

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 2: St. Jean De Crevecoeur (1735-1813)

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### Primary Works

*Letters From an American Farmer: Describing Certain Provincial Situations, Manners, and Customs, Not Generally Known; and Conveying Some Idea of the Late and Present Interior Circumstances of the British Colonies of North America*, 1782 &ndash; This was written by Crèvecoeur to inform a friend in England.

*Lettres d'un Cultivateur Américain* (Letters From an American Farmer) *Écrites à* (written to) A W.S. Ecuyer, *depuis l'année* (since the year) 1770, *jusqu'à* (up 'til) 1781." *Traduites de l'anglais par* \*\*\* (translated from English by...(?)).

*Sketches of Eighteenth Century America: More "Letters From an American Farmer, 1923."*

*Voyage dans la Haute Pensylvanie et dans l'État de New-York, Par un Membre Adoptif de la Nation Onéida. Traduit et publié par l'auteur des Lettres d'un Cultivateur Américain*, translated by Clarissa S. Bostelmann. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964. F153 .C923

*Eighteenth-century travels in Pennsylvania & New York*. Translated & edited by Percy G. Adams. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1961. F153 .C923

### Selected Bibliography 1980-Present

Allen, Gay Wilson & Roger Asselineau. *St. Jean de Crevecoeur: the Life of an American Farmer*. 1987.

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| [Top](#) | Crèvecoeur's most important contribution - *Letters From An American Farmer*

According to Thomas Philbrick (listed above, pages 43-166), *Letters* was received as the most recent contribution to a growing body of works which sought (or pretended) to supply the British reading public with reliable accounts of the land and the peoples of the troublesome North American colonies.

## I. Outline

Letter I: Introduction - establishes the circumstances of James, the American Farmer's correspondence with Mr. F. B. and suggests the point of view of the succeeding letters (a systematic survey of American society in all its manifestations).

Letter II: Consists of an informal and impressionistic report "On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures of an American Farmer" as the narrator has experienced them on his farm in central Pennsylvania.

Letter III: "What is an American?" attempts to answer the query of its title by taking a sweeping survey of the impact of America on the European immigrant, a survey which sketches the diversity of American life but which concentrates on the rural culture of the middle colonies.

Letters IV-VIII: Describe in detail the manners and customs of the whaling villages of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

Letter IX: Gives a brief account of Charleston, South Carolina.

Letters X-XI: Return the reader to the middle colonies, first for some sketches of the birds and snakes on the narrator's farm and then for the report of a Russian gentleman on his visit to John Bartram, the celebrated Pennsylvania naturalist.

Letter XII: The farmer pictures, in highly emotional colors, the disruption of his life by the outbreak of the Revolution and expresses his intention of fleeing with his family to an Indian village in the remote wilderness.

## II. Importance of the *Letters*

1. Provides useful information and understanding of the New World.
2. Creation of personas, or disguises - James, the American Farmer.
3. Tries to create an American identity - it is an attempt to describe an entire country, not merely regional colonies.
4. Celebrates American innocence and simplicity.
5. Describes American tolerance for religious diversity.
6. Asks the important question - what is an American?
7. He is the first writer to explore the concept of the American Dream.

### III. Limitations of the *Letters*

1. Specific details in matters of geography, religion, history, and politics are missing.
2. He glosses over the issue of slavery.
3. American agriculture is treated generally too - absence of details.

### IV. Features of the Utopian Frontier

Mild government, no church tithes or dues, no autocratic prince or lord, no "absurd ordinances," no middleman in agriculture, peaceable inhabitants, no military laws, and no conscription or draft.

| [Top](#) | St. Jean de Crevecoeur (1735-1813): A Brief Biography

#### A Student Project by Jodie Workman

St. Jean de Crevecoeur was born in 1735 in Caen, Normandy. His birth name was Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crevecoeur, and he spent a dreary childhood attending a Jesuit College. In 1754 he was sent to live with relatives in England, where he learned the English language and also fell in love. Sadly, his fiancé died before they could marry. Crevecoeur left the country and went to Canada just as the French and Indian War was beginning (St. Jean De Crevecoeur, Philbrick, 16-17).

He joined the Canadian militia and in 1758 was a candidate for second lieutenant in the French army. Crevecoeur did well in the military, for he had excellent math skills and designed a plan for Fort William Henry. This design was shown to the king, and even the "Gazette de France" noted his bravery and skill (Philbrick, 17).

Unfortunately, Crevecoeur was injured while defending Quebec and was hospitalized. No one really knows what happened after this, except that other officers insisted he resign from the militia. According to Thomas Philbrick, Crevecoeur did not discuss his military experience again, and in 1759 he moved to New York City (17).

This move signaled a complete change for Crevecoeur; he became a new man. Thomas Philbrick explains: "Lieutenant Michel Jean de Crevecoeur, scion of the Norman aristocracy and officer in His Most Christian Majesty's army, vanishes, and in his place appears J. Hector St. John, itinerant surveyor and merchant" (18). Crevecoeur spent his time exploring British North America, parts of the Atlantic colonies, the Ohio Valley, and the Great Lakes. He also began farming, the occupation that he would later discuss in his writings (Philbrick, 18).

