

Voltaire in Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation

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‘Arouet? Voltaire? So, what *is* your name?’

‘Voltaire! My name is just beginning and yours will soon be finished with.’

The icy exchange stopped short in Adrienne Lecouvreur’s dressing room in January 1726. Appalled at the discovery of the influence of a young dandy on the beautiful actress, the chevalier de Rohan countered his rival with a deliberately mortifying slight: what was an upstart dandy doing here, at the Comédie-Française? The affront, however, turned to the assailant’s disadvantage: the poet who had penned the *Ligue* was never short of a good retort. Exasperated, Rohan raised his walking stick. He was about to chastise the boor but suddenly changed his mind and stormed out.

A few days later, Voltaire was dining at the residence of the Duc de Sully. Somebody rang the bell: lackeys seized the guest, dragged him outside and beat him before the eyes of Sir Rohan. Humiliated to the depth of his soul, Voltaire sought redress. He soon learned, however, that justice was not to be on his side: what good was the complaint of a ‘nobody’ against one of the members of the influential Rohan family? Although at first sight insignificant, the event remained branded on the young man’s soul and he decided to avenge himself. He challenged his enemy to a duel but the authorities heard whisperings of the imminent brawl and Voltaire was taken straight to the Bastille. An anonymous letter written by a member of the clergy made the poor wretch’s case worse: he was accused of advocating deism ‘openly during the young nobles’ toilette’. The already oppressive atmosphere soon became unbearable. The authorities agreed to release Voltaire on condition that he went into exile. Despite every indication to the contrary, the decision couldn’t have been better: for months, François-Marie the incorrigible had been considering going to Great Britain to publish his *Henriade*, an epic poem written in honour of Henri IV and a celebration of tolerance. No one in Paris would publish a work so unfavourable of the Catholic Church as this one. However, many French publishers, mostly Huguenots, had established themselves in London...

On 5 May 1726 Voltaire set sail for Great Britain. Lasting three years, the stay was a revelation for the Parisian, both on an intellectual and personal level. Firstly, he discovered Shakespeare, a provocative genius who penned ‘monstrous comedies’; secondly, he discovered the works of John Gay and Swift; thirdly, he was warmly welcomed by his friend Bolingbroke, who introduced him the traveller to Alexander Pope. One can add to this an introduction to Newtonian philosophy and an encounter with the philosophers Berkeley, Locke and Clarke. On the ‘Island of Reason’, exact opposite of the ‘very Christian kingdom’ that was France, Voltaire mixed with the British elite. As a result, his ideas became more refined. It didn’t take more than a few weeks for our hero to fully appreciate the reign of tolerance: here, no *lettre de cachet*; the writ of Habeas Corpus of 1679 (nobody can be detained in the absence of a court order) and the Bill of Rights of 1689 protected civilians from the monarch’s power. Voltaire met people of different persuasions and could not believe what he heard them say: far from killing each other, Jews, Mahomedans and Christians traded with each other and working together for commercial prosperity. This surprising and remarkable example would often be used by the philosopher throughout his long life.

The island model was definitely admirable. The Frenchman noted every detail and recounted his experiences: the pages he wrote as the days went by resembled a scholarly report. The project of writing a number of ‘Lettres anglaises’ gained ground. The first version was published in 1733 – Voltaire had been back in France for five years – and it contained

twenty-four letters. A twenty-fifth letter was added the following year, and the collection's final title became *Lettres philosophiques*. What was it about? Besides the religious question, Voltaire discussed politics, society and economy. He sang the praises of the innovative British spirit, free from censorship heralded by Bacon (the theorist of experience) as much as by Locke (the theorist of empiricism) and Newton (the theorist of the universal law of gravitation). The last part of the collection looked at literary institutions and writers. This work was, one could say, one of the first manifestoes in the favour of Enlightenment.

According to some critics François-Marie's sojourn in London turned the poet into a philosopher. If slightly exaggerated, the importance of the journey to the spiritual transformation of the young author was beyond doubt. Praising their tolerance, pragmatism and free trade, Voltaire would never view his neighbours living across the Channel in a negative light. Britain showed him gratitude, as we shall see.

