

not wear aristocratic kneebreeches but flaunted their patriotism with red caps of liberty. They and their screaming womenfolk were driven on by visceral lust for social revenge. Carlyle only recognized three men as capable of directing these forces of nature. One was Mirabeau, whose death in 1791 left his promise unfulfilled. Another was Danton, who saved France with his energy from foreign invasion in 1792, but was engulfed two years later by the terror: 'with all his dross he was a Man; fiery-real, from the great fire-bosom of Nature herself.' (At the time of Carlyle's writing, Georg Büchner was presenting German speakers with *Dantons Tod* [*Danton's Death*, 1835], a play in which Danton is depicted as too heroic a figure for the petty beings like Robespierre who combined to kill him.) Finally there was Napoleon, who brought the army into politics in 1795, ending the last Parisian insurrection with a 'whiff of grapeshot'.

Dramatic depictions

The idiosyncratic vigour of Carlyle's writing leaves an impression of years of ceaseless turmoil, with blood and violence, merciless 'sansculottism', and baying mobs a daily sight. It was irresistibly dramatic. But Carlyle also had an eye for the pathos of innocent victims falling prey to forces men could not control. Even Robespierre receives a twinge of sympathy as he rumbles towards the guillotine in his new, sky-blue coat. The book thrilled and appalled its readers, and it sold, as well as read, like a novel. Novelists themselves admired it, and none more so than Charles Dickens.

Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), in fact, offered by far the most influential image that posterity has of the French Revolution. From Burke it took one of its underlying themes – the contrast between turbulent, violent Paris and safe, tranquil, and prosperous London. But Dickens' most obvious guide and inspiration was Carlyle. From him comes the lurid picture of a cruel and oppressive old order, a world of 'rapacious licence and oppression', where harmless and innocent

victims can be confined by the whims of the powerful to years of imprisonment without trial in the grim and forbidding Bastille; where a nobleman can think the life of a child killed under the wheels of his coach can be paid for by a tossed gold coin. Worthless authorities rule over a wretched and poverty-stricken population aching with social resentment, in which Madame Defarge, impassively and implacably knitting, plans for the moment when revenge can be visited on her family's noble oppressors. The Revolution provides that moment: "The Bastille!" With a roar that sounded as if all the breath in France had been shaped into the detested word, the living sea rose, wave on wave, depth on depth, and overflowed the city to that point. Alarm bells ringing, drums beating, the sea raging and thundering on its own beach, the attack begun.' Madame Defarge helps to lead it: "What! We can kill as well as the men . . . !" And to her, with a shrill thirsty cry, trooping women variously armed, but all armed alike in hunger and revenge.' This turmoil goes on for years, but by 1792 the instrument of vengeance is the guillotine. Madame Defarge and her fellow Furies now knit around the scaffold, counting victims with their stitches. France is peopled with 'patriots in red caps and tricoloured cockades, armed with national muskets and sabres', sullen and suspicious, who instinctively curse all 'aristocrats'. 'That a man in good clothes should be going to prison, was no more remarkable than that a labourer in working clothes should be going to work.' By the beginning of 1794,

Every day, through the stony streets, the tumbrils now jolted heavily, filled with the condemned. Lovely girls, bright women, brown-haired, black-haired, and grey; youths, stalwart men and old; gentle born and peasant born, all red wine for La Guillotine, all daily brought into light from the dark cellars of the loathsome prisons, and carried to her through the streets to slake her devouring thirst. Liberty, equality, fraternity, or death – the last, much the easiest to bestow, O Guillotine!

And although the French aristocrat Charles Darnay escapes, and his persecutor Madame Defarge is killed before she can pursue him,

Duties of 1795. The European Convention on Human Rights, adopted in 1953, was also full of the provisions and language of 1789. And, whereas France itself declined to ratify the European Convention until 1973, by the time of the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989, President François Mitterrand had ordained that it should be celebrated as **the Revolution of the Rights of Man**.

A disputed legacy

It was a vain hope. **The British, as always, were determined to spoil France's party.** Their royal family refused to attend any celebration of a regicide revolution. **Margaret Thatcher declared that the rights of man were a British invention,** and gave Mitterrand a lavishly bound copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*. A British historian working in America produced a vast chronicle of the Revolution which argued that its very essence was violence and slaughter (*Citizens*, by Simon Schama). It was a bestseller in a market where Burke, Carlyle, Dickens, and Orczy had clearly not laboured in vain. But even within France the celebrations proved bitterly contentious. Although **when the Rights of Man were first proclaimed, the terror lay more than four years into the future,** and the guillotine had not even been invented, few found it easy to look back on the Revolution as other than a single and consistent episode, for good or ill. **For the left, the terror had been cruel necessity,** made inevitable by the determination of the enemies of liberty and the rights of man to strangle them at birth. **For the right, the Revolution had been violent from the start in its commitment to destroying respect and reverence for order and religion. Its logical culmination, some argued, was not merely terror, but, in the rebellious department of the Vendée, slaughter amounting to genocide.** Many Catholic clergy, meanwhile, anathematized any celebration of what had brought the first attack in history on religious practice, using language that had scarcely changed in the course of two centuries. **Mitterrand, however, enjoyed it all.** The Revolution, he reflected with characteristic malice, 'is still feared, which inclines me rather to rejoice'.