Liberty or Death: The French Revolution

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‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’, is how Charles Dickens began his stirring evocation of the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities*. He had it about right. The first ten years of the French Revolution was a time of limitless hope and shattering violence. It was a time of unprecedented, cataclysmic events, vertiginous reversals of fortune, and of contrasts far more dramatic than in any novel, even one by Dickens. It was also the moment at which the modern political world was invented, a turning point, not just in the history of France, but in that of the wider world. Many of the rights that people fought for then are ones we expect in our own lives. How should we understand the French Revolution? What moment, what image, best expresses it? The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, perhaps, with its bold series of statements about the rights of all people to liberty and equality? Or the guillotine, standing tall and sinister, its blade dripping red with the blood of the Revolution’s enemies? No single book can give a full sense of the sheer scale of the Revolution – the social and economic transformations, the cultural revolution, the religious divisions, the regional experiences in a large and diverse country, the global dimensions, the wars with their national and international impact – all driven on by the tumultuous, complex and ever-changing politics. In trying to chart this seismic event, Peter McPhee has set himself a seemingly impossible task, yet it is one that he brings off with aplomb.

I am often asked which books on the French Revolution, written in English, I would recommend to newcomers. There are many short guides to the French Revolution, including one by McPhee himself, that provide an overview to the subject, and are written principally as introductory guides for students.(1) In recent years, however, few historians have attempted the kind of extended narrative of the Revolution designed to appeal to the interested general reader. The nearest equivalents are Simon Schama’s *Citizens*, and William Doyle’s *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, both of which were originally written for the Bicentenary, 27 years ago.(2) Much has changed in historical thinking about the Revolution since then, and there is ample space for a study to bring the French Revolution to a new generation of readers. *Liberty or Death* is very well qualified for that role, and is set to become a standard work on the subject.

It is not only the complexity of events that make writing a narrative of the Revolution a challenge for historians. In the 227 years since its outbreak, the French Revolution has never ceased to attract controversy. Was the Revolution an inevitable conflict rooted in class divisions and exploitation, or a contingent political
and financial crisis that might easily have been avoided? What were the aims and motives of the people who made it? Why did attempts to stabilise successive political regimes fail? Why did the Revolution become so violent? What was its legacy, both for France and for world history? In short, how – if at all – are we to make sense of it? Few subjects in history have generated more debate – and less consensus. For the prospective reader the many studies of the Revolution, all clamouring for attention, and each with their very different perspectives, constitute something of a minefield. A generation ago much of the historiography of French revolutionary studies focussed on Marxist and revisionist debates over whether or not the Revolution constituted a class conflict which resulted in the triumph of the bourgeoisie. Much has changed since then. McPhee shows how new paths of research are uncovering hitherto neglected dimensions of the Revolution. He pays particular attention to the ways in which the Revolution impacted on the lives of the rural and urban poor, on women, and on slaves in the French colonies. He also weaves into his account close attention to the global ramifications of the Revolution.

McPhee’s impressive breadth of knowledge (much of his own research has been on the social and rural history of France), empathy and judgement, make him a sure guide as he explores events, ideas, and culture, to reveal what the Revolution meant for the people who lived through it. The book is structured as a clear narrative, sustained by a wealth of detailed knowledge, and punctuated by brief but vivid glimpses into the lives of a myriad of people whose lives were changed by the Revolution. His approach is even-handed. He sympathises with many of the revolutionaries’ goals, yet he does not shy away from the scale of loss of life that ensued.

Much of the power of Liberty or Death comes through the way it combines the epic sweep of the French Revolution with attention to the impact of the Revolution on ordinary people’s lives. McPhee poses two questions that aid our understanding: firstly, what motivated the people who fought either for or against the Revolution; and secondly, how did people of all kinds experience the Revolution? Here the contrast is clear with Schama’s Citizens, a book which dwells at length on the vicissitudes of dispossessed nobles, whilst showing scant interest either in the peasantry who suffered under the seigneurial system, or in the motives of the revolutionaries, and which consequently runs out of steam well before its abrupt closure with the fall of Robespierre in 1794. McPhee’s account is much bigger in scope – chronologically, geographically and socially. His narrative ranges from the epicentre of Paris, through the different regions of France, and on to the impact of the Revolution in Europe, the French colonies, and beyond. The only difficulty with this ambitious approach is that the sheer scale of events means it is often not possible within the narrative constraints to dwell as much on any one aspect as one might wish. People and places have a tendency to appear, and abruptly disappear, in a potentially disconcerting fashion, like characters in Alice in Wonderland. McPhee goes a long way to mitigate the problem, however, by providing both a detailed index and a chronology. An additional bonus comes in the extensive and characteristically generous footnotes. Readers who wish to know more about any particular subject will find in these notes a comprehensive guide to further reading that includes much cutting edge scholarship.

