Tyrant of Languedoc?
Nicolas de Lamoignon de Basville in Public and in Private

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On 11 November 1703, the intendant of Languedoc, Nicolas de Lamoignon de Basville, wrote in private to his brother in Paris on the subject of the maréchal then commanding royal forces in the Cévennes, Nicolas de la Baume Montrevel: "I do not believe that there is a man in France more incapable of this position; he is a mere weathercock who never has an original thought, but who also cannot benefit from the thoughts of others. . . . He is a liar to the highest degree." The intendant also accused the maréchal of hopeless lassitude and of being so superstitious that he spent much of his time corresponding with an astrologer in Paris whose warnings he obeyed assiduously. Montrevel, who appears to have been every bit as stupid as the intendant charged, detected only the slightest hint of tension with the intendant, writing merrily to the Minister of War the following month that "the small chill between M. de Basville and me has ended after he has given me good cause to be content with the assurances he has given me." Alas for the maréchal, he was woefully mistaken. The intendant had determined to be rid of him, and while it took several months to engineer, Montrevel

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1 Archives Nationales, Paris [hereafter AN], Chartrier Tocqueville [hereafter Ch. Tocq.] 171, Nicolas de Lamoignon de Basville to Chrétien de Lamoignon, 11 November 1703, fol. 169.
2 Archives Historiques de l'Armée du Terre [hereafter AHAT], A1 1708, Nicolas La Baume Montrevel to Michel Chamillart, Minister of War, 11 December 1703, fol. 292.
was soon relieved of his command and replaced by the much more talented and energetic Maréchal de Villars.

It is hardly surprising that an intendant as skilled in court politics as Basville should have kept certain thoughts, attitudes, and plans confined to a small inner circle of discreet friends and relatives. What is remarkable is that historians should have access to a portion of his private correspondence with those intimates, permitting a rare view into both the man behind the public image and the ways in which he used his private correspondence to attain his public ends. That we possess some of those letters is entirely due to Basville's famous grand-nephew, Guillaume-Chrétien de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, who collected his private letters in an effort to see if the old intendant was indeed as much the persecutor of Protestants as his public reputation suggested. Malesherbes was devoted to the cause of religious toleration, of course, and there was thus a certain bias in his motivation for copying and preserving these letters. A thorough reading of the surviving letters also shows, however, that Malesherbes made no attempt to conceal or to downplay unattractive traits of Basville's character. The letters, largely copied in Malesherbes' own hand, form the core of the correspondence preserved in the Archives Nationales under the private seal of the d'Herouville family today.3

The author of this remarkable correspondence came from an illustrious robe family. His father had been Guillaume de Lamoignon, first president of the Parlement of Paris, and his older brother Chrétien, to whom many of his letters were

addressed, succeeded his father in the same parlement. Basville followed the classic path of a son born to such a family, becoming an avocat in 1667, a conseiller au parlement in 1670, and a maître des requêtes in 1673. Attaching himself at the same time to the clienteles of Louvois and Claude Le Pelletier (and also Madame de Maintenon, whose friend he had been before her marriage to the king), Basville was appointed to his first intendancy at age thirty-four in 1682 in Poitiers. He acquitted himself well, reforming the tax system and manipulating it to persuade Protestants to convert to Catholicism. When Henri Daguessseau retired from the intendancy of Languedoc in 1685, Basville was appointed to replace him.

The intendancy he assumed that year resulted from a long line of development that had begun with a series of powerful governors, such as Montmorency, who were then gradually displaced by the corps of intendants. Contrary to the traditional view that the intendants came as solitary royal agents determined to establish the authority of an all-powerful king, modern historiography has recast them as centers of local patronage networks. Certainly Basville wasted no time in gathering a clientele of his own to aid him in administering his new province. Esprit Fléchier, who had delivered the funeral oration for Basville’s father, was persuaded to accept the bishopric of

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4 Malesherbes was Chrétien’s grandson and namesake. On the family, especially on Basville’s brother, see the old, but still useful work of Louis Vian, Les Lamoignon: Une vieille famille de robe (Paris, 1896), 219-42.


