Self-Fashioning and Self-Interest: Alexandre Rousselin, comte de Saint-Albin, as Biographer

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Who was Alexandre-Charles-Omer Rousselin de Corbeau, comte de Saint-Albin? Why do I want to write his biography? Why would you want to read it? These are eminently fair questions since he is not among the great names of the epoch, nor has he left a particularly rich collection of letters that gives us unique insight into the Revolutionary era. Rather it is his actions, his experiences, along with the events he observed and participated in, that make him a worthy subject. Rousselin’s self-representation and the series of biographies about Revolutionary generals that he wrote help illuminate his extraordinary life.

Rousselin had a knack for getting powerful men to trust him. Part of that ability rested on an excellent classical education at the collège d’Harcourt and a tireless almost irrepressible capacity for administrative work. But his talent also had much to do with a profound devotion to the Revolution and its principles as well as a willingness not only to take care of administrative details, but also to put his principles into practice. Despite his youth (he was born in 1773), Rousselin served as either confidential secretary or chief administrative aide to Desmoulins, Danton, Garat, Paré, Barras, Bernadotte, and Carnot. He worked closely with Hoche, Chérin, Constant, and Fouché. This list is testament to Rousselin’s singular aptitude at ingratiating himself with the men who made the Revolution. These relationships put Rousselin in a unique position to witness and participate in many key events of the Revolutionary era, a fact noted by contemporaries. A biographical dictionary published in 1819 noted that, “He is one of those people

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who saw events from close up and who can tell the story of what they have seen.”

After the Revolution of 1830, Louis-Philippe frequently commented to Rousselin, “There is only you and me who know the entire history [of the French Revolution] which so few suspect.”

In addition to these posts, on 31 May 1793, it was Rousselin who denounced the Girondins from the bar at the Convention on behalf of the sections of Paris. He was the primary editor of the *Feuille de Salut public*, the newspaper established by the Committee of Public Safety before going to work for Garat at the Ministry of the Interior where he coordinated the reports of police spies in Paris. The Committee of Public Safety also named Rousselin a *commissaire civil* and twice sent him to Champagne in the fall of 1793. He spent about two weeks in Provins and a month in Troyes as a “missionaire de la République” attempting to whip up Revolutionary zeal while ensuring the flow of war materiel to the Army of the Ardennes. In both places, he engaged in a frenzy of dechristianization and deployed Paris’ revolutionary army to wage war on the rich, especially the nobility, to force them to give up their gold and silver. He replaced experienced local leaders with “vrais sans-culottes.” Rousselin’s actions prompted a strong reaction from Troyes’ sections. He was recalled to Paris where diverse groups of Troyens repeatedly charged him with corruption and dictatorial practices. These charges became more dangerous with the fall of Danton and Desmoulins as Rousselin’s interactions with Robespierre and Couthon in the Jacobin Club became increasingly toxic. Arrested and sent before the Revolutionary Tribunal, Rousselin was acquitted on 2 Thermidor, which many contemporaries took as evidence that Robespierre’s power was fading. Rearrested on 4 Thermidor by order of Vadier, Rousselin was freed on the 9th by Danton’s friend Legendre only to be imprisoned later that month by Vadier for being a “terrorist.” Pursued hotly by Troyens throughout the White Terror, Rousselin spent significant time in jail before being amnestied in October 1795. Paré made Rousselin secretary-general of the Department of the Seine in 1796. When Paré moved on, Rousselin became Barras’ secretary. After the coup of 18 Fructidor, Rousselin worked in military supply on the staffs of first Hoche, then Chérin and finally Bernadotte.

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During this last period, Rousselin began to write biography. His *Vie de Lazare Hoche* was published in 1797, a second edition appeared in two volumes the following year, with a total of four editions by the end of 1800. The short *Notice sur Chérin* arrived in June 1799 and a brief *Notice historique sur le général Marbot* appeared early the next year. In the meantime, Rousselin served as secretary-general of the Ministry of War under Bernadotte and then on the Émigré Commission in the Year VIII.

