Facing the Revocation: Huguenot Families, Faith and the King's Will

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Whatever Louis XIV's objective, the consequences of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in October 1685 moved well beyond his control and, as is frequently the case, proved unanticipated and unpredictable. The French Reformed community did not cease to exist, despite the outward conformity of many Protestants to Catholicism. The majority secretly maintained their Reformed beliefs and practices. Indeed, an earlier generation of Protestant scholars argued that the Revocation served to reinvigorate a religious minority whose devotional life had become increasingly arid. Along these same interpretative lines, the threat of gradual demographic erosion – the result of intermarriage with Catholics – is thought to have only exacerbated a deteriorating situation. The Revocation altered these dynamics dramatically. To be sure, the two most striking long-term results of the proscription of Reformed Protestantism in France were, on the one hand, the exodus of some 150,000 to 200,000 Huguenots and, on the other, the enormous suffering endured by those who remained in the kingdom. The Huguenot diaspora and subsequent resettlement in Protestant lands throughout Europe and the wider Atlantic world eventually conferred a badge of honor, which descendants jealously guard down to the present. Contemporary Huguenot societies, active and flourishing, stretch from the United Kingdom to South Carolina and back across the Atlantic to South Africa. Protestants living in contemporary France are equally proud of their ancestors – the men and women who remained in place, withstood coercive pressure, and risked all as they gathered clandestinely, often in the woods and fields to worship. Not surprisingly, the period of the *Désert* or wilderness, with imagery firmly rooted in Holy Writ, has become a defining moment in the French Protestant narrative. Every year, on the first Sunday of September, members of the Reformed community, French and diasporic, gather at the Musée du Désert in the Cévennes Mountains of southern France to celebrate the heroism and resolve of their 18th-century forebears.

Carolyn Chappell Lougee carefully examines and adroitly explicates these and related critical issues through the lens of one noble Protestant family, the Champagné from Saintonge in the French southwest. What was their experience in 'facing' the Revocation and how might it serve to inform us about this key event in fresh and original ways? What propelled them to join the *Refuge*, as it is commonly known, even as some family members remained in the kingdom? Who left? Who stayed? What might explain the differing decisions? In the process, Lougee challenges or, at the very least, forces a reassessment of several prevailing assumptions

regarding the Huguenots and the emigration of a significant number of their community. Was the impetus to depart the kingdom purely religious? How porous was the frontier? Did the monarchy relentlessly seek to capture and punish those who attempted flight? Had the Reformed nobility effectively abandoned any firm confessional commitment well before the Revocation? Finally, did the *Refuge* act as a powerful solvent on traditional relationships and values? To these and related queries, Lougee advances new and thoughtful responses founded on well-known as well as far less familiar sources.

This is not the first and surely will not be the last exploration of the Huguenot *Refuge*. In surveying the Huguenot diaspora, historians have frequently turned to memoirs – the personal recollections of those who fled France following the Revocation. The most celebrated of these escape narratives are those authored by men, individuals such as Isaac Dumont de Bostaquet, Jacques Fontaine, and Jean Migaut. The uniqueness and great value of Lougee's contribution is the fact that she focuses on the emigration account penned by Marie de La Rochefoucauld, the mother of the family and, accordingly, brings a feminine perspective to bear on the subject. Throughout her study, Lougee reveals and investigates the female voice, which has so long been muted (though not entirely absent) in accounts of the Revocation and the *Refuge*.

Marie, her husband Josias de Robillard de Champagné, and seven of their eight living children (an infant daughter was left behind) fled France in April 1687. The decision to seek asylum abroad could not have been easy. She and her husband were ardent Protestants as well as proprietors of the noble estates of Bernéré (Marie) and Champagné (Josias). Indeed, the remarkable circumstances of Marie's inheritance made their flight painful well beyond the religious setting. Her family had 'fallen into distaff', to borrow the language of the age. Beginning with Susanne Isle, Marie's grandmother, three generations her family had only female heirs – 14 daughters, and no sons. Thus, Marie de La Rochefoucauld's inheritance conferred upon her and her husband an honorable residence, valuable landholdings, social prominence, and escape from the unhealthy coastal marches of her husband's estates. With regard to the last point, Lougee surmises that the deaths of three of their children in infancy resulted from the insalubrious clime of their initial residence at Champagné.

