

INTRODUCTION



J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur

(1735-1813)

Crèvecoeur, aptly named (heartbreak), wrote the first major work of pastoralism in American literature, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), which is compatible in some respects with *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784-5) by Thomas Jefferson, who published his *Notes* first in France. Crèvecoeur the Frenchman loved his life as an American farmer so much he opposed the American Revolution because he feared it would lead to new laws that would spoil the paradise of rural America. His *Letters* is the earliest influential definition of (1) the American; (2) the idea of America; (3) America as a symbol; (4) and the cultural myth of the American Adam and Eve in the New World Garden.

BIOGRAPHY

Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur was born in France, had a classical education from the Jesuits at the College of du Mont--in Latin, rhetoric, mathematics and theology. He rebelled against the theology and became deistic like the young Franklin and like Jefferson. In 1755 he joined a French regiment in the St. Lawrence Valley of North America and for the next four years was a soldier. During the French and Indian War he took part in the assault on Fort William Henry at Lake George in 1757, the battle Cooper dramatizes in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). He was wounded in the battle of 1759 in which Montcalm lost Canada for France. Afterward he surrendered his military commission, emigrated to America, changed his name to J. Hector St. John and entered New York City in a spirit comparable to that of Benjamin Franklin entering Philadelphia 36 years before.

He became a traveling surveyor who journeyed from Nova Scotia and Vermont throughout the colonies down to Virginia, perhaps even to Bermuda and Jamaica. In 1767 he joined a surveying and exploring party that ventured west over the Appalachians and penetrated "the great wilderness." They went down the Ohio River to St. Louis, up the Mississippi to the Great Lakes at present-day Chicago and returned to New York via the Mohawk Valley where Crèvecoeur visited the Oneida Indians. In 1769 he married a member of a wealthy Tory family of Westchester and settled on land he named Pine Hill, near Goshen in New York State. He differentiates himself from his James the farmer by setting *Letters* in Pennsylvania.

NEW EDEN

Crèvecoeur and his wife had three children and made such a success of their farm that he considered it a paradise on earth--until the American Revolution in 1776. His new Eden was threatened by two counterforces: (1) hostile Indian raids from the Wilderness and (2) antagonism from his patriotic neighbors,

who turned against Tories. Crèvecoeur had divided sympathies: His wife's family was loyal to the British crown and he himself feared the effects of the Revolution, while at the same time his vision of an ideal agrarian society depended on American Independence.

REVOLUTIONARY WAR

He made plans to escape to France and take legal steps necessary to ensure that his children would inherit the modest family estate. In 1778 he left his family under protection of friends, slipped into New York City and got captured by the British. He was thrown into prison, his health suffered and he had what today would be called a nervous breakdown. Finally he escaped to Europe in 1780 and sold his *Letters* in 1781 to the publishers of Samuel Johnson. After their publication in 1782, he came back to New York City in 1783 as French consul. To Rochefoucauld he wrote, "If I had but 200 pounds income, I would return to cultivating my land and my friends, and he who wanted it could become the consul."

PARADISE LOST

Then news reached him that his wife had been killed in an Indian raid and his farm burned to the ground. His children had been rescued and taken in by a Bostonian, who returned a favor of hospitality some Bostonians had once received from Crèvecoeur when they were shipwrecked on the coast of France. Crèvecoeur returned to France with his children in 1790 and never saw America again.

Michael Hollister (2015)

