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MISTRESS TO A REVOLUTIONARY AGE

By Geoffrey Buchler Ph.D



Madame de Staël by Mlle E. de Godefroy at Versailles from the painting by Gerard. Photo by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.

CERTAIN Swiss Observer readers may recall, amongst the numerous biographical portraits that have been penned in our journal, one particular article on the turbulent life of Mme. de Staël. Resulting from the stimulated interest created at the time, Dr. Buchler promised at some future date to re-apply his research in that field, to provide for our further enjoyment. To be fair, he has been drawn again to Mme. de Staël for a variety of other reasons. Perhaps it has been an amalgam of meeting such scholars in the field of the early Romantic Movement as M. Pierre Cordey, Miss Alison Fairlie and M. Jean-Réné Bory, or perhaps it was the immediate association of ideas linked with the death of Mme. de Staël on Bastille Day, or the recent mysterious assassination of Prince Jean de Broglie, whose great-grandfather married Mme. de Staël's daughter, Albertine. Whatever other reason may have led to this further inspiration, it might just be the need to ally Mme. de Staël more closely with the period of the French Revolution, that has been the author's main motive in re-creating this mistress to an age. Our sincere thanks are due to Dr. Buchler for this meticulously researched article.

W.G.S.

FEW epochs in history stir the imagination so much as the French Revolution and the ensuing period dominated by the figure of Napoleon. Few personalities so faithfully reflect the spirit of their age as does that of Germaine Necker, Madame de Staël.

In one astonishing woman may be

observed the aspirations, convictions and disappointments of a society shaken to its foundations, rudely torn from its past and hurled into an uncertain future. If the declared purpose of the Revolution was to free mankind in general, it was equally Mme. de Staël's intention to liberate herself from the confines of

society, whatever its form of government. Thus, all her activities – literary, political and amatory – tended to be fused into a concerted whole, designed to move others to her way of thinking.

Paradoxically, she was a voice of moderation in a tumult of violent extremes, and few women have employed such passionate measures, as she did, to achieve such temperate aims.

Though born in Paris in 1766, Germaine Necker was of Swiss Protestant background which placed a certain distance between her and her French contemporaries. Her father, the renowned Genevese banker Jaques Necker, occupied the key position in the French government as Minister of Finance during two critical periods in the early stages of the Revolution.

Germaine venerated her indulgent father to the same extent that she secretly detested her domineering mother. During her formative years, this precocious girl was exposed to a bewildering interplay of emotions and influences, ranging from her mother's frequent nervous outbursts to lengthy philosophical discussions in the family home with such famous figures as Diderot, d'Alembert and Gibbon.

Largely on account of her father's considerable personal fortune, Germaine was thought a good marital *catch*, which more than compensated for any lack of physical beauty. As the family insisted on a Protestant husband, the field of potential suitors was somewhat restricted in Catholic France. When she was seventeen, the possibility of an alliance with William Pitt, the son of Lord Chatham, was considered, but the future Prime Minister eluded the marital net since Germaine did not wish to be separated from her father.

Besides, she had fallen in love with the Swedish Count Fersen, only to find that he in turn was in love with the Queen, Marie Antoinette. This early disappointment was to have tragic results when Germaine turned to Fersen's companion, Eric-Magnus de Staël, some seventeen years her senior.

The marriage was celebrated in 1786, and now at the age of twenty Germaine was, at long last, free from her mother. Though she never showed much affection towards her husband, and even less fidelity, she was now the wife of the Swedish Ambassador with added *entrée* to the glittering society of the remaining years of the *ancien régime*.

Later in life Germaine was to write: "... the greatest happiness for a woman is to have married a man whom she respects as much as she loves, who through his mind and character is superior to her and who decides everything for her."



Talleyrand, the French diplomat and statesman, who was one of Mme de Staël's many lovers, from a portrait by Gerard. Photo by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.

Given the undemanding nature of her husband, such an idealised situation was impossible. Undisciplined, vain and sensuous, Mme. de Staël was incapable of regarding a relationship between herself and any man as based on equality, whether he be lover, political adversary or literary acquaintance.

