REVOLUTION FRANÇAISE

EMMANUEL MACRON and the Quest to Reinvent a Nation

SOPHIE PEDDER

BLOOMSBURY

Revolution Française

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For Bertrand, Chloé and Luc
And in memory of my mother, Sue Pedder

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Introduction

PALACE OF VERSAILLES, 29 MAY 2017

At the end of a long crimson carpet, rolled out across a marble floor, a lone figure stands motionless awaiting his guest. Ramrod straight, arms by his side, his brow is creased, his gaze fixed firmly ahead. Across the cobbled courtyard before him, Louis XIV's royal gates, a riot of gold leaf and imperial motifs, have been flung open wide, allowing the Russian presidential limousine to deliver Vladimir Putin to the palace steps.

For nearly two minutes, solitary and still, Emmanuel Macron stands there, waiting. He does not twitch. He looks neither left nor right. What is he thinking, this young man without a fleck of grey hair who has just been elected president of the French Republic at the age of 39? Is he rehearsing the public dressing-down he is to give Putin later that day, over the use of Russian propaganda during the French presidential campaign? Perhaps he is mulling over what sort of handshake he will offer the Russian leader when he steps from his car, after the success of the knuckle-buster he exchanged with Donald Trump at the NATO summit in Brussels four days previously? Is he focusing on just looking the part, studiously conscious of the need to add gravity and pomp to his visible youth? Or maybe the philosophy graduate's thoughts are roaming higher, to the course of history, and how he hopes to join Germany's Angela Merkel in shaping Europe against the dark forces of illiberalism?

If this is presidency as theatre, the young leader in the well-cut navy suit waiting for Putin on those steps, framed by two plume-helmeted Republican guards, looks as if he has rehearsed the role.

With a preternatural self-confidence, and disconcerting taste for the imperial frills of power, Macron seems in a few short weeks to have slipped seamlessly into the part. Equally effortlessly he appears to be crafting a return to a far grander version of the French presidency, complete with pomp and ceremonial diplomacy, which has already earned him the title Jupiter, the Roman king of the gods. The besuited political novice who has that day borrowed the Palace of Versailles, where his silk-stockinged forerunners stepped from their carriages, betrays no trace of apprehension. He exudes the self-assurance of a veteran who has greeted world leaders in palaces many times before. Yet, just over a year earlier, almost nobody outside France had even heard of Emmanuel Macron.

AMIENS, 6 APRIL 2016

On a Wednesday evening on the outskirts of Amiens in northern France, a young government minister climbed tentatively onto a platform clutching a microphone. The room was small, stuffy and municipal. There was no bass beat to pump up the audience, no lighting effects or flags. Alone before a blank backdrop, and dressed in a suit and open-necked shirt, Emmanuel Macron looked as if he was about to do a product launch, or give a power-point presentation on local urban planning. Earnest, verging on coy, he announced that he was launching a new political movement, to be called En Marche ('On the Move'). He wanted to put an end to the stale political divide between left and right, he said, repair national confidence, and unblock stagnant France. The idea was 'a bit mad', he admitted: 'I don't know if it will succeed.' Nobody in the audience that evening, including Macron's petite wife Brigitte, with her signature honey-peroxide bob, and assorted members of her extended family, could possibly have known with any confidence where this project would lead. The intimate event, one of the participants said later, felt more like a wedding. Not a high-society event, but a provincial small-town gathering. Macron had never run for any elected office. No poll then bothered to test the one-time banker's presidential

chances. His hopes of building a political movement capable of taking on the existing party machines on the left and the right, which had rotated power between them, under various names, for over half a century, looked like a far-fetched fantasy.

Political barons in Paris dismissed the provincial launch as a quaint distraction by an upstart ingénu. Nothing in modern French history suggested that it was possible to launch a party from scratch a year before a presidential election – and win. Convention stated that presidents had to bear the serial scars of past defeat, or at least of years of political combat. François Mitterrand, in 1981, and Jacques Chirac, in 1995, were each elected at their third attempt. François Hollande first stood for elected office in 1981, 31 years before he ran for the presidency. His predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, who was elected president in 2007, first won an election three decades earlier, in 1977 – the year that Macron was born.

