation 'God has given me in History the means of participating in everything.'

It was his republican anticlericalism, however, particularly his hostility to the continuing influence of the Jesuits in French education, which turned him, prematurely in terms of his overall scheme for the *History*, to the French Revolution. He had also been exploring what he saw as his roots and resurrecting his own early life in a short monograph called *The People* (1846). In the dedicatory preface, to his friend Edgar Quinet, yet another historian of the Revolution, he celebrated his artisan origins. His father was an unsuccessful printer, exactly from the stratum from which the revolutionary crowds were chiefly recruited. Michelet had worked for him for a while, before the educational ladder created by the Revolution opened wider prospects to him. The paper wars of the Revolution were good for the business, but the Napoleonic censorship had been bad. Before writing on the recent and contemporary life of the People (we need to retain the upper case), Michelet had, as he explained, gone among them, talked, asked questions, and listened. But he also says he found his chief material in the reminiscences of his youth:

To know the life of the people, their toils and sufferings, I had but to interrogate my memory. For I too, my friend, have worked with my hands. The true name of modern man, that of *workman*, I am entitled to it in more

than one sense. Before I made books, I *composed* them literally. I arranged letters before I grasped ideas; and I am not ignorant of the dismalness of the workshop, and the wearisomeness of long hours.

In turning in 1847 to the Revolution, Michelet in his own view was entering into the People's greatest historical achievement. The People was the collective hero; for him, as for Carlyle, the Revolution was the epic of Democracy; individual political leaders were secondary and sometimes highly culpable, but the People as such could do no wrong: in the Revolution's 'benevolent period the whole people were the actors; in the period of cruelty only a few individuals'. In the first crisis of the Revolution, among the populace 'each one felt greatness in his breast from hour to hour'.

There are considerable similarities between Michelet and Carlyle, which make the differences instructive. They worked entirely independently, but were subject to some of the same cultural influences, and possessed some similarities of temperament. Both conceived of the task of the historian as being to re-create and re-enact, and both threw their authorial personalities into the action, apostrophizing and exhorting, in moods often of exaltation, almost of frenzy. Michelet said, 'I struggled physically with the clergy and the Terror.' Carlyle complained loudly of the nervous cost of writing history: for a believer in silent toil he could be vigorously plaintive. In speaking of the actions of the crowd, the French language offered Michelet the convenience of an impersonal pronoun. He often spoke of it as '*on*', thus avoiding both 'I' and 'they'; Carlyle sometimes used 'we'. Michelet, in speaking of himself as narrator, asserts his own presence: 'I was at the foot of the Bastille. I was raising on its tower the immortal flag.' Both authors were conscious of straining against the limitations of language. Carlyle, as we have seen, wished the historian had a hundred tongues, while Michelet yearned for 'a new language, the language of a serious, loving Rabelais'. They were, predictably, drawn to the same metaphors. Both spoke with abhorrence of the 'mechanical', which stood for the abstract and soulless. Both invoked volcanoes, and spoke of the making of the new revolutionary world as 'fermentation'. Michelet calls on both images in his description of Danton – whom both he and Carlyle admired with qualifications – and of Danton's club, the

Cordeliers, the rival to the Jacobin Club. We have to see the Cordeliers, Michelet says, 'bubbling and fermenting together in their night sessions in the base of their Etna'. Danton, his face ravaged by the pox, is hideous but sublime: 'This almost eyeless face seems a volcano without a crater – volcano of mud and fire, within whose closed forge one hears the conflicts of nature.' Mud and fire were also Carlyle's two most frequently invoked elements. Without precise recollection, and allowing for translation, the most expert reader could be deceived about which author was responsible for the above quotation.

Both, again, were susceptible to the apocalyptic, but here the differences begin to surface. Michelet's visions are sweeter; there may be a trace of his reading of the medieval mystical philosopher of history Joachim of Flores (above, p. 186), for whom the third age of the world was to be one of freedom, love and harmony. Carlyle's apocalypses were made of sterner, Hebraic stuff: scouring, retributive conflagrations. Carlyle's sensibility was Protestant and Judaic, while Michelet was touched by Indian mysticism. He would never have spoken of God, as Carlyle did, as 'the almighty Taskmaster'. Nature, for Michelet, came to acquire a pantheistic hue. Although, under the influence of German metaphysics, Carlyle was also fond of speaking of the interconnectedness of all things, he, like Karl Marx, conceived of physical nature as something for man to struggle with and wrest his subsistence from.

