Crèvecoeur's New World

Polish émigre poet Czeslaw Milosz recently observed that the popular myth of America, like all such myths, "is kept alive by what it chooses not to say; it selects only the attractive elements from a complex reality." The same could be said of the work of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813). His *Letters from an American Farmer* created a minor sensation when it first appeared in Europe, and passages from this book are still cited in our college texts. His panegyrics to the New World have been transformed into elements of our national self-image. But Crèvecoeur was not free from contradictions—an aristocratic Frenchman who claimed, during his years in America, to be nothing more than a simple rustic. Here historian Bruce Mazlish describes the *Letters* and its author.

by Bruce Mazlish

Exactly 200 years ago, just as the 13 colonies were emerging victorious from their War of Independence, *Letters from an American Farmer* appeared in print.

Published first in London and followed quickly by editions in Dublin, Belfast, Leipzig, Berlin, and Paris, the book was addressed to "a friend in England." It described the customs, manners, work habits, and "modes of thinking" of Nantucket fishermen, backwoods frontiersmen, and Carolina slaveholders, as well as the people in the New World whom the author knew best — the small farmers and freeholders of New York and Pennsylvania.

The volume, 12 letters, or chapters, in all, was widely read in Europe, serving, as one scholar recently put it, "as a report on the application of the liberal and humane doctrines of the Enlightenment to a functioning society." But the book's persistence as a minor classic in Europe and the United States may be largely credited to Letter III with its lavish (and highly quotable) description of the American as "a new man, who acts upon new principles." Such phrases as "melting pot" and "new man," derived from the *Letters*, have become part of the American mythology.

Only more recently have scholars

begun to recognize the *Letters*'s considerable merit as social commentary — as acute in many ways as Alexis de Tocqueville's better known *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840). Yet the special significance of *Letters* derives in part from the ambiguities that troubled the author himself.

The title page named him as J. Hector St. John and further identified him simply as "A Farmer in Pennsylvania."

The larger story is a bit more complicated: Born in France, baptized Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur, the author had immigrated, by way of Britain and Canada, to the northern English colonies in 1759. Curiously, he made no mention of his mixed heritage or uncertain identity, though it is precisely these elements that give the *Letters* its special interest. For Crèvecoeur was not simply describing a nation of "other" people, as Tocqueville later did; he was also attempting to make sense of himself—as an *American.*

What life had Crèvecoeur led before he became an "American farmer"? He was born in 1735, in Caen, Normandy; his father was a member of the lesser nobility. Sent to a Jesuit college for schooling, Crèvecoeur later remembered being treated harshly and living in a "dark and chilly garret."

At age 19, he was shipped off to England, possibly because of a quarrel with his father, to live with relatives. There he proceeded to learn English and fall in love with the daughter of a Salisbury businessman. The death of his fiancée prompted him to sail for Canada in 1755, where he enlisted as a cadet in the French militia.

Endowed with mathematical abil-

In the possession of M. le Comte Louis de Crèvecoeur.

Vallière's 1786 portrait of Crèvecoeur. In that year, the author was living in France, on sick leave from his duties as French consul to the United States.

ities, he served as a surveyor and cartographer, growing acquainted with both the North American landscape and its inhabitants. Three years later, he secured a commission as a second lieutenant in the regular French Army. In the last battle of Quebec, September 1759, trying to help save New France from the British, he was wounded.

A Hyphenated People

And at this point, a mystery clouds Crèvecoeur's life. One month later, in October, he was forced by fellow officers to resign from his regiment. We have no idea of the reason. Had Crèvecoeur, cited earlier for bravery, somehow disgraced himself in the Quebec battle or after it? In any case, he sold his commission, and, boarding a Royal Navy ship, arrived in New York City on December 16, 1759. Crèvecoeur, the Frenchman, now adopted the name J. Hector St. John, and a new American was born.

Americans, almost uniquely, are a hyphenated people. To a remarkable degree, we are still German-Americans, or Italian-Americans or what have you, dragging our other-than-American past behind us. Crèvecoeur was more than ordinarily divided.

First of all, as a Franco-American (and appropriately he named his first daughter America-Francès), he was never sure which half dominated. Though he spoke of himself sometimes as "a good Frenchman and a good American," on most occasions he either emphasized his New York colonial citizenship (obtained in 1765–66) or reverted to his natal claim. Though he wrote in the *Letters*, "the American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born," he became a French consul in 1783, an action sufficient to make the American statesman Gouverneur Morris feel he had abrogated his American citizenship. About this time, moreover, Crèvecoeur wrote to the Duke de La Rochefoucault, calling himself "a Frenchman."

