

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1962)
Heft: 1405

Artikel: Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1712-1778
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688704>

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JEAN-JAQUES ROUSSEAU

1712-1778

This year it will be 250 years since Jean-Jaques Rousseau, the eminent writer and philosopher, was born in Geneva.

The eighteenth century was a period of social evolution and of transition from obscurantism to enlightenment. It witnessed the end of the old feudal régime and the dawn of a new era. The vast inarticulate masses of the illiterate and the down-trodden began to stir, and from the educated classes there emerged an élite of intellectuals, scientists and philosophers who provided the impulse for a progressive movement. Not the least of these was Jean-Jaques Rousseau, whose writings, notably the *Contrat Social*, did much to bring about the French Revolution.

The sources of information concerning Rousseau are so numerous and abundant that in sketching his life the difficulty is not what to relate but what to omit. Many biographies exist; of those in English, Lord Morley's standard work and Mrs. F. Macdonald's *New Criticism*, said to be the result of twenty years' research, are probably the best known. An extensive French bibliography is available and some twenty volumes of Rousseau's copious correspondence have been published. Above all, there are Rousseau's own *Confessions*, one of the most curious human documents ever produced. In these *Confessions*, written for posthumous publication, he tells the story of his life. The reader is spared nothing, Rousseau's triumphs and disappointments, his love affairs, his bad habits, his distressing ailments and their treatment, all are minutely described. Few men have left so complete and candid a record of themselves.

Rousseau was neither Swiss nor French. His birthplace, Geneva, a small independent republic, did not become a Swiss canton until 1814. In his later years, when he learned that his writings had been publicly burned in Geneva, he resigned his citizenship and would have been a man without a country had he not been granted the right of residence in the principality of Neuchâtel and the citizenship of the commune of Motiers. But it was in France that he ended his days.

He had a genuine attachment for Switzerland. Feelings of affection and admiration for the Swiss repeatedly find expression in his writings. After he had been expelled from the canton of Berne, he wrote, "I was so much attached to Switzerland that I could not resolve to quit it as long as it was possible to live there." On his first flight from Paris he stopped the coach at Pontarlier and, to the bewilderment of the postillion, who thought him mad, dismounted, kissed the ground and exclaimed "Heaven, I praise you, I touch the land of liberty!" A fortnight later he wrote to Maréchal de Luxembourg, "I have set foot in this land of justice and liberty which I ought never to have left."

Jean-Jaques Rousseau was born on 28th June 1712, in the city of Geneva, where his father was a watchmaker. His mother died before he was a year old. He received the scantiest of education, but he was a precocious, intelligent child and absorbed knowledge easily. By the time he was ten, he had read an enormous amount, mostly classical literature, his favourite author being Plutarch. His father tried to make a Notary of him; the boy was dismissed for ineptitude. Next he was apprenticed to an

engraver, but he was too volatile for steady employment and ran away. At the age of sixteen he left his home and began his wanderings, which, during the following twenty years, took him to Savoy and Switzerland, to Italy and France.

His Odyssey began in Annecy, in Savoy, where he became acquainted with Madame de Warens, the first of the many ladies of high social rank who, throughout his life, befriended and mothered him. She took him under her roof and treated him, for many years, as an adopted son. She was thirteen years his senior; he called her Maman. Under her influence he entered in 1728, the Hospice of Catechumens in Turin, where he was received into the Roman Catholic Church. (Thirty-five years later, in Motiers, Neuchâtel, he returned to the fold of the Reformed Church.) He led a happy-go-lucky existence, earned his living as best he could, was in turn a lackey, a teacher of music, a family tutor and, for a while, secretary to the French Ambassador in Venice. Once he walked all the way from Solothurn to Paris with the intention of enlisting in the Swiss Guard, but changed his mind and returned to Madame de Warens.

The first forty years of his life were spent in this peripatetic manner; they were, on the whole, happy and carefree. He did not realize that he possessed a talent for writing, he was mainly interested in music, for which he seems to have had a real gift. It was not until 1750, after winning a gold medal from the Academy of Dijon, for a prize-essay he had submitted on the advice of his friend, Diderot, that he discovered his literary powers. From now on he devoted his life to writing, and soon all Europe rang with his fame. He had found himself.

His literary output, apart from his musical and operatic compositions, was varied and extensive. The first of his books to establish his reputation was *Julie, la nouvelle, Héloïse*, an idyllic romance which achieved an immediate and wide success. It was followed by the celebrated *Contrat Social*, a plea for justice and human rights. The last book he wrote, beside the *Confessions*, was *Emile*, a treatise on education in the form of a novel. All of them display evidence of deep thinking and are written in a flowing, limpid style.

