

MONTESQUIEU

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Montesquieu by Albert Sorel

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ALBERT SOREL

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Great French Writers

MONTESQUIEU

BY

ALBERT SOREL

Translated by

GUSTAVE MASSON, B.A. UNIV. GALLIC.,

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GREAT FRENCH WRITERS.

ORDER OF PUBLICATION :—

- 1.—*MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ* (with Portrait) By GASTON BOISSIER (French Academy). Translated by H. L. WILLIAMS.
- 2.—*MONTESQUIEU*. By ALBERT SORREL. Translated by GUSTAVE MASSON.
- 3.—*VICTOR COUSIN*. By JULES SIMON (French Academy).
- 4.—*GEORGE SAND*. By Professor E. CARO (French Academy).
- 5.—*VOLTAIRE*. By FERD. BRUNETIÈRE.
- 6.—*RACINE*. By ANATOLE FRANCE.
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- 9.—*VILLON*. By Professor GASTON PARIS (French Institute).
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- 14.—*LAMARTINE*. By M. DE POMAIKOLE.
- 15.—*MUSSET*. By JULES LEMAITRE.
- 16.—*SAINTE-BEUVE*. By M. TAINÉ (French Academy).
- 17.—*GUIZOT*. By G. MONOD.

GREAT FRENCH WRITERS.

STUDIES BY THE PRINCIPAL FRENCH AUTHORS OF THE DAY ON THE LIFE, WORKS, AND INFLUENCE OF THE PRINCIPAL FRENCH AUTHORS OF THE PAST.

Our nineteenth century, now drawing to a close, has shown from the first, and will bequeath to the next age, a vivid taste for historical research, to which it has brought an ardour, a method, crowned by a success unprecedented in former times. The story of the World and its inhabitants has been entirely re-written. The pickaxe of the archaeologist has restored to light the bones of the heroes of Mycenæ and the very features of Sesosiris. Ruins explained, hieroglyphs translated, have led to reconstructing the life of the illustrious dead, sometimes to penetrating into their thoughts.

With a still more intense passion, because it was blended with affection, our century has applied itself to reviving the great writers of all literatures, those depositaries of national genius and interpreters of national thought. France has not lacked scholars to undertake this task; they have published the works, and cleared up the biography of those illustrious men we cherish as our ancestors, and who contributed, even more efficiently than princes and capitalists, to the formation of modern France, not to say of the modern world.

For it is one of our glories that the sway of France has prevailed less by the power of arms than by the power of thought; and the action of our country upon the world has ever been independent of her military triumphs; indeed, she has been seen to predominate in the most distressing hours of her national history. Hence the great thinkers of our literature have an interest not only for their direct descendants, but also for a large European posterity scattered beyond our frontiers.

Initiators first, then popularisers, the French were the foremost, in the turmoil prevalent at the opening of the Middle Ages, to begin a new literature; the first songs heard by modern society in its cradle were French songs. Like Gothic art and the institution of universities, mediæval literature commences in our country, thence expands throughout Europe. Here was the beginning.

But this literature was ignorant of the value of form, moderation, and reserve; it was too spontaneous, not sufficiently reflective, too heedless of questions of Art. The France of Louis the Fourteenth gave due honour to form, and was in the meanwhile the age of the revival of philosophy, of which Voltaire and Rousseau were to be the European apostles in the eighteenth century, awaiting the eclectic and scientific era in which we live; it was the period of the diffusion of literary doctrines. Had not this task been carried out as it was, the destiny of literatures would have been changed; Ariosto, Tasso, Camoens, Shakespeare, or Spenser, all the foreign writers together, those of the Renaissance and those subsequent, would not have sufficed to bring about this reform; and our age would perhaps never have known those impassioned poets, who have been at the same time perfect artists, freer than their precursors of old, purer in form than Boileau had ever dreamed: the Chéniers, Keats, Goethes, Lamartines, Lécopardis.

Many works, the publication of which is amply justified by all these reasons, have therefore been devoted in our days to the great French writers. And yet, do these mighty and charming geniuses occupy in the present literature of the world the place which is due to them? In no wise, not even in France; and for sundry reasons.

In the first place, after having tardily received in the last century the revelations of Northern literature, feeling ashamed of our ignorance, we became impassioned for

foreign works, not without profit, but perhaps to excess, to the great prejudice at all events of our national ancestors. These ancestors, moreover, it has not been possible as yet to associate with our lives as we should have wished, and to mingle them in the current of our daily ideas; and this, precisely on account of the nature of the works that have been devoted to them, it has been no easy thing to do. For where do these dead revive? In their works, or in treatises on literature? That is a great deal, no doubt; and the beautiful and scholarly editions and the well-ordered treatises have rendered in our days this communion of souls less difficult. But that is not yet sufficient; we are accustomed nowadays to have everything made easy for us: grammars and sciences, like travelling, have been simplified; yesterday's impossibilities have become to-day's matters of course. This is why the old treatises on literature often repel us and complete editions do not attract. They are suitable for those studious hours, too few in the lives of busy men, but not for the leisure moments, which are more frequent. Thus the book to which all turn, and which opens of itself, is the latest novel; while the works of great men, complete and faultless, motionless like family portraits, venerated, but seldom contemplated, stand in their fine array on the high shelves of our libraries.

