

*H-France Review* Vol. 10 (October 2010), No. 172

William Doyle, *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. ix + 371 pp., bibliography, index. \$60.00(cl). ( ISBN 978-0-19-955985-5

Review by Doina Pasca Harsanyi, Central Michigan University.

During the last four decades or so, the nobility and its fate during the French Revolution, a subject long ignored in French historiography and generally relegated to the presumably gentler field of literary studies, has become one of the most exciting venues of historical research. The shift in perspective from social to political and cultural paradigms compelled historians to question prevailing beliefs which led to questions such as: “Was there an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-revolutionary France?” By asking this very question as early as 1972 William Doyle placed himself in the forefront of inquiries that began to reveal a much more fluid and complex picture of the nobility than the one emerging from the hitherto foremost analysis offered by social historians.[1] With each subsequent title, Doyle deepened and widened our understanding on the matter.[2] It is therefore with great anticipation that interested readers will open Doyle’s latest book on the nobility and they will not be disappointed. The book grew out of a study on the Society of the Cincinnati, the (partially) failed attempt of American and French veterans of the American War of Independence to organize themselves into a distinct association. That study grew into a wider inquiry into the rise and fall of the aristocracy, structured in ten chapters following the entire arc from “Aristocracy ascendant” (chapter one) to “Persecution” and “Ambiguous Aftermaths” (chapters nine and ten).

The first three chapters detail the world of eighteenth century nobility. The focus is on the assumption of natural inequality that sustained the sense of superiority nobles never questioned and which justified, at least in their eyes, guaranteed positions in the government and in the army as well as royal pensions and sundry privileges. The rationale for the nobility’s status as a self-perpetuating separate caste, entitled to the king’s largess and to the esteem of the rest of the mortals, was rooted in the medieval tradition of good social order through equilibrium between the three estates. Nobles formed the second estate of those who fight. They deserved exemption from the land tax on account of the “blood tax” paid in defense of the king and of the people, a higher calling supposed to generate a superior moral code which placed them above those who merely worked.

By the eighteenth century, as venality became the most widespread mechanism for achieving nobility, such literally fabled founding myths lost much of their credibility, without however losing their appeal. Unbroken links with past deeds accounted for the nobility’s collective sense of identity, which meant that disregard for mundane realities emerged as just another noble privilege, ultimately the justification for nobility being “that it needed none” (p. 56). Indeed, the cracks in the nobility’s hitherto unchallenged position at the top of the social, political, and moral hierarchy began to appear at the time

---

well-meaning observers were endeavoring to argue in favor of its utility. Be it Montesquieu's intermediate order as rampart against despotism or Coyer's expansion of gentlemanly activity to include commerce, merely attempting to explain why and how a distinct noble order could be useful to society meant that the question was asked, which in turn meant that a spell was broken. The question was in fact asked with increased frequency and eventually answered in the negative throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, culminating in devastating denunciations of the nobility as an alien and idle lot, detrimental to the entire society. Unsurprisingly, Sieyès's "What is the Third Estate?" the most famous and articulated piece in an avalanche of anti-aristocratic writings, was timed to coincide with the call for summoning the Estates General (1788).

Not that such persistent displays of rancor put a dent in most nobles' defiant sense of superiority, for many nobles were preoccupied with their own set of grievances, centered on the perception that they were losing ground to wealthy and well-connected lesser born people. Hence, as they all arrived at Versailles to the meeting of the Estates General in May 1789, third estate delegates expected relief from noble privileges and pretensions, while a vast majority of noble delegates expected relief from the current regime's reliance on bureaucrats, courtiers, and wealthy commoners. The collision course became apparent as soon as the work of the Estates General started in earnest. Before that, however, French nobles were offered, and missed, a valuable opportunity for drawing more realistic conclusions regarding their future fate: in Doyle's telling the controversy around the Society of the Cincinnati had all the makings of an ignored crystal ball (chapter four: "Aristocracy Avoided").

