



I.B. TAURIS

FRANCE *and the* age of REVOLUTION

Regimes Old and New from Louis XIV to Napoleon Bonaparte

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藏 书 章

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LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2013 by I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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International Library of Historical Studies: 91

ISBN: 978 1 78076 444 3 (HB)
978 1 78076 445 0 (PB)

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Typeset by Newgen Publishers, Chennai
Printed and bound in Great Britain by T.J. International, Padstow, Cornwall



William Doyle is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Bristol, and Fellow of the British Academy. Among his many publications are *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (2nd edn., 2002) and an earlier volume of essays, *Officers, Nobles, and Revolutionaries* (1995). More recent books include *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (2009) and the edited *Oxford Handbook of the Ancien Régime* (2011).

This book reveals the ever fertile mind of Bill Doyle in all its many facets, from the carefully researched, intricate minutiae of venality and finance in ancien régime France, to the grand sweep of the fall of monarchies and the roots of revolution across the Western world in the Age of Revolutions. There is a fresh insight and a refreshing dash of much needed iconoclasm, on every page. Doyle is a scholar who continues to provoke, instruct and inspire, in prose as sparkling and clear as a vintage Champagne.'

**Michael Broers, Professor of Western European History,
University of Oxford**

'Here is William Doyle at his finest. In this book, distilling his most recent research, this master historian of the Old Regime and French Revolution explores key issues in the collapse, and rebuilding of French state and society from Louis XIV through Napoleon. In typical Doyle fashion, the chapters emphasize contingency, complexity and continuity. By steering clear of determinisms and refusing to treat the French Revolution as inevitable, Doyle makes palpable the sense of possibility that infused those heady times.'

**Rafe Blaufarb, Professor of History and Director of the
Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution,
Florida State University**

'In recent decades William Doyle has been the leading British historian of France's evolution from ancien régime to Revolution and beyond. This welcome collection of incisive short studies throws illuminating and, at times, unexpected light on this trajectory and will be essential for all who study or teach Europe's long-eighteenth century.'

Professor Hamish Scott, University of Glasgow

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Introduction

Most of the essays in this collection have appeared since the publication of *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-Century France* in 1996. In that book I attempted to analyse the structure, operation, and implications of a practice which lay at the heart of how institutions and elite social life worked in pre-revolutionary France. The abolition of venality was one of the most radical and enduring of all the reforms of the French Revolution. Its ramifications were so far-reaching that no single volume could do complete justice to them.

Part I of the present book explores some aspects of venality that a general survey could only have discussed in unbalancing detail. The only piece falling outside the Age of Revolution concerns the attempts of Louis XIV's great minister Colbert to rein in its growth, and his hopes of getting rid of it altogether. His failure illustrates the scale and intractability of the problem, and, by implication, why it took a revolution to bring his dreams to fruition. Colbert himself owed much of his rise to the opportunities offered his family by venality; and throughout its history few even of its fiercest critics were completely untainted by it. Among the most celebrated after Colbert was Voltaire, whose hostility turns out to have been far more equivocal than has often been assumed, and directed overwhelmingly against a magistracy which attracted his contempt largely for quite different reasons. The venal instinct penetrated into some most unlikely places, including the church. Although simony, the sale of priestly functions, was one of the

oldest and most execrated of abuses, in France other positions confined to priests were open to purchase. Yet few clergy defended venality, any more than most of the laymen who wrote about it. There was, in fact, a massive consensus against it, regarding it as a virulent form of corruption. The problem remained not simply how to eliminate it, but how to do without it. Some critics feared that, however undesirable, some sort of corruption was a necessary evil in public life. Nor was this perception confined to France. Across the Channel in Great Britain and in Ireland there was relatively little venality outside the army, but corruption seemed just as pervasive in other ways, and perhaps just as necessary. Yet over the Age of Revolution, roughly between 1770 and 1850, corruption of the old sort was largely eliminated in both France and Great Britain. It was a great turning point in the history of political culture, and a final essay in this section explores the very different routes by which two polities arrived at the same destination in abandoning the instinctive ways of their old regimes.

Even in Great Britain one of the major forces bringing this about was the French Revolution. Having spent many years, thanks to an unlikely chapter of accidents, teaching the history of Ireland in the revolutionary age, an invitation to discuss the Irish Union of 1801 in a European context gave me the opportunity to contribute to debates on how far Great Britain in the eighteenth century might be called an *ancien régime*. Nevertheless most of Part II reflects on how the French destroyed theirs. The main theme of the various essays is to emphasise the role of choice and contingency. In the mid-twentieth century, writing about the French Revolution was pervaded by a certain economic and social determinism, much of it inspired by Marxism. Between the 1950s and the 1980s the empirical underpinning of this approach was chipped away by what became known as revisionism. But many, especially in France and across the Atlantic, worried that revisionism had exorcised Marxism