These three biographies were the only ones to appear during Rousselin’s lifetime. His elder son Hortensius published the *Vie de Championnet* in 1860 though he had previously allowed Jules Michelet consult the manuscript. Hortensius also printed biographical fragments written by his father of Danton, Kléber, and Malet in 1873. In his will, Barras charged Rousselin with editing his memoirs and making them available when appropriate, but this task was left to Rousselin’s grandson-in-law, Georges Duruy, who published them in 4 volumes in 1895-6.

Rousselin’s close relationships with Constant, de Staël, Barras, Bernadotte and Josephine Bonaparte made him increasingly wary of Napoleon. In 1800, he went into hiding in Provence where he later seduced and impregnated a young cousin of Barras’, Anne Marie Espérance Clementine de Montpezat. Their son was born in 1805 and they married the following year. Rousselin spent much of the Consulate and Empire either in hiding or in internal exile, though he did do some discreet spying for Fouché. He became count of Saint-Albin in 1813. During the Hundred Days, Carnot requested that he join the Ministry of the Interior as secretary general and head of Public Instruction. After Waterloo, the new-made count decided to return to journalism, helping to found a paper that ultimately became *le Constitutionnel*, for a time in the 1830s, the best-selling newspaper in the world. This enterprise made him rich and influential; during the Restoration, he fought a long battle against censorship and was an important player in the Revolution of 1830 which brought his old friend Louis-Philippe d’Orléans to the throne. Offered a variety of influential posts, Saint-Albin refused them all, preferring to be one of the bourgeois king’s behind-the-scenes advisors. After leaving *le Constitutionnel* in 1838, he devoted himself to his books, his writing in various domains including biography, and his occasionally macabre art collection, which came to include what appears to be the skull of Charlotte Corday. He died in 1847: his last public act was to sign a petition to free the slaves in France’s colonies. This breakneck description of what Rousselin de Saint-Albin is intended to help you understand the stakes involved in his biographical writing and their psychological foundations.

As a biographer, it is important to recognize that Saint-Albin never chose to make his mature work available to the public. All the biographies published during his lifetime appeared in a three-year period as Alexandre Rousselin. He certainly did not disdain the public eye, as his journalistic endeavors demonstrated amply. *Championnet* is considered to a solid if highly romantic work of history by more professional historians while his account of Danton is a major though hardly unbiased source for those interested in this controversial figure. It is possible that he did not think the time was right for publishing pro-revolutionary biographies of republican generals, just as he delayed putting out Barras’ memoirs to avoid conflict with the Bonaparte family. Perhaps Saint-Albin thought that these biographies did not fit with the public image and reputation that he had crafted for himself?

To understand his choices, we need to know more about Saint-Albin. When I first encountered Rousselin de Saint-Albin while working on my dissertation, I was intrigued by the profoundly anti-noble actions of this noble who later made such profound use of his title and aristocratic connections during the Restoration and July Monarchy despite having been a “terrorist.” His family continued Rousselin de Saint-Albin’s public spirit: his son Hortensius was a deputy and judge in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s while his younger son (born in 1822), whose godfather and namesake was Louis-Philippe, became librarian to Empress Eugénie. Every contemporary source confirms that he was the son of artillery officer Antoine-Pierre-Laurent de Corbeau and grandson of the Marquis Antoine de Corbeau de Saint-Albin, an old Dauphinois noble family. Given that background, his fine education, interest in the military, and marriage to the granddaughter of a duke all made perfect sense.

There’s only one problem with this scenario: Rousselin was not Corbeau de Saint-Albin’s son. People even discussed his parentage at the time, though for the wrong reasons. There were persistent rumors that Rousselin was Louis-Philippe’s natural brother, in other words that Rousselin was the bastard of the Duke d’Orléans. There is no evidence that d’Orléans was Rousselin’s father and in light of the arc of his mother’s life, it seems profoundly unlikely. Nicole Marchand, a washerwoman, married François Rousselin, a dyer from Normandy in 1767. Rousselin was born six years later. The family claims that François abandoned the

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6 For example, see Ferdinand Hoefer, *Nouvelle biographie générale depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’à 1850-60 avec les renseignements bibliographiques et l’indication des sources à consulter*, vol. 41 (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, fils et Cie, 1862), 1018.

