

# PARIS

Sir James Macdonald (1742–1766) to Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800)

Paris, 11 April 1764

I have seen several very agreeable and very sensible women since I have been in this country; but as they seem not to know what diffidence and modesty mean, and force from everyone such a torrent of praise and compliments that they leave nothing behind to think upon and admire, there are few of them who have appeared to me very amiable. It is certainly a mistake to think they can have real admirers when they force them to let all their enthusiasm evaporate in quaint speeches and idle flattery. There is no time for a sentiment of approbation to warm into real admiration when it must immediately get vent in the form of a witty sentence. For which reason I am apt to think that in France women are more flattered and less esteemed than in other countries, for I cannot think that a man who converses with a woman in order to keep his wit in practice and prevent it from growing rusty has always the same admiration for her that it is necessary he should pretend to in order to exercise his talents. The most amiable woman I have met with in Paris is Mademoiselle de Rochefort, a friend of the Duc de Nivernois<sup>1</sup>. She has, joined to many other good qualities, the singular graces of simplicity, elegance, and modesty. I like her house because I am sometimes tempted when I am there to think I am in Hillstreet, which is saying enough of her society.

You would certainly be much entertained with a jaunt to this country—though I should be sorry you were to unlearn here anything you have learnt at home.... You would amuse yourself. You would carry much useful knowledge home; but you would unlearn nothing, leave nothing behind in your own country, nor soften in the least degree what is already the perfection of delicacy. I should be very glad you paid a visit to this country, not to correct prejudices but to satisfy a rational curiosity, and to learn to think better of yourself and of your own country than perhaps you do at present.

You desire to know something about the philosophes of this country, whom you have severely censured. I do not pretend to vindicate them, though perhaps I do not think so hardly of them. If President Montesquieu had never wrote, there would have been fewer systems and more sense among the philosophers of the present age. It is necessary to analyze and extract the essence of everything in order to make a system, and perhaps if he had not shown the example, men's thoughts would have taken another turn. You must have remarked that one man who greatly excels in anything always spoils a thousand who attempt to rival him. You may see at present in London one of the most remarkable writers of the age, Helvetius<sup>2</sup>, whom I recommend it to you to see in order to be convinced how different a man may be from what his writing announces him. He is a man of great simplicity, void of affectation, very respectable in private life, remarkably friendly and hospitable; I need not tell you what judgment one readily forms from his book. Diderot<sup>3</sup> is noisy and talkative, and somewhat fond of a dispute; he is certainly very learned, and very conscious of his own knowledge—he would be a better philosopher and a more agreeable companion if he did not make philosophy a matter of party, and treat subjects of the gravest nature and which require a cool examination too much like the head of an opposition. D'Alembert<sup>4</sup> is dry and decisive, very quick and clever; but arrogant and self-conceited. His merit is, however, so great that people easily forget his blemishes. Marmontel<sup>5</sup> (the author of *Contes Moraux*) is one of the most agreeable of the whole society. Not deep, but at the same time not ignorant. He speaks much in the manner of his book, narrates remarkably well, and has nothing disagreeable but an appearance of gravity and severity which I believe is not really in his character. I have not seen Buffon<sup>6</sup>, who is universally said to be superior to them all; and I am afraid I shall not have an opportunity of seeing him as he is gone to the country for some months. I am acquainted with several others who have considerable literary merit, but as I believe their names have not reached our country, I shall not trouble you with any account of them. I am perhaps mistaken in my opinion of those I have mentioned, but I have told you fairly how they appear to me. I fancy the worst of them is better than their sceptered leader.

