

The Crisis of the Absolute Monarchy

France from Old Regime to Revolution



Edited by Julian Swann and Joël Félix

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THE CRISIS OF THE
ABSOLUTE MONARCHY:
FRANCE FROM OLD REGIME
TO REVOLUTION

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JULIAN SWANN AND JOËL FÉLIX



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THE CRISIS OF THE ABSOLUTE MONARCHY

For Bill Doyle

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Julian Swann is Professor of History at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is the author of *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–1774* (Cambridge, 1995) and *Provincial power and absolute monarchy: the Estates General of Burgundy, 1661–1790* (Cambridge, 2003). He is currently completing a history of political disgrace in Bourbon France.

Preface

In 2008, William ‘Bill’ Doyle retired from his chair as professor of history at the University of Bristol. Bill was first appointed to a lectureship at the University of York in 1967, which was followed by a spell as professor of Modern History at the University of Nottingham. In the course of a distinguished career he has held various Fellowships at, among others, the Université de Michel-Montaigne-Bordeaux III, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris and All Souls, and since 1998 he has been a Fellow of the British Academy. His prolific and acclaimed research has resulted in numerous books and articles, and thankfully as professor emeritus and Senior Research Fellow at Bristol he has continued to display his usual healthy appetite for scholarship and since then has published the acclaimed *Aristocracy and its enemies in the age of revolution* (Oxford, 2009) and has edited the magisterial *Oxford handbook of the ancien régime* (Oxford, 2012). However, his retirement from his teaching duties offered an opportunity for his admiring friends, colleagues and former students to mark his many achievements and to do so by taking a fresh look at one of the central preoccupations of his academic life: the origins of the French Revolution. More than thirty years have elapsed since Bill published the first edition of his seminal work *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980). That book, now in its third edition, has long been recognized as a classic. When deciding to produce a book of essays in his honour, we were inspired, in part, by Bill’s great insight that the ‘Revolution had not been made by revolutionaries. It would be truer to say that the revolutionaries had been created by the Revolution’. Such an approach of course requires us to explain what had brought about that Revolution, and Bill’s emphasis on what he has described as the ‘inner contradictions’ of the old regime led us to the theme of ‘The crisis of the absolute monarchy’, which offers a starting point for a broader investigation of the origins of 1789.

The essays published in this volume all began life as papers delivered to an international conference held at the British Academy in December 2009, and have been reviewed and amended in the light of the formal and informal debates on that memorable occasion. The conference received generous financial support from the British Academy and from the *Ambassade de France au Royaume-Uni* as well as the Society for the Study of French History, Oxford University Press, BBC History Magazine, Birkbeck College and the University of Reading. The organizers would like to thank all of these bodies for their help and assistance. We would also like to thank James Rivington, Brigid Hamilton-Jones and the publications team at the

British Academy for their help, assistance and patience throughout the publication process.

Bill has always been extremely generous with his time, whether helping individuals with encouragement and advice, bringing together colleagues for collaborative ventures or serving as President of the Society for the Study of French History. The conference and the preparation of this volume have offered constant reminders of his many contributions and of the esteem and affection in which he is held throughout the international scholarly community. This book is a mark of gratitude from Bill's friends and colleagues, and it is accompanied by our best wishes to him and to Christine, both for their future happiness and for many more years of scholarly productivity.

*Julian Swann
Joël Félix*

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Introduction: The crisis of the absolute monarchy*

JULIAN SWANN

THE DEBATE ON THE French revolution of 1789, lively enough in its own day, has seldom ceased during the past two centuries and the topic itself remains the subject of enormous scholarly interest. For generations of historians, 1789 was a defining moment in world history: it has been said to mark, among other things, the triumph of the bourgeoisie, the birth of modernity, the rise of nationalism or even the invention of ideology. To explain an event of such magnitude, it was understandable that historians should seek no less portentous origins, with factors such as the rise of capitalism, class struggle or the impact of the Enlightenment cited as long-term causes of Revolution. In recent years, however, there has been a preoccupation with the actual course of the Revolution. The prevailing concern with political culture and gender as analytical tools has illuminated developments in Paris and the French provinces, and has brought to prominence many themes inadequately explored in earlier scholarly generations. Rather less attention is now paid to how France was plunged into revolutionary turmoil, which is taken largely as a 'given'.¹