Going Native

Besides a confused *national* identity, Crèvecoeur wrestled with a provincial one: Never fully settling on any one claim, he kept calling himself, variously, a Pennsylvanian or a New Yorker (he had his farm in that colony), or a Vermonter. (Ethan Allen, in 1787, arranged for Crèvecoeur and his three children to be declared naturalized citizens of the Green Mountain state; St. Johnsbury, Vermont, was named after Crèvecoeur.)

To complicate matters further, he even flirted with an Indian identity. In Letter XII, the last of the collection, Crèvecoeur fantasized about leaving his farm in New York, menaced as it was by the Indians under British command, and fleeing to a friendly tribe of Indians, among whom he and his entire family would take up life as full tribal members. In his *Voyage* (1801), a book that he published after the *Letters*, he stated on the title page that the author was

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"un membre adoptif de la nation Onéida" (an adopted member of the Oneida nation); his Indian name was Cahio-Harra.

Opium in Nantucket

But the ambivalent qualities that emerged in Crèvecoeur's life and work have usually been neglected. His praises of the "American" are cited by students of American literature who have read no more than the lyric passages from Letter III, so often reprinted in anthologies.

"*He* is an American," Crèvecoeur wrote, "who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world."

Thus, few readers know that his troubled view of the frontiersman (whose life, he believed, led to moral degeneration) anteceded and influenced James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking" portrayals or that his description of the whalers in Nantucket, including their opium-using housewives, is a worthy prelude to that given in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

Crèvecoeur's private ambivalence aside, his experiences were, for an American, typically broad and varied. After his arrival in the colonies, he traveled, worked (as a surveyor or farmer), and lived in different parts of Pennsylvania and New York. Then, in 1769, he married a Yonkers woman, Mehitable Tippet, and settled down on a farm in Orange County, New York about 35 miles northwest of Manhattan.

During the 1770s, Crèvecoeur led the life of a prosperous American farmer, writing most (if not all) of his *Letters*, as well as occasional articles critical of British taxation. Yet when the war broke out, Crèvecoeur sided with the Tories and soon felt himself forced to flee, along with his oldest son but without his wife and two other children, to New York City, then to England, and ultimately, in 1781, to his native France.*

Cultural Baggage

It was probably Crèvecoeur's private allegiance to his own class, the aristocracy, and his fear of the unruly rabble that drove him, albeit with reluctance and mixed feelings, to the Loyalist side during the War of Independence. Yet, in his *Letters*, Crèvecoeur went to great lengths to stress his own simple, rustic qualities. He insisted that he was "neither a philosopher, politician, divine, nor naturalist, but a simple farmer."

In fact, he was a relatively sophisticated student of French Enlightenment thought, and something of all of the above. In one area, religion, he was misled by the anticlericalism of the Enlightenment into predicting that the children of Americans would "grow up less zealous and more indifferent in matters of religion than their parents. The foolish vanity, or rather the fury of making Proselytes, is unknown here."

Crèvecoeur dedicated the *Letters* to the Abbé de Raynal (a minor Enlightenment thinker), whose own work on North America, *Histoire Philosophique* (1770), helped inspire a favorable view of the New World.

*He returned to America as a French consul in 1783, only to learn that his wife had died the year before; he finally retired to France in 1790.

The cultural baggage Crèvecoeur brought with him also included, significantly, an admiration of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Here, too, we have a highly ambivalent figure, partly *of* the Enlightenment and partly *opposed* to it. In any case, Crèvecoeur echoed many attitudes found in the writings of the "Citizen of Geneva": a tendency to romanticize nature, an eager willingness to shed tears, and a stress on the virtues of sincerity and the language and feelings of the heart.

Firsthand experience delivered Crèvecoeur from any idolization of the "noble savage." Nevertheless, he, too, recognized and mythologized some of the good qualities of the Indians, even as he noted their lack of strict morals and self-discipline.

Crèvecoeur, a cultivated European, wished, like Rousseau, to shed his overcivilized veneer in order to become a new man. Although he wanted to know what that new man would be like as an American, he also posed a larger question: What might any new man be? More to the point, what *should* he be?

Into the Melting Pot

Behind the philosophical question was Crèvecoeur's own unrelenting quest for an identity. Like a religious convert, he sought to become a new man, for that was the only way Crèvecoeur believed he could become a fully human being. We sense the personal note when he writes of how the newcomer to America "begins to feel the effect of a sort of resurrection; hitherto he had not lived, but simply vegetated; he now feels himself a new man, because he is treated as such." A few pages later, he repeats, "for the first time in his life [he] counts for something; for hitherto he has been a cypher."