Nîmes and became a close friend and ally. The intendant secured the military command of the province for his brother-in-law, Victor Maurice, comte de Broglie, in 1688, and the office of inspector-general of roads and inspector of missions throughout the province for his client François de Langlade du Chaila in 1699. As part of the latter appointment, Basville agreed to the closure of the small seminary that du Chaila had opened in the Cévenol town of St. Germain de Calberte, thereby securing the support and alliance of the Bishop of Mende, Baudry de Pencourt, who had opposed its establishment. When the bishopric of Nîmes was split in two to create a new bishopric at Alès, Basville made sure that the seat went to another client and relative of his wife, François Chevalier de Saulx. He worked to attain some influence in the often quarrelsome Parlement of Toulouse by arranging marriage alliances between his wife's nephew and the daughter of de Sevin, a conseiller au parlement, which further enabled more distant links to the de Pennautier family, who dominated the office of treasurer general for the Estates of Languedoc. Basville also created a number of sub-delegates in various towns throughout the province, securing a variety of royal pensions to insure their continued fidelity.

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10 The office of subdelegate was not officially created until April 1704, but intendants had effectively created it years before. Kettering, Patrons, Brokers, and Clients, 188. Basville appointed subdelegates in Castres, Alès, Tournon, Montpellier, Nîmes, Le Vigan, Uzès, and Toulouse. Poujol, Basville, 153-54.
their own clients.\textsuperscript{11} His long tenure likewise helped to create a legendary authority that led no less a memoirist than Saint-Simon to refer to his "tyranny" over the province, characterizing him as "crafty" and "implacable" and writing that his "domination broke all resistance."\textsuperscript{12}

Drawing power and support from clients and allies, Basville worked to implement the often brutal religious policy of the king in this most Protestant province. Unsurprisingly, his energetic enforcement of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes drew universal condemnation from Languedoc’s Protestants. The pastor Pierre Corteiz called him "as cruel and pitiless a man as there ever was in the world. The hate and detestation for the reformed religion with which the Jesuits filled him, the cruelty to which he was naturally inclined, made his soul happy on those occasions when he was able to condemn some Protestant to an awful punishment. We will give over this tyrant to the judgment of God."\textsuperscript{13} It was Basville's image as ruthless persecutor of Protestants that drew Malesherbes' attention, but there are signs in the sources that this portrait has been overdrawn and ample evidence that he took little joy in this role. When Protestants continued to gather in illegal and illicit assemblies in the mountains after the Revocation had been issued, Basville chose arrest and imprisonment over the more drastic death penalty favored by his patron Louvois.\textsuperscript{14} During the ferocious Camisard Rebellion that raged in the province from 1702 through 1704, there is some evidence from his private correspondence that Basville resorted to several quiet amnesties to accompany his far


\textsuperscript{13} Pierre Corteiz, \textit{Mémoires et lettres inédites} (Mende: Société des Lettres, Sciences et Arts de la Lozère, 1983), 22.

more public policy of severe examples and violent repression. He likewise insisted on judicial process for those captured at Protestant assemblies, and he was not inclined to create evidence where there was none in doling out punishments. That said, he did not hesitate to enforce these religious policies, and he followed the pattern of most administrators of the period in maintaining a stubborn and determined belief in the efficacy of severe punishment as a deterrent to resistance and rebellion.

His enemies might have been surprised (and delighted) by the extent to which the long struggle to force the conversion of Protestants to Catholicism exhausted and depressed him. He wrote privately to Fléchier that he was working "ten hours a day" to bring peace to his province, and he referred to his "sad" ministry so often that one suspects he might have suffered from clinical depression. "I am doing my best to acquit myself of this sad ministry," he wrote to Fléchier in May 1701. In June of the same year he wrote, "It is a sad life that one should occupy oneself in such matters." When, during the Camisard war, royal forces resorted to burning more than four hundred Cévenol villages in order to cut off supplies to the mountain guerrilla fighters, Basville wrote to his brother, "What a sordid business (un asses vilain métier) for an old councillor to be a burner of houses." Finally, on 25 May 1708, he summarized his

