Madame De Staël

By

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The Château de Coppet, near Lake Geneva, Switzerland: Mme de Staêl's home and burial place.

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Preface

Many years ago, I decided to write a series of sketches of personalities who have marked the history of Geneva in Switzerland. These articles were published in English and French in local magazines. Among them was a short account of the life of Mme de Staël, one of the leading political and literary figures of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic era. I eventually came to realise that my account of her life was altogether inaccurate and inadequate. Also among these sketches was an article on Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, a long-serving, French politician of the same epoch and one of Mme de Staël's transient friends. After completing a longer study of Talleyrand, the question arose of "what next?", and there seemed only one choice.

Mme de Staël led a tumultuous existence. The purpose of this book is to present the main events in her life for the general reader, outlines of her principal publications, portraits of her family, opponents, friends and lovers, and a description of her influence on French politics and European literature during her lifetime.

The material from this book has been drawn from the selected list of publications appearing in the sources. The study of Mme de Staël is a vast field of scholarship and many of these publications contain extensive lists of notes, references and chronologies. The present book is intended for the general reader and merely lists the most interesting sources. Those readers wishing to take a more profound interest in Mme de Staël's life are directed to these publications, which sometimes focus on a particular episode or on a particular relationship. I have attempted to synthesize the many different approaches and, like the majority of these publications, to create a continuous historical narrative. Inevitably, these books contain a multitude of contrasting points of view and interpretations of events (not to mention significant discrepancies!), and I have attempted to avoid any controversial issues. I express my sincere gratitude to those authors on whose research I have drawn and hasten to point out that any remaining errors are my own.

I have benefited from the corrections and comments of a number of people who accepted to read the draft of this book and to whose suggestions I am profoundly grateful: Karin Kaminker, Debra Kinson, David Stieber, Sarah Wellborn and Béat Zumbach.

JOHN FOX

Introduction

On 13 July 1812, in a little Ukrainian village on the frontier between the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, an Austrian border guard paid Mme de Staël a formidable compliment: "There are, therefore, only three independent powers left in the world: England, Russia and you!" Over the previous twelve years, she had goaded the dictator Napoleon about the lack of liberty and tolerance in France. In retaliation, the French Emperor had tried to silence her, to isolate her—his most outspoken critic. His efforts, however, only succeeded in drawing attention to her writings and promoted her fame on a European scale. Faced with increasing repression from Napoleon's government and the risk of arrest and imprisonment, she chose to exile herself, making her more famous than any other person in Europe, with the exception of Napoleon himself.

If ever an illustration were needed for the proverb "the pen is mightier than the sword", the confrontation between Mme de Staël and Napoleon Bonaparte would serve as an excellent example. Napoleon was very fond of tormenting people and Germaine de Staël was one of his preferred victims. The confrontation between Mme de Staël and Napoleon reached a point where only one of them would prevail—she lost all the battles but won the war. What is most remarkable is that, while Napoleon was making her life impossible, she was on the very best of terms with his brothers Joseph and Lucien.

Owing to her father's wealth, Mme de Staël was rich. As a banker, her father had acquired a fortune of such proportions that he lived the latter part of his life in great comfort, passing the management of his bank to his brother and concentrating on politics. Even though he was Swiss and a Protestant, he became the first minister of Louis XVI in Catholic France. During his initial years in charge of the French Government, he enjoyed a status among the general population approaching glory. Mme de Staël worshipped her father, treating him like a god who inspired her acts and thoughts.

When she was a teenager, her father purchased the Château de Coppet in a village situated between Geneva and Lausanne in Switzerland. At first, she hated the place, finding it isolated and boring. Because it was impossible to heat the building satisfactorily, the family would often spend the winter months in Geneva, Lausanne, Paris or travelling. During her frequent periods of exile from Paris, Mme de Staël was often obliged to move her salon to Coppet, Geneva or Lausanne. As a direct result of her exile, the summer seasons at Coppet would come to surpass all other salons, before or since.

In the eighteenth century, the people who hosted the most prestigious salons in Paris were usually rich, beautiful and charming aristocratic women, but they did not pretend to compete with their guests' intellectual brilliance. Mme de Staël was wealthy, charming and intelligent but not a noble and not beautiful. Nevertheless, she considered herself equal to any man, dominating the discussions in any room she entered. She expressed her opinion on politics, religion, literature, justice, morality and philosophy and wrote newspaper articles, pamphlets and books, where she challenged contemporary social attitudes. She became a well-known author, admired throughout Europe but, because it was an unusual role for a woman, attracted mockery. She defended the freedom of the press while contemplating with horror the resulting deluge of calumny, of which she was often herself the victim.

Many influential Europeans attended Mme de Staël's summer salons at Coppet in Switzerland, where freedom and tolerance reigned supreme. What distinguished these events was that groups formed spontaneously in her house and garden, consisting of individuals of different nationalities and different religions, promoting no particular literary style nor beating any particular political drum. Nevertheless, the literary output of the *Groupe de Coppet* marked a major step forward in European thought, culture and civilization.

At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, Germaine de Staël was a creature whose actions and writings contradicted the accepted social norms of female decorum and male authority. She challenged the patriarchal attitudes and injustices that were intended to

ensure women's social subordination. She harangued the Duke of Wellington; she goaded French government ministers; she taunted German philosophers; she treated the Tsar of Russia as an equal; and cracked jokes at the Pope's expense, hoping that integrity might guide these leaders' actions. The only sovereign who did not see her as an equal—Napoleon Bonaparte—she treated with contempt. To accomplish this, she had at her disposal some powerful weapons—wealth, intelligence, fearlessness and an extraordinary ability to express herself with words. Although Mme de Staël did not feel constrained by the common rules governing society, she was still obliged to accept that, at that historical epoch, there was no place for women in politics. Therefore, she always had to act by proxy, transmitting the political ambitions reflected in her writings through her male friends, many of whom became important members of parliament, government ministers, ambassadors, administrators or political journalists.

