

**LORD JOHN RUSSELL
AND MR. MACAULAY ON
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION**

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Lord John Russell and Mr. Macaulay on the French Revolution by Philip Henry Stanhope

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PHILIP HENRY STANHOPE

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566.

1. *Causes of the French Revolution*. London. 1832.
 2. *Essay on Dumont's Souvenirs sur Mirabeau*.
Edinburgh Review, No. CX.
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THE first work mentioned on the title-page is generally believed to be the production of Lord John Russell. Some years ago his Lordship undertook what he called "Memoirs of the Affairs of Europe since the Peace of Utrecht," and of these he had already given two massy quartos to the world. Being now, however, diverted from the prosecution of his task by his construction of the Reform Bill, his correspondence with political unions, and his other useful public labours, he appears to have selected from his papers, for separate publication, some reflections on the most momentous revolution of modern times.

Of the second work on the title-page, Mr. T. B. Macaulay, we understand, avows himself the author. It appeared last autumn in a contemporary journal. As such it would seem at first to be no fit object for our animadversions. To review a review is directly contrary to the laws of literary

etiquette. But besides that in these reforming times we might justly plead the example of our betters for disregarding laws and etiquette, we consider the article in question not so much a review of M. Dumont, as an essay on the French Revolution; and we are desirous of examining conjointly the opinions of two members of the same administration on the same great political event.

The essay of our noble paymaster is pleasantly written, lively, and amusing; full of gossip and chit-chat, and carefully retailing all the jests of the day. Any one, however, who seeks in it long-sighted views, or statesmanlike reflections, will be most sadly disappointed. In fact, there never was a production which was less what it professed to be—in which the performance of the book lagged more grievously behind the promise of the title-page. In the first place, these ‘Causes of the French Revolution’ extend no further than the death of Louis the Fifteenth. The two first chapters contain a just, but very high-coloured description of the misgovernment during the latter years of that monarch. But they contain no attempt to prove that such misgovernment existed either before or since. The third chapter (twice as long as the other two together) gives us an account of the lives and personal adventures of the principal writers of that period, and more especially Voltaire and Rousseau. In all the two hundred and seventy-four pages of this pamphlet, it is almost incredible

how large a space is devoted to insignificant details. No less than three dinners are minutely described in different passages. The first, we are told, comprised 'good brown bread, made entirely of wheat;' 'a ham that looked very tempting;' 'a bottle of wine, the sight of which rejoiced the heart,' and 'a large omelette.' The next, seventy pages afterwards, consists of 'juicy vegetables and mutton of the valley, admirably roasted.' Of the third dinner the dishes are not recorded, but we are told that it began between five and six; that it lasted nearly two hours, and was followed by 'different childrens' games,' and especially 'the royal game of goose!' And such trifling, forsooth, is to pass for philosophy and history—for a critical inquiry into the real causes of the French Revolution!

We are also bound to say, that short as this pamphlet is, it affords conclusive proof that Lord John Russell is but slightly and superficially acquainted with the French language. Thus, for instance, in one of his favourite descriptions of a dinner, translated from Rousseau, he concludes by saying, that it was 'such as pedestrian never made before.' Now, the original French is *tel qu'autre qu'un piéton n'en connut jamais*; and we need hardly point out that these words do not bear the meaning which Lord John Russell gives them, but allude to the healthy appetite derived from a journey on foot—a mode of travelling which Rousseau fre-

quently practised, and which he highly extols in his *Emile*. Thus again, Lord John repeats a good, but somewhat threadbare jest, in the following words :—Madame du Deffand said, on being asked whether she could believe that St. Denys had walked a whole league with his head under his arm? *Et cependant ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.* Every critical reader of French must at once perceive that the words *et cependant* could never be the commencement of any sentence in answer to that question.

We might also, were it worth while, prove Lord John Russell to be very frequently mistaken, and blundering in even his slight sketches of the lives of Rousseau and Voltaire. To give only one instance : speaking of the children of the former being sent to the foundling-hospital, the noble paymaster observes, 'It was for telling this secret that he quarrelled for ever with Diderot.' Now this is wholly incorrect. This secret was known so early as 1751, as we find by a letter of Rousseau's to Madame de Francueil, on the 20th of April in that year, and it had even become a topic of common gossip amongst his neighbours at Paris.* Rousseau and Diderot continued on intimate terms for several years afterwards. Their final quarrel was connected with that of Madame d'Epinau, and did not take place till the winter of 1757.

* See on this point one of the notes to the later editions of Rousseau's works. (Vol. ii. p. 127, ed. 1822.)

We do not blame Lord John Russell for not being an accurate French scholar. But we do blame him for passing, under these circumstances, such very decided and presumptuous judgments on the old French manners and the old French government. We do blame him for saying, without a shadow of proof—nay, in opposition to all proof—that this government was ‘totally beyond all capability of improvement.’ We do blame him for thinking, that to collect a few gossiping anecdotes is to develop the origin of a great national convulsion.

Mr. Macaulay’s is evidently a mind of a very different order. From his political opinions we differ still more widely than from Lord John Russell’s; but we trust that no difference of political opinions will ever restrain us from both appreciating and acknowledging his talents. His speeches in parliament, like his political or historical essays, have been distinguished by rich stores of reading and remarkable energy of language. His essay on M. Dumont, which we are now to consider, is, as all the rest, full of plausible theories and of ingenious illustrations. Of his style, indeed, both in speaking and writing, we cannot altogether approve. It does not give us so much the idea of a great orator as of a man who has taught and trained a great orator. It is too much the style of a rhetorician. With him antithesis is not an occasional ornament, but a constant material;—with him every

idea is systematically broken into short rugged sentences, and every period worked up for effect, in the manner of a peroration. Thus, separately considered, each is splendid, but when we come to view the whole together, we are dazzled with the universal glare—we are stunned with the universal declamation. In fact, Mr. Thomas Macaulay is in prose exactly what Mr. Thomas Moore is in poetry. This system of writing has made Mr. Moore an admirable lyrist; but it has not supported him whenever he has tried a longer and a loftier flight, like that of Lalla Rookh. Thus, also, we think that Mr. Macaulay would clearly perceive the faults of his style were he to use it in any longer historical work, such as that which he has announced on the restoration of the Bourbons. We hope, however, that he will take our well-meant warning: and we point out his errors the more freely, since they admit of correction—since they proceed from false taste, and not at all from inadequate powers.

The text of Mr. Macaulay's discourse—we mean the *Souvenirs sur Mirabeau* of M. Dumont—is, we think, the ablest and most important work that has yet appeared on the first stages of the French Revolution. We have lately read it a second time with attention. It has very much altered our previous opinions as to the abilities both of its author and of its object. It has made us think far better of Dumont's—it has made us think far worse of Mirabeau's. We had hitherto looked upon M.