Marie and her husband were also Protestant, living in an intensely Protestant region of France. Their families had been, already in the mid-16th century, among the wealthiest, most powerful, and most devoted of Protestant lineages. After 1685, forced attestations of Catholicity, the demolition of Reformed temples, and strict prohibitions on Protestant worship propelled the Champagné and many other families – perhaps a quarter of the Protestants of Saintonge and Poitou – to flee abroad. Yet the great majority stayed. The traditional explanation for the difference has focused on factors such as kinship ties, common economic interests, and the shared faith of an oppressed religious minority. Lougee reframes the issue in posing a simple yet elegant question. What made staying possible for some and impossible for others? Josias de Robillard's letters and Marie de La Rochefoucauld's memoir, composed after reaching safety abroad, reveal the forces at work in their decision to escape. It was a 'process rather than an event'.

Josias was particularly well versed in the details of the Reformed faith. He communicated them in a 51-page meticulously constructed letter to his children in July 1685. The missive was both an affirmation of his own beliefs and a means of transmitting, at a moment of extreme peril, the family's religious identity to the next generation. Despite this spiritual testament, Josias abjured a few months later. The royal threat of quartering fierce dragoons in Protestant towns and homes was a powerful force in prompting conversion. Josias yielded to protect his family, but the action provided little relief. Unable to reconcile himself to Catholicism, he turned to the possibility of exile. He even considered fleeing alone and abandoning his wife and children. Yet he did not. Josias's vacillation of these critical matters is striking and, in this reviewer's opinion, warrants further exploration.

Marie's brief memoir, written after her arrival in the safety of Holland, dwells on the struggles she faced and, in particular, the threats posed to her and her family's personal safety by the Catholic monarchy and its dragoons. She also encountered severe challenges to her financial security. The difficulties stemmed from the complicated arrangements that her grandmother created in settling various properties upon her. The

situation turned disastrous for Marie when, several years prior to the Revocation, a hapless and impoverished aunt sued Marie and her sisters for a larger share of the family inheritance. The case would drag through the courts for more than 25 years, but the estate of Berneré, Marie's most important economic asset, was effectively lost by 1688. She had already departed for Holland the previous year and now Josias would join her. The financial disaster that befell Marie had, not unexpectedly, a strong religious undercurrent. Marie remained Protestant, her aunt had converted to Catholicism, and the Catholic judges proved deeply prejudiced. Yet, as Lougee points out, inheritance law was deeply gendered and did not look with favor on the type of settlement that Susanne Isle made for her daughters and granddaughters. Ultimately, confessional position and economic adversity combined in prompting the decision to emigrate.

On a practical level, patience and careful preparation would be needed for a successful escape. For Protestants living near France's Atlantic coast, finding ship transport to England or Holland was not an insurmountable obstacle. Paying the ship's captain and insuring the availability of funds upon reaching the host country could be more difficult. In addition, refugees had to make difficult choices regarding what meager possessions they dared to take. Finally, they needed to calculate the risk of being caught and perhaps imprisoned. Nonetheless, 150,000 or more French Protestants found ways to overcome these barriers.

Perhaps the most captivating pages of the present study are those in which Lougee relates the fate of Thérèse, the daughter to whom Marie gave birth five weeks before her escape in April 1687. The baby stayed with her father and the initial plan seems to have been that he would bring her when he fled. Yet when Josias left in the spring of 1688, the child remained in Saintonge, never to see her mother or father again. Was the infant too frail to travel? Would she have been a dangerous encumbrance on the clandestine journey? Did the parents expect to recover her at some later date? In any event, she quickly became a pawn in intra-familial and confessional rivalries. Josias entrusted the child to a brother-in-law, Casimir Prévost de Touchimbert, the husband of his recently deceased sister. Casimir was a dedicated Protestant who suffered imprisonment in the Bastille until he reluctantly abjured in February 1686. As guardian of the infant Thérèse and her property in Saintonge, principally the estate of Berneré, Casimir had to fend off New Catholic relatives as well as Catholic and royal authorities. The situation became utterly more complicated when Thérèse, at the age of four, was placed in the convent of the Filles de Notre-Dame at Saintes. The bishop of Saintes, backed by the king's officials, initiated the action. The motivation was at once confessional (the anticipated conversion of Thérèse and other Protestant girls similarly confined) and financial (the nuns demanded that families pay for the girls' maintenance). Thérèse would remain in the convent until her death in 1699. The contest for control of her mother's estate of Berneré, however, continued for another half century before it passed to distant relatives.

