

Arthur Young

Travels in France

(1792)

J.H. Robinson, ed.,
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Robinson's Note: Of all the descriptions that we have of the general condition of the French people upon the eve of the Revolution, the most important and interesting is Arthur Young's account of his travels in France during the years 1787, 1788, and 1789. Young was an honest and observant English gentleman farmer, whose aim was to ascertain "the cultivation, wealth, resources, and national prosperity" of France, which were, as he foresaw, to be fundamentally changed by the Revolution then under way. His book first published in 1792, met with immediate success, and still fascinates even the casual reader. In 1787 Arthur Young visited Paris and Versailles, then traveled southward as far as the Pyrenees. Of Versailles and the capital he says:

Again to Versailles. In viewing the king's apartment, which he had not left a quarter of an hour, with those slight traits of disorder that showed he lived in it, it was amusing to see the blackguard figures that were walking uncontrolled about the palace, and even in his bedchamber; men whose rags betrayed them to be in the last stage of poverty, and I was the only person that stared and wondered how the devil they got there. It is impossible not to like this careless indifference and freedom from suspicion. One loves the master of the house, who would not be hurt or offended at seeing his apartment thus occupied if he returned suddenly, for if there was danger of this the intrusion would be prevented. This is certainly a feature of that good temper which appears to me so visible everywhere in France. I desired to see the queen's apartments, but I could not. Is, her Majesty in it? No. Why then not see it as well as the king's? Ma foi, Monsieur, c'est une autre chose.

22
Ramble through the gardens, and by the grand canal with absolute astonishment at the exaggerations of writers and travelers. There is magnificence in the quarter of the orangery, but no beauty anywhere; there are some statues, good enough to wish them under cover. The extent and breadth of the canal are nothing to the eye, and it is not in such good repair as a farmer's horse pond. The menagerie is well enough, but nothing great.

23
This great city [Paris] appears to be in many respects the most ineligible and inconvenient for the residence of a person of small fortune of any that I have seen, and vastly inferior to London. The streets are very narrow, and many of them crowded, nine tenths dirty, and all without foot pavements. Walking, which in London is so pleasant and so clean that ladies do it every day, is here a toil and a fatigue to a man, and an impossibility to a well-dressed woman. The coaches are numerous, and, what is much worse, there are an infinity of one-horse cabriolets, which are driven by young men of fashion and their imitators, alike fools, with such rapidity as to be real nuisances, and render the streets exceedingly dangerous, without an incessant caution. I saw a poor child run over and probably killed, and have been myself many times blackened with the mud of the kennels. This beggarly practice, of driving a one-horse booby hutch about the streets of a great capital, flows either from poverty or wretched and despicable economy; nor is it possible to speak of it with too much severity. If young noblemen at London were to drive their chaises in streets without footways, as their brethren do at Paris, they would speedily and justly get very well threshed or rolled in the kennel. This circumstance renders Paris an ineligible residence for persons, particularly families that cannot afford to keep a coach, - a convenience which is as dear as at London. The fiacres - hackney coaches - are much worse than at that city; and chairs there are none, for they would be driven down in the streets. To this circumstance also it is owing that all persons of small or moderate fortune are forced to dress in black, with black stockings.

After a stay of three months, Young finds himself in the southern confines of the kingdom.

94
[August 11] Take the road to Lourdes, where is a castle on a rock, garrisoned for the mere purpose of keeping state prisoners sent hither by lettres de cachet. Seven or eight are known to be here at present; thirty have been here at a time; and many for life, - torn by the relentless hand of jealous tyranny from the bosom of domestic comfort; from wives, children, friends, and hurried for crimes unknown themselves - more probably for virtues - to languish in this detested abode of misery, and die of despair. O liberty! O liberty! And yet this is the mildest government of any considerable country in Europe, our own excepted. The dispensations of Providence seem to have permitted the human race to exist only as the prey of tyrants, as it has made pigeons for the prey of hawks. . . .

25 [The 12th.] Pau is a considerable town, that has a parliament and a linen manufacture; but it is more famous for the birthplace of Henry IV. I viewed the castle, and was shown, as all travelers are, the room in which that amiable prince was born, and the cradle - the shell of a tortoise - in which he was nursed. What an effect on posterity have great and distinguished talents! This is a considerable town, but I question whether anything would ever carry a stranger to it but its possessing the cradle of a favorite character.

26 Take the road to Moneng [Monein] and come presently to a scene which was so new to me in France that I could hardly believe my own eyes. A succession of many well-built, tight, and comfortable farming cottages, built of stone and covered with tiles; each having its little garden, inclosed(sic) by clipped thorn hedges, with plenty of peach and other fruit trees, some fine oaks scattered in the hedges, and young trees nursed up with so much care that nothing but the fostering attention of the owner could effect anything like it. To every house belongs a farm, perfectly well inclosed, with grass borders mown and neatly kept around the cornfields, with gates to pass from one enclosure to another. The men are all dressed with red caps, like the highlanders of Scotland. There are some parts of England (where small yeomen still remain) that resemble this country of Bearn; but we have very little that is equal to what I have seen in this ride of twelve miles from Pau to Moneng. It is all in the hands of little proprietors, without the farms being so small as to occasion a vicious and miserable population. An air of neatness, warmth, and comfort breathes over the whole. It is visible in their new-built houses and stables, in their little gardens, in their hedges, in the courts before their doors, even in the coops for their poultry and the styes for their hogs. A peasant does not think of rendering his pig comfortable if his own happiness hangs by the thread of a nine years' lease. We are now in Bearn, within a few miles of the cradle of Henry IV. Do they inherit these blessings from that good prince? The benignant genius of that good monarch seems to reign still over the country; each peasant has the fowl in the pot. . . .

