

Norman Hampson's Carlyle

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The tide was visibly setting towards Romanticism. With Carlyle it reached its flood. Carlyle's French Revolution (1837) is more like a series of volcanic explosions than a history. Although he had a shrewd eye for character, he was not much concerned with explaining either the motives of the revolutionaries or the sequence of events. Everything is illuminated by sudden flashes of lightning and smoke. Danton emerges for an instant: "Minister of Justice is his name but Titan of the Forlorn Hope and Enfant Perdu of the Revolution is his quality." Carlyle does not stop to explain why. Danton reappears briefly, to take his bow. "He had many sins [Carlyle does not say which] but one worst sin he had not, that of Cant. No hollow Formalist . . . but a real Man." From now onwards there was to be a good deal of emphasis—which would have pleased Danton—on his masculinity. In those days this was intended as a compliment. (Hampson, Danton 3)

THUS NORMAN HAMPSON (1922–2011) ON CARLYLE IN HIS *Danton* (1978). The gentle, courtly and unobtrusively learned Hampson seems a far cry from the combustible, combative, and censorious Carlyle, yet the passage invites a little sauce for the gander. In all Hampson's range of impressive books, published lectures, essays, reviews, and articles, Carlyle, perceived so shrewdly here, makes little other formal impact. Hampson does not stop to explain why the volcanics, explosions, noise, and smoke: he is not much concerned with the Carlyles' and their disciples' motives or their biographical events, at any rate not directly.

Let us begin with his coda, that Carlyle's impact was above all to assert Danton's masculinity, "in those days . . . a compliment." Hampson's Frenchness would have given him confidence in pronouncing on sexual matters, his Englishness

then if not later would have kept those pronouncements to a minimum. The coda radiates the warm, fleeting smile his pupils learned to love. Hampson had too much balance, and too much irony, to indulge in ancestral prating over descendants' excesses, and he assessed women (especially French women, such as his wife) much too seriously to be unduly defensive or capitulatory to feminism younger than his own, but he clearly enjoyed a mild mockery of nineteenth-century male chauvinism and twentieth-century emasculation.

Simultaneously he was circumnavigating the issue of Carlyle's sexual sterility or impotence, which needs to be recalled when Carlyle's worship of masculinity cries its hosanna. Macaulay thought persons sharing Danton's and Robespierre's best qualities identified or bonded with them accordingly.¹ Hampson here argues the contrary, and his thesis is probably correct for Carlyle and Danton. Carlyle rejected the suspicion of Frederick the Great's homosexuality (so much so as to increase the reader's suspicions of it), but even he would not have made Frederick his most interminable hero/subject from admiration of his masculinity. Unspoken by Carlyle or Hampson, yet glaringly implicit is the contrast from Robespierre, to whose incorruptibility (not claimable for Danton) Carlyle attached his ill-founded adjective "sea-green," recalling the serpentine/Satanic of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and its less explicit Scriptural foundation. Robespierre, especially when flanked by Saint-Just, contrasted sharply with the Danton masculinity. Certainly this was Danton's view, as recorded in one of the few Dantonian farewells the ruthlessly judicious Hampson would authenticate. He granted Danton's instruction that his head should be shown to the public, worth the beholding, as likely authentic as any. Carlyle's chapter—headed "Danton, No Weakness!"—was ignored, perhaps because of its supreme masculinity (cutting short his lament for the wife he would never see again), perhaps because its masculinity was Carlyle's reason for aggrandizing it. In Hampson's Danton it was supplanted by less elegant but no less masculine accredited next-to-last words:

¹ See Macaulay, "Bertrand Barère" (1844): "Danton and Robespierre were indeed bad men; but in both of them some important parts of the mind remained sound" (*Works* 7: 125).

Danton could hardly have been surprised by the verdict, and, as he had told the court, he was not afraid of death. Riouffe, who was in the same prison, said he overheard Danton swearing a good deal and talking, ostensibly to Westermann who was in the next cell, but actually to the public and to posterity. "I'm leaving everything in a frightful mess. There's not one of them who knows anything about government. . . . If I left my balls to Robespierre and my legs to Couthon [a paralytic] the Committee of Public Safety could last a bit longer." According to Riouffe, he spoke a good deal about trees and nature.² In the end, Falstaff had taken over from Mark Antony. (*Danton* 174)

Thus the penultimate paragraph of Hampson's *Danton*. It is easier to read than any of Carlyle's riddles, as the long-suffering editors of *The French Revolution* bore witness. Carlyle could not have printed it, though he drew elsewhere on Riouffe, whose compassion for his fellow-prisoners the hard Borderer reciprocated. Kenneth Fielding and David R. Sorensen have identified 56 uses of Shakespeare in the book, most of them uncredited. Hampson was therefore in full Carlylean key in his view that "Falstaff had taken over from Mark Antony." Like Carlyle, he expected his readers to know their Shakespeare, and had little patience to waste on those who did not.