By contrast, the present collection focuses once again on the origins of the dramatic events in and beyond France that transformed later-eighteenth-century Europe so comprehensively and established the terms of political and social struggle for the next two centuries. It presents a series of up-to-date essays that, collectively, provide a new interpretation of the origins of the Revolution. Uniquely among recent contributions to the field, this volume transcends national historiographical traditions and includes contributions by leading experts from France, Britain and the United States, giving it a breadth of approach that previous scholarship has lacked.

* I would like to thank Hamish Scott and Joël Félix for their help and constructive criticism in preparing this chapter. Any remaining defects are my own.

¹ This approach is particularly apparent in the valuable special issue of *French Historical Studies*, 32: iv (2009), on the theme '89: Then and Now', which says remarkably little about how and why the Revolution broke out, instead concentrating on developments in the decade after the summer of 1789.

From crisis to revolution

The events that preceded the outbreak of the French Revolution are well known and can be briefly summarized. In the late summer of 1786, Louis XVI, enthused by the seemingly bold and imaginative visions of his *contrôleur général* of finances, Charles Alexandre de Calonne, became convinced that the monarchical state required radical reform.² Public opinion and even the majority of the king's council were soon astonished to learn that their sovereign intended to summon an Assembly of Notables, an institution that had last met in 1626. Consciously or not, the king had broken with over a century and a half of Bourbon political tradition. Although composed of nominees, who were intended to be pliant supporters of the crown, the Notables were a genuinely national body including representatives of a broad section of the kingdom's élites. After it opened in February 1787, however, the Assembly rapidly assumed a critical stance, seeking to amend or even reject Calonne's measures, and the French public became aware for the first time of the true scale of the government's financial deficit. What had begun as an attempt, however misguided, at reform had within months escalated into a full-blown political crisis. Calonne was disgraced in April 1787 and within weeks a badly shaken Louis XVI had appointed one of his fallen minister's critics, Archbishop Loménie de Brienne, to replace him. Despite his credentials as a leader of the opposition within the Notables, Brienne proved scarcely more successful at managing them and in May they were dismissed.

Still determined to press on with its reforms, the ministry was now obliged to fall back on more traditional methods by seeking registration of the necessary laws in the Parlement of Paris. Irritated at having been temporarily sidelined by the Notables and sensitive to heightened public scrutiny of its response, the Parlement in its turn proved obstreperous. The magistrates did approve edicts freeing the grain trade and emancipating Protestants, but dug their heels in when it came to the crucial proposals for new land and stamp taxes. Unable to achieve his aims by persuasion, Brienne resorted to force, exiling the Parlement to Troyes, where he hoped a combination of inconvenience and boredom would encourage a more cooperative stance. By now these disputes had also taken on an international dimension because, paralysed by its domestic problems, the French Government's abdication of its traditional role as a Great Power was revealed. Starved of funds and political leadership, it stood impotently by as Prussian troops marched into

² The following is intended as a general introductory survey and for more detailed accounts of these events, see: W. Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1999); J. Egret, *La Pré-Révolution française, 1787–1788* (Paris, 1962); J. Hardman, *Overture to revolution: the 1787 Assembly of Notables and the crisis of France's old regime* (Oxford, 2010); C. Jones, *The great nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon* (London, 2002), 378–422; and P. M. Jones, *Reform and revolution in France: the politics of transition, 1774–1791* (Cambridge, 1995), 139–74.

the Dutch Republic and overthrew its Patriot regime, which was formally allied to France.³ It was a devastating blow to national prestige, but Brienne's ministry remained preoccupied with the crown's financial woes.

