



Letters from an American Farmer

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur

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From Introduction: "Hazlitt wrote that of the three notable writers whom the eighteenth century had produced, in the North American colonies, one was "the author (whoever he was) of the American Farmer's Letters." Crèvecoeur was that unknown author; and Hazlitt said further of him that he rendered, in his own vividly characteristic manner, "not only the objects, but the feelings, of a new country." Great is the essayist's relish for passages descriptive of "a battle between two snakes," of "the dazzling, almost invisible flutter of the humming- bird's wing," of the manners of "the Nantucket people, their frank simplicity, and festive rejoicings after the perils and hardships of the whale-fishing." "The power to sympathise with nature, without thinking of ourselves or others, if it is not a definition of genius, comes very near to it," writes Hazlitt of our author. And his references to Crèvecoeur are closed with the remark: "We have said enough of this ILLUSTRIOUS OBSCURE; for it is the rule of criticism to praise none but the over-praised, and to offer fresh incense to the idol of the day." Others, at least, have followed that "rule of criticism," and the American Farmer has long enjoyed undisturbed seclusion. Only once since the eighteenth century has there been a new edition of his Letters, that were first published at London in 1782, and reissued, with a few corrections, in the next year. The original American edition of this book about America was that published at Philadelphia in 1793, and there was no reprint till 1904, [Footnote: References may be found to American editions of 1794 and 1798, but no copies of such editions are preserved in any library to which the editor has had access.] when careless editing did all it could to destroy the value of the work, the name of whose very author was misstated. Yet the facts which we have concerning him are few enough to merit truthful presentation."

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Kristin Walker:

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