Crèvecoeur was willing to take on a new life in any setting, French or American, as long as it promised to answer the question, what is *this* man? What gives Crèvecoeur, and his writing, a historical as well as a personal dimension is that in the course of seeking his definition he offered one to all others who would wish to find theirs by calling themselves Americans, however mixed their cultural origins.

The new American was one who had left Europe and its old authority relations. He was an immigrant. He became an American, dipping himself in a melting pot and emerging with his "past" behind him.

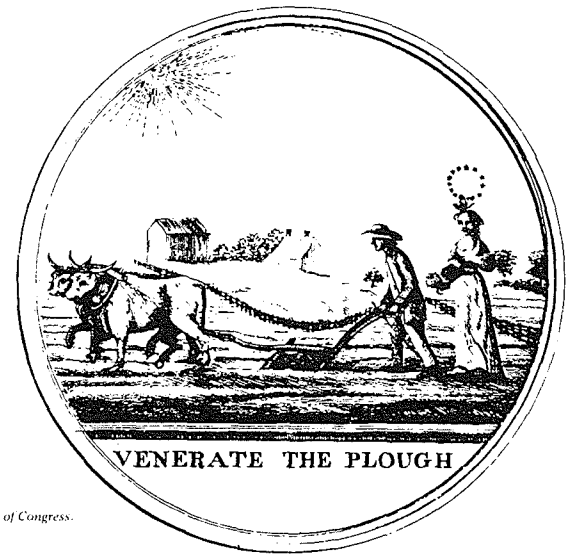
A Mixed Vision

On many points, Crèvecouer defined America's virtues as the obverse of Europe's ancient vices: "the severity of taxes, the injustice of laws, the tyranny of the rich, and the oppressive avarice of the church," these are all absent for the American. He is a "free" man—"possessing freedom of action, freedom of thoughts"—free of the weight of European institutions. His new home is "the general asylum of the world," welcoming to its shores the poor and oppressed of the old continent.

Crèvecoeur claimed to be interested only in the man of the present and the future. He mocked those who were absorbed in viewing ruins and who went to Italy for that purpose; how much more interesting was a civilization emerging, how satisfying the observation of "the humble rudiments and embryos of societies." In America, one could contemplate "the very beginnings and out-lines of human society, which can be traced no where now but in this part of the world."

Nevertheless, here, too, Crèvecoeur

Crèvecoeur hailed the simple rural life: "The father thus plowing with his child, and to feed his family, is inferior only to the emperor of China ploughing as an example to his kingdom."



Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

was ambivalent. In his youth he had been interested in artifacts of the past—old worm-eaten furniture, tapestries, and portraits. And, in Letter XII, he wrote of an America that was itself in ruins as a result of the Revolutionary War. He was compulsively interested in the ruins, rather than in the glowing future.

Before that, however, in the first three letters, he offered an idyllic picture of America, free from the ancient curses of Europe. "Here," he lyricized, "we have had no war to desolate our fields [ignoring the convulsions starting in 1776!]: our religion does not oppress the cultivators: we are strangers to those feudal institutions which have enslaved so many."

Unburdened by these negative influences, America enjoys a number of benefits and blessings: "Here nature opens her broad lap to receive the perpetual accession of new comers, and to supply them with food"; "We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory . . . united by the silken bonds of mild government, without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained because each person works for himself"; and "Here man is free as he ought to be." Rousseau could ask for little more.

This is the Crèvecoeur who figures in the anthologies. It is the Crèvecoeur who was writing for Europeans, not Americans, trying to impress them with the wisdom of the choice he and others were making in settling in the New World. It is the Crèvecoeur who was reacting to Constantin-François Volney (the French author of a famous work on ruins), who had just written a widely cited book belittling America and its inhabitants, native and colonial. It is also the Crèvecoeur who was challenging the view of Georges-Louis

Buffon and other Frenchmen who saw American flora and fauna as degenerative species, weaker than their European counterparts. Crèvecoeur described the way in which the "plentitude" of both geographic and social space transformed Europeans into Americans: The European "no sooner breathes our air than he forms schemes, and embarks on designs he would never have thought of in his own country."

Frontier Mongrels

Crèvecoeur offered an "environmental" explanation of the American and his goodness. "Men are like plants," he announced in Montesquieu-like tones, "the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow. We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment." Nurture, then, is more important than nature in the case of man.