Hampson was probably thinking of Antony and Cleopatra 4.3.15-19:

1 *Sold.* Hark!
 2 *Sold.* Music i' the air.
 3 *Sold.* Under the earth.
 4 *Sold.* It signs well, does it not?
 3 *Sold.* No.
 1 *Sold.* Peace, I say! What should
 this mean?
 2 *Sold.* 'Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved,
 Now leaves him.

² See the words of the Hostess (formerly Mistress Quickly) in Shakespeare, *Henry V* 2.3.16: "[Falstaff's] nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a [babbl'd] of green fields." Did this passage prompt Hampson's thought of Falstaff as Danton's last role?

Hampson was not denying the heroic in Danton. In fact, for Danton to abandon the role of Antony was to reassert his previous possession of it. In opening Danton's biography, Hampson had emphasized his subject's cultivation of Shakespeare: "Danton . . . had . . . in his library in 1793 . . . eight volumes of 'Schakespeare,' who at that time had few readers in France" (20–21; eight-volume editions were in wide use on both sides of the Anglophone Atlantic from the mid-century). Hampson wanted his readers to reflect on whether Danton was consciously imagining himself in such theatrical roles, or indeed unconsciously, which seems implied by his abandonment of Antony when Antony was abandoned by Hercules. "Danton, no weakness!" would still have been consistent with Antony. "Show my head to the people" was not, especially for the Shakespearian hero who had so effectually shown Caesar's body to the mob. But "show my head to the people" flowed naturally from someone no longer playing Antony, yet long used to having done so. Shakespeare's Antony would have known all too well how anti-climactic such an exhibition of himself would have been, especially before the Roman mob mastery of whom he had abdicated with "Let Rome in Tiber melt."

The role of Falstaff certainly fitted the Danton insisting Robespierre should have his balls and Couthon his legs. The latter allusion was true Falstaff: insulting, callous, contemptuous of disability, and yet with derision scraped away, a compliment, acknowledging Couthon's potential had Nature made him a whole man. It was particularly consistent with the Falstaff of *Henry IV, Part 1* 5.1.125–41, where Falstaff realistically assesses the uselessness of honor, and if grosser than the language Shakespeare or the Lord Chamberlain permitted Sir John to use, "balls" was an eighteenth-century commonplace device when the tone appeared to need lowering. George Townshend, heir to the family viscountcy, caricatured his commander the puritanical James Wolfe at Quebec, having him tell French suppliants for clemency, "*Mes ordres sont rigides: pour chaque homme, un bal, pour chaque femme, deux*" (Hibbert 132). Danton's implication of Robespierre as eunuch or impotent was an elegant revenge on his executioner and former colleague, and Hampson in finding Falstaff in the lampoon-making also

invited readers to make Robespierre the fat knight's Prince Hal, ultimately to betray and to degrade him. If anything, Robespierre seems the more humane of the two, and Henry V certainly rivaled him in the number of Frenchmen he slaughtered. Even so, there was still the wry compliment: had Robespierre only been enough of a man, he might have been able to preserve the regime as long as necessary.

II.

French historians of the 1789–95 Revolution sometimes refer to Norman Hampson as being one of the “English school.” Its only sensible meaning is that he was English: it will not even do to say or imply that the predominant quality of his being English lay in his conviction, however concealed, of the importance of being English. Hampson did not have to prove himself to be English. He seems to have had little identity formed in University College Oxford, which many if not most Oxonians would imagine the defining phase of his apprenticeship, but which seems to have mattered most to Hampson by giving him a teacher who passionately enjoyed his subject, evangelized it, and wrote memorably about it (his reverence had by now given way to atheism), the Reverend James Matthew Thompson (1878–1956). As late as 1991 Basil Blackwell advertized on the back of Hampson's *Saint-Just* (after listing Hampson's own studies of Danton, Robespierre, and his *Prelude to Terror*), Thompson's *Napoleon I* (1951, now “reissued after an absence of twenty-five years”) and *Robespierre* (1935), whose single-sentence blurb here was simply “J. M. Thompson's *Robespierre* is still the best biography that there is.’ Norman Hampson.” This could never have occurred without Hampson's permission and probably appeared by his command (at 70, and first president of the Society for the Study of French History and Fellow of the British Academy, he could command). No other historian's work appeared on that book jacket. Their age-difference of 44 years strengthened Hampson's devotion: a North-Englishman all his life, he would not be ashamed of reverence where it was due, although his fellow-Northerner A. J. P. Taylor heard Thompson as an under-graduate with no formal recollection save autobiographical amusement at following in his job. Taylor did not add that on succeeding Thompson as lecturer in French history in

