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Bicentennial Colloquium

Edited by R. A. Leigh

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Rousseau after two hundred years



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ROUSSEAU
AFTER TWO HUNDRED YEARS

Proceedings of the
Cambridge Bicentennial Colloquium

Edited by

R. A. LEIGH

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Medieval Languages, University of Cambridge
and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge*

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Introduction



Jean-Jacques Rousseau died on 2 July 1778. From 14 to 17 July 1978, the bicentenary of his death was commemorated by a bilingual colloquium held at Trinity College, Cambridge, under the somewhat ambitious title: ‘Two hundred years of Rousseau: a balance-sheet of his life and work/Rousseau après deux cents ans: bilan d’une vie et d’une œuvre’.

A dozen specialists were invited to read papers to an audience of about a hundred other scholars interested either particularly in Rousseau or in the eighteenth century in general, who discussed the papers with their authors. This book contains the original papers in full and a somewhat abridged and revised account of those discussions.

As was only to be expected, the papers did not in fact achieve the desired synthesis. Rousseau is too vast and too elusive a subject for convenient encapsulation. Indeed, it is unlikely that a completely satisfactory account of him and his work will ever be given. He spans an intimidatingly wide range of subjects (anthropology, sociology, political theory, religion, ethics, education, language, fiction, music and drama); and the complexities and refinements of his ideas, their application to different circumstances or different phases in the history of society, call for a degree of insight, sensibility and sophistication which is too often inhibited by the polemical animus his work and personality so frequently arouse.

To these difficulties must be added the problem of his influence, which has never been completely surveyed, no doubt on account of the frightening immensity of the task. Rousseau requires the attention of encyclopedic minds, and demands both the synchronic and diachronic approaches. However, it is an unfortunate fact that preoccupation with his influence has muddied retrospectively the interpretation of his thought. Too often it has obscured rather than elucidated his meaning. His ideas have been persistently assessed in the light of events which came later, his vision has been glimpsed through the

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screen of subsequent philosophising with which he has little in common, and which he would have rejected in bewilderment or even contempt. He has also been, to an unusual extent, the prey of sciolists, journalists and polygraphs. In particular, more than any other writer, Rousseau has suffered from critical fixation on the 'paternity' approach. He has too often been regarded primarily as the father of certain ideas, attitudes or events. The father of romanticism; the father of intuitionism and subjectivism (and therefore of laxity) in ethics and religion; the father of the French Revolution (of its achievements or of its excesses and its horrors); the father of socialism, of anarchism, and latterly of totalitarianism.

The 'paternity' approach has usually meant that writers tend to take sides, consciously or unconsciously, for or against him in direct proportion to their approval or disapproval of the movements and attitudes he is alleged to have fathered. In English-speaking countries, the attitude has generally been accusatory or even indictive, a neat inversion or reciprocation of Rousseau's own position. As a result, he has often been, not so much an object of study, investigation or understanding, as a scapegoat or a whipping-boy. It was therefore almost a relief to see him hailed recently as the true ancestor of ecological movements designed to protect and preserve the environment. However that may be, for a long time many have felt that, in Rousseau studies, as in other matters, 'la recherche de paternité est interdite'.

But far-reaching though his influence was, Rousseau is not simply a writer of historical importance: his work remains of immediate interest to us today. He is not only the most original, the most profound and the most controversial of all the great eighteenth-century writers: he is also the most topical. Some years ago, *The Observer* published a letter from an employee in the Vauxhall works at Luton, who wrote: '[. . .] in the trim shop the other day we were having such a heated discussion on the merits of J.-J. Rousseau as a philosopher, that the final inspection discovered that cars were rolling off the line without steering columns' (27 October 1963, p. 30).

It is odd that Rousseau, who has been blamed for so much, should in addition have to shoulder responsibility for some of the shortcomings of the British car industry. However that may be, it is not difficult to account for the renewal of interest in his work since the War. He will always, of course, have three principal claims to our attention. He was a challenging thinker, an outstandingly great writer, and a fascinating personality. But today the problems he raised have become more, not less acute, and their solution increasingly urgent.

Rousseau wrote about the origins of society, the nature of authority

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and liberty in the state, the aims and methods of education, the foundations of religion and morality, the nature of happiness, and the way it might be attained. But behind all these momentous questions, there loomed even vaster issues. He raised the fundamental question of where modern civilisation was leading mankind. He put forward the alarming and unpopular view that humanity had taken the wrong turning, and had, perhaps irretrievably, lost its soul, all notion of the real point of existence, of everything which really makes life worth living. Regeneration was problematic and precarious; and the way to it was hard and stony, unattainable perhaps. This was the most unsettling implication of all. There are no panaceas in Rousseau, only the summons to unceasing effort.

His voice was a dissonant one in an age which (to judge by its articulate members) found immense satisfaction in material progress, correlated the well-being of humanity with the advancement of learning, and displayed a form of complacency which led Edward Gibbon to write: 'We may readily acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion, that every age of the world has increased and still increases, the happiness, the knowledge and perhaps the virtue of the human race.' Some would have suppressed that tell-tale 'perhaps'; but even taking it as it stands, we are more likely today to endorse Rousseau's view than Gibbon's. However, in one respect at least Rousseau's message and example are far too radical for all but a few. He did not want us all to take to the woods, or live on acorns and the water of the nearest brook. But he did believe (as Stendhal was to say later of Englishmen, seeing the effect but not the cause) that modern man was 'victimé par le travail'. Even in the eighteenth century, Rousseau noted that we work, not to sustain life, but to acquire things we don't really need, which then become more necessary to us than necessities themselves. This is the secret of our enslavement, the garlands of flowers that conceal the chains. If we were to cut our requirements down to necessities (even generously interpreted), no one need work more than a few hours a day. The curtailment of luxury would mean liberty. Such a message falls uneasily today on the ear of the acquisitive society, in which the insistent pressures of advertising and public opinion ensure that we do our duty as consumers, in which we are all engaged in the game of keeping up with the Joneses, and in which everyone is somebody else's Jones. Of course, we shall never do as Rousseau suggests. That is why, as Marcel Raymond has said, he is 'd'autant plus actuel qu'on ne l'a pas suivi', why he will always remain both the prophet and the critic of modern times.

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Principal abbreviations



<i>AR</i>	<i>Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau</i> , Geneva, 1905–
<i>BV</i>	Bibliothèque de la Ville
<i>Considérations</i>	<i>Considérations sur le gouvernement de la Pologne</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>Contrat social</i>
<i>Dialogues</i>	<i>Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques: dialogues</i>
<i>DM</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de Musique</i>
<i>Discours II</i>	<i>Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes</i>
<i>EOL</i>	<i>Essai sur l'origine des langues</i> , éd. Charles Porset, Bordeaux, 1968
<i>Inégalité</i>	See above, <i>Discours II</i>
<i>La NH</i>	<i>Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse</i>
<i>LCB</i>	<i>Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont</i>
<i>LD'A</i>	<i>Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles</i> , éd. M. Fuchs, Lille–Geneva, 1948
<i>LM</i>	<i>Lettres écrites de la montagne</i>
<i>Leigh</i>	<i>Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau</i> , ed. R. A. Leigh, Geneva, Oxford, 1965–
<i>Pléiade</i>	<i>Œuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau</i> , éd. B. Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, Paris, 1959–
<i>Projet</i>	<i>Projet de constitution pour la Corse</i>
<i>RHLF</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>Social Contract</i>
<i>SV</i>	<i>Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century</i>