John Wilson Croker’s Image of France in the Quarterly Review

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Introduction

Political developments in France provided a substantial topic for British periodicals during the first half of the nineteenth century. The most sustained comment came from the Rt Hon. John Wilson Croker, the principal contributor to the Quarterly Review (QR) on political matters over the period. His thirty or so articles on France published up to 1851 constitute a significant part of his total QR output, and are the main focus of this paper. Consideration will also be given to a number of articles on France which appeared during this period in the Edinburgh Review (ER), Fraser’s Magazine (FM) and the Westminster Review (WR). All of these were published under the ruling convention of anonymity.

Within four or five years of its foundation in 1802, the ER began to attack the policies of the Tory government. By 1809, it had sharpened its attack to include the evacuation of British forces from Corunna, the debacle of the Walcheren Campaign, and the scandal over the sales of Army commissions by the Duke of York’s mistress. The QR was founded in that year to counter the ER, and achieved a rapid success. Its first editor, William Gifford, estimated in 1812 that it was read by ‘at least 50,000 of that class whose opinions it is most important to render favourable, and whose judgment it is most expedient to set right’.

Croker was involved with the QR from the beginning. His closeness to senior Tory figures was such that ‘at his peak, [he] was essential to the political survival of the Quarterly’. He was proud of his influence, believing for instance that an article in the issue of June 1841 had been regarded as a ‘kind of Conservative manifesto [...] frequently referred to [...] by candidates on the hustings’. He told Sir Robert Peel that the QR was a ‘kind of direction post to a large body of people [...] its chief use is to keep our friends in a right course and to furnish them with arguments in support of their opinions’.

1 A complete list of all Croker’s contributions to the QR on all subjects can be found in W. E. Houghton et al. (eds.), Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, vol. i (Toronto, 1966), pp. 861-2
As France gradually reasserted herself after the Napoleonic Wars, relations with Britain were often strained (over Belgium in 1830, the Near East in 1840, and the Spanish Marriages in 1846). At other times there was a measure of entente, and in 1854 France and Britain were allies in the Crimean War. These vicissitudes coloured Croker’s writing on France in the *QR* but were not his primary concern, which was the domestic political situation in France, and in particular the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. He constantly feared, not least in the period leading to the 1832 Reform Bill, that British politics would suffer contagion from the influence of French revolutionary tradition.

**Croker and France**

Croker, born in 1780, came from a Protestant Irish background, and trained as a lawyer. As a boy, he was strongly affected by the French Revolution and learned of the Terror from émigrés who taught him French. In 1798 he was a university student in Dublin when rebellion in Ireland was briefly supported by a commando raid from France. He had family connections with Edmund Burke, whose critique of the French Revolution was one of the seminal works of the age. Following the 1801 Act of Union he won a Parliamentary seat at Westminster as a protégé of the Duke of Wellington, then Chief Secretary for Ireland. During his absence in the Peninsular Wars, Wellington asked him to manage Irish business in the House of Commons. He made a strong mark, and was appointed Secretary to the Admiralty in 1809. Remaining in that post till 1830, he was close to the centre of Government during the last five years of the Napoleonic Wars, and throughout the fifteen years of the Bourbon Restoration. He visited Paris after Waterloo, when he discussed with Castlereagh, Wellington, Talleyrand and others ‘the best method of laying hold of Napoleon’.

He prided himself on his knowledge of French affairs. He had a special connection with France through his father-in-law, a member of the British consular service based in France, and through his son-in-law, the British Consul in Brest. He regularly took Paris newspapers, and visited Paris when he could. Over the years, he assembled extensive collections of original printed documents from the French Revolution — a total of over 48,000 items — which are held in the British Library.

In 1831, he famously took issue with Macaulay on the causes of the French Revolution during the Commons debates on the Reform Bill. He visited Paris with his friend Sir Robert Peel in 1837, on which occasion he called on Marat’s aged sister, and on Chateaubriand, who recalled this visit in his memoirs. He called on Louis Philippe during his exile in England after 1848, making notes of his calls, and began a correspondence with Louis Philippe’s minister Guizot which lasted well into the 1850s.

The articles on France which he wrote for the *QR* can be considered under four main heads: the French Revolution of 1789 and its aftermath; the eighteen-year July Monarchy of Louis Philippe; French drama and the French novel in the 1830s; and the Revolution of 1848 and the rise of Louis Napoleon.

