



VINTAGE

# DANCING TO THE PRECIPICE

CAROLINE MOOREHEAD

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Caroline Moorehead

Praise

List of Illustrations

Time line

Characters in the book

Dedication

Title Page

Foreword

1. This Magnificent Age
2. A Talent for Deception
3. A Sparkling Picture
4. The Colour of Hope
5. The Dismantling of Paris
6. Deep and Dark Shades
7. Standing on a Vast Volcano
8. Heads Falling like Tiles
9. Mrs Latour from the Old Country
10. *Incroyables* and *Merveilleuses*
11. Hordes of Vagabond French
12. Toothless Dogs and Clawless Cats
13. Not a Court, but a Power
14. Oh Unhappy France!
15. Embarking on a Career of Grief
16. A Pocket Tyranny
17. A Warm Heart
18. The Rhapsodies of Life

Afterword  
Picture Section  
Source notes  
Acknowledgements  
Bibliography  
Index  
Copyright

## About the Book

Lucie de la Tour du Pin was the Pepys of her generation. She witnessed, participated in, and wrote diaries detailing one of the most tumultuous periods of history. From life in the Court of Versailles, through the French Revolution to Napoleon's rule, Lucie survived extraordinary times with great spirit. She recorded people, politics and intrigue, alongside the intriguing minutia of everyday life: food, work, illness, children, manners and clothes.

Caroline Moorehead's richly novelistic biography sets Lucy and her dairies in their wider context, illuminating a remarkable period of history.

## About the Author

Caroline Moorehead is the biographer of Bertrand Russell, Freya Stark, Iris Origo and Martha Gellhorn. She is well known for her work in human rights and has published a book on refugees, *Human Cargo*. She lives in London.

Also by Caroline Moorehead

*Fortune's Hostages*

*Sidney Bernstein: A Biography*

*Freya Stark: A Biography*

*Beyond the Rim of the World: The Letters of Freya Stark*  
(ed.)

*Troublesome People*

*Betrayed: Children in Today's World* (ed.)

*Bertrand Russell: A Life*

*The Lost Treasures of Troy*

*Dunant's Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the*  
*Red Cross*

*Iris Origo: Marchesa of Val d'Orcia*

*Martha Gellhorn: A Life*

*Human Cargo: A Journey among Refugees*

*The Letters of Martha Gellhorn* (ed.)

‘A rich and satisfying book which not only adds to our appreciation of Madame de la Tour du Pin’s story but brings the whole tumultuous period and its characters to life’

*Spectator*

‘Beautifully composed’

*Daily Express*

‘A gripping story of an extraordinary life’

*Literary Review*

‘Moorehead has an eye for the detail ... The book sparkles with gems about life at the court of Marie-Antoinette’

*Herald*

‘[A] romantic adventure, staged in colourful historical settings’

*Times Literary Supplement*

‘[A] comprehensive and absorbing biography’

*Independent*

‘The attraction of Moorehead’s biography lies in her seamless fusion of Lucie’s warm subjectivity with a broad historical canvas of bitter turmoil’

*Irish Times*

## List of Illustrations

### Text Illustrations

Court dress with panniers. Plate number 161 from *Galerie des Modes et Costumes*, engraved 1778-87. (Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Art Library)

*Coiffure au Globe*. Engraving of 1780. (Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Art Library)

Archbishop Dillon's palace in Narbonne © cliché Jean Lepage (Musées de Narbonne)

Dressed to reflect the craze for ballooning. *The Flying Coquette*. Engraving of 1784. (Private Collection/Bridgeman Art Library)

Woman in a day dress with a hairstyle 'à la Belle Poule'. Period of American Independence. Engraving of 1779-80. (Private Collection/Bridgeman Art Library)

*Adieu Bastille*, 1789. Anonymous French cartoon 'Vive la République'. Satirical drawing by Sir John Tenniel. (CartoonStock)

The execution of Louis XVI. (Bridgeman Art Library)

The chateau of Le Bouilh

Marie Antoinette on her way to the guillotine. Drawn from the life by David. (Bridgeman Art Library)