We have space for only two specific comparisons of Carlyle's and Michelet's respective treatments of key episodes of the Revolution. The first episode is the loyalist banquet at Versailles to welcome a new, royalist, regiment's officers, rumours of which fed revolutionary indignation and fears of counter-revolution in Paris, leading to the march, led by the market women, to Versailles to bring the royal family back to the capital. Carlyle's treatment is uncharacteristically bluff, almost amused. Young men get drunk, brag, say and do foolish things:

Suppose champagne flowing; with pot-valorous speech, with instrumental music, empty feathered heads growing ever the noisier, in their own emptiness, in each other's noise! Her Majesty, who looks unusually sad to-night (His Majesty sitting dulled with the day's hunting), is told that the sight of it

would cheer her. Behold! She enters there, issuing from her State-rooms, like the Moon from clouds, this fairest, unhappy Queen of Hearts . . . Could featherheaded young ensigns do other than, by white Bourbon Cockades, handed them from fair fingers; by waving of swords, drawn to pledge the Queen's health; by trampling of National Cockades; by scaling the Boxes, whence intrusive murmurs may come; by vociferation, tripudiation [dancing in triumph], sound, fury and distraction, within doors and without, – testify what tempest-tost state of vacuity they are in? Till champagne and tripudiation do their work; and all lie silent, horizontal; passively slumbering. (I.VII.II)

Carlyle's comment is untypically indulgent: 'It was so natural, yet so unwise.'

Michelet takes the episode with deadly seriousness and a sense of outrage. The whole event, in his narration, is hectic, irrational and almost diabolic, as well as operatic. The officers are not only drunk but dazzled and disoriented when the King and Queen enter the royal theatre, 'where the boxes, lined with looking-glasses, reflect a blaze of light in every direction'. The officers tear off their revolutionary red-white-and-blue cockades, the new national emblem, and trample them underfoot. Michelet was always sensitive to symbolism, and employs it himself: in the *History of France* the English, in destroying Joan the Maid, 'thought they were deflowering France' (X). In Versailles

The music continued, ever more impassioned and ardent; it played the Marche des Hulans, and sounded the charge. They all leaped to their feet, looking around for the enemy to appear; for want of adversaries they scaled the boxes, rushed out into the *Cour de Marbre* . . . The frenzy of that moral orgy seemed to infect the whole court. (II.vii)

The differences appear most sharply, however, in Michelet's treatment of the first 'Festival of the Federation', on the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, 14 July 1790. Carlyle's version is above all ironic: the professions of universal goodwill are shortly to give way to massacre and the guillotine. But, in any case, humankind cannot sustain very much fraternity. Though he acknowledges that the Federation movement began spontaneously in the provinces and aroused popular

enthusiasm all over France, he treats it as a kind of contagious intoxication and the greatest of the festivals, on the Champs de Mars in Paris, as manifestly artificial and stage-managed, which of course it was. To Carlyle its gospel was merely sentimental: he had, as we have seen, a Presbyterian sourness towards ritual, though he could be indulgent to spontaneous violence (as in the Scottish Reformation). But for Michelet the Federation is the high point of his history and in French national consciousness, pointing the way to a better future. He said that writing about it marked one of the great moments of his life. His description has an ominous element: at the sacramental moment, the swearing of the oath of fraternity, the surly demeanour of the royal family strikes a jarring note. But irony is almost absent, though he goes on to mourn over the contrasting future. The moment of the Federation was 'the holy epoch in which the entire nation marched under one fraternal banner'. He compares the marches to Paris by the participants from all over France to the Crusades: 'What Jerusalem attracts thus a whole nation? . . . the Jerusalem of hearts, the holy unity of Fraternity, the great living city made of men . . .'; its name is *patrie*. At the oath-swearing in the Champs de Mars