Mme de Staël cared deeply about politics—the theory and practice of the exercise of power. Her political aims were always moderate, liberal and practical, but expressed through a triangular tangle of ideals, hero worship and sexual love. In a slew of contradictions, she tended to confuse nationalism with cosmopolitanism, high society with equality, and sobriety with enthusiasm. She invited successful people from all horizons to her salon—nobles, diplomats, politicians, journalists, philosophers, playwrights and poets—admiring the manners, the sophistication and the ethics of those who were brought up to govern. With her extraordinary ability to analyse situations and to express herself clearly, she identified the ideal conditions for bringing the French Revolution to a successful conclusion. She belonged to a liberal group who were very attached to the British model of government consisting of a constitutional monarchy providing a balance of power between a king and a two-chamber parliament. Even before the French Revolution, with her father and a group of like-minded politicians, she strongly recommended that France should be governed in the same way as Great Britain. While she recommended moderate politicians on the left and the right to unite in the formation of a national government, she was attacked violently with slanderous accusations by extremists from the republican and royalist camps, her principal fault being that she was woman! Although she rejected violence

as a political weapon, she was often held responsible for riots, plots and satirical publications in which she had no hand—once again, it was easy to blame a woman! The members of her moderate group would watch aghast as, in the decade following the French Revolution, the republican extremists and the conservative royalists conducted a life-and-death struggle for control of the nation until Napoleon seized power for himself. As the principles of the French Revolution were gradually eroded and the royal family destroyed, her group of liberal politicians became the subject of scorn by radicals and the victims of propaganda under Napoleon's dictatorship.

At this time, women were legally minors, subject to their husband's whims and without any political or economic rights. Mme de Staël drew attention to the inferior role forced upon women by society and championed their education and their emancipation. The matter of equal rights for women had been raised by the Marquis de Condorcet in 1790, with Mme de Staël deeply interested in this subject. Votes for women, however, were still a long way off. Her attitude gave rise to a storm of ridicule, calumny and vilification. She thought that this was too high a price to pay for a politically active role for women, so she continued to exercise her influence through her male colleagues. She declared that it was the way society treated women that reflected its level of civilization.

Despite her steadfast belief in liberal politics, Mme de Staël was not a democrat—she was perfectly happy with inequality. She was not in favour of universal suffrage, believing that, at a time when most people were illiterate, giving all men the vote rapidly equated with anarchy. Her opinion was that the country should be managed by able, intelligent and educated leaders elected by the propertied classes who would then guarantee civil liberties for all. The French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen had acknowledged that all men were equal but she believed that the elite was more apt to govern the country. It had been believed at the beginning of the Revolution that universal suffrage would produce a serviceable government that, once jump-started, would run smoothly and indefinitely. In reality, the Revolution, seeking to bring happiness to mankind, sparked a conflagration. The behaviour of large population groups turned out to be wildly unpredictable and, under the

influence of demagogues (not to mention alcohol), the common people were inclined to sudden outbursts of fanaticism and violence. As a result, following the revolution, successive governments disappeared rapidly without a trace into a black hole. After 1789, it would take France 169 years, three monarchies, five republics and two dictatorships to find political stability once again.

Mme de Staël was a risk-taker. At the height of the massacres in Paris in September 1792, with intoxicated, blood-stained, armed hordes roaming the streets, she drove in her carriage around the city counting upon her diplomatic immunity as Swedish ambassadress to protect her, while ensuring that her friends had found shelter and/or providing money for their escape. Although pregnant, one morning she was seized by the mob and came very close to becoming another of Robespierre's victims. It was a time when denunciation by a drunkard was sufficient to be arrested—to be arrested was proof of guilt and, if your influential friends did not intervene rapidly, execution on the guillotine often followed without further delay. At a time when it was customary to tolerate no political adversaries, she combatted the revolutionaries who espoused "Jacobinism", the counter-revolutionaries who continued to believe in the king's divine right, and Napoleon who tolerated no opposition of any kind. He expected women to run their households, bring up their children, "to mend shoes" and "to stick to knitting".

Even under normal circumstances, Mme de Staël travelled indefatigably. Along with her constant commuting between France and Switzerland, she travelled all over Europe: Austria, Germany, Italy, Russia, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Much later, when Napoleon had forcibly confined her to the Château de Coppet and its environs, she decided to flee to London via a circuitous route passing through Zürich, Vienna, Kiev, Moscow, St Petersburg and Stockholm—a voyage of several thousand kilometres in a wooden, horse-drawn coach. Without being extravagant, when she travelled abroad, she behaved and was treated like a monarch, often accompanied by her male intellectual support team, while her servants travelled with the luggage in a separate vehicle.

Mme de Staël hated to be alone. Her apartments in Paris, Geneva and Lausanne, her château in Coppet and her various, rented residences elsewhere were often teeming with guests, members of her family and servants. Everyone wanted to meet her, to listen to her—she enjoyed the fame of a diva. Her verdict on herself was: "I was condemned to celebrity." Though she did have a number of female friends and relatives—the beautiful Juliette Récamier being the most faithful—wherever she went she was accompanied by a coterie of loyal menfolk, lovers and former lovers, but also enthusiastic, chaste and intelligent retainers.