The founding father: Theodore Besterman

'The first book I bought with my own money and had bound was a Voltaire, the *Fables*. I loved it so much I immediately knew I'd be a Voltaire enthusiast for the rest of my life. I was 12.'¹

Born on 22 November 1904 in Lodz, Poland, Theodore Besterman left his country for Perfidious Albion in the 1920s. Naturally inquisitive and curious, he worked in parapsychology and soon amassed a considerable fortune. Alongside his professional activities he nurtured his passion: bibliography. The Enlightened connoisseur loved dictionaries and other scientific and artistic works so much that he edited 'dictionaries of dictionaries', 'encyclopaedias of encyclopaedias' and even 'bibliographies of bibliographies', that is to say monumental works in ten, twenty or even fifty volumes. Who did he work with? No one. Theodore Besterman created his *in-quartos* by himself, such was his erudition and knowledge, and perhaps slight eccentricity.

Ever since he was a young boy, this man of means had been inhabited by Voltaire's spirit. Money being no object, he began collecting letters, manuscripts, first editions... in short, anything related to the philosopher. A decision taken by the Unesco (where he worked after World War II) was the final push that made him specialise in eighteenth-century studies: no one in the organisation was willing to support his appeal for the publication of a world bibliography of bibliographies. So be it! Theodore Besterman stormed out and from then on focused exclusively on Voltaire. A new chapter of his life was about to be written. The 1950s were under way.

The villa in Hampstead (a north London suburb) in which the collector's volumes were kept finally became too small. Theodore Besterman was ambitious, he saw his work as a genuine attempt to preserve our cultural inheritance; he needed a venue fit for his project. As the French were not amenable to his objectives (the country was just coming out of war and had other concerns), he turned to Geneva: the Swiss were more responsive to his requests. They even had the perfect place: *Les Délices*, which had once housed Voltaire. It was where he had written his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* following the earthquake on 1 November 1755 that counted over 30,000 victims; it was where the expatriate had witnessed the beginning of the Seven Year War; it was also where he had begun writing *Candide*. *Les Délices* had been the stage of one of the key events in Voltaire's life: natural disasters and armed conflicts triggered a reflection on Fate; cataclysms also led him to mock Pope's or Leibniz's followers' 'Whatever is, is right'. The city of Geneva acquired the vast mansion in 1929 and had it converted into a block of flats. Andrew Brown, former secretary of Theodore Besterman, recounted what happened after that: 'Negotiations were difficult but lead to an agreement according to which Besterman gave his Voltaire collection to the city while the city created a Voltaire Institute and Museum, with an operating budget, at *Les Délices*. Theodore Besterman was to be its

honorary director for life. All was for the best. The building was refurbished, the collections transferred and the Institute opened to the public and academia in 1954.²²

A few years later, some problems arose: Theodore Besterman considered the *Délices*'s collections as 'his own' rather too much... The Genevans became suspicious of Theodore Besterman and decided to prosecute him. The director soon crossed the Channel and reacquainted himself with the realm of Her Majesty Elizabeth II. Authorities issued an international arrest warrant. As extradition didn't exist, Besterman was safe; so all was for the best in the best of all the possible worlds. The story does not end there, however. From 15 to 24 July 1971 the third international congress on the Enlightenment was taking place in Nancy under the presidency of Theodore Besterman himself. On the day before the conference, one of the organisers received a phone call: the Meurthe-et-Moselle prefect wanted to see him in his office, immediately. Once there, long after dusk, the organiser was informed of the dispute. To avoid a scandal, Theodore Besterman was kindly asked to return to Luxembourg. While the inhabitants of the Meurthe-et-Moselle region were sound asleep, a Bentley hastened through the night. The episode is worth its salt. After leaving *Les Délices*, Besterman settled in Thorpe Mandeville, a little village not far from Banbury in Oxfordshire. There he established a Foundation to further advance the work initiated in Geneva.

But let us get back to the editorial work. When the future director settled in *Les Délices* he hired a young secretary, Andrew Brown. Together they undertook several colossal projects: after Voltaire's *carnets* (published in 1952, before the arrival in Geneva), the correspondence got under way (1953-1965). It counted twenty thousand letters divided in three volumes. Theodore Besterman edited the text and annotated it in English. One can only imagine the sheer magnitude of the project. The *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* were published next, a series of monographs and bilingual edited volumes that counts over five hundred titles nowadays. The most considerable task consisted in editing Voltaire's *Œuvres complètes*. What is it exactly? The first scientific and critical edition, that is to say the publication of all the works including their variants, annotated by leading specialists. Theodore Besterman lived to see the first two volumes published. Unfortunately, his health deteriorated and now in his 60s, he considered what was to be his legacy: he bequeathed the foundation to Oxford University and died on 10 November 1976.

