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VOLTAIRE

Lettres sur les Anglais

EDITED WITH
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
BY
ARTHUR WILSON-GREEN

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PREFACE

THE second centenary of the publication of these Letters approaches. The appearance of an annotated English edition may not, perhaps, be inappropriate; it will certainly not be precipitate.

The importance of the Letters in the story of Voltaire's career cannot be disputed. With these Letters his legend begins. Defying the lightning of authority, he began his long battle against stupidity and oppression; he joined the distinguished circle of those who have striven to increase the sum of human happiness,—

> That white-filleted company that Æneas found
> Circled around Musæus in the Elysian fields.

The book has a place also in the unending succession of works which have been written to reveal England to foreigners and to its own inhabitants. His picture of the (still) Unknown Island was the first to have about it traces of immortality. Even in 1931, his description of the life and thought of England in 1731 has some of its original colour, vivacity and piquancy. In these pages, there still shines the young gold of that pen which indeed grew old, but seldom, or never, faltered.

A. W.-G.

June 1931

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INTRODUCTION

I

VOLTAIRE

FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET, known in later days to all men as Voltaire, was born in Paris on November 21, 1694. His father, François Arouet, was a lawyer, a man of substance and some culture, holding government posts and enjoying the friendship of noble clients and men of letters. At the age of seven, Voltaire lost his mother, *née* Marguerite d'Aumard, and so was deprived of that maternal companionship which, in many lives, has been a refining and mellowing influence. On both sides, he came of successful bourgeois stock, of families that had made good their claim to share in the privileges of the nobility.

At the age of ten, the boy was sent to the Jesuit school, *le collège Louis-le-Grand*. Here he acquired some knowledge of the ancient classics, and the beginnings of that good taste, *le goût*, which became his most treasured possession. Further, he made friendships with *le comte d'Argental*, *le conseiller de Cideville*, *le marquis d'Argenson*, and others—friendships which were maintained throughout his life. He was a very distinguished pupil, *collecteur de couronnes*, acclaimed above all as a poet, recognised already as of a sceptical turn—puer ingeniosus sed insignis nebulo—but the pride of his teachers. These latter Voltaire never forgot. At the age of forty-five, he was still writing, *avec une éternelle reconnaissance*, to one of them, *le père Charles Porée*, and mingling felicitously the dogmatism of a law-giver and the docility of a pupil: *Le plus grand écueil des arts dans le monde, c'est ce qu'on appelle les lieux communs.... Songez seulement, mon cher père, que ce n'est pas un lieu commun que la tendre vénération que j'aurai pour vous toute ma vie.* He left school at the age of sixteen, accustomed to applause, assured of the possession of great talents, and fortified, in consequence, with no little aplomb.

The sixteen years following, 1710–26, up to the time of his visit to England, which forms so definite a landmark in

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his career, were years of ceaseless activity and of great variety—of journeys to Holland, of sojourns in the provinces, of the beginnings of his literary fame, of imprisonments in the Bastille, of escapes from death by smallpox and by fire, of unwearying efforts to distinguish himself as a poet and as a man of wealth and fashion.

His father vainly endeavoured to make a lawyer of him, and Voltaire did in fact spend a few months in the chambers of Maître Alain, and to some purpose, as he learnt at this time something of business methods, knowledge which helped to make him so successful in financial speculation and moneylending. In the lawyer's office, also, he began a lifelong friendship with a fellow-clerk, the easy-going and not very trustworthy but, at times, indispensable Thieriot, who hastened to his side when he was stricken with smallpox, and to whom, ostensibly, the 'Lettres sur les Anglais' were addressed.

It was during this period that Voltaire became acquainted with Bolingbroke, who exerted considerable influence upon his philosophy and politics (note, p. 120). Another important friendship was that of M. de Caumartin, marquis de Saint-Ange, a distinguished veteran of the reign of Louis XIV. Voltaire, with his characteristic and inimitable grace in turning a compliment, wrote of him:

Caumartin porte en son cerveau
De son temps l'histoire vivante;
Caumartin est toujours nouveau
A mon oreille qu'il enchante.

As a result of his intercourse with Caumartin, Voltaire conceived the bold ambition of giving to France its first epic poem, with Henry IV, the one popular King of France, as the hero. Caumartin's reminiscences also bore fruit at a later date in the compilation of a great historical work, 'Le Siècle de Louis XIV'.

