



PROJECT MUSE®

**Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays
by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (review)**

Susan C. Imbarrato

Early American Literature, Volume 50, Number 1, 2015, pp. 248-252 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: [10.1353/eal.2015.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2015.0021)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/eal/summary/v050/50.1.imbarrato.html>

scholarship, however, will continue to struggle with clarifying the distinction between “exemplary” and “representative” biography.

There is something decidedly “neo-Whiggish” about *Biography and the Black Atlantic*. Like those historians of the 1960s and 1970s who emphasized the importance of human motives and ideas in the face of progressives’ economic determinism, the volume resists quantitative abstraction and opts instead for the moral value of human stories. Each chapter, moreover, is grounded in the figure of the liberal subject, the resilient and resourceful individual who nevertheless has an abiding social consciousness. The rhetoric of liberal individualism unsurprisingly permeates a volume dedicated to these exceptional figures who escaped slavery and claimed freedom for themselves. These subjects exemplify the virtues of “selfhood, dignity, prosperity, freedom, justice, and community” (11). They dramatize “the pathos of alienation and the human struggle to overcome it” (15). When the editors ask, *What is the “moral of these stories”?* then, I cannot help but believe that the answer resembles that which one finds, for example, in the published narrative of Venture Smith or, better (or worse) yet, Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography (14).

PHILIP GOULD *Brown University*

Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays

J. HECTOR ST. JOHN DE CRÈVECOEUR,
 edited and with an introduction by DENNIS D. MOORE
 Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013
 416 pp.

In J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), James the Farmer extols the simplicity and virtues of agrarian life, while also casting a critical eye on what he deems callous behaviors, especially those associated with slavery in the southern colonies and lawlessness on the frontier. Although initially unsure of his ability to comply with Mr. F. B.’s request for these letters, James is encouraged by the Englishman’s assertion that “writing letters is nothing more than talking on paper” (5). And so, James takes up his pen and records his observations from Pennsylvania and Nantucket to Charles Town and the western fron-

tier. From the optimism inspired by industriousness to the anguish fueled by war, Crèvecoeur's *Letters* and essays invite examination of an American identity as it is imagined and tested during this tumultuous transition from colony to Republic. A new, scholarly edition of these writings, *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays*, edited and with an introduction by Dennis D. Moore, aids this examination in important ways with extensive context that provides valuable resources for reading, studying, and teaching Crèvecoeur's writings and early American literature.

The edition includes the twelve letters along with thirteen essays that together present a dramatic narrative about early America. This drama is particularly evident in eight of the essays that as Moore explains "describe the turmoil that was, at ground level, the Revolution" (xx). They are "A Happy Family Disunited by the Spirit of Civil War," "The Commissioners," "Ingratitude Rewarded," "Susquehannah," "The Grotto," "The Frontier Woman," "History of Mrs. B.," and "The Man of Sorrow." With families torn apart, mysterious disappearance of friends into a subterranean cavern, clandestine interrogations, embattled settlements, stalwart women and despairing men, these portraits counter the bucolic harmony found in many of the letters. In "A Happy Family," the narrator nostalgically marks this contrast: "It was then the age of peace and innocence." In "Ingratitude Rewarded," he regretfully observes the current state of affairs: "'Tis human nature unchecked, nonrestrained in its most dangerous career of wealth and power" (186, 233). The other five essays offer equally compelling portrayals of travel, colonialism, slavery, military hospitals, and industriousness.

For this edition, Moore has worked closely with the Crèvecoeur manuscripts at the Library of Congress and archival material from Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library to make corrections to earlier editions, including restoring original titles and providing complete versions of both the letters and the essays. The introduction, "Moving beyond 'The Farmer of Feelings,'" provides extensive background and surveys a variety of critical approaches to these writings. Among many topics, Moore discusses shifts in "tone and perspective," from the "ebulliently utopian Letter III" to Letter IX "with its grisly, up-close representation of slavery" (x). In doing so, Moore notes how reading *Letters* in and out of sequence may affect perspective: "When readers encounter Letter III out of context, its many resonances of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pro-

motional writings about the so-called New World make it sound too good to be true" (x). In "Letter III, What Is an American?" Farmer James imagines "the feelings and thoughts" of "an enlightened Englishman when he first lands on this continent": "Here he beholds fair cities, substantial villages, extensive fields, an immense country filled with decent houses, good roads, orchards, meadows, and bridges where, a hundred years ago, all was wild, woody and uncultivated!" (28). All of this grandeur leads James to announce: "we are the most perfect society now existing in the world" (29). James also observes transformations of a different kind: "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" (31); "[m]en are like plants; the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow" (32). Moore notes that these two passages, in particular, from Letter III "are crucial to the pattern that scholars have recognized as American exceptionalism, the notion that there is something unique—and, supposedly, uniquely privileged—about being from America" (xix). Subsequent letters present a dramatic contrast, as in "Letter XII, Distresses of a Frontier Man" where James imagines fleeing from the turmoil of war, freeing his slaves, and finding refuge for his family in an Indian village, concluding with an appeal to "O Supreme Being!" to "Restore peace and concord to our poor, afflicted country; assuage the fierce storm which has so long ravaged it!" (173). Thus, what was once "the most perfect society" has become a "poor, afflicted country." These contrasts again address the issue of sequence, as Moore explains: "For a reader who has been proceeding through these selections in numerical order, then, Farmer James's shift from naïveté to disillusionment makes sense" (x).