McPhee traces the development of the Revolution through the early years when the newly established National Assembly set up a constitutional monarchy under ‘the most inclusive and participatory system in the world’ (p. 142). The Revolution began in a spirit of enthusiasm, unity, excitement and exhilarating optimism. At the Festival of the Federation, held on the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, the king took an oath to support the constitution. The Revolution seemed over. Why then did the constitutional monarchy fail? Some historians, including Schama with his determinedly negative take on the Revolution, have argued that it was always bound to lead to anarchy, violence and terror. McPhee shows that there was no inevitability about the fall of the constitutional monarchy; it came about through a series of misjudged choices by leading protagonists. A pivotal chapter explores the fateful decision by the revolutionaries to impose an oath of loyalty to the constitution on the clergy, forcing them to choose between keeping faith with the Catholic Church and allegiance to the Revolution. It was, says McPhee, ‘the moment that fractured the Revolution’ (p. 123). Yet the king himself still commanded considerable loyalty. Ironically the fatal blow against the constitutional monarchy was dealt by Louis XVI himself when he took the ill-judged decision to flee with his family towards the Austrian border in what became known as the flight to Varennes,
with the intention of returning, backed by Austrian armed force and French émigrés, to regain the power he had lost with the Revolution. Recognised, intercepted, and brought back to Paris, Louis never regained the fractured trust of his people. McPhee then moves to the ‘dangerous game’ (p. 152) played by the revolutionary leader, Brissot and his followers, the Girondins, to unleash a ‘people’s war’, intended to unmask the king’s treachery and to bring liberty to other peoples in Europe. Brissot’s policy was strongly opposed by Robespierre, who told the warmongers, ‘No one likes armed missionaries’ (p. 151). Robespierre’s warnings were disregarded, and a war ensued that lasted for 23 years and transformed the fate not only of France, but also that of Europe and beyond. The war in turn led to the overthrow of the monarchy in August 1792, and the establishment of a new assembly, the Convention, which declared France a republic.

By the summer of 1793 the Republic was at war with most of western Europe, France was beset with invading armies, and a full-scale civil war had broken out in the Vendée. The cosmopolitanism of the Revolution’s early years gave way to a dangerous nationalism. It was at this crisis point that the radical group, the Jacobins, became leading figures in government, and, under pressure from the Paris popular movement, the sans-culottes, the Convention resorted to a legalised ‘terror’, passing a series of laws that enabled the arrest, trial and execution of people found guilty of opposing the Revolution. Around 40,000 people died in the legalised terror (more if one counts people who died of sickness in the revolutionary prisons). A grim tally. But by far the greatest loss of life occurred in the Vendée. McPhee explains how the specific regional circumstances – the landholding system, religious factors, antagonistic relations between town and country, and peasant anger over mass conscription in the revolutionary wars – all combined to ignite a conflict that resulted in the deaths of around 200,000 people.

What determined people to risk everything, to fight for or against the Revolution? A fascinating chapter, entitled ‘Liberty or death: choosing sides in violent times, 1793’ explores the many considerations that led people to make choices about which side to follow, or indeed, whether to keep their heads down and hope for the storm to pass. As McPhee shows: ‘The key determinants were material … but also affective’ (p. 189). Friendship networks and family loyalties were important factors, whilst occupational, neighbourhood, religious and regional identities all played their part. The Revolution left no one’s life untouched, ‘no one could avoid choices’ (p. 203). By prioritising personal choices, McPhee gets to the heart of the turmoil thrown up by the Revolution: ‘By mid-1793 such decisions had become a question of life and death’ (p. 204). It is this dilemma, expressed in the revolutionary slogan, ‘Liberty or death’ that gives McPhee his title. The revolutionaries wanted liberty, but declared they were prepared to sacrifice their own lives to ensure that the Revolution survived. The revolutionary leaders felt increasingly confused, bewildered, and fearful, battered by a succession of unprecedented events, and drained by the effort of living at that pitch of intensity. Ironically, many of them would indeed pay with their own lives for their commitment to the Revolution.