The *Contrat Social* and *Emile* raised a storm. The unconventional, modern theories therein expounded were considered subversive and harmful to the established order. The sale of the book was prohibited and the Parliament of Paris ordered Rousseau's arrest. Forewarned by influential friends, he took to flight and, accompanied by Thérèse Le Vasseur (of whom more later), found refuge in Motiers, a village in the Val de Travers. There he lived three years and began to write *Confessions*. During his residence in Motiers he adopted the Armenian style of dress, long craftan and high fur-cap, which can be seen in Allan Ramsay's painting now in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

The good people of Motiers did not take kindly to the queer, brooding stranger in his outlandish garb. They resented the presence of Thérèse, and Rousseau suffered a good deal of persecution. When it came to stone-throwing, he decided to leave the village. He moved to

an island in the lake of Bienné but had hardly settled there when the Senate of Berne ordered his expulsion. Once again he had to take to the road. He travelled to Paris, but not feeling in safety in the French capital, determined to emigrate to England. In the company of David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, who happened to be in France, Rousseau crossed the Channel. Thérèse Le Vasseur followed him a few weeks later, escorted by Boswell, the biographer of Dr. Johnson. The exile in England lasted twelve months; they lived successively in Chiswick, in Wootton, Staffordshire, and in Spalding, Lincolnshire. King George III took an interest in Rousseau and granted him a pension of £100 a year, but the two never met.

When it became known that Rousseau wished to leave England, the Marquis de Mirabeau and the Prince de Conti both offered him their hospitality. He accepted and spent the remaining years of his life in France, the last eight in Paris. He died of a stroke on 2nd July 1778, and lies buried in the Panthéon.

No incidents in Rousseau's chequered life have given rise to so much controversy as his liaison with Thérèse Le Vasseur and his treatment of her children. Thérèse was a serving maid in the Paris Hotel at which Rousseau used to take his meals. She was, by all accounts, stupid, vulgar and greedy, could neither read nor write, and so ignorant that she was incapable of telling the time on a clock or the difference between various coins. That Rousseau, intellectual, fastidious, with his many high-placed friends and his knowledge of the world, should have chosen this impossible woman to be his companion for the rest of his life, is not easy to understand.

As for her children — five in all — Rousseau's behaviour was equally strange. Directly they were born, he had them carried to the foundling hospital *Aux Enfants Trouvés*, and took no further interest in their fate. It is difficult to believe that a man of his high ideals and sensitive nature, author of a book on education, should have been so callous as to abandon his own offspring. Yet he admits the facts. His comments in the *Confessions* are, however, singularly unconvincing. He writes that it was to save Thérèse's honour that he disposed of the first two infants. As to the other three, it was, he explains, a case of conscience, inasmuch as he considered it his duty to let them be reared at the *Enfants Trouvés* where, he thought, they would receive a more suitable upbringing than he could give them in his own surroundings. On the other hand, in a letter to Madame de Luxembourg he says it was largely remorse for his treatment of the children which had induced him to write the "*Traité de l'Education (Emile)*". On receipt of this letter, Madame de Luxembourg caused enquiries to be made at the hospital, but no trace of the children could be found. The researches by Mrs. Macdonald, who also inspected the registers at the *Enfants Trouvés*, were equally fruitless and she reached the conclusion that the existence of the children is disproved. The story told in the *Confessions* is certainly open to doubts Rousseau himself never saw the children, and it is even probable that his physical infirmities, of which he gives so many details in the *Confessions*, made him incapable of becoming a father.

Rousseau worshipped nature. He found delight in long solitary walks during which inspiration for his writings came to him. He loved the woods, the fields, the nights under the stars, and the songs of the birds. The simple

life, and the open air, as a source of human happiness, was his ever-recurring theme. Towards the end of his life he took up the study of botany. He carried the cult of simplicity into his private life. Never quite destitute, he lived frugally and in self-imposed poverty. The revenue from his many publications he invested in an annuity for himself and Thérèse, and he earned a modest income by copying music. He was scrupulously honest and fiercely independent. He resented any gift and often returned, with almost offensive terseness, even small presents which some of his admirers had sent him. It is known that of the pension King George III had granted him, he drew no more than the first annual portion and that he refused payments from his publishers because he considered them too high.

His character, never very stable, deteriorated with advancing years. He had always been abnormal, introspective, with a vivid imagination and alternating fits of elation and depression. As he grew older, he became eccentric and morbidly sensitive. He nursed imaginary grievances, quarrelled and fell out with all his friends, saw spies and enemies everywhere, suffered, in fact, from a mania of persecution. David Hume, who knew him well, in a letter written in 1767 to Adam Smith, sums him up thus: "Rousseau is a composition of whim, affectation, wickedness, vanity and inquietude, with a small, if any, ingredient of madness." A later critic, Lytton Strachey, writes, "This unfortunate man, deeply sensitive, misunderstood and buffeted, was essentially a modern."

Whatever his faults and peculiarities, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had in him a spark of genius and will always hold a prominent place in the history of Europe as one of the most original thinkers of his period.

The Editor.