The *Diana*, 1794

Fashion plate of 25 August 1790 from the *Journal de la Mode et du Gout*. (British Museum/Courtauld Institute of Art)

Fashion plate of 4 March 1798 from the *Journal des Dames et des Modes*. (British Museum/Courtauld Institute of Art)



Art)

Cossey Hall in Norfolk. St Augustine's Chapel on left  
*The Pinnacle of Liberty*. Satirical drawing by James Gillray.  
(CartoonStock)

General Bertrand by Dutertre. (Bibliotheque Municipale de  
Chateauroux)

Rue des Champs Elysees, no. 1. Visiting card from the  
Rothschild Collection, Waddesdon. (National Trust)

Francois-Rene Chateaubriand

Marie Caroline de Bourbon-Sicile, Duchesse de Berri, in  
her 'Petit-Pierre' disguise

The Fort du Ha

## **Plate Section One**

- [1.](#) Lucie as a young woman
- [2.](#) Comte Arthur Dillon, Lucie's father. (Georges Martin collection)
- [3.](#) Thérèse-Lucy de Rothe, Lucie's mother. (Georges Martin collection)
- [4.](#) Fanny Bertrand, Lucie's half-sister. (Georges Martin collection, Chateauroux archives)
- [5.](#) Arthur Richard Dillon, Archbishop of Narbonne, Lucie's great-great-uncle. (Georges Martin collection)
- [6.](#) Frédéric-Séraphim, Comte de Gouvernet and later Marquis de la Tour du Pin, Lucie's husband. (Guy de Feuilhade)
- [7.](#) Humbert, Lucie's first child. (Georges Martin collection)
- [8.](#) The Princess d'Hénin, Frederic's aunt. (Comte Liederkerke Beaufort private collection)
- [9.](#) Lady Jerningham, Lucie's aunt. (Georges Martin collection)
- [10.](#) Lucie's children: Humbert, Charlotte, Cécile and Aymar. (Georges Martin collection)

- [11.](#) Lucie's grandchildren: Cécile and Hadelin. (Comte Liederkerke Beaufort private collection)
- [12.](#) Lucie as an older woman. (Guy de Feuilhade)

## **Plate Section Two**

- [1.](#) Marie Antoinette and her children, 1787, oil on canvas, painted by Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun. (Château de Versailles, France, Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library)
- [2.](#) Caricature of Louis XVI at the time of the French Revolution. (Bridgeman Art Library)
- [3.](#) *'A Versailles, A Versailles'. March of the Women on Versailles*, Paris, 5 October 1789. Coloured engraving, French School. (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France/Lauros/Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library)
- [4.](#) Camille Desmoulins with his wife, Lucile, and their baby, Horace-Camille, c. 1792, oil on canvas, by Jacques Louis David. (Château de Versailles, France/Bridgeman Art Library)
- [5.](#) Thérésia Cabarrus, c. 1805, oil on canvas, by Francois Gérard. (Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris, Paris)
- [6.](#) View of the Hudson River from Fort Knyphansen, water colour on paper. By Thomas Davies. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada/Bridgeman Art Library)
- [7.](#) Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, 1807, oil on canvas, by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon. (Musée de Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France/Bridgeman Art Library)
- [8.](#) Lucie and six-year-old Humbert among the Indians on her farm near Albany. (Artist unknown)
- [9.](#) A Parisian tea party, c. 1800, colour litho, by Jean Fulchran Harriet. (Private Collection/Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Art Library)

- [10.](#) Josephine at her Coronation (detail from *The Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon and the Coronation of the Empress Josephine, 2 December 1804*), oil on canvas, by Jacques Louis David. (Louvre, Paris, France/Bridgeman Art Library)
- [11.](#) Napoleon after his Abdication. Oil on canvas, by Paul Hippolyte Delaroche. (Musée de l'Armée, Paris, France/Bridgeman Art Library)
- [12.](#) Claire de Duras, engraving, French School. (Private collection, Roger-Viollet/Bridgeman Art Library)
- [13.](#) Félicie de la Rochejacquelein.
- [14.](#) Madame de Staël, painted by Elisabeth Vigee Le Brun, 1807. (Château de Copper, Switzerland/Erich Lessing/Art Resource)
- [15.](#) The Château de Vêves in Belgium.
- [16.](#) Fanny Bertrand and her children at Napoleon's death-bed on St Helena. (Chateauroux archives)

The author and the publishers thank the Bridgeman Art Library for assistance with picture research, and Comte Liederkerke Beaufort, Georges Martin and Guy de Feuilhade for the family pictures.

