RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Napoleon's Master

David Lawday

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About the Author

David Lawday was born in London and educated in Sussex and at Oxford. A writer and journalist, who was a correspondent for twenty years with *The Economist,* he is now based in Paris where his son and daughter grew up and where he lives with his French wife.

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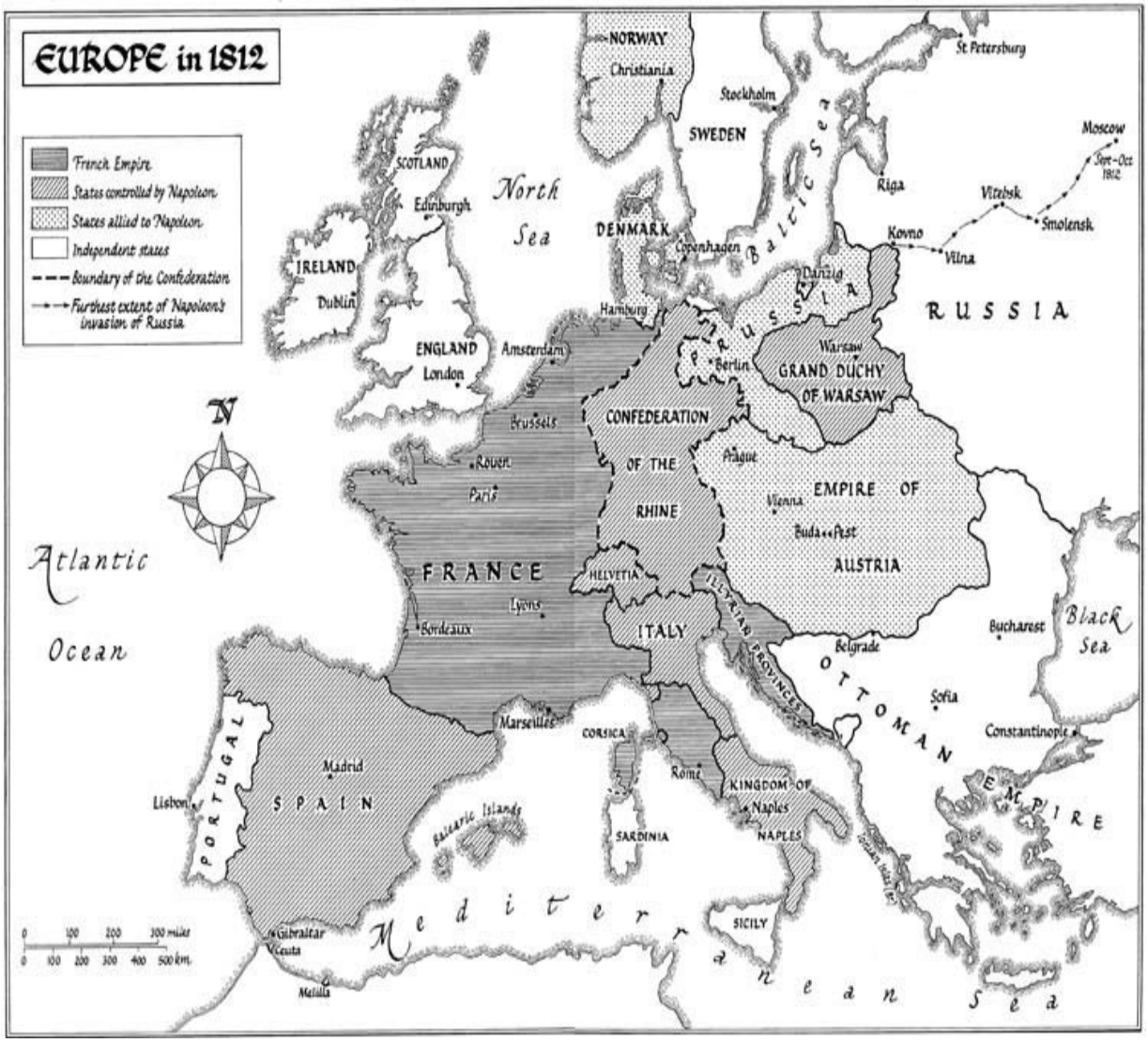
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CONFEDERATION OF THE RHINE
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EMPIRE OF AUSTRIA
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HELVETIA
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SICILY
Gibraltar
Ceuta
Melilla
Mediterranean Sea
Atlantic Ocean
N
0 100 200 300 miles
0 100 200 300 400 500 km

