

---

H-France Review Vol. 22 (May 2022), No. 90

Simon Davies, *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: Colonial Traveller, Enlightenment Reformer, Celebrity Writer*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. xii + 323 pp. Bibliography and index. £65.00 (pb). ISBN 978-1-789-62248-5; £65.00 (eb). ISBN 978-1-800-85779-7.

Review by April G. Shelford, American University.

Several years ago, my husband and I visited the Musée du Nouveau Monde in La Rochelle, one of whose rooms featured ceramics illustrated with scenes from *Paul et Virginie*, the sentimental novel by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1737-1814). The museum occupies the mansion of Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriau (1709-1787), who recouped his family's fortunes through a decades-long stay in Saint-Domingue. The basis of Bernardin's more modest, less certain fortune also came from opportunities created by empire, though he traveled east. Ultimately, he founded a literary career on a brief visit to Isle de France (now Mauritius) in 1768-1770, which he chronicled in the anonymously published *Voyage à l'Île de France, à l'île Bourbon et au cap de Bonne-Espérance* (1773). While Bernardin's second work, the multi-volume *Études de la Nature* (1784), enjoyed considerable success, *Paul et Virginie*, originally published as its fourth volume, became a bestseller. Scenes from the lives of lovers raised in tropical innocence but destroyed by the corrupt values of the Old Regime and a globalizing mercantile capitalism, prompted readers' tears and provided motifs for interior décor well into the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, slavery had proven profitable for both Fleuriau, who exploited it for commercial gain, and for Bernardin, who fiercely criticized it—though the former rather more handsomely.

*Paul et Virginie* remains the basis of Bernardin's fame, though scholars in recent decades have been tugging him from its long shadow. In *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: Colonial Traveller, Enlightenment Reformer, Celebrity Writer*, Simon Davies seeks to "reposition Bernardin as an *incontournable* figure in the cultural scene, broadly defined, in the final three decades of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth" (p. 25). Throughout, he draws on an encyclopedic knowledge of Bernardin's published and unpublished works and his correspondence, which he and a team of researchers are readying for the Electronic Enlightenment.[1] He fills out the three dimensions of Bernardin's life signaled in the book's subtitle with six chapters: "Science," "Colonies and Overseas Initiatives," "Regeneration," "Education," "Celebrity Culture," and "The Professional Writer." Here I consider his claim that Bernardin was *incontournable*—"essential," if you will—in two ways: a historical figure who changed his historical moment or one who epitomized it. This is an admittedly artificial and porous distinction. Nevertheless, it is useful to ask, "Which was Bernardin? Was he both?"

Bernardin's struggles to gain a secure financial footing, self-respect, and the regard of peers and the public, the limitations he overcame and the opportunities he exploited, his *formation*, passions, and prejudices—all follow and further illumine the career tracks of the Old Regime as well as the newer possibilities created by empire, the rise of celebrity culture, and the French Revolution. Born to a bourgeois family of Le Havre, he lacked social position and connections. After a Jesuit education in Caen, he attended the Ecole des ponts et chaussées. Dismissed from a position in the army during the Seven Years' War, he had little success as an engineer in Malta. There he received bruising treatment from fellow engineers, who disdained him for his lack of professional qualifications. This inspired a lifelong antipathy for any kind of *corps* and a sense of grievance (exacerbated, one suspects, by his family's own thin claim to nobility) that eventually embraced France's intellectual academies. Travels in search of employment took him to Russia, where he undertook an investigation of Finland to impress Empress Catherine. His activities in Poland, perhaps in service to Louis XV's secret diplomacy, ended in arrest, though they brought him the friendship of Pierre-Michel Hennin (1727-1807), the diplomat, *littérateur*, and correspondent of Voltaire who faithfully promoted Bernardin's interests for decades. Despite these setbacks, Bernardin secured a position as royal engineer in the colony of Isle de France after returning to Paris. He traveled there in 1768 but refused to follow his commanding officer in an attempt to establish the French on Madagascar, ultimately a good call because it ended badly. He took little pleasure in what remained of his colonial service on Isle de France, though no one was very happy there. [2] Sighing for European political news and for Madame Poivre, wife of the *intendant*, he acquired a contempt for the colonists, an aversion to the institution of slavery, and a passion for botany.

Returning to Paris in 1771, he befriended Rousseau and gained entrée into the salon of Mlle de Lespinasse. Until 1784, when he published the *Études*, he largely exercised his pen not to launch a literary career, but to secure a government position. In Davies's account, we see him navigate the interpenetrating world of intellectuals and officials that Michèle Duchet alerted us to years ago. [3] People who mattered, d'Alembert and Condorcet most notably, willingly made his case to other people who mattered, such as the royal ministers Anne Robert Jacques Turgot and Antoine de Sartine. This was why, even before returning to France, he was tidying his notes on Isle de France, which he published as the *Voyage* with d'Alembert's help. Continuing his work in Paris, he assured Hennin that he had no desire to become a writer, which he dismissed as "une carrière trop désagréable et qui ne mène à rien" (p. 296). In his many unpublished memoirs to government officials, the world was a screen onto which he projected a mélange of imperial, humanitarian, and personal ambitions, indulging his "desire to reimagine the world" with proposals of expeditions to Southeast Asia and North America and the installation of a colony of soldier-farmers in Corsica (p. 261). Although he secured a number of royal gratifications, he failed to obtain a more permanent and remunerative government position. Finally, he walked through the door that letters had opened. Among Davies's most satisfying chapters are those that detail Bernardin's management of his literary career, from the nuts and bolts of timing a new edition to avoid cannibalizing an earlier edition's sales, to worrying over reviews, to responding to fans nearly as breathless as those of Rousseau. [4]

