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Book Review

Apgar, Garry and Edward M. Langille
eds. and presenters
The Quotable Voltaire
Bucknell UP, 2021

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Apgar, Garry and Edward M. Langille eds. and presenters. *The Quotable Voltaire*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2021. 486 pages, 33 b-w, 1 color image, 6 1/8 x 9 1/4. ISBN: 9781684482917¹.

Garry Apgar and Edward M. Langille dedicate their work to Theodore E. D. Braun, one of the founders of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and a specialist of one of Voltaire's permanent target for criticism, Le Franc de Pompignan—Braun created a site to publish some texts illustrated by a painting of Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan (1709-1784)²; and to George W. Gowen “chairman of the board of the Voltaire Society of America Inc., and its driving force since its inception in 1996” who, circa 2003, helped the VSA produce a film on Jefferson and Voltaire³. Apgar and Langille are part of an illustrious circle of very active American eighteenth-century specialists who are curious about the French and American intellectual roots of North-American nations, and who forged the current force of our powerful and numerous associations for eighteenth-century studies in various disciplines. In this constructive spirit, Apgar and Langille collected statements by the renowned French Philosophe from his correspondence, early editions of his writings, and conversations recorded by contemporaries like Casanova, Edward Gibbon, and James Boswell, conversations carefully contextualized for us: it will be usable by specialists, as well as by our undergraduate students who might prefer being introduced to great thinkers through little capsules of knowledge and opinions that they are free to explore at a later date. The result is also an invaluable complement to the scientific edition of the *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* nearing completion (p. 413) at the University of Oxford under the auspices of the Voltaire Foundation⁴.

Voltaire stands as one of the most enduring and relevant figures in the European and Anglo-American imagination. His iconic name and persona are invoked in times of crisis: the 2010 earthquake in Haïti⁵; the 2015 terrorist attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris (see the documents pp. 19-20 ff). His words find their way into politics and popular culture: during his first presidential campaign Barack Obama used Voltaire's line, “the better is the enemy of the good” (p. x); even in an episode of *NCIS*, special agent Gibbs repeats that now proverbial saying.

The dictionary-like organization – alphabetically by topic, with an index and “further reading” recommendations – of *The Quotable Voltaire* facilitates easy consultation or investigation according to individual taste and curiosity. The subject headings reflect Voltaire's preoccupation with big-picture questions such as the origins and meaning of life, the existence of God, good and evil, death, freedom, how government can best foster happiness, and how happiness can be measured or defined. In addition, the editors cast an unflinching eye on Voltaire's occasionally inconsistent – sometimes evolving – views on present-day hot buttons: issues like sexuality or religion may not please everyone (p. 18). However, we still turn to Voltaire – one of the founders of Western democratic discourse – for direction, encouragement, solace, and amusement. Paul Valéry declared him “infinitely current” (p. 4). Who has not wondered what he had to say about criminal religious fanaticism, or what remedies he might envision? Why might the family of a rape-kill victim feel that its first order of business is to express, beyond forgiveness, love for the perpetrator? If one must be either the hammer or the anvil in life, where does Voltaire situate himself (spoiler: he says he was born an anvil, p. 109) ? So how

¹ Consulted on April 27, 2021 : <https://www.ubcpress.ca/the-quotable-voltaire>

² Cf. Consulted on April 27, 2021, last updated in 1785 : <http://www1.udel.edu/flt/faculty/braun/index.html>

³ Produced by Dennis Powers Productions, Inc. in association with Della Robbia Productions, for the Voltaire Society of America ; produced & directed by Dennis Powers, Patrick H. Ryan & Rawn Fulton in association with Polaris Arts ; written by Garry Apgar, George W. Gowen & Patrick H. Ryan. Princeton, NJ : Films for the Humanities & Sciences, c2001. 1 videocassette (23 min.) : sd., col. ; 1/2 in.

⁴ <https://www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk/oeuvres-completes-de-voltaire/>

⁵ Referring to his Lisbon poem (1755), p. 7.

does one grow out of being an anvil? How would he reconcile religion and the notion of a benevolent Supreme Being with natural disaster?