Her parents, Suzanne and Jacques Necker, were devoted to each other throughout their married life. Their daughter sought the same successful, uplifting, indestructible love … and fell at the first hurdle. She desired to share her life with a man she admired—like her father—but things got off to a poor start with her arranged marriage to Erik Magnus de Staël. With the handsome, dashing, intelligent Louis de Narbonne, she believed she had found her man of destiny but the failed relationship with him was a prelude to years of chaos as, one after another, her love affairs collapsed. In truth, with her lovers, Mme de Staël had a taste for histrionic quarrels, theatrical collapses, threats of suicide, paroxysms of grief and tearful reconciliations. Her egotistical, capricious, domineering and sporadically hysterical behaviour intimidated and estranged her lovers. She demanded, she expected, she required devotion so complete that her paramours soon found themselves unable to satisfy such passion and were rewarded with colourful descriptions of their shortcomings. The result was that they would remove themselves from her presence, often to considerable distances. However, while apparently heartbroken over the loss of one lover, she might be actively trying to seduce another. Unencumbered by social mores, her life was a perpetual pursuit of happiness—a goal she was perfectly incapable of ever reaching.

Mme de Staël was aware that she was not beautiful, neither was she elegant since she used little jewellery and often dressed herself carelessly, choosing to wear brightly coloured, short-sleeved dresses that revealed her cleavage, the whole topped off with shawls and outrageous turbans adorned with feathers. Nevertheless, her energy, her endless inspiration, her vast knowledge, her spellbinding conversation and her generosity fascinated

and overwhelmed a range of men, both lovers and those virtuous courtiers who remained faithful to her until her death. She was capable of an astonishing capacity for seduction, particularly of handsome roués. An exception to this rule was the bespectacled Benjamin Constant, who took a long time to overcome her resistance to his red hair and strange mannerisms. However, Constant's intelligence and ideas placed him as her equal and he eventually imposed himself as her indispensable partner. For a period of sixteen years, their intellectual partnership became vital for both of them. She was never bored in his company, which was, nonetheless, marked by stormy scenes. Every time they were separated, it soon became apparent that they were lost without each other.

Even as a teenager, Germaine experienced bouts of melancholy. Her sadness often had a material cause: a lover who absconded, ostracism by French society, political exile, her father's death. There was a continuous torment of dissatisfaction and nostalgia for the lost glory when her father had governed France. However, there seemed to have been a cyclical rhythm associated with insomnia, which she combatted by absorbing increasing doses of opium. Opium, which derived from a species of poppy grown abundantly in British India, was introduced into Europe in the late eighteenth century and, at the time, was considered as a harmless recreational drug. It was used as the panacea for a huge range of ailments: arthritis, chest infections, depression, diarrhoea, headaches, insomnia, period pains, etc. It was freely available as a powder or paste at a modest price from a range of shops and could be consumed diluted in water or wine. Although it is not always mentioned, a vast number of people appearing in this book employed opium on a regular basis and were, no doubt, hooked on it—starting with Germaine's mother. Its popularity among the intelligentsia eventually drew the attention of medical authorities to its highly addictive qualities. Because of her existing bipolar disorder, Germaine's opium dependence would affect her health and shorten her life.

She gave birth to five children but did not seem to be motivated by maternal instincts involving babies. When her surviving children reached school age, however, she took the greatest possible personal care over their education, with the outcome that they were devoted to her. She brought

her children up respecting the advances of the Age of Enlightenment, an intellectual and philosophical movement that emphasized science as the source of knowledge and promoted ideals such as freedom, a constitutional government, the rule of law and religious tolerance. Although she had firm faith in God, given the minor observance she actually paid to religion, it is remarkable that her surviving son and daughter both grew up to become devout Christians.

Mme de Staël was a European long before the term had its present meaning: her father came from a Prussian family, her nationality was Genevan, she was born in Paris, she spoke French, English, Italian and German. At Coppet, she shone like a supernova over the talents that arrived from all over the continent. At a time when Napoleon's armies marched from victory to victory, she rejected any form of forced union based on invasion and conquest, favouring respect, agreement and tolerance between countries. She also saw through every despotic regime: "Those guilty of doing harm in every period have tried to attribute some generous pretext to themselves to excuse their actions; there are almost no crimes in existence which their perpetrators have not attributed to honour, religion or liberty."

Mme de Staël was a furious writer and was able to express herself in a wonderfully clear style. She was only happy when she was writing and perplexed when her words resulted in exile and censorship. She would write standing up at a mantelpiece, with a tablet on her knees, while talking with friends and having her hair dressed during her morning toilette—rarely sitting at a desk. For many years, there was not the least work-surface in her bedroom on which she could write. It was only after the publication of her novel *Corinne* in 1807 that she declared: "I would like to have a large table. I believe that I deserve it at present." At the time of their publication, her books caused a sensation, at least in part due to her reputation as Napoleon's enemy—a status largely fuelled by the emperor himself. She believed that: "Provided it does not harm others, everything that is private and intimately personal, like opinion, should not be subject by law to the social power."

* * *

A few words should be addressed to the reader to aid comprehension. From her birth until her marriage in 1786, the daughter of Suzanne and Jacques Necker was known as Louise Necker; from that moment, until a few months before her death in 1817, she became Madame Germaine de Staël. On this same subject, it should also be borne in mind that, until his enthronement as Emperor of France in December 1804, Napoleon I is referred to as Napoleon Bonaparte.