1943 he read the printers' proofs for Thompson's *The French Revolution* and won hearty thanks.³

Both Thompson and Hampson used literature to open up the past, sometimes in unusual ways. Hampson drew readers' attention to Danton's exceptionalism as a young Frenchman by wielding all Shakespeare while also pointing out that "Danton was to be one of the few revolutionaries who did not regard himself as a latter-day Roman. His uniquely blunt speeches owed little to classical models and imagery, and the classical texts in his library were all in French, English or Italian translations. He could both read and speak English and he had a reading knowledge of Italian" (*Danton* 20). We have already seen Hampson's lightning use of Shakespeare in the conclusion to his *Danton*. The inference he left to his readers is that if Danton modeled himself on Antony, it would not be Antony of Plutarch or any other ancient writer (least of all Cicero) but the Antony of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Similarly, Thompson employed Shakespeare to enhance his audience's comprehension when he used *Hamlet* to provide chapter-epigraphs for his study of Napoleon III (with Napoleon I as Hamlet's view of his father, not, as the first Napoleon really was, his uncle):

Yet he was a man too small for the great things he set out to do; too prone to be led by weak or bad friends; too quick to take dreams for facts; one who walked in his sleep, and woke too late to save a fall. And so I have been led to put at the head of each scene of his life some lines from the play in which a brave and wise young prince, called to mend a deep wrong done to his house, and born to set right a world that is out of joint, finds that the task is too much for him, and that he has not the strength to make his dreams come true" (*Louis Napoleon* 322).

Carlyle, celebrant of Prussian victory in 1870, would have sneered. But he would not have sneered at the use of Shakespeare to deepen historical perception; he after all did make Shakespeare his climactic "Hero as Poet":

³ See Taylor, introduction, *A Personal History*, and Thompson, *The French Revolution* (1944), introduction.

August Wilhelm Schlegel has a remark on his Historical Plays, *Henry Fifth* and the Others, which is worth remembering. He calls them a kind of National Epic. Marlborough, you recollect, said, he knew no English History but what he had learned from Shakspeare. There are really, if we look to it, few as memorable Histories. The great salient points are admirably seized; all rounds itself off, into a kind of rhythmic coherence; it is, as Schlegel says, *epic*;—as indeed all delineation by a great thinker will be. (*Heroes* 93)

We can see readily enough what Marlborough would have learned from Shakespeare, notably how military conquest abroad could strengthen a shaky (and ultimately doomed) claim to rule at home. Had Thompson's application not been for Napoleon III, Carlyle might have agreed that the historian might enhance his understanding of the past by the study of a play about a prince who did not exist.

Thompson apart, Oxford does not seem to have weighed too heavily in the making of Hampson's intellect. He was born in Greater Manchester; his school was Manchester Grammar; he would teach at Manchester, Newcastle, and York Universities. This limitation to the English North was probably not coincidental. The historic rivalry of York and Lancaster descended readily enough to sporting hostilities between their shires, but the mutual distaste of the English North and South (more particularly South-East) is a prime detriment to the course of English political life. Scotland may be feeling nationalistic today, but English Northerners and Scots find mutual affection in common bluntness and the common enemy. Hampson was far too gentle to exhibit provincial aggression, but his honorary degree was bestowed by Edinburgh, and his actual doctorate was French, from the Sorbonne. World War II rather than Oxford made him the cosmopolitan who sought French as well as English historical training. He learned his multiculturalism from war service on the sea (having completed only one year at Oxford, 1940–41, before enlisting in the Royal Navy). He recalled the experience in a memoir that was as amusing and shrewd as any of his craft have left us. Its title sparkled with self-deflation: *Not Really What You'd Call a War* (2000), his last book. He might have called it *Historian at Sea*, since his own naïveté is one of its slightly studied charms. The tone had some likeness

to Carlyle in correspondence, and the ironies, if not up to Jane Welsh Carlyle's standards, would not have lost her respect. Both Thomas and Jane would have savored Hampson's disgust with what he termed naval "pusserdom": "Spit and polish became ends in themselves and doing things in the textbook way took precedence over getting the right results. It was an invasive mentality that drove the pusser to try to regulate every aspect of other people's lives in accordance with King's Regulations and Admiralty instructions" (14).