Gifted with a brilliant mind and eloquent means to express it, she was the unquestioned arbiter of her *salon*. Furthermore, as the daughter of a statesman who was much discussed, Germaine exploited her influential position to support the moderate reform policies of her father. Her political philosophy was a liberal one, favouring a constitutional monarchy modelled on the Westminster pattern, though taking into account French traditions and national characteristics. So, throughout her life the world of ideas and their impassioned advocacy were always to overshadow the duties of wife and mother.

Of all the eye-witness accounts of the first months of the Revolution (from July 1789), that of Mme. de Staël is the

most vivid if not the most objective. Her open liaisons with Talleyrand and Louis de Narbonne and her many connections with men in high position made it difficult to remain a passive bystander; her passionate character made it impossible. During what became known as the *October Days* she was to witness and record the direct confrontation between a vengeful army of six thousand women, and the royal family at Versailles. Though Marie Antoinette bravely faced the mob, thereby gaining their grudging admiration, the royal family was forced to return to Paris. Once in Paris and, in spite of her personal dislike of the Queen, Mme. de Staël continued to loyally remain at her side.

Women from every social class played an important role in the early years of the Revolution, and many who had participated in the march on Versailles were later to become the grim *tricoteuses* at the foot of the guillotine.

Also of importance were the ladies who founded the brilliant *salons* that were an essential part of pre-revolutionary France: such as Mme. de Condorcet and Mme. Roland who lent style and wit to their immediate entourage, besides being women of considerable insight and knowledge.

With the coming storm, frivolity and scandal increasingly gave way to discussions on politics and weightier subjects. "Never", wrote Mme. de Staël in retrospect, "was society at once so scintillating and so serious as during the first three or four years of the Revolution."

For Germaine, however, the world of the *salon* soon began to crumble. Having failed to find a husband who might have dominated her, Germaine, shortly after her marriage, entered into an affair with Talleyrand (then Bishop of Autun). During this period the casual affair was hardly the exception and more the rule.

Mme. de Staël was eventually to give birth to four children, each, in all probability, having a different father.

Thus, to Mme. de Staël love and life were synonymous and, therefore, it was the artificial institution of marriage, often arranged against one's own free will, that was immoral. Enthusiasm and emotion

were the driving forces that produced creative work.

And so, the final section of her best-known work, *De l'Allemagne*, is devoted to the virtues of enthusiasm which the author views as the source of all true love and religion. Whatever outward disappointments or defeats she was to suffer – and there were many – it was this personal faith that enabled her to overcome all obstacles and challenges.

Her affair with Talleyrand, soon to leave the Church for higher worldly goals as a diplomat and politician, could not last long – given their respective characters and ambitions.

Her first real lover was Louis, comte de Narbonne, commonly regarded as an illegitimate son of Louis XV, notable as the Minister for War, who had gained office by the influence of the moderates (the Brissotin faction) and was soon to be ousted in March 1792.

As the lover of Mme. de Staël, no sooner had Narbonne become faithfully established – faithful being a very relative term with Germaine – than the liberal aristocrat, Mathieu de Montmorency, appeared on the scene. In these and all the amatory matters to follow, Mme. de Staël was the leading partner, the high-priestess of love who decreed the obeisance of others.

Napoleon's wrath

Love, to Germaine, resulted from spontaneous enthusiasm and, therefore, was unlikely to develop into the alliance of a lifetime. It seems all the stranger, then, that she should be so extremely reluctant to relinquish her ex-lovers, when passion had run its course. However, Germaine was here the victim of her passionate nature, complicated by awareness of her own intellectual superiority, yet desperately requiring a male audience to gratify her need for self-dramatisation.

Only Paris, in a sense, offered her a role on the centre of the stage, with men of the calibre of Talleyrand, Lafayette and Barras, all of whom she attempted to manipulate for her own ends. This, perhaps, included the most famous Frenchman of them all, Napoléon Bona-



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parte, but he chose to elude her embrace and in so doing was soon to feel her dangerous enmity, and she his.