Other topics tackled by Voltaire include the benefits of luxury and commerce, the value of intercultural exchanges vis-à-vis clashes fueled by factionalism and fanaticism, colonial war over North America – a territory belonging to neither (cf. Canada) –, the ways superstition breeds fanaticism, how both can be countered, and how tyranny, by creating opposition, is self-defeating. On the topic of the mechanisms of national governance Montesquieu and himself seem to have missed one another: Voltaire is not very analytical about Montesquieu (who, in turn, is not very appreciative of Voltaire, p. 295). Voltaire does not appear to be depressingly satirical like a Romantic because he is very jovial and entirely sociable – optimistic at heart really since he fights to produce good outcomes. And I defy the reader not to laugh at this rather truthful observation about people's lack of self-awareness and self-centered view of the world: "Are not most of us like the old general of ninety who, coming upon some young officers making merry with loose women, angrily says to them, Gentlemen, is that the example I set for you?" (p. 57). Voltaire seems keen on determining "national character" which, at the time, had some importance over his translation or adaptation of Shakespeare for a French public (p. 230), and he is obviously seduced by England, though he seems to dislike some of its architecture a bit haphazardly (apparently Diderot's opinion as well): Voltaire's dismissal of Blenheim Palace as a "heap of stone" (p. 44) during his journey to England is certainly correct as the sober rectangular structure is impressively massive, though, as current pictures of the palace indicate, that does not prevent it from being appealing⁶, and truth be told, Ferney (as rebuilt by Voltaire) is really just a big rectangular structure itself⁷, though judged "small" by some of his visitors.

The editors offer variations or alternate versions for certain translations, pinpoint errors in attribution, and distinguish reported quotations from direct quotes. One of the originalities of this well-crafted reference work is the English translation of many of the quotes – often quite ingenious – that Apgar and Langille devised whenever accurate historical translations were not available.

The second part of the book "consists of comments about Voltaire, his life and accomplishments, by Voltaire himself, his contemporaries, and posterity". Commentaries on Voltaire in languages other than French or English, by Goethe (pp. 288-289) and Nietzsche (p. 369) in German, by Casanova in Italian (p. 273), or Jorge Luis Borges in Spanish, appear in their native tongue and as well as in English. Those are remarks and observations – not always favorable – about the Great Man by everyone, from Rousseau, Adam Smith (very positive, p. 299), Lytton Strachey (p. 388), Freud (p. 338), Churchill (p. 320), de Gaulle (p. 339), and the boxer Mike Tyson (p. 392). Two early American presidents, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both commented on Voltaire; in college, Richard Nixon helped form a student club with a Voltaire-inspired motto (p. 4).

Since I am very interested in paintings and illustrations, I commend the authors for their selection of a portrait of Voltaire by the Genevan artist (p. 10) Jean Huber (1770-1775) that graces the cover of the book. We also encounter M^{me} Denis, Voltaire's niece (fig. 5, p. 8) and Dr. John Morgan (fig. 6, p. 9), "cofounder of the Medical College at the University of Pennsylvania" (p. 10), the first school of its kind in North America. Morgan visited Voltaire at Ferney. Figure 7 shows a

⁶ Consulted on April 27, 2021:

https://www.google.com/maps/uv?pb=!1s0x4876cfe323947857%3A0x553e59b8e1ef0e18!3m1!7e115!4shttps%3A%2F%2Fwww.trover.com%2Fd%2F1cDzl-blenheim-palace-oxfordshire-england!5sBlenheim%20palace%20-%20Google%20Search!15sCgIgAQ&imagekey=!1e10!2sAF1QipOO7YNSgaQT9-8nJrHI_QyGj8ziBYcemCfRgR5W&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewibs93xoJ_wAhXRQc0KHS6jAKUQoiowK3oECG8QAw

⁷ Consulted on April 27, 2021 : https://www.tripadvisor.ca/Attraction_Review-g196701-d2249284-Reviews-Chateau_de_Voltaire-Ferney_Voltaire_Ain_Auvergne_Rhone_Alpes.html

bridge, quai Voltaire, that the magic of Google Map can let us visit⁸. Figure 8 is fascinating as it depicts clearly a statue of Voltaire in front of the city hall of the XIth arrondissement of Paris, currently place Léon-Blum⁹. The symbolism of statues and their *quadrille* in the places and squares of Paris deserve some scrutiny.

As I close this book, I meditate on Lord John Morley's comment, "Voltaire left France a poet, he returned to it a sage" (p. 367); and I return to the conclusion of the historian Gustave Lanson (1857-1934): "There is nothing more difficult than making an overall assessment of Voltaire" (p. 355). Yet this concise work allows us to see most clearly some of his tendencies and some of his contradictions. What will interest many researchers and journalists are the snippets reviewing his legacy and what people take away from reading Voltaire.

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⁸ Consulted on April 27, 2021 :

<https://www.google.com/maps/@48.8586672,2.3330558,3a,75y,23.27h,80.95t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sMqkUtZ1nPHAp cXFChieziQ!2e0!7i13312!8i6656>

⁹ As the symbolism and location of statues is currently hotly contested and debated, cf. the fate of the space in front of the square located in front of the city hall of the 11th district of Paris : Consulted on April 28, 2021 :

<http://www.parisrues.com/rues11/paris-avant-11-place-leon-blum.html>

Consulted on April 28, 2021 : https://www.tripadvisor.ca/Attraction_Review-g187147-d14171797-Reviews-Statue_de_Leon_Blum-Paris_Ile_de_France.html

Consulted on April 28, 2021 : <https://macommunedeparis.com/2016/07/05/la-statue-de-voltaire/>