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Marlies K. Danzinger

**"Horrible Anarchy": James Boswell's View
of the French Revolution**



James Boswell's response to the French Revolution was vehement and consistent. It is expressed in the one-word reply he gave to his friend Edmund Burke on 23 January 1790 during their conversation at the famous Literary Club founded by Dr. Johnson. Burke had observed, "France a disgrace to human nature; cannot call it democracy," and Boswell's own comment was simply: "Diablacy."¹ Subsequent events only confirmed Boswell's negative opinion, as his journals, letters, and other writings reveal. These writings, most of them published here for the first time, are part of the great hoard of Boswell Papers now at Yale University. They are of interest because they reveal the conservative, Tory, monarchist view of a good many Englishmen and Scotsmen at the time of the French Revolution and also because they show a development in Boswell's attitudes. For much of the time he seems to have enjoyed adopting a variety of roles or poses; just as he had liked to see himself as a dashing Macheath in earlier years and would soon become "the great biographer," so he seized the opportunity offered by the French Revolution to play the great dramatist, the wit, the persuasive political advisor, and above all the outraged monarchist. But as the revolutionaries in France became more violent and

as their ideas were taken up by their sympathizers in England, Boswell took the political situation more seriously. Finally, when France and England went to war, the Revolution became for him a painful personal experience.

At the time of the French Revolution Boswell was living primarily in London, where he was trying to make his way at the English bar and to finish the *Life of Johnson*, on which he had been working for years and which was finally published in May 1791. He was still, however, very much the Scotsman. He took his duties as Laird of Auchinleck very seriously and in 1790 bought the small neighboring estate of Knockroon even though this purchase forced him to assume a considerable debt. In particular, he was a Scot in his monarchism. A "sentimental Jacobite," as Frank Brady has called him,² he had deeply nostalgic feelings about the Stuarts, the Scottish royal house which he considered more truly legitimate than the house of Hanover. In fact, he considered the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that ended the Stuart reign as perhaps necessary but not really desirable.³ Yet Boswell was such a thoroughgoing royalist that he also always referred to George III in tones of veneration.

Boswell's first recorded reaction to the events in France appears in a letter to his old friend William Johnson Temple written on 28 November 1789. Not only had the Bastille been stormed in July of that year, but other riots had also broken out both in Paris and the provinces, and revolutionary committees had taken over municipal governments. In October the royal family had been taken by force from Versailles to Paris, where they were installed in the Tuileries as virtual prisoners; and in November the National Assembly, now calling itself the Constituent Assembly, had confiscated all Church property.⁴ Boswell deplored this state of affairs in the strongest terms, referring to "the ruffians in France who are attempting to destroy all order ecclesiastical and civil." He continued:

The present state of that country is an intellectual earthquake, a whirlwind, a mad insurrection without any immediate cause, and therefore we see to what a horrible anarchy it tends. I do not mean that the French ought not to have a Habeas Corpus Act. But I know nothing more they wanted.

While recognizing that the French suffered from the notorious *lettres de cachet* whereby the King could arbitrarily order the arrest of his subjects--a danger not feared by British

citizens thanks to their right of *habeas corpus*--Boswell clearly regarded the behavior of the French revolutionaries as unjustified and excessive.

Soon Boswell had an opportunity not merely to criticize the revolutionaries but also to show his sympathy for the French royalists. In December 1789 Thomas de Mahy, Marquis de Favras, was put on trial for counter-revolutionary plots. He was accused of planning to murder Lafayette (now Commander of the National Guard) and the mayor of Paris, of plotting to destroy the National Assembly, and of getting the royal family to escape from the Tuileries. Favras insisted that he was innocent, but he nobly refused to save his life by implicating the King's brother in any conspiracy, and on 19 February 1790 he was ignominiously hanged.⁵ This was just the sort of gallant action and sad fate that would stir Boswell's imagination and would be a pleasant diversion from the seemingly interminable task of completing the *Life of Johnson*. Casting himself in the role of dramatist, and nothing if not ambitious, Boswell determined to write a tragedy about Favras that would also be a drama of ideas. A preliminary puff in the 13 March issue of the *World* announced: "It seems that the 'Tory soul' of Boswell is employed upon a tragedy, of which the subject is . . . deeply interesting. It is the death of Favras, one of the *ultimi Romanorum* [last of the Romans], the faithful and heroic martyr for the monarchy of France."