Hampson's war service induced neither chauvinism nor iconoclasm, but he would regard *Catch 22* (1961) as a very reliable account of what World War II armed service bred and entailed. What he saw and heard put his past into perspective. Contemplating class assumptions in status regulations, he reflected that "anyone at Oxford could be regarded as a temporary acting gentleman." He had necessarily to lose a little of his near-pacifism, but was required to take part in a St. George's Day pageant at the Albert Hall, where "I was not greatly impressed by the selective view of 'Our Island Story' and revolted by the crude and hysterical attempt to conscript the Almighty on the Allied Side" (*Not Really* 2, 14). This fastidious morality was exemplary to his future profession, but was shared by few historians in wartime, whatever their level of proficiency. It meant that his future identity as a French historian, which discovered him during the war when he volunteered for liaison work among the Free French, would mean a lifetime's love of a foreign culture—he married the sister of one of his wartime comrades—but with small signs of a convert's rose-red visions. He noted grimly that while the French sailors condemned the Vichy régime's collaboration with the Nazis, they might still respect its puppet leader, the World War I hero Marshal Pétain, and, much more deplorably, some agreed with Vichy's anti-Jewish policies (which, whether the sailors knew it or not, were effectively sending the Jews into the hands of their Nazi exterminators).

What Hampson saw convinced him that he was witnessing an episode in the long shadow of the French Revolution. Examples gross as earth exhorted him (he enjoyed purloining the occasional line from Shakespeare to invite a smile or to deflate his own rhetoric). He would interrupt his classical essay

“The French Revolution and its Historians” with an anecdote that later appeared in his memoir:

Tocqueville worked mainly on administrative history, which led him to stress something that was denied by everyone else: instead of presenting the Revolution as a clean break and a new start, he saw it as accelerating a process of bureaucratic centralization that was already under way in 1789. What he had in mind was brought home forcibly to me one autumn day in 1944 when a rowing boat put out from the French coast towards the Free French warship in which I was serving. It carried a policeman who tried—admittedly without much conviction—to arrest one of the ship’s officers on the ground that he had “deserted” (i.e. escaped to join the Free French forces) two or three years before. Occupations and Liberations might come and go but the files apparently went on for ever. Tocqueville would not have been amused, but he would not have been surprised either. It was perhaps his emphasis on continuity that led Englishmen to regard him as the most penetrating of French nineteenth-century historians of the Revolution [though not of commentators on the British Isles]. In his own country he was treated with cautious respect but his message was not to be taken up for over a century. It did not tell Frenchmen what most of them wanted to believe. (224–25).

Whatever the points of contact between Carlyle’s French Revolutionary studies and Hampson’s, continuum was hardly one. It might be said that Carlyle had anticipated Hampson’s volcanic classification in the commencement of his review-essay on “The Parliamentary History of the French Revolution,” published in 1837, the year of *The French Revolution’s* initial publication: “A huge explosion, bursting through all formulas and customs; confounding into wreck and chaos the ordered arrangements of earthly life; blotting-out, one may say, the very firmament and skyey loadstars,—though only for a season. Once in the fifteen-hundred years such a thing was ordained to come” (*Historical Essays* 219). Hampson produced some of his own most interesting effects by awareness of where continuum might be, as he showed in his *Danton* where the reader beholds the subject at work building up a political machine and making political calculations as though revolutions growing all around him were

simply historical events to which the astute politician tempers his wind (the wind a prime commodity in Danton's case).

One reads the book and marvels that in addition to all else, revolution could simply prove a continuation of politics by other means. Acton had concluded his Cambridge lecture on Robespierre: "Only this is certain, that he remains the most hateful character in the forefront of history since Machiavelli reduced to a code the wickedness of public men" (300). But Hampson's Danton seemed much more the Machiavellian product, not particularly unique or supreme in his opportunism and pragmatism, simply putting his talents to work on economic calculations of his needs and assets. Certainly Robespierre and Saint-Just, to name but two, could be as Machiavellian as the next man, if Danton were the next man. Granted also that Danton could be visibly led less by opportunism than by kindness and generosity. Such qualities are, happily, not limited to revolutionary generations. For that matter Carlyle in his concluding account of Robespierre singled out his landlord's love of him, his brother's death for him, thus unconsciously preempting a strike on Acton, who as though in retaliation, declared that Carlyle's *The French Revolution* "remain[s] one of those disappointing storm-clouds that give out more thunder than lightning" (358–59). Continuum stretched out its stabilizing hand even in the characterization of Carlyle's book.

