THE ANCIEN REGIME

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THE ANCIEN REGIME

William Doyle

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In memory of John Bromley

Editor's Preface

The main purpose of this new series of Macmillan studies is to make available to teacher and student alike developments in a field of history that has become increasingly specialised with the sheer volume of new research and literature now produced. These studies are designed to present the 'state of the debate' on important themes and episodes in European history since the sixteenth century, presented in a clear and critical way by someone who is closely concerned himself with the debate in question.

The studies are not intended to be read as extended bibliographical essays, though each will contain a detailed guide to further reading which will lead students and the general reader quickly to key publications. Each book carries its own interpretation and conclusions, while locating the discussion firmly in the centre of the current issues as historians see them. It is intended that the series will introduce students to historical approaches which are in some cases very new and which, in the normal course of things, would take many years to filter down into the textbooks and school histories. I hope it will demonstrate some of the excitement historians, like scientists, feel as they work away in the vanguard of their subject.

The format of the series conforms closely with that of the companion volumes of studies in economic and social history which has already established a major reputation since its inception in 1968. Both series have an important contribution to make in publicising what it is that historians are doing and in making history more open and accessible. It is vital for history to communicate if it is to survive.

R. J. OVERY

A Note on References

References are cited throughout in brackets according to the numbering in the general bibliography, with page references where necessary indicated by a colon after the bibliography number.

Preface

The aim of this essay is neither to chronicle the Ancien Regime nor to analyse it. It is to describe and discuss the way the Ancien Regime has been thought and written about since the French revolutionaries first coined the term. In their eyes its meaning was self-evident. Subsequent debate and discussion, however, has expanded that meaning far beyond anything its originators dreamed of, so that the idea of the Ancien Regime has become extremely elastic. Historians have disagreed, often radically, about what it was, where it operated, how it worked, when it began, and when it ended. Students are often unaware of the range of questions they may be begging whenever they use this apparently straightforward term. What follows is an attempt to guide them through this hitherto uncharted intellectual minefield: to explain how the concept of the Ancien Regime originated and developed down to our own century, and why historians continue to find it a fruitful, though problematical, framework for thinking about pre-modern times.