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7 See William Thomas, op. cit.
I. Articles on the French Revolution

In his day, Croker was widely regarded as the leading British authority on the events of the French Revolution and was more than once urged to write its history. In 1816, John Murray offered him £2,500 for an ‘Annals of the Revolution’. Some years later, Peel suggested that he write an ‘Encyclopaedia of the Revolution’. Several of his QR articles on the Revolution were eventually brought together in a separate volume, on which he was working up to his death. As a historian, he was particular to the point of obsession about details of time and place, his approach being essentially forensic and political. He sought detail in order to reveal and rebut, and clinch his case. He ‘regularly went in for the kill with a blunderbuss effect’. In his articles he confronted, as prosecuting counsel, those whom he saw as falsifiers of the truth, whether politicians or historians. The jury to which he appealed were the readers of the QR, the wider British public, and posterity.

As the years passed following the Reform Bill, fear of revolution in Britain receded; but this did not lead him to abandon either his mission or his method. A case in point is his critique in the QR of September 1845 of Thiers’s Histories of the Revolution and the Napoleonic period. The fact that much of this work had already been available for several years did not deter him. He proclaimed his intention ‘to demolish utterly and irretrievably Thiers’s credit as a historian’. After numerous illustrations in forensic style, he concluded that he had ‘proved […] a deliberate case of fraud and falsehood’, that he had shown the works to be grossly distorted, and that their purpose was not to reflect historical fact, but ‘to electrify France with a galvanic exhibition of Bonaparte’s glory’.

In his own historical work, he sought the explanation of events in personal motive rather than social and economic circumstance. Although he could bring himself to acknowledge that the Revolution was ‘hailed at its dawn with universal enthusiasm’ and that ‘large and deep reform was desirable and inevitable’, he believed that this could and should have been achieved within the existing constitution, and that enthusiasm for reform was misappropriated by self-serving individuals who used ‘gangs of malefactors and murderers’ in order to gain power. Revolution was far from being the result of an irresistible march of events. It sprang from conspiracy by a small group of journalists and propagandists. Had he accepted (as did the ER from its early years) that events such as the French Revolution result from complex social and economic causes, he would have been led into what he would certainly have regarded as inopportune speculation as to whether similar factors were at work in Britain – or Ireland for that matter.

In an article in the QR of March 1844 entitled ‘The Revolutionary Tribunals’, Croker wrote:

> Our object will have been attained […] if we can awaken the attention of the general reader to the great truth with which the whole Revolution is pregnant – that the direct intervention of what is called the people – which in Revolutionary language means nothing but the demagogues and the populace – in the actual government of a country, can produce nothing but miserable anarchy, of which blood and plunder are the first fruits, and despotism the ultimate and not unwelcome result and remedy.

This was Croker’s principal theme – that revolution is coterminal with popular tyranny, and leads inexorably to autocracy and despotic tyranny. No doubt this was what many subscribers to the QR wanted to hear. It was also highly acceptable to its editor Lockhart,

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9 Shatock, op. cit., p. 111.
who wrote to the publisher John Murray in 1836 about the need ‘to caution the English against the course of France by showing up the audacious extent of her horrors, political, moral and religious’.¹⁰

Others, notably J. S. Mill, saw things differently. In his Autobiography, he noted that the founding of the WR in 1824 arose from a perceived need for a ‘Radical organ to make head against the Edinburgh and Quarterly, then in the period of their greatest reputation and influence’.¹¹ The earliest numbers of the WR contained articles attacking both. The QR was said to ‘watch the earliest symptoms of any tendency in the human mind towards improvement in any shape, in order to fall upon it with determined hostility’ (WR, October 1824). In a review of April 1828 of Sir Walter Scott’s Life of Napoleon,¹² Mill identified the French Revolution as ‘the work of the people’ which would never be ‘more than superficially understood by the man who is but superficially acquainted with the nature and movements of popular enthusiasm’. Mill thought Scott’s account ‘a story skillfully and even artfully constructed for a purpose’. He rebuked Scott for failing to refer either to Mme de Staël’s Considerations on the French Revolution, a book ‘in every man’s hands’ which showed why French peasants had detested the government, or to Arthur Young’s Travels in France, with its picture of abuses and corruption immediately prior to the Revolution. (Unsurprisingly, Croker similarly fails to draw attention to the accounts of Mme de Staël and Arthur Young.)