Continuum also united Carlyle's and Hampson's sense of the Revolution as France's identity. Carlyle captured it better than he realized in the opening to his essay on "The Parliamentary History":

To those who stood present in the actual midst of that smoke and thunder, the effect might well be too violent: blinding and deafening, into confused exasperation, almost into madness. These on-lookers have played their part, were it with printing-press or with the battle-cannon, and are now departed; their work, such as it was, remaining behind them;—where the French Revolution also remains. And now, for us who have receded to the distance of some half-century, the explosion becomes a thing visible, surveyable: we see its flame and sulphur-smoke blend with the clear air (far *under* the stars); and hear its uproar as part the sick noise of life;—loud, indeed, yet embosomed too, as all

noise is, in the infinite of silence. It is an event which can be looked on; which may still be execrated, still be celebrated and psalmodied; but which it were better now to begin understanding. (*Historical Essays* 219–20)

A century and a half later, Hampson confronted what looked like the same agenda with the same urgency, as he opened his essay, “The French Revolution and its Historians”: “The profound disruption of French society caused by the Revolution of 1789 and its Napoleonic sequel made the country very difficult to govern for the next hundred and fifty years.” Writing in 1988 Hampson found an ominous means of telling the British what the Revolution might mean to the French: “[H]istory is more urgent in Northern Ireland than in England” (211). Hampson in 1988—like Carlyle in 1837—saw a turning-point from France’s self-intoxication with the Revolution of 1789: “François Furet understood very well what he was doing when he called the first section of his *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1978) ‘The French Revolution is Over.’ For the first time, Frenchmen are free to treat their Revolution as history rather than as politics” (214). Hampson’s reasons for not including Carlyle in his French Revolution historiography echoed Carlyle’s reasons for writing the history of the French Revolution. An irony as genial as Hampson’s own seems to hover over the last paragraph of his essay: “In the nature of things, any survey of the historiography of the French Revolution must always be an interim report until historians cease to think about it at all. Nevertheless, Furet is probably right: it *is* over and its bicentenary is as good an occasion as any to celebrate its demise as theology and its reincarnation as history” (234). Certainly, it is as good an occasion as its semi-centenary.

III.

Hampson’s *The Enlightenment* (1968) at present seems likely to prove his most enduring work, despite the great advances made by recent scholarship in its concerns (the book is scarcely aware of America, and its Scotland seems a mere rural address). It exemplifies Hampson’s genius in measuring intellectual impact and its distance from what it infected, in this case the theme of the Enlightenment on the French Revolution, a theme that Hampson pursued most notably and judiciously in two

later works, *Will and Circumstance*, *Montesquieu*, *Rousseau and the French Revolution* (1983), and *Saint-Just* (1991). Seldom has so complex a topic been made so attractively accessible. Its author is not an unavoidable presence, as Carlyle must be, but even in a work so immune from anachronism the reader may find a personal imprint: “Despite the enormous variations within European society, the gentlemen of Europe formed more of a social club in the eighteenth century than at any time before or since. Court society almost everywhere, and the gentry in the more civilised areas, shared a common language and a common culture” (71). This is as close as Hampson comes to a personal credo. It is an unspoken cause for choice of a research field because Hampson liked that kind of Europe.

Perhaps because his North English soul was so North English, it wanted its owner to take it, good-neighbor fashion, to people possessed of its own friendliness and frankness with enough reserve for self-respect. He did not term himself Francophile or claim honorary Frenchmanship, but he would speak of the French side of his family after his marriage. A permanent feeling that a spouse’s family is now one’s own makes a wonderful gift in a marriage, but not all marriages may have this gift, however happy. It makes nonsense of allusions to Hampson’s being in an “English school” of historians. If anything, he was a French doctor with French war service and a French wife who happened himself to be (North) English. There are many ways for British historians of France to think French: observant Roman Catholics among them will have some advantages, as shown by my late Edinburgh colleagues Maurice Larkin and James McMillan, both friends of Hampson.⁴ Yet most outsider historians reveal their alien status as Hampson found in Carlyle. He himself had no apologies to make and he did not make them. He wrote his French studies from the inside looking outward.

Climaxing his life of scholarship and teaching, Hampson’s *The Perfidy of Albion: French Perceptions of England during the French*

⁴James McMillan contributed “Religion, Revolution and Religion: Grégoire and the Search for Reconciliation” to the Festschrift for Hampson published in 2004, ed. by Malcolm Crook, William Doyle, and Alan Forrest. Hampson traveled to Edinburgh in 2004 for Maurice Larkin’s memorial service, when I met him.

Revolution (1998) closed with thoughts on French and British divergence on the Revolution of 1789–95:

As Rousseau had foreseen, it proved difficult to identify emotionally with the human race as a whole, and what the French revolutionaries came to substitute for the old order was a new sense of devotion to the patrie. This soon came to mean the one country that had had the vision and the energy to transform itself in accordance with the new doctrines. The principles might be universal, but only the French had known how to identify and implement them. The outcome was a kind of ideological nationalism, quite distinct from the British sense of patriotism, that became part of the revolutionary legacy. (164)