The French Revolution shut off the spigot of royal funds but opened others. Davies acknowledges the claim that "[Bernardin] was an opportunist who moved from being a monarchist to a republican to a supporter of Napoleon"; he himself somewhat vaguely characterizes Bernardin as a "moderate" (p. 289). But obviously much in Bernardin's thinking, from his antipathy to any kind of privileged group to his considerable empathy for the dispossessed and the oppressed to his

later interest in theophilanthropy, inclined him to welcome reform, if not the disorder that accompanied it. Just as obviously he had much to discuss with the Abbé Grégoire, champion of anti-slavery. Indeed, it would be good to know more about his association with other figures of the *Cercle Social*, several of whom he knew and who perished on the guillotine, such as Madame Roland, Olympe de Gouges, and Brissot. Even at an advanced age, he was prepared to do his part to “regenerate” the nation in deed, not just in writing. He served for a year as director of the soon to be nationalized Jardin royal des plantes, assumed pedagogical duties at the École normale, and was appointed to the Institut during the Directory. In 1803, he shifted from outsider to insider, becoming a member of the Académie française and its president in 1807. He continued to draw the approving notice of people who mattered. Joseph Bonaparte, an admirer of his works, subscribed to a luxury edition of *Paul et Virginie* (1806) and created for him an annual pension of 6000 francs.[5] In the same year, he received the *légion d’honneur*, Napoleon’s recognition of those “who, by their knowledge, talents, and virtues, have contributed to establish and defend the principles of the Republic.”[6] There is some irony in the fact that he received it from the same man who had dispatched an army to Saint-Domingue to reimpose slavery, an invasion that led to the colony’s independence, but not before unleashing a genocidal war.

In his conclusion, Davies asserts that Bernardin “became a leader through the power of his pen, through the moral authority of his publications” (p. 263) and that “he was one of the most significant figures on the cultural scene in late-eighteenth-century France” (p. 295). This goes to Bernardin’s “essential” nature as influencing, not simply epitomizing, his historical moment. These claims are more difficult to assess given the vantage point of Davies’s study. He notes that Bernardin’s works resist classification, and so does his book. Neither an intellectual history nor a “man in his times” biography, the author’s use of extensive quotation permits Bernardin and his friends to speak for themselves. Much here positions Bernardin as more interesting and original than the dismissal of him as an author of merely “flamboyant style but impoverished thought,”[7] yet we must take care not to take Bernardin as seriously as he took himself. The rather large chip on his shoulder weighed a great deal in the intellectual positions he took, as did his stance of solitary sage above the fray. Davies’s decision to explore Bernardin’s thought thematically is certainly justified by his insight that “[m]any of his fundamental beliefs were established by the 1770s,” (p. 25) but this leaves the reader struggling to form a coherent picture of a long and full life, scrambling to confirm details in other works. It also makes it difficult to consider Bernardin’s thought more thoroughly in relationship to that of contemporaries and to larger trends. Many aspects of his life and thought no doubt deserve deeper exploration: the warm reception of his works among clerics, a religiously infused view of nature that lent itself to a kind of proto-environmentalism, the contexts of the moralizing dimension of physiocracy, emergent anti-slavery thought, orientalizing tales that simultaneously critiqued French society and offered paths to wisdom other than *philosophie*, and other projects meant to make colonialism pay, while serving humanitarian, even utopian goals.

Davies spends many pages detailing Bernardin’s ideas on education and “regeneration,” but the later eighteenth century was awash in them, and contemporaries connected the two during the revolutionary period from the *cahiers de doléances* to the reports and initiatives of the Convention and the Directory. How did Bernardin differ or agree? What influence did his ideas have? A footnote on Bernardin’s appreciation of Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, a formidable Christian apologetic in verse, highlights how infrequently we hear about whom Bernardin read and his responses to his readings (p. 293, n.75). His admiration for Young combined with his rejection of materialism and atheism also suggests that Bernardin’s life and work offer an opportunity to

rethink the sometimes unhelpful triangulation of “Enlightenment,” “Counter-Enlightenment,” and “Romanticism” with a version of Enlightenment that focused on improvement, both social and personal, while eschewing the irreligion of what reasonably “enlightened” people regarded as the excrescences of *philosophie*. Bernardin’s counsels of modesty and an opening up to the experience of the natural world and its wondrous interconnections is both appealing and wise in our ravaged world, which demonstrates too well the effects of the opposite. In short, Davies makes the case that Bernardin was far more than a Rousseau *manqué*, and a lengthening bibliography of works by other scholars implicitly suggests the same. Ultimately, though, wider contextualization of his ideas, their reception, and their impact will settle how much and in what ways Bernardin is *incontournable* in the second sense.

## NOTES

[1] Bernardin de Saint-Pierre Project, Electronic Enlightenment, <http://www.e-enlightenment.com/coffeehouse/project/saintpierre2008/index.html>.

[2] Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

[3] Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1971; rpt. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

[4] Robert Darnton, “Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity,” in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 215-56.

[5] Regarding the pension, see Malcolm Cook, *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: A Life of Culture* (London: MHRA & Maney Publishing, 2006), p. 155.

[6] Quoted in Susan P. Conner, *The Age of Napoleon* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. 49.

[7] Anne-Marie Drouin-Hans, “De Bernardin de Saint-Pierre à Rousseau. Variations en miroir,” *Dix-huitième Siècle* 33 (2001): 495. Drouin-Hans notes that the articles in this special issue argue against that characterization as well.

April Shelford  
American University  
shelfor@american.edu

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without

permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172