

**THE FRENCH REVOLUTION  
AND NAPOLEON IN  
LITERATURE AND  
CARICATURE**

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The French Revolution and Napoleon in Literature and Caricature by George H. Sargent

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*Attest:*

*George H Sargent*



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THE following article was originally written for *The Literary Collector*, but circumstances preventing the prompt appearance of that periodical, it has been printed privately in a limited edition, for presentation purposes.





THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND  
NAPOLEON IN LITERATURE  
AND CARICATURE

THERE is no more fevered portion of the world's history than was comprehended in France between the fall of the Bastille and the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. The French Revolution was cosmopolitan. It was the protest of the ages against the growing usurpation of power. The hour developed a man. Admiration for a transcendent genius, gratitude for services to the nation, a crying need of order, made Napoleon Bonaparte emperor of the French. His downfall was due to the fact that he divorced liberty and civil equality, which were the principles of the French Revolution, and attempted the impossible in trying to make a nation free without making free the individuals who composed that nation. Yet from July 14, 1789, to June 18, 1815, the world was in travail for the birth of a new and larger freedom, and that freedom was born only



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when the world had suffered nigh unto death.

It is but natural that such a time led to a literature and that the collectors of books and portraits have not neglected this period. The library of Mr. A. D. S. Bell of Cambridge, Massachusetts, undoubtedly contains the largest collection of English literature and portraiture relating to the French Revolution and Napoleon to be found anywhere in this country. Curiously enough this collection grew (and every true collection grows and is not made) out of the collector's interest as a boy in the writings and life of Voltaire, who once said that no rare book was valuable because a really valuable book could never become rare. From reading the lives of Voltaire and Rousseau and Tom Paine and LaFayette an interest was naturally awakened, which led to a deeper study than the ordinary course of reading would give, in the French Revolution. Mr. Bell was fascinated as a boy with the story of the life of LaFayette, told as it always has been told, with an extravagance of laudation. Some day in the not far distant future, he believes, the halo will be removed from the head of one who, though the friend of Washington, permitted the death of the discrowned widow of Louis, the "once brightest of queens," Marie Antoinette.

Thus do the collector's ideas grow with his accumulated and accumulating treasures. That the collection is not generally known will not surprise

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book collectors. Great collections, like that of the late Frederick W. French, grow best in the dark. To many close friends of men like Mr. French and Mr. Bell it comes as a revelation that they are interested in book collecting. And the surprise is the greater when one recognizes the years of labor it has taken, the unremitting study of catalogues, and the enlisting of agents in all parts of the world where such material might be secured, to build up a collection which stands at the head of its class.

To gather the contemporaneous literature relating to the history of such a period of the world's life as the French Revolution, seems an impossible task. Even to assemble the literature in English relative to that great past is to bring about a constant mental unquiet. The dissonance of the judgments of contemporaries, the strange mixtures of the comic and the tragic, the domestic and the heroic, the records falsified and distorted by prejudice, the pictorial glorification, the humorous, silly and venomous caricatures and broadsides, the mere number of books and papers to be handled, bewilder the mind.

Yet the collection of such material richly repays. The interest in it grows—grows from within outward, the collection itself expanding like the bark of a tree. It would be easier and much less expensive to limit one's self to a smaller field; to collect eulogies or caricatures of Napoleon alone; to gather narratives of the horrors of the Revolution. Yet

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such a collection would be of little real value because of its asymmetry. It is only by gathering everything, good and bad, the commonplace narratives of the time and the real "nuggets," that the collector reaches anything like completeness and reality. The unity in a collection so secured is real, if it is not artistic. It has coherence, along with its heterogeneity. Thus alone do we gather, as Mr. Bell has gathered through years of untiring industry, the materials for true history. The lives of the leaders of the Terror, the stories of the times in which they lived, the contemporary accounts of the trials, the history of the struggles of the three Estates, the sordid recital of deeds of meanness and passion, the grim relations of prisons and executions, all are needed to tell the story of the Revolution. And to follow Napoleon through his career, from Corsica to Italy and Egypt, through the coup d'état and the Consulate, through the Imperial regime, to Moscow, to Leipsic, to Elba, to Waterloo, to St. Helena, we must have, as here we find, contemporary histories, biographies real and fictitious, military reports, memoirs, trials, collections of state documents, newspapers, broadsides, portraits, prints, maps, plans, caricatures, autographs, medals. Such a collection becomes something worth infinitely more than the sum of its units. It is the Genius of History embodied in literature.