7 Benjamin Constant, *Correspondance générale*, vol. 3 (1795-1799), eds. C.P. Courtney and Dennis Wood with Peter Rickard (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993), 496-7 and *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 39 (1967), 141.
family, which may very well be the case. Nicole then took up with Corbeau de Saint-Albin who paid for Rousselin to attend the collège d'Harcourt: their liaison began no later than 1784 and probably earlier. François and Nicole divorced in 1794 and Nicole married Corbeau de Saint-Albin in 1795 when Rousselin was 22 and in jail for being a terrorist; she passed away the next year. The count adopted Rousselin almost 20 years later in 1813. With all his close relatives dead and “no legitimate children,” he wanted his title to pass to the son of the woman he had married. Did people know about Rousselin de Saint-Albin’s complicated family background and, if so, how did these circumstances affect him?

My next set of questions concerns why young Rousselin published biographies. A number of political and financial considerations complemented his literary aspirations. As a young man, Rousselin never had much money, so selling books was an important source of income, especially after 18 Brumaire, when he lost any possibility of gainful public employment. As a confirmed Jacobin with close ties to Hoche, Jourdan, Barras, and Bernadotte, Rousselin disapproved of Napoleon’s rise, especially after he deserted his troops (among them Kléber) in Egypt. Rousselin’s depictions of heroic, virtuous, and Jacobin generals who died “pour la patrie” both implicitly and explicitly highlighted their differences from “Buonaparte.”

Laudatory accounts of Marbot and Chérin who both were linked intimately with Bernadotte solidified Rousselin’s bond with the future king of Sweden. Rousselin seemed to crave the reflected glory of his association with these martyrs of the Revolution.

Although these considerations certainly played major roles in Rousselin’s decision to write biographies and his choice of subjects, I believe that his chief motivation reflected a rather different set of goals. Although he had been amnestied and served as secretary-general of the department of the Seine and on the staffs of Hoche, Chérin and Bernadotte, Rousselin was still known as a “terrorist.” He clearly wanted to improve his reputation in official circles. In search of rehabilitation Rousselin brought his Vie de Lazare Hoche to the Council of Five-Hundred asking for official recognition of his patriotic work. The Commissions of Public Instruction and Republican Institutions agreed. They proposed that Rousselin’s book be distributed at public expense and that the Directory be sent a message to propose that the Vie de Lazare Hoche be given “as prizes to young citizens as a national reward.” After this impressive public success,

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8 Archives de Paris, D4U1 52, 7 January 1813.
10 Dictionnaire des jacobins vivants, dans lesquels on verra les hauts faits de ces messieurs (Hamburg: n.p., 1799), 156-8.
it should not surprise that the *Notice sur Chérin* was also sent to the Council of Five-Hundred.\(^{11}\)

At the same time, Rousselin wished to propagate a particular version of republican ideals and to show that even someone who had been imprisoned under the Terror like Hoche had not lost his faith in the Revolution. He described himself as a “patriot historian” whose duty it was to “remember constantly the sentiment which animated Pompey when he returned from the war in Spain.” Obscure references aside, Rousselin wanted his work to be seen as “historical truth” rather than as a partisan piece. He described his methodology at length:

> The information that I found in Paris was insufficient. Not only to treat my subject with sincerity, but also to give my conscience the security of the truth, it became necessary to insure the witness of my eyes to the information that I gathered. . . . I wanted to capture the character of the man. Nothing was too minute that could provide an indication: his domestic habits, his words, even his gestures, sometimes unappreciated by the vulgar often provide wisdom to the historian searching for causes. I questioned curiously all the memories of everyone I could. I lost myself, so to speak, in the life of Hoche, as I followed up on every trace even into the heart of his enemies.