Moreover, in those dark days of 2016, when France had been battered by repeated terrorist attacks, Mr Macron's breezy optimism, liberal internationalism and pro-European politics seemed woefully out of touch with the sullen times. A wave of angry populism and political nationalism appeared to be sweeping through Western democracies. Britain turned inward and voted for Brexit on 23 June. Five months later, Americans elected Donald Trump as their president. The only near-certainty about the French presidential election the following year was that one of the two candidates in the final run-off would be Marine Le Pen, of the far-right National Front (FN), a prospect that shrouded the election in dread. That summer, Hollande, the sitting Socialist president, dismissed Macron's project with En Marche as 'an adventure with no future'.

Thirteen months after the launch of En Marche, on 7 May 2017, the French elected the 39-year-old president.

What took place in France in the spring of 2017 marks the greatest wholesale political clear-out that the country has seen in over half a century. It was, in many ways, a form of bloodless revolution. Not in the sense that the structures of power were overturned – in the end, Macron reinforced the very institutions

of the Fifth Republic that he used to secure the highest office – but because it brought about the eviction of a political caste and a party duopoly. Macron not only defeated pessimism, defeatism and anti-European populism in the shape of Marine Le Pen, whom he beat in the second-round run-off with 66 per cent of the vote. He also upended an existing political order, and turned the party system inside out. For the first time since the Fifth Republic was established by Charles de Gaulle in 1958, the two broad political groups that had run modern France were eliminated from the second-round presidential run-off. A month later, Macron's chaotic fledgling movement was swept into the National Assembly, bagging 60 per cent of the seats, decimating the Socialist Party, and reducing the centre-right Republicans to a nationalist rump. In a country famed for its resistance to change, Mr Macron cast aside the *ancien régime*, overturned the left-right divide and crushed the two biggest political parties. Out went a generation of grey-haired men in suits. Fully 75 per cent of incoming deputies in the National Assembly had not held seats in the previous parliament. Nearly half the new legislators were women. 'Everybody told us it was impossible,' Macron declared on victory night. 'But they didn't know France.'

* * *

I first met Emmanuel Macron in 2012, shortly after he became economic adviser to President Hollande. Fresh from Rothschild's bank, at the age of 34 he already boasted the title of *secrétaire-général adjoint*, or deputy chief of staff, and occupied a top-floor corner office under the mansard roof at the Elysée Palace, with a view through gabled dormer windows over the sweeping back gardens. A gendarme collected the visitor at the entrance lodge, on the chic rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, and led the way around the edge of the gravelled palace courtyard to a discreet corner entrance. There was no lift, and the back staircase, covered in a faded blue patterned carpet, creaked as you climbed up. During that meeting, two things about Macron struck me. One was the length of his sideburns, which he wore just a little too long, and gave his remarkably boyish face an oddly mod-like look. The

other was his unstuffy and approachable manner. He had none of the airs that you might expect from somebody who had been propelled into a big job at a young age. In a suit and tie, a uniform he seems to have trouble discarding, Macron emerged into the narrow corridor to say hello, his hand outstretched, and we sat down to talk around a small oval table in his office. Neither arrogant know-it-all high-flyer, nor gratingly chummy, his tone was professional, warm, earnest and engaging. 'Keep in touch; come back whenever you like,' he said breezily, in that slightly nasal voice of his, when we were done. Most arresting, this young adviser had a way of focusing on the conversation, of offering his undivided attention, that left you with the uncanny impression, however untrue, that just for that stretch of time he had nowhere else more important to be. It was a precious skill, and one that he went on to use to ruthless effect, both on the campaign trail and later when in office. Macron, as one of his aides put it to me during the election campaign, is a 'networking machine'.

