

British Identity and the Antirevolutionary Novel: Nineteenth-Century British Novels about the French Revolution



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Date

2012-12-04

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Abstract

Between Edmund Burke's 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Charles Dickens's 1859 *A Tale of Two Cities*, a cluster of antirevolutionary British works depicting the French Revolution that bridges periodisation divisions and often challenges the conventionally recognised political affiliations of the authors in question appeared. Recent work in recovering neglected Romantic and Victorian-era texts about the French Revolution has typically focused on radical and liberal works or the literary output of the 1790s, while disregarding the long-term antirevolutionary tradition my dissertation examines. I analyse canonical and well-known texts such as Burke's *Reflections*, Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837) and Dickens's *Tale* with understudied and sometimes utterly neglected antirevolutionary novels, including Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), Frances Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814), Anthony Trollope's *La Vendée* (1850) and Charlotte M. Yonge's *Dynevor Terrace* (1857), in order to reconstruct the political and representational contests surrounding the French Revolution that occurred across seventy years of British literature. My work reveals that by representing the Revolution as inherently and unavoidably violent, the antirevolutionary writers in this study take up their own violent positions against it. These writers are primarily concerned with the French Revolution's impact on British communities and identities, and construct their own versions of Britishness in the context of, and usually in opposition to, revolutionary violence and the French revolutionary state. These texts all politicise the family and the domestic community as models or microcosms of the broader national community, although they do so in diverse ways: Burney and Trollope turn to the political family romance to test out versions of the state modelled on patriarchy, fraternity or the heterosexual marriage contract. By contrast, Burke, Dickens and Yonge use middle-class domestic ideology to promote a national community rooted in private, social affections. However, as the home comes under threat by revolutionary violence in all of these works, each writer commits some kind of representational violence against revolutionary symbols, ideals and narratives. My analysis of these texts as a group demonstrates that the French Revolution was also a British event, generating decades of antirevolutionary reaction, histrionic paranoia and literary strategies for containing French and British radicalism.

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The French Revolution began in May 1789 when the Ancien Régime was abolished in favour of a constitutional monarchy. Its replacement in September 1792 by the First French Republic led to the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, and an extended period of political turmoil. This culminated in the appointment of Napoleon as First Consul in November 1799, which is generally taken as its end point. Many of its principles are now considered fundamental aspects of modern Liberal democracy. *British Identity and the Antirevolutionary Novel: Nineteenth-Century British Novels about the French Revolution*. Patricia Cove, 2012. Twentieth Century. Interviews at Work: Reading the Paris Review Interviews, 1953-1978. Kelley Lewis. "The Lurking Poison of Sensuality": French Novels and Sensation Fiction in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Doctor's Wife*. Kja Isaacson, 2008. Rudyard Kipling and the Poetics of Failure. French Revolution, revolutionary movement that shook France between 1787 and 1799 and reached its first climax there in 1789—hence the conventional term 'Revolution of 1789,' denoting the end of the ancien regime in France and serving also to distinguish that event from the later French revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Although scholarly debate continues about the exact causes of the Revolution, the following reasons are commonly adduced: (1) the bourgeoisie

resented its exclusion from political power and positions of honour; (2) the peasants were acutely aware of their situation and were less and less willing to support the anachronistic and burdensome feudal system; (3) the philosophes had been read more widely in France.