To Noëlle

NAPOLEON'S MASTER

A Life of Prince Talleyrand

DAVID LAWDAY

PIMLICO

PROLOGUE

Paris 1809

IN MID-AFTERNOON ON the last Saturday in January, five imperial dignitaries are gathered in the Emperor Napoleon's private salon at the Tuileries Palace, waiting for him to descend from his bedroom. A chill wind off the Seine rips around the front courtyard of the palace. Napoleon has summoned his chief counsellors at short notice after a headlong gallop to Paris from the Pyrenees. The five men are wary. What made Napoleon dash back like this from his warring in Spain? Five hundred miles and more on horseback in barely five days, and over rutted winter roads. It shows a terrible sense of purpose. They can guess at the conqueror's mood: it will not be placid.

The dignitaries rise as the emperor enters, plumper than they have known him despite his exertions. Strangely calm, he starts discussing public perceptions of how his military campaign in Spain is going. Idle tongues in Paris speak of failure, he says. Well, they are wrong. The war is succeeding. As he talks his counsellors take their seats, all except one. The man still standing is the emperor's diplomatic brain, the most artful negotiator in all Europe.

He stands at the fireplace in high imperial vestment, bewigged, powdered, the model of a bygone France, an elbow propped on the mantelpiece to take the strain off his club foot.

Still outwardly calm, Napoleon reminds the five that he requires their absolute obedience. He has heard, he says, that people have been scheming for his fall in his absence, people of high rank. The police have warned him of possible assassination plots. He has held power for ten years, conquered the whole of Europe. England alone eludes him. And now this! People he has honoured scheming to get rid of him!

Napoleon's self-control snaps. He bounds across the study to the figure leaning on the fireplace, enraged by his nonchalant stance. He raises a fist, waving it before his quarry's powdered face. 'You are a liar, a coward, a man without faith. You do not believe in God; all your life you have failed in your duties, betrayed everyone, tricked everyone. Nothing is sacred for you. You would sell your father.'

Not a muscle moves in the other's face. His impassiveness only incenses Napoleon the more. 'What are you planning? What do you want? Tell me, I dare you! I should break you like a piece of glass; you deserve it. I have the power, only I despise you too much to take the trouble.' For a moment Napoleon turns away, consumed by anger. Then, abruptly, he turns back, his rosebud mouth curling. 'Why haven't I had you hanged from the Carrousel railings? There's still time. You are a … a … a shit in a silk stocking.'

The target of the wondrous imperial insult is Talleyrand – Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, prince, bishop (defrocked), statesman, diplomat, imperial elector and much of rank besides – and it is a scene that leads inexorably to the undoing of the greatest conqueror since Julius Caesar. For most of ten years they have been

partners, on top of the world together. Talleyrand is more familiar than most with Napoleon's temper fits. But this is the bitter end. His face has remained a mask throughout the attack but as Napoleon stamps out of the room the mask at last speaks, in a measured bass tone: 'What a pity, such a great man and so ill-mannered!'

Talleyrand gathers his cane and departs, leaving his fellow high courtiers reduced to stunned silence. From this moment on Talleyrand makes the fall of Napoleon his mission. It is not personal vengeance that drives him, it is hunger for peace and a return to the civilised world he prizes.

I know why I am drawn to Talleyrand. Though he faces grave and momentous tasks, it is often hard to suppress a smile in his company. He has flaws, extravagant flaws, and when he accepts them as such he contrives to live easily with them, convinced they count for nothing beside his worth. He lives a constant dilemma at the pinnacle of power and does not always come down on the side a man of his rank ought. Aside from the true monsters of history, few world figures have managed to achieve as mottled a reputation as he.

He is himself a monster of sorts. Yet what turns people against him is his humanity; he has too many sides for lesser mortals to cope with. He lives through the most dangerous age Europe has known – directing it, surviving it, moulding it – without batting an eyelid. Give him a dozen hard kicks from behind, says one who knows him well, and nothing in his face will betray the slightest discomfort to those in front of him. The twinkle in his eye is always there, though it often has to be imagined. For Talleyrand is a performer, a supreme performer. The English come to call him 'Old Talley', which speaks of suspicion but also of admiration for the performance. His astonishing self-control is often put down to cynicism, heartlessness or

some other unlovely trait. Its origin lies elsewhere. Life's great game for this most aristocratic of statesmen is never to give the game away, and he plays it well – so well that few have matched him then or since in the art of putting the world aright.