After protracted negotiations, the Parlement was eventually recalled and assembled amid great pomp for a royal *séance* on 19 November. Sensibly abandoning the ill-conceived land tax that Calonne had championed, Brienne proposed renewing the old *vingtièmes* and floating a series of massive loans that would allow the crown to reschedule its debt. In exchange for the financial lifeline, the king promised that he would call an Estates General in 1792, by which time it was hoped the government would be able to deal with it from a position of strength. Here was a potential solution to the political and financial crisis, and yet remarkably hopes of a compromise were dashed by a mixture of inadequate planning, personal animosity and mounting political distrust. In another sop to its critics, the ministry had announced that the meeting of the Parlement on 19 November was a royal *séance*, not a *lit de justice*, which meant that those present could discuss and criticize the proposed legislation. Yet rather than the votes being counted as the assembly was expecting, it was suddenly announced that the law had been registered as would have been the practice in a *lit de justice*. When challenged by the duke of Orléans who claimed that this was unlawful, the king blurted out 'it is legal because I wish it'.⁴

In the resulting pandemonium any remaining goodwill evaporated, Orléans was exiled and the government began plotting a drastic restructuring of the judicial system that would reduce the Parlement's political powers even more sharply than the short-lived, and reviled, Maupeou Revolution of 1771–4.⁵ Aware that the blow was about to fall, the Paris magistrates issued an *arrêté* on 3 May 1788 containing their definition of the fundamental laws of the kingdom, while the king gave orders for the arrest of two magistrates he blamed for fomenting opposition. Nothing could better illustrate the complete breakdown of relations between the monarch and his Parlement than the sight on 6 May of armed soldiers surrounding the Palais de Justice, on the Île de la Cité in central Paris, to seize the two men. With cries of

³ The diplomatic crisis has been examined by T. E. Kaiser, 'From fiscal crisis to revolution: the court and French foreign policy, 1787–1789' in T. E. Kaiser and D. K. Van Kley (eds), *From deficit to deluge: the origins of the French Revolution* (Stanford CA, 2011), 139–64, and M. Price, 'The Dutch affair and the fall of the ancien régime, 1784–1787', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), 875–905.

⁴ Doyle, *Origins*, 102–3.

⁵ Maupeou's revolution of 1771 led to the remodelling of the *parlements* and provoked widespread opposition, see: W. Doyle, 'The parlements of France and the breakdown of the old regime, 1771–1788', *French Historical Studies*, 6 (1970), 415–58; D. Echeverría, *The Maupeou Revolution: a study in the history of libertarianism* (Baton Rouge, 1985); J. Egret, *Louis XV et l'opposition parlementaire* (Paris, 1970), 175–232; J. Flammermont, *Le Chancelier Maupeou et les parlements* (Paris, 1883); and J. Swann, *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–1774* (Cambridge, 1995), and his 'Silence, respect, obedience: political culture in Louis XV's France' in H. Scott and B. Simms, *Cultures of power in Europe during the long eighteenth century* (Cambridge, 2007), 225–48.

'despotism' in the air, the government unveiled its latest reforms at a *lit de justice* two days later, the most striking of which was the creation of a plenary court composed of magistrates, great nobles and officers of the crown that would register new laws. Not content with stripping the *parlements* of their political authority, Brienne and the *garde des sceaux*, Lamoignon de Basville, who was the principal architect of these measures, also drastically reduced the judicial prerogatives of the *parlements* by transferring these to the lower courts, now christened the *grands bailliages*.

Whatever the merits of these changes or the other innovations that Brienne was simultaneously imposing on the court, the army and the financial administration, the way they were implemented was highly provocative. Resistance took many forms, from pamphlets, songs, placards and graffiti to the tiles that rained down on the troops sent to impose the royal edicts in Grenoble in June 1788. Yet it was not public anger that thwarted Lamoignon and Brienne, but the deepening financial crisis. By August 1788 the government was facing bankruptcy, brought low by the refusal of its usual creditors, who were themselves threatened by reform, to make short-term loans. In desperation, Brienne offered to bring forward the proposed meeting of the Estates General to 1 May 1789, but to no avail. On 25 August he resigned, quickly followed by Lamoignon, and their policies collapsed. The new ministry was headed by Jacques Necker, who had acquired a reputation as a miracle worker for his handling of French finances during the War of American Independence (1775–83), and attention now turned to the imminent Estates General.⁶ With the fall of Lamoignon, the Parlement of Paris had been recalled, seemingly more powerful than ever; on 25 September it intervened decisively in the public debate about the composition of the forthcoming national assembly. As might be expected of France's premier court of law, it dutifully followed precedent by announcing that the forms employed in 1614 (when the Estates General had last met) should be maintained in 1789.