One of the most troubling questions about the Revolution is why a movement that began with humanitarian intentions resorted, three years later, to the state-sponsored violence known as ‘the Terror’? McPhee takes the view – shared by many historians – that the pressure of circumstances, especially the war, was central to this process. He does not, however, limit his analysis to the part played by external forces; he also enlists recent interpretations by historians who have been exploring the ways in which the emotions of revolutionaries affected their decision making. The most important of these emotions in the crisis of 1793 was fear, above all the fear – often misplaced, but nonetheless powerful - that external and internal conspiracies were endangering the Revolution. Such fears helped stoke the revolutionaries’ decision to have recourse to terror. McPhee himself has contributed in no small measure to this new understanding of the thinking behind the recourse to terror with the best biography of Robespierre in English to appear in many years. In place of the tired old view of Robespierre as a power-crazed dictator, and mastermind of a ‘Reign of Terror’, McPhee shows us Robespierre’s gradual evolution from an idealist who began, in Robespierre’s own words, as a defender of ‘the poor and unknown’, against a privileged and rich elite ‘whose luxury devours the sustenance of a thousand men in a single day’ (pp. 47–8). In May 1791 Robespierre tried unsuccessfully to secure the abolition of the death penalty, which he termed a barbaric punishment. To understand how such a man, along with many others, turned to the use of terror to defend
the Revolution we need to comprehend the shattering effects of the critical period of the Revolution, combined with the tensions that ran rampant through the political class in 1793–4.

The fall of Robespierre in July 1794 (Thermidor, Year II according to the new revolutionary calendar) was a turning point in the Revolution. It was engineered by a group of Jacobin deputies (later known as the Thermidoreans) fearful for their own lives. In the chapter ‘Settling scores’, McPhee examines how, after Thermidor, the laws that enabled terror were gradually repealed, and suspects released. New revolutionary leaders pulled back from the Jacobin experiment in radical democracy and curbed the popular movement in Paris that had sustained it. The Thermidoreans, all former terrorists, exculpated themselves from responsibility by fabricating the story that Robespierre had been a dictator with sole responsibility for ‘the Terror’, which he imposed on an unwilling Convention. Thermidor did not end the violence. Politics was tainted by hatred, fear, and the desire for revenge; up to almost 30,000 people perished in reprisals against Jacobins during the year following Thermidor. The Revolution had a shattering impact on the political class, as Boissy d’Anglas, one of the makers of the new, more moderate, constitution of 1795, said: ‘We have lived through six centuries in six years’ (p. 294). Many political activists, ‘out of despair, fear or exhaustion’ (p. 299) left public life in the years after Thermidor. The politicians of the Thermidorean regime, and later of the Directory regime pulled away from the social and political equality of the Jacobins, fearful of its dangers. Henceforward the vote was once again restricted to men of property. Advocacy of the libertarian and egalitarian Constitution of 1793 was made ‘a capital offence’ (p. 298). Yet political stability proved elusive. To shore up the regime the Directory turned increasingly to an expansionist military, now fighting wars beyond French borders, thus preparing the ground for Napoleon Bonaparte’s military coup in Brumaire, 1799. For McPhee this was the moment when the Revolution ended and a new, ultimately more fatal, regime began: the coup brought to power a man whose ‘dreams of imperial grandeur would cost French people far more than had the securing of their Revolution’ (p. 341).

In the final chapter, ‘The significance of the French Revolution’, McPhee poses the question – what changed because of the Revolution? His answer is a tour de force, in the course of which he provides a comprehensive reckoning of the Revolution, politically, socially, economically, culturally and emotionally. Many of the changes wrought by the revolutionaries proved temporary and perished along with the Revolution. Many reforms (including the abolition of slavery, and the right to divorce) were subsequently curtailed, either by Napoleon, or by the restored Bourbon monarchy; some, however, proved to be permanent, notably the ending of the seigneurial regime which permanently emancipated France’s peasantry, whilst the former slaves of Saint-Domingue defied Napoleon’s attempts to re-enslave them and, at the price of a colossal loss of life, established the new nation of Haiti. The political legacy of the Revolution was bitterly contested, within France and beyond. The violence that came with the Revolution precludes any easy answers to the continuing problem of that legacy. Yet many of the questions first raised by the revolutionaries still resonate with us. The right to democracy, political equality, social equality, the right to protection under the law, freedom of religious belief, and liberty of the press, all are as pertinent now as they were in 1789 and, as McPhee concludes, they ‘remain at the heart of all democratic political life everywhere’ (p. 370).

Notes


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