The author and the publishers have made every effort to trace the holders of copyrights in illustrations and quotations. Any inadvertent omissions or errors may be corrected in future editions.

# Time Line

1770	25 February	Birth of Lucie-Henriette Dillon in the rue du Bac, Paris
1774		Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette ascend the throne of France
1778	5 April	Departure of Lucie's father, Arthur Dillon, for the American War of Independence
1782	8 September	Death of Lucie's mother, Thérèse-Lucy Dillon
1787	22 May	Lucie marries Frédéric de Gouvernet and is presented at court
1789	5 May	Estates General meet in Versailles
	14 July	Fall of the Bastille
1790		M. de la Tour du Pin made Minister for War
	19 May	Birth of Humbert
1791	20 June	Flight of royal family to Varennes
	October	Lucie and Frédéric (and Humbert) leave for Holland where he is now ambassador
1792	March	Frédéric dismissed
	20 April	France declares war on Austria
	August	Prussian and Austrian troops invade France
	10 August	The storming of the Tuileries and the massacre of the Swiss Guard
	22 September	French Republic proclaimed
1793	January	Lucie returns to Paris
	21 January	Louis XVI guillotined
	March	Lucie and Frédéric go to Le Bouilh, Bordeaux
	September	Birth of Séraphine
	October	Marie Antoinette guillotined
1794	January	Terror reaches its peak in Bordeaux
	March	Lucie, Frédéric and the children leave for America
	13 April	Arthur Dillon is guillotined
	28 April	Jean-Frédéric de la Tour du Pin is guillotined
	June	Lucie and Frédéric buy a farm near Albany
1795	September	Death of Séraphine

1796	6 May	Lucie, Frédéric and Humbert return to Bordeaux via Spain
	1 November	Birth of Charlotte
	2 November	Directoire set up; it would last until November 1799
1797	July	Lucie, Frédéric, Humbert and Charlotte go to Paris
	4 September	<i>Coup d'état</i> of 18 fructidor
	November	Lucie, Frédéric and the children flee to England
1798		Birth of Edward and, three months later, his death
1799		Lucie, Frédéric, Humbert and Charlotte return to Paris via Holland
	November	Consulat set up, with Napoleon as First Consul
1800	13 February	Lucie gives birth to Cécile
	September	Family goes to settle at Le Bouilh
1802	25 March	Treaty of Amiens signed with Britain
	2 August	Napoleon appointed First Consul for Life
1804	28 May	Napoleon becomes Emperor
1805–6		Series of military victories by Napoleon across Europe
1806	18 October	Birth of Aymar
1808	12 May	Frédéric appointed Prefect of the Dyle and family moves to Brussels
1810	1–2 April	Having divorced Josephine, Napoleon marries Marie-Louise of Austria
	End of April	Lucie attends on Marie-Louise in Brussels
1813	May	Marriage of Charlotte to Auguste de Liedekerke Frédéric dismissed from Brussels but appointed Prefect of Amiens. Family moves to Amiens.
1812		Disastrous Russian campaign
1814	1 January	The Allies invade France
	20 April	Napoleon sails for Elba
	3 May	Louis XVIII arrives in Paris
	1 November	Frédéric sent to represent France at Congress of Vienna
		Lucie settles in Paris