While the legal logic was impeccable the political repercussions for the Parlement were catastrophic. If the forms of 1614 were followed, then the Third Estate, representing perhaps 98 per cent of the population, would have the same number of deputies as the clergy or the nobility; worse still, voting would be by order, meaning that the privileged had a built-in majority of two to one. Throughout the autumn of 1788 there had been growing support for doubled representation for the Third Estate and voting by head, and the Parlement's *arrêté* was seen

⁶ Necker's policies have long been a source of controversy, see: J. Félix, 'The financial origins of the French Revolution' in P. R. Campbell (ed.), *The origins of the French Revolution* (Basingstoke, 2006), 35–62; R. D. Harris, 'French finances and the American war, 1777–1783', *Journal of Modern History*, 48 (1976), 233–58; E. N. White, 'Was there a solution to the ancien régime's financial dilemma?', *Journal of Economic History*, 49 (1989), 545–68.

as a privileged plot to block the legitimate aspirations of the people.⁷ The *parlementaires*, accustomed to being treated as the ‘fathers of the nation’, saw their popularity vanish. Their discomfort was symptomatic of wider malaise amongst the noble élites as they realized that the Third Estate was no longer content to leave political leadership to its social superiors. Louis XVI did convoke a second Assembly of Notables in an attempt to resolve the issue, but it proved unwilling to recognize the Third Estate’s claims and it was left to the royal council to decide. Rather than take a bold and decisive step one way or the other, the crown sat on the fence, deciding to double the number of representatives of the Third Estate, while leaving the issue of voting to be decided by the Estates General.

Viewed with the benefit of hindsight, this was a fatal error: it meant that the king ceded the political initiative and allowed the dispute to poison the atmosphere during the spring of 1789, which was a period of unprecedented political excitement. Almost the entire adult male population had an opportunity to participate in the elections to the Estates General or to contribute to the drafting of the *cahiers de doléances* containing their grievances and their hopes for reform. Heightened expectations are difficult to manage at the best of times, but in 1789 the problem was exacerbated by a severe economic downturn, largely triggered by the poor harvest of 1788 whose impact on prices, employment and the general psychology of a subsistence society was always potentially inflammable. The Revellion riots in Paris and reports of disturbances in the countryside were indicative of rising tension, though it is doubtful that these would have troubled the regime were it not for the paralysis that overcame the Estates General when it opened in May. The ministry stuck rigidly to its policy of wait and see, and with neither the nobility nor the Third Estate prepared to back down the meeting was deadlocked.

Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum and as the days, even weeks, drifted by without any lead from Versailles the more radical deputies gained the ascendant.⁸ The results were dramatic. On 17 June, the chamber of the Third Estate voted to declare itself the National Assembly; on 20 June, fearful of a government coup, its members swore the Tennis Court Oath not to disperse until France had a constitution; and, when, three days later, Louis XVI finally made his own intentions clear, the National Assembly rejected them and vowed only to separate at bayonet point. Faced with what was in all but name a revolution, the king capitulated and ordered those nobles and clergy who had not already done so to join the National

⁷ There has long been a lively debate about the events of autumn 1789, see: E. Eisenstein, ‘Who intervened in 1788? A commentary on *The coming of the French revolution*’, *American Historical Review*, 71 (1965), 77–103, and J. Kaplow, ‘On “Who intervened in 1788?”’, *American Historical Review*, 72 (1967), 497–502.

⁸ The more recent discussions of this period include T. Tackett, *Becoming a revolutionary: the deputies of the French National Assembly and the emergence of a revolutionary culture, 1789–1790* (Princeton, 1996), and M. P. Fitzsimmons, *The night the old regime ended: August 4th 1789 and the French Revolution* (University Park PA, 2003).