



→ **Book Review – SS**

"Letters from an American Farmer" (J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur)

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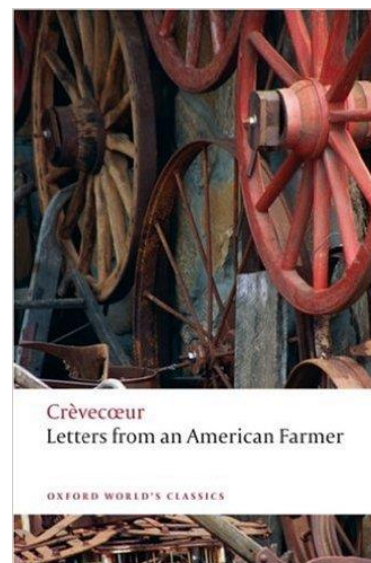
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Article will examine the idea of American identity and the ability to create a world through hard work and industry. In this effort the effort will reflect on the views of St. John who was a Frenchmen that was naturalized in the United States. He lived through the revolution and was a writer who was inspired the abundance of opportunity in America. He spent the majority of his days in the United States in New York City where he was a popular writer.

In his analysis of America and its potential, St. John de Crevecoeur illustrates a "glass half full" approach. In the beginning of Letters from an American Farmer, he creates a romanticized and idealistic picture of the life of the American farmer. He depicts a life that he feels is one in which a man can find both honor and gratification. St. John de Crevecoeur was a man of French descent who married an American woman and became a British citizen while living in the United States. He was a dynamic character, considering that at the time it would have been anathema for a Frenchmen to admire British values; in his case, he bought in entirely to British ideas and concepts. He embraced the idea of British citizenship, and with it sang the praises of the wonderful new world that was America. America, in his mind, was truly a great new civilization, a novel launching point from which a man could build his future with full honor and dignity.

Interestingly, St. John de Crevecoeur was not a man who came from poverty; his father left him a decent amount of wealth. For his time, St. John de Crevecoeur was well-educated and he clearly mastered the craft of expressing himself, especially since he only saw himself as a simple farmer. After serving in the French army, he traveled to the new world, learning to acclimate himself to living off the land. He gained valuable skills and insights with regards to farming, purchasing and managing farming properties, hunting, and fishing. The beauty of America from St. John de Crevecoeur's point of view was the ability of its people to advance themselves beyond their previous conditions through their own industry. This concept comes up repeatedly throughout his book. This is the type of rhetoric that would fuel notions such as "The American Dream" and "American Exceptionalism"; the ever-persistent pessimists and nationalists were long in the future.

In exalting the beauty of America, St. John de Crevecoeur glorified how in the America he knew, there was no poverty, war, or destruction like there was in Europe. Rather, in his eyes America was bountiful, peaceful, and full of hope and opportunities; it was teeming with chances for everyone to reach prosperity. He romantically embraced the view of a man building himself up with his own hands, and giving his family a great future. There was no feudalism in America like





there was in Europe; a farmer was not at the mercy of a king, prince, bishop, or pope. He was the master of his own destiny, and an illustration of how Europe was old and decaying. There was no religious tyranny in America as Quakers, Catholics, and Protestants not only were free to worship as to their own will, but there was also a mutual respect and peace; they did not quarrel amongst themselves. The idea of prosperity and productivity was king; it brought all groups together under an umbrella of cooperation.

In continuing with the theme of industry, for St. John de Crevecoeur what set America apart from Europe was that a farmer could live the best, most comfortable life, which could only be rivaled by the Emperor of China. The farmer, through his own industry, could produce with his labor enough to sustain himself. He could pull himself out of the poverty that he suffered in his old country. He could leave behind for his son and family a decent and productive farm that would shelter them from want and suffering for their entire lives. He used bees as a symbol of the things he loved and appreciated; bees worked together and were extremely productive. In his eyes, the American farmer had tremendous freedom, and in a moment that would make Locke smile, he related how the farmer had freedom in both action and thought because the government was not involved in his private interests. The government stayed away, and protected the farmer's interests. This concept of self-interest resonates even today with American politics, as well as economic and foreign policies.

In terms of hard work and labor, he looked at certain groups of people very surprisingly. He held some very racist and biased views of the Irish, of their drinking, lack of productivity, and their tendencies to fight and have too many children. On the flip side, he considered the Germans to be very industrious and efficient. The Scots were believed to be industrious as well, and both frugal and efficient with money. He also held a clear hatred of lawyers and litigation. In a Puritanical view, a lawyer's labors were not really considered to be work because they played around with books and got paid to write. In his idealized world, these people were like a cancer; it was only honorable to live off of what you produced with your own hands.

Norman Grabo's article "Crevecoeur's American: Beginning the World Anew" picks up on some of the themes from St. John's book and confirms some of his views. The article illustrates how St. John de Crevecoeur paints the picture of the American dream; however, it adds that with the beauty of the dream came some very brutal blemishes. Some of these blemishes were the sad treatment of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans. In some disheartening and gloomy moments, both the article and St. John de Crevecoeur's book capture the misery of the slaves in Charleston. The conditions of the Indians were also brutal and Grabo writes that St. John de Crevecoeur picked up on their misery. In many instances, St. John de Crevecoeur brought up some of these problems by chastising Charleston and the easy and luxurious life there; he described the people of Charleston as hedonistic, and explained how their luxuries led them to moral collapse. He felt for the slaves and detested the condition of the Indians; he was a very dynamic man in his time, all things being considered.

A theme that both St. John de Crevecoeur's book and Grabo's article address is that of man and nature. For St. John de Crevecoeur, there is nothing more honorable than a man making a living based on what nature provides, and what he can produce through his own industry. Grabo highlights the importance of how man can manage nature. Through this relationship, man can understand nature and it can help him be more productive. This is where all of the traveling that St. John de Crevecoeur did in his earlier days came in handy; it helped him become a better farmer because he was able to understand different climates, soils, and animal husbandry.

Also, both authors wrestle with the notion of man's greed. For both, men have true evil inclinations, especially with regards to amassing tremendous amounts of wealth. St. John de Crevecoeur saw this greed in those who avoided physical work, sat idly, and were responsible for the pain and suffering of the slaves and the abuse of Indians (or others who were from the





lowest rungs of society). This greed is insatiable and evident in European kings, aristocrats, and religious leaders. St. John de Crevecoeur did not hold generally acceptable social or political views. Grabo, on the other hand, believed that St. John de Crevecoeur was in many ways very isolated and naïve in his outlook.

St. John de Crevecoeur was caught up in his own world that sadly would crumble beneath his feet. In the end, Grabo believed that St. John de Crevecoeur was set up for a great fall, much like a hero from a tragedy. He became a victim, consumed by a world from which he wished he could be removed. He was consumed by the very world that sheltered him and from which he ran; his dream was destroyed, despite how romantic and ideal it seemed to him.

Acknowledgements: *I would like to thank Dr. Bowles of William Paterson University's History Department. The project comes from her "Classic Views of America" History Seminar." Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Jo-An L. Morris, Librarian at St. John's University, for being a constant source of support and helping me to acquire the necessary materials for this project.*

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Grabo, N. S. (1991). Crèvecoeur's American: Beginning the World Anew. The William and Mary Quarterly 48(2): 159–172.

Details regarding to the book:

Type	: Authored Book
Author	: Crèvecoeur, J. H.
Language	: English
Total Pages	: 288
Edition	: 1 st (Reissue Edition) – (Oxford World's Classics)
ISBN	: 978-0199554744
Publishing Location	: New York, NY: USA
Published in	: 2009
Publisher	: Oxford University Press



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