That Germaine survived the Revolution at all was a credit to her courage and tenacity. Paris in the summer of 1792 had lost the idealism of '89; the city now abounded with violence and terror. On the 10th August the Swiss Guard, defending the royal family at the Tuileries, was massacred by the infuriated and attacking mob. Germaine then set about the task of rescuing the King and Queen, but this proved to be impossible, as even the ultra-royalists were soon to find. Narbonne's life, as an aristocrat, was also threatened: he quickly fled to England under a false passport.

Characteristically, Mme. de Staël remained behind in Paris to still help others escape the September Massacres, which was soon followed by the abolition of the monarchy and the imprisonment of Louis XVI in the Temple.

It was now only with the greatest difficulty that Mme. de Staël, seven months' pregnant with Narbonne's child, avoided being hacked to pieces. However, after several harrowing experiences, she made her way to the family home at Coppet on the northern shores of Lake Geneva, where she was reunited with her father and mother. No sooner was Albert born, on 20th November, than Germaine was anxious to leave and rejoin Talleyrand, Montmorency and Narbonne in England, arriving there at the same time as the news of Louis XVI's execution (21st January, 1793).

A dazzling hostess

Life in England, in Surrey, had a scintillance of its own, presided over and dominated by the presence of Mme. de Staël. The daytime was devoted to literary research and writing, as well as to the preparation of the spontaneous *bons mots* that were to dazzle the company in the evening. Yet, amongst the émigré group, it was apparent that Narbonne's love for her had all but burnt itself out. So, despite being received by Pitt and Fox, Germaine was shrewd enough to realise that her welcome in London society was polite at best — with reluctance she set out for Switzerland again, meeting her husband for the first time in over a year.

Possessed of tremendous vitality, the first task Mme. de Staël set herself was to plead for the life of Marie Antoinette, whom she regarded as a woman persecuted on the flimsiest of evidence. As Christopher Herold points out in his life of Mme. de Staël; Germaine, a foreigner herself, must have felt some emotional kinship with the unfortunate Austrian-born Queen whose main crime was that of having interfered in a man's world.

Failing, Germaine turned her energies to the rescue of several minor figures from the effects of the Reign of Terror. Meanwhile Narbonne, who had ignored numerous entreaties to rejoin Germaine,

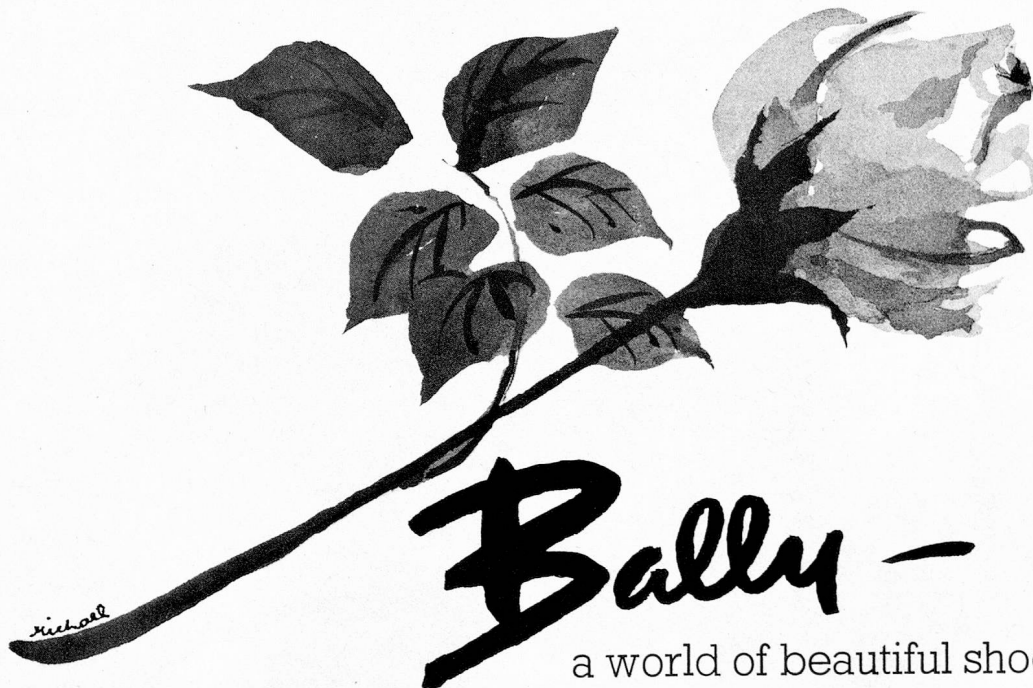
eventually obeyed his mistress' summons only to discover that the Swedish Count Ribbling had supplanted him in her affections. So, a second affair had come to an end — but a third was about to begin.

