

Abraham Tessereau

An address given in Saint Patrick's Cathedral Dublin,

2 October 2011.

I shall begin by thanking you Dean for inviting to give this address on the occasion of the Huguenot commemorative service at Saint Patrick, a service that is held every year in the Cathedral since the International Colloquium which Prof. Caldicott, Prof Gough and myself organized in 1985 to commemorate the Tercentenary of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. My subject to-day is Abraham Tessereau, a member of the reformed Churches who was born in a Western province of France in the mid 1630's and who died in exile in Holland at the end of the 17th century. Abraham Tessereau deserves to be better known by anyone interested in the history of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and in the Huguenot Refuge. Two portfolios of historical material, manuscript and printed, gathered by him, lie, largely unstudied in Marsh's Library, amongst the papers of Élie Bouhéreau. The portfolios are a remarkable source assembled by Tessereau, detailing royal and judicial measures taken from the end of Louis XIII's reign aimed at curtailing the religious and civil liberties granted by the Edict of Nantes of 1598 to the members of the French Reformed Churches - a process that culminated in 1685 in the Edict of Fontainebleau which revoked the Edict of Nantes.

The documentary material collected by Tessereau is particularly rich for the period which begins in 1659 with Louis XIV's personal reign. His papers provide a list in precise and concise form, of the legislative and judicial decrees issued against the Réformés, during the three crucial decades that preceded the Revocation. Particularly important are the documents, either in original form or in transcription and joined to the official ones, that give the texts of submissions made by the Reformed Churches in response, as well as Tessereau's own historical and legal observations on them.

One of the most remarkable achievements of Abraham Tessereau, was his collecting of depositions from Protestants of the Western provinces of Poitou, Aunis and Saintonge who in 1681 suffered the first dragonades. By billeting soldiers and officers from regiments of dragoons in the households of Protestant families - a tactic generally used to enforce the payment of taxes- the two highest royal administrators in these provinces, the intendant of Poitou, René de Marillac and his imitator, the intendant of Saintonge, De Muin hoped that physical, mental and economic pressure by the dragoons would force families to convert. The depositions collected by Tessereau, which would deserve to be fully studied and should, in my view, be digitalized, are an outstanding first-hand source on the behaviour of the soldiery of

the period and on its impact upon helpless rural folk. The dragonnades of Poitou were the immediate cause of the first significant wave of Huguenot refugees to reach foreign lands. It is of interest to us here in Ireland that some 24 of these families, many of them destitute, reached Dublin in 1682. The names of some of those whose depositions are among Tessereau's papers, names such as Moussaut, Renard, Cossoneau, Barré and De Niort, are found in the Registers of the Huguenot churches of this city.

This address will recall the figure of an *honnête homme*, who was also a Just , and who used his intellectual skills and his knowledge of legal procedures to document and record the aims and the language of oppression. As a form of resistance, though written at a very different, less darker period of European history and in circumstances undoubtedly far less extreme, Tessereau's record of the legal language of oppression used during Louis XIV's reign, calls to mind the notes made on the *Lingua Tertii Imperii* by Otto Klemperer during the Third Reich.

Abraham Tessereau was born around 1633 probably in Saint Jean d'Angely, where his father retired after the surrender of La Rochelle in 1628. The area was old "Protestant country". With the cities of Languedoc and the mountain villages of Dauphiné, the region remained so during the whole period. Abraham's family was staunchly Protestant. His father also named Abraham and his uncle Mattieu were among the municipal counsellors of La Rochelle called "pairs, i.e. holders of hereditary seats on the Municipal council. Tessereau's uncle, Mattieu was a judge on the Royal Presidial Tribunal. Both he and Abraham's father were members of "Les Quarante-huit", "The Forty-eights", a municipal council for war, set up in 1620. In 1626 they sided with the popular movement of resistance in the City and both took an active part in the Siege. It was either the father or the uncle of Tessereau who directed the first firing of the city guns against the fort of Saint Louis at the start of the hostilities. The Tessereau brothers paid dearly for their involvement in the conflict. They were fined 20.000 livres, a considerable sum at the time and banished from the city when it surrendered to Richelieu on All Souls day 1628.

The siege of La Rochelle and the Peace of Alais that followed put an end to the military and political organization of the Protestant Party and to the dream of a political and religious conquest of the Kingdom still entertained by some of the Protestant nobility and of the provincial bourgeoisie of the previous decades. For the sons of those who had fought and lost the battle, the only choice left was to offer guarantees of fidelity to the Crown either by serving in the army or by holding a public office.