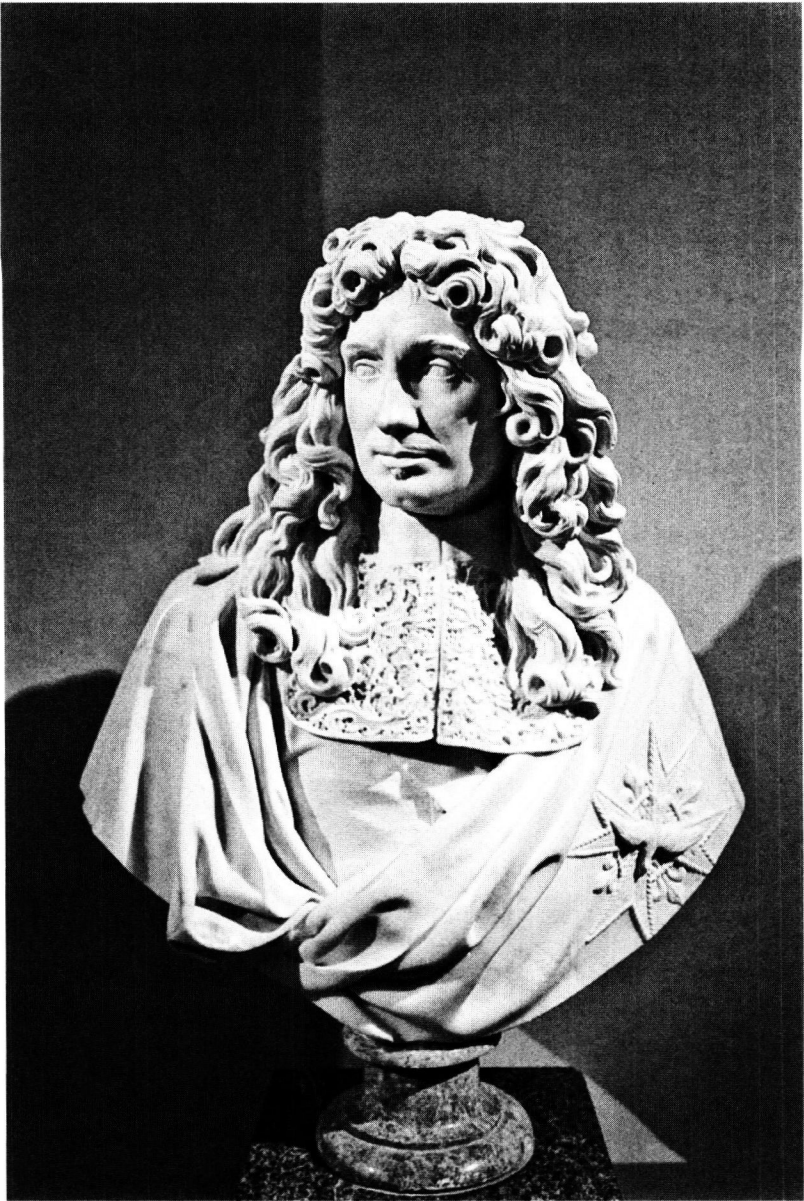
while ‘putting nothing in its place’. Why something was needed in its place was far from obvious; but those who felt the need eagerly embraced the so-called cultural or linguistic ‘turns’ sweeping through wider history writing by this time. The result was a post-revisionism in which cultural and linguistic determinism came to replace the old economic and social varieties. Two essays here take issue with some of the results. While post-revisionists tend to accept that the Revolution had to become ‘thinkable’ before it became possible, I argue quite the opposite. Some also believe that the regicide which was one of the crucial events of the Revolution could not have come about without a long-maturing pre-revolutionary ‘desacralisation’ of the French monarchy. It has seemed to me ever since the idea was first mooted that no such process can be demonstrated convincingly, and that it is not in fact necessary for explaining the overthrow of monarchy. Nobody dreamed of executing Louis XVI in 1789. It was the unprecedented, hitherto *unthinkable* events of the Revolution itself which largely explain his fate. The course of those events is revisited in a further set of reflections on how the Revolution transformed attitudes to monarchy and its basis in France and beyond. Fully a year before the French Revolution turned republican, the revolutionaries also attempted to abolish the social elite previously inseparable from royal government, the nobility. On that occasion, the lead was taken by nobles themselves, who, ever since their eager participation in the republican revolt across the Atlantic, had heedlessly embraced ideas and developments deeply dangerous for the interests of their own order.

This is a theme I have explored at greater length in *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (2009). There I followed the fortunes of nobility through abolition, emigration and Terror to show that although the revolutionaries denied it any recognition, they were unable to destroy nobility as they intended. Napoleon, in fact, revived it in a new form: and one of the essays in Part