The 1980s and 1990s

Following Theodore Besterman's death, Andrew Brown was asked to take charge of the Voltaire Foundation. The new director knew how books were made: his sound technical knowledge would not suffer near-best and he aimed for perfection down to the last detail, so much so that the quality of the volumes was improved. His wife, Ulla Kölving, joined the team. The couple wanted to broaden the Foundation's reach and introduced other famous names such as Montesquieu (for his complete works), Helvétius, Mme de Graffigny (for her correspondence) into the publishing programme. The publication of Voltaire's *Œuvres complètes* continued at the rate of one volume per annum. In the 1980s, the editorial committee envisioned an electronic version of Voltaire's work that would enable simple searches on keywords and phrases. As the books were expensive, Andrew Brown looked for a French supplier. He chose Aux Amateurs de livres who had been supplying libraries and institutes around the world since 1930. However, as Andrew Brown realised rather too late, Aux Amateurs did not sell books within France. As sales were disappointing, he established a publishing house in France to distribute the books, and 'Universitas' was born. Monographs, studies and elaborate nomenclatures were published, such as the *Dictionnaire des journaux 1600-1789* (1991), the *Dictionnaire des constituants 1789-1791* (1991), and *La Face cachée des Lumières: recherche sur les manuscrits philosophiques clandestins de l'âge classique* (1996). At the end of the 1980s, Andrew Brown left the Voltaire Foundation and settled in Ferney where, in 2000, he opened

an International centre for eighteenth-century studies. Nicholas Cronk, a professor of French literature at Oxford University, was then appointed as the new director of 99 Banbury Road.

Since 2000

The Foundation was not financially robust at the turn of the new millennium, being on the verge of bankruptcy. To avert closure, debts had to be cleared. The administrators applied for grants and sought sponsorship from both private and public institutions. Prospective candidates were, however, unforthcoming: who would sponsor the publication of Voltaire's complete works when no one knows how long it will take? To answer that question, Nicholas Cronk named 2018 as the end date of this amazing adventure. The figures make one feel dizzy: the *Œuvres complètes* will count 200 volumes, so to keep up with the schedule the speed of production needed to be multiplied by six, which meant (and means) publishing one new volume every two months. To achieve this target – and it will be achieved, 2018 having become the goal at 99 Banbury Road! – the *Œuvres* will have taken fifty years of labour (1968-2018). 30 000 euros is budgeted for research work for each volume and an electronic version is planned. The challenging rhythm might make one question the scholarly value or the quality of the books. But this is careful and erudite work, beautifully bound on quality paper. Everything is done according to the purest bibliophilic tradition.

It is remarkable that the most ambitious project of a critical edition in French is undertaken outside of France. How can the British success be explained? This is due to a cultural turn in research interests: more attentive to the technical development of a book than its history – as opposed to its French neighbours – Britain developed after 1920 a new field of study called *material bibliography*. This scientific method – somewhat laborious, one might concede – looks at each and every detail that pertains to the physical provenance of a volume. As a result, British bibliographers produced a genuine 'archaeology' of the books analysed. This research tradition is one of the keys to the editorial success of the *Œuvres complètes*.

As proud as it may be, France acknowledges the genius abroad: in 2010 the Voltaire Foundation was awarded the prix Hervé-Deluen by the Académie française in recognition of its work to promote French as an international language.

Nicholas Cronk can boast another achievement: the creation of an electronic database, the Electronic Enlightenment, that digitises eighteenth-century correspondences in French and English as well as those in other languages.³ Voltaire's 20,000 letters are thus now available on line. The multilingual website truly stands at the crossroads between the spirit of the Enlightenment and the twenty-first century.

Is that all there is to say about the Foundation⁴ that employs around 15 people in 2011? Of course not, but as 'the secret to being a bore is to leave nothing out',⁵ it is best to keep certain things back...

¹ René Johannet, 'Aux Délices', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1 Octobre 1955.

² Andrew Brown, 'La Fondation Voltaire de l'Université d'Oxford', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, avril 1994.

³ See the website www.e-enlightenment.com.

⁴ www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk.

⁵ Voltaire, *Sept discours en vers sur l'homme*.