

CHAPTER VI

THE BONNEVAL LEGEND

The Bonneval legend brings some very important elements into the family history of Jean Latrobe, the refugee, and his descendants. We can see how the three brothers, Benjamin Henry, Christian Ignatius and John Frederic, living in different parts of the world, were interested in their heritage, and why the Bonneval legend became an important issue to each of them.

On February 1st 1820 Christian Ignatius in London wrote a long letter to his brother John Frederic in Livonia. I quote from this letter:

'Whether my answer to your question about the Nobility will be satisfactorily answered or not, I cannot tell you for I have no documents of that kind which would be thought valid in law and where to find them I do not know. Our brother Benjamin, now in America, had more family vanity than I and took some pains to find the origin of our race in the Registering Offices in France. Mr Gibert, who was at that time secretary to Mr Eden, now Lord Auckland, was his correspondent and assisted him in his research. The result was that Mr Gibert sent him an emblazoned Coat-of-arms of the Bonneval family, which is said to have been the name of ours and of which the seal, with which I shall seal this letter is a copy, with some explanation, to this effect, that the family resided on their own estates in Languedoc, a branch of which (if remembered right) was called La Trobe, which emigrated into foreign parts and there the genealogy of that branch stops.

But for the same reason, which you quote as having operated with you, I took no trouble about it and cared not a farthing for foreign nobility, having by that emigration been raised up to the honour of being an Englishman, born in England and possessing all the rights of a Briton...

What I know further of this business is only what I heard our excellent father relate and that was something to this effect: that his great-grandfather was a nobleman, generally called a Marquis, that the family name was Bonneval or -vaux (which is the same) and La Trobe, a name derived from some event in the family, a document of great consequence, as relating to some great possession, having been discovered just on the day when an heir was born, which procured for the young newcomer the name and title of La Trouve, or, as V's and B's were put for each other La Trobe. The ennobling of the family is said to have taken place under Charles V.'

It is here that the name Bonneval is mentioned for the just time.

For John Frederic his heritage was important, in view of his forthcoming marriage with a daughter of a noble Baltic family, to confirm his own nobility. Since he had visited the Moravian boarding school in Germany and had been

separated from the family at a young age, the relations with his father had been rather limited.

Therefore he had not heard any details about his ancestors. But in a letter (1836) he wrote to his brother: *'That we are from the Bonneal family even I have heard it from our father and have been teased at school in Niesky enough about it'*.

Benjamin Henry had married Lydia Sellon in 1790 and had named their children Lydia Sellon Bonneval Latrobe (1791) and Henry Sellon Bonneval Latrobe (1792). We assume that Benjamin Henry must have heard his father mention a link with the Bonneval family. We do not know when, but Mr Gibert, a secretary to the English Ambassador in Paris, must have sent some documents in order to verify the connection with the Bonnevals. Possibly he was not well informed or he was even deceived, for over many years the family endeavoured to produce comprehensive material free of any incorrectness, and was not able to find any documents proving a Bonneval ancestry.

Nevertheless when being on the American continent in the first years of the 19th century Benjamin Henry had a strong reason for his interest in the family background. On the question of being appointed Surveyor of public buildings in Washington, he had to face a long, bitter controversy with his predecessor Dr William Thornton. The latter accused Benjamin Henry vigorously of not being a distinguished, experienced, and qualified architect for building this most important public symbol, the Capitol.

Thornton said that Benjamin Henry was deceiving the public by using more than one name, calling himself Bonneval de Latrobe and sometimes only Latrobe. In the end Latrobe won the lawsuit and *'proved his right to use the more complex form, the name Bonneval or Bonneval Latrobe'*. He must have had sufficient material to convince the court. His competence and rectitude were re-established by a Certificate of satisfaction on September 1st 1813.

Benjamin Henry died in New Orleans in 1820, believing he was a Bonneval descendant.

Two years later, Christian Ignatius met the Chevalier Jean Joachim Latrobe in Paris after they had exchanged a few letters. They tried to find out whether they had common roots. In a letter dated 31st of January 1822, in reply to a letter of Christian Ignatius requesting information about the link with the Bonneval family, Jean Joachim writes: *'En attendant, et to à l'occasion de notre letter, j'ai vérifié dans un établissement de cette ville le recensement general fait en 1766 et années suivantes, de familles protestantes à cette époque, les droits de la noblesse au Languedoc, et le nom de Latrobe, ni de Bonneval, ne s'y trouve pas'*.

There can be no doubt that Christian Ignatius was informed by Jean Joachim, that their common ancestor was Michel Latrobe, of Montauban.

