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MADAME DE STAEL

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—Mistress to an age, by Geoffrey H. Buchler



Anne Louise Germaine Necker, the daughter of the illustrious Jacques Necker, Swiss banker and finance minister to Louis XVI, was born in Paris in 1766. Already at a young age she was imposing her brilliant mind, wit and personality, if not her beauty, on the salons of Paris. Evidently her family's social position made it desirable that a match be found before too long. Thus it was that after many fluctuations of heart she married, at 20, Baron Magnus de Stael who aspired to be the future Swedish Ambassador to the Court of France. This match though, like many others, was a marriage of convenience and ended in a formal separation in 1797.

Madame de Stael was essentially and by virtue a great woman. Great by her services to French liberalism, great by the literary inspiration which her work gave to others of similar temperament—those like Lamartine, who exclaimed when she was young, "*j'étais ivre du nom de Mme. de Stael*". In her eyes the world was changing and conscious that society must adopt new forms. She insisted all her life long that those new forms could only survive if men were given freedom. Her demon-

stration of specific points in this doctrine, in particular the necessity for a free literature, has never been bettered even by writers living at times which proved her ideas with more evidence. Moreover, Madame de Stael's supreme service to liberalism and to political science did not reside in literature, but in her own life. It was a prolonged action in which she was prepared to sacrifice her dignity to her ideals of justice and freedom. A temperament of her nature was destined to clash with the imperial authority of Napoleon.

First literary theories

After retreating to Coppet in 1793, Mme. de Stael followed her new companion, Louis de Narbonne, to England and did not return to France until after the Reign of Terror, in 1794. It was then that a brilliant period of her career started. Her "salon" flourished and among several political and literary essays she published "*De l'influence des passions*" (1796) which in time became one of the more important documents of European Romanticism. She began to study the new ideas that were being developed in Germany and read the elderly Swiss critic von Bonstetten, the German philologist Humboldt and above all, the brothers Schlegel. It was Benjamin Constant de Rebecque, however, who influenced her most directly in favour of German culture. Her fluctuating liaison with Constant started in 1794 and lasted the better part of 14 years.

At the beginning of the 1800's the literary and political character of Mme. de Stael's thought became defined. Her literary importance emerged at once in "*De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*" (1800). This complex work was rich in new ideas and new perspectives—new, at least, to France. Later Chateaubriand saw it in a "prospectus of Romanticism". The fundamental theory to her was that a work must express the moral and historical reality, the "*Zeitgeist*" of the nation in which it was conceived. Her two novels "*Delphine*" (1802) and

"*Corinne*" (1807), to some extent illustrate her literary theories, particularly so by showing the fundamental solitary feelings of the intellectual woman, reflecting the conflicts of her own life between a thirst for fame and a longing for human affection. It further became quite apparent that as time wore on, Mme. de Stael began to influence political opinion seriously and was regarded by contemporary Europe as the personal enemy of Napoleon. In forming the nucleus of a liberal resistance she exposed herself dangerously and was exiled from Paris in 1803 on what today may be termed as political grounds.

The Campaign against Napoleon

She had, in fact, openly inspired Benjamin Constant to oppose, in the "*Tribunat*" a motion put forward by Napoleon; she had opposed his life tenure of the Consulate, and criticised the Concordat of 1802. She had alluded to Napoleon's suppression of free speech in the preface to "*Delphine*". For these offences she was exiled from Paris. Had she desired to be a heroine, this was the cue for a proud and silent withdrawal to Coppet. But she was less interested in herself than in life. An act of injustice had been committed against her and she set out to protect society against such action.

In spite of everything, Mme. de Stael stood up on many occasions in front of Napoleon, asking him to rescind his sentence of exile; but he threw her off each time with an insulting refusal. This sufficed to make her appear even more ridiculous. Like her portrayal of Delphine, she was extremely sensitive to public disappropriation: the knowledge that her cause was just cannot have made her humiliation disappear. So, year after year, she repudiated decorum in favour of stubborn integrity and went on proving that Napoleon was a tyrant. Her movements were restricted to a narrow area around Coppet in which even her visitors found themselves closely watched and subject to severe penalties if they

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ventured to visit her too often. Hardly had she decided to publish her new book "*De l'Allemagne*" (1810) in Paris, that Napoleon imposed a harsh censorship on it. In turn Mme. de Stael's hot tempered letter to the Emperor only succeeded in having her exiled permanently from France and her book irrevocably condemned. Its defence of democracy was apparently quite "un-French". So, eventually obliged to flee from Coppet to the dubious refuge of a Europe which seemed likely to fall at any moment into the hands of her enemy, she had to suffer many indignities.