One thing I as an Englishman have sensed when delving into his extraordinary life and his still more extraordinary relationship with Napoleon is that to grasp Talleyrand is better to grasp that elusive race, the French. Anyone looking for the hand that created today's highly unusual Europe – unusual because it is more or less united, at peace with itself and, with luck, disposed to stay that way – could do worse than track back to well before the war-weary pragmatists of 1945 and start with Talleyrand. If there is anything more than coincidence in the fact that he dies just as Queen Victoria mounts the throne for the longest reign in Britain's history, it is that he has been intrigued all his life by the British system and has wanted to borrow from it to strengthen the French one. Since his diplomatic accomplishments close to two centuries ago, the British and French, hereditary enemies so long accustomed to being at each others' throats, have never again warred against each other. This is no coincidence.

And on a still broader stage, how many times have I stopped short when exploring Talleyrand's epic struggle against Napoleon's imperial overreach and thought, aha! yes, if only our world's lone superpower at this outset of the twenty-first century were to lend him an ear. He identified for all ages the ultimate foible of empire. The alert he sounded two hundred years ago to a military genius who bestrode a vast empire of his own making rings all the bells:

> I attest that any system which aims at taking freedom by open force to other peoples will only make that freedom hated and prevent its triumph.

If Talleyrand isn't heard loud and clear, it may be that he comes across as a little too ungodly in other matters to be thought entirely trustworthy. Born in 1754 into one of France's noblest houses – the Talleyrand-Périgord line goes back to the ancient Counts of Périgord, sovereign rulers in western France through the Middle Ages – he stands out among world statesmen over the past two centuries and stamps himself upon modern times. Yet in terms of the amount of abuse attracted by a Frenchman, not even Vichy's wretched Philippe Pétain during the Second World War can touch him. In the furious view of many of his contemporaries, as of critics to this day, he is the prince of vice – turncoat, hypocrite, liar, plotter, voluptuary, flatterer, gouger and, to make matters worse, highly successful at them all.

He isn't simply masking his emotions, the detractors say, he has none. Even the club foot he drags painfully through life counts against him on this scorecard; if he has a single principle, they charge, it is to serve his own interests. The insult hurled at him above by the Emperor Napoleon, whom he also long serves, though not so faithfully in the end, still sticks to Talleyrand. It says more, though, of Napoleon on his downward spiral to humiliation and defeat at Waterloo than it does of Talleyrand.

Talleyrand's disdain for emotional display hardens jumpier hearts against him during what must count as the most pulse-racing age in Europe's history, surpassing in long-term impact the Russian Revolution and the Hitler blight. At the outset the French monarchy, older than England's and still absolute, is on its last legs, sapped by liberal thinking without and by scandal within. With his wigs and powders, Talleyrand seems so much a product of this *ancien régime* that it comes as a shock at first to find him riding the wave of revolution that turns world history on its head. Political ambition and a liberal outlook fired by the times propel him into the fray. His sixty-year public

career spans the rotting *ancien régime*, the Revolution of 1789, the Terror, Napoleon's endless wars across Europe, the unstoppable spread of the Napoleonic empire, the emperor's dramatic fall, monarchy restored (twice) and further revolution besides – most of which occur as Britain and Europe's other main powers, Russia, Austria and Prussia, are at war with France.

By force of circumstance he lives as an exile in the United States of America, itself newborn of revolution, as well as in England. Exile encourages him to make allowances for Anglo-Saxon prejudices, which is generous of him since the English display the worst of theirs when the guillotine hangs over his head. After England, the sanctuary he finds in the early United States is a hard landing for a man reared on the blueblood brilliance of the Paris salon, a man said to write the finest language ever penned in world affairs (his worst detractors may allow this). In his reports on the raw America he comes to inhabit he is as astute in assessing its chances of growing rich as his compatriot Alexis de Tocqueville is a little later in assessing its political possibilities. He recognises the US will one day become a 'great people'. But he never quite understands the American spirit; cussed American honesty and self-righteousness in time confound him.

The age he lives in is one of social decomposition on the grand scale. To have lived through it as an ordinary citizen would have been daunting enough. Talleyrand hobbles in its vanguard: leading participant, architect, guide and at times its helpless plaything. He is too human for most others to accept easily. Surely, they're thinking, a man of his influence and rank can't have so many faults. His eccentricities increase their qualms: he rises close to noon, retires the night half over, overdoses on face powder and scent, daily inhales two beakers of water through the nose and snorts forth the intake before shocked visitors to avoid

headcolds, and he sits playing cards at times of peril with an insouciance to match Sir Francis Drake's.

