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A NEW SOURCE ON ATHANASE DE MÉZIÈRES:
CHRONIQUES PITTORESQUES ET CRITIQUES DE L'OEIL DE BOEUF*

Between 1769 and 1780 the prime mover for Indian affairs in the Louisiana-Texas borderlands was Athanase de Mézières y Clugny. Yet for a figure who was a lieutenant-governor of Louisiana, almost governor of Texas, and one of the few men who actually solidified European control of the borderlands, historians have ignored his role in the Southwest.¹ Since the early history of the Southwest was actually the history of Indian policies, Mézières' anonymity is incomprehensible. Even the most prestigious historical journals of the Southwest have been silent. This author could find only two books on Mézières, both based on the same primary information, but no articles or dissertations.² It is the purpose of this article to rectify this neglect and bring to light a new and previously unused primary source on Athanase de Mézières: *Chroniques Pittoresques et Critiques de l'Oeil de Boeuf, des Petits Appartments de la Cour et des Salons de Paris, sous Louis XIV, la Regence, Louis XV, et Louis XVI.*³

Athanase de Mézières was born of aristocratic parents in Paris about 1715. He received an excellent education, probably at the Royal College of Paris, where he excelled in Spanish and Latin. His life of luxury was shortlived, however, for when his mother remarried, the strict social pressure of French court forced her to abandon the children of the first marriage. Her second husband, M. de la Haie, who was well known in court for his intrigues with the daughter of the Regent, aided in committing the daughter to a nunnery and having the 14 year old Athanase exiled to Canada as a *Mauvais Sujet Incorrigible* (incorrigible subject of the Crown.)⁴

Distressed with his fellow Frenchmen, Mézières left the budding European settlements of New France, drifted south, and joined an Indian tribe. In this self-imposed exile he was able to adapt to his adopted culture quickly and was able to learn the new languages with phenomenal ability. To achieve warriorhood he submitted to a series of painful tattooing operations which left his body covered from head to foot with brightly colored designs. He was so well respected that at the age of 20 he became chief when the old one died.⁵

Before 1769 Mézières is historically elusive. He apparently left the Indian tribe to join the French army. He was promoted several times, finally attaining the rank of captain. He was also a partner in a trading firm called "Sieur de la Fleure" based in Natchitoches. It is apparent that despite his obvious Indian attributes his good breeding allowed him to associate with the upper class and in 1746 he married Marie-Petronille-Feliciane Juchureau de St. Denis, daughter of the famous French explorer. The marriage was shortlived, however, for within two years both mother and daughter, an only child, died.

After the death of his wife Mézières spent considerable time with the Indians as a trader and possibly as a member of the tribe. He also aided the Indians in preying on the Spanish. When the Spanish retaliated by carrying on an aggressive war against the Indians, Mézières at this time was fortunate enough to have a substantial library of books concerning the art of war and was able to use this added knowledge to defeat the classical

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military strategy of the Spanish. The Spanish were amazed that such brilliant military tactics could have been used against them by a "savage general." Mézières and the Indians were so successful that the Spanish sued for peace. A peace council was arranged which Mézières attended dressed as an Indian. When the Spanish began to search for an interpreter, Mézières stated in perfect Latin: "That's useless [to look for an interpreter]. Just ask for someone who has not forgotten his studies." The Spanish were dumbfounded. After the peace negotiations had been concluded to the Indians advantage, Mézières accepted a post in the Spanish government. In 1769 he was contacted by Governor Alexander O'Reilly and offered the post of lieutenant-governor of Natchitoches.⁷

For the Spanish Mézières was an excellent choice as administrator. He had first-hand knowledge of the Indians of the area and spoke their language. He was a Frenchman, which would ease the recent transition of Louisiana from a French possession to a Spanish territory. He was also well connected in the French court, being related to the former Regent, the French minister of state, as well as a general on the staff of the French army in Europe. Through his first wife he was related to a Spanish lieutenant-general.⁸

