TWO CENTURIES OF ROUSSEAU

Every student of Education, Political Theory, and Sociology is familiar with the name of Jean Jacques Rousseau. There is something lacking in the reading of a person who has gone through college if one or more works of this great thinker has been totally missed by him. As a matter of fact, students of Education should be acquainted with some of Rousseau's ideas about the process of teaching. It has been said that his political thoughts have helped to form the mind of modern Europe.

His great work entitled *The Social Contract* was published just 200 years ago this year. The political philosophy discussed in that book had such a tremendous influence on French thought that it is said to have prepared the ground for the French Revolution. In the best institution of learning, that book is usually read and studied by those interested in History and Philosophy. It should, therefore, be of interest to us today to know something about the life and character of that famous man and the conditions prevailing during his days. These are briefly described in an article by Charles Campbell which follows in part.

Rousseau's epoch-making book *The Social Contract* had been preceded by his *Discourse on the Influence of Learning and Art* (1750) and the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754). Thus men's minds had already become disturbed when *The Social Contract* was published. A further contribution to the spreading restlessness in Europe was made by the waspish wit and mocking laughter of the great sceptic philosopher, Voltaire, Rousseau's older contemporary. His savage attacks on the power, the intolerance and the superstition of the Catholic Church, which he regarded as the worst scourge of humanity, stung and quickened the public mind. In-

deed, it may be said that if Rousseau sowed the seed of which the ideas of the French Revolution were the harvest, it was Voltaire who prepared the ground for the sowing.

The conditions of life in France aroused the passionate indignation of all liberal thinkers. For the French Court, the nobles and the clergy, to quote Voltaire's 'Dr. Pangloss', "All was for the best in the best of all possible worlds." The "privileged orders" saw to it that their taxes kept to a minimum. They were exempt from *la taille* — an impost levied on the peasants just because they were peasants. The lion's share of all taxation was borne by this class, the artisans, the merchants, and the professional workers. In addition, the peasant groaned under out-of-date feudal dues that had been re-imposed after long disuse, as well as dues to the Church. Rabbits and pigeons might invade his land and consume his crop, but he dared not touch them; they were reserved for his lord's sport. Nor dared he complain if his fences were broken down and his crop trampled underfoot. There were unpleasant physical penalties for such insolence on his part.

It was a society that to the casual observer might have appeared ordered, secure and established in its artificiality. But it was ripening a terrible harvest — or rather, one should say, it was rotten through and through. Dickens, in his grim introuction to *A Tale of Two Cities,* wrote: "France was rolling with exceeding smoothness downhill, making paper money and spending it." "The Woodman, Fate, and the Farmer, Death, though they work unceasingly, work silently, and none heard them as they went about with muffled tread — the rather, forasmuch as to entertain suspicion that they were awake, was to be atheistical and traitorous." The Woodman was making a framework, complete with sack and bloody knife, that was to be much in use; and the Farmer's carts to become the dirty and evil-smelling tumbrils that would trundle their crammed loads of aristocrats to the guillotine.

When *The Social Con-*

tract was published in 1762, more than a quarter-of-a-century was to go by before the wild mob-cry of *"Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite!"* was to echo in the Paris streets. But the new wine of the book's doctrines burst the old bottles, so that, more and more, men looked at each other with a wild surmise and demanded "Why need it go on?"

The political philosophy of Rousseau, in brief, was that society is founded on a contract that implies a mutual obligation as between the people and the head of the State, in terms of which he is their 'mandatory', or accredited representative, but in no sense their master. Man as a being is born to be not only happy but good, so that the evil within him and around him is not to be attributed to original sin but to the fact that society has departed from the natural state of things and set up new strains, false values, wrong standards of conduct. To win his way back to a simple and desirable condition, man must banish from life its artificial elements. Instead of giving ear to the doctrines of the warring priests and philosophers he should listen to his own intuitions, that tell him there is a benevolent divine spirit, who rewards virtue and punishes crime, and that the human soul is free and immortal.

