

**Memoirs and History:
A Seventeenth Century Perspective of a Genre**

by
Robert Emory

Prior to the seventeenth century, the main purpose for composition of memoirs was an exact narration and explanation of intrigues, negotiations, or military campaigns of national importance, written by illustrious men and women who had personally witnessed them or taken part in them. From its inception in the Middle Ages, the genre had served many purposes: apology or defense of one's position or activities, a sort of biography with incidental autobiography, a moral treatise, or social commentary, all with the avowed purpose of instructing and enlightening history and exalting the exploits of the individual. Although historical accuracy is the prime factor involved in the narration of events, the genre also has literary interest in that the writer may narrate his personal or political memoirs, but only to the extent that they relate to history in general. Choice, arrangement, and disposition of materials are a matter of personal preference and indicate aspects of the individual's personality.

It is an amorphous genre, in a state of continual flux. Despite the absence of codified rules of composition or content, a rather general conception existed in the minds of the seventeenth century writer. The high esteem in which memoirs were held is demonstrated by the diversity of titles: *Annales*, *récit*, *relation*, *journal*, *souvenirs*, as well as *mémoires*. Madame de Caylus is overly precautionous in her choice of title for her *Souvenirs*: "Le titre de Mémoires, quoique de toutes les façons d'écrire la plus simple et la plus libre, m'a cependant paru encore trop sérieux pour ce que j'ai à dire, et pour la manière dont je le dis." While perhaps not in the mainstream of memorialist literature from the purist's viewpoint, they are completely within the realm of the genre, in content, form, and structure. "J'écris des souvenirs sans ordre, sans exactitude. ... Mais ni la prévention que donne l'éducation, ni les mouvements de ma reconnaissance, ne me feront rien dire de contraire à la vérité." (23)

The abbé Arnauld gives the best documented evidence of contemporary attitudes toward memoirs:

"Je n'entreprends point de justifier le titre que je donne à cet ouvrage, quoique je n'ignore pas qu'il y a des gens qui croient qu'on ne doit nommer Mémoires que ce qui peut servir à l'histoire en générale ou ce qui regarde la vie des personnes si éminentes en naissance ou en dignité, qu'elle fait elle-même partie de cette histoire." (XXIV,119)
 Lenet apologizes for writing "beaucoup de choses inutiles à l'histoire." (II,248)

The abbé de Choisy states that his will not be the definitive history of the reign of Louis XIV since "[Boileau et Racine] sont chargés d'un si grand travail, je me fais justice, et suis persuadé qu'ils nous donneront une histoire meilleure que celle que je pourrais faire, d'autant plus qu'ils ont en main tous les Mémoires les plus secrets, et qu'ils y travaillent depuis quinze ans."(22) The first editors of the memoirs of Bussy-Rabutin omitted from his manuscript "tout ce que Monsieur le Comte de Bussy a écrit depuis son exil jusqu'à sa mort parce qu'ayant passé presque tout ce temps-là chez luy à la campagne, on n'a rien trouvé parmi ses Papiers, qu'on ait crû devoir joindre à des événemens historiques." (I, *Avertissement*)

A distinction was made between memoirs and pure history, however, in spite of the close relationship between the two. For Madame de Motteville, this separation was quite clear: "l'histoire traite des actions, les mémoires des passions."(IV,312) History and memoirs are divergent also for the abbé Arnauld, as he relates in his narration of the siege of Damvilliers: "Comme je n'entreprends pas d'écrire une histoire, je ne ferai la description ni de la place, ni de la circonvallation, ni des tranchées." (XXIV,158) Regardless of methods and materials at the disposal of the author, the objectives of the memorialist and of the historian are similar, though the former leans more in the direction of a depiction of the individual, his character, passions, ambitions, morality, and deeds. Instruction frequently is the goal of the memorialist, whether it be that of one's family, friends, or the edification of the prince.

Of all the various genres so popular in the seventeenth century, the memoir is the most intimate and

individualistic, the only one in which the author is eternally present. The "moi" dominates, regardless of the author's attempts to reduce his presence and his importance. Choice, arrangement, and dispositions of materials are his alone, as are the experiences, events, and observations which he records. His ability to penetrate, reveal, or portray causes, effects, passions, and motives which govern his actions or those of prominent men, his ability to capture their essence in a true characterization of themselves, both physically and through their actions, reflect in varying degrees his artistry and his own character.