Mill, twenty-six years his junior, is the figure who most strongly contrasts with Croker as an observer of France. As a young man he lived for a year with Bentham’s brother near Montpellier, where he studied science and logic and enjoyed ‘the free and genial atmosphere of Continental life’ away from the ‘low moral tone of what in England is called society’.¹³ He saw his review of Scott’s Napoleon as a labour of love, being a ‘defence of the French revolutionists against Tory misrepresentations’. His general view of the Revolution was that ‘substantial good [had] been effected of immense value’, albeit at the cost of ‘immediate evil of the most tremendous kind’. Tories always began, he said, by assuming that ‘decisive reform’ was available by peaceful means, which revolutionaries set aside in their ambitious and indecent haste. Having made out revolution to be ‘a mere bagatelle that, except by the extreme of knavery and folly […] may always be kept at a distance’, they went on to assert that all revolutionary leaders were knaves or fools.¹⁴ Reviewing Mignet’s History of the Revolution in the WR of April 1826, he castigated Englishmen for their ‘utter ignorance of the causes and effects’ of the Revolution, largely because of their dependence on ‘what the Tory prints choose to tell them’. In a leading article in the Examiner in October 1830 he wrote:

> it becomes highly necessary to apprise the French that the Quarterly Review represents the feelings of nobody except the church and the aristocracy: that with the exception of these peculiar and narrow classes, and their hangers-on and retainers, the readers even of the Quarterly Review do not read it for the sake of its political opinions […] .¹⁵

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¹⁰ Samuel Smiles, A Publisher and his Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the late John Murray (London, 1891), vol. ii, p. 233.
¹² Scott’s Life of Napoleon was published in 1827.
¹³ Mill, op. cit., p. 58.
II. Articles on the July Monarchy

When Wellington’s administration fell in late 1830, Croker left the Admiralty office which he had occupied for the past twenty-one years. He remained in Parliament to fight the Reform Bill brought in by Earl Grey’s Whig administration, and finally resigned in 1832 after the Bill had passed, refusing to take part in the reformed parliament. His mind was full of the perils which he expected to flow from reform, and those feelings lent colour to the several articles on France which, with greater leisure, he now began to contribute to the QR. The first was an account in the issue of January 1831 of the July Revolution of 1830 which brought Louis Philippe to power. It was far from his purpose to suggest that the Revolution had sprung in any way from the reactionary policies of the displaced Charles X. Instead, he confined himself to a detailed account of the fighting in Paris, claiming that instead of a ‘mighty upheaval in public opinion’ there had been nothing more than a small riot which only succeeded because of ‘marvellous imbecility’ on the part of ministers and generals.

Croker’s thesis that revolution could always be ascribed to small disaffected groups was further developed in an article of July 1833 entitled ‘The French Revolution of 1830’. In QR articles of 1834 (August: ‘Present State of France’ and November: ‘Personal History of Louis Philippe’), he laid great emphasis on chronic instability and repression to which the British paid ‘too little attention’, claiming that the whole of France remained highly unstable and would have to ‘pass through a despotism – a republic – or a restoration – and probably all of these – before it can settle down into a constitution’.

In contrast, the ER greeted the 1830 Revolution with enthusiasm. In its issue of October 1830, Lord Brougham, one of its founders, wrote that ‘the cause of France is that of all free men’ and that ‘the battle of English liberty has really been fought and won at Paris’. The proprietor of the WR, T. P. Thompson, went even further:

> It is the breaking up of the great frost. There may be a few weeks difference between its operation in one place and in another; but it will reach all in the end. The people everywhere know that their cause is won.

This exuberance did not long survive passage of the Reform Bill and actual experience of the new French administration. In an article of April 1835, Brougham complained that Louis Philippe was interfering too much, and that the French press was being ‘hounded’. By then he had come to think that further change would be needed ‘in the direction of a commonwealth’, unless more popular policies were pursued. For Mill, the 1830 Revolution initially ‘roused my utmost enthusiasm, and gave me, as it were, a new existence’. But he too lost faith in Louis Philippe. By February 1831 he was openly hoping for his fall.

III. Articles on French drama and the French novel in the 1830s

At the end of the Napoleonic Wars Britons began to visit France in large numbers, and there was a revival of interest in French fashion, including literary fashion. The battle in French drama between the guardians of convention and the new Romantic spirit, which came to a head with the production in Paris of Hugo’s Hernani in 1830, did not pass unnoticed. Although the Romantic movement owed much to the novels of Sir Walter Scott, its manifestations in France were widely regarded in Britain as excessively melodramatic if not actually pernicious. The QR saw itself as a guardian of taste and was keen to pass judgment. Croker had for many years acted as literary arbiter. His most notorious article was a

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damning review of Keats’s *Endymion* in April 1818, and he was still acting as literary policeman in 1851, claiming in an article entitled ‘Revolutionary Literature’ that Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* ‘followed the socialist principles of the French Revolution’. In the aftermath of *Hernani*, he concluded in ‘State of the French Drama’ (*QR*, March 1834) that the French theatre portrayed ‘so irregular a state of society that the matter seems to belong rather to politics than to [literary] criticism’. He spoke of the ‘turpitude’ of the French stage as being ‘the consequence […] or the cause of a general lapse of morals […] in the people who are fed nightly on such intoxicating and mortal poison’.

