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978-1-108-05985-5 - Madame de Staël: Her Friends, and her Influence in Politics and Literature Volume 1

Charlotte Blennerhassett

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Madame de Staël

An accomplished biographer of figures ranging from Talleyrand to Cardinal Newman, Charlotte Blennerhassett (1843–1917) originally published this three-volume study in German. Reissued here is the English translation of 1889 by J.E. Gordon Cumming. Madame de Staël (1766–1817), an intellectual in Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century, was ranked by Auguste Comte as among the ‘great men’ of the era. A novelist, *salonnière*, literary and social critic, and follower of Rousseau, she became keenly involved in the opposition to Louis XVI. Volume 1 of Blennerhassett’s authoritative study addresses Madame de Staël’s life up to the Revolution, examining her ancestry, family and marriage to the Swedish ambassador to France. The volume also covers her views on marriage, slavery, the Rights of Man and the contemporary political turmoil.

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Madame de Staël

*Her Friends, and her Influence
in Politics and Literature*

VOLUME 1

CHARLOTTE BLENNERHASSETT
TRANSLATED BY
JANE ELIZA GORDON CUMMING



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*HER FRIENDS, AND HER INFLUENCE
IN POLITICS AND LITERATURE.*

BY

LADY BLENNERHASSETT.

WITH A PORTRAIT OF MADAME DE STAËL.

In Three Volumes.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.

The following pages are a slightly-abridged translation of LADY BLENNERHASSET'S work "FRAU VON STAËL IHRE FREUNDE UND EHRE BEDEUTUNG IN POLITIK UND LITTERATUR".

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P R E F A C E .

“ La première loi d’une portrait est de ne pas le faire dans un ton opposé à celui du modèle ”— SAINTE-BEUVE.

HARDLY any important book of an historical tendency has been written concerning the period between 1789 and 1815 without bringing in the name of Anne Germaine Necker, Baronne de Staël-Holstein.

Born on the 22nd April, 1766, in the midst of the culture of the eighteenth century; brought up under the direct influence of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s ideas, and in active intercourse with all the celebrated people of her day, from Voltaire to Mirabeau, from Turgot to Bonaparte, she never concealed her predilection for them; and in a manner took part in the whole Revolution. Her share in politics chiefly occurred in the ten years between 1789 and 1799. When this period came to an end, her actual literary career began with her book, *On Literature*, and only ceased at her death, which took place on the 14th July, 1817.

This career is marked by the immense success of *Corinne*, by the publication of her book *On Germany*, an intellectual feat of importance that can scarcely be over-estimated; and lastly by the political legacy

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she bequeathed, in the *Reflections on the French Revolution*, which inspired the flower of the sons of France with a desire to secure the blessings of liberty for their country, in attempting which their predecessors went to their death in 1789—conquered, but unconvinced.

The life of one whose existence combined all the vicissitudes of a woman's lot, and whose nature was endowed with a special capacity for suffering, was sure to arouse an equal degree of sympathy and interest.

Thus an essay on Madame de Staël has ever been a favourite theme with French authors. Men no less distinguished than M. J. Chénier, Barante, J. de Maïstre, Thiers, Villemain, Châteaubriand, Lamartine, Nettelement, Nisard, Ch. de Rémusat, Gustave Planche, Gérusez, Ch. de Mazade, Amiel, Branetière, Caro, O. Feuillet, Guizot, Taine, failed not, were it but incidentally, to lower their flag before her.

More detailed studies, taking her for their subject, have been written by Madame Necker de Saussure, Benjamin Constant, Alexander Vinet, and above all by Sainte-Beuve, the master of modern criticism; and they belong to the most skilled portraiture in French prose. All these studies are chiefly, however, of a literary character. The numerous accounts of the political position and importance of Madame de Staël, spreading over the literature of the French Revolution, generally lack authenticity, or they are imperfectly verified.

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This literature is so voluminous that it is almost impossible to look through all the memoirs, biographies, letters, and histories it includes.

And yet the portrait of this wonderful woman could only be examined in connection with the framework of the current thoughts and events surrounding her. In the words of one of our greatest historians, we should rather prefer the repetition of what is already known to the risk of inaccuracy induced by an incessant effort to be original.

Owing to the difficulty of separating Madame de Staël's personal history from that of her surroundings, the various attempts, especially the English attempts, to produce an exhaustive and life-like portrait of her, have utterly failed.

Seventy years have elapsed since her death, and one of the most important figures in modern times has hitherto found no adequate biographer.

Whilst in pursuit of entirely different studies, the authoress of the following work became sensible of this void in the history of the nineteenth century. That she should have felt herself constrained to set these studies aside, in the endeavour to fill up the deficiency, is amply explained by the wealth of material, and its connection with so many of the episodes and leading figures of the Revolution, of the Empire, the German classical era, the Restoration; and finally it is explained by the central figure itself, which owed its powers of attraction more to its irresistible worth than even to its genius.

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And there was an additional motive.

Madame de Staël saw Germany in the hour of its deepest political debasement. Undeterred by passing events, she chose that hour to acquaint the world with its intellectual worth and renown.

Schiller, and Goethe, Charles Augustus, and the Duchess Louise, William and Alexander Humboldt, were her friends, and she was the patroness of A. W. Schlegel. Grillparzer's *Sappho* was inspired by *Corinne*. Her picture hung above Baron de Stein's library table, as that of an ally in the struggle against the oppressor.

Such memories have their responsibilities. Taking this into consideration, we trust that the story of Madame de Staël, traced by a German hand, may be accepted with indulgence as a contribution to the German literature of the centenary of 1789. No one more deeply valued all that was good and enduring in the weighty experiment of that date than she, to whom liberty was more precious than all other gifts in life.

Munich.

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Page,	line.
2,	8, <i>for XIV. read XVI.</i>
5 and 16,	footnotes, <i>for Jacob read James.</i>
53,	19, <i>for XIV. read XVI.</i>
103,	footnote, <i>for Frederick read Frederika.</i>
179,	12, <i>for unequal read unequalled.</i>
224,	14, <i>for on read in.</i>
349,	24, <i>for Toulon read Foulon.</i>
426,	12, <i>for then read than.</i>
428,	5, <i>for XVI. read XIV.</i>
430,	footnote, <i>for remarks read "Reflections."</i>
432,	3, <i>for l'aine read l'ainé.</i>
457,	headline, <i>for 1790 read 1791.</i>