[The.13th.] The agreeable scene of yesterday continues: many small properties, and every appearance of rural happiness.

In September, 1788, Young found himself in Brittany.

27 To Combours. The country has a savage aspect; husbandry not much further advanced, at least in skill, than among the Hurons, which appears incredible amidst inclosures. The people almost as wild as their country, and their town of Combours one of the most brutal, filthy places that can be seen; mud houses, no windows, and a pavement so broken as to impede all passengers, but ease none. Yet here is a chateau, and inhabited. Who is this Monsieur de Chateaubriant, the owner, that has nerves strung for a residence amidst such filth and poverty? . . .

28
To Montauban. The poor people seem poor indeed; the children terribly ragged, - if possible, worse clad than if with no clothes at all; as to shoes and stockings, they are luxuries. A beautiful girl of six or seven years playing with a stick, and smiling under such a bundle of rags as made my heart ache to see her. They did not beg, and when I gave them anything seemed more surprised than obliged. One third of what I have seen of this province seems uncultivated, and nearly all of it in misery. What have kings, and ministers, and parliaments, and states to answer for their prejudices, seeing millions of hands that would be industrious idle and starving through the execrable maxims of despotism, or the equally detestable prejudices of a feudal nobility. Sleep at the Lion d'Or, at Montauban, an abominable hole.

Young was in Paris during the early sessions of the Estates General in 1789.[1] On June 28 he left the capital to visit the eastern and southeastern provinces.

29
[July 4.] To Chateau Thiery, following the course of the Marne. The country is pleasantly varied, and hilly enough to render it a constant picture, were it inclosed. Thiery is beautifully situated on the same river. I arrived there by five o'clock, and wished, in a period so interesting to France and indeed to all Europe, to see a newspaper. I asked for a coffee-house, - not one in the town. Here are two parishes some thousands of inhabitants, and not a newspaper to be seen by a traveler, even in a moment when all ought to be in anxiety. What stupidity, poverty, and want of circulation! This people hardly deserve to be free; and should there be the least attempt with vigor to keep them otherwise, it can hardly fail of succeeding. To those who have been used to travel amidst the energetic and rapid circulation of wealth, animation, and intelligence of England, it is not possible to describe in words adequate to one's feelings the dullness and stupidity of France. I have been to-day on one of their greatest roads, within thirty miles of Paris, yet I have not seen one diligence, and met but a single gentlemans carriage, nor anything else on the road that looked like a gentleman.

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[July 12.] Walking up a long hill to ease my mare, I was joined by a poor woman, who complained of the times, and that it was a sad country. Demanding her reasons, she said her husband had but a morsel of land, one cow, and a poor little horse, yet they had a franchar (forty-two pounds) of wheat and three chickens to pay as a quitrent to one seigneur; and four franchar of oats, one chicken, and one franc, to pay to another, besides very heavy tailles and other taxes. She had seven children, and the cow's milk helped to make the soup. But why, instead of a horse, do not you no keep another cow?" Oh, her husband could not carry his produce so well without a horse; and asses are little used in the country. It was said, at present, that something was to be done by some great folks for such poor ones, but she did not know who nor how, but God send us better, car les tailles et les droits nous ecrasent.

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This woman, at no great distance, might have been taken for sixty or seventy, her figure was so bent and her face so furrowed and hardened by labor, but she said she was only twenty-eight. An Englishman who has not traveled cannot imagine the figure made by infinitely the greater part of the country women in France; it speaks, at the first sight, hard and severe labor. I am inclined to think that they work harder than the men, and this, united with the more miserable labor of bringing a new race of slaves into the world, destroys absolutely all symmetry of person and every feminine appearance. To what are we to attribute this differences, in the manners of the lower people in the two kingdoms? To government . . .

212
The capitaineries were a dreadful scourge on all the occupiers of land. By this term is to be understood the paramountship of certain districts granted by the king to princes of the blood, by which they were put in possession of the property of all game, even on lands not belonging to them; and what is very singular, on manors granted long before to individuals so that the erecting of a district into a capitainerie was an annihilation of all manorial rights to game within it. This was a trifling business in comparison to other circumstances; for in speaking of the preservation of the game in these capitaineries it must be observed that by game must be understood whole droves of wild boars, and herds of deer not confined by any wall or pale, but wandering at pleasure over the whole country, to the destruction of crops, and to the peopling of the galleys by wretched peasants who presumed to kill them in order to save that food which was to support their helpless children.

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The game in the capitainerie of Montceau, in four parishes only, did mischief to the amount of 184,263 livres per annum. No wonder then that we should find the people asking, We loudly demand the destruction of all the capitaineries and of all the various kinds of game. And what are we to think of demanding as a favor the permission to thresh their grain, mow their fields, and take away the stubble without regard to the partridge or other game? Now an English reader will scarcely understand without being told that there were numerous edicts for preserving the game, which prohibited weeding and hoeing lest the young partridges should be disturbed, steeping seed lest it should injure the game, mowing hay, etc., before a certain time so late as to spoil many crops; and taking away the stubble which would deprive the birds of shelter.

