

*The supplement to the Penny Cyclopaedia or the Society for the diffusion of useful knowledge*, vol. II, London, Charles Knight, 1851: 553-555

SISMONDI, JEAN CHARLES LEONARD SIMONDE DE, was the son of a Protestant minister of the canton of Geneva; he belonged to an antient family of Tuscan origin, which has become extinct by his death. His ancestors, who were attached to the Ghibelline party, were expelled from Pisa in the fourteenth century, and took refuge in France, where they remained till the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, when they settled at Geneva.

Sismondi was born at Geneva on the 9th of May, 1773. He was first placed at the College of Geneva, where he acquired a sound knowledge of classical literature. From the college he was removed to the Auditoire, where he was enabled to pursue a more extended course of study. His education being completed, he was compelled by the change of fortune which befel his family, owing to the events of the French revolution, to enter as clerk in the counting-house of the firm of Eynard and Co. at Lyon. Filial obedience induced him to undertake a duty to which he was unfitted by his previous habits, and which the highly cultivated disposition of his mind rendered scarcely supportable. The moral training, however, which he underwent in mastering the difficulties of his new situation, and in the regular discharge of its duties, produced an effect which, in after life, he acknowledged to have been eminently beneficial; to it he was accustomed to ascribe his taste for the science of political economy, which predominates in his historical writings. The revolutionary troubles, which overtook the city of Lyon in 1792, compelled Sismondi to return to Geneva: this city however, having become annexed to the French republic, proved no asylum from political persecution; his father and himself, though they had carefully abstained from interference in public affairs, were imprisoned; but, as no charge could be brought against them, they were soon after liberated. In February, 1793, he accompanied his family to England, where they intended to settle; but the dilapidated state of his father's fortune rendered their residence in London one of privations to which they had not been accustomed, and, after a year's residence in different parts of England, they returned to their native city. This sojourn in England Sismondi turned to profitable account; besides acquiring a sound knowledge of the language, and studying the English constitution, he examined our commercial and agricultural system, and was thus enabled, when in after-

life he published his peculiar views on political economy, to speak from actual knowledge of the merits and defects of the internal policy of England. His return to Geneva afforded him the painful opportunity of studying the science of politics in a far ruder school; it was his lot to behold the peaceful commonwealth where his fathers had enjoyed liberty of conscience and freedom of speech, suffering under the despotism of what was, by courtesy, termed a popular rule. The frenzy of revolutionary feeling had spread over the city of Geneva, and had converted its quiet money-making citizens into turbulent and suspicious demagogues. In the hope of finding a more quiet abode, and in order to afford a shelter to a friend, M. Caila, who had been proscribed by the revolutionists, the family of Sismondi removed to Châtelaine. The capture of their unfortunate friend, and his immediate execution in their presence, rendered their residence at Chatelaine as distasteful as it was dangerous. Having sold the estate they possessed there, they determined upon emigrating to the country of their ancestors, and arrived at Florence in October, 1795. They invested the produce of the estate which they had sold in purchasing a small farm at Valchiusa, near Pescia, a spot selected by the young Sismondi. Here he divided his time between the active superintendence of his farm and the preparation of a work which he had projected during his travels, *Recherches sur les Constitutions des Peuples Libres*. These researches, though they have not been published, are generally regarded as the groundwork of his subsequent historical writings; the ideas which he adopted in them have been amplified and illustrated in the work of M. de Tocqueville on the democratical governments of America.

In 1801 appeared at Geneva the first published work of Sismondi, which he had written during the latter part of his stay of Italy; it was entitled *Tableau de l'Agriculture Toscane*. To his study of this subject may perhaps be attributed the prominence which, in his writings on political economy, he gives to agriculture. Eminently practical in its details, this interesting treatise discards even the appearance of theory, and contents itself with portraying in true but lively colours the actual state of the country and the manner of life of its inhabitants. The year previous to the publication of this work Sismondi and his parents had again returned to Geneva, where they lived on the remnant of a once large property, which his father had sacrificed to his confidence in the financial measures of Necker [NECKER, Penny Cyclopaedia]. He published, in 1803, his essay on political economy, with the title *De la Richesse Commerciale, ou Principes d'Economie Politique appliquée à la Legislation du Commerce*. This work he

afterwards entirely remodelled, and, in 1819, published it under the title *Nouveaux Principes d'Economie Politique*.