In 1717–8, Voltaire underwent his first imprisonment in the Bastille. He was charged with the authorship of two satirical poems directed against the Regent, *Philippe, duc d'Orléans*. During his enforced leisure, which lasted nearly eleven months, he began his epic 'La Henriade'. He was

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allowed no paper or ink and wrote his poem between the lines of a Homer, the only book that he took to prison with him.

The year 1718 is memorable for the production of his first tragedy 'Œdipe'. Its success was prodigious; it was performed forty-five times, a record for that age, and Voltaire was hailed as a worthy successor of Corneille and Racine. In this play, the first note was heard of that warfare against superstition and absolute rule which fills so large a part of Voltaire's life:

Nos prêtres ne sont point ce qu'un vain peuple pense;
Notre crédulité fait toute leur science.

In a dedication of this work to the *duchesse de Lorraine*, Voltaire first styles himself *Arouet de Voltaire—pour voir*, he says, *si je serai plus heureux sous ce nouveau nom que sous le premier*. The most plausible explanation of this new name is Condorcet's (note, p. 150, l. 31). The theory that 'Voltaire' is an anagram of *Arouet L. J.* is surely impossible; he would not have called himself *Arouet d'Arouet le Jeune*.

The new name figures largely in an incident which happened in January, 1726, and which, paltry though it may have seemed at the time, had remarkable consequences for Voltaire, and even, it may be said, for France and the French monarchy. At the Opera House, seemingly by his too assured bearing, Voltaire excited the wrath of *le chevalier de Rohan* (*Gui-Auguste de Rohan-Chabot*), an unworthy bearer of a great name, who put to him the question, using the contemptuous abbreviation of *Monsieur* common at that time: *Mons' de Voltaire, Mons' Arouet, comment vous appelez-vous?* Voltaire replied: *Savez-vous la différence qu'il y a de vous à moi? C'est que je fais honneur à mon nom et que vous déshonorez le vôtre.* A few days later, the chevalier proceeded to have Voltaire beaten in the street by *six coupe-jarrets*. Voltaire began desperately to seek means of avenging himself, when on April 17, at the instigation of the *Cardinal de Rohan* and with the connivance of his own relative, d'Aumard, he was arrested and again incarcerated in the Bastille. The *maréchal de Villars* in his 'Mémoires' thus sums up the matter for all time: *Le public,*

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disposé à tout blâmer, trouva pour cette fois, avec beaucoup de raison, que tout le monde avait tort: Voltaire d'avoir offensé le chevalier de Rohan; celui-ci d'avoir osé commettre un crime digne de mort; le gouvernement, de n'avoir pas puni la notoriété d'une mauvaise action, et d'avoir fait mettre le battu à la Bastille pour tranquilliser le batteur.

By an order dated May 2, 1726, Voltaire was released from prison and allowed, or obliged, to go to England. He disembarked on a public holiday, probably Whit Monday, May 30, 1726, near Greenwich. In Greenwich Park he found a great concourse of holiday-makers and he was delighted with their gaiety and good looks: the sky was cloudless, and the view of the river, with its shipping and, in the distance, the vastness of London, aroused his lively admiration.

The French government, though, in effect, it exiled him, provided him with letters of introduction to the Duke of Newcastle, the Foreign Secretary, and the *duc de Broglie*, the French Ambassador. The ostensible purpose of Voltaire's visit was to arrange for the publication of 'La Henriade' and this matter did in fact occupy him for some months of his stay. Before his visit, he had become friendly in Paris not only with Lord Bolingbroke and Lady Bolingbroke, a Frenchwoman by birth, but also with Mr (later, Sir) Everard Falkener, a wealthy London silk merchant. He did not arrive as a solitary exile; his earliest addresses were *chez Mr Faulknear, à Wandsworth* and *chez mylord Bolingbrooke, à Londres*. His feeling towards the French government was naturally hostile. He had hoped for the favour of the French court; to hold office had not seemed impossible; instead, he had been wrongfully imprisoned and exiled. He was in a mood, it may well be imagined, to admire and extol the freedom of speech and liberty of person which he found in England, and to envy English writers their political influence.