In addition to being taken seriously for his scholarship and classical learning, the *Vie de Lazare Hoche* is also a romantic-tinged “narrative of the heart” that owed as much to Rousseau’s sentimentality as it did to Plutarch’s biographical model. Rousselin “paid a tribute to Hoche by shedding tears upon his tomb.” He could tell the truth because “the liberty of the republic has given to virtue the right of thinking anything, saying anything, and writing anything.”\(^ {12}\)

Like all other generals who rose from the ranks, Hoche “carried in his heart the sentiments of the Revolution.” He was devoted to the cause of justice and could discern “the prejudices accumulated by 14 centuries in the interests of tyranny”

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\(^{12}\) The quotes in this paragraph are from Rousselin, *Vie de Lazare Hoche*, x, 2, 4.
while avoiding the temptations of corruption and maintaining the discipline and revolutionary fervor of his troops.\textsuperscript{13} Rousselin painted similar though less detailed portraits of Chérin and Marbot.\textsuperscript{14} What might be termed Rousselin’s “Neo-Jacobin” biographies of generals all propagated a vision of devotion to the republic, to the Revolution, and to honesty while rejecting arbitrariness, corruption and political involvement by the military. Spreading and popularizing this vision appears to have been just as important to Rousselin as the money or the founding of his literary career.

So what do the biographies written by Alexandre Rousselin and later by the count de Saint-Albin tell us about this complex eyewitness to Revolution? First and foremost, I think his themes of republican virtue, dedication to hard work against all odds, anti-clericalism, and social equality demonstrate his vision of the Revolution and his enduring attempts to propagate it. His biographies were an element of continuity with his journalistic endeavors on behalf of the Committee of Public Safety and lasting through his tenure at \textit{le Constitutionnel}. His choice of subjects demonstrated loyalty to those he served, an ongoing interest in military affairs, perhaps fostered by his stepfather, and a desire to make political points, usually at Bonaparte’s expense.

Rousselin de Saint-Albin also identified personally with his biographical subjects.\textsuperscript{15} He portrayed Hoche as a true “child of the Revolution,” while Championnet and Kléber both served with Antoine Pierre Laurent Corbeau de Saint Albin during the early years of the Revolution. Contemporaries often denigrated Chérin for being “only an administrator.” Hoche, Championnet, Malet, and Marbot all were jailed for political reasons associated with their Jacobinism. In his introduction to the \textit{Vie de Championnet}, Saint-Albin explained why he had chosen these particular people: “among those warriors whose actions serve as examples, these men have consistently practiced the principles of selflessness and of absolute devotion to their country.” My biography of Rousselin de Saint-Albin will demonstrate that he saw his own actions in similar fashion though his weapon of choice was the pen not the sword.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} The quotes in this paragraph are from Rousselin, \textit{Vie de Lazare Hoche}, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{14} Among his later unpublished work, the impression of Championnet strongly resembles that of Hoche while the sketches of Danton, Kléber, and Malet focused more on their early lives, perhaps reflecting an older man’s search for understanding the impact of his upbringing.
\textsuperscript{15} For a broader sense of how the private and public lives of someone like Rousselin might have interacted, see Jan Goldstein, \textit{The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
Finally, Rousselin de Saint-Albin’s decision to stop publishing biographies and to suspend writing them for more than 15 years also reveals something important about the man. He showed over and over again that he had a strong sense of political survival. He was either unable or unwilling to temper his historical judgment of Bonaparte, but once the Consulate was on firm ground, he recognized that he could not express himself freely. He was not so dedicated to freedom of speech or freedom of the press that he would provoke Bonaparte; Rousselin knew his protectors would not be able to save him from the full force of the First Consul/Emperor’s wrath. The postponed publication of his biographical writings under the Restoration and July Monarchy are more curious. Having had a child out of wedlock, married a duchess’ granddaughter, gained a title from his mother’s lover and later husband, and become an important figure in the literary world shifted Saint-Albin’s sense of self. The biographies he wrote as a mature man consistently emphasized early life as a determinant of adult action and described Antoine Pierre Laurent Corbeau de Saint Albin as his father.\footnote{1799), 9; and Alexandre Rousselin de Corbeau de Saint-Albin, \\textit{Vie de Championner}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1861 [1860]), 21.} I suspect that Rousselin carried scars from his youth based on his mother’s actions and wanted to spare his elder son from similar abuse or uncertainties about his parents’ choices. In short, I would argue that Rousselin de Saint-Albin had, what some today might refer to as both “mommy and daddy issues.” The choices he made, the emotional content of his views on loyalty and on authority, all had roots in these parental relationships. I believe that he declined to publish his later biographical writings to avoid raising these matters publicly for his son. Such family issues did not fit the biography that Rousselin de Saint-Albin had constructed for himself, though they are an essential part of the biography that I intend to write.