The plain is suddenly shaken by the report of forty pieces of cannon. At that clap of thunder, all rise and stretch forth their hands to heaven . . . O King! O People! pause . . . Heaven is listening and the sun is breaking expressly through the cloud . . . Attend to your oaths! Oh! how heartily the people swear! How credulous they still are! . . . But why does the King not grant them the happiness of seeing him swear at the altar? Why does he swear under cover, in the shade, and half-concealed from the people? . . . For God's sake, sire, raise your hand so that all may see it. (III.xii)

Hippolyte Taine, a quarter of a century later, offered his own version of the Federation oath, and the Revolution itself, in his *History of the French Revolution*, which formed the second part of a longer work, *The Origins of Contemporary France* (1875-95). His account of the Revolution is in almost every respect the opposite of Michelet's. The contrast between the two invites being treated as archetypal. Lord Acton coupled them as two works reading which formed an epoch in the reader's life: 'No man feels the grandeur of the Revolution until

he reads Michelet, or the horror of it without reading Taine.' George Rudé, the chief modern analyst of the composition of the revolutionary crowd, spoke of historians, when referring to the crowd, as following the traditions established respectively by Michelet and Taine, and speaking of it accordingly as 'the people' or 'the mob'. Rudé is highly critical of Taine's use of documents to characterize the make-up of the crowd, but it is a kind of tribute that Rudé expounds his own version, three-quarters of a century later, mainly in the form of an argument with Taine. Taine's research had been thorough, if insufficiently critical of documents which supported his case, and his rhetoric has an enduring power to shock and alarm. Where Michelet saw the essence of the Revolution, the role of the People, as benign, fraternal and inspiring, and blamed for its horrors only those who rejected the fraternal embrace, for Taine the Revolution was from the outset a pathological social phenomenon. The people, in the form of the mob, released from normal restraints, was irrational, uncontrolled and highly dangerous. He wrote in the shadow of the Paris Commune of 1871, which had revived memories of the excesses – and for some the heroism – of the first Revolution, and it shows.

Taine saw the revolutionary leaders as similarly out of control, intoxicated by general ideas which inspired an overconfidence exacerbated by political inexperience. Virtually the only point in common in the attitudes of Michelet and Taine was that neither was at all disposed to idealize, as some had done, the Anglophile constitutional leadership, above all that of Mirabeau, in the first stage of the Revolution. But their reasons for this rejection were characteristically different. Michelet, a strongly Anglophobe republican, had no sympathy with constitutional monarchy and the *juste milieu*, while Taine denied that the Revolution had at any time been anything but recklessly utopian. In particular, Taine argued, from the moment, in July 1789, when the Assembly used the people as its shock troops and accepted the popular distribution of arms, the Revolution was set on a predetermined course.

Taine was himself a liberal constitutionalist, naturally drawn to the July Monarchy, which ended when he was twenty – the year he entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure. He envied England's constitutional stability and responsible and experienced governing class, and read

Macaulay's political essays as a source of political wisdom. He played no part in the Revolution of 1848, in which students were prominent, and wrapped himself self-consciously in the mantle of 'science', far removed from political strife, as his vocation. He was a liberal for all that, believing strongly in freedom of thought and speech. Falling under suspicion by the clergy, who were influential in education in the Second Republic, he was forced into a kind of exile in the provinces for a while, despite his academic brilliance. He established his reputation, however, by his writings in the 1860s, on culture, art and psychology, and for several decades, from the '60s to the '80s, he became the dominant figure in French intellectual life.

Taine stood, above all, for a scientific approach – by which he often meant a psychological one – to questions of art, literature and (a particular interest) national character. In biology he was a follower of Lamarck among others, believing in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, and his slogan '*race, milieu, moment*' – intended to provide a frame for the explanation of all cultural phenomena and collective psychologies – can be rendered roughly as 'inheritance, circumstances and epoch'. He believed that each cultural milieu and era had its master idea or disposition, which determined all its manifestations: thus the French mentality of the eighteenth century, which for him provided the motor of the Revolution, was characterized by an overriding confidence. This confidence was, for Taine, exemplified above all by Rousseau, and resulted in the application of simple abstract ideas of universal rationality – the *esprit classique* expressed during the Revolution by the idea of popular sovereignty and embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

But until the 1870s, while Taine conducted himself with intellectual hauteur towards government and people alike, his interests were above all in psychology. What was intended as his masterwork, the result of years of study which included attendance at dissections and observation of the insane, was *On Intelligence* (1870). This set out a conception of the mind which attempted, rather tentatively, to combine the philosophy of mind with neurology. In it the idea of the stable ego was dispensed with. Insanity was nearer the surface of the human mind than optimists would think; Taine's psychology had a distinctly pathological turn.