He spent several months of 1726 at the house of Mr Falkener, working assiduously and with remarkable success at the study of English. As early as October, 1726, he writes an excellent English letter to Thieriot: "I lead an obscure and charming life at Wandsworth, quite given over to the

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pleasures of indolence and friendship". To most people, Voltaire's indolence would have seemed hard work. Early in 1727, he was presented at court. He stayed for some months at Parson's Green, at the house of a generous patron of letters, the much-travelled Lord Peterborough. He became acquainted with the foremost poets and writers—with Pope, Swift, Gay, Congreve, Thomson and Young—as well as with scientists and theologians, such as Sir Hans Sloan and Newton's disciples, Dr Samuel Clarke and Dr Henry Pemberton. He met Mrs Conduitt, the niece of Newton, and heard from her the historic story of the falling apple (p. 60), which he was the first to set down in writing. He was received by the Duchess of Marlborough and gleaned from her some information for his 'Vie de Charles XII', which he began in England. He spent some time at the Eastbury seat of Bubb Dodington, afterwards Lord Melcombe, and thirty years later had not forgotten the hospitality he then enjoyed—nor lost his mastery of the English language: "be assured", he wrote to Lord Melcombe, "of my sincere and everlasting gratitude". Obviously, he mixed in somewhat exclusive circles and his society was chiefly that of the most advanced thinkers of the time. His view of the general level of intelligence in England may have been a little too flattering—for him, the English were "a nation of philosophers"—but he kept his eyes, his penetrating and inquisitive eyes, open, and observed some of our idiosyncrasies—"we have men", he wrote to Thieriot, "who walk six miles a day for their health, feed on roots, never taste flesh, and wear a coat thinner than your ladies do on the hottest days".

In the winter of 1727, he published, in English, 'Essays on the French Civil Wars and on Epic Poetry', noteworthy alike for their English style and discriminating criticism. These Essays were intended to prepare the way for 'La Henriade' which was published in March, 1728. Voltaire, with this work, gave to French literature the epic poem which it lacked and took his place as the foremost of French poets. The poem was published by subscription and brought to its author a sum of at least £2000. Henceforward he enjoyed an ever-increasing affluence.

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Among his acquaintances in London he counted Baron Fabrice, a former companion of Charles XII of Sweden and later Chamberlain of George I. Intercourse with the baron led to the writing of his 'Histoire de Charles XII', a work for which he had particular affection: *C'est mon ouvrage favori*, he wrote at the time of its publication in 1731, *et celui pour qui je me sens des entrailles de père*. With this work, Voltaire made his début as a historian. Such history had never been written before. Its theme was modern, it was, like almost everything he wrote, eminently readable, it abounded in exact and vivid detail, it illustrated, without unduly stressing, the futility of war—*les saccageurs de provinces ne sont que des héros. J'appelle grands hommes ceux qui ont excellé dans l'utile ou l'agréable.*

Before leaving England, he also wrote the first two acts of 'Brutus', a play in praise of liberty, which had been inspired by the reading of Shakespear's 'Julius Caesar'. Finally, in the latter part of 1728—*dans la maison de notre cher et vertueux Falkener*—the indefatigable poet began his 'Lettres sur les Anglais', though they were probably far from complete when, *à l'anglaise*, he made his adieus.

The date of Voltaire's departure is uncertain. In July, 1728, he wrote, "I want a warmer climate for my health which grows worse and worse in England". In November, Lord Peterborough, writing to a friend, mentioned that M. Voltaire had already taken his leave. Early in 1729, Voltaire, in a letter to Thieriot, in English, says: "If I am smoked out this bout, I will plead that former leave for my excuse....I am here upon the footing of an English traveller". From these expressions, it may be concluded that he was already in France. In March, 1729, he addressed a letter to Thieriot from St Germain and, in April, he received permission to return to Paris. It would seem that he fled, in November, 1728, from the rigours of an English winter.

It is convenient to consider next the years from 1729 to 1753—from his return to France until his departure from the court of Frederick the Great. Henceforward propaganda rather than publicity engrossed his attention. His fame as a poet had been secured by the publication of 'La

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Henriade'. The publication of the 'Lettres sur les Anglais', 1733, 1734, brought him all the notoriety he could desire. His experiences and his travels had enriched his personality and broadened his interests. *L'exil et les malheurs le sacrèrent philosophe*, says M. Texte; he fought for the three sovereignties which, in Lamartine's bold phrase, were secured for France by the Revolution of 1789—the sovereignty of right over might, of intelligence over prejudice, of popular government over absolute rule. He still went in fear of imprisonment and his place of residence was often determined by his desire to avoid the Bastille.