1815	20 March	Napoleon returns to Paris and Louis XVIII flees to Ghent
		Lucie returns to Brussels
	18 June	Napoleon defeated at Waterloo and sent to be held on St Helena; in his entourage are Lucie's half-sister Fanny and her husband
		Frédéric returns as Ambassador to Holland
1816	28 January	Death of Humbert, aged 25, in a duel
1817	20 March	Death of Cécile, at the age of 17, from tuberculosis
1820	1 January	Lucie decides to write her memoirs
		Frédéric appointed Ambassador to Turin
1822	1 September	Death of Charlotte, at 25, from tuberculosis. Her 2-year-old daughter, Cécile, comes to live with Lucie
1824	16 September	Death of Louis XVIII; his brother ascends throne as Charles X
1830	February	Lucie and Frédéric visit Paris for the first time in 10 years
	2 August	Abdication of Charles X; Louis-Philippe becomes King
		Frédéric resigns and moves back to Le Bouilh
1832		Aymar implicated in failed coup by the Duchesse de Berri
	December	Frédéric is sent to prison in the Fort du Hâ
1833	20 March	Frédéric is released and they move to Italy
1836		Félicie lends them her house in Lausanne
1837	26 February	Death of Frédéric
1842	November	Lucie and Aymar move first to Lucca and then to Pisa
1848		Year of revolution in Europe
1852		Louis-Napoleon adopts the title of Napoleon III
1853	2 April	Death of Lucie in Pisa at the age of 83

## Characters in the book

### **Lucie's family and friends**

*Arthur, Comte Dillon* (1750-94) (*father*). Colonel-proprietor of the Dillon regiment serving under Louis XVI. At 18 married his cousin Thérèse-Lucy de Rothe, and after her death Comtesse de la Touche, first cousin of the Empress Josephine. Arthur fought in the American Revolution, was promoted General and made governor of Tobago. He returned to Paris to represent Martinique at the Estates General, then fought on the side of the republican army. Having tried to save the King's life, he was himself arrested and guillotined on 13 April 1794.

*Lucy de Rothe* (?-1804) (*grandmother*). After the death of her only daughter, Lucie's mother, Mme de Rothe brought up her granddaughter with great severity. Assumed to be the mistress of her uncle, Archbishop Dillon, she presided over his household until the revolution, when they fled to Germany, and then to England.

*Thérèse-Lucy de Rothe* (1751-82) (*mother*). Married at 17 to her cousin Arthur whom she thought of as a brother, she had two children: Georges, who died before his second birthday, and Lucie. She became lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette, but died of tuberculosis at the age of 31.

*Richard-Arthur Dillon, Archbishop of Narbonne* (1721-1806) (*great-uncle*). A worldly administrator rather than a

pious prelate, the Archbishop kept a famed hunt at Hautefontaine north of Paris. Lucie accompanied him on several occasions to his see, Montpellier, where he lived in great splendour. Forced to flee France after the attack on the clergy, he spent his last years in exile in London. He was the life-long companion and lover of Lucie's grandmother, Mme de Rothe.

*Frédéric-Séraphim, Comte de Gouvernet and later Marquis de la Tour du Pin Gouvernet* (1759-1837) (*husband*). A soldier by profession, Frédéric served with Lafayette in the American Revolution. Briefly a diplomat, he was forced into hiding by the revolution and fled with Lucie to America. Later he was chosen by Napoleon as Prefect of Brussels and then Amiens. He represented France at the Congress of Vienna and was appointed Ambassador to Turin.

*Jean-Frédéric de la Tour du Pin Gouvernet* (1727-1794) (*father-in-law*). A prominent soldier and Minister for War under Louis XVI, he was arrested during the Terror and sent to the guillotine.

*Adelaïde-Félicité-Henriette d'Hénin* (1750-1820?) (*Frédéric's aunt*). Married at 15 to the Prince d'Hénin, from whom she lived separated, she became the centre of a group of clever, influential women in Paris. By nature irascible and impetuous, but also generous and devoted, she played an important part in Lucie's life. The Princesse d'Hénin was lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette and spent much of her life - after her husband went to the guillotine - as companion to Trophime-Gérard, Marquis de Lally-Tollendal, deputy to the Estates General in 1789 and later member of the Académie Française.

*Félicie de Duras, Comtesse de la Rochejacquelein* (1798-1883) (*goddaughter*). Daughter of Lucie's friend Claire de



Duras, Félicie became Lucie's main correspondent for the last 30 years of her life. Boyish and impetuous, she embroiled Lucie's son, Aymar, in a disastrous escapade.