In another area of investigation, Moore addresses varying degree of details in *Letters* that suggest different levels of direct observation. Letters IV–VIII about Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, for instance, include very specific details about the history, geography, and people, while "Letter IX, Description of Charles-Town; Thoughts on Slavery; on Physical Evil; a Melancholy Scene" has fewer specific details, which raises questions about the narrator's "firsthand observations." Moore elaborates: "There are no place names, for example, no references even to the salt air or to the rivers that converge in Charleston's deep and beautiful harbor" (xi). The question remains an open one, for "Crèvecoeur has had few biographers, and none has uncovered conclusive evidence to show that he did or did not set foot

in the Carolinas” (x–xi). Additionally, Moore marks distinctions between author and narrator, noting that “Farmer James, this fictional persona . . . supposedly lives on a farm near Carlisle, in Pennsylvania, rather than in Orange County, New York, where this ambitious young French-born author had established a life as, literally, an American farmer” (xi). A biographical overview follows in which Moore writes that Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813) was born in Normandy, went to Salisbury, England, “as a young man,” and then sailed to New France, where he “served as a cartographer and surveyor for the French militia there during the French and Indian War.” In 1759, he moved to the colony of New York, “married the daughter of a prosperous local family, and became an American farmer, using the name by which he was naturalized in 1765, St. John” (xi). After the war, he served as French consul for New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Moore then situates Crèvecoeur within his transatlantic milieu and underscores his Enlightenment connections, where prior to his diplomatic position, “Crèvecoeur enjoyed notoriety as a fixture in one of Paris’s fashionable literary salons, that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s former lover, the Countess D’Houdetot” (xi–xii).

Regarding various models for the *Letters*, Moore discusses John Dickinson’s *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1768), Voltaire’s *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733), and Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627). The last two references connect *Letters* to satire, as Moore explains, which leads to this question: “in establishing Farmer James’s naïveté so painstakingly in the opening three selections of *Letters*, might Crèvecoeur be satirizing a certain level of credulity on the part of some English colonists?” (xiii). Crèvecoeur’s Enlightenment and scientific interests are evident in “Letter X, On Snakes; and on the Humming-Bird” and “Letter XI, From Mr. Iw-n Al-z, a Russian Gentleman; Describing the Visit He Paid at My Request to Mr. John Bertram, the Celebrated Pennsylvanian Botanist,” which includes an interesting “interview” with John Bartram (1699–1777). Moore continues with a fascinating discussion of the French and English versions of *Letters*, when Crèvecoeur “rewrites *Letters*, converting it into the 1784 two-volume *Lettres d’un cultivateur américain* and the 1787 three-volume *Lettres*” (xiv). In “A Man of Feeling,” Moore discusses how “recent scholarship has helped to place [Crèvecoeur’s] writings within the larger eighteenth-century context of sensibility, with its emphasis on feelings” (xvi). “To Begin the World Anew” makes interesting connections between

Crèvecoeur's writings and the impulse toward change and regeneration found in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776).

"In a State of Civil War" looks at Crèvecoeur's writings as a direct response to the Revolutionary War. Moore again notes sequence: "If a reader chooses to begin with Letter XII, the near-apocalyptic 'Distresses of a Frontier Man,' and continue throughout much of the second half of this collection, the effect would be that Crèvecoeur is portraying a sense of graphic, violent tableaux. For him and his contemporaries who were experiencing the American Revolution firsthand, it was literally a civil war" (xx). For example, in Letter XII, "Crèvecoeur portrays Farmer James as a yeoman farmer who is shocked to be witnessing the horrors of civil war. One way in which he emphasizes Farmer James's unease is by calling attention to how much this narrator had, in simpler times, identified as a subject of the Crown" (xxi). Moore also addresses "whether Crèvecoeur himself believed that the thirteen colonies should break with the Crown" (xxii). Crèvecoeur's allegiances might perhaps be mirrored in "James's unease."

In "Literary Touches," Moore discusses various influences on Crèvecoeur's writings, such as Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759). And in a discussion of Crèvecoeur's narrative techniques, Moore cites the "Rock of Lisbon," dated New York, June 3, 1770, and "the earliest surviving piece of the author's juvenilia," and finds that this essay "stands as evidence that this young writer's ambitions included producing much more than a simple, straightforward account or record of life on the frontier in very early America. There is another frontier at play here, that between the realms of rationalism and of sensibility, and an expression that can help put that frontier in perspective, 'pre-Romantic'" (xxiv–xxv). These connections, in turn, demonstrate how, as Moore notes, "Crèvecoeur relished his role as a man of letters" (xxvii). The introduction thus offers a rich foundation on which to explore the imaginative, emerging perceptions of American identity through Crèvecoeur's diverse writings. Overall, Moore's edition of *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays* offers readers a meticulously researched, comprehensive, accessible collection that will significantly contribute to Crèvecoeur scholarship and early American studies.

SUSAN C. IMBARRATO *Minnesota State University Moorhead*