The founders of the Society of the Cincinnati, General Knox and a few fellow-officers more or less implicated in the almost-mutiny at Newburgh (1783), never intended to stir up controversy. They had in mind a "society of friends" dedicated to perpetuating the memory of the struggle for American independence—hardly a divisive event. The membership fee, understood to go to veterans in need, added a charitable side, but made Congress nervous because it implied that officers stood ready to defy the government should their needs remain unmet. To mitigate such fears, the founders adopted the Roman hero Cincinnatus as their model, indicating that they were, like Cincinnatus, prepared to return to peaceable occupations once the Republic no longer required their services. Theirs would be a non-political association of dignified veterans and nothing more.

Apparently the founders failed to grasp the reaction to the stipulation that the dignity in question was to stay in the family, allowing future generations to share in the pride of having been present at the birth of the Republic. Rules were debated and agreed upon, distinctive medals designed, and George Washington's commitment to serve as the first president of the society secured. What could go wrong? Almost everything, as it turned out, to the founders' embarrassment and Washington's growing exasperation. First, American observers loudly disapproved of the attempt at introducing distinctions between citizens, especially hereditary distinctions advertised for all to see through the wearing of ribbons and medals. Town meetings and even state legislatures in several states took up the issue, which only raised to the level of anxiety the general discomfort with "blood" distinctions, unseemly in a republic. In addition, the eligibility of foreigners coming, as John Adams pointed out, "from nations widely differing in their principles of government," was not calculated to assuage the fears of watchful republicans.

Matters only worsened after news of the society's founding reached France where Lafayette was tasked with recruiting the French membership. French officers deluged Lafayette with requests. In keeping with French army statutes, the quasi-totality of the officer corps belonged to the second estate. They were, hence, noblemen well versed in the art soliciting favors and not shy about their desire to distinguish themselves. They pressed for maximum flexibility in deciding the rules for eligibility, to make sure that each officer who participated, even from afar, even for short periods of time, even in subaltern positions, be allowed to join. Benjamin Franklin, still living in Paris, watched all this

---

clamoring with some amusement but also, and especially, with alarm at the prospect of seeing “an order of hereditary knights” transported to the United States. So did Adams, from his post in the Dutch republic, and so did eventually Lafayette himself.

While many of the founders suspected that a good number of their critics were moved by jealousy rather than principle, it was the principle that made the strongest impression on all concerned, American and French alike: why should heredity, known to bring nothing but trouble wherever it existed, be introduced in societies lucky enough not to have to deal with it? And when even veterans of impressive noble stock like the marquis de Chastellux condemned hereditary marks of distinction, Washington had no choice but to threaten to resign if the Society maintained it. In 1785 Mirabeau seized, with much gusto, the opportunity of thundering against noble privileges, prejudices, and pretensions to honor, and in the process heaped ridicule on the initial lofty aspirations of the Cincinnati. Finally, the beleaguered founding members ended up with a much diminished society, a social club of sorts rather than a proud fraternity and, maybe, political pressure group. The main import of the entire episode, Doyle concludes, was in its ability to function as catalyst for reinforcing aversion against hereditary aristocracy in America, possibly preempting the danger of a home-grown aristocratic caste in the United States.

In France, the arguments marshaled against tolerating even the appearance of hereditary aristocracy in a country freed from the historical burden of such an onerous social category added fuel to the slow burning fire against the legitimacy of noble claims. While it is not clear how widely read Mirabeau's pamphlet was, it is undeniable that many would-be revolutionaries were encouraged by America's example of a society without nobles, yet fully functional, orderly, and stable. Consequently, a great number of the delegates to the Estates General joined the debates better prepared to demand an end to noble privileges and to the notion of intrinsic noble superiority. Although the question was not asked right away, revolutionary events revealed that few Frenchmen were inclined to shed tears over the nobility's potential disappearance.