Mézières had a tenfold assignment. In addition to winning the alliances of the Indian tribes to the Spanish he was also assigned to keep the Indians hostile to foreigners; especially the British. In order to bring the recalcitrant tribes to their knees Mézières was ordered to cut off all trade with these Indians and allow only bonded traders to trade with any Indians. This would allow the Spanish some control on what trade items were being exchanged. Mules, horses and Indian slaves were considered contraband and Mézières was ordered to collect all such items he found in the possession of the Indians. All harmful intertribal rivalries were ordered stopped and all apostatic Indian Christians were to be sequestered before they could influence any others. Kidnapping for ransom and the atrocities such as torture of prisoners was outlawed and Mézières was to oversee the region to make sure that no such actions took place. And, finally, Mézières was ordered to elevate the Indians to a "civilized" life.⁹

The English especially frightened the Spanish. Although no nation was above using the Indians, the English seemed to have the most loyal following. To the north they were allied with the Mohawks, Onedas, Tuscaroras, Onodages, Cayugas, and Senecas. The English supplied their allies with guns and ammunition, taught them to fortify their villages for a seige, and introduced the use of "explosive bombs." But the main fear of the Spanish was that the English might try to extend their influence into the Red River Valley. Mézières' job was to make sure that this did not occur and that those tribes who had been friendly to the French would transfer their amity to the Spanish.¹⁰

Under the new governor of Louisiana, Col. Don Louis de Unzaga y Amezaga, Mézières went to the tribes of the North along the Red River. He met and negotiated with several subtribes of the Wichita and Cacicque. Through extensive negotiations he was able to formalize a treaty that was signed in San Antonio de Bexar.¹¹

In April of 1773 Mézières made arrangements to return to France to take care of some personal business. Permission was granted and on April 7, 1773 he departed for Paris.¹²

In France Mézières found the lifestyle radically different from that of Louisiana. The court of Louis XV could best be described as hedonistic. Louis was a timid man who required flattery in the same prodigious quantities as

bread and wine to survive. He was a slave to his carnal desires and allowed his administration to rapidly degenerate into a carousel of balls, hunting excursions and other "sensual excesses." His bachannalian reveries were so well-known to all that he earned the title *roi faineant* (the fawning king). Inexorably the reins of government slipped from his grasp to be taken by Madame Pompadour (and later Madame de Barry) which reduced the Royal Administration to a labyrinth of neopotic favors rather than a viable government.¹³

At court Mézières was a novelty. His reticence and good French breeding allowed him to be accepted while his New World attributes and antics made him a showpiece. His brightly colored tattoos—serpents on his legs and flowers on his chest—were visible through his light shirt and silk stockings. His tattooed fingers with the heavy jeweled rings added to the incongruous image.¹⁴

On hunting junkets with the king, Mézières would sometimes run ahead of the dogs in search of game. One day on a hunting trip in the Parc de Marly, Louis XV asked Mézières if he could climb trees. In reply Mézières dismounted, ran down a pathway to an oak tree about fifty feet high and within three minutes was at the top. "Gentlemen," said the king pointing to the elegantly dressed nobleman in the crest of the oak, "you have seen ambition. But I defy you to find one among you who will climb as high as he did." Mézières' friendship with the king later earned him admission to the Order of St. Louis.¹⁵

Mézières liked the accoutrements of the court: the fashionable clothes, the elegant rings, and the powdered wigs; but he disliked the gluttony and often fasted while the other nobles feasted. Within a year he returned to Louisiana.¹⁶

On March 17, 1774 he returned to Natchitoches. For the next five years he worked diligently to cement the alliances that he had created. He was quite successful and as a reward for exemplary services to the Spanish crown he was appointed governor of Texas on October 13, 1779. But before he could take formal control of the office he died on November 2 in San Antonio.¹⁷

Mézières' reward for his service to the Spanish crown was penury. When he entered the service of the crown he was a wealthy man; he died a debtor. Most of his money was spent in rebuilding forts and other governmental buildings that the Spanish could not, or would not, repair at their expense. He was also instrumental in taking a census of the area. His work was so precise that for more than two decades after his death his communiques and geographical information were considered the only legitimate source on the Indians and geography of the borderlands. Yet historians still ignore him. His elegy is yet to be written.¹⁸

A major question still remains: How authoritative is *Chroniques de l'Oeil de Boeuf*? Although the alleged author is la comtesse douaiere de B . . . , the *Catalogue General des Livres Imprimés de la Bibliotheque Nationale* lists the author as Georges Touchard-LaFosse. Subsequent editions of the *Chroniques de l'Oeil de Boeuf* bear his name.¹⁹

