Bernardin de Saint-Pierre

A Life of Culture

Malcolm Cook
BERNARDIN DE SAINT-PIERRE
A LIFE OF CULTURE
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Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, from the frontispiece of the 1823 Œuvres complètes (Paris: Aimé Andrê) edition of Essai sur la vie et les ouvrages
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M.C.
Exeter, 2006
BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF
BERNARDIN DE SAINT-PIERRE

1737 Born in Le Havre, Normandy
1749 Accompanied uncle, a sea captain, on voyage to the island of Martinique
1750–56 Studied under the Jesuits in Caen
1757 Awarded prize for Mathematics by the Académie de Rouen
1758 Enters the École des Ponts et Chaussées as ‘élève-ingénieur’
1760 First military campaign, under the comte de Saint-Germain, in Germany. Argues with commander and is sent back to France
1761 Sent to Malta as ‘ingénieur-géographe’ but quarrels with colleagues who refuse to recognise his qualifications. Returns to France
1762–63 Leaves for Holland and thence to Russia; makes the acquaintance of Duval, the jeweller, in Saint-Petersburg. Meets Catherine II in Moscow; made ‘capitaine ingénieur’ and goes on a mission to Finland to inspect what he calls its ‘places frontières’
1764 Leaves for Poland, encouraged by the baron de Breteuil, then French Ambassador to Russia, probably as a sort of secret agent. Liaison with the princesse Marie Miesnik. Brief imprisonment in Poland. Beginning of correspondence with the diplomat, Hennin
1765 Brief stay in Vienna; returns to Warsaw and then leaves for Dresden and Berlin. Meets Taubenheim (conseiller du Roi); returns to France. Death of father
1767 Appointed as ‘capitaine ingénieur’ on the Île de France (Mauritius)
1768 Leaves Lorient in February for the Île de France. Arrives 14 July. Refuses to follow Maudave to Madagascar, where it was intended he should actually go; meeting with Poivre, the intendant who introduced him to botany
1769 Journey on foot round the island
1770 Leaves island to return to France, via the Île Bourbon (Réunion), the Cape
1771 Returns to France in early June. Aided by the baron de Breteuil with whom he later falls out. Goes to salon of Mlle Lespinasse, meets D’Alembert
1772 Meets Rousseau (May)
1773 Publication of Voyage à l’Île de France. Liaison with Louise de Kéralio, who reads his histoire de Virginie
1778 Death of Rousseau
1779 Beginning of Dutailly affair
1784  Publication of the Études de la nature
1786  Second edition of the Études
1788  Third edition of the Études, including for the first time, Paul et Virginie
1789  Publication of first separate edition of Paul et Virginie. Publication of the Vœux d’un solitaire
1791  Publication of La Chaumière indienne
1792  Appointed intendant of the Jardin royal
1793  Marriage with Félicité Didot, daughter of the printer. Post of intendant suppressed
1794  Birth of daughter, Virginie. Creation of the École normale supérieure; Bernardin appointed as professor of republican morality
1795  École closed; Bernardin appointed member of the Institut
1796  Publication of prospectus for the Harmonies de la nature, which appeared only after his death
1798  Birth of son, Paul. Publication of De la nature de la morale
1799  Death of wife, Félicité
1800  Marriage with Désirée de Pelleporc
1802  Birth of second son, Bernardin, who dies in childhood
1803  Member of the Académie Française
1806  Publication of ‘luxury edition’ of Paul et Virginie; awarded Légion d’honneur
1807  Publication of La Mort de Socrate; President of the Académie Française
1808  Portrait painted by Rembrandt Peale
1814  Death, 21 January, at Éragny
INTRODUCTION

Bernardin’s first major novel, *Paul et Virginie*, published in 1788, was an outstanding literary success. While there have been many studies of this novel, comparatively little attention has been paid to its author, a major figure who lived a fascinating life. The present work, the first-ever full-length study in English of the life of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, will seek to assess the status of Bernardin as an intellectual and to trace his journey through life. It is punctuated by surveys of his writings in their context and of the reception that was accorded to them, but it is not intended to be a full account of the author’s life and should not be considered as a traditional biography. The emphasis throughout will be on those episodes that I see as formative and significant, those that had a bearing on the eventual literary output of a writer who is known these days primarily for his novel *Paul et Virginie*, but who, in my opinion, needs to be regarded — and this study should allow a reassessment — not just as the author of a great novel but as a major intellectual figure of the late eighteenth century in France whose influence and output are of far greater importance than is generally appreciated.