15 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Gourville, 25 May 1703, fol. 134.
16 This was most famously the case with the Baron de Salgas, whom Basville suspected of being a secret leader of the Camisard Rebellion. The intendant noted in a letter to his brother, "M. de Montrevel estoit d'avis de luy [Salgas] faire couper le col, mais je luy ais fait comprendre que les jugements ont des règles qu'il faut suivre." AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Lamoignon, 29 June 1703, fol. 92. On the Salgas case, see Gaston Tournier, Le Baron de Salgas, gentilhomme Cévenol et forçat pour la foi (Mas Soubeyran: Musée du Désert, 1941); W. Gregory Monahan, "Between Two Thieves: The Protestant Nobility and the War of the Camisards," French Historical Studies 30, no. 4 (2007): 537-58.
17 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Fléchier, 20 October 1702, fol. 45.
18 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Fléchier, 25 May and 2 June 1701, fol. 42.
20 AN Ch. Tocq., 171, Basville to Lamoignon, 27 September 1703, fol. 48.
unhappiness, again to his friend Fléchier: "The job of an intendant is so sad now, Monsieur, that if it were now a question of entering this career, I would avoid it with all my heart. For twenty years I have done this, and I have found nothing but worries, difficulties without end, not a moment of rest or tranquility, and I have forgotten entirely the sweetness of a soul in peace which should be the only happiness of life."19 At age fifty-four in 1702, he constantly referred to himself as "an old man" and evidently acted the part. The affable, if ineffectual Montrevel took him to task for his chronic complaining. "Madame Basville thinks as I do that you make yourself an old man too early," he wrote. "I often receive letters from a lady in Montpellier who has, if I am not mistaken, a much better opinion of you."20

Basville's sense of isolation and depression could well have been considerably amplified by his increasing deafness. Contemporary testimony confirms that his hearing was impaired by the time he was in his thirties and that he long used a hand-held acoustical horn to amplify sounds around him. Contemporaries also told how he would leave two rooms empty between his cabinet and his salon to enable confidants to speak loudly enough for him to hear without the proximity of unwanted listeners.21 There is even evidence that the king might have promoted him to the court but for his disability. This comes from Maleherbes, who related a story he credited to Colbert de Torcy, who was thought to have proposed Basville and someone else for one of two places on the Council. "The king responded that those were precisely the two he was thinking of, but that there were reasons to exclude both, and the one concerning Basville was that he had become deaf."22

His private correspondence also reveals an official who sometimes stubbornly resisted royal policies. We have already

19 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Fléchier, 25 May 1708, fol. 53.
20 Bibliothèque Arsénal, Paris [hereafter BA], Mss. 3854, Montrevel to Basville, 14 April 1703, fol. 108.
21 Poujol, Basville, 233-34.
22 Malesherbes' notation in AN Ch. Tocq. 171, fol. 10.
seen that he refused to execute Protestants caught attending illegal assemblies, but his opposition was sometimes more explicit and did not always incline towards a more moderate course. This was especially the case with the monarchy's decision to soften its religious policies in 1698. Several officials and churchmen, especially Basville's predecessor as intendant of Languedoc, Daguesseau, and the famous theorist Bossuet, argued that the Revocation was producing too many false Catholics, that it had driven wealth from the realm by emigration, and that a softer, more persuasive policy should be pursued. The change was partly prompted by the perception at Versailles that some of the southern intendants had been overzealous in their efforts. Daguesseau in particular attacked Basville, if obliquely, noting that "there are some among the intendants who, inspired no doubt by good motives and inflamed by the indiscreet zeal of certain unenlightened churchmen, use extreme rigor upon those whose Catholicity they suspect. They charge fees, quarter soldiers, and, in a word, employ against them [the Protestants] all the authority they have in order to force them to go to church and take the sacraments."23

Though opposed strenuously by many of the southern bishops in the formerly Protestant south (including Basville's friends and clients, the bishops of Nîmes and Alès), the new Declaration of 1698 ordered that no one be forced to attend mass, that the sacraments not be denied to anyone for any reason, and that religious education not be forced on children.24 Basville regarded the shift in policy as a terrible mistake. Writing in private to Fléchier, who had also opposed the new declaration, Basville hoped "that the orders would change," and he warned that if Protestants found out about this change "not one will enter a church."25 As was often the case, his private attitudes became his public position, and he wrote a memoir to

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23 Henri Daguesseau, quoted in Armogathe and Joutard, "Bâville et la consultation de 1698," 159.
24 AN TT464, fol. 40.
25 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Fléchier, 15 February 1703, fol. 12, no. 3.
the court in May 1698 that used withering logic to show that one could not force religious conversion without also enforcing religious practice. A stream of private letters to Fléchier and his brother thundered against the declaration, all of them filled with arguments about how the older policy of coercion was working, how people were in fact attending mass, and how success would be achieved if they were only required to continue.