In September 1794 began a liaison with a Swiss compatriot, Benjamin Constant, that was to have a profound influence on Mme. de Staël. For the next seventeen years the celebrated politician and polemist, and the author of *Adolphe*, was to intertwine his life, hopes and emotions with a woman incapable of compromise. The direct literary effect that Benjamin had on Germaine's writings is difficult to assess, though the power of his intellect and lucidity of style were, no doubt, very positive forces.

Considering his chaotic youth and complete lack of self-discipline — not to mention his compulsive gambling and wenching — it is all the more remarkable that he had anything in common with the Swedish Ambassador's wife. At first repelled by Benjamin's unprepossessing approach, Germaine was quick to appreciate his political acumen, helped no doubt by their common Swiss Protestant background.

Opium addiction

Unfortunately, it was Benjamin who introduced Germaine to the destructive pleasures of opium, which was also widely used as a pain-killer; her addiction to the drug was not to leave her until her



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death. Another noticeable side-effect of Benjamin's presence was his theatrical behaviour which threatened, at times, even to outdo Germaine's best impromptu performances.

Having failed to seduce her in the first few weeks — she succumbed later, needless to add — Benjamin decided to play the principal role in a death-bed scene of operatic intensity until Germaine entered the bedroom to put a stop to the nonsense. This was the first of many equally dramatic scenes between the two of them.

The next few years were crowded with personal disappointments, punctuated by rebuffs and periods of exile from the French capital and, on occasion, from France itself.

Talleyrand, now Minister of Foreign Affairs — largely due to Germaine's political and financial support — had failed to help in her hour of need. Her husband, valuable mainly because of his diplomatic rank, chose this inopportune moment to lose his position as Swedish Ambassador whilst incurring further debts.

To complicate matters even more, Germaine gave birth to a daughter, Albertine, on 8th June, 1797, Benjamin in all probability being the father. Also around this time, Mme. de Staël made a determined effort to ingratiate herself with the rising star, Napoléon Bonaparte.

The historic encounter between what Germaine considered to be the greatest man and woman of the age took place on 6th December, 1797: Napoleon reacted coldly. When, on a later occasion, she pointedly asked who was the greatest woman living or dead, Napoléon replied, "the one that has had the most children".

The meeting was a disaster. To her remark that "genius has no sex" and that, therefore, men and women of superior intelligence were co-equals, Napoléon was later to reply with a code of laws that would set back women's civil rights by

over a century (article 312 of the *Code Napoléon*).

Thus, faced with financial problems, harassment from government spies, and the failing health of her husband, Germaine decided to return to Coppet. In typical fashion she sought solace by turning her energies to creative writing, the result being the publication in 1800 of *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*.

This complex work was rich in new ideas and new perspectives — new, at least, to France. Later, Chateaubriand saw in it "a prospectus of romanticism". The fundamental theory 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 by so showing the 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 Staël seriously began to influence political opinion and was regarded by contemporary Europe as a personal enemy of Napoléon. In forming the nucleus of a liberal resistance, she exposed herself dangerously and was, therefore, exiled from Paris in 1803.

She had, in fact, openly inspired Benjamin Constant to oppose a motion put forward by Napoléon; she had opposed his life tenure of the Consulate, and criticised the Concordat of 1802. She had alluded to Napoléon's suppression of free speech in the preface to *Delphine*.

Into exile

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 from such action.

Like her portrayal of Delphine, she was extremely sensitive to public disapprobation: the knowledge that her cause was just could not have assuaged her humiliation. So, year after year, she repudiated decorum in favour of integrity and went on proving that Napoléon 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 ventured to visit her too often. Hardly had she decided to publish her new book *De l'Allemagne* (1810) in Paris, after great co-operation from the German scholar, August Wilhelm Schlegel (who was added to Germaine's entourage in the guise of tutor to her children), than Napoléon imposed a harsh censorship on it.

