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**Title:** "France," by George J. Conner

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# France.

It is only in seasons of danger and during the emergencies of a revolution that the genius of an empire is roused to life and activity. When France lay prostrate under the despotism of her kings, her moral and intellectual glory were equally eclipsed. The privilege of class over bore the claim of merit, and the way power of competing for the prizes of honor was denied to those who would have carried them off in triumph. Among a people thus morally degraded the seeds of discontent ripened, where the seeds of glory had been crushed, and that which would have been the ornaments and safeguard of the country was stimulated to dishonor and destroy it. The terrors of anarchy and democratic violence were destined to have a broader field and longer reign before France could be taught to govern, education and knowledge must have a wider range, and take a deeper hold before the people learn to obey. The difficulties which presented themselves in the reconstruction of society during a struggle of sixty years, have almost torn asunder the firmness and stability of the French governments. The rapid succession of power has been wonderful.

After Richelieu and Louis fourteenth gained with a relentless

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from despotism, there followed the most democratic of republics  
and the most staid of military empires, after which a limited  
monarchy ensued. — Then a third revolution, and a better  
republic presented itself to a gazing world. During this period  
mutually and in turn vassals and peers, lords and serfs, then  
the tyrants of their former masters. For this reconstruction there  
were scandalous abuses to be removed, grievances to be redressed,  
shameful oppressions to be cancelled, and rights long and cruelly  
withheld to be conferred. The old theories of government and so-  
ciety were to be swept away, and new ones made ready to take their  
places. The enthusiasm of the Reformers might be accounted ir-  
rational, but the vices of the people beckoned them on. They were  
indignant at past oppression, thirsting for the promised free-  
dom — they prepared themselves for the combat. They had a  
hard task to perform, but the means of its accomplishment  
were within their reach, there was devotion, zeal, and energy,  
in ample measure — there was high virtue and aspiring genius  
— and eloquence of the loftiest order — and courage tried in  
many a conflict, all girding up their loins, and buckling on  
their armor for the struggle. But the labor was a Herculean  
one — It was not the reconstruction of a shattered cabinet — it  
was not the restoration of a fallen dynasty — it was not even the  
reform of a partial and perverted constitution — it was the  
reorganization of society itself — of a society corrupt to its very core.

- in which all the constituents of the social edifice were primed  
 to the heart, in which the monarchy was despised and the  
 aristocracy became powerless, and the clergy were, without influ-  
 ence or general respects, in which no single man could be  
 found to command and maintain the confidence of the people  
 when the middle classes were hopelessly wedded to their own  
 interests and the lower orders were swayed to and fro by the  
 wildest theories. It was at this period that France presented  
 the widest field for human speculation. There are three  
 practical reasons why France has never been able to establish  
 a permanent Republic. 1<sup>st</sup> The domestic ties were abandoned  
 2<sup>d</sup> Literature had assumed the basest forms, and 3<sup>d</sup> Religion  
 was violently driven from the land. A profound and mean  
 immorality had spread its poisonous influence deep and wide  
 through all the ranks of society, which gave tone to the na-  
 tional character and direction to the national policy.  
 It was obvious some painful event was about to transpire,  
 a vague expectation that some great catastrophe must be  
 at hand. License between the sexes was in vogue, all the  
 scrupulous sense of honor, which had formerly distinguished  
 the French people, seemed to have departed. Their regard  
 for truth and integrity was deplorably weak. No longer did  
 the corruption of the eye, revolt the finer feelings of the soul.

that chastity of honor, which felt stain like a wound, had  
 died away, the last barrier to the twin vices of infidelity and  
 licentiousness. But the literature of the age had not furnished  
 one pure sentiment, to a reading world. Not only was the  
 unrestrained indulgence of every thing that was low held up as  
 a model - Not only was the conjugal tie ridiculed, or ignored  
 - Not only was genius ever ready to throw a halo of loveliness  
 over the most degrading vices; - But crimes of the darkest  
 dye were chosen by preference as the materials of their plots,  
 criminals black with every enormity; the most loathsome  
 were chosen favorites of plays, and dramas, - scenes from which  
 the pure and refined mind shrinks to behold, - while a shadow  
 ran through all classes of the people that the measure  
 of iniquity was full, that the time of retribution was at hand,  
 that the awful fiat had gone forth. But, it was an age  
 of reason, religion had been banished from the land; &  
 the intellects of that brilliant people had ranged themselves on  
 the side of infidelity. The absence of a religious principle is a de-  
 plorable feature in the national character of the French. The  
 habitual reverence for a Supreme ruler - the duty of obedience  
 which flows from the first great conviction, lie at the bottom  
 of all communities and governments - without these it is difficult  
 to see how the constructive task can ever be commenced. This  
 is the foundation rock - the very basis, on which to build -