Croker later flattered himself that his ‘exposure of the profligacy of the modern French drama […] had not been without its beneficial influence in France’. At all events, the article was judged a great success by the *QR* editor, who now commissioned an attack on French novels. In an article of April 1836 citing works by Dumas, Hugo, Balzac and George Sand, Croker asserted that the Revolution of 1830 had been ‘even more unfortunate in novels than in politics’ and referred to ‘upwards of a hundred’ recent novels of which the main themes were ‘adultery, incest, suicide and murder’. He reserved his most damning remarks for George Sand who ‘by the union of impassioned rhetoric and sensual ideas carries to its most pernicious excess this species of demoralizing novel’. (Thackeray held similar views: he thought Sand’s *Lelia* a ‘thieves’ and prostitutes’ apotheosis’.)

In July 1836 the *WR* reacted to this article by attacking the *QR* for producing ‘as an example of French manners, a cento of horrors and licentiousness from the French novels and dramas of the present day’. Stressing the folly of extrapolation from literature to society, the article sought to mitigate charges of impropriety by suggesting that earlier rigid canons of French literature had provoked a ‘proportionately violent’ reaction, adding that ‘the *QR*, as everyone knows, is not famous for the strict honesty of its criticisms’. Critics of ‘the Quarterly school’ had been ‘in the habit of attacking everything American since the American Revolution, and everything French since the French Revolution. According to them it would appear that every species of immorality has been imported from France into England […]’ The *QR* did not respond.

IV. Articles on the Revolution of 1848

The deposition of Louis Philippe took Croker by surprise. He saw the 1848 Revolution as a ‘comparatively orderly riot […] got up by cool-headed men’, concluding ironically in an article of March 1848 that the Parisians were ‘improving in insurrectionary tactics’. But he thought the Provisional Government could not last, and that a monarchy would be re-established – hopefully, a Bourbon restoration, since he was deeply suspicious of the ambitions of Louis Napoleon, whose second attempt at a *coup d’état* in Boulogne in 1840 he had come close to witnessing at first hand. Initially, he was relaxed about the effect on England since ‘we feel less alarm than we have done for the past sixteen years’ (that is, since the Reform Bill). There had after all been no revolution in England. Moreover, there was ‘a warmer feeling of loyalty towards the Queen’ and ‘a stronger constitutional zeal and determination to maintain the institutions’. Indeed, Britain had ‘all the political and social blessings that the rest of Europe are now with so much doubt and danger groping after – in the smoke of cannon and through kennels running with blood’.

The *ER* had long lost any appetite for France. Following a difficult passage in Anglo-French relations, the economist Nassau Senior, the friend of de Tocqueville, identified a number of weaknesses in the French national character, including a readiness to ‘consider all opposition to her wishes as an insult, and all actual resistance […] as a crime’ (*ER*, April

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17 He was not alone in castigating a Romantic poet. An 1814 review of Wordsworth by Frances Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* began: ‘This will never do.’
1842: ‘France, America and Britain’). In April 1848, in an ER article on ‘The French Republicans’, H. A. Woodham wrote that those who had come to power since 1830 had not been a political party so much as a ‘confederacy of political sectarians’ and that stable government in France was impractical so long as the Parisian ‘believes he has an indefeasible right to combine and conspire for the advancement of any political or social theories he may chance to advance’. Earlier, on 28 February, The Times had commented drily:

The Parisians, it now appears by the evidence of three revolutions, can overthrow a Government and establish a King, a Republic or an Empire, according to the fashions of the hour.

All of this could have been written by Croker, who was by no means a lone voice. The historian Halévy noted that ‘everybody [in Britain] irrespective of party, was proud to belong to a nation which had […] escaped revolution’. Nonetheless, the QR article of March 1848 came under vigorous attack in an article in FM of April entitled ‘The French Revolution of 1848 – Its Causes and Consequences’:

For any useful information as to […] the motives and moving principles of parties […] you might as well have consulted an old almanac of 1824 or 1825 […] [The author] […] was habituated, it was plain […] to red tape […] He had looked through memoirs on the subject of […] the French Revolution more than once and had often referred to Burke […]. He had talked to Dumouriez eight or nine-and-thirty years ago […] and with Louis Philippe himself since he arrived in this country; he had waded through the blue books of France and England for thirty years of his life; yet […] it was plain he knew nothing of people made of flesh and blood […]

Croker’s hand had been spotted. He had indeed been acquainted with General Dumouriez and had called on Louis Philippe at Claremont House in Surrey, following his exile.

