To borrow from this panel’s title, one might say that J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur was the very personification of “Transnational Cosmopolitanism in Myth and Practice.” His name alone is transnational, mythical, and practical, all at once. Born Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur into a family of minor nobility in Normandy in 1735, he later took the anglicized name J. Hector St. John in his adult life as he traveled and worked as a surveyor in the American colonies after the Seven Years War. Ultimately his American “stage name” and his original French name were fused together to render the cosmopolitan title – J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur – that is used for this famous early American author, who was not really American at all. This paper casts light on the man who lived a cosmopolitan life as French soldier in Canada, farmer in New York’s Hudson Valley, author and salon favorite in Paris, and Consul of France in New York City. It focuses on this American farmer and writer who became a French diplomat, and the shattering of his illusions about the coalescence of the Atlantic World in the wake of the American Revolution – where the practice of transnational cosmopolitanism destroyed its myth.

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur is an important figure in the history of American literature for his 1782 work, Letters from an American Farmer. Today, his chapter entitled, “What is an American?” is often cited by American history and literature professors alike for its definition of American identity at the time when the new nation was being born. In a 2004 article in William and Mary Quarterly, professor Christopher Iannini rightly points to Crèvecoeur’s desire to perpetuate cosmopolitanism in Letters from an American Farmer in the face of nationalizing forces in the revolutionary Atlantic world. Iannini cites Crèvecoeur’s dedication of this work to the Abbé Raynal as a demonstration of this ambition, one that is clear from the very start of Letters. In that dedication, Crèvecoeur showed his admiration for the abbé’s “universal benevolence, that

---

diffusive good will, which is not confined to the narrow limits of your own country …” He added, “There is, no doubt, a secret communion among good men throughout the world, a mental affinity connecting them by a similitude of sentiments: then, why, though an American, should not I be permitted to share in that extensive intellectual consanguinity?\(^{2}\) In dedicating *Letters from an American Farmer* to Raynal, Crèvecoeur celebrated the existence of a transatlantic intellectual community, while clearly stating his goal of being a part of this Republic of Letters.

Crèvecoeur’s role in creating the idealized myth of America, and his own cosmopolitan experience began after having served as a cartographer for the French army in Canada during the Seven Years’ War (including the decisive Battle of Quebec). After 1759, Crèvecoeur chose to remain in North America rather than return to France with his defeated compatriots. He worked as a surveyor and mapmaker in northern New York until 1770, when he married the daughter of a wealthy New York merchant. The couple settled on a farm called Pine Hill in Orange County in the Hudson Valley, about sixty miles northwest of New York City and a few miles from the Hudson River. Within a year, he and his wife had a daughter, who was appropriately named America-Francès. Within four years, they had added two sons, had a thriving farm, and the Frenchman Crèvecoeur was settling into the fairly typical rural existence of an eighteenth-century American farmer. With the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War, however, the farm country north of New York City was transformed from an idyllic rustic setting to a main theater of war. In the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that Crèvecoeur details so vividly in the final chapter of his book, a letter entitled “Distresses of a Frontier Man,” he decided to journey back to France with his eldest son.

This journey was fraught with difficulties, starting with several months of imprisonment in New York City at the hands of the British under the suspicion of being a spy, and ending with a shipwreck on the Irish coast. Somehow his personal papers survived all of this – they had given the British cause to arrest him in New York, and they ended up being the manuscript that was published in London as *Letters from an American Farmer*. Despite the numerous difficulties and long delays, Crèvecoeur eventually arrived at his family’s Normandy estate in August 1781. Nearly thirty years had passed since he had left France, and throughout the summer and fall, Crèvecoeur recuperated from illness and from his rather traumatic journey, while renewing old relationships among the nobility of Normandy. That winter, through the insistence of physiocrats such as the Turgot brothers, Crèvecoeur visited Paris and began taking part in the salon of the Countess d’Houdetot, best known for having been an intimate friend of

---


*Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*
Jean-Jacques Rousseau (and made famous by Rousseau’s description of their love affair in *Les Confessions*).