We have lately had a new tragedy of Voltaire. It is not indeed absolutely new, but it had never been represented here. I mean *Olympie*. It seems to me to be a very bad play, founded on an improbable story, full of inconsistencies, without one good character; and yet it was so well-acted that it has had a remarkable success. As there is a great deal of show and several stage tricks, this has compensated with the audience weak verses, uninteresting characters, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Philip Julius Francis Mancini, Duke of Nivernois (1707–1768), French Ambassador to England.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Adrien Helvetius (1715–1771)

<sup>3</sup> Denis Diderot (1713–1784)

<sup>4</sup> Jean-le-Rond d'Alembert (1717–1783)

<sup>5</sup> Jean-François Marmontel (1723–1799)

<sup>6</sup> Georges Buffon (1707–1788)

an absurd story. They have two actresses, Mademoiselle Clairon<sup>7</sup> and Mademoiselle Dumenil who are greatly superior to any upon any stage. The former the perfection of art; the latter very unequal, but when she is good, the very mouth of nature.

The people of this great city are greatly interested in the question about the inoculation of the smallpox. It is at present discussed with as much heat as if the practice had been yesterday imported from Circassia. There have been many violent attacks lately made on one Gatti<sup>8</sup>, an Italian physician who has practiced it with the greatest success—and he has replied in a small treatise which is written with great spirit in answer to his opponents, great perspicuity in explaining the nature of the disorder as far as it can be known, a great candour in avowing his ignorance where it cannot. He has effectually removed every prejudice against the practice, and yet I dare say he will convince not one physician as it is long ago become a party matter, and consequently put out of the reach of reason and demonstration. The book is worth reading if it comes to London.

Stern's book has struck everyone with the utmost astonishment and horror. I have not yet seen it; I never believe anything I hear quoted out of a book till I see it, but I hope with all my heart for the sake of some of my friends that people have invented the things I hear cited from their letters. I should be very sorry ingratitude and could be joined to so many agreeable qualities: But I believe nothing till I see it....

Before the meeting of Parliament news came of a terrible hurley-burley in America; our young ministers, *qui ne s'étoient jamais trouvé a telle fête*, were alarmed, they were sensible they were too young to manage things so difficult; our major ministers apprehended they were too old to contend with matters so violent. Some took harts horn, some asafetida, but none took the grand specific in such maladies—a *firm resolution*. The Parliament met; you know the King's speech, which was not decisive but prudently equivoque, and they were to meet again. In the House of Lords, Lord Temple and Lord Lyttelton spoke nobly of the authority of parliaments, and the dignity of government. Then they all went into the country to eat their Christmas pies, some for the sake of present ease could have swallowed with them the affronts from America, others were high-stomached and could not digest them. Holidays past, then came working days indeed. The King's speech was firm, it pleased the hearts of oak and they praised it, and thanked his Majesty for it and expressed a desire to support the authority of government. A day was named for taking this great affair into consideration; on that day Mr. Pitt came up from Bath, He talked of liberty, of natural liberty, and he loved liberty and liberty loved him and I know not what, and people said that part of his speech was great, but they did not well understand it; Mr. Grenville talked of laws, and quoted the statutes in support of the legality of the Stamp Act; Mr. Pitt bid him not tell him of dogs-eared, doubled-down acts of Parliament, he was for natural liberty and he was for repealing the Stamp Act, it appeared. This did not please, but his next appearance in the House was more violent; he said we had broken the compact between England and America, and they were independent, or something of that sort; he railed at ministers past and present, and was violent against the Duke of Newcastle. This last speech has totally ruined him in the City, he has lost his popularity here, but will find it rise as the sun does with the antipodes when it sets in this hemisphere. It is amazing how the tide has turned. The last time he spoke in the House there was violent opposition to him, no applause of what he said, and when Sr. F— N— said that in other times whoever had spoken such a language would have been sent to the Tower, no one resented it. Mr. C. Townshend has as yet been perfectly silent. Mr. Burke spoke extremely well. The ministers in the House of Commons were not at unison with those in the House of Lords, they want somebody to lead the chorus. It is supposed this ministry will not last long, but who the next will be composed of I know not. We do not look on Ireland as a sister to America, but to England; America is our child, and a very perverse one.

Reginald Blunt, ed. *Mrs. Montagu, "Queen Of The Blues:" Her Letters and Friendships from 1762 to 1800* (1923), 1:96–98.

---

<sup>7</sup> Claire-Joséphe-Hippolyte L'éris de la Trude (1723–1803)

<sup>8</sup> Francesco Gatti (1730–1798)