Taine explicitly regarded his work on culture and national character, and later on French history, as applied psychology, so it is important to grasp the outlines of his distinctive view. Taine regarded the Revolution as marking the onset of a disease from which France was still suffering; in a letter, he once compared it to the long-term effects of syphilis. With his psychological theory established, with the Third Republic inaugurated, and impelled by an appalled response to the Commune, Taine set out in *The Origins of Contemporary France*, and in particular in the volumes on the Revolution, to trace its pathology.

Taine's psychological theory was a modification of that tradition in the philosophy of mind which is sometimes spoken of as empiricist, or, perhaps more helpfully, as sensationalist. Our knowledge of the world originates in sensations, which the mind combines as images. These remain in the mind after the original sensory input which caused them has ceased. They are therefore in a sense illusions, and in a state of sanity are known to be so. Taine calls them 'true hallucinations'. But since the mind harbours only its own images, the line between those which continue to convey useful information, and are confirmed by current sensations, and those which are simply, as it were, free-floating is a disturbingly indistinct one. Images jostle for attention in the mind – Taine uses an explicitly Darwinian analogy. Sometimes, prompted by some trigger of memory or emotion, particularly in states of reverie or high excitement, those which are no longer confirmed by sensation as real are activated and take over.

The surrender to unreality is of two opposed kinds (this line of thought was developed more fully by Taine's friend and follower Théodule Ribot). On the one side lies a jumble of images, none of them fixed or connected; this is mental confusion, advancing to instability and eventually delirium. On the other side lies the possibility that one, perhaps quite inappropriate, image becomes fixed, supplants all the others, and becomes incorrigible. This is the *idée fixe*, and the state it produces is obsession or monomania. (There is an obvious analogy with the contrast between anarchy and despotism.) The mental poise which can correct and control the hallucinatory images and walk the tightrope between delirium and obsession is precarious; loss of grip on reality – insanity – is always ready to pounce. Taine regarded the French Revolution as a collective insanity; the distinction between

the two types largely corresponds to the crowd and the leaders. He said privately that since 1789 France had been either infantile or mad.

Taine's account of the Revolution may have been decisively shaped by theory – or, if one prefers, prejudice – but it was also the product of extensive research, and is heavily documented, if not always critically. France in the 1790s is in the grip of an *idée fixe*: the idea of the sovereignty of the people, expressed in Rousseau's *Social Contract* and in the Declaration of the Rights of Man (FR I.IV.iii, VI.I.i). This idea is fanatically promulgated by some, who employ it to manipulate and coerce others, who have to defer to it on pain of exile or even death. The revolutionary leaders are intoxicated by their idea; the revolutionary mob, which has no critical powers, is similarly intoxicated by the contagion of mutual excitement which its numbers generate, and driven by need, fear and hatred (I.IV.v). (Taine's work was the forerunner of later studies in crowd psychology and behaviour, particularly of the classic *The Crowd* (1895) by Gustave Le Bon, in which Taine's ideas are applied and amplified.) Elements of the mob, Taine insists, are also bribed.