The return to Coppet

This is surely a heroic story. Its very quality might have been forgotten in the comfortable 19th century, when, as peace grew in prosperity, the Napoleonic Wars began to appear like a huge sporting event, and anybody who attacked his native legend was no better than the most castigated of heretics. Pierre Cordey's recently published book, *Mme. de Stael et Benjamin Constant sur les bords du Léman*, however, clarifies in seemingly uncomplicated terms the point that Mme. de Stael knew very well what she was doing. His book creates a handsome picture of her historic role, and presents a vivid account of a personality which provided the spark that touched off a fire in all who knew her, often to provoke an explosion of rage, often to dispel darkness by a display of intellectual brilliance.

Here at last was the setting in which Benjamin Constant fitted so perfectly, and surely any close perusal of Mme. de Stael's life would be bare and incomplete without him. In truth, her attachment to him became at times almost obsessive, restricting his movements and eventually taking a complete hold on his freedom. His "*Journaux Intimes*" convey quite explicitly,

through numerous essays aimed at self-revelation, his yearnings for many other women; a craving and desire that reads clearly between the lines of "*Adolphe*" and "*Cecile*" and which found a hold in reality with Charlotte von Hardenberg, Madame de Charrière and Juliette Récamier. It is not that Mme. de Stael lacked an amiable character. She possessed a violent temper, but it was balanced by many virtues, including the power to forgive injuries, rare in that vengeful age. But she was too clever, too energetic, and above all, too significant. In the sex-war of that epoch nobody could blame a man for not wanting to possess Napoleon's chief enemy!

Yet one would like to argue on the nature of Constant's relations with Mme. de Stael. It is certain that for the greater part of their association he was not her lover in the physical sense. If all she wanted was "*le langage d'amour*" it must be remembered that there were two things which Mme. de Stael dreaded above all else. She was afraid of marriage and she was afraid of having an illegitimate child. After her separation from de Stael in 1797, her lovers included at first Narbonne and then Adolphe Ribbing, a Swedish nobleman banished from his country, in addition to Constant, who in the formative years of his liaison was very likely the father of her daughter Albertine. But still, a paradoxical situation vis-à-vis Constant remained well in the foreground. Mme. de Stael was, as her whole career shows, an obstinate woman who would not accept defeat. The way she was living was the only way she could live, there was no alternative. Constant's final escape from her grasp is thus less dramatic: it was foreseen.

The journey to forget

By 1811, Mme. de Stael had realised that her only passionate lovers, Narbonne, Ribbing, and now Constant, had all deserted her. In spite of this she

continued to make the best of life and emerged from her exile to travel eastwards on to Germany with its vivid memories of Goethe and Schiller. Further still to Moscow, to meet Czar Alexander 1st and then at last by way of Sweden and Bernadotte, to England.

When she returned to France, Mme. de Stael alarmed her friends by her physical change. And yet her Paris salons never remained empty. The Emperor Alexander 1st came to consult her, Wellington listened to her, Canning, Bernadotte, Talleyrand — all of Europe gathered around her. She could finally play a political role. Withdrawing once again to Coppet, she married John Rocca, a young Swiss her junior by almost twenty years and to whom she had been secretly sworn since 1811. Rocca, in fact, was seriously ill, suffering from tuberculosis acquired in the Peninsular War. As for Mme. de Stael, too many emotions had taxed her. She had no illusions about her condition: "I am very ill", she already admitted to her close friend Mme. Récamier in January 1817. Shortly afterwards she collapsed whilst at a ball, struck down by a cerebral haemorrhage which left her partly paralysed. Mme. de Stael still retained all her former lucidity, but when Chateaubriand paid her a visit at the rue Royale she felt that her last hours were drawing near. "I have loved my God, my father and liberty", such was her farewell to Chateaubriand. She had always been religious. To be sure, she had not practised morals based, as said one of her characters, "on the strict observance of the established rules", but she believed in the immortality of the soul. "Another life! Another life! That is my hope", she had made Corinne exclaim.