My view has always been that what is missing from our knowledge of Bernardin is a picture of the cultural landscape in which he worked. This study is structured around the chronology of Bernardin’s life, but it does not include every episode and seeks not to repeat information that is already well known or is likely to be familiar to many readers. It does, of course, offer an assessment of previous accounts of his life, and should be seen as a supplement to our knowledge and a corrective, rather than as a full analysis of a rich life. In short, this is a specialist, research-led account of the formative episodes, concentrating primarily on the cultural environment in which Bernardin grew up and flourished.

Three major and a significant number of minor sources form the basis of the study. The primary source must be Bernardin himself, and I make extensive use of the rich correspondence and manuscript evidence. The second source is Aimé-Martin, who was Bernardin’s secretary at the end of his life and later married Bernardin’s widow. He was responsible for editing Bernardin’s texts after his death and bringing a number of manuscript works into the public domain. Since he knew Bernardin intimately, his work is invaluable. He is a fascinating figure in his own right, about whom our current knowledge is incomplete. Aimé-Martin’s work was severely criticized by Maurice Souriau, whose illuminating study *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre d’après ses manuscrits* of 1905 represents my third source; the accuracy of Souriau’s criticisms, however, needs to be assessed and solutions sought to the numerous questions he raises. Souriau maintained that Aimé-Martin, as he endeavoured to expand a publishing enterprise, rewrote many of the posthumous works: ‘il emprunte à Bernardin, qui ne peut plus
protester, quelques-unes de ses meilleures pages inédites, et les fait passer pour de l'Aimé Martin'. Souriau makes three points: that Aimé-Martin's biography of the author is incomplete and enriched with 'légendes de toutes sortes'; that we should recognize as Bernardin's works only those published during his lifetime; and that we should disregard all the posthumous works, his published correspondence (issued by Aimé-Martin in 1826), and especially the *Harmonies de la nature*, which Aimé-Martin published as a Bernardin text under false pretences. According to Souriau, Aimé-Martin was a 'faussaire'.

There are some startling claims here and it will not always be possible to discover the truth. Clearly, however, the publishing and editorial norms expected today were not those of the first decades of the nineteenth century. From our early work on the correspondence it is evident that Aimé-Martin changed very little, even though he omitted letters that he knew existed and cut passages from some of the letters he published. But it remains generally true that Aimé-Martin's published versions are very close to the manuscript sources, and in this respect Souriau's criticism of his editorial practices, at least as far as the correspondence is concerned, is unfair. That said, Souriau's book has many qualities. In his own introduction he thanks the then Mayor of Le Havre, M. Marais, for giving him permission to receive the documents at home:

> Jamais, s'il m'avait fallu travailler sur place au Havre, je n'aurais pu terminer le dépouillement de ces manuscrits qui, donnés par la famille, ou complétés à l'aide d'achats, forment sans doute un fond précieux pour la connaissance exacte et intégrale de Bernardin, mais aussi un amas de documents effrayant par son poids et son volume. Ajoutons à cela que Bernardin écrivait ses brouillons assez mal, surtout à la fin de sa vie, si mal même qu'il ne pouvait plus se relire: j'ai mis cinq ans à déchiffrer ces papiers, littéralement à la loupe.  

Souriau was not exaggerating when he described the difficulty of reading some of the Bernardin manuscripts. The current municipal authorities are, of course, unable to loan the manuscripts, and it is unfortunate that no critical inventory of the Le Havre collection exists; but eventually the online edition of the correspondence will provide direct links to the manuscript images. For the moment at least we have a much better knowledge of the correspondence than we do of the entire collection, which is a vast and largely unexplored treasure.

Souriau was a first-class scholar who had the time and intelligence to make a careful assessment of Bernardin's papers, and his description of them is accurate. When the papers were purchased in the nineteenth century, no one attempted to prepare a detailed catalogue; they were brought together in over two hundred folders, were numbered consecutively, and were sewn together in these various folders. The papers are now freed from their former constraints (at the time of photocopying permission was given for the cotton bindings to be cut), but the numbers can be confusing; large pieces of paper were used to contain smaller manuscripts, with the result that the same text can be separated on occasion by a number of other manuscripts. The colour of the paper can help the reader identify similar texts or dates, but at present this cannot be done electronically. As Souriau admitted, Bernardin's writing can at times be impossible to read and can drive the reader to distraction. Thankfully, other manuscripts...
are clearly legible, and the letters, sent with the express intention of being read, present few difficulties (unlike the drafts). However, much remains to be done before scholars are able to explore the resource's full potential. The major requirement is for a complete critical catalogue of the entire manuscript collection in Le Havre, one that identifies the manuscripts and assesses what they are and to which texts they relate.

