

### Three quotes from Flaubert's personal correspondence

*"It's been quite some time since the two of us last wore those venerable school uniforms and ate Father Degouay's Neufchâtel cheese."*

Letter to Emmanuel Vasse de Saint-Ouen, 17 May 1850, between Qus and Keneh (Egypt)

*"Two days ago, I received a visit from Monsieur and Madame Lapierre and yesterday they had me over for dinner. They were so exceedingly generous as to lavish me with four bondons of the big regional competition's prize-winning Neufchâtel!"*

Letter to his niece Caroline, 17 June 1876

*"All the characters in this book are entirely fictitious, and Yonville-l'Abbaye itself is a place that doesn't exist."*

Letter to Emile Cailteaux, 4 June 1857

### text

It was on the Egyptian leg of his travels through the Near East with friend Maxime Du Camp that Gustave Flaubert reminisced about the Neufchâtel cheese he had so relished as a young schoolboy in Rouen. Twenty-six years later, in a letter to his niece Caroline, the famed writer once again expressed his fondness for the cheese after receiving it as a gift.

While we know Flaubert was no stranger to the Pays de Bray, and more specifically to Forges-les-Eaux, where he stayed from late June through early July 1848, it is unclear whether the novelist ever set foot in Neufchâtel-en-Bray. Speculation about his inspiration for the characters in *Madame Bovary* nonetheless fueled countless debates and sent Flaubert scholars and local experts alike on a quest to determine which town—Ry, Forges-les-Eaux, Lyons-la-Forêt or Neufchâtel-en-Bray—most closely resembled the fictional village of Yonville-l'Abbaye. At the same time, in the late 19th century, many residents of these towns proudly claimed to have recognized local figures in the characters of Flaubert's novel: Emma and Charles Bovary, Rodolphe Boulanger, the pharmacist Monsieur Homais, notary clerk Léon Dupuis, etc.

The ongoing fascination led Georges Rocher, a former deputy prefect of Neufchâtel-en-Bray, to investigate in the early 1890s and uncover local lore identifying two of the novel's main characters, Emma and Rodolphe, as Désirée Champion, a doctor's wife who lived in the present-day Jean Wattré House, and her lover, a former officer in the 4th Hussar Regiment who lived at the Pénitents property, on the banks of the Béthune. The similarities between this minor scandal and the plot of *Madame Bovary* would later be fodder for the local press and scholars (Félix Clairembray and André Durand) claiming to recognize real-life surgeon Potel de Neufchâtel in the novel's Dr. Canivet, who amputates poor Hyppolite's deformed foot following Charles' failed operation.

Rocher's investigation did little to put the debate to rest, instead giving rise to further zealous inquiries and well-argued theories which identified the characters of *Madame Bovary* as yet other notable figures from Ry, Forges-les-Eaux, Buchy and other villages in the Pays de Bray. Today, a more circumspect generation of Flaubert scholars believes that the locations and characters of *Madame Bovary*, though indelibly inscribed in the Normandy landscape, are ultimately the product of their author's inventive imagination!