In the vast majority of memoirs, the role and place of the individual is relative to his function or position and is almost always subordinate to the narration of historical certainty, being the focal point of attention only when he has played a prominent role in a particular event. In many, the author is completely absent. There existed a general belief that the life of the individual, unless of eminent birth or station, was unimportant. The individual emerges as the central figure of his account only by the assurance that his work would remain in relative obscurity in the hands of family or friends, and even then, the narrator justifies his temerity in composing memoirs by advancing more important ideals. Henri de Campion modestly acknowledges that the historical aspect of his memoirs is more interesting than his life:

"Si mon dessein étoit d'écrire pour le public, je choisirois un sujet plus intéressant que celui de ma vie; mais comme ce n'est que pour ma famille et mes amis, je crois que je ne puis rien faire de plus agréable pour eux et de plus commode pour moi, que de leur raconter naïvement les divers événemens qui me sont arrivés, en y joignant, pour leur en rendre la lecture plus intéressant et plus profitable, les choses dont j'ai été témoin [...] et qui me sembleront dignes de mémoire." (40)

Arnauld d'Andilly aspires to provide moral instruction through narration of his personal exploits, while revealing a most important aspect of memoirs in general--the veracity of the account and the methods of arriving at the truth:

Une aussi longue vie que la mienne, et dont j'ai passé la plus grande partie à la cour, autant connu des grands et aussi libre avec eux qu'on le peut être, m'a si fortement persuadé du néant des choses du monde, que rien n'étoit plus éloigné de ma pensée que de laisser quelques mémoires touchant mes proches et ce qui me regarde en particulier. Mais, ne pouvant résister aux instances si pressantes que me fait mon fils de Pomponne d'en écrire quelque chose qui puisse servir à mes enfans, pour les exciter à la vertu par des exemples domestiques, et leur inspirer le mépris de ces faux biens idolâtres qu'ils ne craignent point de les rechercher aux dépens de leur honneur et de leur salut, je me suis enfin résolu à lui donner cette satisfaction, et je ne rapporterai rien que je n'aie vu de mes propres yeux, ou qui ne m'ait été dit par des personnes dignes de foi. (XXXIII,301)

Provoked by his father's coldness toward him in his memoirs and inspired by the highly personal nature of Pontis' the abbé Arnauld defends the movement toward individuality and the promotion of one's own exploits as just cause for composition of memoirs. For him, the subject treated is of prime importance; history is only incidental to the narration:

"Je leur demanderois volontiers de qui ils veulent que parle un homme qui ne prétend écrire que ses Mémoires et non ceux des autres; quoique, si on vouloit rendre justice à cet auteur, on ne laisseroit pas d'avouer qu'on trouve dans ses ouvrages beaucoup de particularités agréables, et des traits même de l'histoire de son temps, soit par rapport aux faits auxquels il a eu part, soit à ceux qu'il rapporte des autres..." (XXXIV,199)

Many of the memoirs of the *Fronde* substantiate Dulong's assertion that the contemporaries of Louis XIII were passionately interested in politics, ending in disenchantment and disillusionment as a result of the *Fronde*.(I,105) With the loss of their previous political preeminence, the former *Frondeurs* relate the roles either they or their associates performed, their motives, the causes of the *Fronde*, and analyze or portray human passions in the process. A similar change occurred in

other genres of the same period, a movement toward impersonality and universality, with a resulting diminution of the role of the individual. The memoirs of the Fronde document this movement from the exterior to the interior in that they relate exterior political occurrences while analyzing the underlying passions. In the figure and mystique of an absolute monarch, only through the secrecy of one's own memoirs could one regain the central position which he previously occupied. Of all the memoirs of the reign of Louis XIV, it is not until Saint-Simon that the personality of the author imposes itself so profoundly upon the work.

A corresponding change occurred in attitudes toward the utility and purpose of history. According to Saint-Réal, recitation of events and actions without reflection is not true knowledge of history; what is important is the knowledge of man: "Savoir l'Histoire, c'est connoître les hommes, qui en fournissent la matière; [...] étudier l'histoire, c'est étudier les motifs, les opinions et les passions des hommes, pour en connoître tous les ressorts, les tours et les détours, enfin toutes les illusions qu'elles savent faire aux esprits et les surprises qu'elles font aux coeurs."⁽⁴⁾ The abbé de Choisy proclaims a similar purpose for his memoirs: "Pétri de la même boue que César et Alexandre, [le roi] aura ses faiblesses aussi bien qu'eux, et quelquefois le héros laissera paraître l'homme." (24) Rapin repeats the same advice, (35) while exhorting historians cautiously to use memoirs as a means of arriving at the truth:

"Que [l'historien] n'assure les choses que sur des mémoires bien sûrs et sur des relations bien fidèles... Qu'il soit toujours en garde contre les partialités de ceux qui lui donnent des mémoires, parce que la préoccupation ne fait jamais que des histoires fausses." (22)

While the more historically oriented memoirs analyzed the human heart, others were composed merely to narrate amorous or military adventures of an individual. Suggests that the vogue of adventure novels in the 1670's may explain the success of Pontis' memoirs. (IV,124) The memoirs of Marie and Hortense Mancini, appearing almost contemporaneously with those of Pontis, also support this assertion, since the only aim of their narrative is

justification of their romanesque adventures. Until the end of the reign of Louis XIV, apocryphal and fictitious memoirs abound: Courtiliz de Sandras, Madame d'Aulnoy, Hamilton, Lesage.