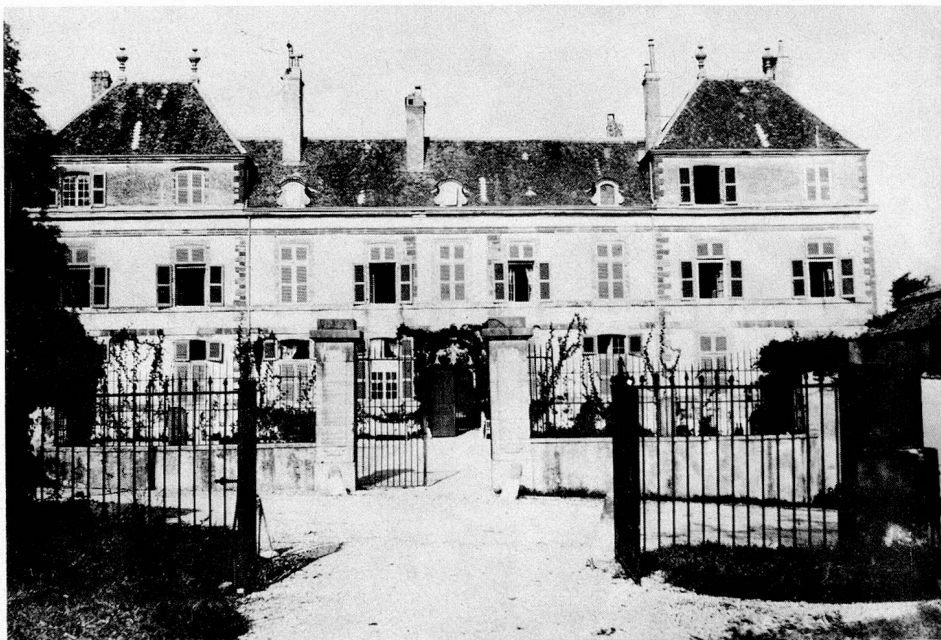
In turn, Mme. de Staël's hot-tempered letter to the Emperor only succeeded in having her exiled permanently from France and her book irrevocably condemned. Its defence of democracy was apparently quite *un-French*. So, she was eventually obliged even to flee from Coppet to the dubious refuge of a Europe which seemed likely to fall at any moment into the hands of her enemy.

This is surely a heroic story. Its very quality might have been forgotten in the early years of the nineteenth century, when, as peace grew into prosperity, the Napoleonic Wars began to appear like a gigantic *sporting event*, and anyone who attacked his heritage was no better than the most castigated of heretics. Pierre Cordey's book, *Mme. de Staël et Benjamin Constant sur les bords du Léman*, furthermore, paints in seemingly uncomplicated terms, 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 Staël's life would be bare and incomplete without him.

Obsession

In truth, her attachment became almost obsessive at times, restricting his movements and eventually taking a complete hold on his freedom. His *Journaux Intimes* convey quite explicitly his yearning for many other women; a craving and desire that also emerges between the lines of *Adolphe* and *Cécile*, and which found an ultimate hold with reality in Charlotte von Hardenberg, Madame de Charrière and Juliette Récamier. It is not that Germaine lacked



Coppet, Mme de Staël's home on the shores of Lake Geneva. Photo by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.

an amiable character; she even possessed a violent temper, but it was balanced by a galaxy of virtues including the power to forgive injuries, rare in that vengeful age.

Yet, although she was too clever, too energetic, and above all, too significant a character, one can argue about the nature of Constant's relationship with Mme. de Staël; for it is certain that during the greater part of their association he was not her lover in the physical sense.

Fear of marriage

If all she wanted was *le langage d'amour* it must be remembered that there were two things which Mme. de Staël dreaded above all else. She was afraid of marriage and she was afraid of having an illegitimate child. The latter notwithstanding, Germaine's private life was, to say the least, episodic: her list of passionate lovers extraordinary and, as Constant was to find out, the way she was living was the only way she could live: there was no alternative. Constant's final escape from her grasps was thus less dramatic: it was foreseen.

