VATTEL’S LIFE

Emer de Vattel was born in Couvet, in the Principality of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, on 25 April 1714.¹ His father David, a Calvinist pastor and member of the Vénérable Classe, the local consistory, had been influential in endorsing Frederick I of Prussia’s successful claim to the sovereignty of Neuchâtel upon the death of Marie de Nemours in 1707. Emer’s mother, Marie, equally came from a filo-Prussian and well-off family. She was the sister of Emer de Montmollin, who served as the Chancellor of Neuchâtel and a diplomatic envoy for Frederick I at Utrecht in 1713.²

Prussian rule in Neuchâtel had inaugurated a time of economic prosperity, especially in the clock industry, as well as intellectual activity. Although it was not until 1838 that the city saw the birth of its long-awaited academy of sciences, an animated scholarly debate had been thriving there since the first decades of the eighteenth century. At the centre of this development were theologian Jean-Frédéric Ostervald, who was to become one of Emer de Vattel’s closest friends, as well as polymath Louis Bourguet, who gave lectures on philosophy, law and mathematics and founded the reviews Mercure Suisse and Journal Hélvétique, with which Vattel was to publish several pieces.³ Though not as celebrated as natural lawyers Jean Barbeyrac in Lausanne or Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui in Geneva, Ostervald and Bourguet nevertheless were intellectuals of Europe-wide renown, and their presence in Neuchâtel certainly benefited the early evolution of Vattel’s thinking.

A brilliant young student, Vattel commenced his university studies in 1728, at the age of fourteen. As Neuchâtel still lacked an académie at the time, he moved to Basel, where thanks to his uncommon talents he was admitted to the faculty of theology prior to reaching the minimum age required.⁴ However, this experience in the field of theology largely

¹ Edouard Béguelin, ‘En souvenir de Vattel’ in Recueil de travaux offert par la Faculté de Droit de l’Université de Neuchâtel à la Société Suisse des Juristes (Neuchâtel, Attinger, 1929) 35–176, 35.
³ Béguelin, ‘En souvenir de Vattel’, 38.
⁴ Ibid 40.
disappointed him as he questioned orthodox theological dogmas and teaching. It was probably at this stage that he began to feel close to contemporary deist doctrines and develop a certain anticlerical attitude not only towards Roman Catholics, but also towards the Calvinist Church. In a letter sent to Ostervald a few years later, Vattel denounced the alleged greed and lust for power of the Neuchâtel consistory in the following terms:

There is good reason to believe that the greater part [of the Vénérable Classe] pays much more attention to preserving their own rights than to protecting their sheep from the Devil; indeed, they regard the Devil himself but as a scarecrow very much suitable for them to dominate over the inane. Good apostles, who preach the Gospel to others and apply very well themselves the maxims of secular politics.5

As Vattel grew critical of the role of ecclesiastical hierarchies and tended to reject orthodox theology he set out to quit the faculty. Probably pressured by financial issues too, he moved to Geneva, where he worked as a preceptor and enrolled at the Academy, in 1733. There he was initiated, perhaps through Burlamaqui’s lectures, to natural law and political philosophy, and became acquainted with the works of Leibniz and Wolff.6 Both Burlamaqui’s utilitarianism and Leibniz-Wolffian rationalism were to become primary sources of inspiration for the Vattelian system of natural law later on.7

Still, Vattel’s first literary endeavours did not consist of any systematic treatises, but of brief essays, often on trivial topics, as well as poetry, his life-long passion.8 Even in later stages of his life, when he delved more deeply into legal theory and international law, he never ceased to compose verses and dialogues. So he recurrently published miscellanea of short pieces of different literary genres, such as the Pièces diverses, avec quelques