Basville and his brother were both stung, however, by the argument that they were persecutors. Malesherbes preserved a letter from Basville's brother to Bossuet in which Chrétien de Lamoignon wrote defensively, "I do not want anyone here to characterize myself or my brother as persecutors of the Huguenots. There have been widespread rumors that they are subjected to terrible violence in Languedoc. I can assure you that there is not a province in the realm where they are treated with greater kindness." Whatever the rationalization, Basville and many Languedocian bishops pushed beyond the limits imposed by the new declaration and the royal orders that followed, forcing some Protestant children (especially from noble families) to attend catechism classes, denying burial to those who could not document having received the last rights, and arresting those caught at Protestant assemblies with greater ferocity than ever before.

Basville's harsh policies certainly played a role in igniting the Camisard Rebellion, which broke out in the Cévennes in July 1702 with the murder of Basville's client, the abbé du Chaila.

26 The memoir, dated 11 May 1698, is in AN TT430, fol. 126.
27 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Fléchier and Lamoignon, July 1698 through August 1699, fols. 12, 16, 18, 23-26, 80, 157, 159.
29 The royal memoir to the intendants is in AN TT430, fol. 129. Basville's memoir to the bishops pushing the limits of the order is in ADH C273 (no fol. #). There is another copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Mss. 7045. Fléchier made his opposition clear in a series of letters to La Vrillière. Esprit Fléchier, Oeuvres complètes (Nîmes, 1782), 10:87-91.
30 The literature on the Camisard Rebellion is vast. For an excellent historiography, see Philippe Joutard, La légende des Camisards: Une
Lacking troops and experience at fighting what was essentially a mountain guerrilla war, the intendant's brother-in-law, Broglie, failed repeatedly to stop rebel bands from burning remote mountain churches and murdering priests and school masters. By the end of 1702, criticism at court of Broglie's military failures was mounting, and Basville found himself in the uncomfortable position of defending a relative and client who he himself had begun to fear was not up to the job and whom, privately, he had never much liked. In June 1701, more than a year before the outbreak of the war, the intendant was already complaining about Broglie that "he will always be the most disagreeable of men. . . . He is a man who always speaks in anger and acts only with ill humor." His irascibility made Broglie unpopular with the local nobility and caused Basville no end of difficulties, but the intendant nevertheless noted in private that Broglie had always acted with the energy worthy of a man of honor and argued that lack of troops rather than incompetence caused his downfall. Nevertheless, Broglie's disagreeable nature certainly played a role in his own disgrace. After Montrevel arrived to replace Broglie, Basville wrote to his brother of the need to defend the former commander at court—even while he confidentially admitted the brutal truth: "If you speak to the king, put in a word for him. You can say that Monsieur de Broglie had no conflicts with a single gentleman and that none had cause to complain about him. Between us, the truth is that his manner was never agreeable to them."

Being entirely unrelated to Basville, Montrevel invited no such family loyalty, but the intendant was at first charmed by the old maréchal's joie de vivre and his open courting of Basville's

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31 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville writing to an unnamed correspondent, 2 June 1701, fol. 160.
32 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Lamoignon, 23 March 1703, fol. 170.
33 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Lamoignon, 28 February 1703, fol. 170.
favor. Alas, the charm soon wore thin, and the intendant became increasingly aggravated by Montrevel's laziness and stupidity. The maréchal seemed considerably more interested in chasing after young women at his headquarters in Alès than chasing after rebels in the mountains. Basville was perhaps especially incensed by the fact that his brother-in-law had failed and been disgraced because the monarchy had sent too few troops, whereas this new commander had plenty of troops but lacked the energy or the wherewithal to use them. In letters to his brother like the one which opened this article, Basville began to attack Montrevel's laziness and jealousy. While that correspondence was private, the intendant certainly must have realized that rumors would begin to circulate, and that letters from his own correspondents to their correspondents would begin to create doubts in officialdom about the maréchal's abilities that might make a more public condemnation possible and successful.