Whenever possible Talleyrand serves power regardless of who holds it, and always at the top of the pile. The king of turncoats, then? I'm not so sure. In his memoirs he notes with his habitual understatement, 'I placed myself at the disposal of events'. The ambiguity of the grand figure that is Talleyrand is a leitmotiv of this book, for ambiguity seems to me a central part of French character, along with a certain trust in reason. Talleyrand does in fact have principles and one of them in particular resonates right through his life. It is this: only fools never change their minds.

In weighing Talleyrand's 'treason', a familiar accusation thrown his way, I've found myself listening not entirely by chance to John Maynard Keynes, whose economist friends have a habit of holding to pet theories even when they are shown to be wrong. 'When events change,' Keynes memorably observed to an obdurate colleague, 'I tend to change my opinions. What do you do?' What does Talleyrand do? Major events overtake each other so fast in his time that it would have been an insult to his own liberal intelligence to ignore the changes they bring. The reference to Keynes is relevant because Talleyrand is an enthusiastic student of economics, a new science in his youth and one that will stand behind every major policy he is to follow. As the young Talleyrand turns over new ideas with fellow intellectual gadabouts in Paris, Adam Smith is publishing *Wealth of Nations*. The book's fame soon spreads to the Continent. Economics seems the right companion for the social ideas of the Enlightenment lately advanced by Voltaire and Rousseau. To Talleyrand, human wealth and happiness derive from industry, enterprise and commerce – all of which he believes depend on flourishing trade between France and mercantile Britain. This in turn requires peace in Europe.

Yet the same Talleyrand comes to lend his diplomatic arts to an alternative method of coalescing Europe: Napoleon's way, by force of arms. He is Napoleon's foreign minister, negotiator and policy guide (in so far as Napoleon ever allows anyone but himself to steer his actions). The Talleyrand–Napoleon relationship is mutually faithless. It can't be otherwise since the relationship is based on a hopeless contradiction: Napoleon lives for conquest, Talleyrand abhors it. France can only ruin herself, he believes, by expanding outside her natural frontiers; the risk applies to all countries that covet territory belonging to others. So he constantly attempts to put a brake on the warrior emperor. His warnings are masked, however, with such outrageous flattery for Napoleon's courage and glory that the emperor may not know which to heed – the brake or the caress – until Talleyrand at last stops him dead to put an end to it all. When he fails to get his way with Napoleon, he goes along with him – but always in the hope of influencing him further down the line. His flattery becomes pitted with irony. On news of one of Napoleon's most resounding later triumphs in battle, his laconic congratulatory dispatch reads: 'I wish to consider this victory the last your Majesty will be obliged to win.' The message between the lines is that victory only makes sense if it leads to all-round peace, not extended dominion.

Talleyrand's tie to Napoleon is extremely complex, and part of the knot is the emperor's generosity. The erstwhile man of the cloth, a high liver, is not made to resist it. Property and titles are showered on him. On the emperor's back he moves up to a grand mansion in Paris where he can feast the highest dignitaries of Europe, he takes a magnificent chateau in the provinces, is raised to the post of Imperial Grand Chamberlain and made a prince (initially of unknown Benevento, an Italian statelet filched from the pope in which Talleyrand will never set foot). He is surely aware of the comic opera side to such elevation, but his

impassive temperament helps him to treat it with the necessary gravitas. His home is the epicentre of Paris society, his table the best in the capital, hence in the world, and the new titles carry welcome additional income.

Talleyrand lives dangerously. This is what makes him a performer. In all but the cut of the sabre it is Talleyrand quite as much as the Duke of Wellington who halts Napoleon. Hence the charge of treason.

Those who find the case against him open and shut fail to convince. Talleyrand can plausibly claim he has no blood on his hands. If he is not always the gentleman, he is, despite the thrust of his tongue, a gentle man. His 'treason' exists in defending civilised values through thick and thin, against all odds. This requires a different kind of courage which in the end proves invincible. It is his legacy and it is a large one, not just for France.