But, her bright ornaments of piety and learning which were the glory  
 of her better days, shed no longer a lustre of holiness and protection  
 around her sacred altars and temples; and nothing was left to  
 oppose the aits, the jeers, and the scoffs of philosophers but, the inde-  
 lent and profligate lives of the clergy. Amid the cries of weary &  
 satiated profligacy arose first a spirit of scoffing — of savage, aim-  
 lessness of scepticism. Religion ranged herself on the side of ig-  
 norance and despotism — while scepticism fought the battles of  
 justice, of science, and of civil freedom. Religion, morality and  
 order were the laugh and jeer of the day. The majesty of the Most  
 High, was insulted in his own temples. — while the prophets  
 confidently predicted the glorious era of Reason and Liberty. —  
 That era arrived — The principles of infidelity had a fair trial.  
 The cup of vengeance was full, and tremendous, was the punishment  
 read, to a trembling world. The Kingdom was torn up to its  
 foundations, — the throne overturned, — Nobility banished, —  
 king murdered, — all the bonds of civil society torn asunder, and  
 France like a huge volcano, like the confliction of its boiling,  
 and heterogeneous elements belched forth fire and flames, while  
 from its deep mouthed crater rose aloft, the gigantic demon  
 of infidelity, the dark fiend, the ruling spirit of the whirlwind  
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ages under the rust, and rubbish of the tyranny of the Bourbons,  
 she arose and with a giant arm burst asunder the chains  
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 of her transient glory was soon extinguished in the blaze  
 of another Bourbon ascendancy, sunk again to quail beneath  
 an added chain of accumulated misery. But a night of  
 darkness had settled on the country's hope, Expectation struggling  
 with pain became enshrouded in gloom, and the future  
 had wrapped itself in sackcloth. A million hearts  
 throbbed with tremulous anxiety, and thousands lay crushed  
 in the dust, when the star <sup>of promise</sup> arose to cheer the scene in  
 the character of Napoleon,

Geo. S. Kenner

Dickinson College

July 8. 1852.

*[Decorative flourish]*

Commencement Oration of George Jacob Conner, Class of 1852  
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008  
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

## France

It is only in seasons of danger and during the emergencies of a revolution that the genius of an empire is roused to life and activity. When France lay prostrate under the despotisms of her kings, her moral and intellectual glory were equally eclipsed. The privilege of class overbore the claim of merit, and the very power of competing for the prizes of honor was denied to those who would have carried them off in triumph. Among a people thus degraded the seeds of discontent ripened, where the seeds of glory had been crushed, and that which would have been the ornament and safeguard of the country was stimulated to dishonor and destroy it. The terms of ancestry and democratic violence were destined to have a broader field and longer reign before France could be taught to govern, education and knowledge must have a wider range and take a deeper hold before the people learn to obey. The difficulties which presented themselves in the reconstruction of society during a struggle of sixty years have almost torn asunder the permanency and stability of the French government. The rapid succession of power has been wonderful. After Richelieu and Louis fourteenth governed with a relentless

~~power~~ despotism there followed the most democratic and the most stern of military empires after which a limited monarchy ensued. Then a third revolution and a tottering republic presented itself to a gazing world. During this period mutually and in turn vassals and serfs ruled, first equals, then the tyrants of their former masters. In this reconstruction their ever scandalous abuses to be reviewed. grievances to be redressed shameful oppressions to be cancelled and rights long and cruelly withheld to be conferred. The old theories of government, and society were to be swept away and new ones made ready to take their places. The enthusiasm of the Reformers might be recounted irrational, but the vices of the people beckoned them on. They were indignant at past oppression. Thirsting for the promised freedom they prepared themselves for the combat. They had a hard task to perform but the means of its accomplishment were within their reach there was devotion, zeal, and energy, in ample measure there was high virtue and aspiring genius and eloquence of the loftiest order and courage tried in many a conflict, all girding up their loins and buckling on their armor for the struggle. But the labor was a Herculean one. It was not the reconstruction of a shattered cabinet – it was not the restoration of a fallen dynasty – it was not even the reform of a partial and perverted constitution – it was the reorganization of society itself – of a society corrupt to its very core,

in which all the constituents of the social edifice were poisoned to the heart, in which the monarchy was despised and the aristocracy became powerless and the clergy were without influence or general respect in which no single man could be found to command and maintain the confidence of the people when the middle classes were hopelessly wedded to their own interests and the lower orders were swayed to and fro by the wildest



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