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# Voltaire . . . a Notary?

**V**oltaire was born François-Marie Arouet in 1694, into a comfortable bourgeois family whose patriarch, Voltaire's legal father, was a *notaire*.

Rumours at the time held that his mother was the mistress of the Abbé<sup>1</sup> de Châteauneuf and that Voltaire was the Abbé's son.

From an early age, the Abbé de Châteauneuf took an interest in the boy, financing his studies at the Jesuit school *Louis-le-Grand* (Louis the Great) in Paris, from 1704 to 1711. There, the boy was well trained in Latin, Greek, and Law, as well as a smattering of the classical authors.

When the Abbé died, his brother, the French ambassador to Holland, employed Voltaire as a secretary and intelligence officer in the French Embassy in The Hague. Unfortunately for the young Voltaire, he became infatuated with the daughter of an

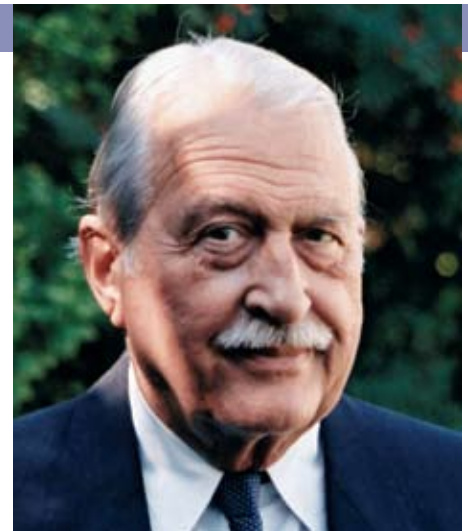
adventurer. Fearing scandal, the Ambassador bowed to the wishes of Voltaire's disapproving father and sent him back to Paris.

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Here began the age-old battle between a son who wished to become a philosopher and a father who refused to regard literature as a profession at all.

Monsieur Arouet instead wanted his son to take over the notarial business that had ensured the family's prosperity. When Voltaire refused to do so, he threatened to disinherit his son.

Thus threatened, Voltaire indeed entered into the notarial business, practising as a *notaire royeux*<sup>2</sup> for 5 years. As soon as his father died, however, Voltaire abandoned the notarial profession. Taking the pen



name "Voltaire" in 1718, he began his career as a philosopher, poet, and satiric writer. By the time Louis XIV died in 1715, Voltaire was a young man of 21. The age of Enlightenment had started, and he witnessed its birth. Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and the encyclopaedists boldly spread the spirit of critical discernment and the joys of enlightenment to all classes of European society.

Voltaire has been hailed by many as the patriarch of the Age of Reason. The Age of Enlightenment was sceptical toward tradition and confident in the power of modern science. Voltaire was a popularizer, a man of letters, and one of the first to make a fortune through writing. In his younger years, he lived under the heavy-handed censorship of Louis XIV



François-Marie Arouet aka Voltaire

<sup>1</sup> *The Concordat of Bologna, passed between Pope Leo X and Francis 1 of France in 1516, gave the kings of France the right to appoint, among abbés de commendataires. An abbé was usually the fourth son of a nobleman, who received income from a monastery or abbey without the requirement to render religious services. Title and rank went to the first-born son; the second son became a diplomat; the third, an officer in the army, and the fourth, an abbé.*

<sup>2</sup> See Dr. Hoeter's article on French Notaires in *The Scrivener*, Fall 2005 issue ([www.notaries.bc.ca/scrivener](http://www.notaries.bc.ca/scrivener)).

and XV, and thus spoke metaphorically of “purging the Iroquois,” even though his readers knew full well he was talking about the Catholic Church.

His ideas were, for such a time, very daring. He was widely known in the literary community. With his friend, the great encyclopaedist Diderot (1713 to 1784), he worked on the first *Encyclopaedie*. Voltaire campaigned heavily for Diderot’s membership into the Académie des Sciences, but Diderot was never admitted.

In 1750, Voltaire accepted the invitation of Frederick II of Prussia to go to Potsdam. This friendship with Frederick the Great lasted only a few years. In 1753, Voltaire left Prussia in disgrace, even being placed under arrest in Frankfurt by the local Prussian agent.

Voltaire was a deist, rejecting the confines of French Catholicism and frequently attacking the Church’s dogma. He stood for many liberal ideals: civil liberties, freedom of religion, and the right to fair trial. He was a champion of reform and an ardent opponent of the *ancien regime* but, interestingly, was not a proponent of democracy or representative government.

Voltaire’s wit made him popular among many aristocratic families, but also made him many enemies. His first stint in the Bastille, in 1717, arose from writings perceived to be insulting to Phillip II, Duke of Orléans and Regent for Louis XV. In a convoluted disagreement with the powerful de Rohan family, he was assaulted by hired thugs, imprisoned in the Bastille, and finally exiled to England in 1726.

It was in England that he honed his satiric style, writing a great deal and contributing to the first *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. He finally returned to France in 1729, but would be exiled from Paris for his writings several more times in his life.

On May 30, 1778, Voltaire was on his deathbed and already a forgotten man in Paris. The exact time and date of his death is unknown. A satirist to the last, he refused the final

anointment because “he did not need an oil wash to go to hell.”

The rector of the Paris cathedral of Saint-Sulpice refused to have Voltaire interred in his cemetery. Friends of Voltaire had his body smuggled out of Paris and buried in Troyes, where the Archbishop was more sympathetic. The inscription on his tombstone was typical of his sardonic wit: “Glory, thy name is Vanity.” During the French Revolution of 1789, his remains were exhumed, brought back to Paris, and interred in the Pantheon.

Even today, Voltaire is controversial. He is remembered and honoured as a courageous polemicist who fought for the rights of working people, a man who denounced the corruption of the French Church and the *ancien regime*. Aaron Jean-Marie Lustiger, the cardinal and Archbishop of Paris who died last year, believed that “most of the wrongs of the world, including Communism, Fascism, and anti-Semitism, came straight from the Enlightenment Age, from Voltaire, Diderot, and the Cult of Reason.”

One thing is for certain: Voltaire was, for 5 years at least, a practising member of the notarial community of Paris. ▲

**Dr. Bernard Hoeter was the Secretary of The Society of Notaries Public of BC from 1969 to 1986.**

**David Leggett is a UBC History student who assisted Dr. Hoeter in the process of writing this article.**

### Sources

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