Until the beginning of Louis XIV's reign, Protestants had a relatively unhindered access to royal office, and they also had the advantage of having received a generally more thorough education in the Humanities that provided the foundations for the required intellectual skills. We do not now where the young Abraham Tessereau was educated. A Humanities college had opened in La Rochelle, but it took years to recover from the disaster of the Siege. The growing reputation of Académie of Saumur, on the other hand, attracted many from the region. Its registration book is lost, but I think that it is most likely that Abraham did some of his studies there.

In 1653, Tessereau purchased the office of Secrétaire du Roi in Chancery, the Secretariat in charge of drafting and dispatching acts of the Royal Councils. His training in the Humanities combined with a native intellectual curiosity soon led him to investigate the foundation and the early history of the royal office he held. By 1672 he had assembled and published a collection of the ancient acts and regulations that governed its legal and political functions. It is characteristic of his intellectual thoroughness that that having published this first work, the unearthing of much previously unrecorded material led him to entirely revise it and considerably broaden its scope. This second work, the *Histoire Chronologique de la Grande Chancellerie de France*, was published in 1676 and was drawn, as the title specifically states, from "des chartes et autres actes authentiques".

Tessereau's enquiry into the antiquities of the Royal Chancery, taught him the importance of documenting the sources upon which the writing of history relies. On the other hand, he was also acquainted with contemporary narratives of the siege of La Rochelle. Such personal narratives had long circulated in manuscript and a new edition of Pierre Mervault's *Journal of the Siege* appeared in 1670. From these narratives of experience and from what he had learnt for his father and his uncle, Abraham Tessereau learnt the lesson that History should provide an account not just of what was done, but of how and why it was done, and that it was his personal calling to keep an exact record of the new forms of oppression to which the Réformés were now subjected. From the vantage point of his office, he was able to monitor the rise of oppression and witness how the Réformés, as Jacob did with the Angel, wrestled with it, as a test of the strength of their commitment to the faith of their fathers and forefathers.

From 1670 onwards, the public side of Tessereau's life was that of the royal official, of the Secrétaire du Roi and of the already recognised scholarly author of the annals of the Royal Chancery. But from then on, probably encouraged quietly by prominent members of the consistory of the Charenton Church in Paris of which he was the secretary, he devoted

himself to another unofficial task, that of recording the royal legislation and the judicial decisions which bore directly on the legal situation of the Réformés of his days, as well of documenting how the churches and individual Réformés responded to their implementation.

As the exiled Pasteur of Rouen, Pierre Du Bosc, later wrote in a letter to him, Tessereau went about setting this record straightforwardly and objectively - “ sans déguisement, sans exagération, sans artifices”. To illustrate it, I shall quote briefly and at random from his list covering the beginnings of the year 1676: 1676: “3 janvier, Arrêt du Conseil...,15 janvier, Procès verbal..., 26 janvier, Sentence de lieutenant criminel...” and so on. I translate these few entries: “3 January, Uzès, decree of the Royal Council : Protestant counsellors ordered to relinquish in favour of Catholics their seats on the municipal council; January 15, Loudun, minutes of the proceedings by the local baillif : sequestration against her parents will, in the convent of the Filles de l'Union Chrétienne of the daughter of Louys Thibaud, and his wife, both Protestants; January 26, La Rochelle, sentence of the royal Criminal prosecutor of la Rochelle : Pierre Savouret, bookseller, condemned to pay a fine of 500 livres for having published a sermon without permission of the local magistrates.

I shall make two brief observations on the significance of this material for the historian. First the portfolios provide evidence that the drive towards the suppression of the Réformés as a legally recognised minority in the Kingdom, came as much from below as from above, as much from the followers of the majority religion as from the Crown. The petty hostilities that the réformés suffered, were the manifestations of a deeply engrained resentment, still present four decades after the end of the wars after the Huguenot Party, a resentment that fed a desire to humiliate as well as a will to share some of the spoils. Secondly, to recall the phrase often repeated during the Revocation to justify it - “ un Roi, une Foi, une Loi” - the Revocation was indeed an act of absolutism, but it was so in two ways: on the one hand it came from the King's determination to impose a unity of religion on his subjects. But it was also an administrative act designed to put an end to the numerous and seemingly endless legal conflicts to which the interpretation of the Edict of Nantes had given rise and which were perceived by the Crown and its high officers, as an obstacle to the consolidation of Crown made Law and to the streamlining of the judicial system of the Kingdom.