III discusses some remaining problems concerning the imperial elite. Only in the most superficial sense can this creation be described as a betrayal of the Revolution; and the same can be said of Napoleon's notorious marginalisation of women, which seems much in line with what leading feminist historians have seen as the deep misogyny of the Jacobins. Napoleon has been a late interest for me, and only one of the four pieces in Part III has been published before. On the political culture of his empire, it explores how far he drew on instinctive French reflexes long predating the Revolution (in the original version, delivered as a conference paper, I suggested calling them memes, but the audience discouraged me from going on with this). In the end, however, I conclude that Napoleon did far more to consolidate the work of the Revolution than to reverse it. His reputation as the Revolution's gravedigger seems to be largely based upon an assumption that its essence lay in the Jacobin republic, much of whose Terror-haunted work he did indeed repudiate. But, apart from sullyng the reputation of republicanism in Europe for three generations, Jacobinism achieved nothing enduring. The earlier years of the Revolution, by contrast, destroyed the ancien régime and rationalised French public life for ever. Napoleon welcomed both achievements as the bedrock of his new regime. He then used his power to extend them to Europe beyond France, with unavoidable ramifications in its extensive overseas dominions. These achievements too were never reversed. Bonapartist authoritarianism, it is true, had little content beyond nostalgia, and was to have no longer-term future than Jacobinism. Perhaps that was because its true destiny, the destruction of Europe's old order, had already been accomplished by its founder.

PART I

FUNCTIONS
FOR SALE



Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–1683) by Antoine Coysevox

CHAPTER 1

Colbert and the Sale of Offices

When in the later Middle Ages kings began to realise that they could no longer wage war effectively by raising feudal levies, they were compelled to look for unprecedented sums instead to fund professional warriors. They realised at the same time that they would never be able to find the necessary sums through taxation alone. Soon seeing themselves as overtaxed, their subjects resisted their demands either by evasion or simply by refusing to pay; and states lacked the means of assessment and compulsion to back up their demands, especially among their richest subjects who found means to avoid at least the majority of direct taxes. Great orders or corporate bodies, such as the church or the nobility, soon proved able to formulate excellent reasons for exemption that no king was able to set aside. Above all, the liquid wealth of mercantile groups completely escaped fiscal demands.

These were the problems that gave rise to the sale of offices. By selling public offices, in other words farming out portions of the royal authority to persons prepared to pay for it, kings found a way of persuading holders of liquid capital to place it in their hands. Nor was it only their own capital. Office-holders themselves could borrow more on the security of their offices; and by varying the powers and privileges attached to them, a king could find further occasions to make their holders borrow and pay out.

And so in the sixteenth century the sale and manipulation of offices became widespread in European monarchies. It was found in the Spanish Empire and the states of the Pope, in England, and in several German principalities.¹ But nowhere was venality more widespread or more systematically exploited than in France. It was already well established when, in the 1520s, King Francis I set up the Office of Parts Casual (*bureau des parties casuelles*) to serve, in the famous words of the jurist Loyseau, 'as a stall for selling this new merchandise'.

Given that, ever since 1467, an office was defined as a function of which no holder could be deprived except by death, resignation, or forfeiture, it was the soundest of investments. Very soon, most of the king's offices were venalised, and their number never ceased to multiply. Entire new categories of offices were created simply for selling, without the slightest regard for sound administration. Between 1515 and 1610, their number rose from around 4–5,000 to about 25,000, most of them judicial offices. The advantages attached to venal offices reached their peak in 1604 with the introduction of the *Paulette* or annual due (its official name, usually shortened to *annuel*) which guaranteed the free transmission of an office to a named successor, heir, or buyer in return for the payment of a fee worth one sixth of its official valuation (*finance*). This protected the officer from the operation of the so-called forty-day rule (introduced in the 1530s) under which, if an officer happened to die within 40 days of relinquishing an office, it reverted to the king or, as the phrase went, 'fell to the Parts Casual'. The only worry office-holders might still have was over the renewal of the *annuel*, which was normally only granted for a period of nine years. The king might always choose not to renew it, which would upset the matrimonial strategies of thousands of families whose property and fortunes were bound up in offices.

Almost inevitably, therefore, any renewal by the king offered him the chance to demand extra payments from officers in order to retain the privileges of 'admission' to the payment of the *annuel*.

French society and institutions in the seventeenth century were deeply marked by the development of venality. Office purchase became the main ladder of social mobility for the elites, and several thousand ennobling offices at the summit of the system opened nobility to the ambitions of the richest commoners. The body of office-holders made up a powerful network of interests, and each company fiercely protected its corner of the system. At the same time, the king came to depend more and more on venality. His 'casual' revenues, essentially what venality brought in, made up an important proportion of the royal finances. In the year when Richelieu entered the Thirty Years' War, casual revenues made up no less than 40 per cent of the king's income.² And, since the alienation of royal authority represented by the sale of an office was never more than temporary, capital advanced in this way could never be considered more than a loan. The king could not suppress an office without reimbursing the holder. And so, despite repeated promises by monarchs and regents throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to abolish venality, reimburse office-holders, and recruit servants of the state on merit, it was never seriously possible to think of such a policy because of its prohibitive cost. It is probable that the point of no return in this process had already been reached as early as the reign of Henry II (1547–1559), when the renewal of Italian wars brought renewed expansion of venality.³ The creation under Henry IV of the *annuel* marked in turn a recognition of the fact that it was better to milk systematically a system which could not be got rid of. This approach reached its peak under Richelieu who, while deploring the principle of venality, realised the practical impossibility of doing without it, and exploited it to its very limits.