*Lady Jerningham* (1748-1825) (*aunt*). When Lucie and Frédéric fled to London in 1798, they found a home with Lady Jerningham and her family at Cossey Hall in Norfolk. Lucie was very attached to her English aunt.

*Fanny Dillon* (1785-1836) (*half-sister*). The only surviving daughter of Arthur and his second wife, Fanny married General Bertrand, faithful follower of Napoleon, and had four children. They accompanied the deposed Emperor to St Helena.

### **Lucie's six children:**

*Humbert* (1790-1816) Sous-Préfet under Napoleon and lieutenant in the Black Musketeers; Humbert was killed in a duel.

*Séraphine* (1793-5).

*Alix*, known as *Charlotte* (1796-1822) who died of tuberculosis.

*Edward* (1798) who died aged a few months.

*Cécile* (1800-17) who died of tuberculosis soon after her 17th birthday.

*Aymar* (1806-67) who was the only one of her children to survive her.

### **Lucie had two grandchildren to whom she was close:**

*Cécile* (1818-93), daughter of Charlotte and brought up by Lucie.

*Hadelin* (1816-90), son of Charlotte who rose to prominence in the political and social world of Brussels.

### **Characters in France**

*Angoulême, Marie-Thérèse d'*, (1778-1851). The only surviving daughter of Louis XVI, she accompanied her uncle, later Louis XVIII, into exile in England and married her cousin, the Duc d'Angoulême. During the Bourbon restoration she presided over a starchy court, but remained unpopular.

*Beauharnais, Hortense de* (1783-1837). The only daughter of the Empress Josephine by her first marriage, she was later married to Napoleon's brother, Louis, and became Queen of Holland. Her son became Napoleon III.

*Berri, Marie Caroline de Bourbon-Sicile, Duchesse de* (1798-1870). Married to the Duc de Berri, she followed Charles X into exile and tried to inspire the royalist insurrection in which Aymar and Félicie de la Rochejacquelein took part.

*Cambacérès, Jean-Jacques, Duc de Parme* (1753-1824). A lawyer and judge, who became Second Consul and worked on the Napoleonic Code.

*Charles X, King of France* (1757-1836). Younger son of Louis XVI's brother. While still the Comte d'Artois, he was one of the first to flee the revolution. On his return, he became head of the ultra-royalist party, and succeeded his brother Louis XVIII as King in 1824. His fall marked the end of the Bourbon reign in France.

*Chateaubriand, François-René* (1768-1848). Poet and writer, he spent the first years of the revolution in England, returning to France to have a troubled relationship with Napoleon. He inspired great devotion in women.

*Danton, Georges* (1759-94). The first president of the Committee of Public Safety in the French Revolution, he was considered a moderating influence on the Jacobins.

Accused of leniency towards the enemies of the revolution, he was sent to the guillotine.

*Desmoulins, Camille* (1760–94). A political journalist and lawyer, Desmoulins played an important part in the revolution through his writings. He was a friend of Lucie's father Arthur, and refused to condemn him before the Tribunal. Falling out with Robespierre, he was tried with other moderates. His wife Lucile followed him to the guillotine, going to the scaffold on the same day as Arthur and leaving two small children.

*Fouché, Joseph, Duc d'Otrante* (1759–1820). One of the most efficient organisers of the Terror, his political skills contributed to the fall of Robespierre. Later, as Minister for Police under Napoleon, he created a formidable network of spies.

*Josephine de Beauharnais, Empress, first wife of Napoleon* (1763–1814). Imprisoned under the Terror, in which her husband was guillotined, she married Napoleon in 1796, but was unable to give him a child. He divorced her, and she lived at Malmaison until her death.

*Louis XVI, King of France* (1754–93). Married to Marie Antoinette at 15 and King at 20, Louis XVI was serious-minded and vacillating. Unable to respond to the challenges of the liberals and democrats, and arrested after the failure of his plans to escape, Louis was accused of secret dealings with foreigners. Brought to trial for treason, he was executed on 21 January 1793.