This book is not a history of revolution and war, though I hope to have kept the historical picture clear through the heady year of 1789 and through the wars, glory and tragedy that followed. As to dates, I have dropped the stirring *Messidors, Thermidors* and *Brumaires* that coloured the months of the French Revolution in blood and putschery in favour of plain Junes, Julys and Octobers. The imaginative revolutionary calendar stayed in use for fourteen years until 1806, close to halfway through Napoleon's rule, and was finally abandoned because Napoleon decided it harked back to times his people ought to forget and because it inconvenienced French trade. I judged it inconvenient for readers too, and I daresay Talleyrand would have agreed. The book, then, is not a history of the times; it is the story of Talleyrand, as rich in personal ups, downs, foibles, eccentricities and physical trials as those of any world figure I have come across.

Though I first vaguely encountered him in school history classes, I came to meet him[1] at close quarters quite by

chance – during a stay in 1990s Berlin, well after the Wall came down, where the pavement stall of a secondhand bookshop off the Kurfürstendamm revealed, wedged between German volumes, a pair of dusty French hardbacks recounting his tormented youth and his exile in America. I was mildly surprised to find those two books on offer there in Berlin. Talleyrand couldn't be a local favourite, for the France of his day was in the habit of wielding the military stick against the Prussians, not, as has often happened since, receiving it. I must anyway have been homesick for Paris, where I actually lived, because having picked out the two volumes I was unable to put either down. They introduced me to this strange figure and set me on his longer trail. While his person is the heart of this book, its backbone is the perverse and addictive relationship with Napoleon, the imprint of which is hard to miss on the world of today.

I won't claim to have unearthed previously unknown things about Talleyrand in tracking him from Berlin to the stupendously rich archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, by way of the vaults of the French foreign ministry, the British Library in London, the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and the many Talleyrand homes, the grandest of which is the chateau of Valençay deep in the pastoral Berri region of France. The challenge has been to peel the cover off the hidden things. For his track also passes through a crop of candid memoirs by his contemporaries who have often spiteful, always perceptive views on him, and through the lives of those contemporaries themselves: Germaine de Staël, Metternich, the Duke of Wellington among others. The earth has been well turned by professional scholars, though the last esteemed biography in English was published in 1932 by Duff Cooper, a lovely writer who became Britain's ambassador to France after the Nazi occupation. In Duff

Cooper's time, though, the Talleyrand earth wasn't so well turned, which left him in the dark on certain matters.

Issue must now be taken with that majority of historians, Cooper included, who have taken as gospel Talleyrand's story of his club foot, which he claims was caused by a childhood fall from the top of a cupboard. The story is false. He was born with it, as any modern pediatric bone specialist will attest; infants don't snap bones in a minor fall. To clinch matters, a contemporary painting of a Talleyrand uncle with a club foot has recently come to light. The childhood fall story is a terrifying sop to family pride, a fable spun by family shame. Moreover, there can now be little doubt that his relations with women were broadly platonic, which conflicts with his standard reputation as a serial womaniser. Talleyrand likes women. He loves women, the brighter, comelier and more talkative the better. But in his libertarian age, when it seems next to unavoidable even for a man of moderate sexual drive to plant his seed, he would quite as soon have his women clustered around him in a lively literary salon as lying in his bed.

Still, Talleyrand is the most elusive of subjects. His own memoirs are an enigma. They are a joy to read for their flowing language but ultimately fail to satisfy. They are wickedly good on the art of diplomacy and on the sovereigns, statesman and rascals who inhabit his world. The trouble is that, typically, they uncover little of what goes on inside him. They are an exercise in concealment at which he is highly skilled, having spent all his life at it. They take us through the critical points of his career behind the same hooded gaze he adopts with adversaries, giving away almost nothing of himself. And like all memoirs, Talleyrand's are not to be trusted. Omission is a ready defence. Where he feels uneasy over his course of action or where he may leave himself open to attack, he omits the issue entirely or dismisses it in a throwaway sentence – except where he goes to great lengths to defend

himself against taunts of his involvement in a notorious assassination.