This was a first-class contribution to historical understanding, but would have been a higher First had Hampson lifted the lid on British patriotism and asked whether more affinities were to be found in Irish, Scottish, and Welsh nationalism. After all, the two greatest eighteenth-century icons of Scots and Irish nationalists, Robert Burns and Theobald Wolfe Tone respectively, were profoundly influenced by the French Revolution and their cultural legacies to their country-folk reflected it more than their modern votaries may see. Hampson was presumably thinking of the most British moment in world history, 1940–45, during which he himself discovered his French contemporaries. In the *Perfidy of Albion*, he distinguished French from British nationalism:

Radicals who were neither French nor British tended to stress the universal message of the French Revolution and to see themselves as its heirs. . . . It was the revolution and its message of universal human rights that was to inspire European radicalism, rather than the traditional practices of the islanders. The Union Jack was a historical synthesis; the newly emerging European nations, tended to adopt their own versions of the *tricolor*. Even the British, from 1832 onwards, were in their piecemeal way, to concede that there was more to politics than the cautious adjustment of tradition that was so dear to Burke in his latter years. What the British did was their own concern. Elsewhere, as Metternich put it, “When Paris sneezes Europe catches cold.” . . . All that was for the future. Meanwhile, for the British, the revolutionary and Napoleonic period tended

to reinforce old attitudes. . . . Bonaparte's seizure of power . . . restored the old vision of France as despotic and aggressive. St. George had got his dragon back. . . . Old sympathizers gradually fell away.

He made appropriate quotations and citations from Arthur Young, Robert Burns, Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge, and Thomas Paine, and summed up: "It was all rather comfortably familiar and the message was obvious: the revolutionary leopard had not changed its national spots" (165). The 76-year-old Hampson was taking a very courteous farewell of his British colleagues, although he had yet to publish the war (or non-war) memoir that could tell them how he could so confidently question British credentials for writing the history of the French revolution while doing so himself. Ironically, one point on which twentieth-century French and English could see eye to eye was a common blindness to Scottish identity within British, where Hampson shared the difficulty of coming to terms with Carlyle's Scottish self-baptized Englishness.

J. M. Thompson remains the most English force in Hampson's education as a historian. The latter would have remembered that Thompson's training had been in theology for a faith that he had discarded, and that he encountered him as an undergraduate listening to an honorary fellow of another College (St. Mary Magdalen, as Thompson in his devout atheism was punctilious in reminding his more thoughtless juniors, its correct name should be). Oxford or no Oxford, what Thompson offered the youthful Hampson was the guidance of a brilliant, creative, self-schooled amateur historian, one of the last of the great British amateurs descended from Clarendon, Robertson, Hume, Gibbon, Scott, Macaulay, and Carlyle. Acton could claim professionalism, both in his six years at Munich under Döllinger and as Regius Professor at Cambridge and planner of the *Cambridge Modern History*, but Thompson could claim a far cooler head on Robespierre and Carlyle than Acton.

While quietly setting aside Acton's damnation of Robespierre, Thompson gave him undue credit for charity to Carlyle, convincing himself that Acton concluded that Carlyle's "historical insight and dramatic sense triumphed over an inadequate study of authorities" (*Robespierre* 1: xxxi–xxxii). Acton, prone to the occupational hazard of archive-obsessed scientific historians to

drug themselves with gossip, gave his main emphasis on Carlyle to a story of his being scared from the British Museum Reading Room by a sneeze or by mutual antipathy with Anthony Panizzi (a condition more relevant to the 1850s when Panizzi was a power rather than the mid-1830s when he was a minor official exiled from his native Italy as a Carbonaro). Acton's conclusion to his bibliographical assessment inflated its rhetoric in inverse proportion to its reliability. Of Carlyle's style, he noted that "the vivid gleam, the mixture of the sublime with the grotesque, make other opponents forget the impatient verdicts and the poverty of settled fact in the volumes that delivered our fathers from thralldom to Burke" (*French Revolution* 358–59). However charitable, Thompson would ensure that Oxford students would get something sounder than Acton had dished out to the Cambridge of the 1890s.

In the 1920s Thompson published his own *Lectures on Foreign History*, the title of which showed how low eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism had sunk by the early twentieth-century. Fittingly, he confronted Carlyle on the eighteenth century:

What, then, did the century produce? "To me," writes *Carlyle*, "the eighteenth century had nothing grand in it [this was before he wrote *Frederick the Great*] except that grand universal Suicide, named French Revolution, by which it terminated its otherwise most worthless existence with at least one worthy act." This is to put a truth rather hysterically. The eighteenth century was neither destitute of grandeur nor of worthy acts. Its suicide, like most suicides, was a crime as well as a release. But more. The French Revolution was not a detached event, a breach in the continuity of the eighteenth century: it was a natural and necessary outcome of it. (210)

Was Thompson being disingenuous or forgetful in square-bracketing the passage as anterior to *Friedrich*? He was literally correct: it is in the second paragraph of the second section of the first chapter of the first book of Carlyle's Prussian epic. But for the rest, Thompson showed how the student might tackle Carlyle (which was the way Oxbridge tutors might talk to students in those days). This exposure to the idea of continuum made Hampson receptive to its phenomenon when he encountered it in wartime in Autumn 1944. Alternatively, his wartime

experience opened Hampson up to the argument all the more when he encountered it after the war.