The account of the general cluelessness with which the vast majority of the nobility entered the Revolution is masterful and makes for absorbing reading. Doyle also turns his attention to the minority of well meaning liberal nobles who, inspired by the contemporary enlightened ethos of equality and freedom, volunteered the first moves to abolish noble privileges (August 1789) and noble titles (June 1790). Their story is not a happy one: once the National Assembly and the newly unleashed popular press tapped into the vast reservoir of anti-noble resentment, all possibility for compromise vanished, and distinctions between good and bad nobles vanished as well. Just how deep the resentment ran and how easy it was to turn it to political advantage came as a surprise not only to noblemen but also to the new crop of revolutionary politicians playing catch up with public sentiment. The noblemen themselves, unable to mount any sort of effective counter-offensive, ended up either fruitlessly fighting revolutionary change, and confirming the worst anti-noble stereotypes in the process, or fighting each other. Doyle concludes that in the end the revolutionary struggles provided nobles “with new reasons to despise one another” (p.238), not a promising starting point for eventual recovery.

By the time France proclaimed itself a Republic and King Louis's head fell into the basket, the French nobility, broadly speaking, had become the target of popular hatred in France and of barely disguised contempt abroad. Explanatory theories on why this happened ranged between divine retribution for the sin of deviating from ancestral duties (Joseph de Maistre) and political penalty for not learning to live with the times (many liberals such as Alexandre de Lameth). Each new piece of anti-noble legislation and each new attack pushed more nobles into emigration, where they typically formed small coteries that kept busy heaping blame on each other. The German princes offered a less than enthusiastic welcome while the émigrés, on their side, did little to endear themselves to their hosts. As if eager to supply additional arguments in support of the decay and uselessness of the nobility, the king's brothers' court at Coblenz struck even friendly observers as a farcical caricature of Versailles at its

---

worst: all the pettiness, the gossip-mongering, the conceit, the chicanery and none of the lofty ideals of honor, sacrifice, and noblesse oblige.

And yet, the *ci-devants* were able to garner some sympathy owing to the revolutionaries' aggressive and often randomly discriminatory anti-noble policies, culminating in the Law of Suspects (September 17, 1793) that specifically singled out nobles without making any allowances for those who supported the Revolution, fought its battles, and gave countless proofs of loyalty to revolutionary causes. Doyle traces the exemplary, in this sense, destiny of the hapless German baron Anacharsis Cloots, noble by birth, self-proclaimed "citizen of the human race," passionately involved with the Revolution, only to find himself arrested under the Terror and guillotined with the Hébertiste *fournée*. Deserving of sympathy, as well of respect, were many militant pro-revolutionary nobles, who had to count their blessings if they were languishing in exile, considering that the committed Jacobin Hérault de Séchelles was also executed with the Hébertiste *fournée* in spite of having served irreproachably on the Committee of Public Safety. Nobles, initially held accountable for what they were doing--or for what they have done--were now punished for who they were, often regardless of what they were doing. This situation provided credible claims to unjust persecution to all but the most active counter-revolutionaries and generated the narrative of self-righteous martyrdom that many nobles embraced throughout the nineteenth century.

The anti-noble legal harassment and the fiery rhetoric ended with the Thermidor coup; the suspicion directed toward nobles, widely believed to be plotting against the government, did not. Consequently, the Thermidorian Convention, and the Directory regime that followed it, enacted harsh anti-noble legislation whenever it felt the political ground shifting beneath their feet, which was often. Even without the guillotine these policies could be fatal. See the poignant case of Adrien Duport, eminent liberal noble and the Parisian second estate deputy who on August 7, 1789 had declared feudalism dead in France: he died of tuberculosis in 1798, as the coup of 18 Fructidor forced him to leave France shortly after returning from two years of painful emigration in Switzerland, where he had to endure the angry rebukes of other émigrés unable to forgive and forget his early revolutionary engagement. Chapter nine ("Persecutions") analyzes in detail, and with exceptional subtlety, the complex economic and political difficulties nobles faced during their steady resettlement in France during the Directory.