His truer self comes out in private correspondence, where he can be bewilderingly open and one almost wants him for his own sake to shut up, given the risks he runs. And what a flow of personal letters[2] he keeps up. The Talleyrand mails hum. He lets loose a daily barrage of confidences, appraisals and bits of advice to society women, fellow statesmen, financial partners and of course to Napoleon himself. Fortunately a good many of the letters have been collected and published since his death. He will also reveal himself in the set pieces of Parisian society: in conversational sparring at the dinner table, in an outburst at whist, in the busy gossip of the salon with smart women around him, waiting to be intrigued. Virtually none of this figures in his memoirs, but fortunately it is recorded in memoirs penned by others, often by observant high society hostesses, the political chatterboxes of Paris, some who hate him, some who are lost to his charm. And what hostess of either persuasion can reject a man who maintains the highest standards of taste and style even when circumstances may point to lowering them? A familiar story spun about Talleyrand in frenzied revolutionary times – apocryphal, I fear, and therefore not meriting a direct place in this life but reaching to his essence all the same – features an exhausted Jacobin radical bursting into his study, clearly in need of sustenance. Talleyrand hands him a glass of cognac, which he starts tossing down his throat. Talleyrand, aghast, interrupts him:

‘No, no, no, that is not[3] the way to drink cognac. One does it like this. One takes the glass in the hollow of the hand, one warms it, one shakes it with a circular motion to liberate the scent, then one raises it to one’s nostrils, one breathes it in …’

‘And then?’ sighs his panicked visitor.

‘And then, Sir, one puts one’s glass down and one discusses it!’

I own to a certain favouritism towards Talleyrand on this count, authentic or not. Hear today’s educated French people in dinner table discussion and someone, seeking to impress on one subject or another, will soon break in with: ‘As Talleyrand said …’ Then they’re off, each venturing a version of some pearl of wit he is supposed to have uttered. The result is that he has to take credit for more badly mangled aphorisms than ever entered his head. This is the kind of dubious honour that, in English, Shakespeare and Churchill are obliged to bear. There is, moreover, a further count on which it is hard to deny Talleyrand sympathy. It is that the battle he won against Napoleon was in the end unfair. Unfair, that is, to Talleyrand. For in French hearts it matters little what hardship and misery Napoleon caused France. He gave the nation glory, lasting glory. Posterity permits no one to best Napoleon, as the map of today’s Paris shows. The capital of the nation which Talleyrand ultimately rescued lives in eternal tribute to the destroyer he rescued it from. Spoking out from the massive Arc de Triomphe, a testament to Napoleon’s military genius, run avenues with names that tell of his victories; the busy Place de la Concorde exhibits Napoleon’s martial souvenirs in bronze and stone; from atop his column on the central Place Vendôme, the conqueror continues to command the city; his tomb at Les Invalides commands the river Seine. And Talleyrand? He has a single street named after him, a short alley in the Left Bank government quarter behind the present foreign ministry.

Scots, Welsh and Irish will take exception to being lumped together in this book with the majority of the inhabitants of the British Isles as ‘the English’, and to having the lands they live in called England. I apologise. To people like Talleyrand with roots in the *ancien régime* – and to

Napoleon as well for that matter – the act of union between England and Scotland (1707) was still just raw enough in the mind to leave them thinking of the singular old enemy across the Channel in the age-old manner. As for union with Ireland, this was only being hammered out in their time. So Talleyrand and Napoleon, like their compatriots, never called the British nation anything but *les Anglais* or Britain anything but *Angleterre*, and because of the number of direct quotations concerning them in this book it would have been confusing to do otherwise. In subtler ways, to have gone for political correctness with 'British' would have ill conveyed Talleyrand's thinking, though it is a little strange perhaps that the French to this day continue to designate all Britons in everyday speech as *les Anglais*.

A word on the world as it appears in this book is also in order. The majority of its inhabitants, particularly those living east of Suez, won't locate themselves in the 'world' Talleyrand shapes and reshapes. To him the world is Europe; his concern is power, and Europe in his day is where world power begins and ends. The United States, whose future weight Talleyrand nonetheless foresees, is so new as to be left to herself once he manages to end his exile there. The Ottoman Empire exists purely to be played off against tsarist Russia. The rest of the planet is good chiefly for European colonisation, a jealous pursuit in his times.

Finally, money[4]. Given Talleyrand's appetite for it, it has a potent place in this book. The currency Talleyrand was most interested in was the *livre* (pound) under the *ancien régime*, which became the *franc* after the Revolution and kept the same nominal value. It is well nigh pointless to make value comparisons with today's money but those who insist on trying to make some sense of Talleyrand's wealth may wish to evaluate his *franc* at a good £2 sterling – three-to-four euros or US dollars.