Georges Touchard-La Fosse was born in France in 1780. He held a commission under Napoleon, but in 1815 he was relieved of his post because of the restoration of Louis XVIII to the throne of France. He was a prolific writer having completed over 100 works before his death in 1847. Many of his novels were written in the satirico-historical style of the times as exemplified by Alexander Dumas, *père*, among others. Touchard-LaFosse often wrote under the pseudonym of la comtesse douaiere de B . . . He was very knowledgeable in history, but wrote very fast, often negligently, and would blur facts under the guise of poetic license.²⁰

His credibility is, therefore, suspect—an anti-monarchist writing about the secret affairs of the court. There are two points to be considered, however, in regard to the Mézières passage. First it is unlikely that Touchard-LaFosse could have invented a character from his imagination that actually existed. His description of Mézières, the tattoos, and the New World antics all seem to fit with what Mézières probably would have been. Though some of his facts are wrong—for example he claims that Mézières met Madame de Pompadour in the French court. This would have been an error of about a decade—the passage seems historically consistent.²¹

Secondly, assuming that Mézières did meet Louis XV, there would be no reason for Touchard-LaFosse to color the incident. In the entire passage Louis XV is mentioned only once. The rest of the passage is an aggrandizement of Mézières in an innocuous encounter with the king. There would be no reason to distort the facts.

It is the contention of *Chroniques de l'Oeil de Boeuf* that Mézières lived among the Canadian Indians. His tattoos, however, tend to contradict this claim. This author could find no Canadian tribe whose tattoos showed even a close resemblance to those mentioned in the *Chroniques de l'Oeil de Boeuf*. Had Mézières been tattooed in the style of the plains or Canadian Indians he would have had configurations of form: zig-zags, bars, stripes, and his face would have been tattooed. The only tribes that tattooed with "brilliant colors" were those of the South. The Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw had tattoos of "hieroglyphic scrolls, flowers, figures of animals, stars, crescents, and the sun." These figures seem to correspond with the tattoos mentioned in *Chroniques de l'Oeil de Boeuf*.²²

Checking maps that would have been available when Mézières was in the New World it can be easily seen that there were no concrete boundries. New France and Louisiana blended into each other. To someone unfamiliar with the New World, and there is no reason to assume otherwise in the case of Touchard-LaFosse, New France and Louisiana might have been interchangeable geographic terms.

From a source contemporary to Mézières was a letter to Hugo O'Conor, inspector commandante, from Don Rafael Martinez Pacheco, dated April 20, 1774. Pacheco stated that Mézières had lived with the tribes of the North. Pacheco, being a trader and explorer, would have written New France if he had meant Canada. It is important to note that the Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw were all tribes of the "North."²³

Historical documentation of the *Chroniques de l'Oeil de Boeuf* is scant in America. Herbert Bolton, the author of the most authoritative book on Mézières, did find a document, however, that indicated that a Manguet de Mézières, son of Madame de la Haye, was sent to America as an incorrigible in 1738. This geneological information matches with the claim of Touchard-LaFosse but the dates do not: perhaps this is another instance of Touchard-LaFosse's hurried style or his desire to heighten the drama.³⁴

With all of the superfluous historical hairsplitting aside, the most important fact to be garnered from the *Chroniques de l'Oeil de Boeuf* remains that somewhere in some French archive there is more information on Mézières. Touchard-LaFosse, being an excellent historical researcher, must have come across a diary or series of letters that may again be discovered. The figure of Athanase de Mézières y Clugny will then come out of the historical shadows and be fleshed out as an important figure in the history of the Southwest.

NOTES

¹Bolton, Herbert Eugene, *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier: 1768-1780* (Cleveland: 1914), 13.

²Bolton, *Mézières*; Vivian, Julia, *A Cavalier in Texas* (San Antonio: 1953). From their inception to 1972 the following journals have printed a total of 55 lines on Mézières and 2 reviews of Bolton's book: *Journal of the West*, *Western Historical Quarterly*, *New Mexico Historical Review*, *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, *Journal of Southern History*, *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, *Louisiana History*, *Texana*, *Journal of American History*, and the *American Historical Review*.