In Marsh's Library, the two portfolios of documents assembled by Tessereau bear the title of *Memoires pour servir a l'histoire generale de la persecution faite en France contre ceux de la religion Reformée depuis l'année, 1656, jusqu'a la Revocation de l'Edit de Nantes*. They were probably given this title by Elie Benoist in whose hands they came as he was engaged in writing his *Histoire de l'Édit de Nantes* and who made extensive use of the information they

contain in that work which appeared in Delft in 1693-5. Seen from this perspective and that of long-term history, the documents appear to map out an already planned out path that led inexorably to the Revocation. But I am not sure if this was the way that Tessereau and the majority of the Réformé elites saw it. Until the last four years before the Revocation, they clung to a belief that the harassment to which many of them were subjected came from parish priests and petty officials encouraged by the Catholic zealots of the *Compagnies du Saint-Sacrement*, and that if they, as loyal subjects, presented irrefutable evidence to the King of the injustices done to them, the King would listen to their grievances and act to remedy them.

That illusion came to an end in 1681 with the dragonnades of Poitou and Saintonge. Courageously, Tessereau set out from Paris to gather evidence from the victims of the dragoons though some of their units were still on the rampage moving from one village to another across the provinces. The depositions he collected are in different forms. Some are brief lists of names of victims with their complaints, other letters from eye witnesses, others statements by individuals or by a group of villagers victims, made to a notary public or collected by consistories. Time only allows me to give two brief quotes from them. The first comes to an individual statement collected directly by Tessereau : “Le 8 juillet 1681, sur les trois heures de l’après-midi... - On the 8 July 1681, around 3 o’clock in the afternoon, I Pierre Marsault, residing at Exoudun, declare that having told the Sieur de St-Amand lieutenant billeted with me , that I had nothing left to give to him, the said St Amand was seized by a great ire, grabbed an iron shovel, proffering swears and blasphemies...And the daughters of the said Marsault having come to his help, the said St Amand hit one aged 13, with the shovel upon the head head, from which bows she bled and fainted...And this happened in the presence of Estiene Thoreau, blacksmith of the said place, Merry Perrin and his wife Suzanne Parpai, Suzanne Priorelle. Signed Marsault”.

The other quote comes from a deposition to the consistory of Melle : “Le 26 du dit mois de juillet... Pierre Bonneau, from Baigniaud declares that on the 26 of the said month of July, twelve horsemen were billeted in his house... some having got hold of ropes put one around his neck as if to strangle him... and others dragged him to the fire to burn the soles of his feet... and this violence lasted at least 12 hours from six o’clock in the evening to 6 o’clock in the morning...”

In these depositions, beyond the formal legal language in which they taken down, one can hear the voices of ordinary men and women. They speak without the pathos of righteous indignation which Benoist adopted when he later recounted some of these experiences in his *Histoire*. Nor are these testimonies presented, as some of them were by another pastor in exile

Pierre Jurieu, are exhortations to resistance, even to martyrdom. The voices in these depositions speak of their helplessness when faced with lawlessness and violence, of the helplessness that was felt also by those that had succumbed and betrayed their conscience. A number of the depositions in Tessereau's papers were made to consistories, by members of local churches, who had collectively abjured under duress, and who "their strength made perfect in weakness" to quote 2 Corinthians, renounced their abjuration and returned to their church to seek reconciliation.

Tessereau must have been aware that his Royal office could not offer much protection for what he had been engaged in. A year after the dragonnades, he left for England though, not before some of the depositions he had gathered, had been used by Pierre Du Bosc, the Rouen pasteur, who went to the Court as a deputy of the churches, to seek redress for the victims of the dragoons. Less than two years later, Tessereau was forced to resign his office by decree of the Council. From England, he went to Holland. He died in Rotterdam in 1689.

When Abraham Tessereau died, his contribution to the preservation of the memory of a decade of a legal onslaught on the Réformés was acknowledged by one of the first journalists of the times, Basnage de Beauval. From his refuge in Holland, the pastor of La Rochelle, Daniel Delaizement made sure that the *Mémoires*, once used by Benoist would be handed over to their common friend Elie Bouhereau for safekeeping. But Tessereau's contribution was soon forgotten among the quarrels that divided the refugees in the aftermath of the Revocation. This portrait of Tessereau will, I hope, helped to restore him to his rightful place as a witness to the history of the Revocation.

To-day, we may see in Abraham Tessereau one of the first in a long line of just men who out of conscience and of an urge to tell the truth, used their talents to expose the oppression which they witnessed. But Abraham Tessereau's quiet determination to resist by keeping a record of oppression cannot be separated from the strength of his religious convictions. Abraham Tessereau could have made his own Milton's words, "All is, if I have grace to use it so/ As ever in my great Task-master's eye".

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