Thompson's great strength was to show Hampson the importance of positive response in place of the normal malice of less articulate academics. A fascinating if fanciful speculation as to what the few surviving Girondists might have made of other survivors or historians in the mid-nineteenth century ushered in Carlyle to the pages of Thompson's *The French Revolution*: "Did they fight the old battles over again? Or did they ever read, in that 'wild savage book,' born in the 'blackness, whirl-wind, and sorrow' of Carlyle's soul, eighteen years before, one of the shrewdest pages ever written upon the failure of the Gironde?" Thereupon he quoted from Carlyle's *The French Revolution* Part III, Book III, Chapter II, the passage in which the author labeled the "weapons of the Girondins" as "Political Philosophy, Respectability and Eloquence." Carlyle then speculated whether this outlook might "bring some glimmering of light and alleviation to the Twenty-five Millions, who sat in their darkness, heavy-laden, till they rose with pikes in their hands." His response was emphatic:

The ground to be fought for is Popularity: further, you may either seek Popularity with the friends of Freedom and Order, or with the friends of Freedom Simple; to seek it with both has unhappily become impossible. With the former sort, and generally with the Authorities of the Departments, and such as read Parliamentary Debates, and are of Respectability, and of a peace-loving monied nature, the Girondists carry it. With the extreme Patriots again, with the indigent Millions, especially with the Population of Paris, who do not read so much as hear and see, the Girondins altogether lose it, and the Mountain carries it. It must be owned likewise that this rude blustering Mountain has a sense in it of what the Revolution means; which these eloquent Girondins are totally void of. Was the Revolution made, and fought for, against the world, these four weary years, that a Formula might be substantiated: that Society might become more *methodic*, demonstrable by logic; and the old Noblesse with their pretensions vanish? (2: 247-48)

This was the Carlyle that Hampson discovered from Thompson. But Thompson's *Robespierre* (1935) thought itself ill-served by Carlyle:

His Robespierre—"that anxious, slight, ineffectual-looking man, under thirty (but he was thirty-one), in spectacles; his eyes (were the glasses off) troubled, careful; with upturned face, snuffing dimly the uncertain future times; complexion of a multiplex atribiliar colour, the final shade of which may be the pale sea-green;" "most consistent, incorruptible of thin acrid men"—"acrid, implacable-impotent; dull-drawling, barren as the Harmattan wind"—is a cruelly life-like caricature. Unfortunately, Carlyle's failure to see the constructive side of the Revolution (he called it "the suicide of the eighteenth century"), and the passion which led him not to "investigate much more about it but to splash down what I know in large masses of colours, that it may look like a smoke and flame conflagration in the distance, which it is" (letter to Mrs Carlyle, 1836), blinded him to most of what is important in Robespierre. (*Robespierre* 1: xxxii)

And it was Robespierre on whom Norman Hampson would make his most controversial publication.

IV.

Hampson derived from no historiographical "school" in any strict sense of the word, but it is reasonable to think of him as the inspirational leader of one, British with the inadequacies that implies, coherent from its juniors' admiration for Hampson as opposed to dictatorship of the Acton or Namier variety. It was headed by William Doyle, Colin Haydon, Alan Forrest and included others visible from the contributors to Hampson's 2004 *Festschrift*, and from among his obituarists, and perhaps most telling, from among the contributors to the compilation *Robespierre*, edited by Haydon and Doyle in 1999. Was it coincidence that their book appeared a quarter-century after Hampson's? At any rate, the editors' opening salvo signaled Hampson's as the most daring approach the subject has received. They cited the panegyrics of Ernest Hamel and Acton's *fin-de-siècle* commination (his language more appropriate for obituaries of Dorian Gray or Professor Moriarty) and then followed Robespierre's historiographical fortunes to the twentieth century:

[H]e was "this great democrat" and "the immovable and incorruptible head of revolutionary Resistance" in

the eyes, respectively, of Albert Mathiez and Georges Lefebvre, whereas Richard Cobb reduced him to “a fumbling, prissy, routinal, comfort-loving, vaguely ridiculous, prickly little man.” It was in 1974 that Norman Hampson, in his *Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*, came clean about the problem with a frankness that is unusual among historians. Such, on occasions, are the inadequacies or the complexities of the evidence, that the book’s three fictional commentators—a clergyman who takes Robespierre’s side [perhaps inspired by Thompson?], a [Communist] party member, and a civil servant [shades of wartime pussedom?], who remorselessly scrutinises the Incorruptible’s deeds—frequently find it impossible to reach mutually satisfying conclusions. That historians’ own convictions can colour their interpretations, despite their professional ideals, is plainly a truism. It is the extent of the difficulty respecting Robespierre that is abnormal, and hence peculiarly disconcerting. (4)

