ENGLAND AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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ENGLAND AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Stephen Prickett

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>List of Plates</i>	viii
<i>Editor's Preface</i>	ix
<i>Author's Preface</i>	x
1. Introduction: Images of Revolution	1
2. A Mirror for 1688: Refractions and Reflections	31
Richard Price	31
Edmund Burke	42
William Blake	61
Tom Paine	66
Charlotte Smith	82
Fanny Burney	87
Daniel Eaton	91
Hannah More	95
3. France and England 1795–1820	105
Part A: Enthusiasm Reconsidered	105
Wordsworth and Coleridge	105
William Godwin	111
Samuel Taylor Coleridge	115
William Wordsworth	121
Robert Burns	132
Robert Southey	134
Part B: The Condition of England Question	138
The Influence of Milton	138
Percy Bysshe Shelley	141
William Cobbett	145
William Hone	148
4. The Architecture of the State	158
The Metaphor	158

vi *Contents*

<i>The Political House that Jack Built</i>	160
Thomas Love Peacock	163
Thomas Carlyle: The Fall of the Bastille	166
<i>Chronological Table</i>	172
<i>Bibliography</i>	177
<i>Index</i>	181

Acknowledgements

Much of the background to this book lies in a course I taught over a number of years at the University of Sussex with historians of the period. To my friends and former colleagues, John Burrow, Maurice Hutt and Eileen Yeo I probably owe more than I am aware. To Marilyn Butler, Ann Hone, Iain McCalman and Björn Tysdahl I am grateful for ideas and further reading; to Karen Thompson I owe the discovery of a collection of original pamphlets of the time; from my present colleagues, Dagmar Eichberger, Fred Langman and above all Rosemary Foxton I have received invaluable criticism, advice and help. My secretary, Karina Pelling, has throughout been a model of good-temper and efficiency even under the most trying circumstances. Mrs Jocelyn Dawson has been invaluable in the proofreading. It is a pleasure to record my debts to all these and many more.

List of Plates

1. Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1785. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library.
2. Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Tennis Court, 20th June, 1789*. Paris, Musée Carnavalet. Courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library.
3. Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, c.1794. Brussels, Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts. Courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library.
4. Jean-Joseph-Xavier Bidault, *View of the Town of Avezzano beside Lake Celano in the Kingdom of Naples*, 1789. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Courtesy of Photographie Giraudon.
5. Illustrations to *The House that Jack Built* by William Hone, 1819.
 - i Frontispiece
 - ii The Wealth
 - iii The Vermin
 - iv The Dandy of Sixty.
6. Frontispiece to *A Parody on the Political House that Jack Built* by M. Adams, 1820.
7. Frontispiece to *The Real Constitutional House that Jack Built*. Anon. 1820.
8. Frontispiece to *The Loyalists House that Jack Built*, Anon. 1820.

Editor's Preface

J.H. Plumb has said that 'the aim of (the historian) is to understand men both as individuals and in their social relationships in time. "Social" embraces all of man's activities – economic, religious, political, artistic, legal, military, scientific – everything, indeed, that affects the life of mankind.' Literature is itself similarly comprehensive. From Terence onwards writers have embraced his dictum that all things human are their concern.

It is the aim of this series to trace the interweavings of history and literature, to show by judicious quotation and commentary how those actually working within the various fields of human activity influenced and were influenced by those who were writing the novels, poems and plays within the several periods. An attempt has been made to show the special contribution that such writers make to the understanding of their times by virtue of their peculiar imaginative 'feel' for their subjects and the intensely personal angle from which they observe the historical phenomena that provide their inspiration and come within their creative vision. In its turn the historical evidence, besides and beyond its intrinsic importance, serves to 'place' the imaginative testimony of the writers.

The authors of the several volumes in this series have sought to intermingle history and literature in the conviction that the study of each is enhanced thereby. They have been free to adopt their own approach within the broad general pattern of the series. The topics themselves have sometimes also a particular slant and emphasis. Commentary, for instance, has had to be more detailed in some cases than in others. All the contributors to the series are at one, however, in the belief (at a time when some critics would not only divorce texts from their periods but even from their authors) that literature is the creation of actual men and women, actually living in an identifiable set of historical circumstances, themselves both the creatures and the creators of their times.

ARTHUR POLLARD

Author's Preface

With such a wealth of material available, any selection of documents concerning England and the French Revolution will at best appear arbitrary and incomplete. It seems proper, therefore, to acknowledge this at the outset and, given the limited space available, explain as well as I can the principles of selection. Certain writers – Price, Burke, Paine, for instance – are clearly indispensable for any account of the revolutionary debate within England (though it is important to note that two out of those three are not English) and it has been the intention to set such major political thinkers alongside the important literary figures of the period, such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and later, Shelley. At the same time, I wished to give readers some sense of the diversity of the debate and an idea of the many different literary levels at which the argument was being conducted. Thus while Daniel Eaton, for instance, might publish both Southey and Shelley, it would be a mistake to think of the bulk of the political verse of the period or even in his journals as being of this standard or directed at this level of reader. Similarly William Hone is less well-known than he should be, and even those of his works commonly mentioned by histories of the period are often difficult to obtain. I have, therefore, included material from the (literally) thousands of pamphlets published during the period 1789–1820, among them Hone's liturgical parodies and *The Political House that Jack Built*, as well as others, like the anonymous *Death of Billy Cobb and Tommy Pain*, which have never to my knowledge been reprinted since they were first issued.

The principles of arrangement presented other problems. Should the material be arranged thematically, chronologically or simply by author? In the end I have chosen a compromise whereby the chapters are principally thematic, but within each chapter the writings cited are grouped under their authors in roughly chronological order. This has enabled me to

concentrate on certain broad themes related in each case to the changing meanings of particular key words and their associated metaphors which emerge during the period, such as 'nature', 'revolution', 'enthusiasm' and the idea of the state as a work of architecture, which in turn reveal so much about the assumptions behind the revolutionary debate in England, while at the same time not separating the writings of any particular author from the context in which they were created.

The most controversial omission is probably that of Mary Wollstonecraft. Her *Letter to Burke* and *The Rights of Women* are of course important products of the revolutionary debate but the latter in particular is now easily available elsewhere, and they have reluctantly been left out in favour of other extracts from Charlotte Smith's much less well-known novel *Desmond*, as well as material from the letters and diaries of Fanny Burney.

Finally, what is implicit in the entire selection is spelled out in the last section linking Hannah More with Burke, Peacock and Carlyle; namely, that there is no way of dividing the debate over the Revolution in France from the subsequent radical agitations leading eventually to the Reform Bill of 1832 and beyond. It serves also as a reminder of the longevity and influence of the metaphors of such a debate, even in apparently non-political contexts, long after the situation that gave rise to them has disappeared or seemingly altered beyond recognition.

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