They are loved, yet neglected. Those great men seem too distant, too different, too learned, too inaccessible. The idea of an edition in many volumes, of the notes which divert our attention, of the scientific display which surrounds them, perhaps the vague recollection of school and classic studies, the juvenile task, oppress the mind; the idle hour we had to dispose of, has already flown away, and thus we acquire the habit of laying aside our old authors, like silent kings, careless of familiar converse with them.

The object of the present collection is to recall to our firesides those great men, whose temples are too rarely visited, and to revive between descendants and forefathers that union of ideas and purposes which alone can secure, notwithstanding the changes wrought by time, the unalloyed preservation of our national genius. In the volumes that are being published will be found precise information on the life, works, and influence of each of the writers conspicuous in universal literature, or representing an original side of French intellect. These books will be short, their price moderate; they will thus be accessible to everyone. They will be uniform in size, paper, print, with the specimen now before the reader. They will supply on doubtful points the latest results of literary research, and thereby may be useful even to the well read; they will contain no notes, as the name of the authors for each work will be a sufficient guarantee, the co-operation of the most able contemporary writers having been secured for the series. Finally, an accurate reproduction of an authentic portrait will enable readers to make in some degree the acquaintance by sight of our great writers.

In short, to recall the part they played, now better known, thanks to erudite researches; to strengthen their action on the present time; to tighten the bonds and revive the affection uniting us to the past ages of our literature; by contemplating the past, to inspire confidence in the future, and silence, if it be possible, the doleful voices of the disheartened,—such are our chief objects. We also believe that this series will have several other advantages. It is right that every generation should reckon up the riches bequeathed to it by its ancestors, learning thus to make a better use of them. Finally, there is no better test of the quality, power, and limitations of an age, than the verdict which it passes on the productions of the past. It judges itself while giving judgment on others. It is hoped that this series may be at once useful in facilitating the comprehension of former periods, and helpful to a knowledge of the present, if the scheme, favourably received by the public, should be carried on to final completeness.

J. J. JUSSERAND.

PREFACE.

FEW modern French philosophers were better qualified than M. Albert Sorel to discuss the merits of Montesquieu, and assign to him his place in Messieurs Hachette's collection: *Les Grands Écrivains Français*. By his admiration of England, its constitution and its government, the illustrious author of *l'Esprit des Lois* was, on the other hand, specially entitled to the notice of the English public; and it is, therefore, with the fullest confidence and the sincerest pleasure, that we introduce to our readers the biography of one of the greatest thinkers of the last century, written by the gentleman to whom we are indebted for a most valuable work:—*l'Europe et la Révolution Française*. No one, assuredly, could appreciate more accurately the share which Montesquieu had in inspiring, directing, and modifying the progress of the great political crisis begun in 1789, and destined to influence, more or less, all the countries in the world.

We have added to this translation a few notes on points less familiar to ourselves than to French readers, and an alphabetical index.

November 1887.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE.

SYNCHRONISMS.	
1689 (January 18th) Birth of Montesquieu	{ Racine's "Esther" performed at Saint-Cyr.
1700 Studies at Juilly under the Oratorians	{ Philip V. proclaimed King of Spain.
1711 Leaves Juilly	Death of the Dauphin.
1714 (February 24) Councillor at the Bordeaux Parliament	} Bull <i>Unigenitus</i> .
1715 Marries Jeanne de Lartigue (April 3)	Death of Louis XIV.
1716 (July 13) Named <i>Président à Mortier</i> —member of the <i>Académie</i> of Bordeaux	} Law proposes his Financial System.
1719 Sends to the press his "Histoire physique de la Terre ancienne et moderne"	} Death of Madame de Maintenon.
1721 "Les Lettres Persanes"	Plague at Marseilles.
1725 "Le Temple de Guide." Pronounces at Bordeaux an address on the duties of barristers	} Death of the Czar Peter the Great.
1726 Leaves the magistracy	Voltaire in England.
1728 Elected a member of the <i>Académie Française</i> . Goes to Italy	} Dean Swift publishes his "Gulliver."
1729-31 Resides in England	} The Bull <i>Unigenitus</i> becomes law in France.
1734 "Considérations sur la Grandeur et la Décadence des Romains"	} Labourdonnais Governor of the Islands of France and Bourbon.
1745 "Dialogue de Sylla et d'Eucrate"	Battle of Fontenoy.
1748 "L'Esprit des Loix"	} Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle. Richardson publishes his "Clarissa Harlowe."
1749 "L'Esprit des Loix" attacked both by the Jesuits (<i>Journal de Trévoux</i>) and the Jansenists (<i>Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques</i>)	} Buffon begins the publication of his great work on Natural History.
1750 "Défense de l'Esprit des Loix."	Death of Marshal Saxe.
1755 (February 10th) Death of Montesquieu	Earthquake at Lisbon.