Only a brief synopsis of the play exists, but it is informative. Boswell pits the "highly monarchical" Favras against his boyhood friend, the republican Dumont. Both are soldiers: Favras has "served in the French army in the war in Germany [and] has had honours and distinctions from his sovereign"; Dumont "has served in America with Lafayette and is full of democratical sentiments." Significantly, Favras alludes to "Charles the First of that unhappy Stuart race"-- "(pay some compliment pathetically)," Boswell reminds himself in parentheses. Dumont, on the other hand, "has his head full of fiery modern writings about the rights of men" and "raves like Rosseau." Whereas Dumont is cautious, advising Favras not to antagonize the National Assembly, Favras gallantly rejects such prudence, calling it "a sneaking quality when great duties require bold exertions." The two friends argue about principles in a scene very likely inspired by the Pierre-Jaffier debates of Otway's *Venice Preserved*. Dumont is all for extending the people's rights (the National Assembly had passed its Declaration of the Rights of Man in August 1789, and the first part of Paine's

Rights of Man was published in February-March 1790, just as Boswell was working on his play). But Favras "calmly and firmly argues against this, showing that there *are no rights* . . . [and] that subordination and right of any sort are coeval and coexistent." Like Dr. Johnson, Boswell had little faith in egalitarianism and firmly believed that society functioned best if its members accepted the principle that some must be subordinate to others and all must be subordinate to the King.

At this early stage of the Revolution, Boswell believed that the French monarchy could prevail. Although he lets Favras admit that the King has been guilty of some faults, he makes Favras insist that the King has not had sufficient time to remedy these. Boswell's belief in a positive outcome is also suggested in the stirring and noble metaphor he planned to give to Favras: "His image of the *fleur de lis* of France being only in decay for a season, to revive with fresh lustre in all its glory like the lily of the field, is particularly beautiful."

Boswell intended to end the play with praise of the British limited monarchy; he would focus on the "generous Britons who adore their Monarch and are sensible of the blessings of our happy Constitution." In an article he inserted in the *Public Advertiser* of 24 March⁶ he boasted that his fourth Act would end strongly with "God save the King" and that "The acclamation of the audience at this loyal conclusion will, however, be matter of '*serious joy*'--and the instant the curtain drops, the well-known tune ["God Save the King"], played by a numerous orchestra, to be enlarged for the purpose, will keep all in glow for the fifth Act." Boswell also assured his readers that "some of the most eminent musical performers will from zeal for loyalty condescend to exercise their superior talents in a playhouse." He was already casting Kemble in the role of Favras and assuming that Sheridan would mount the play at Drury Lane Theatre, even though it was contrary to Sheridan's own feelings about the French Revolution.

So pleased was Boswell with the idea of this heroic play that he also inserted in the *Public Advertiser* of 24 March the kind of doggerel he like to dash off. It was entitled: "On hearing that Mr. Burke is bringing out a pamphlet and Boswell a tragedy, both against the Revolution in France."⁷

Sure Britain's Isle will seem prodigious fierce,
Burke in wild prose,⁸ and Boswell in wild verse.
Burke's blank verse prose the Tory flame will wake

And Boswell's boisterous verse make Frenchmen quake.
 Thanks to the gods! Old England's sons are clear,
 'Tis Teague and Sawney who will thus appear.

Obviously Boswell delighted in the irony, emphasized in the last line, that the honor of the English was being saved by an Irishman ("Teague" or Burke) and a Scotsman ("Sawney," a version of "Sandy," or Boswell himself). But then, rather characteristically, Boswell seems to have lost interest; after all these preliminary exertions and advance publicity, he did not continue the play.

