

Voltaire, Rousseau and the image of Geneva

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The eighteenth century was also the century in which Geneva became a centre of European intellectual life. Voltaire settled at the gates of the city, first at Les Délices and then at Ferney, on neighbouring French territory.¹ There he received lettered Europe, and there he also developed economic activities, notably a watch manufactory that employed craftsmen from Geneva, sometimes taking advantage of the city's political unrest.² The episode shows that the skilled workforce of the Fabrique could be drawn out of Geneva by a neighbouring entrepreneur, to the detriment of the financial centre.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, born in Geneva, signed some of his works with the title "citizen of Geneva". His books *Émile* and *Du contrat social* (The Social Contract) were condemned by the Genevan authorities in the early 1760s, which triggered a political crisis in the Republic.³ Rousseau, who had idealised his homeland, became a point of reference for the opponents of the Genevan oligarchy.

The image of Geneva in Enlightenment Europe was ambivalent. The article "Genève" in the *Encyclopédie*, written by d'Alembert, presented the city as a prosperous, educated and tolerant republic, which provoked sharp reactions from the Genevan pastors, to whom the article attributed liberal religious opinions.⁴ For foreign observers, Geneva embodied both the economic success of a small trading republic and the political tensions of a contested oligarchy.

This intellectual reputation contributed to the city's attractiveness for wealthy families, students and travellers. It also nourished the image of Geneva as a place of reason, culture and moderation, which would later accompany the construction of International Geneva.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (en), “Les Délices”: Voltaire moved into Les Délices (Saint-Jean, at the gates of Geneva) on 1 March 1755 and left the property for Ferney in 1760; the City of Geneva acquired the house in 1929 and installed the Institut et Musée Voltaire there (1952); Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS) [Historical Dictionary of Switzerland], art. “Ferney-Voltaire”: “Voltaire acquired the seigneurie in 1759 and rebuilt the château and the church in 1761”. ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Ferney-Voltaire”: “By creating various crafts (pottery, watchmaking, silk weaving) from 1758 to 1778, Voltaire attempted to diversify a very poor rural economy”; DHS, art. “Versoix”: Voltaire supported the Versoix port project, which would offer “a direct outlet for the watch manufactories of Ferney”; more than 1,200 Genevan natives attracted in February 1770. ↩
3. Wikipedia (en), “Emile, or On Education”: because of the “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar”, Émile was banned in Paris and Geneva and publicly burned in 1762, the year of its publication, and placed on the Index. ↩
4. Wikipedia (fr), “Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles”: in the article “Genève” in volume VII of the Encyclopédie (1757), d’Alembert praised the tolerance of the pastors, judged Genevan Christianity to be close to deism and criticised the moral strictness that “prohibits all theatrical performance”; the pastors drew up a declaration of orthodoxy to “refute any tendency towards Socinianism”; Rousseau composed his Lettre à d’Alembert in March–April 1758 (Amsterdam, Marc-Michel Rey), with a second edition from the beginning of 1759; Wikipedia (en), “Letter to M. d’Alembert on Spectacles”: more than four hundred articles and pamphlets in reply. ↩

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