The manuscripts for the early period are scarce and certain elements must therefore be taken on trust. However, as Bernardin begins to attain fame, so the manuscript evidence increases. What emerges is a fascinating picture of a busy writer whose success in the eighteenth century was astonishing — *Paul et Virginie*, I am told, has apparently been through more editions than any other French novel. But my aim in this study is to try to show that Bernardin was more than simply a successful novelist. He considered himself to be a major scientist, he had an impressive knowledge of mathematics, and he sought to find evidence for his theories by resorting to the kind of experiments that were at the very heart of the French Enlightenment, such as asking sailors to throw bottles into the oceans when he was attempting to prove his theories on tidal movement. Certainly, I could have written a quite different study, one that concentrated more on the domestic side of the writer and his intimate relationships; but I chose not to take that path because, when the full correspondence becomes available, readers will be better able to assess and interpret for themselves the nature of those friendships and the debates and discourses that the letters contain. I wanted, rather, to view the life and the productions critically, assessing their impact, their strengths, and their weaknesses; and I believe that placing the writer in the cultural environment in which he lived will be of greater interest to specialists than a mere recitation of the trivial details that affected Bernardin’s everyday existence. On the other hand, many elements combine to form a writer and an intellectual, and a study of this kind must at least attempt to allow readers to perceive other factors, so that they will have both the knowledge and the impetus to pursue a particular path further. There is no doubt that the eventual publication of the complete correspondence, consisting of over 2500 letters, will provide readers with a much fuller and more authentic picture of the subject; nothing will be omitted, and many remarks and details will be added by the editors as part of the critical apparatus.

Since it is my wish that this book will be bought and read — thus introducing further constraints — elements of Bernardin’s life have had to be omitted (and not all readers will agree that my selection of episodes is necessarily the correct or the best one). A biography can rarely tell a full life, but it can attempt to sketch out the formative episodes, which in the case of a major author and intellectual might be seen as those that most clearly influenced him and affected his work. My intention here is to offer new perspectives on the age and the environment in which the subject lived and worked. I hope that my study, beyond merely offering a selective account of a fascinating life, will give details about the ways in which authors merchandized their texts, about their relationships with what we would now call the media, and about the manner in which they sought publication outlets and discussed terms and costs with printers and with artists. An author of the period was doing a lot more than writing, and this is undoubtedly true of Bernardin, particularly during the Revolution and Empire.
One advantage has been available to me that not all biographers have — a view of the life of the character given by the individual himself. In 1808, towards the end of a life that had been rich, difficult, exciting, and adventurous, Bernardin was visited by the American painter Rembrandt Peale. Bernardin was already famous and the painter wanted to produce a portrait that could be sent to America and hung in a gallery. On 20 August 1809 D. B. Warden, the American consul in Paris, wrote to Bernardin asking him to provide a brief account of his life that could hang alongside his portrait:

Vous vous rappellez sans doute que M. Peale de Philadelphie a eu l’honneur de faire votre portrait que l’on voit aujourd’hui à l’exposition du Musée américain. Le Peintre pour mieux faire connaître à ses compatriotes celui dont il a retracé la ressemblance désirerait pouvoir ajouter une notice abrégée de la vie de son modèle. il m’a chargé de vous faire part de ses désirs en vous priant de vouloir bien me communiquer ce que vous voudrez de matériaux à cet égard.

