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Book Review

Simon DAVIES, *Bernardin de Saint-
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<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/bernardin-de-saint-pierre-9781789622485?cc=ca&lang=en&>

As soon as you read the introduction of Simon Davies for this volume on Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, you encounter a new style of biography with France taking center-stage as seen from its outskirts: its embassies and colonies were the contexts of much of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's early years. The biography of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre is contextualized by his epistolary exchanges with his protectors. Essential passages from personal letters reveal what his protectors wrote on his behalf and to whom while Davies follows up on the outcome, further explaining why the recommendation letters were unfruitful. For instance, he provides the specific conjecture: 'Turgot remained unreachable because he felt out of depth ("accablé" p. 76) in his new post, and when he was swiftly replaced it was by someone (the lesser-known Antoine de Sartine) who was out of tune with the proposals that could have served Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (around 1775). We find Sartine again but as the head of police several years later. Not only do we benefit from a clearer picture of who the author was and his options and reactions in mobile circumstances, we get a panorama of the influential movements carried by individual delegates representing France throughout Europe and impacting his personal fate. It is very unusual and lively, and it is certainly a novelty in terms of biography because instead of furnishing a simple narrative, Davies shows us the documents that allowed him to tell us about Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's circumstances. They also enlighten us regarding the difficulty of getting anywhere without influential people intervening on your behalf and how these efforts come to naught if the solicited party is not personally engaged either in his function, or for personal gains. Let us remember that Diderot claimed that virtue and service alone were less reliable than bartering in *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?* Since Davies buttresses his biography and the twists and turns of the author's fate with quotes, he had to consult archives from the BNF, the Bibliothèque Armand Salacrou–Le Havre, the Electronic Enlightenment, and he finds that he should be grateful to the librarians of the BNF, the British Library, the Archives diplomatiques du ministère des Affaires étrangères, and the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg. We discover new facets of D'Alembert and Julie de Lespinasse as well as Pierre-Michel Hennin who was most supportive up to the time of the Revolution. Davies supposes that it is entirely possible that in the new governmental configuration, his association with Hennin could be dangerous or detrimental to one another. People who are curious about Poland should find interesting leads in the introduction and the first chapter.

Davies is sympathetic to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and explains how his source of strength motivated his weaknesses: his ultra-modern view of an interconnected planet and universe led him to extraterrestrial elucubrations that were ridiculed by his contemporaries but are current with our considerations on the plurality of worlds and are entirely legitimate (p. 57); but it also led him to elaborating faulty concepts of tides as caused by the melting of polar glaciers. Like modern ecologists, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre recognized the interdependence of different forms of life (pp. 51-53): and the fact that a plant must be considered in relation to insects (p. 49); animals have to be studied *in situ* and live (p. 50) to see what is necessary to sustain them in terms of food, habitat and surroundings. Davies gives the example of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's strawberry plant on his window sill. The

author described the different types of beautiful flies that visited it and used it as a dwelling. Compared to our contemporary populations, his power of observation on the interdependence of plants and insects remains quite superior. We are just beginning to grow alarmed at the disappearance of pollinating insects due to our use of insecticides because we are growing aware that they assist our food crops. Understandably, considering his view of interconnectedness, he also found that dried plants could not yield much information and animals displayed in post-mortem fashion were ghastly and scientifically meaningless. Eventually, he called this perception of interdependence “harmony” and it led him to work against the imbalance of French aristocratic society where the nobility and the Church were so noxious that they let members of the *Tiers-état* die of hunger, and it led him to be attentive to international perspectives and become a diplomatic spy.

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre grew discouraged at the evidence that Europe was inundating the colonies with its surplus population. He compared French, British and Dutch colonies. The French practice of sending undesirable criminals to the islands in the hope that they would become positive members of (any) society appeared nonsensical and produced horrendous results (p. 63). The government was not ready to read any real report from the colonies nor hear any criticism, beginning with the horrors of slavery—he experienced that any “truth” on such topics had to be mitigated in order to appear in print. The state of the world and the disconnection in people’s preoccupations as reported by Claude Joseph Girault to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre sounds oddly familiar: “Dans la Pologne et sur la Frontiere des Turcs vous verriés regner l’atrocité des Temps les plus barbares et [...] des projets d’envahissements qui tendent à renverser le système d’équilibre des puissances d’Europe, tandis qu’à quelque distance d’autres gens sont profondément occupés du mauvais succès d’un Opéra et des petites anecdotes de la Cour [...]” (p. 15). Aren’t our front-page news stories inclusive of massacres on the one hand, as well as details of Meghan and Kate’s wedding attires and disenchantments on the other hand while our video news of gruesome murders are interrupted by upbeat car commercials?

