

THE STORY OF CIVILIZATION: 9

THE AGE
OF
VOLTAIRE

*A History of Civilization in Western Europe from
1715 to 1756, with Special Emphasis on the Conflict
between Religion and Philosophy*

by

Will and Ariel Durant



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**TO OUR BELOVED
GRANDSON
JIM**

Apology

BLAME for the length of this volume must rest with authors fascinated to exuberant prolixity by the central theme—that pervasive and continuing conflict between religion and science-plus-philosophy which became a living drama in the eighteenth century, and which has resulted in the secret secularism of our times. How did it come about that a major part of the educated classes in Europe and America has lost faith in the theology that for fifteen centuries gave supernatural sanctions and supports to the precarious and uncongenial moral code upon which Western civilization has been based? What will be the effects—in morals, literature, and politics—of this silent but fundamental transformation?

The scale of treatment in each volume has grown with the increasing number of past events and personalities still alive in their influence and interest today. This and the multiplicity of topics—all aspects of civilization in Western Europe from 1715 to 1756—may offer some excuse for the proliferation of the tale. So *The Age of Voltaire* has burst its seams, and spills over into a contemplated Part X, *Rousseau and Revolution*, which will carry the story to 1789. This will look at the transformation of the world map by the Seven Years' War; the later years of Louis XV, 1756–74; the epoch of Johnson and Reynolds in England; the development of the Industrial Revolution; the flowering of German literature from Lessing to Goethe, of German philosophy from Herder to Kant, of German music from Gluck to Mozart; the collapse of feudalism in the France of Louis XVI; and the history of those peripheral nations—Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Russia, Turkey, Italy, Portugal, Spain—which have been deferred from this volume partly to save space, and as not directly involved (except through the papacy) in the great debate between reason and faith. This final volume will consider the later phases of that debate in the revolt of Rousseau against rationalism, and the heroic effort of Immanuel Kant to save the Christian theology through the Christian ethic. The perspective of the age of Voltaire will be completed in that Part X of *The Story of Civilization*. The epilogue to the present volume reviews the case for religion; the epilogue to *Rousseau and Revolution*, surveying all ten volumes, will face the culminating question: What are the lessons of history?

We have tried to reflect reality by combining history and biography. The experiment will legitimately invite criticism, but it carries out the aim of “integral history.” Events and personalities go hand in hand through time, regardless of which were causes and which were effects; history speaks in

events, but through individuals. This volume is not a biography of Voltaire; it uses his wandering and agitated life as connective tissue between nations and generations, and it accepts him as the most significant and illustrative figure of the period between the death of Louis XIV and the fall of the Bastille. Which, of all the men and women of that turbulent era, is more vividly remembered, more often read, more alive in influence today, than Voltaire? "Voltaire," said Georg Brandes, "summarizes a century."¹ "*Le vrai roi du dix-huitième siècle,*" said Victor Cousin, "*c'est Voltaire.*"² Let us follow that living flame through his century.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The manuscript has had the advantage of being read by Dr. Theodore Besterman, Director of the Institut et Musée Voltaire in Geneva; we thank him for his patience, and for opening to us his great collection of Voltaireana. He found one serious error in our text, but otherwise voted us "a very high degree of accuracy." Doubtless some errors still remain. We shall welcome all corrections that are tempered with mercy.

Our warm appreciation to Sarah and Harry Kaufman for their help in classifying the material, and to our grandson, James Easton, for revising the chapter on the history of science. Our daughter Ethel not only typed the manuscript but improved it by her suggestions. And we have had again the benefit of expert and scholarly editing of the text, the notes, and the index by Mrs. Vera Schneider.

NOTES ON THE USE OF THIS BOOK

1. Dates of birth and death will be found in the Index.
2. Voltaire reckoned a 50 per cent depreciation of French currency between 1640 and 1750.³ The general reader may use the following rough equivalents, as between 1750 and 1965, in terms of the currency of the United States of America:

crown, \$6.25	guilder, \$5.25	penny, \$.10
ducat, \$6.25	guinea, \$26.25	pound, \$25.00
écu, \$3.75	gulden, \$5.25	shilling, \$1.25
florin, \$6.25	livre, \$1.25	sou, \$.0625
franc, \$1.25	louis d'or, \$25.00	thaler, \$4.00
	mark, \$16.67	

3. The location of works of art, when not indicated in the text, will usually be found in the Notes. In allocating such works, the name of the city will imply its leading gallery, as follows:

Amsterdam—Rijksmuseum	Edinburgh—National Gallery
Berlin—Staatsmuseum	Frankfurt—Städelsches Kunstinstitut
Bologna—Accademia di Belle Arti	Geneva—Musée d'Art et d'Histoire
Budapest—Museum of Fine Arts	The Hague—Mauritshuis
Chicago—Art Institute	Kansas City—Nelson Gallery
Cincinnati—Art Institute	Leningrad—Hermitage
Cleveland—Museum of Art	London—National Gallery
Detroit—Institute of Art	Madrid—Prado
Dresden—Gemälde-Galerie	Milan—Brera
Dulwich—College Gallery	Naples—Museo Nazionale

New York—Metropolitan Museum of Art	San Marino, Calif.—Henry E. Huntington Art Gallery
Paris—Louvre	Vienna—Kunsthistorisches Museum
	Washington—National Gallery

4. Passages in reduced type are especially dull and recondite, and are not essential to the general picture of the age.

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