During this time, Crèvecoeur became a minor celebrity in Paris. A true American farmer, and a Frenchman to boot, Crèvecoeur shared a glimmer of the enlightened enthusiasm which Benjamin Franklin enjoyed in his days in France. Avidly welcomed by those who had dreamed or written about America, Crèvecoeur had come to Paris when the rage for all things American was at its peak. With the close of the revolutionary war and the Franco-American victory over the English, Frenchmen were hungry for news and accounts from their new ally. Crèvecoeur was warmly received in d’Houdetot’s salon, which featured a group of writers that were starting to dominate the Académie française in the 1780s, and included men such as d’Alembert, La Harpe, Target, Marmontel, and the poet Saint-Lambert. If Benjamin Franklin had been the ideal American Statesman, a thinker of great wit, wisdom and simplicity, in Crèvecoeur they found the ideal American Farmer. Here was a man who had made his own way in the backwoods of America, who had established a farm and a happy family with his own toil and sweat while having the vision and talent to record his observations and experiences. His success in Paris, further stimulated by the charm of his rusty, rough French, was ensured by his appearance as proof that a Frenchman could find only happiness and prosperity in the peaceful, rustic, tolerant and free world across the Atlantic.

Thus Crèvecoeur embarked on a period of his life that he would later recall as his golden age, or as he put it, the “shining link” in the chain of his life’s events. Indeed, the years 1782-83 marked a transformation for the French nobleman who had lived the life of a soldier, surveyor, traveler, trader, farmer and family man in the American wilderness. In Paris, he became a well-connected member of an intellectually dazzling group in one of the most refined cities in the world of the 1780s. Although he had left America in a state of great personal anguish over the war and its resultant distrust among neighbors, in Paris, Crèvecoeur played the role of the blissful American Farmer.

As Crèvecoeur participated in the salon society of Europe’s cultural capital, *Letters from an American Farmer* became a hot item in Paris. Those who lacked a good command of the English language wanted a French version of the Farmer’s life. Crèvecoeur struggled with his discomfort with the French language, and was reluctant to translate his *Letters* until Madame d’Houdetot convinced him by promising the aid of her circle in the preparation and

---


publication of his French edition. It would seem that if this point in his life was the “shining link” in the chain of his life’s events, it was because Crèvecoeur was at the peak of living the ideal cosmopolitan existence. His American identity, his successful literary production, the flattering appeals for a French translation of Letters, and his heady success in Parisian society all must have been tremendously intoxicating for Crèvecoeur. He undoubtedly felt at that moment that he had finally achieved that ardent cosmopolitan desire – that “extensive intellectual cosanguinity” – that he had expressed in his dedication to Raynal in Letters from an American Farmer.

And at this time in late 1782, the friendship of Madame d’Houdetot and her circle offered another remarkable opportunity for Crèvecoeur. Madame de Beauvau, who was intimately associated with some of the highest members at Court (such as Minister of the Navy de Castries), used her influence to obtain a government post for Crèvecoeur. He was given use of Monsieur d’Houdetot’s suite at Versailles with two secretaries to write a report on America and its mineral, agricultural and commercial prospects for France. For seven weeks, Crèvecoeur worked at assembling this report. Maréchal de Castries was impressed with Crèvecoeur’s report on America, which glowed with information regarding bountiful opportunities for French trade and stunning maps of the vast American territory. Crèvecoeur’s maps fascinated Louis XVI, an amateur cartographer himself. The King’s esteem for his work pushed Crèvecoeur’s name to the top of the list for consuls in the growing French diplomatic corps in America. Crèvecoeur eagerly seized the opportunity to be reunited with his family, as well as the chance to serve the French government and to further the connection between France and the new republic. He was granted the consulship of New York, which encompassed New Jersey and Connecticut, and most importantly, would take him back to the region where Pine Hill was located.

On June 22, 1783, Crèvecoeur was officially named consul of New York and he began his preparations to leave France. The completion of the French translation Lettres d’un cultivateur américain was left in the hands of his friends Target, Saint-Lambert and Lacrevelle. On several occasions in the summer of 1783, Crèvecoeur lamented the slow process of approval for his new edition to his confidant from the d’Houdetot salon, the duke de La Rochefoucauld. In early September, Saint-Lambert informed Crèvecoeur that, despite Foreign Minister Vergennes’s approval, the Keeper of the Seals Gaillard had disapproved of his work. Crèvecoeur vented his anger to La Rochefoucauld, writing “it is unfortunate that ideas which would only be simple reflections in Philadelphia

---

seem so terrible in Paris…” He added, “If it can only be that it [Lettres] remains forgotten, I will retranslate it and I will publish it in Philadelphia where censorship is unknown.”