Several years of this period were spent at the château of the *marquise du Châtelet*, at Cirey (Haute-Marne), a hundred miles east of Paris. The *marquise* was a lady of exceptional graces and gifts. She was charming to behold—intelligent, wistful, vivacious, broad of brow. She had a natural aptitude for languages, science and mathematics. But these were her diversions rather than her preoccupations. She loved her friends more than her books. It was written of her, as it was of the delightful *duc d'Antin*, in the pages of Saint-Simon, that she was never heard to say evil of anyone. Voltaire must have profited by his years of friendship with this gifted, tender and gracious spirit. She shared in his studies, restrained him when he was inclined to publish works which would inevitably endanger his liberty, and eventually helped him to make peace with the court. In 1745, he was appointed *historiographe et gentilhomme du roi*, and soon afterwards he was elected a member of the Academy. In France, however, the sun of royal favour soon set, but another court, that of Prussia, desired his presence and, on the death of Madame du Châtelet, Voltaire journeyed to Berlin.

The ruling King of Prussia, Frederick the Great, had long corresponded with Voltaire. He aspired to write French poetry and took pleasure in performing on the flute. Further, he desired to make his court illustrious by surrounding himself with men of wit and learning, and he preferred those who were of French birth. But his chief interests were military and political, and his ruling passion was self-aggrandisement. He was often brutal and offensive

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in his treatment of his courtiers. The years spent at Berlin and Potsdam, 1750–3, were for Voltaire years of humiliation. In his quarrels with the King and with the other literary men of the court, he showed his worst qualities—he was petty, shifty and malicious. When, finally, he left the Prussian court, the long arm of the King's vengeance pursued him across Germany, and rid him for all time of desire for the society of kings. The desire was laudable for it was inspired by his reforming zeal; he had hoped, through his influence on the rulers, to make their rule more just and more enlightened. By virtue of his genius, he was now himself becoming a king. At a later date, Frederick was heard to say that the king he feared most was *le roi Voltaire*.

To this period of his life belongs a series of great works. The most popular of his tragedies 'Zaïre', which owes not a little to 'Othello', was first performed in 1732. The diverting story of 'Zadig'—*né avec un beau naturel fortifié par l'éducation*—the ingenuous youth who became King of Babylon, was written in the course of a few days when its author was hiding from arrest. 'Le Siècle de Louis XIV', to which nearly twenty years of study were given, was published in 1751 (in its final form in 1768). It is a history of the march of civilisation—*de l'esprit des hommes dans le siècle le plus éclairé qui fut jamais*. A second great historical work—it owed its inspiration to Mme du Châtelet—is the 'Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations', a history of the world in 197 chapters, which covers the period from Charlemagne onward. Both these works are humanitarian in their aim; Voltaire would have men more rational and so happier. They abound in clear exposition, in striking generalisations, and memorable phrases. In the 'Essai', one of Voltaire's most cherished beliefs finds expression, his belief in the solidarity of the human race—*la patrie est où l'on vit heureux*.

There remains the last and greatest period of this great man's life, from 1753, when he was nearly sixty years of age, until his death in 1778. All through these years he continued an indefatigable worker; he acted on his own precept—*vieux il faut travailler comme le diable*. He complained throughout his life of ill-health and, as he grew

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older, he lamented it, or jested about it, in almost every letter. His digestion was never of the best, he was sparing in his diet—scrambled eggs was one of his favourite dishes —*je veux une bonne chère plus simple que délicate*. . .*je n'ai pas pu manger de perdrix* (1774)—he was constantly trying new régimes, and advising his friends to eat less; the only man who inspired him with awe was his doctor, the famous Tronchin (who gave his name to the *canne à la Tronchin*) of Geneva. However, he lived to be eighty-three. It was with truth that he said: *je suis un roseau qui a vu tomber bien des chênes*. His adaptability did not fail him. He was able to the last to settle down anywhere and in any circumstances, provided that his appetite for work was satisfied. His gaiety and irascibility remained. His compliments lost none of their grace. He would allow no one to outdo him in courtesy: when the great actress, Mlle Clairon knelt down before him to do him honour, *le vieux malade* also knelt down before her—and had to be assisted to his feet. His zest kept him alive. As long as there was the cause of humanity to fight for, and an enemy of it to fight against, it was well with him. These years of unexampled effort for what seemed to him the happiness and welfare of mankind end with his triumphant return to Paris, with a welcome there such as the city had never given to king or conqueror and with the death of this aged, heroic, dauntless fighter, borne down at last—by the weight of his laurels.

