

Postscript

“Some kind of universal agnosticism”:
A Letter from Norman Hampson to
David R. Sorensen on
Carlyle’s *French Revolution*

*In November 2006, David R. Sorensen sent Norman Hampson (1922–2011) a draft copy of his introduction to the sources of Thomas Carlyle’s *The French Revolution (1837)*, which will be included in the forthcoming Strouse edition of the work. Sorensen asked Hampson whether he might have any comments, either about Carlyle as a historian or about his conception of history. Characteristically, Hampson responded promptly and generously, offering a typically detailed and succinct appraisal of the essay and the questions it raised about interpreting the past. He apologized in advance for his “incoherent views,” explaining that his wife Jacqueline Hampson (née Gardin), who was “very ill,” (and who later died in 2007) had only recently returned home from the local hospice. With inimitable modesty, he pledged to do “the best I can” in making sense of some of the issues involved. The editors are extremely grateful to Professor Hampson’s daughters Françoise and Michèle for permission to quote from his letter, which serves as a fitting postscript to the essay contributed by Owen Dudley Edwards.*



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Dear David Sorensen

. . . . Let me begin by saying how much I enjoyed your preface, which is sending me back to re-reading Carlyle's *French Revolution*, with a new perception of the issues involved.

We are very much on the same wave length when it comes to thinking about the factual and imaginative sides of history. There *are* facts—e.g. Robespierre was executed in 1794. He did not escape to England and eventually marry Queen Victoria. I think it's also a fact that a statesman cannot have been influenced by events of which he was unaware, although that's a more slippery question since it may or may not be susceptible to proof that he may have suspected them. 'Facts,' of one kind or another, are almost infinite in number, so that selecting the most significant and assembling them in the shape of a historical argument is to a large extent an exercise of one's historical imagination. Whether or not the end product is a demonstration of some kind of inevitable process is another matter. It may be there, although I failed to identify it, or I may have invented it. In the latter case, it may—but need not—be possible for you to demonstrate that my argument can be discredited by the discovery of more facts that I could not have known.

So far, so (obviously) good, but it seems to me that this is where the problem begins i.e. where does the imagination come from? In part, it seems to me a product of one's genetic make-up. No two individuals share exactly the same imagination. But it is also a product of one's experience, which is partly personal and partly derived from the general experience of one's generation and nationality. I.e. you and I may share the same conviction that X's explanation of Y is so overwhelmingly likely that we can take it as factual, but it could appear absurd to Aquinas or a Chinese historian of the next century. So, in one sense, there is a clear distinction between fact and imagination, but in another, a particular way of looking at things,

even if universally accepted by one's fellow-countrymen of the present generation, may be, wholly or in part, a reflection of the times in which we live. That is not true, it seems to me, of science in general, even if some scientific theories are eventually disproved, or at any rate, come to be disregarded.

I'm not sure where that gets us, unless the end product is some kind of universal agnosticism (but Robespierre *was* executed and his defeat did make a contribution to the future course of the revolution). Being the kind of person that I have become, I don't see any possible solution to the dilemma. If I happened to arrive at some kind of perception of the ultimate laws of historical development, that would be no more than a lucky guess on my part. It would not be accepted by all my contemporaries and I'm sure that it would strike my great-grandchildren as typical of the odd ways of thinking of my generation.

. . . . This is a pretty pathetic reply to your own hard thinking but I reckon it's about as far as I can go and I hope that it may be of some use to you.

One final word of apology: I was convinced (until I saw this invisible typing) that I had recently changed the ribbon of my machine. I do hope that you will be able to make it out, but if not, I don't think you will have missed anything worth regretting!

With warmest greetings & many thanks,

Norman Hampson.