The year 1765 was an important one for Crevecoeur; he met Mehitable Tippet and he also became a naturalized citizen of New York. Mehitable and Crevecoeur were married on September 20, 1769, and he bought one hundred and twenty acres in Orange County so that he could be a farmer. The land was quickly made into a homestead, and Crevecoeur called his home "Pine Hill" (Philbrick, 18-19).

Crevecoeur's first child was born on December 14, 1770, and he named the little girl "America-Frances." He and Mehitable also had two other children; Guillaume-Alexandre was born in 1772 and Phillipe-Louis was born in 1774. Crevecoeur spent these years in a relaxing manner. He talked with his well-educated friends, painted, traveled, and began writing (Philbrick, 19-20). Everyman's Dictionary of Literary Biography English and American describes him as an "essayist" (164), and it was during this time that he started to become one.

Crevecoeur's first writings were done before 1774, and these are mainly accounts of his various travels. From 1774 to 1776 he wrote about Americans and their lives, and from 1777 to 1778 his work describes the Revolutionary War's effect upon America. In his work, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur explains, "The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions" (*Nation of Letters: A Concise Anthology of American Literature*, vol.1). This is exactly what the author tried to do; he completely embraced America and the way of life there, and he severed all his connections with France. Even his parents did not know what had become of him (Philbrick, 21-22).

Crevecoeur's contented lifestyle did not last long, however. The Revolutionary War broke out, and Pine Hill was right in the middle of the fighting. Being a Tory, Crevecoeur sympathized with the British, but the atrocities of war shocked him. According to Philbrick, Crevecoeur most likely took an oath of loyalty to the new government because his land was not confiscated (23-24).

In spite of the danger, Crèvecoeur left his wife and two of the children at Pine Hill and left for New York City, which was occupied by the British. He wanted to take his oldest son back to France so that he could claim his inheritance. When it was discovered that Crèvecoeur had persuaded a friend to take the oath of allegiance to the Revolutionary government, the British threw him in jail for three months. While in jail he became extremely sick, but in 1780 Crèvecoeur and his son left the New World. In London Crèvecoeur sold the first volume of his writings to a company called "Davies and Davis" (Philbrick, 24-27).

Once he reached France, his father and Madame d'Houdetot helped him form a connection with Benjamin Franklin. Crèvecoeur's new identity was that of a Patriot and staunch supporter of the Revolution. Madame d'Houdetot introduced him to her friends and helped him establish a place in French society (Philbrick, 27-30).

Letters from an American Farmer was published in 1782, and it was quite a success. Crèvecoeur began writing a French version of it, and returned to America. He was shocked to discover that Pine Hill had been burned down, Mehitable was dead, and his children were gone. The children were eventually found and sent to live with friends, and Crèvecoeur focused on strengthening the relationship between America and France. Due to his accomplishments, such as founding a Catholic church and botanical gardens, writing agricultural articles, and trying to establish a free port in France for American products, Crèvecoeur was made a member of the American Philosophical Society. He was an honorary citizen of various cities and the town of St. Johnsbury was named after him. However, Crèvecoeur felt torn between France and America, and he returned to France (Philbrick, 31-34).

He was just as well received there as he had been in America, and was able to attend meetings of the French Academy. The Royal Agricultural Society of Paris made him its member, and people clamored for a second edition of the French version of Letters to an American Farmer. Although Crèvecoeur did go back to America for a short time, he spent his final years in France (Philbrick, 34-35).

Although he tried to maintain the peaceful way of life that he loved, it did not last. The Terror in France began in 1793 and many of his friends were killed or became prisoners. Crèvecoeur tried to return to America, but was not allowed to. His new book, *Voyage dans la Haute Pensylvanie et dans l'état de New-York* was issued in 1801, but was not very successful. He spent his final years in a fairly peaceful manner, and died in 1813 of heart trouble (Philbrick, 36-39).

As Philbrick explains, readers have been interested in Crèvecoeur's writings as a documentation of life in America at that time and as an idea of what being an American is all about. More recently, readers have also considered his work an examination of the whole human experience. In *The Land Was Everything*, Victor Davis Hanson writes, "Mr. Crèvecoeur, you had it right- we in America did for a time create a new man nourished from a unique stew of freedom and liberty. But you had it absolutely wrong too: your new man was really not new, for he was, after all, still man himself" (257).

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## Study Questions

1. For eighteenth-century writer Crèvecoeur, witnessing slavery firsthand leads him to lament the "strange order of things" in Letter IX from Letters from an American Farmer. Analyze the difficulty he has reconciling the existence of slavery and the great contrast between lives of plantation owners and slaves in Charles-Town with his own belief in a "sublime hand which guides the planets round the sun."

2. Evaluate Woolman's (in "Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes") and Crèvecoeur's (in Letter III) different

uses of the phrase self-interest. How does the phrase become central to two very different arguments about who Americans are and what they should be?

3. Compare and contrast Woolman's and Crèvecoeur's understanding of "strangers" and their place in "American" society.

## MLA Style Citation of this Web Page

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 2: St. Jean De Crevecoeur." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap2/creve.html> (provide page date or date of your login).

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