In these years, Voltaire possessed three residences—two in Switzerland, one for the summer, near Geneva, which he named *Les Délices*, and another for the winter, near Lausanne, and a third across the French frontier, four miles to the north-west of Geneva, at Ferney. His object in thus multiplying his properties was to have a place of refuge in the event of his relations with either the French or Swiss government becoming dangerously strained. In the last years of his life, he resided continuously at Ferney and made the name famous throughout Europe. Thither came visitors of various nationalities—philosophers and princes, writers and courtiers, actors and diplomatists—d'Alembert, Turgot, the Prince de Ligne, the Landgrave of Hesse, Mme de Genlis and Mlle Clairon, Goldsmith,

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Beckford, Fox, Wilkes, Boswell (who received a snub even worse than those which Dr Johnson gave him), Gibbon (who could not boast of any particular notice: Virgilium vidi tantum), and two less famous men who wrote long accounts of their visit, Dr John Moore and the Rev. Martin Sherlock. Voltaire rebuilt the château of Ferney and made it the spacious and dignified building, with its three *perrons* and mansard roof, with double row of windows, which one sees to-day. But he was not only *l'aubergiste de l'Europe*, he was also *le patriarche de Ferney*. He was not content to be an advocate only, he taught also by example. He endeavoured to provide a model of how the betterment of conditions which he claimed for human kind might be accomplished. He transformed his estates—drained marshes, cultivated his woods, his vineyards and his gardens, raised cattle, prided himself on the size and cleanliness of his poultry-runs. To agriculture he added manufacture. He had his tile factory, his tannery, he made silk and silk stockings, he started a colony of watchmakers. Further, he was a champion advertiser of his goods. His messages to his friends sound strangely like the advertisements which now, every night, are broadcast from France to the listening earth: *Vous voulez des bas? Vous ne pouvez mieux faire que de vous adresser à nous. Nous sommes bons ouvriers et très fidèles.*

M. Lanson, and surely no one knows more of Voltaire than he, declares that in the last twenty years of his life Voltaire scarcely wrote a page which was not the condemnation of an abuse or the advocacy of a reform. There came from his pen, in rapid succession, pamphlets and speeches, stories, dialogues and monologues, and—perhaps the most attractive of all his compositions—letters. Seldom, or never, has there been a writer at once so voluminous and so readable. 'Candide', the most famous of his stories, appeared in 1759. Here the target is that false optimism which discourages effort and suggests that all is well when, manifestly, it is not, and the upshot of it is—*il faut cultiver son jardin—travaillez et Dieu travaillera.*

Until the days of Ferney, Voltaire's fame had been limited to the rich and cultured. From 1761 onwards, he

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took upon himself the championship of the wronged and oppressed, and it is this courageous, persistent, disinterested championship that made his fame universal. When, in 1791, his ashes were conveyed for burial to the Panthéon in Paris, the catafalque bore the words: *Il vengea Calas, La Barre, Sirven et Montbailly. Poète, philosophe, historien, il a fait prendre un grand essor à l'esprit humain; il nous a préparés à devenir libres.* The cases of Calas and Sirven were similar: a Huguenot father was accused of murdering a child because the child had adopted the Roman Catholic religion. After years of effort, Voltaire brought about the rehabilitation of both families and saved the life of Sirven, though Calas was executed. The deaths of the children were accounted suicides. La Barre was a young man who was executed on a charge of mutilating a crucifix, which stood in a public place at Abbeville. Voltaire's intervention was ineffectual but the circumstances of the accusation rendered it more than ever courageous. Montbailly suffered death as a parricide. Voltaire saved Mme Montbailly, who was charged with complicity, from punishment and secured the vindication of Montbailly. Among English people, Voltaire's most famous remark is his comment on the execution of Admiral John Byng (1757): *En Angleterre, on fusille un amiral pour encourager les autres.* Less well known is the fact that he endeavoured to save the life of the Admiral, whom he had known in London. There was ample time for intervention as Byng was not executed until ten months after his defeat off Fort Mahon. Voltaire obtained a letter on Byng's behalf from the *maréchal de Richelieu*, one of the French commanders from whom Byng sailed away. The letter, though it did not secure Byng's acquittal by the court martial, is said to have influenced some votes. In it the Marshal expressed the soldierly opinion that Byng's only crime was that he had been beaten. The last of these fights for justice, episodes so unusual in the life of a poet, was undertaken to clear the memory of *le comte de Lally*, and it was crowned with success. Lally surrendered Pondicherry to the English in 1761; he held out for nine months and the force to which he finally surrendered was about thirty times as large as his own. For this offence he