The difficulty in gaining approval for his new edition was not his only complaint against the French government. Before Crèvecoeur even left for America, he was already frustrated with his new post, and the obstacles to establishing a regular packet boat service between France and America. Just before he sailed from France in September, he wrote to La Rochefoucauld, emphatically expressing his unhappiness,

I confess to you that my zeal is indeed diminished … Ah! If I had an income of 200 louis I would return to cultivate my lands and my friend(ship)s and whoever would want to be consul would become it. If there is so much audacity and servitude, at 48 years old, to start obeying after having been free and independent all one's life, it is a little difficult, at least I find it so…”

But Crèvecoeur did depart for New York just days after penning this letter, leaving his son Ally behind in France, as he was now eleven years old and ready for a Continental education. Crèvecoeur was assured that his son's education would be taken care of by Madame d'Houdetot and her circle, which now included Thomas Jefferson. (Crèvecoeur, as a man of the Enlightenment, even went so far in his preparations to be sure that the ship that would carry him was fitted with Benjamin Franklin's novel invention, the lightning rod.) Finally, in late September 1783, the packet boat Courier de l'Europe, carrying its new lightning rod, Crèvecoeur, and the recently signed Treaty of Versailles as well, set sail for New York.

Crèvecoeur's return to America was less than triumphant. He was returning to the country that he had left in 1781, when he was profoundly troubled by its war against Britain and the physical and mental toll which that conflict had exacted on him personally. He was worried about the fate of his
family and concerned that New Yorkers would remember his indifference toward
the Patriot cause and be displeased with his appointment. Soon after
disembarking on November 19, Crèvecoeur’s worst fears were realized: he
discovered that his farm had been burned in an Indian raid, his wife was dead and
his two younger children were missing. Crèvecoeur was devastated. For days, he
was physically unable to execute the duties of his new office, turning down
invitations to attend receptions and balls in honor of him and of the new Franco-
American relationship. He stayed in the house of his friend William Seton, who
had helped to secure his release in 1780 from the British prison in New York. Again, Seton faithfully worked for Crèvecoeur, investigating the details of the
Pine Hill tragedy. Finally, seventeen agonizing days after Crèvecoeur’s arrival, he
learned that his children were safely living in Boston. While Crèvecoeur would
not be able to travel from New York to Boston until the spring, he was comforted
by the news that his children had survived the tragic destruction of Pine Hill, and
were being cared for in a comfortable household.

Crèvecoeur was then able to take up the reins of his new position at New
York, and worked hard to develop the ties between France and the United States
in following years. He asked La Rochefoucauld to send him French journals,
academy proceedings, newspapers and the like, in the hopes of establishing a
meaningful exchange of news, and of scholarly and scientific information
between the two countries. He engaged Seton as his agent in the founding of
regular packet service between New York City and France’s Atlantic port at

---

11 Julia Post Mitchell, *St. Jean de Crèvecoeur* (New York: Columbia University Press,
1916), 88-97.
12 They had been rescued by Gustavus Fellowes, the uncle of one of the five American
sailors who Crèvecoeur had helped at Pierrepont in 1781. Fellowes, unable to get news of
Crèvecoeur’s family due to the war, took it upon himself to travel to New York, where he
found Fanny and Louis-Alexandre, taken in by a destitute neighbor. Fellowes escorted the
children to Boston, where he adopted them as his own children. Seton had uncovered this
story by finding a letter from Fellowes to Crèvecoeur in England that had ended up in
13 Crèvecoeur traveled to Boston in March 1784, where he was finally reunited with his
daughter and younger son. He stayed in Boston until that summer, visiting the city, and
reacquainting himself with old friends who were living there. In the summer of 1784, La
Fayette returned to America for a hero’s tour, which was partially managed by
Crèvecoeur. At Crèvecoeur’s request, La Fayette visited the Fellowes’ home during his
stay in Boston in gratitude for their heroic generosity toward the Crèvecoeur children. By
the fall of 1784, Crèvecoeur had reassembled what was left of his family, and returned to
Lorient. He sought this regular shipping service to augment French trade, especially through the importation of luxury goods into America.

In the years that followed, Crèvecoeur did a variety of tasks that he thought useful for Franco-American relations. He published newspaper articles on farming under the pseudonym “Agricola,” sponsored the exchange of agricultural improvements in France and America; helped found botanical gardens in New Jersey and New Haven (which later officially recognized him for his efforts). Crèvecoeur distributed French medical journals to American doctors, seeds to Harvard University, and copies of General Washington’s speeches to French newspapers. He even supplied information on the new American republic for the expanded and revised version of what had been Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*.

