



J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813)

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Cartographer; Explorer; Letter-writer/ Diarist; Soldier; Essayist; Travel writer.
Active 1760-1801 in United States; Canada; England; France

Born to Norman minor nobility in 1735, Michel-Guillaume Saint-Jean de Crèvecoeur emigrated to England at age 19, and then, one year later, to Canada, where he worked as a cartographer and surveyor for the French militia. Arriving in upstate New York in 1759, Crèvecoeur continued to travel, working as a surveyor, trapper, and trader. There he changed his name to J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, and was eventually naturalized as a British citizen. In the 1760s, Crèvecoeur began writing the pieces that would eventually be included in *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*. Set in rural America on the cusp of the Revolution, these pieces celebrate the independence of the yeoman farmer from the hierarchy and corruption of the Old World. A Loyalist, Crèvecoeur fled New York during the American Revolution, stopping briefly in London to publish *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), and then establishing residence in Paris, where he published a vastly altered version two years later. By this time, Crèvecoeur had become a fixture in Parisian salons. With the aid of Turgot and Madame d'Houdetot, he was appointed consul to New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. He then returned to New York late in 1783 to discover that his wife was dead and his children had fled north to Boston. Crèvecoeur returned to France twice more, once for a year's furlough in 1785, and then finally to retire in 1790. Beleaguered by events during the French Revolution, however, Crèvecoeur saw his sons scattered by the Terror to Germany and the United States. He published his final work, *Voyage dans la Haute Pensylvanie et dans l'état de New-York*, in Paris in 1801, and died in 1813 in Sarcelles.

Crèvecoeur's literary reputation rests largely on *Letters of an American Farmer*, a series of sketches describing the idyllic life on the freehold farm. While *Letters* was quickly translated into German and Dutch, and was well-received in Europe, the only American edition for the next century would be Matthew Carey's Philadelphia imprint of 1793. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, through the rediscovery of Crèvecoeur by Moses Coit Tyler, the *Letters* was absorbed into the canon of early American literature. While critics tended to draw on the text to support a myth of a classless America in the years before the Revolution, readers and anthologists have begun in recent years to pay greater attention the less idyllic of the letters which portray the deleterious effects of the Revolution and—in a brief and poignant vignette in Charleston, South Carolina—of slavery. Crèvecoeur had culled the *Letters* from a box of manuscripts that he carried from New York to London. In 1925, Henri Bourdin, Ralph H. Gabriel, and Stanley T. Williams edited a dozen of the remaining pieces as *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* and published four other sketches in academic journals. Albert E. Stone published the *Letters* and the *Sketches* together in an edition for Penguin in 1986. And in 1995, Dennis D. Moore produced a critical edition of all of the English-language essays that Crèvecoeur had not included in *Letters from an American Farmer*.

Generically, both *Letters* and *Sketches* are aggregates of travel narrative, essay, and scientific correspondence. *Letters* is addressed to an Englishman who has paid its protagonist, Farmer James, a visit, and, by extension, to Europeans curious about America. Even Letter III, “What is an American?”, which focuses on the idyllic condition of the American farmer, is framed as taking the reader on a tour: “I wish I could be acquainted with the feelings and thoughts which must agitate the heart and present themselves to the mind of an enlightened Englishman when he first lands on this continent” (Crèvecoeur 66). In this vein, many of the letters chronicle travels to Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, Pennsylvania, Charlestown, and the commercial seaports of New England. At the same time, the dedication, addressed to the Abbé Raynal, sets the *Letters* within an “extensive intellectual consanguinity” (Crèvecoeur 38) of naturalists and *philosophes*.

Delicately poised between Europe and the unreconstructed nature beyond the frontier, Crèvecoeur's pre-Revolutionary agricultural America appears as the best of both worlds. In the *Letters*, James's farm represents a middle ground between the savagery of the Indians on the one hand, and the vicious luxury and social hierarchy of Europe on the other. Because the frontier provides a seemingly inexhaustible abundance of cheap land, the *Letters* can strip the civic-humanist ideal of the freehold farm of the aristocratic associations it carried in Britain, while maintaining its values of virtuous independence and incorruptibility. “This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return, it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens” (Crèvecoeur 54).

While Crèvecoeur often refers to America as a “nation”, the nation he celebrates is only roughly equivalent to either Britain or the incipient United States. The advantages of British America are due, in fact, to its distance from the metropolis and, by extension, from governmental authority, bureaucracy, and the market:

[W]here is that station which can confer a more substantial system of felicity than that of an American farmer, possessing freedom of action, freedom of thoughts, ruled by a mode of government which requires but little from us? I owe nothing, but a pepper corn to my country, a small tribute to my king, with loyalty and due respect; I know no other landlord than the lord of all land, to whom I owe the most sincere gratitude. (Crèvecoeur 52)

Given Crèvecoeur's antipathy to state power, it is not surprising that he has no taste for the emergence of an independent United States. Though the *Letters* has been read by generations of critics as a proto-nationalist expression of American character, the Loyalist Crèvecoeur sees the impending American Revolution not as the fulfillment but rather as the downfall of the virtues he ascribes to agricultural British America. In the final chapter of the *Letters*, “Distresses of a Frontier Man”, the tone shifts dramatically in the face of the imminent Revolution, and Farmer James contemplates fleeing his farm to live among the Indians. (Crèvecoeur heads in the other direction, first for London, where he publishes the *Letters*, and then Paris.)

The Revolution, however, disturbs an already tenuous balance. Crèvecoeur's pastoral (or more precisely, georgic) vision is in tension with several key elements of the texts, and the participation of the *Letters* within a network of correspondence among scientists and men of letters jars with the simplicity of its homebound persona, Farmer James. There is a considerable discrepancy between Crèvecoeur's elaborate style and patrician diction and his repeated professions of being “neither a philosopher, politician, divine, or naturalist, but a simple farmer” (Crèvecoeur 50). Moreover, the portrait of America as a nation of farmers is already rather nostalgic by the second half of the eighteenth century, and, indeed, the farmer's pretended self-sufficiency is contradicted in several places in the course of the *Letters*. Both of these tensions are central to the very form of the transatlantic correspondence that makes up the *Letters*; it is a portrait of the autarchic virtue of America as opposed to Europe, addressed to a European, and published in London and Paris for the delectation of

Europeans.

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