The views of Adam Smith [SMITH, ADAM, Penny Cyclopaedia] are almost implicitly followed in this treatise, and, as they happened to coincide with the popular notions on the subject, they brought the writer into repute. The vacant chair of political economy in the university of Wilna was soon after offered to him by Count Plattner, who came purposely to Geneva to urge in person his proposal. Though the offer was advantageous in a pecuniary point of view, and the acceptance of it on that account urged upon him by his parents, it was declined by him from his dislike to teaching. It was at this period that Sismondi began to apply himself in earnest to historical investigations, and, by the advice of his mother, a woman of cultivated mind and sound understanding, to devote himself chiefly to the study of history.

His residence at Geneva, though it was enlivened by his enjoying the intimacy of several literary persons, such as Benjamin Constant and Madame De Stael, could not deliver him from the desponding feelings which are so common to the young author, and, at the suggestion of his excellent mother, he was induced, in 1805, to accompany Madame De Stael in a tour through Italy. Sympathy of literary tastes had produced the sincerest friendship between these two distinguished writers; the influence of the scenes they visited together in that classical country, and the poetic charm cast upon them by the conversation of the authoress of *Corinne* [STAEI, ANNE GERMAINE DE, Penny Cyclopaedia], fixed the determination of Sismondi to consecrate the past glories of the land of his ancestors in the page of history. The first-fruits of his historical studies appeared in the first two volumes of his *Républiques Italiennes*, which were published at Zurich, in 1807. His publisher, Gesner, is stated to have dealt hardly with him, and the publication of the subsequent volumes, the last of which appeared in 1818, was transferred to Treuttel and Würtz. A new and more complete edition, in sixteen volumes, appeared during the years 1825 and 1826, both at Paris and Brussels. In the composition of this his first and most important historical work, Sismondi has been blamed for not having made a sufficient use of public archives and private collections; he is, however, acknowledged to have carefully consulted every printed book from which he could derive information. It is to this conscientious examination of authorities, and the absence of political prejudices, that the value of the *Républiques Italiennes*, as a faithful historical record, is chiefly due. The style is pleasing and attractive, but, though a good French scholar, he never hesitates to use an unauthorised or even ungrammatical

phrase in order to convey his meaning with greater precision. The part of the work, which is generally considered to be most defective, is that which treats of the development of the republican constitutions and the modifications which they afterwards experienced; for the full accomplishment of this portion of his task, Sismondi is said not to have possessed sufficient legal knowledge. While engaged in writing this history he was likewise employed as a contributor to the *Biographie Universelle* which was publishing in Paris under the editorship of Michaud. The biographie which he contributed to this valuable work were those of the principal historical personages of Italy, for the composition of which the researches he was then making in Italian history eminently fitted him. Sismondi was accustomed regularly to read the manuscript pages of his history to his mother, and, with the humility of filial obedience, to lend an attentive ear to the corrections she suggested.

To her pious care he has gratefully acknowledged himself not a little indebted for the eminence he attained as an author; in his desponding moment she was ever a present comforter, and the rough path to literary fame was smoothed by her counsels and cheered by her example. In 1811 he delivered at Geneva a course of lectures upon the Literature of the South of Europe, which were printed at Paris in 1813, and a third edition, in four volumes, was published in 1829.

It comprises an introductory history of the decline of the Latin language and the formation of the languages of Southern Europe, and presents us with a history of Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese literature to the end of the eighteenth century. The portion of this work which treats of the literature of Spain and Portugal is the most imperfect, as the information which it contains is derived from secondary sources.

In 1813, Sismondi visited Paris, which at that time presented an interesting study for a political observer; he there formed an acquaintance with an illustrious brother historian, M. Guizot, who, when, in 1819, he became Minister of Public Instruction, made him the offer of a valuable professorship at Paris, which, however, he declined. During the Hundred Days a series of letters, which he published in the «*Moniteur*», on the French Constitution, attracted the attention of Napoleon, who requested an interview with the author. The interesting details of this interview were immediately after reported by Sismondi to his mother, and an abridgment of them may be seen in the article of the «*Quarterly Review*» referred to at the end of this article (p. 318-321).

In the year 1819 Sismondi began his longest, and, as it is by some considered, his best work, *L'Histoire des Français*, which occupied him till the close of his life. It was not it

first the intention of the author to bring down this history to a later period than the Edict of Nantes, which terminates the twenty-first volume; he was induced to continue it, on a more abridged scale, to the period of the Revolution, but he carried it no further than the year 1750. His principal motives for undertaking this important work were, the connection of French history with Italian, and the fact that French literature possesses no history of the kind which can be looked upon as a work of authority.