Bernardin had never visited England and he was not at ease in the language, in spite of the English friends he had made in Paris, so he was unable to compose a text in English for the American audience. Nevertheless, he responded to Warden’s request and provided a brief account of his life in French, which, for the biographer, is of particular interest since it is selective and identifies those incidents and events that the subject himself thought important. Writing to ‘aimable Philadelphe, Reimbrun de l’Amérique’ (a curious form of address), he says that he will seek to paint a picture of himself ‘en peu de mots’. He begins by making a mistake over his date of birth, then spots the error, correcting 1736 to 1737. He tells of his first experience at sea, when his uncle took him to Martinique, of his homesickness, and of his return to study ‘à gisors chés les jesuites de Rouen ou je pris pour les lettres un goust que je perfectionnai à l’université de Caen’. He gives details of his subsequent training in Paris to become an engineer, after which he was sent to Malta, quarrelled with the ‘ingenieurs ordinaires’, and lost his position. The next passage is a detailed history of his early career, his journey to and period spent in Russia, his return to France via Poland, and his imprisonment, eventual release, and return to France via Dresden, Berlin, Postdam, and Vienna, where the pride of the inhabitants, especially the nobility, caused him to depart sooner than expected. He made his way back to Paris and found the opportunity to go to the Île de France with an expedition that was to establish a colony in Madagascar. Fortunately (and without going into detail) he was retained on the Île de France, where he stayed for two years. He describes the poverty he experienced there and his disgust at ‘le sort déplorable des malheureux noirs’ — ‘ce spectacle continuël de maux de toute espèce me jetta dans une profonde mélancolie’. He seeks to return to France and does, but promises made to him were not kept (as we shall see later, he refers to Breteuil but does not name him), and this led him to decide ‘de ne plus mettre ma confiance dans aucun homme’. He continues, ‘je me decidai a creuser dans mon propre terrain pour y chercher de leau et je renoncai a celui d’autrui’. The expression is curious, grammatically wrong indeed, but it will remind readers of the conclusion of Voltaire’s Candide.

The following section is of greater interest since it describes the manner in which he took up writing, first the Voyage à l’Île de France, which was admired by critics but
made enemies in Versailles, then — ‘au bout de quelques années’ — the first three volumes of the Études. He says that the Études criticized ‘des abus et des erreurs en tout genre et j’y annonçai une révolution prochaine si on ne se hautoit d’y remédier’. Hindsight is a wonderful thing and Bernardin gives his work, important though it was, qualities that were not apparent at the time of publication. Without ‘contrefaçons’ he would have been a rich man. He explains how the king had made him ‘intendant du jardin des plantes’, and goes on to say that he married and had ‘plusieurs enfants’. As we shall see, Bernardin had three children, but only two, Paul and Virginie, survived into adulthood.

The Revolution impoverished him by taking away hard-gained pensions. Fortunately,

[l’]illustre empereur bonaparte se dissipe pour moi tous les orages; il a retablé une partie de ma fortune par plusieurs pensions et il y a joint la croix d’honneur. son frère Joseph y a mis le comble par une pension de dix mille francs. je dois ces bienfaits non sollicités au simple mouvement de bienfaisance naturel à ces deux grands princes.

He then says that he has two children, that Virginie is being educated at Écouen, that their mother died young, but that ‘j’ai recouvré dans une seconde épouse une femme rare qui a élevé leur enfance et qui prend soin de ma vieillesse avec la même affection’. He concludes the letter by giving his age wrongly and then correcting it, saying that he enjoys good health, that he takes pleasure in ‘le gout des muses et de la philosophie’, that he has recently published a ‘drame sur la mort de Socrate’ and some other short texts, and that he is now busy finishing a ‘long ouvrage que je continuai il y a beaucoup d’années’. Providence has been kind and he has all the advantages he needs to work at leisure:

j’ai un hermitage commode et agréable à 7 lieues de Paris sur les bords de l’oise. j’y passe en toute liberté, avec une partie de ma famille, la moitié de chaque mois de la belle saison. ainsi mon vaisseau longems battu par les tempêtes, s’avance en paix, à la faveur des vents favorables vers le port de la vie, avant d’y jeter l’ancre pour toujours, je tache d’en couronner la poupe de quelques fleurs nouvelles.

The account is interesting for the way it selects elements of the past and omits others. There is generous praise for the Bonapartes and the way they have supported him and provided him with the income that his literary reputation merited but did not produce. But there is nothing in this retrospective on Paul et Virginie, the novel that in fact guaranteed his literary survival. His literary work is unfinished and he continues to strive to complete projects that had occupied him for many years. And his health, good in 1809, declines. He died on 21 January 1814.9