Once arrived in Holland, Josias somewhat inexplicitly joined the military forces of William of Orange as the Dutch Stadtholder prepared to descend upon England. Josias eventually participated in the expedition to Ireland, where he died, likely of disease, in the early autumn 1689. In January of the following year, Marie wrote her memoir of the Revocation, flight from France, and resettlement abroad. A decade later, her daughter Susanne also wrote an account of the family escape experience. Individually they appear unexceptional. Read together and comparatively, they disclose the deeper texture of the exilic experience and, in particular, its meaning for women. How do the two women tell their story? What do they wish the reader to know? What do they leave out? Marie's account, a little over six handwritten pages, takes special note of the monetary costs of escape. Her narrative also carries a sense of calm and continuity. Finally, it stresses her role as wife and mother. Her daughter Susanne's memoir is twice as long and far more polished. In addition, it exhibits a feeling of disappointment for what might have been had the family been able to remain in France. More importantly, when placed side by side, the two accounts reveal a 'hidden dialogue' and provide a 'picture of mother-daughter emotions', all the while presenting women's understanding of the *Refuge*.

For three decades following her husband's death, Marie de La Rochefoucauld was head of the family. She had special responsibility for the management of financial affairs. Marie demonstrated a remarkable independence in moving the family's investments into movables and the financial markets, a direction

wholly different from her husband's inclination. Additionally, she had no male kin to supervise her choices. She could act with relative independence. Marie's overriding purpose was to provide for her children. They found suitable governmental and military offices, contracted advantageous marriages, and eventually settled across Western Europe in a pattern typical of the Huguenot noble 'International'.

What might the Champagné experience reveal about the wider narrative of Huguenot emigration? Or conversely, the decision to remain in France? Lougee makes no particular claim for the Champagné as archetypal. Still, Huguenot families shared certain commonalities, which are well worth pursuing. Was the decision to flee tied to a faith commitment? Were, as various royal officials claimed at the time, some emigres on the verge of insolvency and thus driven to find new opportunities outside the kingdom? Did those who remained in France give precedence to the preservation of the economic resources deemed necessary to sustain the family over successive generations? In considering these questions, Lougee offers a fresh perspective. She underscores that ways in which Louis XIV's religious policies undermined community solidarity and family cohesion. The converted and unconverted found themselves at odds. Marie de La Rochefoucauld's own kinship network fractured. Some joined the king's religion; others remained loyal to the faith of their ancestors. Moreover, Lougee argues, the absence of a dominant patriarch amid three generations of daughters would have disadvantaged most any family in an early modern society that privileged male authority. Occasionally the nuclear family split. One spouse fled, the other stayed. More commonly, one or more children were left behind as was the case with Marie's infant daughter.

This a compelling, if complicated history. Lougee conveys it with compassion and purpose, all the while maintaining an enquiring eye and critical distance. Still, this reader confesses to the occasional sense of bewilderment amid the intricate details of family relationships, financial arrangements, and legal particulars. Lougee's project is also extremely ambitious, perhaps too ambitious. The principal story of Marie and Josias can sometimes get lost in attempts to explore ancillary questions that may seem relevant to their family's circumstances, their strategies for survival, and their eventual fate. These digressions can also distract the reader. Such relatively minor frustrations, however, in no way diminish Lougee's achievement. In the end, she relates with care and nuance the story of Marie de La Rochefoucauld, a Reformed matriarch whose determination and dedication combined with careful planning and financial acumen to not simply save, but in fact advance her family amid the appalling circumstances of religious oppression. The result is a highly original set of insights into the uncertainties and burdens that French Protestants encountered as they confronted the royal proscription of their ancestral religion.

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