The reader should also be warned that it is sometimes difficult to follow the tumultuous career of her husband, Erik Magnus de Staël, the Swedish ambassador to France. He experienced an amazing series of vicissitudes, through provisional appointments, confirmed appointments, sudden dismissals, equally unexpected reappointments, disgrace and so on until his definitive removal from the post in 1799. The same remark applies to the efficient Minister of Police, Joseph Fouché, who, between, 1800 and 1814 was continuously either in or out of favour with Napoleon. His significance is that, when in office, he relaxed the emperor's harassment of Mme de Staël in an indulgent manner.

During Mme de Staël's lifetime, the French parliament changed its name and its form an extraordinary number of times. For instance, between the spring and summer of 1789, over the space of only a few weeks, it was first known as the States-General, then the National Assembly and then the Constituent Assembly. A similar rapid sequence of name changes took place in 1792 and continued at intervals over the following years and decades, with the legislature sometimes existing as one chamber, sometimes two and sometimes three, and always with new designations, relationships with the government and degrees of power.

From late 1793 until the beginning of 1805, the French Revolutionary Calendar was employed. It formed part of the system to remove all religious and royalist references from the days, weeks and months, as well as forming part of a larger move towards decimalization in France. The calendar did not begin with the declaration of the Revolution in mid-1789. Four years later, in late 1793, a committee was appointed to examine the proposal for a new decimal calendar. It decided that Year I had actually taken place between September 1792 and September 1793—in other words,

it had already been completed before the committee met! Therefore, the new calendar would commence with Year II. When it was fully introduced, the revolutionary calendar was said to have begun on the date of the autumn equinox on 22 September 1793—*1 Vendémiaire,* Year II. After he became Emperor of France for life, Napoleon I dismissed this delightful but impractical system in order to follow the Gregorian calendar used by the rest of Europe.

Before the French Revolution, the money of France had been the *livre*, with smaller denominations such as the *écu*, and larger ones such as twenty *livres* making a *louis* and twenty-four a *louis d'or.* In 1795, the government introduced the decimal *franc* with a value similar to that of the *livre*. Since this book covers the period from the 1760s to the 1820s, the reader will encounter both terms—*livre* and *franc*—and should consider them as roughly equivalent and interchangeable.

Chapter I
Necker's daughter

The beautiful but strait-laced Mme Necker was astonished to discover that she had conceived a child.

Suzanne Curchod was the daughter of a Presbyterian priest from the Swiss village of Crassier, lying on the French border between Geneva and Lausanne. Switzerland is a federation and, nowadays, this village lies in the independent French-speaking Canton of Vaud but, for two hundred and fifty years before Suzanne's birth, this region had been governed by the neighbouring German-speaking Canton of Berne. Suzanne's father made sure that his daughter received a thorough education, so she could speak and write French, German, English and Latin, and had some knowledge of Greek, mathematics, geometry, chemistry and physics; she took an interest in literature and could paint skilful watercolours, as well as being able to play the harpsichord and the violin. She was also taught how to run a household, while respecting strict religious and moral principles. The attentive reader may note that sadly such essential matters as sex education and obstetrics were completely overlooked with consequences that we will discover. Above all, she was an attractive, blue-eyed blonde and gravitated to Lausanne, which enjoyed a rich social life. Suzanne was too educated to become the wife of a local farmer and too poor to aspire to marry into the Swiss gentry. When she was 20, the British writer and historian Edward Gibbon fell in love with her and wished to marry her, but paternal disapproval on both sides and Suzanne's refusal to leave Switzerland for England forced Gibbon to break off his engagement. Gibbon was well-mannered, well-spoken, very intelligent and rich but it did not help that, even at the age of 20, he was no Adonis. Following the death of her father, Suzanne scraped a living by giving private lessons to pupils in Lausanne, where she moved in the best circles. Abandoning Lausanne, she gravitated to Geneva, where she became the tutor to, among other clients, the children of a Pastor Paul-Claude Moultou, one of her father's former students. Among Moultou's closest friends were the two greatest writers of the Age of Enlightenment: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire. One day, Moultou

learned that Gibbon was about to visit Rousseau and asked the philosopher to persuade the Englishman to step in and rescue Suzanne from both spinsterhood and indigence. Rousseau refused to help stating that, if Gibbon did not appreciate the true value of Mlle Curchod, he was not worthy of her. While in Geneva, Suzanne was drawn in pastels by the famous portraitist Jean-Etienne Liotard.

However, a solution to Suzanne's predicament was about to present itself. A young, wealthy and extremely pretty Parisian widow, Mme Anne-Germaine de Vermenoux, had come to Geneva to consult Dr Théodore Tronchin, a fashionable physician at this time with an elegant European clientele. Mme de Vermenoux rented rooms in central Geneva in the same house as Pastor Moultou, where Suzanne Curchod was already living, with the result that the two ladies became acquainted. When the time came for Mme de Vermenoux to return to Paris, she proposed a modest salary for Suzanne to accompany her, without establishing exactly in what capacity. Suzanne's mother had recently died and she was thrilled to be invited to Paris. Possessing nothing but her good looks, her ambition and her self-confidence, in the spring of 1764 Suzanne Curchod accompanied Mme de Vermenoux to the French capital. It soon transpired that the task her new employer expected Suzanne to perform was to look after her 8-year-old son, a chore which corresponded neither to her expectations nor her interests. She found the company attending Mme de Vermenoux's salon disappointing and, furthermore, she was required to dress herself to a standard that was beyond her means. Assuming her mother's maiden name, she began to call herself Mlle Suzanne d'Albert de Nasse and sought posts as a governess in England or in Germany. Meanwhile, the beautiful Mme de Vermenoux had caught the attention of a young Swiss banker who was looking for a wife. Suzanne's life was about to undergo a sudden and spectacular transformation.