The ostensible political sovereign, the Assembly and later the National Convention, is in fact at the mercy of the mob and of the political clubs like the Jacobins from which the revolutionary leaders promulgate their demands. The Assembly itself is virtually a mob (Le Bon says this too), in a constant state of hubbub and rowdy confusion, easily distracted, conducting its debates by means of slogans, which seek the applause of the galleries of spectators. These, since they represent the sovereign people, are incorrigible. They add to the din, intimidate those who dare utter unpopular opinions, and are in fact participants rather than onlookers (II.I.i). In the circumstances it is not surprising that the Assembly is given to sudden fits of ill-considered enthusiasm, resulting in hasty and confused legislation. Over-excitement becomes a kind of drug; the Assembly is not a conference for business but 'a patriotic opera' (II.I.i). France's men of experience, the *intendants* (governors) of the provinces, the members of the local *parlements*, the ecclesiastical rulers of great dioceses, are in the main excluded (III.II.iii). The hubris begotten on inexperience by a-priori ideas is unchecked. Suspicion also thrives, and denunciation is encouraged. (Taine always speaks as though all supposed counter-

revolutionary plots were fantasies.) The 'bad counsellors' of the Assembly are fear and theory. Abstract ideas and conceit among the leaders, the urge to tumult and bloodshed among the people, feed off each other. Government makes way for 'an intermittent despotism, for factions blindly impelled by enthusiasm, credulity, misery and fear' (I.II.vi). Henceforth, beyond the King, beyond the Assembly,

appears the real monarch, the people – that is to say the mob of a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand beings gathered together haphazard, on an impulse, on an alarm, suddenly and irresistibly made legislators, judges and executioners . . . who, with its mother, howling and misshapen Liberty, sits at the threshold of the Revolution like Milton's two spectres at the gates of hell. (I.II.viii)

Michelet, as we have seen, had a strong sympathy with what we may call the folkish elements of the early Revolution: the dancing, singing, street theatre and carnival. Taine, predictably, regards these as ominous as well as orgiastic and pathological. The oath of the Federation in Paris in July 1790 and the outbursts of federative enthusiasm all over France which preceded it are regarded by Taine as mass delusions: 'Never was such an effort made to intoxicate the senses and strain the nerves beyond their powers of endurance . . . The difference between magniloquence and sincerity, between the false and the true, between show and substance is no longer distinguishable.' A whole nation is losing its grip on reality in a kind of delirium which is taken for fraternity. But there is also manipulation, even if it does not recognize itself for what it is. Children, as young as nine years old, declaim patriotic orations: 'it occurs to no one that they are puppets', with words put into their mouths. But people remain as they were: they avoid paying their debts, they lay their hands on public property if they get the chance – 'everywhere there is philanthropy in words and symmetry in the laws; everywhere there is violence in acts and disorder in all things' (III.I.i). Taine does not draw the parallel, but the reader of Thucydides can hardly fail to be reminded of the anarchy and political fanaticism in Corcyra, where words lost or reversed their meanings, just as, elsewhere, Taine's account of the Terror reminds us of Tacitus' description of the omnipresent, suspicious eye of the despot and of the miseries of the Roman

proscriptions (above, pp. 84, 121). Where Michelet saw in 1790 a nation in the process of formation, Taine sees a society in a state of disintegration.

Taine does not often narrate events. Rather, he takes soundings of the state of French society, of the agents and the sufferers, across the social and institutional spectrum: in the Assembly and the Convention; in the psychology of the leaders, and in the political clubs which provide their power bases; in the Parisian mob and in the Paris Commune and sections; in the revolutionary tribunals and their victims; and in the provinces – including the representatives, the feared *representants en mission*, sent from Paris with despotic powers to enforce the government's will and often their own. Rather than narration – though there are many interpolated anecdotes – Taine offers a steady accumulation of evidence, from documents, from observers, from the quoted remarks of leading political agents, and from memoirs. He is not writing a narrative but compiling an indictment, which he does with as much weight and skill as vehemence.

The time and energy required by 'active citizenship' tends to bring forward, according to Taine, the worst elements in the population – those with plenty of both to spare and the impulse to agitate and dominate. They control the politics of the small-scale units, the sections: 'Politics became a profession.' The capital was more feverish than the provinces, the towns than the villages; Taine uses the simile of an abscess. The incoherence of the legislation produced by the Assembly, with no possibility of judicial review, plays into the hands of local leaders, who interpret it, and implement it or not, as they please (II.III.iv). The political club becomes 'the champion, judge, interpreter and administrator of the rights of man' (II.III.v).