ONE

Born to Count

TALLEYRAND'S PARENTS WERE an unusual couple. His mother Alexandrine, the daughter of a Burgundian marquis, was six years older than his father Charles-Daniel, the stripling Count of Talleyrand-Périgord. Though both hailed from France's high aristocracy and were serving at the court of the Bourbon monarchy in Versailles some thirty years before revolution overturned their world, they were hard up. Family wealth that others of their rank took for granted stubbornly eluded them. In the case of Charles-Daniel, it was bestowed on an older half-brother. Inheritance rights at times went disconcertingly wrong in the tangled Périgord chain. Alexandrine's dowry, though solid, permitted few luxuries. There were chateaux in the provinces to compensate, but in Paris the young couple had barely enough to keep up the minimum living standards of their class: a mansion, servants, a carriage, mountains of linen. Furthermore their residence on the Left Bank, in the shadow of the church of Saint Sulpice, a step from the Seine, was a family home in the widest sense: it was rented in the name of Alexandrine's mother, so that sundry other

relatives had lodging rights as required. The predicament seemed to burn itself into the tissue of their son born in the Paris home on 2 February 1754. Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord would forever be obsessed by wealth, by both the lack of it and the amassing of it. He too was unusual. He was born with a club foot which neither parent cared to acknowledge as such.

Talleyrand arrived in the world fifteen years before Napoleon Bonaparte, who was born into the clannish small gentry of rugged Corsica, then practically a foreign land. Their worlds were so different as to make a future partnership the wildest of improbabilities. Each man, when he came to know the other, was forever aware of the gulf in class, breeding and upbringing, though only Napoleon much mentioned it.

The Talleyrand-Périgords were the stuff of France's *ancien régime*. It was a wonder any of their line proved able to find their way when the old order ceased to exist. The age Talleyrand was born into was not one of momentous change, but it was agitated all the same. Europe was on the brink of what would come to be known as the Seven Years War, a worldwide struggle in which France and Britain were, as usual, on opposing sides and which soon stripped France of her colonial possessions, including her prized lands in North America and India. Otherwise the long-reigning French king, Louis XV, ruled the country according to the unbudging feudal concepts of his Bourbon forefathers, and only the ruinous outcome of the war, plus the wanton extravagance of his court, showed signs of unsettling the established order. A greater danger did exist, though it was more subtle. It came from a determined and talented school of freethinkers.

Everything Talleyrand's parents undertook was directed by aristocratic tradition. Charles-Daniel was sixteen when he married Alexandrine, a capable young countess of twenty-two with a convent education behind her and a light

indoctrination into Paris society and the arts. The marriage was made because it was high time for a girl of noble birth to have a husband on reaching her twenties. Although Charles-Daniel's financial situation was not all his Burgundian bride's family hoped for, his prospects appeared bright. He was in line to become a colonel in the king's grenadiers with a regiment to his name, a tribute to his fine lineage. This he traced back to the early Middle Ages when Counts of Périgord were sovereign rulers over a picturesque chunk of western France lying just above Aquitaine and the Bordeaux vineyards, centred on the Dordogne valley. The lords of Périgord were fully aware of their status. One of them, Adalbert, had a set-to over rank with Hugh Capet, France's first king. Family chronicles recorded a roosterish clash between the two at the close of the tenth century when Hugh Capet sought to bring the Périgord champion under his sway. 'Who made you Count?' inquired the king. 'Who made you King?' retorted Adalbert.

While grand, the Talleyrand-Périgords weren't strictly speaking every inch as grand as they felt. They were an offshoot of Count Adalbert's direct line that died out in the fifteenth century. The titles they bore had changed to Prince of Chalais and Count of Grignols, though Count of Périgord crept back into use with royal assent as the years went by and Talleyrand always figured somewhere in the family name. Often pronounced *ta-i-ran* – a variant that came to be favoured by Napoleon with his strong Corsican brogue – the name Talleyrand was a valorous sobriquet awarded to one of the medieval Périgord rulers for skill in scything through enemy ranks (from the French *taille-rang*).

It is true that our Talleyrand's enemies would delight in questioning his lineage as he rose above them, but this was spite. There could be no serious argument: his best inheritance was a great name. He was proud of it and it lent him a natural superiority he had no need to boast

about. In later life he simply recalled that his father and mother were not wealthy, but that they held positions at court which if well used might lead them and their offspring as far as ambition ran.