By the summer of 1791 the Revolution in France had progressed steadily. The National Assembly had formulated a new constitution, reorganized government departments, dismantled the feudal system, and stripped the clergy of its rights. There had also been further public disturbances, including mutinies of troops that were suppressed, and the royal family's flight to Varennes on 21 June was foiled. England was divided between those who, like Boswell, Burke, and their circle, were increasingly disturbed by these events, and others who sympathized with the French republicans and began to consider ways of reforming the English government. Not suprisingly, the latter made the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille a rallying point.

In this intellectual climate, Boswell could again show himself the wit by concocting several newspaper paragraphs that mocked those who were planning to celebrate the 14th of July at the Crown and Anchor Tavern. The cleverest of these newspaper articles, in the *Times* of 13 July 1791, requests the company of Lord G----- G----- "at dinner on that glorious day, Thursday, July 14." Lord George Gordon was the notorious rabble rouser who had caused the anti-Catholic riots of 1779, in which parts of Newgate were burnt, and who was now the most famous prisoner in Newgate. He was jailed for seditious libel because he had attacked the government's treatment of criminals and had, in addition, insulted Marie Antoinette by publishing an account of the scandal concerning the sumptuous diamond necklace she had supposedly ordered but not paid for.⁹ Boswell has the celebrators of the anniversary of the French Revolution declare:

As the presence of that respectable and never to be forgotten friend to freedom, Lord G----- G-----, may be of great, essential, and effectual consequence to the purposes of this Society, and he being withheld from us by the fangs of arbitrary power; Resolved unanimously,

that our celebration be holden in the yet undestroyed jail of Newgate.

At his witty best, Boswell here plays with multiple ironies in suggesting that the celebrators should invite the fanatical extremist Gordon, that he was a victim of "arbitrary power," and that the meeting might as well take place in the prison which he had once almost had destroyed but which now--unlike the Bastille--remained standing.

But Boswell also took this 14 July gathering more seriously and made an effort to dissuade his old acquaintance, the Rev. Andrew Kippis--a respected Presbyterian clergyman--from participating in the Crown and Anchor meeting. To prevent Kippis from going there, Boswell invited him "to a private and pleasant dinner" on the 14th. When Kippis declined, Boswell wrote a letter, dated 11 July, that shows him rising to considerable eloquence:

No man is a warmer and more determined foe to despotism and oppression than I am or could more sincerely rejoice at a rational and temperate reformation of the abuses of the French government, a reformation of which I with great pleasure observed the progress in a constitutional meeting of the states of that Kingdom under their monarch as a free agent.

Here Boswell was referring to the gathering of the States-General, summoned to Versailles by Louis XVI in May 1789, which was, in fact, far less effective than Boswell was suggesting. He continued: "But when seditious and unprincipled spirits violently overturned that constitutional system, destroyed all limits, trampled upon all establishments, let loose the wild fury of a multitude amounting to twenty-four millions and in short produced all the horrors of a barbarous anarchy, it appeared to me that the change was infinitely for the worse, and I shuddered to think of its immediate effects in France and nonbenevolence towards the nations around [and] deprecated the contagion of such a political fever." Here Boswell was alluding to the mob rule, pillaging, and mutinies that had preceded and followed the taking of the Bastille.

Boswell concluded with all the persuasiveness he could muster: "In that hot fever are the French at this moment. Though there are some symptoms of abatement, the crisis is not yet come. May GOD grant a favourable turn. You and I differ widely in our notions of policy both ecclesiastical

and civil, but we differ as friends and men of candor who make mutual allowance. Oblige me then, dear Dr. Kippis, by abstaining from celebrating the Anniversary of the French Revolution at least till it is certain that it is a Revolution upon the whole beneficial to mankind."

