



## Rousseau's bed curtain

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Lumières.Lausanne | *Trouvailles*

Mai 2013 – n° 1

ISBN 978-2-940331-43-7

Pour citer cet article :

Béla Kapossy, « Rousseau's bed curtain », *Trouvailles Lumières.Lausanne*, n° 1, mai 2013,  
url : <http://lumières.unil.ch/publications/trouvailles/1/>.

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## Rousseau's bed curtain

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Eighteenth-century Bern is not commonly known as a place of Rousseau worship. The physician and poet Albrecht von Haller compared the author of the *Contrat Social* to Carneades, the ancient Greek sceptic who tried to convince the Roman youth that any seemingly valid argument could be met with an equally valid counter-argument. When in June 1762 Geneva's government condemned *Emile*, Haller wrote that Rousseau should count himself lucky to live in an age where his fellow citizens had overcome their earlier passion for burning heretics at the stake. Remarks of a similar kind were also made by other Bernese councillors. To many of them Rousseau's notion of popular sovereignty and civil religion presented a direct threat to the social cohesion of the Republic of Bern. It is thus not surprising that each of Rousseau's two stays within Bernese territory turned out to be of only short duration. His first attempt to escape French and Genevan justice by seeking refuge in Yverdon in June 1762 lasted a mere three weeks, while his retreat to the Île de Saint-Pierre in autumn 1765 was cut short after two months. In both instances the government of Bern declared Rousseau a *persona non grata* and ordered his immediate eviction.

And yet, even aristocratic Bern had its share of Rousseau admirers. Several members of Bern's reform circles, like the *Oeconomic Society*, the *Société des citoyens*, as well as the salon of Julie Bondeli, were enthusiastic readers of Rousseau's writings which they saw as a blueprint for the renewal of the Bernese commonwealth. While disagreeing with some of his most famous political ideas, they fully adhered to his critique of excessive foreign trade, the love of agriculture, and the educational program spelled out in *Emile*. The admiration seems to have been mutual. Not only did Rousseau maintain a steady correspondance with his Bernese friends, he also considered Bern itself, despite its oligarchic tendencies, a model republic where good housekeeping and economic moderation went together with patriotic politics. We can see this from his *Projet de constitution pour la Corse* and the *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* where he repeatedly refers to Bern's economic and institutional settings.

The degree of enthusiasm expressed by some of Rousseau's most ardent patrician followers, however, can probably be best gathered from an object that is now part of the Family Archive Mülinen deposited at the Burgerbibliothek in Bern. At first sight, the bluish piece of printed cotton, measuring 42 cm by 12 cm, seems hardly the stuff to quicken the pulse of hardened Rousseau followers. The true significance of this artefact is revealed on the folded paper which served to protect the piece of cloth. The message, written in a hand common for the late eighteenth century, states that the enclosed object is nothing less but a piece of Rousseau's bed curtain from the île Saint-Pierre: "Restes des rideaux du lit de J:J: Rousseau à l'île de St: Pierre."



It might seem ironic that Bern, the city that repeatedly refused to grant the Genevan projection, should have come into the possession of this most curious and singular piece of Rousseau memorabilia. While the exact provenance of the bed curtain remains uncertain, there are a number of indications that make it possible to speculate on its original owner. The first indication is the shelf mark (Mss. Mül. 615) which, besides the piece of bed curtain, contains the copy of a letter Rousseau wrote in 1763 in order to congratulate the young Bernese Niklaus Anton Kirchberger on his marriage to Johanna von Diesbach. Kirchberger had met Rousseau the year before during his pilgrimage to Môtiers in the principality of Neuchâtel, where the latter had found refuge following his expulsion from Yverdon. The correspondence that followed their first encounter is a testimony of the near religious veneration with which the young Bernese bowed to his older friend. One letter from 1764 ends with the greeting, "Adieu mon cher maître." Not only did Kirchberger provide Rousseau with news from Bern, the letters also reveal the various plans with which he hoped to win his master's favours. These include a joint visit to the Alps as well as the rather ambitious project of writing a follow-up to *Emile*. Rousseau in turn was asked to help with a speech on the history of Swiss patriotism Kirchberger had agreed to give at the *Äussere Stand* and to comment on the program of the Bernese *Société morale*. In exchange, Kirchberger invited Rousseau in the summer of 1764 to come and stay at his country estate near Bern. Rousseau would be entirely safe there and protected from the kind of scenes that made his life in Môtiers increasingly miserable, he wrote on 31 May. Only Rousseau's closest friends would know of his presence so as to keep any curious onlookers at bay: "Je conois assez la tournure d'esprit de notre ville pour sentir la nécessité de cet incognito, si votre arivé fut sur, il y aurait 300 personnes qui attendroit deux heures pour vous voir passer d'une rue a l'autre." Rousseau would always be welcome in Bern, not because of his fame, but because of his heart.

Rousseau, perhaps wisely, remained in Môtiers. He did however thankfully accept Kirchberger's subsequent proposal of November 1764 to settle on the île Saint-Pierre. Whether Kirchberger ever visited Rousseau there remains unclear. The person who most certainly did seek out Rousseau's temporary lodgings is an admirer from the next generation, the Bernese Sigmund von Wagner, who captured his trip from the 1790s in a booklet entitled, *Die Peters-Insel im Bielersee* (s.l.: s.n., [1795]).

By this time Rousseau had been dead for nearly twenty years. The bed curtain, as Wagner recalls, was however still in place. Next to a tall wooden cupboard, some chairs and a small table, stood Rousseau's French bed with a curtain decorated in a red and white floral pattern: "mit einem Vorhange und Ueberzuge von weiss und roth geblumtem Zitze, auf französische Art errichtetes Bett." Himself an avid collector of autographs and other kinds of material memories, it is difficult to imagine how Wagner could have passed the opportunity of acquiring a relic of the Swiss Plato, as Rousseau was occasionally called. And so, it is probably thanks to Wagner that Rousseau's bed curtain ended up at the Burgerbibliothek, a hypothesis hardened by the fact that considerable parts of Wagner's collection were later integrated into the Family Archive Mülinen.

(An earlier version of this article was published under the title: "[Rousseaus Bettvorhang](#)", in *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Heimatkunde*, n° 3, 2012, p. 42-45)

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