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**A Very Historic Moment in Caribbean Studies: Boisrond-Tonnerre's *Mémoires* (1804) online**

Although originally published in 1804 in Dessalines (then capital of Hayti), it is with their second edition by Saint-Remy (Paris, 1851), that Boisrond-Tonnerre's *Mémoires* were passed on to posterity.

Until recently, misled by Saint-Remy's remarks on the rarity of the book and his difficulties in tracing a single copy in good condition in the 1840s (Boisrond-Tonnerre 1851, vii), it was generally incorrectly assumed that the original edition was no longer available, or perhaps never even existed as Raphaël Berrou and Pradel Pompilus claimed in their *Manuel d'histoire de la littérature haïtienne* (1961, 25-26). Decades later, it was also Marlene Daut's first conclusion as she states in an article on Boisrond-Tonnerre and de Vastey: "I have not been able to find an original copy of the 1804 text in any libraries in the U.S., France or Haiti. This caused me to momentarily question whether or not the memoir was published at all before 1851" (2008, 57 note 13).

Yet Saint-Remy, in his "historical and critical study" of Boisrond-Tonnerre's text, explicitly refers to the edition of 1804, and Beaubrun Ardouin in volume 6 of *Études sur l'histoire d'Haïti* states that the *Memoirs* were "written and published in 1804" (1856, 42). In addition, the 1804 first edition is listed in the *Catalogue of the Harvard University Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts*, at least since 1830 (vol. 1, 85). This gift of Colonel Israel Thorndike (1755-1832), according to Harvard reference librarian, Susan Halpert, based on a note in William Bentinck-Smith's *Building a Great Library: The Coolidge Years at Harvard* (1976, 13), most likely dates from 1818 (email to Jean Jonassaint, May 16, 2013).

If the Dessalines edition is now online, it is primarily because Henri Cauvin and Nicole Xavier Cauvin in 1987 had published a third edition of the *Memoirs*, which, except for some typos or omissions, carefully followed the 1804 text, even reproducing word for word its front cover. This self-published book went unnoticed. But after I read it in August 2011, I knew there was a copy of the first edition still available. I decided to go to the source. Thanks to such modern research tools as online catalogs, I was able to trace the unique volume that has probably survived at the Houghton Library of Harvard

University. It is a reproduction of this very rare document that is now in cyberspace. This is a great premiere for the Caribbean, and for Haiti in particular.

To really understand the importance of having this volume online, we must remember that it is not listed in Max Bissainthe's impressive *Dictionnaire de bibliographie haïtienne* (1951, 37-38 notice 435), which cites only Saint-Remy's second edition, that Bissainthe had found at the New York Public Library and the library of Saint-Louis de Gonzague (Port-au-Prince). Moreover, even a nineteenth-century historian such as Beaubrun Ardouin, while stating that the book "was written and published in 1804," only had access to the second edition, as suggested by the following note: "*Memoirs* by B. Tonnerre, edited by Mr. Saint-Rémy (sic), p. 23, a note of the author" (1856, 334 — my translation). That tells us how rarely the first edition was read or consulted. Indeed, with the exception of Xavier Cauvin and Cauvin (1987), which follows the text of 1804, since 1851 each edition or reproduction of the *Memoirs* follows Saint-Remy: Fardin's reprint of 1981, or the 1991 edition prefaced by Pierre Buteau and Michel Acacia. Therefore, the text that passed to history is not quite that of the Adjutant General Boisrond-Tonnerre, and a part of Haitian historiography and bibliography has been built on a text only more or less in conformity with the original.

In fact, despite assertions to the contrary in his presentation, Saint-Remy did not faithfully follow Boisrond-Tonnerre's text. Among many minor silent corrections such as "Français" rather than "français" or "Haïtiens" rather than "haytiens," the most significant variant spelling is "Haiti" rather than "Hayti" in the title. There are also quite large number of deletions or omissions, such as the incomplete note 2 on page 23, incorrectly numbered 22 (1804, 13-14 note 2). But more significantly, Saint-Remy gives as the author's name, simply Boisrond-Tonnerre rather than "l'adjutant général Boisrond-Tonnerre." He cut the last phrase of the front cover of the first edition, "AVEC LA PERMISSION DE S. E. LE GOUVERNEUR GENERAL, 1804." This erasure of the imprimatur of the army and of the government at the highest level, the head of the state himself, is very questionable. In part, it elides the official nature of the book, which is reinforced by the quote of the national motto "LIBERTE OU LA MORT" (FREEDOM OR DEATH) at the top of the first page of the original text, which is also lacking in the Saint-Remy edition, as well as the italicized phrase, "*An premier de l'indépendance*" (First year of independence),

just before the opening of the text itself. By such editorial decisions, consciously or not, Saint-Remy tends to displace the work from the paradigm of revolutionary and official discourses in which the Adjutant General wanted to inscribe it, by borrowing (rhetorical and typographical) features of the first page of the booklet of the Act of Haitian Independence and other related documents of January 1, 1804, published by “l’Imprimerie du Gouvernement” (the Government Printing Office) just like the *Memoires* (see figures 1 and 2). Moreover, Saint-Remy modernizes the annotation system by placing the parenthetical references before the final period rather than after. Finally, he confesses in a note that contradicts his policy statement at the end of his “Étude”:

“Here, following Boisrond-Tonnerre’s *Memoirs*, pages of the appended correspondence are missing, the book is mutilated. But we complete this correspondence with the Ambigu, French collection that was published in London under the direction of Pelletier” (1851, 100 note 1 — my translation).

Beyond this overview of different editions of the text, of the fortune or misfortune of its first edition, the big question remains its genesis, some even questioning its authenticity, as Bissainthe recalls in his notice on the second edition (1951, 37-38). Indeed, what are the sources for this text? How it was produced? When? In addition to being the secretary of Dessalines and the writer of the Act of Independence of Haiti, who is this man born Louis Félix Mathurin Boisrond (1776-1806), this author, Adjutant General Boisrond-Tonnerre, who, for the first time in history, systematically and radically breaks with the dominant Western discourse, rejecting any dialogue with the French authorities to speak directly to the Haitian people of his time and the future? (See opening and closing paragraphs of the memoirs in 1804, 3-4 and 93, [English translation by Asselin Charles.](#))

Let us bet that putting online in May 2013 the 1804 edition, which finally restores to the entire research community the first volume of the history of the Haitian Revolution by a forefront witness and actor, opens the way for some decisive rereading that will shine new lights on the foundations of our modernity.

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