CHAPTER ONE

AN ENLIGHTENED EDUCATION

The Invention of Educational Theory

‘Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.’¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau was good at writing opening lines, and this one from *Emile ou de l’éducation* (*Emile, or On Education*) is one of his best. This single sentence encapsulates the message of the book: less is more. It was a book that readers found confusing, beginning with Rousseau’s publisher, who immediately realised that the work would meet with censure. Although it was in fact banned as soon as it left the printing presses in Paris and Amsterdam in 1762, subsequent editions followed in rapid succession.²

Was this book a novel or a treatise, many wondered. Rousseau stressed the fictitious and theoretical nature of his book: Emile’s upbringing should be viewed as an unattainable ideal, and the book could best be read as a fanciful vision of the future. Rousseau stated this explicitly at the beginning of *Emile*, where he explained the grounds on which his brainchild had been conceived. He cast Emile as an orphan, so that he, the writer, would not have any parents to worry about. Because he thought it senseless to educate sickly children, his pupil had to be in perfect health. He also considered it pointless to lavish a good education on the children of labourers, so he endowed his protégé with a substantial inheritance from wealthy parents.³ From this ideal starting point, Rousseau recommended that one become acquainted with children before commencing on their education. His advice to educators was to begin by ‘studying your pupils better’.⁴ He had only one predecessor of whom he approved to some extent: the English philosopher John Locke, a pioneer of the Enlightenment, who in 1693 had published the pedagogical treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Locke had distanced himself from earlier pedagogues, who considered children bad and sinful by nature. He argued that a child came into the world as a blank slate, or to use the Latin term, a *tabula rasa*. Children learned by experience, through confrontation with their environment – in short, empirically. Rousseau adopted the idea of empirical learning, though
he saw the child not as a blank slate but as a reservoir filled with innate talents and potential, as a seed that only had to bud.

Just as Rousseau’s *Emile* completely changed people’s attitudes towards children, so had his previously published *Discours sur l’inégalité* overturned the traditional view of society. Civilisation and culture were, in his view, a threat to both the individual and society, and the development of humankind from wild to civilised signified degeneration rather than progress. Rousseau’s ideal was a state of nature: for society this was an era long past; for the adult individual it was the time of childhood. Rousseau thought that the innately good nature of the child should be spoiled as little as possible by culture, but he was also aware that a certain measure of adjustment was needed to take part in society. For Emile this phase began only when he had come of age, for he spent the first twenty-five years of his life in the countryside, far away from cities, which Rousseau called ‘the abyss of the human species’. In his view a child must learn by experience. This process began by learning to walk without a walking frame, leading strings or the padded