The editors closed their introduction on “Robespierre After Two Hundred Years” with a grim comment on the fate of Hampson’s book in his own profession:

Hailed by Richard Cobb on its first appearance as brilliant, dramatic, a formidable achievement which made its subject human (praise indeed, given his loathing of ‘His Holiness’), it never made the impact it deserved among historians. No doubt its literary approach, the conversation between the characters, disconcerted them. . . . It brought out the ambiguities, uncertainties and genuine difficulties of interpretation thrown up by all the evidence about the man. Historians, perhaps, cannot forgive Hampson for refusing to take a final position on these complexities. Novelists must be allowed these privileges. (16)

Carlyle had a rougher passage with the contributors. The editors were even a little ungrateful for his illumination of the Robespierre paradox:

Whilst he projected himself as [the Revolution’s] embodiment in his speeches, there is a glaring asymmetry between the tumultuous, titanic events and the small, fastidious, bespectacled lawyer, lacking the hideous passion of Marat or the volcanic personality

of Danton. "O unhappiest Advocate of Arras," wrote Carlyle, always anxious to belittle him. (7)

Certainly Carlyle belittled Robespierre—e.g. conceding and even elevating his incorruptibility but sea-greening it on small and in fact inaccurate evidence—but the editors may have chosen the wrong example. When Carlyle was growing up the Lord Advocate was the most powerful man in Scotland.

Mark Cumming's "Carlyle's Seagreen Robespierre and the Perilous Delights of Picturesque History" in the Haydon-Doyle symposium made the charge clearer:

In Carlyle's treatment of Robespierre, we do not get what we get in J. M. Thompson's biography, for instance—the author reaching across the gulfs of time (and the English Channel) to recreate a mind differently constituted and differently situated from his own; we have an external caricature in the Hogarth-Dickens vein which always tends to oversimplify this complex man. . . . Carlyle does energise his text by directing divergent voices towards Robespierre, but these are not evidence of conflicting views, as in Norman Hampson's explicitly multivocal study of him, but merely different modes of negativity. As Carlyle plays cat-and-mouse with his subject, Robespierre is repeatedly bandied back and forth between the left paw of satire and the right paw of moral indignation. (190–91).

Be it so. But as we scorn the pettiness, the self-confessed inability to string the Odyssean bow among Hampson's detractors, was not their antipathy to *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* a fresh symptom of the same "pusserdom" that has dogged Carlyle's *The French Revolution* for the past 175 years? Whatever the superiority of Hampson's achievement, both men were trying to break out of a historiographical prison in which we might argue historians were locked in by Robespierre with the likelihood of inadequacy, not to say guillotining, of their results. Carlyle in *The French Revolution* and Hampson in *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* were striving to mine truth from shafts down which history supposedly cannot reach, not as a playwright or a novelist strives (as two centuries of art from Coleridge and Southey to Hilary Mantel bears witness), but through what might perhaps be imagined as the performance of an opera. The audience is firmly directed to

contemplate this opera from the perspective of the orchestra (as a totality and as individual foci), or even from that of its critics. We will have many visions and views of the opera, but what does or does not happen on the stage is no longer the primary concern.

My own object here was to discover what Carlyle meant to Hampson. I never really found the day-by-day character of his awareness of Carlyle, but I may have succeeded in showing points where Carlyle must have been visible and audible to him, even to the extent of his having firmly to pick him up and put him aside. Carlyle would also have the disadvantage of not being French, a criterion which would have enraged him. In his essay on "The Parliamentary History" he had gone to some self-interested lengths to show how superior he was to the recent historians of the Revolution, Thiers and Mignet. To judge from his assessment of these two in "The French Revolution and its Historians," Hampson might have agreed. He would have undoubtedly kept in mind that Thiers in 1870–71 was responsible for more deaths in Paris than the entire French Revolution had managed, never mind Robespierre's own contribution. But Hampson concluded his Robespierre book with a new voice in addition to the historian and his three critics. The speaker ends his narration: "Perhaps the best epitaph is Carlyle's: 'He had on the sky-blue coat he had got made for the Feast of the Être Suprême—O Reader, can thy hard heart hold out against that?'" (300). It was as though Hampson ended his opera with a salute to the one whose inspiration and pioneer work influenced his own, and inspired him to defy the creative conventions of history.

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