Jacques Necker was the second son of Karl-Friedrich Necker, a Prussian lawyer who had been appointed as professor of German law at the University of Geneva. At this time, thanks to its reputation as a fierce bastion of Protestantism, Geneva was an independent city republic. Through his marriage to Jeanne Gautier, the daughter of the director of the Genevan Government, Charles Frédéric Necker (as he now called himself)

was soon granted citizenship of the city by special dispensation, as well as obtaining a seat on the city's religious council.

While the Necker family concentrated its ambitions on Louis, their eldest son, younger brother Jacques entered the Geneva branch of the Banque Vernet at the age of 16 as a bookkeeper. Jacques's father was good friends with Pastor Vernet, whose brother Isaac was the director of the bank in Paris. The Roman Catholic Church had decreed that usury or money-lending was immoral, so the Parisian banking system relied heavily upon the employment of Protestants, of whom the Genevans and the Dutch were the most numerous. Soon, Jacques Necker was transferred to the bank's headquarters in Paris and made himself indispensable to Isaac Vernet. In 1756, at the age of 24, he was made a partner of the bank, now renamed Vernet, Thellusson and Necker. Vernet retired from the bank in 1762 and Thellusson was transferred to England as manager of the London branch. By the age of 33, through intelligence, daring, hard work and an honesty beyond reproach, Jacques Necker became the unique director of the bank and a principal associate of the Parisian banking fraternity. Jacques Necker had become rich by speculating on the grain trade and government loans, with the agony of the royal finances giving ample opportunities for private financiers to make fortunes. He lived and dressed modestly, kept no mistress, attended no important salons and consorted mainly with other Genevan financiers. The sister-in-law of his partner Isaac de Thellusson was the same Mme de Vermenoux, Suzanne's employer, whose fortune was managed by the shy Jacques. Mme de Vermenoux had no romantic interest in her Swiss banker and often left him alone with her child's nanny. Jacques quickly transferred his attention to Mlle d'Albert de Nasse. At the age of 27, the highly strung Suzanne must have resigned herself to spinsterhood but, only a few months after her arrival in Paris, Jacques married her according to Protestant rites on 30 September 1764. Mme de Vermenoux, learning about this event through an embarrassed letter from Suzanne, observed maliciously: "They are so boring together that this will give them something to do." It may have been distressing for her to acknowledge that her former employee now enjoyed more wealth than herself.

In one bound, Suzanne Curchod leapt from humbleness to opulence. Suzanne and Jacques were not only united by love but shared the same

strict moral principles and the same love of God. Their marriage would be a source of infinite satisfaction and happiness to both of them, with the couple becoming utterly devoted to each other. She considered her husband as the very incarnation of worldly wisdom, declaring for all to hear with missionary zeal that he was incomparable, equal to a god, etc. Mme Necker wrote the following sketch of her husband: "Picture to yourself the most humourless fellow in the whole world […] completely persuaded of his own superiority." Despite his elevated sense of his own worth, neither his physical appearance nor his conversational skills could be counted among Jacques's assets.

Even in the early days of her pregnancy, Mme Necker had already begun to doubt that she would survive childbirth and began to look for an adoptive mother who was sufficiently advanced in years so as not to present a temptation to her soon-to-be-bereaved husband. Her first choice fell on Marie-Cathérine Vernet, wife of her husband's former partner at the bank. Suzanne wrote to Mme Vernet begging her to be the godmother of the future child, whose birth she anticipated with impatience, since the pregnancy was causing her considerable discomfort. Mme Vernet declined the honour so, not knowing many other people in Paris, Suzanne next turned to Mme de Vermenoux, whose qualifications for the post were even less inspiring than those of Mme Vernet.

As the moment of birth approached, Suzanne's days and nights were punctuated by pains so intense that she could not sleep and became convinced that the only outcome would be her death. After labour lasting three days and two nights, at 6 o'clock on the afternoon of 22 April 1766, in their mansion on the Rue de Cléry in Paris, Suzanne Necker finally gave birth to a daughter, Louise—it would be her unique child. Although she survived the experience, it was so awful that two months later she was still ravaged in her body and mortified in her mind. How was it possible for God to allow such suffering? She gave her verdict on pregnancy: "The revolting details of childbirth had been hidden from me with such care that I was as surprised as I was horrified."

As a disciple of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, she set out to breast-feed the child, even though the task disgusted her. She persevered, but neither the mother

nor the child seemed to benefit from it. It took Mme Necker three months after the birth of her baby daughter to realize that the child was starving to death. When the mother's milk dried up, the function of wet-nurse was passed to a Flemish lady whose provision was inexhaustible. The health of both mother and daughter quickly flourished. Louise soon seemed impatient to start talking. The child's eyes, which had been blue at birth, turned to the flashing dark brown almost black that would be a remarkable trait of her adult years.

Suzanne Necker then began to envisage how to bring up this creature that had cost her so much physical discomfort to become a new-and-improved version of herself. She wanted "Minette", as her parents called her, to benefit from the same individual attention that she had received herself as a child. With intense care and respecting her mother's moral principles, Louise would be educated in all the arts, languages and sciences. By the time she was 16 years old, Minette would become a walking, talking encyclopaedia. However, Mme Necker's daughter would eventually rebel against her mother, becoming her rival, appropriating her husband's affection and achieving Continental notoriety, while straying far from the mother's preordained moral path. Until the child was old enough to enter this wonderful programme of instruction, she was cared for by a team of maids who bore the unpardonable drawback of being Roman Catholics or *Papists!* Mme Necker wrote to one of her correspondents in Switzerland asking him to find her a nursemaid who was kind, gentle, knew how to read and possessed the much-sought-after Protestant faith. Unfortunately, no such person was forthcoming.

