

## WHAT IS AN AMERICAN? (1782)

Michel Guillaume Jean de Crevecoeur was the son of French nobles who served with the French army during the Seven Years' War. In the late 1750s he settled in New York and became a naturalised American. His 1782 book *Letters from a Farmer* told of his experiences. In this extract, de Crevecoeur offers his opinions on the differences between an American and a European:

*“What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? The knowledge of the language, the love of a few kindred as poor as himself, were the only cords that tied him: his country is now that which gives him land, bread, protection, and consequences...*

*What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country...*

*He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.*

*Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle.*

*The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and which will hereafter become distinct by the power of the different climates they inhabit.*

*The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that in which he or his forefathers were born. Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest; can it want a stronger allurement?*

*Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread, are now fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields, where exuberant crops arise to feed and to clothe them all; without any part being claimed by a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord. Here religion demands but little of him; a small voluntary salary to the minister and gratitude to God – can he refuse these?*

*The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. **This is an American.**”*