Kippis replied immediately. He appreciated Boswell's concern but nonetheless felt obliged to attend the Crown and Anchor meeting, for he had just declared his support of the French Revolution in his eulogy of Dr. Richard Price, an ardent pro-revolutionary. Kippis's answer is of interest because it shows the moderate position of a pro-French republican. "In my address at the funeral of Dr. Price, I have publicly avowed my exultation in the emancipation of twenty-five millions of people from a wretched tyranny and despotism; and I feel that this avowal is perfectly consistent with my firmest attachment to the British Constitution, and the illustrious House of Hanover." Besides, Kippis added, he found "the alarm and clamour" occasioned by the meeting "altogether ridiculous."

Although more than a thousand people were said to have attended the meeting, it took its course without any public disorder. According to the *St. James's Chronicle* of 14-16 July 1791, the participants behaved quite peacefully and showed their loyalty by enthusiastically singing "God save the King." But Boswell chose to interpret the event more melodramatically. On 16 July he wrote to Burke: "That meeting I understand lost all its vivifying principle of mischief, which was chilled by fear. They who ventured to attend were with very few exceptions men of little consequence; and under the cloak of decency they slunk home at an early hour, like pusillanimous conspirators who were very glad to get out of a scrape" (the last part apparently a jocular allusion to the muffled conspirators in *Julius Caesar*, I.i, who meet at dawn, "their faces buried in their cloaks"). Yet Boswell's concern for Kippis was not wholly unjustified; a parallel meeting in Birmingham led to a riot and the calling out of the troops.¹⁰

Conditions in France went from bad to worse, with continued unrest within the country and attacks by the Austrians and Prussians from without. As the French faced the danger of invasion, they took more and more radical steps to ensure the survival of the Revolution. In early September 1792 Parisian mobs massacred a large number of royalists and priests held in various prisons; later in September the newly elected National Convention declared France a republic, ending the French monarchy; émigrés who had been captured

when bearing arms against the republicans were tried and executed; and in late October there was talk in the Convention of putting Louis XVI on trial as a traitor.¹¹ Boswell became alarmed not only about the events in France, later known as the first Terror, but also about their impact in England. His chief remedy was to join two anti-republican clubs, one private and one more formally organized. Recording a meeting on 4 November with his friends William Windham and French Laurence, both politicians, Boswell wrote in his journal: "Windham, Laurence and I . . . talked with earnestness of the seditious exertions in Britain, founded on a wild approbation of the proceedings in France. We agreed in thinking that it was the duty of our Government to take speedy and vigorous measures to check such sedition and not suffer it to increase and strengthen; and Windham thought that men of this way of thinking should meet prudently and concert what ought to be done." The Society for Constitutional Information was advertising for subscriptions to support the French republicans; a counter-organization seemed desirable. On 16 December a distinguished company dining with the noted jurist Sir William Scott and including Windham, Edmond, Malone, Edmund Burke and his son Richard agreed to form a private club that would foster their belief in the English Constitution. Burke proposed a toast, "Old England against New France," which they repeated at their next meeting on 23 December. At about the same time Boswell also joined the Association of Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, founded in November 1792, but all we know of his connection with this group is that he met its chairman, John Reeves, and its treasurer, John Topham, on 26 December and later declared himself one of the Association's earliest members.¹²

Boswell exerted himself more strenuously, however, when he learned of the execution of Louis XVI, who had been on trial since 11 December 1792. Guillotined on 21 January 1793, Louis was unceremoniously buried in an unmarked grave in the Madeleine cemetery, and quicklime was poured over his body to ensure its speedy dissolution.¹³ Horrified, Boswell believed that a tribute should be paid to the King's memory. And so, very likely inspired by the monument for Dr. Johnson that he and his friends were planning at this time, Boswell conceived the idea that a monument for Louis XVI should be erected in Westminster Abbey. In his call for subscriptions, dated 31 January 1793, he cast himself as spokesman for all outraged monarchists and rose to new heights of eloquence:

The anarchy, assassination, and sacrilege by which the Kingdom of France has been disgraced, desolated, and polluted for some years past cannot but have excited the strongest emotions of horror in every virtuous Briton. But within these days our hearts have been pierced by the recital of proceedings in that country more brutal than any recorded in the annals of the world. Not contented with murdering their sovereign with every circumstance of rude and barbarous insult, previous to and during the execrable act the ruffians who have now usurped the power of France not only inhumanly refused to allow his remains to be repositied in the sepulchre of his fathers but with unexampled malignity have taken measures to prevent that honour being paid to him at any future time. To express therefore to surrounding nations and to posterity the generous indignation and abhorrence felt by the humane, free, and happy subjects of this realm at such savage atrocity, it is proposed that a subscription be opened for a monument to be erected in Westminster Abbey, the venerable repository of our own monarchs, to the memory of Louis XVI, King of France, whose patience, piety, dignified deportment, and fortitude in his last moments entitle him to the admiration of mankind.

Before publishing this appeal, Boswell did however take the precaution of sending it to his former schoolmate Henry Dundas, a powerful politician who was currently Home Secretary. Dundas, after checking with the Prime Minister, William Pitt, quickly discouraged the scheme. "He [Pitt] thinks that the public mind is sufficiently alive on the subject of the death of the King of France, and that any immediate expression of it in the manner you suggest would not be attended with any real beneficial effect and might raise discussion unnecessary to be agitated." The Government, all too aware of the tensions within the country between arch-monarchists eager to declare war on France and the pro-republicans pressing for reforms, had no wish to see Boswell stir up feelings any further.

Foiled in his attempt to make a public statement, Boswell took another opportunity to express his condemnation of the French Revolution to a wider audience. In the "Advertisement to the Second Edition of the *Life of Johnson*," dated 1 July 1793, he included a paragraph suggesting that a knowledge of Johnson's qualities might counteract the pernicious influences coming from France:

His strong, clear, and animated enforcement of religion, morality, loyalty, and subordination, while it delights and improves the wise and the good, will, I trust, prove an effectual antidote to the detestable sophistry which has been lately imported from France, under the false name of Philosophy, and with a malignant industry has been employed against the peace, good order, and happiness of society, in our free and prosperous country; but thanks be to GOD, without producing the pernicious effects which were hoped for by its propagators.

Certainly the qualities here attributed to Johnson and well documented in the *Life of Johnson* were just those that Boswell found most lacking in the French republicans. Moreover, invoking the spirit of Johnson was surely a serious matter for Boswell, and so was his idea that the Johnson of his *magnum opus*, as he like to call the *Life*, could be a powerful counterinfluence to the French Revolution.

Yet in all these activities Boswell remained relatively detached. To plan a play, to write amusing paragraphs in the newspapers, to compose eloquent letters to his friends, to join a club or two, even to write a passionate appeal for a monument and a part of an advertisement for the *Life of Johnson* still kept the events in France at arm's length. But then something happened that affected Boswell much more deeply and personally. In the summer of 1793, after France had declared war on England and British troops were fighting side by side with the Austrians and Prussians, a favorite young friend of Boswell's, Col. Thomas Bosville, was serving with the Combined Armies. Boswell believed that the Bosvilles, who lived in Yorkshire, were the older branch of the Boswell clan; he had visited the family often and had watched young Thomas grow up. Thomas was extremely tall, and that proved his undoing; an enemy bullet, passing over the head of a shorter man, shot him through the head.¹⁴

Boswell received the news on 22 August and recorded his reaction in his journal:

At breakfast I read in the newspaper that there had been an action in Flanders, in which Colonel Bosville was killed. This agitated me much, and I hastened to his friend Colonel Morrison of the Coldstream, who I was pretty sure would have certain information. As I was going along Upper Seymour Street, in which he lives, I

met a sergeant of the Coldstream, to whom I spoke, and was informed by him that the sad report was real. I found Colonel Morrison with tears in his eyes; he put into my hand a letter which he had just received from Captain Hewgill, Adjutant to the Coldstream and secretary to the Duke of York, communicating the melancholy event. I was deeply affected, running back in my mind on the many scenes in which I had seen the Colonel since I first saw him a little boy at his father's in London.