An article in the WR of April 1848 expressed sympathy with the aspirations of working people in France, but stopped short of the enthusiasm for revolutionary activity which it had shown in 1830. J. S. Mill, who initially thought well of the Provisional Government, produced a damning critique of the superseded regime of Louis Philippe. At the same time, he identified a fatal weakness of the new constitutional arrangements, which provided for the election of a President by direct suffrage – the route by which Louis Napoleon soon enough rose to autocratic power.

In the QR of March 1850, Croker rebutted an account of Louis Philippe’s escape from France by the poet Lamartine, a minister of the Provisional Government. It was just the kind of detailed refutation that Croker enjoyed, and he had had the advantage of a personal briefing by Louis Philippe. He later boasted that his account had had a ‘retentissement immense’ in France, which sounds a considerable exaggeration.

With Louis Napoleon’s rise, Croker came to see a darker horizon in France. In a bitter article of December 1851 entitled ‘The French Autocrat’, he described how Louis Napoleon was using the armed forces to impose despotic rule on the country, and expressed

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astonishment at the ‘complacency towards this […] shown by many persons in England’ (an apparent reference to Palmerston). He asserted:

We have often said […] that the whole Revolution from 1789 to our own day has been nothing but an alternation […] of falsehood and terror; and it has been the constant endeavour of this review […] to vindicate historical truth.

But, he went on, there had never been a ‘grosser perversion of the actual facts and a more complete suppression of the public voice’ than under Louis Napoleon. However unwilling Britain might be to get involved in France’s internal affairs, it was ‘destined in the end to feel the electric shock of every explosion or convulsion that she undergoes’. As for the success of Louis Napoleon’s audacity:

there are no rational means of resistance. France – or at least revolutionised France – is alternately slavish and rebellious; at the outset always submissive to violence and servile to usurpation – by and by […] impatient of all constituted authority.

Between eighty and a hundred copies of the QR were regularly sold in France, and the publisher, John Murray’s son, expressed concern that the article would lead to a ban. Croker was stung into reminding him that the QR had come into being ‘in your father’s back room in Fleet Street and cemented in my father’s office in George Street, where I met Scott, Ellis and Gifford […] for the main purpose of attacking Hercules the first [Bonaparte]’.

Croker’s unremitting opposition to Louis Napoleon led two years later to a rift with the QR. The issue was the policy to be followed over the Near Eastern Question. Croker was adamantly opposed to any alliance with Louis Napoleon against Russia. Elwin, the new editor, foresaw conflict with government policy and Croker was induced to back down. Following this, he ceased to write, as he had for so many years, the ‘political’ articles in successive issues of the QR.

Conclusion

Croker’s image of France was partial. Unlike Mill, he had no sympathetic understanding of social and economic forces, and read the events of 1789, 1830 and 1848 in an essentially political light – revolutions were the work of malcontents and conspirators. But his partiality was integral to the real concern which he felt. He had seen the effects of 1789 and lived through its Napoleonic consequences. Well into the 1840s he believed that revolution in Britain was a real threat and that advocates of reform were playing with fire. These were also the entrenched views of the QR and its High Tory readership. Was he therefore merely preaching to the converted? Not as he saw it. People had to be kept up to the mark. By constantly showing the pernicious effects of revolutionary activity in France, he could contribute to the avoidance in Britain of revolution or reform à la française. He undoubtedly believed that it was his mission to do so.

As for the effect of his articles, the QR was assiduously read by the political class in

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19 Brightfield, op.cit., p. 402.
20 This was not however the end of the Quarterly’s regular ‘political’ article. See David Morphet, ‘Political Comment in the Quarterly Review after Croker: Gladstone, Salisbury and Jennings’, Victorian Periodicals Review, xxxvi (2003), pp. 109-34.
London and by an important and country-wide Tory constituency. The relative influence of the quarterlies was of course declining towards mid-century with the growth of the daily press and the speed of communications. But the QR’s political comment carried weight in Croker’s day, and his articles on France helped to reinforce a climate of opinion. It would however be wrong to expect to trace any direct effect on Government policy. The QR was essentially in the business of following a Tory government’s lead, and disseminating its views, rather than advocating policies of its own. As for influence on a Whig administration, this was hardly to be expected.

It remains ironical that, after thirty years of Croker articles warning about the contagion of French political ideas and the instability of French politics, Britain allied itself with Napoleon’s nephew in the Crimean War.