Although a shrewd analyst and clearly heading places, Macron was then a decidedly strange sort of revolutionary-in-the-making. He was an obscure member of the invisible French technocracy: that high-flying sect of ambitious individuals unknown to the general public, who tend to rotate into top jobs in business or the administration. For a journalist from *The Economist*, his office was a natural port of call, and I had regular exchanges with him over the period he spent as a presidential adviser. Anybody hoping for gossip was disappointed. But, if you wanted a thoughtful discussion about the state of France, conversations were always worthwhile. Looking back at my notes from that very first encounter at the Elysée Palace, it was an almost comically technical discussion, all about stabilization of debt, French competitiveness and the rigidities of the labour market. Did I think to ask him then whether he had political ambitions of his own? Not for an instant. He had arrived at the administration from Rothschild's investment bank, and had transferred there from the civil service. The only political comment of his that I noted down was a wry reflection on the nature of Hollande's 2012 election

campaign. At the time, the candidate had promised to introduce a crushing top income-tax rate of 75 per cent, and denounced the world of finance as his 'enemy' in a famous speech at Le Bourget. In private, Macron greeted Hollande's income-tax proposal with the line: 'It's Cuba without the sun!' The 2012 campaign, he said, had been 'conducted on the sidelines of reality'.

If anything, as the months went by, Macron was growing restless, frustrated both with the mechanics of government and the Hollande presidency. In April 2014 he was passed over for a job in the new, reformist government of Manuel Valls, the up-and-coming centre-left Socialist prime minister. Macron turned his eyes to a different horizon. By June 2014, when I again climbed up those creaking stairs to see him in his corner office, he had given in his notice. He was quitting public service, would give some lectures at the London School of Economics, he said, perhaps write a book on philosophy. Macron had lined up a couple of his advisers to join him in launching a start-up, and was heading to California with Brigitte, to take a break and meet some tech contacts there. At the time, his departure didn't quite make sense. Why would he bail out of one of the best jobs in the administration? Who was this over-achieving technocrat who wanted to leave public service to write about philosophy? But if anybody had suggested then that he would be running for president three years later, it would have seemed preposterous. At the end of that summer, in the dying days of August, Macron was cycling in Le Touquet, the seaside resort on the Channel coast favoured by the *bourgeoisie* of northern France and where his wife has a house, when his mobile phone rang. It was President Hollande. He was offering him the job of economy minister. The next day, Macron returned to Paris to prepare for government, public life and a wholly different future. 'If Mr Valls wanted to send a message with his new government, Mr Macron is it,' I wrote for *The Economist* when the announcement was made the next day.

From that moment, the young man with the wide gap-toothed smile who went on to become president three years later burst

into the public eye. 'Who is Emmanuel Macron, the new economy minister?' asked a puzzled *Sud-Ouest* newspaper, after his nomination to government. Nobody seemed to know. His propulsion into public life was abrupt, and his landing in the unforgiving world of politics uneven. He was, said one observer of French political life, 'accident-prone'. The left wing of the Socialist Party found him insufferably liberal. The right did not know what to make of him. Macron was critical of his own government, tireless in his efforts to get legislation through parliament, and wilfully disruptive in his approach to policymaking. A maverick, or political '*métèque*', as he described himself later: a foreigner without full citizenship rights, as in the city-states of ancient Greece. Macron slept little, read a lot, and thought hard about the changing nature of France. And he listened. To everybody. Each visitor to his office at the Ministry of Finance at Bercy, an oblong monolith built in 1984 that protrudes like an unfinished viaduct into the river Seine, came away with the disconcerting sense that he might genuinely have been interested in what they had to say. Hard-nosed businessmen with little time for politicians, and older ones in particular, stepped out of his office charmed. Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, or even Tony Blair seemed to have the same effect in their time. There was something of a Macron spell, and his advisers were as prone as anybody. 'When he fixes you with his steel-blue look, you have the impression that you are the only one who counts in the world,' one of them gushed to me. 'For those ten to twenty seconds, you are the only one who counts. The rest of the world could crumble, but he listens, he's all yours.'