And yet, while Crèvecoeur took great satisfaction from developing the scientific and literary ties between the two nations, he found the practical matters of the consulship almost too difficult to bear. In an April 1784 letter to La Rochefoucauld, Crèvecoeur bemoaned his inability to focus on cosmopolitan intellectual exchange, stating, “The Business of a consul is singularly opposed to these kind of researches; on Account of the perpetual attendance & the disgusting Minutiae with which it is attended.” He then went on to blame French merchants and émigrés for these problems:

…that Part of the French nation new settled in this country, is the very worth [worst]: They are in a state of of [sic] war with each other, they are min [men] of neither Principles nor property, & by their conduct [give] to the Americans a bad Idea of the nation: Juge here a Poor consul must fare in the Midst of such a set: if he want to do his duty, calumny & scandalous reports are propagated ag’ him on all sides – he is deceived by false reports, he find a Man to be a consumate Rogue & hypocrite in whom he had reposed some degree of confidence: in short the being consul in this country, untill it is replenish’d by substantial & worthy marchts [merchants] will allways be attended with very disagreable circonstances.

At the end of this letter, Crèvecoeur once again expressed a willingness to leave his consular position, stating, “I will do as well as I can, if the saine [same] degree of calumny ag’ me reaches Versailles which has been so plentifully spread ag’ the others … I will very Patiently submit to my fate, & see another substituted in my Place …”

Crèvecoeur’s disillusionment in 1784 is clear in his private correspondence. It is obvious that while his optimistic belief in cosmopolitan ties was satisfied by the academic or intellectual exchange between France and

---

14 Mitchell, 100-150. Crèvecoeur’s consular work is covered in great detail by Mitchell.
15 Crèvecoeur to La Rochefoucauld, Boston, 14 April 1784, Kunkle MSS.
16 Ibid.
America, the mundane tasks of settling trade disputes and building commercial relationships were not to his liking at all. In July, Crèvecoeur wrote that “consular tasks are all squabbling and disagreeable – one must see, hear and please 100 people at once.” Again, Crèvecoeur does not hesitate to blame the French for the problems and conflicts that he encounters as consul. He goes on to say, “Here the Frenchmen that I see are to me a new race of men. Scandalmongerers, slanderers tearing each other apart, haunting American offices, without good faith or morals, they believe that outside of France there are neither any laws nor restraint upon them…” These Frenchmen made the job of representing France as a diplomat virtually impossible for Crèvecoeur: “For these men, consuls are the worst kind of beasts, and slander is their customary weapon […] if I am obliging, they say I am ignorant and weak, if I am firm, they accuse me of being more American than French, and they say that I am haughty and proud…” Crèvecoeur's frustration was clearly boiling over by the summer of 1784. Tired of being attacked, he found that his own cosmopolitanism was the weapon being used against him.

Beyond Crèvecoeur's words, it was clear in his actions that he regretted his acceptance of the consul's job. In letters from the autumn of 1784 onward, Crèvecoeur claimed medical problems and nervous disorders, which may have been genuine, considering his breakdown upon receiving news of the Pine Hill massacre. He wished only to return to France, be attended to by a French doctor, and retire peacefully. It was perhaps an attempt to resurrect the simple rural lifestyle he enjoyed on his Hudson Valley farm prior to the American Revolution. From 1785 to 1787, he was able to return to France, and during this time he produced a second French edition of *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain*, and helped found the Société gallo-américaine with Brissot de Warville. This small group of Parisians included Étienne Clavière, a Swiss banker, friend and associate of Brissot, and Nicolas Bergasse, a lawyer from Lyon, who contributed trade information from southern France. According to their constitution for the
Société gallo-américaine (Franco-American Society), they sought to strengthen the commercial and cultural ties between America and France. During this time Brissot and Clavière were collaborating on a major work on the relationship between the two countries. Entitled *De la France and Des États-Unis*, it was a primary subject of discussion in the meetings of the Société gallo-américaine before its publication in 1787. Crèvecoeur’s foundation of the Société illustrates his desire to link France and America. From the time of his appointment as consul of New York, the main goal of Crèvecoeur had been the development of Franco-American trade and good will. Frustrated by a government that was obsessed with its own financial and political problems, and also by individual immigrants and merchants with bad intentions, Crèvecoeur turned to the foundation of a private society to accomplish what was not being done through official channels. The work of the Société gallo-américaine was short-lived, however. Crèvecoeur had to return to America to continue his diplomatic duties in the spring of 1787, and his departure effectively ended the proceedings of that society. It would be subsumed by the Société des Amis des Noirs (Society of the Friends of Blacks), which Brissot would found the following spring in order to work for the abolition of slavery in America.