As a good 18th-century advocate of the primacy of agriculture (one thinks both of the "Physiocrats," who believed land was the source of all wealth, and of Jefferson), Crèvecoeur often tended to emphasize the shaping force of the land. He was, after all, a farmer, and he appears to have said that tilling the soil produces healthy results in men. At other times, he seems to have put the stress on government, as when he claimed that barren Nantucket "seems to have been inhabited merely to prove what mankind can do when happily governed."

Essentially, however, Crèvecoeur's praise was reserved for the cultivated and the "middle way." His utterly unromantic view of the frontiersman, or "back settlers" makes this clear. "The chase," he tells us, "renders them ferocious, gloomy, and unsociable." Their mode of life produces "a strange sort of lawless profligacy." Their children "grow up a mongrel breed, half civilized, half savage." Such "degeneracy" hardly accords with Frederick Jackson Turner's picture of the frontier as the regenerative source for American democracy.

Crèvecoeur preferred another setting: Between the struggle with the sea and the hazards of the frontier lies the stable state of agriculture. It is the happy man, he wrote, who can "inhabit the middle settlements, by far the most numerous," where "the simple cultivation of the earth purifies them."

America in Ruins

Alas, Crèvecoeur's optimism disconcertingly declines as we move further into the *Letters*. His metaphor for man changes from plant to animal. Though he began by treating man the animal as possessed by instinct, which is good, he ended by focusing on the bad side of the passions. Man, Crèvecoeur came to see, is quarrelsome, cruel, and power-hungry. He is, in short, potentially bestial; and, on the frontier, he relapses into barbarism.

A dark shadow falls over the later letters, in which Crèvecoeur penned a description of Charlestown, South Carolina, its aristocrats given over to foolish pleasures and supported by an exploitative slave system. The end of Letter IX presents a harrowing scene: Crèvecoeur comes across a Negro slave, hanging from a tree in a cage, birds pecking out his eyes and insects eating his rotting flesh. His crime: killing the overseer of the plantation. As Crèvecoeur's host ex-

plains to him, "The laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary."

Increasingly, as the *Letters* progressed, Crèvecoeur went back and forth between shocking instances of cruelty and suffering in man and nature in America — there is an extraordinary account of two snakes battling one another — and depictions of occasional "benignity" (as in the portrait of the botanist, John Bartram).

All falls apart by Letter XII. War had come to Crèvecoeur's idyllic farm. He and his family were threatened by British-led Indians and had to flee. The Revolutionary War for Crèvecoeur, as we know, did not open the way for the pursuit of happiness but instead ended his bucolic contentment. "America," for our "American Farmer," was now in ruins.

Crèvecoeur's only salvation was an imaginative retreat. He would take his family and escape to some "good" Indians, where they would be sheltered from the storm. He was aware that in becoming "A Frontier Man"—the title of his letter—he ran the risk of degenerating into bestiality. But he imagined that he would, in fact, help civilize the Indians and prevent his children from adopting their ways. The severe divisions within Crèvecoeur are striking in this final fantasy. We witness a terrible transformation, as the American dream becomes a nightmare. In the end, Crèvecoeur was overwhelmed by a riven sense of identity and the loss of a stable world.

Ironically, Crèvecoeur's claim to be describing the reality of America and Americans has generally been taken by critics at face value. The claim, in fact, is valid, but not precisely in the way he asserted.

Crèvecoeur's intent was, at least in part, philosophical; and the English publishers were right when they saw through his project for a third book, to be titled *Journey through Northern Pennsylvania and the State of New York.* Writes Julia Post Mitchell, an early biographer: "When they learned that this was not an actual journey, in reality undertaken by the author, but rather a philosophical description of America, their interest cooled, and the plan had to be abandoned."

The importance of Crèvecoeur's *Letters* lay in its message to Americans and to those outside who wished to know about this strange new world. His *was* an "actual journey," but it was also a *mythical* one through a largely psychological landscape. In writing his account of *this* journey, Crèvecoeur helped create the myth of what it was to be an American, and that myth, in turn, helped shape reality. He also suggested the ambivalences, as well as the darker aspects, of the American character.

In his own ambivalence and in his painful search for identity, Crèvecoeur was one prototype of the new "American," especially the American writer. He mirrored and prophesied for us the polarities — what Erik Erikson calls the "counterpointing of opposite potentialities" — that still partly define us as a nation 200 years after *Letters* was first published.