The success of this strategy became plain in December 1703, when the controller general and minister for war Michel Chamillart sent the intendant a confidential set of questions to be answered in Basville's own hand that echoed some of the very charges the intendant had already made to his own confidants in his private correspondence. Chamillart asked, for example, whether rumors that Montrevel was lazy and spent only the mornings at work were true. Basville answered, "One can speak of various matters to him principally in the morning, but often he doesn't pay very much attention, and he forgets what he has decided." Asked if Montrevel was jealous and refused to listen to the ideas of others, Basville answered, "It is certain that his jealousy, which extends to all his officers, prevents him from profiting from other opinions." The memoir was a crushing indictment, brilliantly framed to show that the intendant admired the commander, had worked with him, and was still working with him, but lacked confidence in him. This memoir was only

34 BA Mss. 3854, Montrevel to Basville, 12 April 1703. fol. 106.
the coup de grâce on top of a private correspondence that laid the groundwork for a very public act. Once the intendant had begun to make the argument to powerful court figures like his brother, it was only a matter of time before he would be called upon to make his argument directly to the minister of war at Versailles.

Montrevel's replacement, the maréchal de Villars, was far more confident and competent and a superior diplomat. He chose a combination of hard-fought and intense military campaigns in conjunction with a wide-ranging amnesty to try to quell the rebellion. Basville had tried a few amnesties on his own, but they had never been successful, partly because the leaders of the rebellion in its earlier stages remained confident of success and therefore uninterested in surrender, partly because Montrevel had never been enthusiastic about a policy of "douceur." As the new commander's strategy began to succeed, Basville wrote to his brother defending both the policy and the new commander against the charge that Villars was soft on Protestants. Even before the new maréchal's arrival, Basville began psychologically positioning himself toward a more accommodating and diplomatic solution to the rebellion. In a remarkable letter written in April 1704, the intendant argued that he had always favored amnesties and that he had never been in favor of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. "One can never know and one will never know all I have done to end this war by gentle means (par la voie de douceur)." On matters of religion, he wrote, "I will listen to anything anyone wants to say to me. I know this terrain well. It was never my opinion to revoke the edict of Nantes and no one bothered to consult me about it." This newfound moderation on religious issues may well have mirrored the charismatic personality of the new commander, but

35 AHAT A1 1709, memoir in Basville's hand, 2 December 1703, fol. 388. Saint-Simon echoed Basville's opinion of Montrevel, noting that he was so stupid "he couldn't distinguish his right hand from his left." Saint-Simon, Mémoires, 11:50.
36 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, Basville to Lamoignon, ca. 15 June 1704 [date approximate], fol. 175.
37 AN Ch. Tocq. 171, fol. 102, Basville to Lamoignon, 13 April 1704.
his defense of Villars also shows that he could use his private correspondence to support a general as well as to oppose one.

That said, few letters point so clearly to contradictions in this remarkably complex character. Who was the real Basville? Was he the stringent and intolerant judge who sent countless men to the wheel, who tortured confessions out of peasant rebels, who argued consistently and forcefully in favor of coercion to force the conversion of Protestants to Catholicism? Or was he the depressed man of peace, increasingly lonely in his deafness, who regretted the Revocation, preferred a softer path of amnesties, and suffered acutely at the idea that others might find him as intolerant as his administrative duties forced him to be? Of course, he was both. He had been raised all his life to appreciate, indeed to love, the judicial procedures and harsh punishments of the Old Regime. He had been trained to carry out with devotion and energy a royal policy with which he might not in private entirely agree. And, if it seems from the anguish and private agonies in his letters, that Nicolas de Lamoignon de Basville did suffer some degree of regret, it is also true that the public servant remained determined to serve his king as best he could. If that meant executing rebels, burning houses, undermining incompetent generals, and working ten-hour days, then he would do it. Louis XIV had recognized the value of the Lamoignons long before Basville ever took up residence in Languedoc. "I know this family," the king had said in answer to the inference at court that certain members of this particular family were rising too fast, "I can give myself up to them." 38

Basville's private correspondence reveals aspects of his character that deepen our understanding of the intendancy in the old regime. These letters show us an official who did not allow his private doubts to interfere with his public course, but who did have private doubts and who was not loathe to share them with his closest friends and relatives. Yet it also shows the ways in which this intendant used that private correspondence to further his public ends. Serving the king in a distant province which

38 Cited in Vian, _Les Lamoignon_, 222.
prevented him from direct and personal access to his masters at
Versailles, the intendant learned early to master both the private
and public spheres in order to manipulate the monarchy into the
positions that he felt best served its interests. In that sense, the
letters that Malesherbes preserved and that now reside in the
archives of France help to deepen our understanding of the Old
Regime and the officials—or at least, this specific official—who
helped to define it.