Concerning the visit of Christian Ignatius and his son Peter in Paris, one can read in the 'Livre de Famille' written at Varennes by Jean Joachim in 1830: *'Ce Frédéric Latrobe, maria à une comtesse russe, tiendrait beaucoup pour cette raison et d'après même ce que m'a dit frère, à découvrir les titres positifs de la noblesse*

d'extraction de la famille Latrobe. Mais mes recherches n'ont pu être d'un grand secours, et si, comme son frère Christian, il pense d'après l'échange de nos renseignements respectifs que nous sortions de la même souche, il faut bien, dis-je, qu'il se contente d'appartenir à une famille honorable et honorée depuis près de deux cents ans et qui, si elle ne peut retrouver des titres anceins et positifs de sa noblesse d'origine, possède de moins incontestablement la véritable noblesse des sentiments de l'honneur et de la probité héréditaire'.

In 1833 Charles Joseph, son of Christian Ignatius La Trobe, travelled through America, and in Baltimore he met Lydia, daughter of his uncle Benjamin Henry; he wrote to his father:

'On my visit to Lydia (my uncle Benjamin's eldest daughter), I lot out of a bundle of papers a memorandum in my late Uncle's handwriting, giving a much detailed account of the La Trobe and Antes families than I had yet seen. Of course I copied it, for who would throw aside a genealogy which made me a great-great-great-nephew of Renegade Count de Bonneval ¹ and great-great-grandson to the Montmorencis. I opened my eyes wide, when he made out my own father to be a Marques and myself Chevalier..'

When coming back to London one year later, Charles Joseph brought the copy of the pedigree in his luggage. I quote from a letter of Christian Ignatius to John Frederic in Livonia (1834):

'My son Joseph returned from America, and has assisted me in bringing together the few circumstances we know of our genealogy from documents left in my brother Benjamin's handwriting. I will get him to sign it, also both signatures by the Principal Police Magistrate at Manchester (our nephew John Frederic Foster) and another Magistrate of Lancashire, and High thereof Cheshire this year'

The document, the so-called pedigree with Christian Ignatius' signature given at Fairfield, reads as follows:

'I herby certify that I am the above Christian Ignatius Latrobe and that the above pedigree or account of our family has been handed down from my ancestors and was transmitted to me by my late father who personally knew the above name John Henry Bonneval de La Trobe and I certify to the best of my knowledge and belief that the above account is true and correct'

This pedigree document, already being the basis of the American line, was now introduced into the Livonian line, when John Frederic received these documents certified by his brother. But Charles Joseph was obviously interested in that pedigree as well, because he intended to marry a noble Swiss lady, Sophie de Montmollin. In 1900, his daughter sent her family-tree to the Livonian relatives.

Her ancestors started with Comte Henry de Bonneval and showed his son as John the Refugee. We find the same Comte de Bonneval in the pedigree of the Latrobe-Bateman family. Therefore we can assume that a part of the English Latrobes had adopted the pedigree of Benjamin Henry. The legend of the

1. This refers to Bonneval Pacha (1675-1747), belonging to the Bonneval family of Llmousin.

Bonneval connection was carried on through generations, being used as an additional name by the American Latrobes. In the Livonian branch, the family-tree clearly indicated a Marquis de Bonneval as their ancestor. My father Frederik de La Trobe was convinced of the truth of this story until the year 1929 when he got in touch with Ferdinand Latrobe in Nancy, who gave him an excerpt of the 'Livre de Famille'.

Nearly at the same time Frederik found, by his research, the Irish branch of the Latrobes in Waterford. From Fan Latrobe-Chapmen, he got the family-tree of her ancestor Thomas Latrobe, son of the refugee; according to this, Michel Latrobe (1640-1705) was John's father and Pierre (1599-1666) his grandfather, but there was no connection with the Bonnevals.

After the early death of my parents, we came into possession of numerous letters and documents concerning the family, which is the reason why my wife and I started our own research in family history.

In order to collect first-hand information and to find out precisely whether there was a connection between the Bonneval and Latrobe families, we paid a visit to the Marquis de Bonneval, at Coussac-Bonneval (Limousin) in 1991. We were very well received and spent some time in his library with him, looking at various documents together, among them the 'Dictionnaire de la Noblesse' (Paris, 1863) which contains the genealogical tree of the Bonneval family. Like in the pedigree of Benjamin Henry, there exists a Comte Henri de Bonneval in 1630 (p. 508), but he was not married to Adelaïde de Montmorenci, and there was no issue bearing the name Jean Henri Bonneval de Latrobe.

During some trips to Ireland, we found out that there was a Reverend Ligonier de Bonneval, who was a military chaplain in the Huguenot Regiment and later settled in Portarlinton. Here we can see an example of an additional name used in memory of his property. Knowing the place of Jean's origins, Varennes, there is the possibility that Bonneval was chosen by Jean for the same reason, in memory of the lovely valley where he came from.

The Bonneval legend is one of the items in the history of the Latrobe family which is not yet satisfactorily explored. Over the years, again and again, members of the family have strongly believed in the Bonneval connection, but without giving any solid explanation to be accepted as the final version. But in every legend there is a glimpse of truth, and even though working with computers and Internet, the legend leaves room for coming generations to work on.

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