The Voltaire Foundation

The Voltaire Foundation at the University of Oxford owes its existence to the visionary bequest of Theodore Besterman in the 1970s. It has grown to become today a world leader for eighteenth-century and Enlightenment scholarship. Our core mission was originally twofold: to disseminate the most up-to-date research on the eighteenth century through the book series Studies on the Enlightenment; and to research and publish in French the definitive edition of The Complete Works of Voltaire (Œuvres complètes de Voltaire).

Oxford University Studies on the Enlightenment

Founded 60 years ago by Theodore Besterman, this series of scholarly books publishes the best new research in eighteenth-century studies. An editorial board with members drawn from a wide range of international universities gives the Studies global outreach. The longest-established collection of its kind, now numbering over 600 volumes, it publishes cutting-edge research and sets the agenda for new work in the area of Enlightenment studies.

Complete Works of Voltaire

Writers and historians need to be able to read Voltaire in a definitive version, and, astonishingly, this has never been produced. The Oxford Complete Works of Voltaire / Œuvres complètes de Voltaire aims to fill this gap. For the first time ever, we are bringing together the entirety of Voltaire’s writings: not just his poems, novels, plays and philosophy, but also all of his letters, even the marginalia in the books in his library, now conserved in St Petersburg.

To do this, we have trained a team of textual editors who are highly specialised in Enlightenment history and ideas, and in the techniques of textual editing. Their skills ensure the superb quality of the publication and ensure that it will last as a definitive contribution to scholarship. For the first time, thanks to the research contained in these volumes, readers are able to explore the sources of Voltaire’s ideas and unravel the way in which his thinking evolved over his long life. The edition has received widespread praise, winning the Prix Hervé Deluèn from the Académie française in 2010. The new Oxford edition is radically transforming our understanding of Voltaire and, once complete in four years’ time, it will stand as a landmark in our understanding of the Enlightenment.

We are on course to meet our ambitious target of completing the edition in 2019. To do this, we need to publish six volumes per year in each of the four years from 2016 to 2019, and we are now seeking sponsors for each of the last 24 volumes.

Voltaire Digital Laboratory

Work on the Voltaire edition will not stop when the print edition is completed in 2019. We are already planning Digital Voltaire, a digital edition that will carry forward our high standards of scholarship. The new digital medium will allow our work to be regularly updated; and it will allow the works of Voltaire to reach a far wider audience than is the case at present.

Our present scholarly reputation rests on the unrivalled skills of our editorial team; we need to transfer their skills in textual editing into the digital realm so that, going forward, the same high editing principles will apply to digital editions that now apply to our paper publications. The Voltaire Foundation aims to set the standard for user-friendly electronic editions of texts.

The creation of new online resources opens up exciting possibilities that will allow the Voltaire Foundation to engage fully in contemporary research in digital humanities. Digital Voltaire will enable explorations of the writer’s thought and style that were previously impossible, and we aim to encourage doctoral students to work alongside more advanced scholars to experiment with the data and produce their own research.

An international research centre

We aspire to make the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford a beacon of Enlightenment values and a world-class centre for international research into the eighteenth century. We have created the Besterman Centre for the Enlightenment, a new and interdisciplinary research centre which exists to nurture scholars and scholarship. The Centre is affiliated with The Oxford Research Centre for the Humanities (TORCH), and has an annual programme of lectures, seminars and conferences on every aspect of the Enlightenment and the eighteenth century – from debates about tolerance and freedom of speech, questions of intelligent design and atheism, to questions of textual editing in the digital age.

Voltaire’s values

Voltaire is one of the greatest French writers, and more than that, he is an iconic figure in European culture. He is the most potent spokesman of those Enlightenment values – rationalism, freedom of speech, tolerance – that inspired the Founding Fathers of the United States at the end of the eighteenth century, and that remain at the heart of modern western liberal democracies. The challenges of multi-culturalism and religious tolerance in the modern world show that Voltairean values have never been more relevant. The mission of the Voltaire Foundation is to encourage scholarly research into Voltaire and his contemporaries, and to bring the debates of the Enlightenment to the widest possible modern audience.
From the reviews

"The value of the Voltaire Foundation, in allowing the publication of editions and scholarly monographs in eighteenth-century studies, becomes ever more apparent."  
UK Research Assessment Exercise

"The Oxford-based Complete Works of Voltaire is one of the most important ongoing British-based publishing projects in the field of French literary studies ... The Complete Works of Voltaire, a well established and well respected series that is a standard purchase for any university library where there is an interest in eighteenth-century French studies."

Arts & Humanities Research Council

"Questions sur l’Encyclopédie was a real tour de force: some 440 articles on diverse subjects which amused and fascinated the septuagenarian Voltaire. After having nearly disappeared, Questions is surfacing again today in all its originality and irreverent splendour, thanks to the work of an international team of Voltaire specialists."

Professor Robert Darnton, Harvard University

"The Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations is Voltaire’s longest, most comprehensive, most important and most ambitious work of history. It has tended to be overshadowed among his historical writings by the more straightforward and biographical accounts of Louis XIV and Charles XII. The Voltaire Foundation’s complete critical edition of the Essai, based on the final 1775 redaction of the text which the author so carefully crafted over several decades, will restore it to the standing it originally enjoyed. Alongside Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire – which appeared shortly afterwards and owed much to Voltaire – the Essai represents the acme of philosophical history in the Enlightenment mode, and it imparted a whole new impetus, rational, critical and often radically sceptical, to all subsequent study of the subject."

Robert Evans, Regius Professor of History, University of Oxford

"The Essai sur les mœurs is not only one of Voltaire’s great achievements, but a key work of the European Enlightenment. A full modern critical edition is very long overdue indeed, and the Voltaire Foundation deserves the gratitude of the scholarly community."

David Bell, Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities, Johns Hopkins University

Campaign for the Voltaire Foundation

Since 2000, we have raised £2,000,000 for the Voltaire Foundation. By 2019, the Voltaire Foundation needs an additional £2,000,000 to be able to complete the print edition of the Complete Works of Voltaire and to launch the Voltaire Digital Laboratory.

The Complete Works of Voltaire

This magnificent edition has been widely hailed by critics as the definitive version of Voltaire’s writings. When complete in 220 volumes, we will have the first ever scholarly edition of the totality of this great writer’s work. To bring to completion the magnificent edition of Voltaire’s complete works, we need to publish 24 volumes (six volumes a year for the next four years, 2016-2019).

Voltaire Digital Laboratory

A digital presence is crucial for our long-term aim of fostering discussion of Voltairean values and of bringing the Complete Works of Voltaire to the widest possible audience world-wide. This will be crucial for the future development of the Voltaire Foundation.

Summary

If you would like to discuss the work of the Voltaire Foundation in more detail, or explore further options for supporting us, please contact:

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