John Carrick is professor of Church History at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. The current Bulletin of the Seminary is dedicated to examining the work of the great historian Merle d’Aubigne. The Banner of Truth have published d’Aubigne’s ‘The Reformation in England’ in a two volume large paperback set. It is hoped that d’Aubigne’s ‘History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin’ will be republished.

Jean Henri Merle d’Aubigne was born in 1794 to a distinguished Huguenot family in Geneva. In his youth he received a thoroughly classical education, and after completing a course in the Humanities, he commenced, at the age of 19, the study of theology at the Acadamie de Geneve. It is important to note, however, that by the time of the early nineteenth century the influence and savour of John Calvin had long since departed from Geneva and had been substantially replaced by Unitarianism and Socinian. Merle d’Aubigne later recounted that in his four years of theological study at the Acadamie “not one hour was consecrated to the study of Holy Scriptures”[[1]](#footnote-0). Merle noted that the sources most quoted were not Christ and the Apostles, but Plato, Cicero, and Seneca.

It was into this situation that an heir of John Calvin – the Scot, Robert Haldane – came in 1816. Haldane issued an invitation to the theological students in Geneva to meet him in his apartments to study the Bible. Between twenty and thirty students, including Merle d’Aubigne, responded to Haldane’s invitation. This invitation clearly incurred the displeasure of one of the professors who “made it his business to pace up and down under the shady trees of the avenue at the time the students were assembling, making clear his high displeasure at their attendance, and noting their names in his pocket book”[[2]](#footnote-1). Merle describes Haldane’s influence on himself in this way: “I met Robert Haldane and heard him read from an English Bible a chapter from Romans about the natural corruption of man, a doctrine of which I had never before heard. In fact I was quite astonished to hear of man being corrupt by nature. I remember saying to Mr Haldane, ‘Now I see that doctrine in the Bible’. ‘Yes’, he replied, ‘but do you see it in your heart?’ That was but a simple question, yet it came home to my conscience. It was the sword of the Spirit: and from that time I saw that my heart was corrupted, and knew from the Word of God that I can be saved by grace alone. So that, if Geneva gave something to Scotland at the time of the Reformation, if she communicated light to John Knox, Geneva has received something from Scotland in return in the blessed exertions of Robert Haldane”[[3]](#footnote-2). Haldane’s brief stay in Geneva (November 1816 to June 1817) unquestionably contributed to and reinforced “le Réveil” or “the Awakening” in that city which appears to have lasted from 1813 to 1830. In later years Merle would point to the apartments that Haldane had once occupied, saying, “There is the cradle of the second Genevan Reformation”[[4]](#footnote-3).

In July 1817 Merle d’Aubigne was ordained as a minister of the established church in Geneva. He did not, however, enter the pastorate at this stage. He chose rather to travel widely throughout the German lands before continuing his studies in the University of Berlin. Thus, in the autumn of 1817 he was able to attend a celebration of Martin Luther’s tercentenary in the famous Wartburg Castle, near Eisenach. What struck Merle so forcefully at these tercentenary celebrations was the fact that, although Luther was evidently hailed as a great German hero who had had a profound effect upon the German nation, it was essentially his intellectual and political significance that was being highlighted. The spiritual significance of Martin Luther appeared to have been forgotten. It was for this reason that, at the age of 23, Merle resolved to write a history of the Reformation that emphasised the truly religious significance of Martin Luther and the Reformation. “I want this history to be truly Christian,” he wrote, “and to give a proper impulse to the religious spirit”[[5]](#footnote-4).

In June 1818 Merle assumed the pastorate of the French Reformed Church in Hamburg which had been established by French Huguenots who had fled from their homeland during the persecution under Louis XIV. He remained in this pastorate until 1823 when he received an invitation from King Willem I of the Netherlands to become the pastor of a French- and German-speaking church in Brussels. Merle’s ministry in Brussels appears to have been more influential than that in Hamburg. Many in the king’s court attended his church, as did King Willem himself and his Prussian wife, Wilhelmina Frederika, and also Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, the royal historian and author of “Unbelief and Revolution.” Merle held this post in Brussels until the Revolution of 1830, which led to the separation of Belgium from Holland. After seeking to help the scattered members of his congregation during these months of crisis, Merle decided to leave Brussels in June 1831 in order to accept an invitation to assist in the formation of a theological seminary in Geneva. In this he was appointed Professor of Church History and was shortly afterwards joined by Louis Gaussen, later famous as the author of a very significant work on the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. Merle was to remain at the seminary in Geneva until his death in 1872.

The resolution that Merle d’Aubigne had first made back in 1817 to write a history of the Reformation came to fruition during the 41 years spent as a professor of church history in Geneva. In a recent work, John B. Roney gives the following description of Merle’s assiduous labours: “His typical day was spent every morning working on his writings. Rigorous study was only broken by occasional guests, who were accorded a brief visit. His daughter Blanche Bidler recalled that Merle’s office at home was sparse, except for a great number of books that were piled on a large desk. Merle’s style of inquiry and writing seems to have necessitated the collection of the many volumes he needed to study. He spread them out over a number of tables where he could directly refer to them as he wrote. He then spent the afternoon at school, teaching or attending various committee meetings. In the evening he returned to Gravaline and once again worked on his writings and preparation of lectures and speeches. Apart from his regular schedule of academic work, Merle spent a good amount of time with his family, and he was absent only when he made a number of trips to other European countries”[[6]](#footnote-5). It is important to note that Merle visited the major libraries of Central and Western Europe in order to read original documents in Latin, French, German, Dutch, and English.

