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From Jean le Rond to D'Alembert: a route enlightened by new archival

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This article reviews the latest biographical investigation on Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (1717–1783). The results presented here were obtained as part of a project that began in 2009 and has continued ever since. The research was undertaken *ab initio*, meaning that the approach involved reconsidering everything we thought we knew about d'Alembert. Thanks to the careful analysis of unpublished archival data as well as numerous manuscripts found in national and local archives and libraries, it has been possible to correct significant errors in d'Alembert's biography (including elements considered true and reliable for over a century) and to fill in several gaps.

The article provides a chronological biography of Jean Le Rond from his birth in Paris on November 16, 1717, to the moment, in 1739, when he first submitted a work to the Académie des sciences under the name d'Alembert. Throughout the biography, details of the primary sources used to corroborate the claims are provided. Considerable light is shed on the many (well-known but previously inexplicable) twists and turns in the early months of d'Alembert's life. It was also possible to identify the exact location of the boarding school he attended and to identify the schoolmaster to whom d'Alembert expressed his gratitude in his "Mémoire sur lui-même".

The author has also uncovered facts that offer a clearer understanding of D'Alembert's later life. Furthermore, these discoveries are invaluable for the annotation of his letters and other writings. For instance, this research led to the identification of "Mme Voituret", mentioned in D'Alembert's will, as the eldest daughter of his wet-nurse. Moreover, deeper insight into the Camus-Destouches family revealed that D'Alembert maintained contact with Mme Destouches throughout his life. In the same vein, the discovery that mathematician Jean-Paul De Gua (1710–1786) was related to the Camus-Destouches family through his brother adds credibility to De Gua's claim that it was upon his suggestion that D'Alembert adopted the name Le Rond d'Alembert.

The investigation also presents a well-reasoned hypothesis regarding D'Alembert's biological father. Many have inferred that Louis Camus Destouches (1667–1726) – a lieutenant general of French artillery who visited the child frequently and acted as his guardian – was D'Alembert's biological father. However, the author's thorough investigation provides no conclusive evidence for this theory. Instead, the author posits that Camus Destouches may have been entrusted with the child by D'Alembert's biological parents. Furthermore, the author suggests that Leopold Philippe Charles Joseph d'Arenberg (1690–1754), Duke of Arenberg, could be a potential candidate for D'Alembert's father. Although there is no definitive documentary evidence to support this assertion, several factors suggest that this hypothesis merits closer

examination, including the fact that it has now been established that he was in Paris when the child was conceived.

Reviewer: Frédéric Morneau-Guérin (Québec)

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