In fact, it was only after Germaine had left for Vienna, with Schlegel, that Benjamin found the courage to join Charlotte von Hardenberg, his fiancée of long standing. Benjamin, however, was thoroughly tired of the woman "whose iron hand has enchained me for ten years" and, though the news of his secret marriage produced a final emotional outburst from Germaine, the worst of the violent confrontations were over.

Now, at last, having failed to soften Napoléon's heart, Mme. de Staël was determined to make Coppet the intellec-

tual *Mecca* of Europe. If she was refused access to Paris, well then, Paris would come to her on the shores of Lake Geneva. Here Germaine ruled supreme, presiding over an admiring audience of *litterati* including the historian Sismondi, the mystic writer Zacharias Werner, the virginal Madame Récamier and the celebrated Chateaubriand. Germaine now became a literary Napoléon, issuing imperious commands to her guests assembled around the table. It was she who decided whether the topic for discussion would be political, cultural or merely amusing, or whether a scene was to be declaimed from some classical tragedy.

Notwithstanding her theatrical posturing and such witticisms as Byron's, "she thought like a man, but alas! she felt like a woman", her mind was one of the most incisive and scintillating of her age. It is to Mme. de Staël that we owe much of our understanding of the period.

The final years of her life revealed little diminution in her vitality, and at the age of forty-four she entered into her last serious love affair with a twenty-three-year-old veteran of the Peninsular War. Jean Rocca, a young Swiss, was frail in physique and certainly no intellectual match for his mistress.

However, he remained loyal to Germaine to the end, apparently deeply in love with her. From this union was born Germaine's fourth child. Still, she continued to travel whilst in exile, and in 1812 by way of Germany, with its vivid memories of Goethe and Schiller, she voyaged further east to Moscow, to meet Czar Alexander I and then at last by way of Sweden and Bernadotte, to England.

When she returned to France, Mme. de Staël alarmed her friends by her physical change; and yet her Paris *salons* never remained empty. The Emperor Alexander I 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, in 1816, Jean Rocca to whom she had been secretly sworn since 1811. Rocca, in fact, was already seriously ill, suffering from tuberculosis and as for Mme. de Staël, too many emotional upheavals had finally taken its toll.

Very ill

She had no illusions about her condition: "I am very ill", she 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 Staël 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 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, on 14th July, 1817 — Bastille Day — Mme. de



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Staël 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 had instructed, alongside the tomb of her father.

Many of us still ask of what importance is Mme. de Staël to us today? The answer is as a writer, not very much; none of her works is read in its entirety, a few pages of *De la Littérature* and *De l'Allemagne* appearing perhaps in anthologies for the edification of students. But easy though it is to criticise her on personal grounds as being vain, self-centred and hysterical, what it is not easy to do – indeed impossible – is to ignore the one woman, more than any other, who summed up the aspirations of her age. Whatever her faults, Germaine was a shrewd realist, fully aware that her contemporaries were adamantly opposed to conceding any significant social rights to women.

In fact, as a group they gained very little from the Revolution except the right of divorce and more equitable inheritance laws, and even these modest advances were soon lost after the Bourbon restoration. Even though it would be inaccurate to claim that Germaine bent her considerable energies towards the lot of womankind in general, her courageous example served notice that intelligence and ability were equally divided between the sexes. In an age noted for enthusiasm and brilliance, no light outshone that of Germaine Necker, Mme. de Staël.

What more lasting epitaph could the world bestow than the tribute paid many years later, in 1832, by two of her once-famed group, Chateaubriand and Mme. Récamier.

Again at Coppet beside her resting-place and with their eyes fixed on Lake Geneva and the mountains beyond, they recalled Lord Byron, Voltaire and Rousseau: in the words of Chateaubriand – “It was on the threshold of Mme. de Staël’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 Staël 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 domed 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, reigned a hollow silence. . . . Alone a bird was singing.