Many seventeenth century readers, however, did not approve of mixing truth and fiction; the major interest in memoirs was in their veracity, (Letts, 29-32) especially in a century in which truth was the esthetic as well as the historical ideal of letters. However, truth for the memorialist was, of individual necessity, relative, despite protestations to the contrary. Each who had participated or observed did so from his own point of view, in his own manner. His aim frequently was to justify himself and his actions. Age and lapse of time between experience and recitation may further color historical accuracy. On the other hand, since memoirs were to be relegated to the secrecy of the study, family and close friends, many writers could reveal psychological insights into the character of central figures.

For the memorialist who adhered more strictly to the historical and didactic purposes of his experiences and observations, La Mothe Le Vayer cautioned that "il n'y a pas grande apparence qu'une vraie et légitime Histoire peust estre bien receuë par ceux qui se pretendoient interessez dedans." (*Discours de l'histoire*, 1638), p. 19) This attitude would account for the secrecy in which so many were guarded; otherwise, "comment oserais-je parler librement du prince et de ses ministre? Le pas serait glissant..." (Abbé de Choisy, *Mémoires*, p. 24) To fill the vacuum created by a paucity of public information, Louis XIV established a corps of historiographers to compose a history of his reign, based upon their experiences and any memoirs to which they might have access. Consequently, nobility who had been disgraced or who felt that posterity would judge them too severely, aspired to correct court prejudice: "La pluspart des Historiens sont pensionnaires de la Cour; ils n'écrivent que sur les mémoires qu'on leur donne: de sorte qu'il ne faut pas s'étonner si les malheureux paroissent toujours coupables. Cependant il se reconte quelquefois des gens desinteressez et amis de la vérité, qui ne pouvant faire une meilleure fortune aux miserables, leur font au moins une meilleure réputation, et qui leur sauvent l'honneur malgré l'injustice de leur siècle." (Bussy-Rabutin, *Mémoires*, I, 133) Because of the intense

jealousy with which the aristocracy guarded its prerogatives, its preoccupation with and its exaltation of the individual, it attempted to rectify omissions of exploits in official accounts and in the process, exceeded impartiality, the historical ideal. One may admire the style, courtesy, and moderation of a given memorialist, but for the theoretical historian, memoirs could not replace history, for history had another style: "On donne à l'Historien sa matière par les mémoires qu'on luy fournit; mais c'est à luy à l'arranger; et pour le faire comme il faut, il ne doit pas tant penser à ce qu'il dit, qu'à la manière de le dire; car en cecy comme dans les autres parties de l'éloquence, la manière fait tout." (Rapin, *Instructions*, p. 102)

The evolution of memoirs, particularly in the latter half of the seventeenth century, is complex. Evolving from personal experiences, feats, or observations, its form and content depend solely upon the character and personality of the author. It is a genre impossible to define because of its amorphous structure. The individualism of its authors creates a uniqueness in the work and ambiguities surround it. At its highest level, it approaches history as it relates impartially historical, political, economic, and military materials. Personal memoirs may aspire to pure history, with absolute subordination of the individual adventures in which historical consideration is negligible or totally absent. At its best, it attempts to instruct the reader--family, friends, posterity; at its worst, it seeks only to please, thereby approaching the goals of the novel. The range of titles is as vast as the form and content, reflecting the tastes of the writer and of his contemporaries as each tries to conform to prevailing attitudes concerning memoirs and their function.

The Citadel

Works Cited or Consulted

- Adam, Antoine. *Histoire de la littérature française au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Del Duca, 1954).
- Andilly, Robert Arnould d'. *Mémoires*, in Monmerqué and Petitot, eds., *Collection des mémoires relatifs à l'Histoire de France*, 2^e série (Paris: J.L.F. Foucault, 1824).
- Arnould, Abbé Antoine. *Mémoires*, in Monmerqué and Petitot, eds., *Collection des mémoires relatifs à l'Histoire de France*, 2^e série (Paris: J.L.F. Foucault, 1820-29).
- Bertaut, Françoise. Madame de Motteville, *Mémoires*, ed. M. F. Fiaux (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, n. d.).
- Campion, Henri de. *Mémoires*, ed. Marc Fumaroli (Paris: Mercure de France, 1967).
- Caylus, Marthe, comtesse de, dite Madame de Caylus. *Souvenirs*, ed. Bernard Noël (Paris: Mercure de France, 1965).
- Choisy, Abbé Fr. Timoléon de. *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Louis XIV*, ed. Georges Mongrédien (Paris: Mercure de France, 1966).
- Dulong, Gustave. *L'Abbé de Saint-Réal* (2 vols., Paris: Champion, 1921).
- Lenet, Pierre. *Mémoires*, in Michaud and Poujoulat, eds., *Nouvelle Collection des Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire de France*, 3^e série (Paris: Guyot Frères, 1850).
- Letts, Janet T. *Le Cardinal de Retz: Historien et moraliste du possible* (Paris: Nizet, 1966).
- Rabutin, Roger de. Comte de Bussy, *Mémoires*, 3^e éd. (Paris: Rigaud, 1712).
- Rapin. *Instructions pour l'histoire*, 1677.
- Saint-Réal, Abbé de. *De l'usage de l'histoire* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1671).