This brief account provided by the subject himself offers an interesting introduction to my study. It sketches out the landmarks of his life and highlights those episodes that the author felt were informative for a wide audience. As explained above, I follow the chronology of Bernardin’s life, but I shall pause on certain episodes longer than on others in order to try to shed light on aspects of the cultural history of the period that still contain mysteries for us. My aim is to offer a new account of a life that, while well known, needs to be better understood. And this life was in every sense one of culture: Bernardin’s literary career, inspired originally by personal experience,
led to the exposition of scientific theories that could only have been expressed by a
writer with a precise knowledge of mathematics. Bernardin became a public figure
who displayed considerable administrative skills while working for the state. He was
also a very private figure. I have chosen not to concentrate on the sentimental aspects
of his life, except on those occasions when there is an evident relationship to his
writing. But the letters tell a broader story, which a brief account of a life cannot
hope to encompass. His influence on later writers should not be underestimated: no
major writer of the following period was unaware of Bernardin, and all read Paul et
Virginie as part of their education. Bernardin knew that this was the text that had led
to his outstanding success and renown, but it was not the text of which he was most
proud. That honour remains with the Études, to which Paul et Virginie was added only
in the third edition of 1788; but it is not the view of the generations of readers that
followed.

Notes to Introduction

1. The correspondence to and from Bernardin is being edited by a team under my general editorship,
   comprising Kate Astbury, Mark Darlow, Simon Davies, Philip Robinson, Catriona Seth, and Mark
   Waddicor. It will be published online by the Voltaire Foundation, Oxford. Throughout the present
   study each letter will be identified by the abbreviation ‘BSP’ followed by the inventory number of
   the correspondence. This inventory, prepared by me, will form the basis of the online edition and
   will provide full details of each letter, including the manuscript location and any published edition;
   it can be seen on the Voltaire Foundation website <http://www.e-enlightenment.org/01_born_digital/ee_bsp_e.htm> [accessed 1 February 2006]. An earlier inventory was compiled by Denise
   Tahhan Bittar, 'La Correspondance de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. Inventaire critique' (unpublished
   Doctorat ès lettres thesis, University of Paris, 1970), and formed a useful foundation on which to
   build. I pay tribute here to Tahhan Bittar’s work, which was undertaken before the use of computer
databases; there are mistakes and omissions, but its existence certainly made my work easier in the
early stages. The majority of the manuscripts are to be found in the Bibliothèque municipale du
Havre, but they remain uncatalogued. Other studies of note are those by F. Maury, Étude sur la vie
et les œuvres de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (Paris: Hachette, 1892; repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1971), and that
of Arvède Barine, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (Paris: Hachette, 1891); both were known to Maurice
Souriau (see note 3 below) and were criticized by him, with some justification, as Maury made
many mistakes in his readings of the manuscripts and Barine relies heavily on the account by Aimé-
Martin (see note 2 below). As Souriau points out, the most reliable evidence is to be found in the
manuscripts themselves.

2. Of particular note is his Essai sur la vie de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, in the Œuvres complètes, ed. by L.
   Aimé-Martin, 2 vols (Paris: Ledentu, 1840), i, i–lxv. Throughout my study I quote from this edition
   of Bernardin’s works, referred to henceforth as ‘OC’.

   et de librairie, 1905). Henceforth, further references to this particular work of Souriau will appear
   mostly with the author’s name and page numbers only.


5. Souriau, p. ix.

6. See the article by Richmond Laurin Hawkins, ‘Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and Peale’s Philadelphia
   Museum: The History of a Portrait’, Romanic Review, 20 (1929), 1–12. The portrait is reproduced as
   the front cover of this study.

7. The letter is quoted by Hawkins (p. 4). Hawkins notes that there are two copies of the response by
   Bernardin in the archives in Le Havre, one a draft in his own hand and a clean copy that,
   he says, is in the hand of Bernardin’s wife. According to Hawkins the French version was translated
   into English by Rembrandt Peale himself and is ‘fairly good’; in fact it is no more than reasonable,
   as there are a number of errors and misconceptions. The English translation is in the University
of Harvard, Houghton Library, X5 2f, No. 2, 6pp. 4°. Hawkins himself makes a series of errors in the article. The two drafts are both in Bernardin’s hand, and the correct references are: Le Havre, Bibliothèque municipale, 141A:2–3 and 148:72–74. The latter is the later, better version, and this is the version from which I quote. The final version would have been sent to Warden. Warden’s letter to Bernardin is in Le Havre, 141A:5 (and not 41A:5, the reference given by Hawkins).

8. Bernardin uses similar expressions in his letters to Hennin. For example: ‘enfin j’ai cherché de l’eau dans mon puits’ (letter of 2 July 1778 (BSP_00356)); ‘j’espère que dieu qui m’a fait la grace de trouver de l’eau dans mon propre puits en rendra la source suffisante pour mes besoins à venir’ (letter of 7 January 1786 (BSP_00712)).

9. The death certificate is in Le Havre, 151B:3.