

## **Voltaire's British visitors**

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In *Voltaire's British visitors*, Sir Gavin de Beer and André-Michel Rousseau have collected accounts of one hundred and fifty visits by British travellers to Voltaire in Switzerland, where he spent the last years of his life on the shores of Lake Geneva. One hundred and twenty-three of these visitors have been identified, and they range from men as young as fifteen on a Grand Tour to Thomas Pitt, brother of William, and Edward Gibbon. As the Seven Years' War made Switzerland, rather than France, part of the normal route for Englishmen making their way to Italy, Geneva became a destination for more and more British travellers, and many of these, whether they held letters of recommendation from people known to Voltaire, or had merely read his work, wanted to see the famous Frenchman, their motives ranging, as Rousseau puts it in his introduction, from 'very superficial curiosity to downright admiration'.

The accounts run from a bare mention of a visit, consisting of a few lines, to fascinating accounts of lively conversations with Voltaire about politics, religion and English literature and descriptions of his home at Ferney with its chapel and little playhouse. John Morgan in 1764, visiting with a Mr Samuel Powel, writes of his surprise when Voltaire saw a little dog in the room, turned to Mr Powel and 'as I thought, a little abruptly ask'd him, what think you of that little dog; has he any Soul or not, & what do the People in England now think of the Soul.' James Boswell, who stayed for three days in 1764, calls Voltaire's home an 'enchanted castle' and records conversation ranging from impassioned Biblical debate to Voltaire's comment on Scotland's painters when Boswell told him of the failure of an Academy of painting there: 'No; to paint well it is necessary to have warm feet. It's hard to paint when your feet are cold.' Together, these one hundred and fifty vignettes offer a fascinating and unusual glimpse into Voltaire's life from 1754 to 1778 through immediate and personal accounts of his conversation, hospitality and domestic life.

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201

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30