In his third chapter, Davies aims to remedy the “under-researched activities of Bernardin during the Revolution” (p. 3) with the backdrop of the idea of “regeneration”—at once a religious and a revolutionary ideal (pp. 89-90). Saint-Pierre would consider the *Tiers-état* and peasants to be “essential workers” according to our current pandemic vocabulary. Consequently, Saint-Pierre proposed that “*Tiers-état*” be replaced by “communes” to show the importance of their social role (p. 92). This chapter utilizes new material published in 2015, about the author’s journey in Normandy in 1775 (p. 95), and the views of *La Chaumière indienne* (1791) (p. 97). Cruelty-free fashion and ethical food commerce are part of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s concerns (echoing Voltaire’s) (p. 107). Davies details Saint-Pierre’s activities during the Revolution and how he wished to encourage reforms, one of them involving the education system (p. 129) which is developed in the fourth chapter.

An admirer of Rousseau’s *Emile* (p. 131), he shared the novelist’s views on gendered education but objected to the contradictory values of neo-classical sources that are occasionally impossible to reconcile with catechism as observed by Voltaire (p. 141)—the following chapter points to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s underestimated appreciation of Voltaire. The fourth chapter should interest any current pedagogue who needs to rethink the social objectives of education and reflect on the formation of schoolteachers to better serve society and the future of the graduates from the nation’s institutions. About the paradox that his popular literary heroes are illiterate (Paul and Virginie or the patriarch of *La Chaumière indienne*), Davies observes that this fiction is destined to make people reflect but it is not the model of a utopia: “Bernardin knew that education was an investment, and wanted future generations in France to benefit from a national education policy” (171). What is also interesting is that he believes that moral and religious education should not be confined to the Church, but the

responsibility of the nation: education should foster “social cohesion” (*ibid.*). Saint-Pierre’s education reform projects propelled him to the status of celebrity (chapter 5).

Celebrity is treated differently by Voltaire, Rousseau, and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre in a contrasting introduction providing psychological depth to the three authors: the rest is a study of the reception of *Paul et Virginie*, *La Chaumière indienne*, *Études de la nature*, and *Vœux d’un solitaire*. The chapter on critical reception could also be pursued by future researchers interested in his legacy. The impact of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s work is often underestimated, and I found traces of it in Balzac and Baudelaire.

Davies traces the growth of his fame and celebrity status and how he dealt with it as a “professional writer” in the last chapter. He observes that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre converted his traveling into travelogues and then into fiction: “He was a well-informed traveller who acquired information which he filtered into his work over many years” (p. 215). *Voyage à l’île de France* was neither fictional nor very diplomatic, unlike the *Études de la nature*: His condemnation of slavery, the exposure of the viciousness of the white masters and the criticism of the administration of the colonies were expectedly ill-received by the authorities (p. 218) and made him a target of censorship. His needs were multiplied: seeking backing for his publication and supporting his sister or helping his brother (p. 219). The endless introduction of *Paul et Virginie* detailing financial difficulties and other imbroglio are actually explained in such a manner that historians of printing and publishing might find it an item of precious information; Bernardin de Saint-Pierre encounters advisers, financial backers, illustrators, journalists, and dishonest printers leading to court cases (p. 227); he shows some marketing acumen, observes Davies (pp. 232-233). The author was successful enough that he could purchase a house with the sale of his books (pp. 244-245), yet the difficulties facing his sales, such as “pirate editions”, indicate what writers could expect in the 1780’s: “Bernardin proves to be an informative case study to evaluate the role of the professional writer in this age” (p. 25).

Davies cannot pinpoint when or why the writer turned to fiction, but he records his defense of fiction: “Bernardin would thus seem to concede, even to declare, that fiction can prove an enabling medium in the construction of societies through its imagining of better worlds” (p. 257). This defense of fiction based on social usefulness is not entirely convincing. It is repeated in different terms by Paul Bénichou (p. 261). Nevertheless, the question remains unanswered.

In the conclusion, another intriguing question arises: the absence of travel literature by “Voltaire, D’Alembert, de Buffon et Rousseau” as stated by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (p. 262). However, Diderot and Rousseau resorted to *promenades*, and Voltaire’s *Candide* presents a world tour. What constitutes travel literature appears to be non-fictional for Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. Davies also studies Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s relationship to the philosophers, wondering about his criticism of the “head” of philosophers [le baron d’Holbach?]. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre obviously read Voltaire, including *Zadig* (1748) as the source of *Le Café de Surate* (1792) (p. 267). Davies states that his position of anti-cruelty against animals brings him close to Voltaire, and he went further than the Ferney patriarch because of his interest in vegetarianism as advertised by Robert Pigott (p. 273). The rest of the conclusion eventually reviews major modern critics and their works on Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. Such is the case for Anne C. Vila of the University of Wisconsin–Madison (a specialist of medical history), who studied the relevance of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s ascetic withdrawal from society and his self-declared melancholy as a consecrated symbol of “sensitivity” to construct his public persona as a celebrity. My published studies of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre on *Paul et Virginie* would lead me to conclude that the author was eager to tend to his book in commercial terms as he echoed almost every popular trend at the time, including the motif of the cathedral labyrinth.

Davies' volume is essential to new research on Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. It will be of interest to historians and literary critics. It sheds new lights on the literary networks including D'Alembert and Voltaire. It certainly captivated my attention.

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