With Alexandrine busy at Versailles as a lady-in-waiting and Charles-Daniel occupied by soldierly obligations, the couple had little time to take a close interest in the infant son, even if it had occurred to them to do so. Parental coddling was poor form, particularly in aristocratic houses. The duty of parents of high rank was to prepare the ground for their heirs' advance as adults, to secure positions for them, arrange a good marriage and enhance their fortunes. This entailed taking a serious interest in them when they turned fourteen or so. Infants could be ignored. Charles-Maurice was in fact their second child. A sickly first son was to die in early childhood, leaving Charles-Maurice as first heir. Two more sons would arrive. Still, our Talleyrand might well have expected his parents to be more conscious of the mood of the times than they were. For although the *ancien régime* was set to survive for a good three decades yet, the spirit of freethinkers with their liberal ideas on social reform filled the air. The country fizzed with new thinking on most matters. The Enlightenment was in full flow. Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot and the *philosophes* were persuasive heralds of change, as most of the court at Versailles dimly realised, and they paid for their open-minded sins. Troublesome intellectuals were imprisoned, banished, even stoned. Books they wrote were not merely banned but in some cases burned. Still, if Jean-Jacques Rousseau's reforming notions on how to educate children were about to open the window to tenderness and to draw a large audience, the Talleyrand-Périgords weren't listening. They seemed impervious to the Enlightenment.

Frigid parenting was as much to blame as the club foot for the infant Talleyrand's exclusion. For excluded he was.

What was more, none of his brothers was held apart in childhood as he was. He did not remember seeing his parents[1] until he was four years old, and then only briefly. Even allowing for blanks of memory from such an early age and the likelihood that his mother at least kept an eye on him, he was scarred by his treatment. He took it as cruel indifference on his parents' part. Virtually from birth he was farmed out to a wet nurse in a scruffy north Paris suburb near Saint Denis. His exile upheld custom, but lasted uncustomarily long. His story was that during his time with the wet nurse he fell from the top of a cupboard where she'd placed him and broke his right foot, which she left unattended. Though the story was invented he stuck with it throughout his life, except when ribbing the squeamish (to them he said his foot was bitten by a stray pig when his nurse was attending to a passing manfriend). Publicly his family adopted the fall-from-the-cupboard yarn, as did his contemporaries and historians thereafter. Recently, however, a colour portrait of the time resurfaced of a first uncle wearing a tublike shoe plainly made to correct a club foot. Talleyrand's defect was congenital. Surgeons today virtually rule out the possibility that the misshapen right foot – later likened to 'a horse's hoof with a claw tip' by a woman devoted to him – could have resulted from a fall in the home at an age when bones hardly ever break or leave serious deformities if they do. Talleyrand certainly sensed that family shame over his condition consigned him to the wilderness of Saint Denis. His 'accident' changed the course of his life.

Plainly it posed a problem for his youthful father, the count. When the first son died, Charles-Maurice became rightful heir to the family estate, sparsely endowed though it was at the time. Being first in line in a noble house booked him for high service in the king's army. But he did not have a soldier's legs; he was not officer material. The family was in a funk. By Talleyrand's later account, it was

left to chance in the person of another uncle, a naval grandee, to reunite him with his parents. The seafaring uncle had grown curious about his nephew's whereabouts. Perhaps in the long hours at sea he had been reading Rousseau. He found the boy in a grimy working-class back yard, dressed in tatters and chasing sparrows on a makeshift crutch. Shocked, he took the ill-clad child and presented him to his parents as they were receiving guests at their Paris residence. How could they abandon the scion of a great family to such squalor? The uncle's accusation was embarrassingly clear as he pushed the boy forward, saying, 'Go on, my lord and nephew. Kiss this lady. She is your mother.' Talleyrand later recalled the occasion as the first time he saw his mother and father. The reunion did not last long. At six he was sent off for a protracted stay with his great-grandmother in her chateau in the heart of the Périgord region close to Bordeaux, still unable to understand the seeming indifference of his parents.

The Bordeaux stagecoach he boarded with a new nurse took seventeen days to reach Chalais, the family's Périgord seat, a journey now made in four or five hours by car. The ride was grindingly rough and wearying. People of rank did not use the regular stagecoach; they took the post chaise, which was more expensive but more comfortable for being better sprung and could cut the journey by half. This second exile opened the child Talleyrand's eyes, and his heart. His time with his great-grandmother, the Princesse de Chalais, engraved on him a sense of ancient lineage and family grandeur of which he'd known nothing until then. It was an authentic, natural grandeur, and the more gracious for that. The mistress of Chalais, a busy septuagenarian, had a special aura: she was the granddaughter of Jean Baptiste Colbert, the chief minister to the Sun King, Louis XIV, and she was so much at ease with herself and her position that she spent more time fending for others than for herself. Her small heir with the bad leg at once took her