Encouraged by his wife, an important change took place in Jacques Necker's career. With his colleagues from the banking fraternity, he had begun to lend huge sums of money to the French Royal Treasury and had magnanimously allowed the government to set the interest rates that it wished to pay, with the result that he was viewed very favourably at Louis XV's court. Furthermore, the king's ministers had a tendency to listen to his advice: "He carried with him the aura of power and money, which was so obvious that one could not ignore it." Among the general public, he acquired the reputation of a man whose opinion was worth listening to. Then, at the beginning of 1768, with the support of the French prime-

minister Étienne-François, Duke de Choiseul, he was granted a diplomatic position as the chargé d'affaires for the Republic of Geneva to the French court at Versailles, which involved being presented to King Louis XV. This was Jacques Necker's first step from banker to statesman. He then became a director of the French East India Company, around which a fierce political debate revolved about the company's administration and autonomy. When the company went bankrupt in 1769, Necker bought up the company's ships and stock of unsold goods. He then withdrew from his responsibilities at the bank, being replaced by his elder brother. Louis Necker had been working as a professor of mathematics and physics at the Academy of Geneva. He had married Isabelle André from Marseille but she had died in 1759 and Louis had subsequently consoled himself in the arms of another man's wife. This man had very traditional views about adultery and, surprising the couple in bed, discharged his pistol into his wife's lover. Even though Voltaire gleefully portrayed him as a hero and a martyr, the wounded Louis Necker was obliged to leave Geneva and convalesced with his brother in Paris. Through the acquisition of an estate in the Geneva region, Louis had become known by the title of M. de Germagny. Thus, at the age of 39, in order to devote himself to a political career, younger brother Jacques removed himself from any involvement with the bank's affairs, which, however honest and respectable, might raise the taint of corruption in the public's eyes. Both Louis and Jacques Necker would become millionaires.

M. and Mme Necker began to figure as personalities in Parisian society. Suzanne Necker showed an interest in literary circles, inviting well-known writers to dinner at their home on Rue de Cléry in the city centre. At first, unable to compete with the most elegant salons, she had to content herself with less-celebrated guests. Despite her rigid Swiss morality, lack of spontaneity and profound attachment to her Calvinistic roots, she welcomed Catholics and even tolerated several leading militant atheists. Soon, visitors to her salon included the most distinguished thinkers of the day: novelists, philosophers and journalists. To these great names were added those of bankers, economists, government ministers, scientists, lawyers and diplomats who formed part of Jacques Necker's growing circle of influence. Particular family friends included the well-known journalist Jean-Baptiste Suard and one of the editors of the *Encyclopédie,* Friedrich

Melchior, known as Melchior von Grimm. Other frequent guests were the incorrigible rogue and playwright Pierre de Beaumarchais (author of *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*) and the philosophers Voltaire and Rousseau. While remaining firmly the wife of Jacques Necker, she exchanged a particularly rich correspondence with her old acquaintance Pastor Moultou from Geneva and especially with Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte, the Count de Guibert. The writer Jean-François Marmontel gave a mini-portrait of Suzanne Necker: "Without style in her dress, without ease in her bearing, without charm in her politeness, her manner, as with her expression, was too controlled to be graceful." Another visitor described her as follows: "God, before creating her, dipped her inside and out in a tub of starch." The guests were not only invited to the supper table but were sometimes entertained by excerpts from plays presented by a well-known actress, Claire Josèphe Hippolyte Léris, known professionally as La Clairon. Everyone agreed that Jacques Necker, when he was present, remained distractedly distant, silent; one might even say bored.

Surprisingly, Mme Necker does not seem to have had any qualms about exposing her daughter Louise to the radical ideas arising from the Age of Enlightenment, such as atheism and liberalism. The guests at her salon were in favour of rejecting the past and, for good measure, religion and the aristocracy too, but they were less clear about what followed. These independent fighters for justice, tolerance and education questioned everything and accepted nothing unless and until it had been scientifically proven. In Mme Necker's opinion, the sophisticated language and noble thoughts of her eminent guests pardoned their daring ideas and their lack of faith in God. They believed that, with economic progress, the middle class would rise up and triumph over the aristocracy—but how, they were not sure. Thus, Louise Necker grew up in a world where enlightenment and religion were complimentary, rejecting superstition and dogma in all their forms.

Suzanne Necker sought to make contact with the ladies of the high aristocracy who dominated the salon society in Paris. Jacques Necker himself had begun to write and publish, one of his first contributions being *Éloge de Jean-Baptiste Colbert* [In Praise of Colbert], which received a prize from the *Académie française* for eloquence. One of society's leaders, the blind

Mme du Deffand, asked the philosopher Voltaire for his opinion on Necker's publication. Upon receiving Voltaire's endorsement, she invited Suzanne Necker to attend her salon, which gave her guest an introduction to the grand ladies belonging to the royal court. At first, Mme Necker held her salon in the family's home in central Paris, before hiring the sumptuous Château de Madrid in the Bois de Boulogne. Furthermore, when Necker purchased the Château de Saint-Ouen, a suburban retreat near the River Seine, the family moved into a neighbourhood peopled with celebrities, notably the Countess de Boufflers. It was in this splendid society that the infant Louise Necker made her first public appearances and it was as a member of this political, literary and social elite that Louise would identify herself for the rest of her life.

