



Talleyrand: The Art of Survival

Jean Orioux

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Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, for half a century mastermind of the French state, a figure of infinite fascination, embodied - and to an extraordinary degree directed - the most tumultuous era in French history. Born into one of France's noblest families, rejected as a cripple by his parents and given willy-nilly to the Church, he turned his unwanted fate into dazzling personal triumph. The revolution that guillotined his fellow aristocrats saw him serve as a member of the Committee on the Constitution. He held ministerial office through the Directory and the Consulate and was instrumental in both Napoleon's rise and fall (he was prime architect of the Congress of Vienna). After Waterloo he served as president of the provisional government, then engineered the return of the monarchy and again held high office. His biography is the biography of his country during his time, and therefore of Europe. And what a biography Jean Orieux has written! Here is Talleyrand the man of awesome and supple mind. Here is the priest who was notorious as a womanizer, who amassed a huge personal fortune and a principality; the prince who was a shrewd historian; the connoisseur and patron of the arts; the premier statesman of France; the puppet master of Europe, manipulating Metternich and Wellington. Here, finally, is the man supremely in control, who directed his own deathbed scene as brilliantly as he had organized Napoleon's coronation. Protean man of wit, courage, passion, sense, he was the ultimate pragmatist, always working for France's advantage and his own, always unabashedly admitting it. When his barber asked him, "You have had all possible titles: Bishop, Minister, Prince; what do people call you when they talk about you?" Talleyrand answered: "Nothing good." A verdict shared by generations of moralistic biographers - and triumphantly reversed in Orieux's massive, elegant, witty, and marvelously readable volume.

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