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was executed five years after the event. The last letter which Voltaire, prince of letter-writers, wrote is dated May 26, 1778, four days before his death. He had heard that Lally's condemnation had been reversed and his honours restored to his family. He wrote to Lally's son: *Le mourant ressuscite en apprenant cette grande nouvelle; il embrasse bien tendrement M. de Lally; il voit que le roi est le défenseur de justice; il mourra content.*

Voltaire was not exempt from human failings. In some of his writings he appears petty, slanderous and obscene. Many have execrated him for his cynicism, and for his mockery of what they have held most sacred and most worthy of honour. Many may not be willing to forget his faults. In spite of all, Lord Morley's judgment stands: "Humanity armed, aggressive and alert, never slumbering and never wearying, moving like ancient hero over the land to slay monsters, is the rarest of virtues, and Voltaire is one of its master-types."

II

LES LETTRES SUR LES ANGLAIS

It was inevitable that Voltaire should write his 'Lettres anglaises'. He had surveyed with care the work of his predecessors in this field and notably that of Béat de Muralt. From the outset, in letters such as he alone could write, he had described his experiences to '*son cher enfant*', that 'lazy creature', Thieriot. As early as 1727, in a notice introductory to his 'Essays on the French Civil Wars and on Epic Poetry', he had announced his intention of writing a narrative of his stay in England. When Thieriot was in England, in 1733, arranging for the publication of the English translation of the *Lettres*, Voltaire gave him very definite instructions to state in the preface that they were written to him and, for the most part, in 1728. There is no reason to doubt that they were begun in that year and at Mr Falkener's house at Wandsworth. It is evident, however, from Voltaire's own correspondence, that they were not sent from England to Thieriot and that they were in

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fact not completed until 1733. Voltaire's correspondence between 1731 and 1733 shows that he was occupied with the *Lettres* throughout these years. In February, 1733, for example, he wrote to Thieriot: *J'ai passé deux mois à m'ennuyer avec Descartes, et à me casser la tête avec Newton, pour achever les* Lettres *que vous savez.* Internal evidence points to the same conclusion: Colley Cibber in Letter XIX is poet-laureate, a title which was conferred on him in December, 1730: Mrs Oldfield, whose funeral is mentioned in Letter XXIII, died in October, 1730. Voltaire was afraid of what might follow the publication of the *Lettres*. He wished therefore to create the impression that they were ephemeral productions written from England to a friend. His fears may explain also the curious fact that the Letters first appeared in an English translation in London. The translation, which bears the date 1733, was made by a journalist and poet, John Lockman, and it does him credit. It reads like an original work and, though much of the elegance of the French disappears, it has few inaccuracies. It would seem that Voltaire cherished the hope, a vain one, that, if the Letters were favourably received in England and accepted as entertaining and inoffensive, their novelty and subversive tendency might be less apparent in France and possibly condoned. In August, 1733, he wrote to Formont (*conseiller au parlement de Rouen*, a friend of his old schoolfellow, Cideville): *Les lettres philosophiques, politiques, critiques, hérétiques et diaboliques se vendent en anglais à Londres avec un grand succès.*

The Letters were first published in French in the following year, 1734, when no fewer than five editions appeared: one printed in London from Thieriot's text; one printed by Jore in Rouen, and three pirated editions of this latter text, printed in Amsterdam. Voltaire was himself responsible for Jore's edition, of which he corrected the proofs. It is this text which has been adopted for the twenty-four Letters of the present volume. No manuscript of the Letters is now in existence.