Book IV gives us Taine's analysis of the psychology and tactics of the Jacobins, which is essentially an elaboration of what he has set out already as the revolutionary mentality. He sometimes draws the analogy with the Puritans. The revolutionary is characteristically an antinomian, convinced of his righteousness, out of touch with reality. He sees himself as the authorized executor of the common will. 'Marching along in the procession formed for him by this imaginary crowd, sustained by millions of metaphysical wills created by himself in his own image, he has their unanimous assent, and, like a chorus

of triumphant shouts, he will fill the outer world with the inward echo of his own voice.' He is therefore a pathological case: 'Something which is not himself, a monstrous parasite, a foreign and disproportionate conception, lives within him' (IV.I.iii). The link to the argument of *On Intelligence* is particularly apparent here.

In the next three books, Taine goes on to consider at length how the Jacobins' power is established and exercised. Book VIII is devoted to 'the Governed': to the nobles, clergy, bourgeoisie and populace, and how they respectively fared during the Revolution. His history ends with the advent of Bonaparte. The Jacobin dictatorship could not last because it lacked the essential characteristic of a political society, mutual respect, particularly between governors and governed, and therefore was unable to establish mutual trust and confidence. In French civilian society by 1797 'there is not one among the three thousand legislators who have sat in the sovereign assemblies that can count on the deference and loyalty of a hundred Frenchmen.' In the army, however – 'military France' – it is otherwise (IX.I.x). Taine has largely ignored the wars on the frontiers: he speaks always of the revolutionary leadership as autonomous, driven on, deterministically, by its own vanity and obsession, ignoring the pressures to which the leaders were subjected. His indictment is immensely powerful, but it has the weaknesses of a deterministic demonstration.

Now, however, the frontiers, and the army which has seized and expanded them, become relevant. It is not just a matter of discipline. In the army have grown up mutual dependence, respect and sympathy. Hence the army is a society, and with its consent its commander can wield power, while 'civil France' will welcome him as its liberator and restorer. The outcome is a despotism. The Revolution had left itself no alternative to the omnipotence of the state – towards which it had tended, though incoherently, from the outset. What was left from revolutionary chaos was the omnipresence of government as a result of 'the absence of local and private initiative, the suspension of voluntary free associations, the gradual dispersion of small, spontaneous groupings, the preventative interdiction of prolonged hereditary works, the extinction of sentiments by which the individual lives beyond himself in the past or in the future' (IX.I.x). From this passage alone one could tell that Taine was an admirer of Burke and of

Tocqueville. His metaphor for the state of France is a barracks: clean, well-built, symmetrical and 'better adapted to the discipline of the average and lower elements of human nature . . . In this philosophical barracks we have lived for eighty years.'

Taine's work was predictably subjected to heavy criticism for its apparent mono-causal determinism, its simplifications, its indulgence towards dubious sources which suited his case. One of the most prolonged attacks was the book entitled *Taine, Historian of the French Revolution*, published in 1907 by Alphonse Aulard, who in 1886 had taken up the chair of the history of the French Revolution newly founded at the Sorbonne by the municipal council of Paris. Aulard, in announcing his credentials, identified himself as 'a respectful and grateful son of the Revolution which has emancipated humanity and science'. To understand the Revolution, he declared, one must love it. His attitudes were not far from Michelet's, though his manner was much more sober – 'dull' is an adjective it has incurred. Like Michelet he regarded the people as the hero of the Revolution, though he insisted that the conduct of the revolutionary leaders should be judged in the light of their circumstances and the reasonable fears these engendered. He also seemed to go some way to justifying the Terror by arguing that it was necessary for survival and to preserve the gains of the Revolution; this was an argument which others, later, would apply to Stalin.

This is hindsight, but appreciation of Taine is likely to be enhanced by an awareness of the grimmer features of twentieth-century history. Admittedly Taine exaggerates. His work is far from, and does not aspire to, what was becoming an ideal of disinterested history (but so is that of all the other historians of the Revolution in the period). However, when one has allowed for exaggeration, for Taine's monocular vision and his own obsessions with Rousseau and the effects of the *esprit classique*, his indictment remains formidable, as well as a rhetorical tour de force, a powerful psycho-drama. His easy acceptance of some dubious sources does not invalidate others. In the 1870s he described the emergence of the characteristics which, in the twentieth century, came to be spoken of as 'totalitarian'.