*Louis XVIII, King of France* (1755–1824). Brother to Louis XVI, and known by the title Monsieur, he fled France on the revolution and tried to put together an army of émigrés to challenge the French republican forces. After the death of

his nephew in June 1795, he took the title of King and remained in England until returning to Paris in 1814. He had to flee once more during Napoleon's Hundred Days. Immensely fat and suffering from gout, he found it increasingly hard to oppose the ultra-conservative members of his court.

*Louis Philippe, Duc d'Orléans* (1747-93). Cousin to Louis XVI, he lived in the Palais-Royal where he was thought to be plotting against Versailles. In the revolution, adopting the name Philippe-Égalité, he sided with the Third Estate. He voted for the death of the King, but was himself guillotined soon after.

*Louis-Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, King of the French* (1773-1850). After fighting for the revolutionary army, Louis-Philippe lived in America. During the reign of Charles X, Louis-Philippe became the centre of the liberal opposition and was proclaimed King of the French after Charles X was deposed. He reigned for 18 years and was ousted by the revolutionary movement which swept through Europe in 1848.

*Marat, Jean-Paul* (1743-93). A Swiss-born philosopher and political theorist whose journalism was central to the revolution. Briefly one of the most important men in revolutionary France, together with Danton and Robespierre, he was stabbed to death in his bath by Charlotte Corday.

*Marie-Antoinette, Archduchess of Austria, Queen of France* (1755-93). The pretty, frivolous 14-year-old bride of Louis XVI remained childless for eight years and became unpopular with the conservative court at Versailles and with the people of France. When the revolution broke out, she was perceived as a reactionary influence. Accused of

secret dealings with the Austrians, she was imprisoned with her family in August 1792 and guillotined in October 1793.

*Marie-Louise, Empress of the French* (1791-1847). Born Archduchess Maria Louisa of Austria, she was the great-niece of Marie Antoinette. She was Napoleon's second wife, and mother of Napoleon II, King of Rome. After Napoleon's abdication, she fled to Vienna, becoming Duchess of Parma. Later she remarried and had three more children.

*Napoleon, Emperor of France* (1769-1821). A general with the revolutionary army, he organised the coup of 18 brumaire and set up a new government, the Consulate. He was First Consul from 1799 to 1804, then Emperor until 1814. Sent into exile in Elba, he returned for a Hundred Days in 1815 before being defeated at Waterloo. He died in exile in St Helena.

*Robespierre, Maximilien* (1758-94). A disciple of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and one of the main architects of the Terror, when he was known as the 'Incorruptible'. With his execution in 1794, one phase of the French Revolution came to an end.

*Staël, Germaine de* (1766-1817). A woman of letters who wrote novels, plays and political essays and whose salon flourished after the Terror. Banished from Paris by Napoleon who found her hostile and outspoken, she spent many years in Coppet in Switzerland.

*Talleyrand-Périgord, Charles-Maurice de, Prince de Benevento* (1754-1838). A statesman and diplomat renowned for his political intrigues and his capacity for survival. He held office during the French Revolution - spending the two years of the Terror in the United States -

and under Napoleon, Louis XVIII, Charles X and Louis-Philippe.

*Tallien, Jean-Lambert* (1767-1820). An active popular leader in the storming of the Tuileries in August 1792, he was also a direct participant in the September massacres, before being sent to Bordeaux to enforce revolutionary Terror on the provinces. Influential in Robespierre's downfall, Tallien later accompanied Napoleon to Egypt. He died of leprosy, in great poverty.

*Tallien, Thérésia* (1773-1835). A famous beauty who fled revolutionary Paris for Bordeaux where she acted as a moderating influence on Tallien, whom she later married. She became one of the leaders of Parisian social life and set the fashion for the Directory. She married three times and had 11 children, several of them by other liaisons.