³Touchard-LaFosse, Georges *Chroniques Pittoresques et Critiques de l'Oeil de Boeuf, des Petits Appartements de la Cour et des Salons de Paris, sous Louis XIV, la Regence, Louis XV, et Louis XVI* (Paris: ND). The l'Oeil de Boeuf is a small antechamber outside the French king's bedchamber where the lesser nobles would wait for the king to appear. It was called the l'Oeil de Boeuf (Bull's eye) because of the single window which resembled the eye of an ox.

Allegedly this 170 year chronicle was recorded by "la comtesse douairiere de B . . ." who received a collection of court gossip from her aunt and continued the chronicles during her lifetime in what she called her *Tablettes*. She was a rich woman, rich enough to be free of the financial morass that many noblemen found themselves in trying to maintain an appearance in the court. She was well read and familiar with literature though not necessarily well educated. Her independence of finances also reflected her independence of mind which left her free rein to critique the French court.

⁴Vivian, *Cavalier*, xi, 3, 4, 18, 19; Bolton *Mézières*, 80-5, Touchard-LaFosse, *Chroniques*, 362.

⁵Touchard-LaFosse *Chroniques*, 362.

⁶Bolton *Mézières*, 82; Vivian, *Cavalier*, 27.

⁷Touchard-LaFosse *Chroniques*, 362; Vivian *Cavalier*, 32.

⁸Fehrenbach, T. R. *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans* (New York: 1968), 70; Vivian *Cavalier*, 3, 33.

⁹Vivian *Cavalier*, 1; Bolton *Mézières*, 71-2.

¹⁰Bolton, *Mézières*, 13, 67, 69; Fehrenbach *Lone Star*, 70; Barker, Eugene C. *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. I: 324-6; Cox, Isaac Joslin "The Louisiana-Texas Frontier" *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association* Vol. X:1, 8, July 1906; Vivian *Cavalier*, 2, 28, 30, 42.

¹¹The actual tribes that Mézières negotiated with were the Taovayas, Tawakoni, Yscanis, Kichai, Qumseys, Cacicque, Tinhouew, Cadodaches, Tauaizes, Tuscanas, and Iscanis. Bolton *Mézières*, 93; Vivian *Cavalier*, 49, 54-5; Newcomb, W. W. *The Indians of Texas* (Austin: 1961), 233-4, 379-404.

¹²Vivian *Cavalier*, 58.

¹³*Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Louis XV."

¹⁴Touchard-LaFosse, *Chroniques*, 363.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 362—The quote is on page 363; Vivian *Cavalier*, 59.

¹⁶Touchard-LaFosse, *Chroniques*, 363.

¹⁷Fehrenbach, *Lone Star*, 71; Vivian *Cavalier*, xii, 92-3.

¹⁸Bolton *Mézières*, 14; Vivian *Cavalier*, 42, 48.

¹⁹*Catalogue Général des Livres Imprimés de la Bibliothèque Nationale* Volume 192: Column 164. Despite the historical documentation of the above source it is difficult to believe that Georges Touchard-LaFosse actually wrote the book. Proof lies in the fact that the last episode in *Chroniques* was in 1872. According to Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire Uni versel Du XIXe Siècle* Touchard-LaFosse died in 1847.

²⁰*Ibid.*; Bell, A. Craig *Alexander Dumas: A Biography and Study* (London: 1950), 151. For further biographical information on Touchard-LaFosse please see later editions of the *Chroniques*.

²¹*Encyclopedia Britannica* "Pompadour"; See also Williams, H. Noel *Memoires of Madame du Barry* (New York: 1910), *passim*.

²²Bartram, William *Travels* (Macy-Masius: 1928), 394; Touchard-LaFosse *Chroniques*, 363.

²³Bolton *Mézières*, ii, 42, 43, 44; Vivian *Cavalier*, 23; Houck, Louis *The Boundries of the Louisiana Purchase: A Historical Study* (St. Louis: 1901), 32-3; Baudry des Loziers, L. N. *Voyage a la Louisiane et sur le Continent de L'Amérique* (ND); Du Pratz, M. le Page *The History of the Western Parts of Virginia and Carolina* (London: 1763), printed for T. Becket P. A. de Hondt; Beer, William, *Some Points of Interest* (1904). All of the sources above, with the exception of Bolton and Vivian, are available at the Huntington Library.

²⁴Bolton *Mézières*, 81.