It is now commonplace to think of preservation as part of the state’s responsibility to protect the public’s interests and welfare. But what happens when government fails to be a good steward of heritage, or worse, engages in its destruction? Activism, as a soft means of citizen oversight and influence in government, has become a central component of preservation. Victor Hugo shaped the role and the responsibilities of preservation activism through newspaper editorials such as these two calls to arms against “demolishers.” He fearlessly spoke truth to power, publishing scathing accusations of negligence and malfeasance against government bureaucrats and private developers for destroying beautiful historic buildings. The beauty of historic architecture was a public good, belonging to everyone and in need of protection.

Hugo was born in Besançon, France, in 1802. His father was a military officer, and during Hugo’s childhood, years of political turmoil, his family moved frequently, including to Italy and Spain. He settled in Paris with his mother in 1812, where he developed his literary talents, publishing his first novel in 1825. Hugo’s numerous works of fiction and poetry increasingly took up social injustices, and, after being elected to the Académie Française over the objections of opponents of Romanticism, he became increasingly involved in national politics. His novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1831) helped inspire the restoration of Paris’s cathedral, and a renewed appreciation of Paris’s pre-Renaissance physiognomy. It was published a year after the establishment of the Comité des Arts, later transformed into the Commission de Monuments Historiques with Ludovic Vitet (1802-73) as Inspector General. Vitet’s first national survey and damning report on the state of French historic monuments (1831) inspired Hugo to write his 1832 version of “Guerre aux Démolisseurs.” His status celebrity did not always afford him immunity, and following the establishment of the Second Empire under Napoleon III, Hugo had to live in exile on the island of Guernsey from 1855, to 1870. In exile, Hugo continued to defend the idea that historic buildings were not simply national property to be bought and sold to the highest bidder, but really treasures of the whole of humanity. He wrote “The Sack of the Summer Palace” (1861), accusing Emperor Napoleon III and Queen Victoria of barbarism during their joint China Expedition, and for robbing all the citizens of the world, not just the Chinese. “I hope that a day will come,” he wrote “when France, delivered and cleansed, will return this booty to despoiled China.” After he returned to France in 1870, where he was widely honored for his literary and political achievements. Hugo died in Paris in 1885, and was buried in the Panthéon.

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