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The British Isles in Voltaire's *Essai sur les moeurs*
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ABSTRACT

It is quite widely known that Voltaire stayed in England for almost two and-a-half years, then an already well-known poet soon to be the author of *La Henriade*, which was published in London, in march 1728.

This quite long stay gave him the opportunity of knowing the country quite well, and this gave way, in 1733, to another famous publication : the *Letters concerning the English Nation*, better known as *Lettres philosophiques*.

These are probably the most evident works which come to mind when one thinks of « Voltaire and the British Isles ». But I wondered if one could trace, throughout its 197 chapters, what could be called "Voltaire's final word" about the United Kingdom and its history.

In total, about 8% of the final *édition encadrée*(1775) of the *Essai* are devoted to the British Isles, but this percentage rises up to 16% with regard to the 17th century. And 12 of the 197 chapters exclusively concern "British history, mores, and national spirit".

All in all, it appears that Voltaire's points may be summarized in eight main themes, which, when considered as a whole, give quite a faithful account of his views on the subject.

1 . First of all, Voltaire points out, quite often, that the British Isles were originally a poor country, and, consequently, that their first kings were not rich either.

2. In Voltaire's eyes, violence and cruelty seem quite typical, too, of British, and especially English, politics.

3. Quite curiously though, the inhabitants of this "poor and cruel country" have become patriots quite long ago ! Obviously, in Voltaire's eyes, English patriotism is mostly fueled by a kind of hatred against France. But another kind of patriotism has also been seen

under Charles I, when some prominent men of his entourage who offered most of their own belongings to help save the monarchy.

4. This noble act was, in fact, fulfilled as the king was planning an attack against the Scots. Longstanding animosity between England and Scotland is indeed another important point in Voltaire's description of British history. Compared with Scotland, England was rich for sure: so was Scotland only to be feared by England, as long as it was not in the need of selling itself.

5. The firm attachment of the British people to their individual as well as collective independence in religious matters is another point, and one of the roots of the "public debate culture" which characterizes British history since then.

6. « The King in Parliament ». It seems that this motto epitomizes particularly well one of the most singular characteristics of the British institutions, as Voltaire himself points it out in the *Essai* : « *La nation est, à la vérité, représentée légalement par la chambre des communes, mais elle l'est aussi par un roi et par les pairs* » (chap. 180). About 1300, « *le parlement d'Angleterre prit (...) une nouvelle forme, telle qu'elle est à peu près de nos jours* » as Edward I formed « *cette espèce de gouvernement qui rassemble tous les avantages de la royauté, de l'aristocratie et de la démocratie, mais qui a aussi les inconvénients de toutes les trois, et qui ne peut subsister que sous un roi sage.* » (chap. 75)

Absolutists and provocative towards the Parliament, the first Stuarts were succeeded by a clever but hypocritical leader who knew how to use, then submit, it: Oliver Cromwell.

7. According to Voltaire, commerce began to flourish in England during the 14th century, notably in connection with Flanders. But what made England so powerful « *c'est que tous les partis ont également concouru, depuis le temps d'Élisabeth, à favoriser le commerce* » (chap. 182). Due to private initiatives, the people itself benefited from this economic growth, which is a convincing argument in favor of a free economy. And the period of the Glorious Revolution, is the time when English economy has really begun its "take-off".

8. These economic successes, have also been supported by the promotion of scientific knowledge, essentially aimed towards applied research. And the Royal Society is one of its most important actors.

Destitute at first ; rather violent throughout the middle ages and most of the Tudor and Stuart dynasties; but rich since the reign of Elizabeth, and enlightened since the

Restoration and the Glorious Revolution, this is how Voltaire describes Great-Britain in the *Essai sur les mœurs*.

These contrasts might though have been a bit exaggerated, to let the reader understand by himself how Progress and Enlightenment may even come out of a seemingly dispaired situation. And, obviously, it is mainly by getting beyond all religious quarrels and taboos, and by promoting a free exercise of economy and science : freedom really seems to be the key word here !

Let us finally notice that, faithful to its title, the *Essai* does not insist on political reforms, but especially on what nations can achieve "by themselves", regardless of régimes or political contexts, as is clearly show by the next sentence : « *L'esprit de la nation acquit sous le règne de Charles II une réputation immortelle, quoique le gouvernement n'en eût point* » (chap. 182).