The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau had published the ground-breaking *Émile* in 1762 and Mme Necker told her friends that she intended to raise her child according to Rousseau's recommendations—bringing the child up in the country and not beginning education until the twelfth year. Rousseau's "Émile" would be educated only through direct physical experience developing his natural gifts, his body made strong by living in the open air; nature study was his only discipline and textbook. However, by an astonishing feat of self-delusion, Mme Necker did nothing of the sort! Although she admired Rousseau, she paid no attention whatsoever to the upbringing of a child described in his books. With Louise sitting on a stool at the foot of her mother's armchair in their Parisian drawing room, from an early age she instructed her in everything from mathematics to theology, modern and classical languages, history, geography and music. La Clairon (of whom we have not heard the last!) was engaged to teach Louise dancing and drama. On the other hand, the child showed little interest in drawing and painting—and was never, ever permitted to play with other children. Later, Louise was introduced to the works of Rousseau, as well as those of other famous philosophers of the epoch: Voltaire, Turgot and Condorcet. Apart from these lessons, the mother and daughter never seem to have indulged in such mundane matters as banal conversation.

Despite her prim, stiff manner, through sheer self-discipline and determination Mme Necker's salon became one of the most brilliant in Paris. She was proud to show off her daughter, who could amuse the

erudite visitors with her banter. Louise was allowed to mingle with these guests and the mother was no doubt delighted to hear her small child discuss the finer points of literature with popular authors. These serious, clever visitors, such as Melchior von Grimm, Jean-François Marmontel and the Abbé Raynal, liked to tease the child by asking her questions ostensibly beyond her understanding and were entertained by her precocious responses. At the dinner table, she was told to remain silent but, as her friend Cathérine Huber observed: "Her eyes followed the movements of those who spoke and gave the impression of anticipating their thoughts."

The French royal finances were in a mess and the Abbé Terray had attempted to bring order to them, but his efforts were rendered null and void by the death of Louis XV in 1774, leading to a total government reshuffle under a new, young monarch. By the time Louis XVI was crowned King of France, the government's economic situation was desperate. Louis appointed as his Minister of Finance Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, acknowledged as one of the most far-sighted political economists of all time, a great thinker, writer, administrator, philanthropist and statesman—above all, an advocate of *laissez-faire* capitalism, where the government did not interfere in the workings of the free market. Turgot demanded a series of sweeping reforms, such as the restructuring of the royal household, the introduction of religious tolerance, the encouragement of private enterprise, a complete education system for all, relief for the poor, etc. However, as would be the sad litany for the next fifteen years, those who bore the brunt of the economy measures and reforms objected so strongly that the wavering king hesitated to implement them. Judged by ordinary standards, Turgot was a failure for, after twenty months, he was thrown out of office. The measures to which he had devoted his life were soon abandoned; the flagrant abuses which he had tried to abolish were restored; and the opportunities that he had opened for talented people to contribute to national prosperity, peace and influence blocked. France now began its plunge towards one of the greatest social catastrophes that the modern era had ever seen. Turgot's position had been undermined by the admiration of the intellectuals for Jacques Necker, who even the common people had come to regard as an economist of genius.

The fundamental problem was the supply of wheat and hence the price of bread. Already in 1770, the Abbé Galiani, a member of Mme Necker's salon, called attention to this serious problem. With a bad harvest in 1774, the price of wheat began to rise, accompanied by the threat of famine. While prime-minister Turgot was facing riots in the streets over the bread supply, by pure coincidence Jacques Necker published his eloquent and scholarly treatise *Sur la législation et commerce des grains* [On the Legislation and Trade of Grains]. He stated that managing the supply of food for the common people was the government's inescapable duty and was more important than commercial grain suppliers simply selling their wheat to the highest bidder. Furthermore, the government should ensure that there were reserves available to face the inevitable years when the harvest failed. When Turgot and a number of political journalists reacted strongly to Necker's arguments, the king began to lose confidence in his minister. Although calm was eventually restored, this rehearsal for the events of the French Revolution contributed to establishing Necker's reputation. The 8-year-old Louise Necker gloried in her father's fame, while her mother's salon became ever more popular with society men and women attempting to resolve the country's problems. By now, even Louis XVI had to admit that the country's finances were in disarray.

While Turgot prepared to resign his post, the power-mongers began to look towards Necker to replace him. At this moment, there were two notable events in the Necker household: the family moved into a new house just built for them on the fashionable Chaussée d'Antin in central Paris; and, after Louise's recovery from illness, the whole family, accompanied by their friend Suard, left for England on 13 April 1776. The very thought of crossing the English Channel turned Mme Necker green and the actual experience lived up to her worst expectations. Louise Necker would also suffer from sea-sickness throughout her life. Once in Dover harbour, Suzanne Necker refused to set foot in the rowing boat that would bring them from ship to shore, until a team of crewmen and the inimitable Jacques managed to overcome her resistance.

Their six-week stay in London was facilitated by Necker's reputation as an international banker. Among their British acquaintances, the family met Horace Walpole, who had just launched the neo-Gothic movement,

Edward Gibbon, Suzanne Necker's former paramour, and Alexander Pope, the celebrated poet. Louise saw George III (still in possession of his mental faculties), attended Parliament and watched David Garrick playing *Hamlet* at the theatre eleven times! Although she was too young to realize it, throughout her adult life, trying to reproduce in France the way Britain was governed would become one of her obsessions.