To John and Boo

CAROLINE MOOREHEAD

# Dancing to the Precipice

Lucie de la Tour du Pin  
and the French Revolution

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



## Foreword

On 1 January 1820, shortly before her 50th birthday, Lucie Dillon, Marquise de la Tour du Pin, decided that the moment had come to write her memoirs. Until that day, she had never written anything but letters 'to those I love'. 'Let me take advantage,' she wrote, 'of the warmth that is still in me to tell something of a troubled and restless life, in which the unhappinesses were caused less, perhaps, by the events known to all the world, than by secret griefs known only to God.'

So saying, Lucie sat down and began writing what would be one of the finest memoirs of the age, full of humour and shrewdness and affection. She wrote boldly and dispassionately, for there was nothing retiring or falsely modest in her character and she had much to say. It was, she had decided, to be a diary, for her son and grandchildren, for she had no plans for publication, either before or after her death. And it was as a diary that she wrote it, simply and without artifice, describing precisely what she saw and heard, not only of her own extraordinary life, but the exceptionally turbulent period of French history that she lived through. She wrote about domestic matters and affairs of state, about personal tragedies and public mayhem, with optimism and robustness – despite the secret griefs – and a mixture of innocence and knowingness, which makes her voice very much her own.

When her memoir was finally published, 50 years after her death, it was immediately recognised as a faithful testimony to a lost age. Never out of print since then, it has provided countless scholars with detailed, vivid information, made all the more remarkable by the fact that, for most of her very long life, she happened to be precisely where the transforming events of her time were taking place. But her many letters – which have never been published, and which cover the 40 years of her life that followed the events described in the memoirs – are just as remarkable. In some ways, they are even more so, for they show a woman without guile or malice yet possessed of considerable shrewdness about the workings of the world.

Born in Paris in 1770 in the dying days of the *ancien régime*, into a family of liberal aristocrats with many links to Versailles and the court of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, she survived the French Revolution, which saw many of her family and friends die or lose all they possessed. Escaping to America, she and her husband bought a farm and became increasingly concerned about the injustices of slavery. Later she lived through the eras of Napoleon and the restoration of the French kings, Louis XVIII, Charles X and Louis-Philippe. At the time of her death in 1853 Napoleon III had just ascended the throne. Almost nothing of the world into which she was born remained, neither the grandeur, nor the idea of absolute monarchy, nor the privileges; but she herself was singularly unchanged.

Because of her parents, she grew up at the court of Marie Antoinette, but it was a court riven by corruption, vendettas and profligacy. Because of who she became, her friends included Talleyrand, Wellington, Mme de Staël, Lafayette and Josephine Bonaparte – many of whom left descriptions of her. Because of who she married – Frédéric de la Tour du Pin was a soldier, administrator and diplomat – she saw the Terror unfold in Paris and Bordeaux, attended

on Napoleon and Josephine, was in Brussels during the Battle of Waterloo and observed the early days of Italy's unification. Along with a taste for hard work, she possessed a natural curiosity, an enormous need to understand and to remember, not only the grandeur and the politics, but the ordinary everyday events, the food, the clothes, the expressions on people's faces. It made her a formidable witness.

Unremittingly tough on herself, she was extremely demanding of others; but she had a shrewd and self-mocking sense of humour and she possessed a generous and loving heart. When one personal tragedy followed another – the 'secret griefs' of her life – she did not complain. On the contrary, they made her more determined than ever to show fortitude. The memoirs are a portrait in resilience, the way that great pain can be endured and overcome. Lucie was not merely courageous: she was resourceful and imaginative.

Because Lucie's own life and character were so remarkable, her story offers a fascinating portrait of an 18th-century woman. But it is more than that. The times she lived through were indeed exceptional, and it is in that context that she has to be seen, against a constantly changing, frightening and troubled background, broken by periods of domestic happiness and public prosperity, with her life running like a thread through her times. It is impossible to understand why she was so admirable without understanding the world that she looked out on; and which she survived.

What she witnessed was not just the end of an era both of extremes of privilege and extremes of poverty and backwardness, but the birth of a recognisably modern world, a new ordering of society. She saw and recognised the changes and the need for them, and most she approved of. Given her intense self-awareness and her experiences of loss and tragedy – universal experiences she shares with

women at all moments of history – it is sometimes tempting to think of her as a modern woman. But Lucie belonged firmly in her times, and she dealt with her life in the ways that her 18th-century upbringing had taught her; which is why it is so important to set her clearly in her background and the age she lived through.