Three years later the French made him theirs. On election night, in his first appearance as president-elect, Macron stepped out from the shadows into the Cour Napoléon of the Louvre, a royal palace from the time of Charles V, and made his way towards the modernist glass pyramid. His pace measured, his expression grave, the young leader, dressed in a formal dark overcoat, crossed the courtyard, his figure casting a long shadow across the historic walls, accompanied by Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy', the European Union anthem. The three-minute walk spoke

of the country's monarchical past and republican present, of history and modernity, of collective expression and solitary burden. It was a moment that, as often with Macron, prompted mixed feelings. Was this the long-overdue return of presidential dignity? Or an early warning of regal self-regard? The French had voted in a technocratic former banker, and seemed to have ended up with a would-be monarch. They did not know what had hit them, or, really, who it was that they had elected.

'I'm not complicated,' Macron told me when I went to interview him at the Elysée Palace two months later, in late July 2017. I was taken up to meet the president in his high-ceilinged first-floor corner office, which overlooks the landscaped palace gardens, and interconnects with the ornate official bureau next door. It was a sultry 30 degrees in the capital, and a fan was whirring in the corner. The office was awash with sunlight, and the French windows had been thrown open to the lawn below. I knew from photos that real presidential splendour belonged to the far grander neighbouring office, known as the *salon doré*, preserved as it was for the Empress Eugénie in 1861. Furnished with the eighteenth-century Louis XV-style desk used by Charles de Gaulle, Macron receives his formal diplomatic guests there. For everyday work, he has taken over the less imposing corner bureau, more commonly occupied by presidential special advisers, fitting it out with the clean-lined designer furniture he prefers, and modern art. On one wall, behind the table, he has hung a work of modern street art featuring Marianne, a national symbol of the French Republic, and the French motto, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Previously in his office at En Marche headquarters, it is a replica of a piece of street art created shortly after one of the Paris terrorist attacks, by Obey (Shepard Fairey), the artist behind the portrait of Obama entitled 'Hope'.

We sat down around the marble-topped table to talk just days after France's top general had resigned following an explosive public row between him and the president. Would there be traces of the stress or burden of power, I wondered? Would Macron assert the formality of office, and default into political

question-dodging mode? Would I be meeting the republican monarch? Or the chatty, good-humoured adviser from the top floor? The president, in shirt sleeves, seemed singularly relaxed. The intervening five years since I had first met him had left little physical mark. The hair had receded a little, but the boyish grin was the same. Some of his mannerisms had passed me by during previous meetings: the fiddling with his wedding ring, or the funny way he has of occasionally flicking his nose while he speaks. Or his inclination to switch abruptly from the linguistically elegant to the earthy, from lofty abstractions to quotidian words such as *machin* (whatsit) and *truc* (thingummy). But the disarmingly earnest engagement, and the professional focus, was just as it had been five years earlier. He does not avoid questions, but takes them on. '*Non, mais*' is his interjection of choice. Macron's is a version of power through listening.

'I'm not complicated', the line he used that day, was an intriguing phrase. In one sense, it is true. In his first year in office, Macron turned out to have the uncommon political habit of doing pretty much exactly what he had said he would. He was predictable. 'It's in the manifesto', became the answer to almost any query you might put to a deputy or adviser about a new policy, and sure enough, most of the time it was. This sort of straightforward conduct was in itself a novelty for France, whose presidents had a tendency of discarding promises upon election. To be sure, there were misunderstandings, disappointments and unexpected turns. But there was little policy improvisation, and very few genuine surprises. Macron is indeed, in this sense, not complicated.

Yet the more the French get to know their president, the more impenetrable he seems to be. As he retreated into the Elysée Palace, like Jupiter to Mount Olympus, Macron cultivated a studied distance, including with the press, which aggravated this perception. The word that comes to mind is the untranslatable *insaisissable*, meaning something between inscrutable and elusive. This is a man who is so outwardly charming in private, so breathtakingly confident, that it is hard to grasp what exactly

are his gut instincts, what really lurks behind the finely polished exterior. Michel Houellebecq, the French novelist and *enfant terrible* of the Paris literary scene, once tried to interview Macron, and spoke in his inimitable way about the frustration of the experience. 'He's bizarre, you don't know where he comes from, he's a bit of a mutant,' he murmured. Macron speaks 'very well', Houellebecq went on, but like all great politicians, 'I realized the difficulty of making [him] say any sort of truth.' Lots of people say they know him. Very few claim to know Macron really well.