Boswell then records his going to various offices in search of more news and finally seeking out his brother, Thomas David Boswell. The journal continues:

[He] joined me in condolence, saying that the Colonel was *an emblem of life*. It was indeed difficult for some time to bring our *imagination*s to *believe* that he was dead. We went together and left our cards at the lodgings of his brother, and then dined at my house. My *military ardour* was quite extinguished. I resolved not to go to the Continent this year.

Boswell had, in fact, planned to visit the armies in Flanders and to see for himself how the war was progressing. But the news of Bosville's death changed that. On the same day as he heard the news, he wrote to his friend Malone about his planned "expedition to the Combined Armies": "Now I think I have no heart to go, for my good friend and relation Colonel Bosville has fallen." And to his cousin Robert Boswell he wrote on 9 September that the news of Bosville's death "threw a damp over my mind, so that I have resolved not to cross the sea this year." The language in these passages is simple and direct. In his journal entry Boswell shows himself first genuinely agitated, then nostalgic and full of sentiment. Trying to grasp the fact that the young man was really dead, Boswell experienced intimations of mortality. Any notion of personal glory, whether as great dramatist or wit or political advisor, now gave way to the realization that the Revolution meant actual danger and death--and not just for the French. At the same time Boswell's journal entry and letters show him immediately--and with disarming honesty--setting down the impact of the news on his own plans. With his "military ardour" cooled, he was not keen on becoming a hero on the battlefield.

Boswell would continue to observe the Revolution with disapproval from across the Channel.

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NOTES

1. Notes for journal in London. All quotations from the Boswell Papers are printed with the permission of Yale University and the McGraw-Hill Book Company (William Heinemann Ltd.).
2. *James Boswell: The Later Years* (New York, 1984), pp. 70, 585.
3. *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Life of Johnson*, eds. George Birbeck Hill and L.F. Powell (Oxford, 1934), V, 202; IV, 170-1 and n. 1.
4. See the "Chronology of Principal Events" in Albert Soboul, *A Short History of the French Revolution, 1789-1799*, trans. Geoffrey Symcox (Berkeley, 1977), pp. xvi-xvii; Louis Madelin, *The French Revolution* (New York, 1936), pp. 85-92, 109-112, 135-9.
5. Marcel Lecoq, *La Conspiration du Marquis de Favras* (Paris, [1955]), pp. 66-9, 72-3, 99, 125-6, 129, 142, 157; Eduard Freiherr von Stillfried-Ratenic, *Thomas de Mahy, Marquis de Favras, und seine Gemahlin* (Vienna, 1881), pp. 149, 156, 164-74.
6. Boswell marked the articles he himself had written with an asterisk; his file of newspaper cuttings is among the Boswell Papers at Yale.
7. Burke was working on his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a work that had grown far beyond a "pamphlet" when published in November 1790.
8. Printed as "verse" but corrected to "prose" in Boswell's handwriting in the cutting preserved in his file.
9. See Percy Colson, *The Strange History of Lord George Gordon* (London, 1937), pp. 162-99, 208-10, 231-9.

10. See the *St. James Chronicle*, 16 July 1791. Boswell's friend Thomas Barnard, Bishop of Killaloe, sent him a souvenir of the rioters' attack--a brick from the burned-out meeting house of Dr. Joseph Priestley, one of the organizers of the Birmingham celebration.

11. See the "Chronology" in Seboul, p. xx; Madelin, pp. 278-9, 284-7, 299; *Public Advertiser*, 14 (29 Sept., 2 Nov. 1792).

12. To Andrew Erskine, 6 March 1793.

13. Report in Archives Nationales, c182. c11. no. 103, quoted in Saul K. Padover, *The Life and Death of Louis XVI* (New York, 1939), pp. 335-6.

14. *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXIII, ii (Aug. 1793), 774.