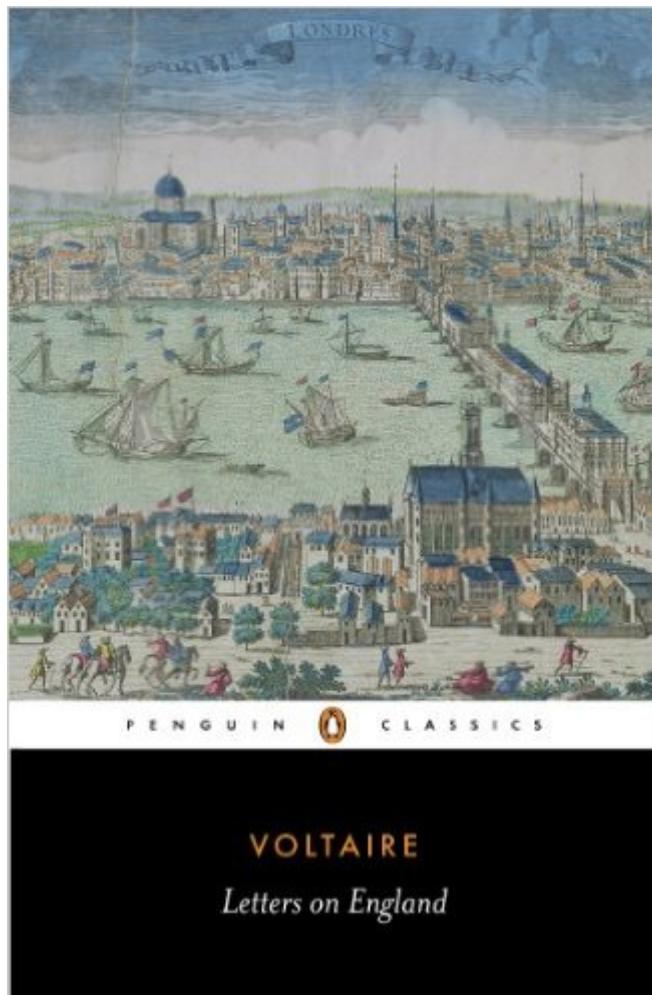


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Letters On England (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Also known as the *Lettres anglaises ou philosophiques*, Voltaire's response to his exile in England offered the French public of 1734 a panoramic view of British culture. Perceiving them as a veiled attack against the ancien régime, however, the French government ordered the letters burned and Voltaire persecuted.

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Customer Reviews

I'm starting to think that there is a certain clique of authors, to wit, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, Swift, and Voltaire, who have developed a popular perception that tragically limits or constrains their legacy in the world of to-day. For Voltaire's part, when he is spoken of, it is generally in regard to "Candide," certainly a great work, but not the be-all or end-all of his particular genius. "Letters on England," a series of musings on his exile in England from 1726-1729, is a work which gives a much different perspective on Voltaire from the cynical, suspected atheist we've all come to know and love. The primary focal points of the "Letters" are comparisons of England and France in the realms of religion, politics, and the arts and sciences. While Voltaire clearly criticizes the French institutions of his day, he does not intend us to look at England as the ideal society. In religious matters, Voltaire derides the monolith of French Catholicism, acknowledging the relative harmlessness of English sectarianism - saying "if there were only one religion in England, there would be danger of despotism...but there are thirty, and they live in peace and happiness". Politically, Voltaire admires the progress England has made since the Magna Carta, even though it means limited

enfranchisement, and division of legislative power. In the arts and sciences, Voltaire examines the ingenuity of philosophers like Bacon, Newton, and Locke, and the ability of authors like Shakespeare, Pope, Swift, Wycherley, and others, to make their reputations and livings largely independent of a feudal patronage system. Throughout the "Letters," Voltaire privileges common sense, forward thinking, and right reasoning.

Letters on England is enlightening on several levels and a very interesting description of the society politics and science of England in the mid 18th century from a French point of view. Voltaire being profoundly interested in all aspects of life and all types of knowledge provides an astounding account of sundry aspects of England from his patently Voltaire style. He makes the book interesting by including his take on some of the peculiarities of English life. Many of the letters are rather short and they need not be read in any particular sequence. The style is strait forward and they are relatively objective for Voltaire's work. I think these letters are indicative of Voltaire's style and provide a unique glimpse of many often overlooked aspects of English culture in the 18th century. He is particularly interested in the Quakers and devotes several of his letters entirely to their customs and beliefs. Yes these letters are certainly interesting. For anyone studying religious toleration (or intolerance) in England these letters may be of certain value. My favorite and possibly the most endearing letters is the one devoted to Francis Bacon. He alludes to the fact that Bacon was involved in an embezzlement scandal for which he was removed from office. Of course this is certainly true but he, as many others have, forgives him for this since he has provided so much for mankind. I feel that Voltaire saw much of the same in Bacon that he saw in himself. We must remember that Voltaire too was a fantastic speculator (investor) and many accused him of possibly crossing into the realm of less than legal activities.

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