Reviews

*Taine's "French Revolution."**

THIS volume completes the elaborate work, to which the author has given the title of 'The Origins of Contemporary France.' The English translator has substituted for this designation (whether with or without the author's consent does not appear) the simpler title of 'The French Revolution,' which is certainly more correct. To select one particular period in the history of a nation as the 'origin' of a subsequent period is anything but philosophical. The present condition of any country grows out of its entire history from the beginning. To find the origins of an existing state of society, we must go back to a prehistoric period, and discuss questions of race, of climate, and even of geology. All this, of course, M. Taine well understands. But he is a book-maker and a politician. The French Revolution is the most interesting event of modern times, and a lively work on the subject is sure of many readers. M. Taine dislikes the ideas which the Revolution developed, and the state of society which it helped to produce. This work is a huge pamphlet, devoted to decrying the principles of modern liberalism. With infinite labor he has accumulated the most minute details of all the shocking atrocities which marked the progress of the revolutionary fever. He has piled up these details into a perfect mountain of horrors before our dismayed sight. 'Behold,' he says, 'the origin of the popular institutions of which you boast. Can that be really good which has come out of all this evil?'

The author is not logical. He forgets, or rather he deliberately refuses to consider, the self-evident truth that, according to his own principles of deduction, the Revolution itself must have grown out of the state of society which preceded it. The 'Old Régime' is the object of M. Taine's highest admiration. One of the best chapters in the present volume is devoted to a description of the classes which composed it, and on whose gracious and noble qualities he dilates with the fondest affection. Yet these charming and perfect beings established and maintained a system of society and government which produced the ignorant, miserable, and debased multitude, the authors of all these revolutionary horrors. Can that state of things have been really good which brought forth so much evil? This is a question which M. Taine conveniently omits to consider. He gives us, however, the means of answering it for ourselves, and the result is curiously interesting. Quite unconsciously and unintentionally he allows us to see how small was the number of those who, under the old system, gathered into their own hands all the good things of life, and how complete was the exclusion and repression of the great mass of the people. He divides the ruling class into three sections—the nobles, the clergy, and the *bourgeoisie*, or civic notables. The nobles he computes at 'thirty thousand gentlemen.' These, with their households, may be estimated at two hundred thousand persons. The clergy comprised 'more than sixty-five thousand ecclesiastics.' These were, of course, all unmarried; but with their relatives who shared their fortunes, they may probably be reckoned at the same number as the nobility. The civic notables, or bourgeoisie, comprising the untitled but educated and wealthy civilians, and especially the government officials, professional classes, and rich merchants, numbered about one hundred thousand families, or perhaps six hundred thousand individuals. Thus the total number of persons in what might properly be styled the ruling class was about a million. In the members of this class, or rather in their leaders, were summed up, the author assures us, 'pretty much the entire political capacity, information, and good sense of France. Outside of their heads the other twenty-six millions of brains contained but little else than dangerous and barren formulas. As they alone had commanded, negotiated, deliberated, and gov-

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erned, they were the only ones who understood men and things tolerably well, and consequently the only ones who were not completely disqualified for their management.' These classes, it may be added, were entirely independent of the mass of the people, and held their ruling position as a right. The nobles inherited their rank. The priests, to a large extent, owned their curacies. The civic officials inherited or bought their offices. Judgeships, magistracies, posts in the public departments, legal and administrative offices of all sorts throughout the kingdom, were private property, and were openly bought and sold. The author has not a word to say against this system. It is as admirable in his eyes as that of the purchase of military offices in England was to the wealthier classes of that country a few years ago, and for the same reason. It ensured that none but the rich and the well-nurtured should hold a position of authority.

What the result of this system was we all know very well, and if we did not, M. Taine's history would inform us. His work is the most formidable indictment that has yet been presented of a system which led directly to the horrors he has so well described—a system which made one person out of twenty-seven comfortable, well-taught, haughty, and exclusive, and left the other twenty-six ignorant, sorely taxed, ill-fed, and discontented. That coolest and keenest of observers, the banker-poet Rogers, made a remark in one of his 'table-talks,' which sums up the whole philosophy of this subject better than the three volumes of the exuberant and inconsequent French writer. He had visited France, he said, before and after each of the revolutions, and he had noticed that after every revolution the common people were fatter. The system which M. Taine admires and laments was simply an ingeniously devised method of government, under which the many were half starved, in order that the few might live in ease and luxury. The literary excellence of the work suffers from its one-sided and partisan character. The style, indeed, has still all the glow and richness which we expect to find. The flow and aptness of language, the clearness of statement, the nicety of discrimination, remain the same; and all these qualities, it should be added, are fairly reproduced in the English version. But in his eagerness to prove his case and produce an impression, the author overloads his pages with shocking incidents and descriptions, until they become wearisome and repulsive. Though many of the facts are new, in the main all seems old and hackneyed. Why should we read, expanded to a thousand pages, what was told, long before the French author was born, with still more splendor of style and far greater force of argument, by Burke in his famous 'Reflections,' and has been repeated by many writers since his day? The world has long since made up its mind on the subject. The most brilliant of essayists can add nothing to his reputation by a work which presents us in history nothing really novel, and for reasoning only a series of exploded paradoxes.