The contradictions that Macron embodies seemed to reflect this unknowable quality. A man of charm and a phenomenal networker, he has few truly close friends. A literary mind, he ended up a civil-service technocrat in the faceless corridors of the Finance Ministry. A graduate of philosophy, who talked of 'moments of philosophical emotion' when first reading Kant, he chose to become an investment banker. A private individual, who struggled to reveal anything intimate in his autobiographical book, he sought the most publicly scrutinized office of state. An unworldly teenager, he won over a drama teacher (now his wife) 24 years his elder. A provincial outsider, he is the embodiment of the French metropolitan elite. A personality with unusual private empathy, he has trouble persuading the French that he likes them. A disruptive innovator, he has ended up strengthening the institutions he used to stage his insolent revolt.

This book is an attempt, after his first year in office, to make sense of Emmanuel Macron, his contradictions, and his ambition to remake France. How did a political novice manage to defy the unwritten rules of the Fifth Republic, and secure the presidency at his first attempt? What had happened to France over the previous 20 years that laid the ground for this improbable feat? What are the ideas and inspirations behind Macronism? What is the nature of the progressivism that he is trying to fashion as a response to the failings of contemporary capitalism? Can it offer a model for liberal moderates on the left and the right in other countries who dream of campaigning for power on the centre ground? Can Macron really hope to restore faith in Europe, and the Western

democratic order, against the threat of illiberal nationalism at the continent's door?

Ultimately, the ballot box in 2022 will be the judge. The circumstances that led to his election are also the challenges that Macron inherited. The most elegant of countries, the nation that brought the world *joie de vivre* and Christian Dior's jaunty New Look, France has in recent decades been through an unusually unsettled and morose time. It has lost ground economically, overtaken by Britain in the late 1990s, and then by its continental neighbour, Germany. In 2002 France and Germany shared comparable levels of GDP per head and unemployment. Fifteen years later, Germans were 17 per cent richer on average and their jobless rate was less than half that in France. The last time a French government balanced its budget was in 1974. The last time unemployment dipped below 7 per cent was in 1980. Most startling of all, France began to lose its way in Europe. Invaded three times by Germany since 1870, and on its fifth republic, France has a long disrupted history, insecure even in peace. After the Second World War it responded by helping to build the European Union – a project designed to bind in Germany, and amplify France's own power. Somewhere along the line, however, the passion it once evoked cooled. The share of French people who looked favourably upon Europe shrank from 69 per cent in 2004 to 38 per cent in 2016. A broader malaise set in. A global 'barometer of hope and happiness' put the French second to bottom of a 54-country world ranking in 2013, ahead only of Portugal.

The signs of a festering popular discontent that reached back over 20 years were there for those who cared to read them. In 1992 the French approved the launch of the single currency, Europe's pioneering project of integration, by the slimmest of margins, in a referendum result that hinted at hardening reservations. In 2002 voters put Jean-Marie Le Pen into the second round of the presidential election, in a shock result that spoke of anti-establishment grievance and a deep vein of xenophobia. In 2005 the French rejected a draft European Union constitution, which had been

devised under the guiding hand of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, their own former president.

This unease was compounded by political *immobilisme*. After the paralyzing strikes that greeted an attempt by Jacques Chirac's prime minister, Alain Juppé, to reform welfare in 1995, fear of the street diminished the ambition and resolve of subsequent governments. The election of the hyperkinetic Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 brought a brief promise of 'rupture' and restored competitiveness. Sarkozy had some successes, but was enfeebled from the start, not least by the financial crisis. Between 2012 and 2017 François Hollande's attempt to embody a 'normal' presidency only served as a reminder to the French how much they valued presidential exception.