To these motives may be added the great interest which Sismondi evinced in the affairs of a country which he had adopted as his own. He has not, however, allowed his bias in favour of France and the French to interfere with the investigation of truth and the declaration of it. So little indeed did he seek to gratify in it the national vanity, that he has not hesitated to expose the weak foundation on which had rested undisturbed for centuries many traditional incidents in the history of France, which, as they responded to the popular feeling, had been fondly cherished in the memory of the people.

The history is divided into eleven periods: the first three treat of the early races of French kings, the Merovingian, Carlovingian, and early Capetian races, to the accession of Louis IX; the fourth brings it down to the death of Charles IV 1328; the fifth, from the accession of Philip Le Valois to Charles V, 1422; the sixth, from 1422 to 1515; the seventh, and most interesting, presents us with the reign of Francis I. and is a beautiful specimen of historical portraiture, in which the colours, though lively and pleasing, are never exaggerated: the eighth embraces the period of the religious wars of France, which are treated of with an impartiality scarcely to be looked for in a Genevan Protestant; the ninth is the reign of that favourite of French kings, the first of the Bourbons, and here, more perhaps than in any other part of his writings, may be seen the honest spirit by which he was actuated: indeed in his endeavour to be impartial, he has perhaps sometimes been unnecessarily severe on the character of Henry IV. The last three periods embrace the history of France under the Bourbons to the latter period of the reign of Louis XV [FRANCE, Penny Cyclopaedia].

In the year 1830 Sismondi published, in *Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopaedia*, an abridgment, in English, of his *Républiques Italiennes*; a French edition of this work appeared in Paris in 1832, under the title *Histoire de la Renaissance de la Liberté en Italie*.

The last and least known of his historical works is entitled *Histoire de la Chute de l'Empire Romain et du Declin de la Civilisation*. This work, which was published at Paris in 1835, embraces the history of 700 years, from A.D. 250 to 1000. The other

writings of Sismondi are 1- *Julie Sevère*, an historical novel in imitation of Sir Walter Scott, in which he describes the condition of Gaul at the time that Rome was a prey to the barbarians; it was published at Paris in 1822; 2- *Etudes sur les Sciences Sociales*, published at Paris in 1836; this work contains a collection of articles which he had previously contributed to various periodicals; 3- *De la Vie et des Ecrits de Th. Mallet*, 1807, in 8vo.

The above is a brief account of the writings of Sismondi; but it would be doing injustice to his memory to omit some of the details of his private life and character which have been recorded by his biographers. Surrounded by a circle of all that was most distinguished in literature, he was conspicuous among them for the amiability of his disposition and the devotedness of his friendship. Though he never reached a state of affluence, he was liberal in contributing to the necessities of the poor, and he is said to have spent considerable sums in the furtherance of causes which had political freedom for their object. Fond of society, he never allowed his inclination to enjoy it to trespass upon the time he had marked out for study, usually nine or ten hours a day. The time he allotted to this object was never broken in upon, except to assist a friend or to alleviate misfortune. As a public character he displayed considerable firmness in the maintenance of his political opinions, and he was careless of the unpopularity which this conduct often entailed upon him.

About the year 1840 he felt the first symptoms of the cruel malady to which he fell a victim, which was a cancer in the stomach. A short journey which he made to England appears to have aggravated his disease; but his sufferings, though intense, scarcely interrupted his application to study, and he may almost be said to have died with the pen in hand. Indeed three days before his death, which occurred on the 25th of June, 1842, he was occupied in correcting the last proof sheets of his *Histoire des Français*.

Sismondi married, in 1819, Miss Allen, sister to the late Mr. Allen of Cressilly, member of parliament for Pembrokeshire, and to the second wife of Sir James Mackintosh [MACKINTOSH, SIR JAMES, Penny Cyclopaedia].

The following extract, which we translate from the conclusion of *L'Histoire des Français*, will be found an interesting supplement to this biographical sketch of Sismondi: «My life has been divided between the study of political economy and that of history; thus, in this long narration of events, the political economist will ever be discovered conjointly with the historian. I have endeavoured to prevent those lessons being lost which experience has given us on the causes which contribute to create and

maintain the prosperity of nations; but, above all, I have always looked upon wealth as a means, not as an end; I have always inquired respecting it, whether it really advanced the well-being of all classes, and I trust my readers will discover, in the constant interest I have taken in the welfare of the cultivator of the land, in the artisan, and in the poor, who has to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, that all my sympathies belong to the needy and suffering classes of the community». An interesting account of the private life of Sismondi may be seen in the «Magasin Pittoresque», for 1843, pp. 314-319. For a critical detail of his writings we refer our readers to the «Quarterly Review», vol. 72, pp. 300-356, and the «Foreign Quarterly Review», vol. 30, pp. 258-261.