What Lucie discovered, as she started writing, was that she had a natural talent for description, a canny eye for the telling detail and strong feelings about right and wrong. She had feared that her memory might be poor: on the contrary, it was precise and deep. And as she wrote, so the age that she had lived through and survived came alive under her pen. Others had endured the same hardships and recorded the turmoil that consumed France in the closing years of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th. What gave Lucie's memoirs and her letters their edge was something quite different. It was to do with a kind of purity. In an era of licentiousness and expediency, when the world of seduction and deceit depicted by Choderlos de Laclos in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* offered a mirror to the aristocratic life around her, when Catholic prelates thought nothing of fathering children, and preferment owed more to intrigue than to natural talent, Lucie retained all her life a moral clarity and simplicity. It might have made her dull and priggish. Instead, it turned her into an impressive reporter who observed and recorded a lost age with candour and humour. It made her a loving and faithful wife and a devoted mother. And it made her brave, which was fortunate, for the events that befell her would have broken a frailer spirit.

## CHAPTER ONE

# This Magnificent Age

WHEN LUCIE-HENRIETTE DILLON, who all her life would be known as Lucie, was born at 91 rue du Bac on 25 February 1770, the Faubourg Saint-Germain was one of the most fashionable quarters of Paris. It was here, behind heavy wooden doors opening on to courtyards with stables and coach houses, that France's noble families lived. Abandoning the overcrowded and unhealthy Marais on the right bank of the Seine, they had crossed the river in the middle of the 17th century and settled in great stone mansions, three and four storeys high, surrounding their properties with high walls and vying with each other in grandeur.

Of all the faubourg's<sup>1</sup> streets, the narrow rue du Bac, wandering down towards the river, was considered by many the most desirable. The first house, along the embankment, belonged to the Comte de Mailly; on the same side was the Marquis de Custine and further up, not far from number 91, was the Princesse de Salm, who wrote verse. Just around the corner lived the Duc de Biron, as did the Rochechouarts, where another baby, Rosalie-Sabine, was born a little before Lucie. In these houses, women held salons and sang, for the Faubourg Saint-Germain was both scholarly and musical. It was on the Duchesse de Castries's harp in the rue de Varennes that Mozart, a few years later, composed his concerto for flute and harp.

At the far end of the rue du Bac, where the road ended and the open countryside began, a missionary order had

built a clergy house, with lintels of carved griffins and cherubs; its orchards and a kitchen garden looked out to the woods behind. On all sides, Paris was surrounded by forest. In the spring and summer, when Lucie and her nurse walked towards the fields, the road smelt sweetly of lime from the pollarded trees, of roses, lavender and lilac and the rare and exotic plants grown by the Swiss gardeners employed by the nobility towards the end of the 18th century. Across the river lay the open countryside of the Champs-Élysées, where on Sundays Parisians brought their children to picnic and stroll under the avenues of chestnut trees.

Number 91 was an imposing, unadorned building, its main reception rooms on the first floor reached by a handsome exterior circular staircase. Inside, the drawing rooms were hung with crimson and yellow damask, and the gold and silver threads of the embroidered armchairs were reflected in mirrors that hung around the walls. Lucie's mother, who was 20 at the time of her daughter's birth, had a room elegantly furnished in acacia. Her singing voice was pleasant and she owned a pianoforte, one of the first to be seen in Paris and which Lucie, as a small child, was not allowed to touch.

The house was known locally as l'Hôtel de Rothe, after Lucie's maternal grandmother, an imperious and ill-tempered woman, whose husband, Charles Edward de Rothe, a French general of Irish extraction, had died some years before; and it was here that Lucie and her parents lived.

On both sides of her interwoven family, Lucie was descended from the Irish Dillons of Roscommon. Her parents were second cousins. Their mutual ancestor, Theobald, 7th Viscount Dillon, had raised an Irish regiment in 1688 and followed James II to France, entering into service with the French, and remaining after James II's