The upshot over this period was that reform came to inspire fear and retrenchment, was seldom discussed ahead of elections, and was put into place by stealth, if at all. When all else failed, it could be blamed on Brussels. Successive governments of the left and right defaulted into a form of passivity, putting off difficult choices, confusing and disappointing voters in equal measure. No president managed to find an overarching narrative of hope or progress to combat genuine worries about globalization, technological change and global warming. By the time of the bloody terrorist attacks of 2015 and 2016, the sense of malaise was acute. France, a great country, the cradle of human rights and the Enlightenment, had somehow lost its self-confidence. A highly centralized rule-bound system that once served the country well, bringing fast trains to every region and three-course meals to every nursery school, was generating taxes and debt, little growth and not enough jobs. Many young French people, fed up with the staid conservatism of Paris, had packed up and left to join banks, pull beers and launch start-ups in London. Perhaps most painful of all was a realization that France was no longer a match for Germany, its closest ally. The *décrochage*, or decoupling, between the eurozone's two big economies was felt in France as a loss of stature and national pride.

In the first months after the election, the French did not know quite what to make of the president who took on the leadership

of this uneasy country. He seemed to oscillate between the magnificent and the absurd. Sometimes he looked the part, neither awestruck nor ill-prepared. Macron knew his way around the Elysée Palace, the pitfalls of isolation in it, and the perils of presidential mistakes. Under Hollande, he had seen up close how to make them. Once in the job himself, he was decisive, inventive and disciplined, and made the French feel good about themselves again. At other moments, Macron seemed to pick up the tattered presidential mantle with the air of entitlement befitting that of a Bourbon king. There he was with his make-up artist and powdered brow, talking about 'my people'. He developed a look that verged on the haughty and, as if one palace would not do, seemed to be disturbingly fond of operating out of Versailles. To a British or an American ear, his theoretical abstractions and grandiosity came across as pompous. His speeches were convoluted, meandering and went on for ever. In all his magnificence, he seemed so very, well, French.

The scale of the task Macron has set himself is daunting. He claims to want not just to reform France, but to transform it: into an ambitious entrepreneurial economy, which can be at the forefront of artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data and green technology, while preserving France's treasured sense of *art de vivre*. He also seeks to revive the European idea, defend post-war multilateralism, challenge nationalist tendencies and invent a 'new global compact' to respond to the failings of advanced capitalism. Failure to do this, he judges, will increase the risk of populist backlash and threaten the liberal order. 'The biggest risk for the next five years,' Macron told me in July 2017, 'is to do nothing.'

What the French president does will determine whether his election was a brief parenthesis of hope, or the beginnings of a reshaping of modern France, and with it possibly Europe. Macron's rise from nowhere to the presidency carried a powerful message that resonated well beyond the country. After the shock of Brexit it was an emphatic demonstration that it was possible to fashion a pro-European centrist response to populism and nationalism, and win. After the election of Trump, it was a resounding

vote of confidence in the liberal order. Indeed, Macron is in some ways emerging as the world's anti-Trump, and France a test of whether liberal pluralism can hold.

France is a thrilling, seductive and maddening country. But it is also, time and again, a country that teaches deep humility. Every time the observer has the pretension to claim to understand France, the French spring another big surprise. The quiet bloodless political revolution of 2017 was one of them. But if the country under Macron's leadership cannot make tangible improvements to people's lives, particularly for the young, voters at the next presidential election, in 2022, may not be ready to give a liberal democrat another chance.

This book is not a biography of Emmanuel Macron. Nor is it an academic work. I am a journalist, and it is rather a story of how he rose from nowhere to overturn the French political establishment, and an analysis of what might happen next. Over the past six years, and through numerous conversations with Macron, I have watched the transformation of a cerebral technocrat into a savvy and calculating politician, who used his charm and seductive powers of persuasion to devastating effect in what became a quest for the presidency, and then an attempt to remake France. His remarkable ascent from obscurity to the Elysée Palace is both the dramatic tale of one man's personal ambition and the story of a wounded once-proud country in deep need of renewal. I have spoken to many of the protagonists in this drama, in order to piece together Macron's path to power. I have visited the places and people that influenced him, and chronicled his first year in office, trying to assess the underlying trajectory of the country that he now governs. My objective is to make sense of both the forces that shaped him and the way he is trying to reshape France.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One, 'Conquest', unpicks the factors that made Macron's improbable adventure work, and how he built En Marche into a force that toppled the mainstream parties and beat Marine Le Pen. Part Two, 'Power', turns to his time in office, the intellectual and philosophical origins of the presidential project, and the promise and the risks