ROMANSH IS STILL SPOKEN HERE

THE United Kingdom is currently labouring through a devolution argument, an argument that threatens to be long and sometimes bitter. But the argument about the use of minority languages is much older with Wales probably making its voice felt more than the rest. The Welsh Language Society is an active and militant body trying its hardest to establish Welsh as the first language of the Principality. In some areas the members go to great lengths to achieve their aims. On a recent visit to Caernarvon I was surprised to see that public notices and road signs originally produced in both languages had had the English versions erased or obliterated. Generally this idiosyncrasy does not matter overmuch but there were instances when the action of these zealots was downright dangerous. I saw a sign warning of an extremely dangerous bend in the road and another on a high-voltage electricity sub-station on both of which the English text had been removed.

As a believer in the encouragement of the use of minority languages I support the campaign to rejuvenate Welsh but deplore irresponsible action such as that described above.

Equally I am a keen supporter of the campaign to keep alive and indeed revive interest in the use of Romansh in Switzerland. I was particularly delighted to see that it appears on the new banknotes. My favourite holiday spot is a remote corner of Graubünden where Romansh is still very much alive. During one visit there I was privileged to meet and to play cards with a local teacher actively engaged in protecting this charming little bit of our Swiss heritage.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I have pleasure in publishing an article on the subject which appeared in the 15th September edition of The Swiss American Review. Our thanks to the publishers and to the author, Mr. Peter Tonge of The Christian Science Monitor.

“If you want to learn more about Romansh, go up the Surselva valley to Disentis.”

So next morning, as a strengthening sun brushed a few remaining tentacles of mist from off the mountainside, I caught the early train for Disentis. The ride up the narrow-gauge line takes little more than an hour, rising steadily to where the retreating snows of spring seem only a stone’s throw away.

Today the Surselva, and a few other valleys in the dramatically beautiful Grisons, are the last enclaves of a language that once predominated throughout the eastern half of present-day Switzerland. It is the oldest of Switzerland’s four national languages – the original Raetian tongue (part Celtic) which was latinised when the Romans invaded the area almost 2,000 (15 B.C.) years ago.

Today, only 55,000 people consider Romansh their mother tongue. German, “the language of bread” as the Romansh themselves readily concede, continues to make steady inroads. And English, of course, is taught in schools throughout Switzerland. But Romansh won’t give away easily.

Four dialects of the language have developed in the centuries since the surrounding sea of German languages cut off one Romansh enclave from another. “We understand each other, but only with a lot of goodwill,” one Disentis resident explains.

Still, it is that kind of goodwill and popular sentiment throughout Switzerland which are increasingly supporting a revival of Romansh. The federal government subsidises the publishing of Romansh literature and school books in all four dialects. A dictionary-cum-encyclopedia dealing with all aspects of the Romansh language and culture also is being compiled. “We are up to letter F,”

says Dr. Hans Stricker, one of three lexicographers currently involved in the project. Work on the dictionary, which began in 1900, is likely to go on for at least another 35 years.

One word in the dictionary is “alp”. That is a Raetian word, preceding the Roman influence. It means mountain or a high place where cattle are sent to graze in summer. That, says Dr. Stricker, is one Romansh word that all the world knows.

At the thousand-year-old Disentis abbey, Father Ambrosias – who, like Dr. Stricker, is not Romansh – explains why it is important to preserve the language. “The Swiss cultural house is a mountain hut with four windows – German, French, Italian and Romansh,” he says. “Close one window and the hut will be that much darker.”

Father Ambrosias is confident that won’t happen soon.

Recently tourism also has had a stabilising effect on Romansh. The increase of summer and winter resorts in the area has provided new job opportunities and stemmed somewhat the flow of young Romansh out of the valley.

Doris Candinas’s experience is a case in point. Miss Candinas, who runs the Office of Tourism, says the town used to be a summer resort with a tourist office that opened for one month only. Then, in 1970, a new cable car brought skiers by the thousand to the area. Now Disentis plays host to visitors year-round and Miss Candinas keeps the office open full-time. “I might have left if this job had not opened up,” she comments.

Spinoff from the tourist trade appears to benefit the whole community. Indeed, many villages in the region now seem to enjoy the best of both worlds – the beauty, peace, and tranquillity of the countryside, with adequate salaries and most of the comforts of a city.