In essence, the *émigré* nobility was fully aware that there was no chance of salvaging their former estates, the only question being to what extent they might minimize their losses; they could realistically expect further outbreaks of anti-noble harassment and certainly harbored no hope of entering the political arena. Undaunted, almost all noble émigrés came back and resumed quiet lives, albeit scoffing--in private--at the New Regime's lack of style and class. Chateaubriand captured the mood beautifully in his memoirs:

Mais peu à peu je goutai la sociabilité qui nous distingue, ce commerce charmant, facile et rapide des intelligences, cette absence de toute morgue et de tout préjugé, cette inattention à la fortune et aux noms, ce nivellement naturel de tous les rangs, cette égalité des esprits qui rend la société française incomparable et qui rachète nos défauts: après quelques mois d'établissement au milieu de nous, on sent qu'on ne peut plus vivre qu'à Paris.[3]

One of the first decisions of Bonaparte as First Consul was to close the list of the émigrés, which finally removed the permanent threat of expulsion and initiated the dual strategy of enticing Old Regime nobles to join in while squashing the royalist opposition. The Restoration pushed no further than a few half-hearted attempts at reinvesting the nobility with some of its historical dignity, efforts that remained only partially successful. Louis XVIII, displaying a rather surprising ability to pragmatically assess the situation, restored ancient titles, but also maintained imperial titles, all just as honorific "trinkets," as Napoleon was fond of saying, with no monetary or political privileges. This meant that, as

---

Doyle concludes, Napoleon succeeded in using the new nobility “as a tool to bury the old one” (p. 321), maybe one more argument in support of the Emperor’s oft reiterated statement that the Revolution was safe with him.

The Restoration’s policies did indeed attest to the success of the Revolution, for even under the friendliest of political regimes the nobility as a separate, hereditary, privileged caste was no more. A noble title either evoked a proud historical legacy that still commanded admiration without guaranteeing a place in the current political hierarchy, or pointed to a more recent history of services to the state. Furthermore, ambitious Old Regime nobles accepted imperial titles, thus illustrating that whenever the nobility survived it was in the guise of the service aristocracy abhorred by noble purists before the Revolution. Through shrewdness, political savvy, opportunism, or sheer luck many individual nobles strove during the Empire and later on under the Bourbons, and some went on to build successful careers under all subsequent political regimes, including the Third Republic, and indeed the current republic.

Yet, if nobility itself was not destroyed, nobles were never able to organize into a political force or even into a social force of significant impact for France’s further development. The Revolution was a watershed that permanently changed the political and social landscape. William Doyle’s relatively short book meticulously traces this remarkable historical phenomenon, guiding the reader with a sure hand through the meanders of pre-revolutionary and revolutionary political landscape. The first three chapters, while offering a reliable survey of the state of the nobility on the eve of the Revolution, seemed to this reviewer a bit rushed and disengaged from the current scholarship. This impression is soon dispelled in the following chapters. The discussion of the Cincinnati (Chapter four) not only sheds new light on an often neglected episode of the revolutionary era, it also convincingly demonstrates how a seemingly minor issue shaped the political discourse in both countries and ended up influencing major political developments. The second half of the book (chapters five through ten) rests on a rich body of archival sources expertly used to dramatic effect to illuminate crucial moments in the saga of the nobility’s collapse. Most admirably, what could have been a narrow study destined for specialists is cast in an easy-flowing narrative that reads like a novel. Doyle has a gift for grabbing the reader’s attention with almost mysterious sounding opening phrases, such as: “The proposal, when it came, looked unplanned” (p. 233). How could one not go on reading? In addition to contributing yet another impeccably researched, clearly written, and persuasively argued historical essay, Doyle has accomplished the great feat of giving social and political history the feel of grand drama, with compelling characters, spectacular plots, and surprising twists at every turn.

## NOTES

[1] William Doyle, “Was There an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-Revolutionary France?” *Past and Present*, 57 (Nov. 1972): 97-122.

[2] See especially *Officers, Nobles, and Revolutionaries* (London: Hambledon, 1995) and *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). Doyle also gave a more subtle image of the nobility in his rightfully popular *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, first published in 1989 and reprinted several times thereafter.

[3] René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*. Edition intégrale critique établie par Maurice Levaillant (Paris: Flammarion, 1949) II, 10.

Central Michigan University  
[Harsaldp@cmich.edu](mailto:Harsaldp@cmich.edu)

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172