it carries. Throughout the book I have tried to maintain a balance between a desire to wish France well, after all these troubled years, and a need to keep a reporter's dispassionate eye on the way Macron handles the exercise of power. During the time that I have covered France for *The Economist*, nobody has accused me of an excessive indulgence towards the country – in 2012 I published a book called *Le déni français* ('France in Denial') – and in television studios and ministerial offices I have fended off accusations of 'French-bashing', however unfounded I thought they were, more times than I can count. France is a country that has welcomed, exasperated and inspired me, and brought some amazing, smart and generous people into my life. I hope, now that the country is undergoing a brave and difficult effort to transform itself, I can defend myself from accusations of excessive optimism and confidence. However it turns out, all errors of judgement are entirely mine.

Part One

CONQUEST

1

The Parable of Amiens

'He puts his own liberty above everything.'

Christian Dargnat, En Marche

When history comes to recount the rise of Emmanuel Macron, it might begin and end in the city of Amiens. On the big-skied lowlands of the Somme, amid the woods and fields of beet and yellow rape that cover the former bloody battlefields of the First World War, this is where the future president was born and grew up. It is a city that is arresting both for its splendour and its banality. The soaring Notre-Dame cathedral, one of the biggest Gothic edifices constructed in the thirteenth century, rises magnificently above the city centre and surrounding floodplain. But Amiens is also a red-brick working city, built on a heavy industrial base, which has bled manufacturing jobs over the years, and is struggling to hold on to the ones that are left. By 2017 it had lost one big multinational tyre factory, but kept another. Whirlpool operated a plant that manufactured tumble dryers. Until 1989 the city had been run for nearly 20 years by a Communist mayor.

When you turn off to reach the city from the A16 motorway, you drive into the featureless suburban landscape that marks the outskirts of today's French cities: a Courtepaille fast-food restaurant; an Auchan hypermarket ringed by a vast car park; a Citroën car dealership; a Buffalo grill restaurant, topped with its insignia bearing giant red horns. Just as the surrounding flatlands of the Somme bear the scars of the First World War, the city centre of Amiens carries those of the second. Amiens was doubly bombed: by the Nazi Wehrmacht in May 1940, and then

again by Allied forces on the Pentecost weekend of May 1944, as part of preparations for the D-Day landings the following month. Most of the centre of Amiens was devastated, its main thoroughfare rebuilt in charmless post-war style. This is the place that shaped Mr Macron, and the city he fled.

It was in a soulless exhibition centre on the edge of Amiens that Macron took to the stage to launch En Marche on 6 April 2016. The choice, he said that night, was 'not unintentional. I was born here. Part of my family still lives here, and I have a strong attachment to this place.' During his campaign Macron crafted a narrative that rooted him firmly in the industrial Picardy city, far from the parquet-floored salons of Paris, and in a family whose origins, he repeatedly underlined, were simple. It was a potent backstory. 'I wasn't born in a château,' he said while campaigning in Amiens. 'The history of my family,' he wrote in *Révolution*, the autobiographical book he published before the election, 'is that of republican ascent in provincial France.'[1] This meritocratic guiding idea was behind the compulsory, free, secular education introduced in the 1880s by Jules Ferry, a whiskered deputy who became minister for public education before serving as prime minister under the Third Republic. Macron's grandparents were among the beneficiaries. They came, he wrote, from 'a modest background': one was a teacher, another worked on the railways, a third was a social worker and the last a civil engineer. His paternal great-grandfather, George Robertson, was an English butcher from Bristol, who married a French woman in Abbeville, near Amiens, after World War One. His maternal grandmother, Germaine Noguès, known as Manette, was the first in her family to stay in school after the age of 15. Raised in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, she became a teacher and later a headmistress. Her own mother did not know how to read or write.