During their stay in England, the Neckers learned that Turgot had been replaced as the French king's Comptroller-General of Finance by Clugny de Nuits. Not long after they had returned to their brand-new house on the Chaussée d'Antin, Clugny de Nuits suddenly died. The new Prime Minister Maurepas appointed Taboureau des Réaux to be in charge of the government's finances with the proviso that he would be seconded by Jacques Necker. Due to his Protestant faith, Necker could neither assume the title of Comptroller-General nor sit in the king's council. Thus, as of 12 November 1776, Taboureau des Réaux would serve as a front-man while Necker, bearing the new title of Director of the Royal Treasury, would actually be in charge. Furthermore, he had daily access to the king, whereas the other ministers only met the monarch during periodic council sessions.

The transfer of Taboureau to other functions in June 1777 meant that, despite his serious religious handicap, Necker assumed full responsibility over the royal finances, becoming one of the most powerful men in France—yet still forbidden from participating in the king's council. When the bishops of France objected to his appointment, Prime Minister Maurepas retorted: "I would sacrifice M. Necker if the clergy accepted to pay off the national debt." In accepting this post, Necker refused some of the favours that accompanied it, principally the salary. Furthermore, in 1778 he continued lending his own money to the state at the low interest rate of 5%. The Necker family moved from their new home the few hundred metres back across Paris to the official residence of the Comptroller-General on the Rue de Cléry.

Since, in her mother's eyes, it seemed likely that Louise would be called upon to serve some extraordinary destiny, Mme Necker redoubled her efforts to make her daughter into a perfect creature, without realising that she was robbing her daughter of her childhood. She expected perfection in

everything, intolerant of the least lapse that might undermine her child's upbringing. The more she applied her inflexible regime designed to create unparalleled wisdom, virtue and grace, the more her pupil resisted. Her educational methods may have functioned with a robot but never on a creature made of flesh and blood. While Mme Necker was deceived by her apparent failure, the talented Louise actually developed her knowledge on her own, devouring works by Dante and Shakespeare with an insatiable appetite. Her writing astonished her entourage by its precocious maturity and intelligence. Louise sometimes carried around with her a portable, hinged writing tablet, which she could place on her knees. Her father found it all rather too much and, unable to take her passion very seriously, named her teasingly *Monsieur de Saint-Escritoire* [Mister Holy Writing Desk]. The use of the male epithet may have suggested that the career of writer was considered a masculine preserve. During all these years, when Mme Necker devoted herself to her daughter's education, in fact Louise sought every occasion to be near her father, to distract and amuse him. She became his companion and took her mother's place. This relationship could be called incestuous but she came to worship this man in whom she had total trust. In fact, Louise flirted with her father, a skill in which she would later become an expert. It is interesting to note that many of the men she later loved were unashamed roués, totally unlike her father.

While this education could be labelled as liberal, Mme Necker sought a moral and religious ideal guided by an inflexible sense of duty and sacrifice. Her approach to education lacked play, physical exercise and an appreciation of nature, as well as the company of other children. It did not cross the fanatical Mme Necker's mind that her 11-year-old daughter needed to yell, to skip or to roll in the grass. After having endured her mother's devastating educational regime until the approach of her twelfth birthday, Louise suddenly fell into lethargy; she stopped eating and she stopped learning. The sensible Doctor Tronchin was summoned from Geneva, quickly diagnosed mental fatigue and advised sending Louise to the countryside away from her mother for a period of exercise and relaxation. After being introduced to the famous poet and playwright Voltaire, who was spending his last springtime in Paris, Louise was dispatched to the family's country residence at Saint-Ouen for the summer of 1778 with her governess. Dr Tronchin's instructions were categorical: no

more books, no more study, no more tight dresses, no more bonnets. Twice a week, she was allowed to spend the day with a girl almost her own age, Cathérine Huber, whose education and intelligence matched those of Louise. Catherine's mother had been a childhood friend of Suzanne Curchod and it was decided that her family was worthy enough to provide Louise with a friend. Catherine was astonished that Louise could recite poetry by heart and dance but did not know how to name a flower or even how to run! From their first meeting Louise considered Catherine as a sister, seizing her hand, hugging her and smothering her with effervescent affection. She declared that she had been waiting for this moment for a long time and would love Catherine until the day she died—this promise would be respected. This first separation from her mother's influence would rapidly grow into a rift which, with the passage of time, became an unbridgeable gulf. When Louise returned to Paris, her education was passed over to tutors, with her mother becoming her rival for Jacques Necker's affections.

Later, when writing her memoirs using her married name, Cathérine Rilliet-Huber described the activities of the two girls during that summer. On their walks, Louise Necker showed no interest in the gardens or the countryside and would hardly stray more than five minutes from the house. On the contrary, she participated enthusiastically in games that involved competition, probably because she knew she would win. Louise asked Catherine if she ever attended the theatre, explaining that she went frequently with her mother, who required her to write down the plot of every play they saw. Similarly, Catherine was obliged to make a summary of the sermons she heard in church. One day, Catherine's mother proposed to take the two girls for a carriage ride in the Bois de Boulogne. Mme Necker was horrified by such a daring suggestion—Louise had never been allowed to undertake such hazardous missions—but eventually relented. Every Sunday at Saint-Ouen, a small group of wealthy neighbours would meet in the form of a literary society. After lunch the children would sometimes play, for instance with a kite, and then, in front of a jury made up of parents, recite passages from historical authors. In the evening, the winner would parade through the streets of town bearing a crown of flowers, followed by the runners-up carrying bouquets. Louise took part