

McGill Library's J. Patrick Lee Voltaire Collection

What: Published and manuscript works by and about Voltaire from the 18th through the 20th century, many with an American origin, collected by a Voltaire scholar.

Why: Intellectual History; Collecting and collectors.

Where: Rare Books and Special Collections.



From histories to theatre, to poetry, Voltaire's writing engaged critically with the major social, political, and philosophical questions of the eighteenth century. His voice was at the centre of much of the deep reflection, but also the violent upheaval coming out of the Enlightenment, around questions of the best form of government and the authority of the church. His philosophical tale *Candide* (1759), perhaps his most famous work, presents a parade of hypocrisy, cruelty, and disillusionment of every kind with the 'civilised' world.

In 2013, McGill acquired the J. Patrick Lee Voltaire Collection, adding an important aspect to the existing strength of books embodying eighteenth-century intellectual history. Lee, an American Voltaire scholar, published several articles about Voltaire, often in relation to items held in his vast personal eighteenth-century library numbering approximately three thousand volumes.

The collection includes over forty manuscript texts and letters, including correspondence to and from Voltaire. There are over nine hundred editions by Voltaire, and an important group of works by his contemporaries, many of them commentators on Voltaire, amounting to well over 1800 titles.



One special feature of this Voltaire collection is the large number of illustrated editions, many of them American printed in the early to mid twentieth century.

Secondary source material from Lee's working library comment on the titles held in the collection, and provide excellent support for understanding the context of these individual titles, along with the significance of the group as a whole.

Another strength includes a good number of early English translations, some of which contain momentous American provenance. Among the most notable of these is a multi-volume

set of Voltaire's Complete Works printed in the 18th century by his principal publisher Cramer of Geneva, with the bookplate of Theodore Roosevelt. There is also a beautiful manuscript book of poetry in French, which carries the bookplate of the George Washington.



Image of Theodore Roosevelt's bookplate

Oeuvres de Voltaire.

Genève, by Cramer, 1775, 40 volumes.

Our Lee copy is in the original 18th-century binding with marbled papers and in impeccable condition.

In addition to McGill's general rare book holdings in eighteenth-century literature and philosophy, several of the named special collections create an exceptional basis for the study of this period. **The Jean-Jacques Rousseau Collection** for example, provides material on the other dominant force in French political letters of that century. Both the **David Hume Collection** and the corpus of material by and about **Frances Burney** and her family provide important British reflections upon the French Enlightenment and thus bridge British and continental communities.

(Text Adapted From: *Meetings with Books*, edited by Jillian Tomm and Richard Virr. (2014), p. 158-159.)

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