For Macron's grandparents, medicine was the preferred route into the professional classes. His father, Jean-Michel Macron, had once dreamed of life as an archaeologist, but his parents judged medicine to be the safer choice. A neurologist, he still practised at the time of writing at the Amiens public hospital. Macron's

mother, Françoise Noguès, now retired, is a qualified doctor who formerly worked at the social-security agency in the city. Macron's two younger siblings each also followed their parents into medicine. His brother, Laurent, became a cardiologist; his sister, Estelle, a kidney specialist. During the election campaign, Macron returned often to this family journey into the middle class, which began with his grandmother, a 'child whose parents could neither read nor write'. 'I'm a child of provincial France,' he told a rally in Lyon in February 2017. 'Nothing predestined me to be here today.'

In reality, Macron grew up in a more comfortable, professional family than this campaign narrative suggested. The family home was in the quiet residential neighbourhood of Henriville, considered the bourgeois enclave of Amiens. First developed in the mid-nineteenth century, after the railways arrived and the old ramparts were torn down, this quarter lies just to the south of the city centre. An unkind observer in 1928 described Henriville as 'deathly boring, with its streets laid out in lines, its dreary appearance, its houses in the style of luxurious stables, its rare passers-by well dressed and its brick church pitifully ugly'.[2] Today, busy tree-lined boulevards frame the neighbourhood's northern and southern edge. Along them, a number of tall early twentieth-century villas rise behind wrought-iron gates. Other treeless terraces are more modest. Macron's childhood home in Amiens is to be found in one of these: an unpretentious two-storey red-brick house, which sits just back from the pavement, in a narrow street of flat-fronted terraced homes. The first time I saw it, while on a reporting visit to Amiens during the 2017 presidential election campaign, it seemed unremarkable. Purple hibiscus and white hydrangeas were growing in the little front garden. A narrow off-road parking space was fringed by a yew hedge.

It was a childhood of privilege by most measures, a world away from the forbidding tower blocks and housing estates of Amiens-Nord, on the rougher side of the city. In the Macron household there were piano lessons, foreign holidays and skiing trips. Emmanuel learned to play tennis at the club that lies down an

alley in the street where he grew up. Macron's father, a reserved figure who later described himself as 'allergic' to the celebrity-style coverage of his son's political life, read widely and taught his son Greek, as well as introducing him to philosophy. His mother limited her working hours in order to spend time with her three children, driving them to music classes and sports lessons.

The three young Macron children attended the local state primary school, but were later sent to a private Catholic school, aptly called 'La Providence'. It was their grandmother Manette, by then a retired teacher, who persuaded the family to enrol them for a more academic secondary education at 'La Pro', as its pupils call it. A lycée run by Jesuits in Henriville, the school lies on one of the arterial boulevards within walking distance of their house. Destroyed in a fire during the bombing of Amiens in 1940, it was rebuilt in the late 1940s. When I went to take a look, the place from the outside resembled a boxy American post-war high school, fronted by symmetrical square lawns, and equipped – unusually for a French school of any sort – with an indoor swimming pool. It is a private institution, although not quite as exclusive a place as this might suggest. In 2017 its fees varied, according to family means, from €520 to €980 a year. The school runs an extensive bursary programme, and offers the technical stream of the *baccalauréat* for the non-academic.

A childhood spent around books, a private Catholic school, piano lessons, a local tennis club: Macron had a more securely middle-class upbringing than he hinted at on the campaign trail. Yet his version is not wholly disingenuous. To this day, the neighbourhood of Henriville feels comfortably bourgeois, rather than flashy, or glamorous. It is not Versailles or Neuilly-sur-Seine, those leafy quarters home to the moneyed French classes, nor is it a bastion of understated established wealth such as you find on the chic Paris left bank. When it comes to understanding Macron's origins, and the path he then travelled, this seems an important distinction. A former investment banker at Rothschild's, and a graduate of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), the hyper-selective training school for elite civil servants, Macron