



Benjamin Constant

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Benjamin Constant (kohn-stahn), son of a Dutch army colonel, was born Henri Benjamin Constant de Rebecque in Lausanne, Switzerland, on October 25, 1767. His education was varied; he was tutored in turn by a sadistic German, a Frenchman who boarded him in a brothel, and a defrocked German priest. His mother having died soon after giving birth to him, he was pampered by his grandmother, aunts, and stepmother. A precocious boy, he was sent to Oxford (where he was not formally admitted), Erlangen (where he was expelled for relations with a prostitute), and Edinburgh (where he acquired powerful Whig political convictions). Finally, in 1787, he returned to Paris to begin the tumultuous social and political life which he embodied in his writings.

Constant was both a serious intellectual and an unrestrained sensualist. At twenty he formed an alliance with forty-seven-year-old Mme de Charrière, who for seven years gave him an education in eighteenth century manners. He left her, however, for Mme de Staël, who maintained one of the most brilliant liberal salons of the age. His two marriages (to Wilhelmina von Cramm in 1789 and to Charlotte von Hardenberg in 1808) and frequent affairs failed to interfere with his social, literary, and political life.

Constant's emotional autobiography is presented in varying disguise in his novels: *Adolphe* (completed for the most part by 1807), the lightly fictionalized *The Red Notebook* (abandoned in 1811), and *Cécile* (written about 1811 but not discovered until 1948). Of these, *Adolphe* is his masterpiece, and it achieved renown as a classic dissection of possessive love. Constant spent the last fifteen years of his life writing steadily, producing not only political works but also his important religious study *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes, et ses développements*. He was regularly elected to the Chamber of Deputies, becoming president four months before he died, December 8, 1830.

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