It was in 1835 that the first volume of ‘The History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century’ was published in French. This five-volume work was completed in 1853. It is often not realised, however, that this work was followed by ‘The History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin’ in eight volumes, which were published between 1863 and 1878, the last three volumes posthumously. It is very important to note that these two works are entirely distinct and separate, and that much of the confusion which appears to surround the existence of this second work is due to the fact that it has long since been out of print and is now virtually unobtainable. It is much to be desired that these eight volumes on The History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin should be republished in the near future.

The immense popularity of Merle’s “History of the Reformation” is evident from Philip Schaff’s observation that Merle’s writings “had a wider circulation, at least in the English translations, than any other book on church history”[[7]](#footnote-6). It is valuable to analyse the reasons for this popularity. The first factor in Merle’s popularity is the powerful personal element that pervades his writings. Merle focuses on the lives of men such as Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, Farel, Calvin, Tyndale, Cranmer and many others whose names are less well known. He recounts their struggles, their labours, their sufferings, their failures, their triumphs, and their Christian heroism. Merle derived this emphasis upon the personal, individual element in history from his mentor at the University of Berlin, August Neander, and it is undoubtedly this emphasis which lent vividness and interest to his writing of history and which contributed to his popularity.

The second factor in Merle’s popularity is the powerful divine element that pervades his writings. Once again the influence of Neander upon Merle himself is discernible, namely, Neander’s concern to discover in church history “the interpenetration of human life by the divine”[[8]](#footnote-7). “The historian,” Merle wrote, “ought to embrace in his survey the whole field of human affairs. He must, of course, take into consideration the earthly powers that bear sway in the world, ambition, despotism, liberty; but he ought to mark also the heavenly powers which religion reveals. The living God must not be excluded from the world which He created”[[9]](#footnote-8). Thus Merle was concerned not merely with the external aspects of history, but also with what he regarded as the internal aspects of history. “There is in history, as in the body, a soul”[[10]](#footnote-9), wrote Merle. It was the soul of “the great revolution of the sixteenth century”[[11]](#footnote-10) the soul of “the grand drama of the sixteenth century”[[12]](#footnote-11) that Merle sought to lay bare. It is this quality which lends a real warmth to his writings. Merle does not write as a detached, disinterested spectator; he loves the Reformation of the sixteenth century, for he sees in it a mighty movement of the Spirit of God unparalleled since the early days of Christianity. Thus there is a real, unashamed spirituality about Merle’s ‘History of the Reformation.’ He writes this history sub specie aeternitatis. “These volumes,” he wrote, “lay down in the chief and foremost place this simple and pregnant principle: GOD IN HISTORY”[[13]](#footnote-12).

Throughout his writings Merle emphasizes that the Reformation of the sixteenth century constitutes “the beginning of modern times”. In other words, it is the Reformation that constitutes the great watershed that divides the Middle Ages from the modern age; it is the Reformation that has determined the destiny and progress of the nations. Roman Catholicism has, both before and since the Reformation, retarded and degraded the nations in which it has held sway. This is all too evident in the history and development of nations such as Ireland, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Conversely, Protestantism has emancipated and enfranchised the human mind in those nations which it has taken root. This is equally very evident in the history and development of nations such as England, Scotland, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and later, the United States of America.[[14]](#footnote-13)

Merle expresses this truth in the following way:

“All kinds of human progress date from the Reformation. It produced religious progress by substituting for the forms and the rites which are the essence of Romish religion, a life of communion with God. It produced moral progress by introducing, whenever it was established, the reign of conscience and the sacredness of the domestic hearth. It produced political and social progress by giving to the nations which accepted it, an order and a freedom which other nations in vain strive to attain. It produced progress in philosophy and in science, by showing the unity of these human forms of teaching with the knowledge of God. It produced progress in education, the well-being of communities, the prosperity, riches, and greatness of nations. The Reformation, originating in God, beneficially develops what pertains to man.”[[15]](#footnote-14)

https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2000/j-h-merle-daubign-the-peoples-historian/

1. Cited John B. Roney, The Inside of History: Jean Henri Merle d’Aubigne and Romantic Historiography (Westport, CT:Greenwood Press, 1996), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. S. M. Houghton, ed. The Reformation in England Vol.1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid.,5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ibid.,4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Cited Roney, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ibid., 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Cited ibid.,6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Cited S. M. Houghton, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Cited Roney,115. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Cited ibid., 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. J.H. Merle d’Aubigne History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century (London: Religious Tract Society, 1863), 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Ibid., 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Ibid., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. See J H. Merle d’Aubigne, The Protector: A Vindication (Harrisonburg,VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1983), 122-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Cited Roney, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)