After a few more weeks of illness and on July 14, 1817, Mme. de Stael closed her eyes for ever. She was faithfully taken to Coppet by her son Auguste, the Duc de Broglie and Benjamin Constant. At length after a moving ceremony she was buried there as she

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had instructed, alongside the tombs of her father and mother.

Chateaubriand's tribute

Many years hence, in 1832, two of her once famed group, Chateaubriand and Mme. Récamier, went down again to Coppet to pay a last tribute to Mme. de Stael's resting-place. Chateaubriand after a time seated himself on a bench, his eyes looking both at the Alps and Lake Geneva. He recalled Lord Byron, Voltaire, Rousseau: "*It was on the threshold of Mme. de Stael's tomb that so many illustrious dead came to mind. They seemed to be seeking their kindred shade in order to soar to heaven with her. If ever I have felt both the vanity and the value of fame and life, it was at the entrance of the silent wood, dark and unknown, where rests the one who had shone so brightly and who had enjoyed so much fame*".

"How sad and long a story is life!" wrote Mme. de Stael to Mme Récamier in 1814. This life that had been so agitated and filled with unrealised hopes, with passion and tears, which had always been dominated by enthusiasm for an ideal and which had always shone with kindness, with generosity—this life, like a sad and long story, was ended! All the charm of the cool evenings behind the doomed Jura mountains whose ember sky drew the silver paths of the moon on the ripple-free lake, all this charm was now lost for ever. To the turmoil, to the fame that had surrounded this stormy life, ringed a hollow silence . . . Alone a bird was singing.

COMMENT

THE OSWALD REPORT

National Service clearly plays a more important role in Swiss life than in Great Britain. This is no wonder. Whereas Her Majesty's Forces have the greatest difficulty in maintaining the level of their effectives at a bare 200,000, every able Swiss youth has to serve his stint in the Army. The Swiss Army can therefore be said to be a part of the nation. By its militia aspect and by its claims on the active life of the average citizen it has become as universally shared as holidays and work.

The Army may not perhaps be separated from the nation in practise, it has however become increasingly divorced in spirit from that part of the nation with which it is most directly concerned: the young. In an age of increased freedom, class equality and permissiveness, the Army's etiquette and code of conduct have remained as fossilised as ever. The constraint of saluting superiors in a marked gesture of outward servility, the prohibition of wearing hair overlapping one's bonnet, the repeated duty of announcing oneself, such were the most blatant anachronisms of the Army's enforced behaviour. Not only did these strictures go against the times, they were useless from the point of view of the army's real purpose, which was to be a combat force.

The commission of officers and

Army instructors presided by Dr. Oswald has proposed to brush all this away. It has just published a report, sanctioned by the Head of the Military Department, which contains the guidelines to a complete revolution in the Army.

The Commission has drawn heavily on the Israeli and Swedish examples. Its central theme is that an Army should exist to fight and train its enrollees for combat. All the mumbo-jumbo which is not directly useful to the creation of good warriors should be done away with. Tradition should be sacrificed to efficiency and relevance. The Oswald Report is not primarily inspired by a dislike of the traditional idiosyncracies of Swiss Army conduct, it only purports to be realistic. A rookie thrown from a discotheque world into four months of basic training is not necessarily able to understand the meaning of insistent drills, maniacal cleanliness and punctilious order, especially if these are applied as punishments. Nothing will ever antagonise the youth of today against the Army with more efficiency.

The Oswald Report means to foster the goodwill of the young by making sensible recommendations. The Army will never produce a good fighting force if it is loathed in its very essence by an important proportion of recruits. The time had therefore come to ingratiate them. Among the new usages which the Report will introduce, the address to superiors will be simplified. The French-speaking recruits will no longer have to say "*à vos ordres*"

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