Crèvecoeur returned to his consular duties in America in 1788 with his new edition of *Lettres*, as well as letters of introduction from Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson to some of America’s leading figures, such as Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin, George Washington and James Madison. To these men Crèvecoeur proudly presented the 1787 edition, which went far beyond his 1784 translation in praising America. In return, these men showered him with praise. In February 1788, Benjamin Franklin wrote to Crèvecoeur from Philadelphia,

Dear Sir, I received from you last summer, and I should have informed you sooner, a most agreeable present, your excellent work … The favorable point of view under which, with such indulgence, you have observed our country will have, I am persuaded, the good effect of

---

21 Of Crèvecoeur, Brissot stated at the Société’s meeting on 3 April 1787, “To him [Crèvecoeur] we chiefly owe the idea and the formation of our Society.” Quoted in Mitchell, *St. Jean de Crèvecoeur*, 158.


convincing a certain number of distinguished Europeans to come settle among us, and this acquisition would be extremely advantageous to us.\textsuperscript{24}

In 1788, Crèvecoeur had a town in Vermont named after him (St. Johnsbury), and he was awarded the key to the city of New Haven, along with a group of his Parisian friends, whom Crèvecoeur had recommended to that city. In 1789, Crèvecoeur was inducted into the American Philosophical Society for his Letters, his work on Franco-American relations, and not least of all, for his contributions to agriculture through his articles under the pen name Agricola. It is remarkable that Crèvecoeur could reap such honors just a few years after he had slipped away from his farm in Orange County, miserably escaped New York City to return to France, only to return as a high diplomatic official and literary phenomenon.

But by 1790, Crèvecoeur had had enough of his post and again used illness to gain permission to return to France. The French Revolution had been roiling for almost a year, and Crèvecoeur was eager to return to France. In the summer of 1790, his closest friends were at the peak of their influence in Paris, and had he wanted to play a significant role in the Revolution, they certainly would have welcomed him. At the time of Crèvecoeur's return, Target was the Speaker of the Constituent Assembly and Brissot was one of the leaders of the Girondins. But, like the abbé Raynal (albeit more subtly), Crèvecoeur distanced himself from the Revolution. He had seen how political faction was capable of hindering government in his years as consul. He had lived the fear and painful loss that comes with war in his bitter personal experience during the American Revolution. For Crèvecoeur, this final return to France was an opportunity to live the dream which he had expressed in his first year as French consul when he wrote to La Rochefoucauld in November 1784, "If it were not for my children, I would thank the minister and I would go hide in a corner of Normandy for the rest of my days..."\textsuperscript{25} Now, in 1790, Crèvecoeur did just that, retiring to his family estate, never to see America again.

In the remarkable life of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, the highs and lows of Franco-American cosmopolitanism are evident. As Durand Echeverria

\textsuperscript{24} "Cher Monsieur, j'ai reçu de vous l'été dernier, et j'aurais dû vous en informer plus tôt, un présent des plus agréables, votre excellent ouvrage... Le point de vue favorable sous lequel, avec tant d'indulgence, vous avez envisage notre pays aura, j'en suis persuade, le bon effet de decider un certain nombre d'Européens distigués à venir et à s'établir parmi nous; et cette acquisition nous serait extrêmement avantageuse." Franklin to Crèvecoeur, Philadelphia, 16 February 1788, reprinted in Robert de Crèvecoeur, Vie et ouvrages, 371-72.

\textsuperscript{25} "Si ce n’était pour mes enfants, Je remercerais [sic] le ministre, & J’irais me cacher dans un coin de la Normandie pour le reste de mes Jours..." Crèvecoeur to La Rochefoucauld, New York, 5 November 1784, Kunkle MSS.
described in his work *Mirage in the West*, the dream of America and the mutual admiration of Frenchmen and Americans peaked in the 1770s and 1780s, before dissipating under the intense pressures of state-building in America and the Revolution in France. As a writer and intellectual, and in his experiences in Paris, it was easy for Crèvecoeur to celebrate the cosmopolitan exchange across the Atlantic Ocean that was more than just a myth. But as a diplomat between 1783 and 1790, the practices of national self-interest and political and economic behavior that he had to deal with on a daily basis ultimately disillusioned him about that exchange.