Thieriot's edition bore the title 'Lettres sur les Anglais', but Jore's edition that of 'Lettres philosophiques', a title first used, and used jestingly, in the letter to Formont from

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which the relevant extract has already been quoted. In all the preliminary correspondence, and even after the appearance of Jore's edition, Voltaire refers to the work as *Lettres sur les Anglais* or *Lettres anglaises*. It may be assumed that he changed the title so that it might cover a twenty-fifth Letter, which is included in Jore's edition, but not in Thieriot's, and entitled *Sur les Pensées de M. Pascal.* This letter has no direct connection with Voltaire's sojourn in England nor with his commentary on English institutions, and therefore is not included in the present volume. It was written in 1732–3. Voltaire found pleasure in showing how the method of reasoning which he had learnt from Locke might be used to combat *ce géant du jansénisme, M. Pascal.* These Remarks on Pascal gave more offence to church people than the Letters on Religion in England, and it was not without cause that Voltaire alleged his desire to undergo prosecution for one book, rather than for two, as a reason for publishing them with the 'Lettres sur les Anglais' and not as a separate volume.

The indignation with which the Letters were received was no less great than the interest which they aroused. The work is of course polemical. Its hostility to the French government and church is none the less bitter for being (rather transparently) veiled. The intention of the book was in part to reveal England to French people. With justice, Voltaire claimed (in a letter to Horace Walpole, 1768) that he was the first who had made Shakespear known to the French; that before him no one in France knew anything of English poetry and scarcely anyone had heard the name of Locke; that he was the first who explained to his fellow-countrymen the discoveries of Newton. All this is true. These names had been whispered before in France; they were not heard till Voltaire uttered them. His main purpose was not however to utter them, or the praise of England; his main purpose was to decry and discredit French institutions. With these Letters he began his long crusade against the absolutism of the monarchy, the privileges of the nobility and the corruption of the church, to which at a later date Diderot, d'Alembert and the other encyclopedists lent their powerful support, and which

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found its culmination fifty years afterwards in the Revolution. The purport of the Letters was quickly seen. They excited the resentment of the court, of the church, of the lawyers, even (by the praise of Shakespear, though it was somewhat faint) of literary men. The government acted with unusual celerity. A *lettre de cachet* was issued for the arrest of Voltaire on May 2, 1734. He had been forewarned by his friends and had departed—*à ce que l'on dit, pour prendre les eaux en Lorraine*. He remained in hiding or abroad—in Holland or Switzerland—for some months. In March, 1735, he received conditional permission to return to Paris but for many years he went in fear of imprisonment, for which, like the rest of mankind, he had *une aversion mortelle*, and one of the charms of Cirey was its seclusion and its proximity to Lorraine.

The *Parlement de Paris* promulgated a decree against the Letters on June 10, 1734: *Ledit livre sera lacéré et brûlé dans la cour du Palais...par l'exécuteur de la haute justice comme scandaleux, contraire à la religion, aux bonnes mœurs et au respect dû aux puissances; la cour fait très expresses inhibitions et défenses à tous libraires...de l'imprimer, vendre, débiter ou autrement distribuer...* and under the same date it was announced that *le livre y mentionné a été lacéré et jeté au feu par l'exécuteur de la haute justice, en présence de nous, Marie-Dagobert Ysabeau, l'un des trois premiers et principaux commis pour la Grand'chambre*. These measures proved ineffective. About forty editions were published in the forty-four years which elapsed between this time and the death of Voltaire.

The Letters fall into five groups: those concerned with religion, with government, with social matters, with philosophy and with literature. All these subjects are treated in a spirit of free inquiry, often of levity, seldom of strict impartiality. To heighten the contrast with France, the picture of England is painted in colours at times too cheerful. The sketch of English government is incomplete. No mention is made of the cabinet and little of the defects of the system, such as bribery and corruption. Social conditions must somewhere have left more to be desired than is suggested in the last paragraph of Letter IX. Not all literary men were as

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fortunate as Addison and Prior. It is to be feared that Voltaire scorned to notice the most famous of all heroes of fiction, Robinson Crusoe. He is silent concerning Robinson's creator, Daniel Defoe, like himself a writer of best-sellers, unresting and unconquerable.

Education, it has been said, should not pack the mind but make it plastic. The perusal of these Letters may well contribute to that end. There is the contrast between the seventeen-thirties and the nineteen-thirties; there is the wide variety of topics; there is, above all, the quick, vivacious mind of Voltaire, his wit, fertility and terseness—*malheur à qui dit tout ce qu'il peut*—to stimulate and encourage the reader. More often than not the reader will find himself in agreement with the author, who was of the opinion that *quand un Français et un Anglais pensent de même, il faut bien qu'ils aient raison.*

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