An attractive gospel indeed to hungry desperate downtrodden serfs! The prosperous clergy promised them "pie in the sky". But here was a new intoxicating creed that not only offered a better life freely, here and now, but gave men a new vision of themselves, a new hope, a new inspiring goal.

What of Rousseau himself, this man whose ideas threatened the social order and helped to bring about its ruin? He was the son of a Swiss watchmaker, of French descent, and was born at Geneva on June 28, 1712. If his mother had not died in child-birth and had his father been less careless of his parental duty and less dissipated, the boy might have had more balance and stability of character. As things were, he had no regular schooling and developed un-

disciplined habits that were to be a handicap for life.

He was only thirteen when he was apprenticed to an engraver, from whose ill-usage, as he tells us in his *Confessions,* he ran away. This highly-coloured autobiography, written with a candour at times shocking, records many such instances of flights from situations that for one reason or another displeased him.

He was employed with first one noble family then with another in Turin, as a domestic servant, or footman, and was assisted to pursue his study of Italian music. But to the unstable youth the grass on the other side of the fences was ever the greener.

Many people, men and women both, and some of them aristocrats, gave him thankless aid and shelter throughout his unsettled life, broken by periods of what can only be termed "vagabondage'. Prominent among these was Mme. de Warens ('mama', as he called her), a soulful and kind-hearted lady of easy morals who for years 'protected' him until at the last she wearied of his comings and goings and, to his great fury, found comfort elsewhere. An associate of a very different type was the dull unattractive servant-girl Therese Levasseur, who, according to his own story, presented him with five illegitimate children, which he left one by one at the door of the Foundlings' Hospital in Paris.

From place to place, from occupation to occupation, he drifted through the years, leading a wretchedly erratic life, now taken up by benefactors whose kindness he ill repaid, now in dire poverty, copying music, teaching music, working as a clerk, troubled by religious doubts and by the disparity between his principles and his practice, searching ever, it may be, for some *summum bonum.*

In the latter part of his life he settled at last to the writing of the works that brought him fame, and as Saintsbury has said, "when not dominated by passion and prejudice, he became something of a sage." But a mental disorder troubled him increasingly in his later years.

In 1767 he came to England at the invitation of the

philospher, David Hume; but with him, too, Rousseau quarrelled violently. He accused Hume of plotting against him. Hume described him afterwards as "a man born without a skin."

When Rousseau went to England, Therese travelled separately, and James Boswell piloted her to her destination. But Dr. Johnson, stern moralist that he was, frowned on his protege's acquaintance. "Rousseau, sir, is a very bad man. I would sooner sign a sentence for his transportation than that of any felon who has gone from the Old Bailey these many years."

The end of his troubled life was drawing near when in May 1778 he went to live on the Marquis de Girardin's domain at Ermenonville, among the woods and heaths, where he botanized and rejoiced in the beauty of Nature that had always, through whatever vicissitudes, remained dear to him. He was a sick man, a prey to paranoid delusions, and some months later died of an apoplectic stroke — not by suicide, as was for long believed by some writers.

We must turn to the poets for an epitah for this strange and complex character. Burns might well have had Rousseau in mind when he bade us, in his "Address to the Unco Guid": "Gently scan your brother man!" And Byron, in *Childe Harold* spoke of him as "the self-torturing sophist who cast o'er erring deeds and thoughts a heavenly hue of words."

Rousseau was not of the stuff of which martyrs are made, nor was he the type to lead an uprising. The revolution he wrought was in the realm of ideas — an essential prelude to the violent upheaval that came after his death. Since then sociology has become a branch of science and is no longer dependent on brilliant flashes of insight. We can no longer accept the over-simplified origins in *The Social Contract,* and anthropology has shown 'the Noble Savage' to be an eighteenth century myth. But Rousseau was nevertheless responsible for seminal ideas which helped to form the mind of modern Europe. His influence was enormous and we are still heavily indebted to him.