

An Intendant to a Noble Family at the End of the Old Regime

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Though a great deal has been written about the social and economic situation of the nobility in France at the end of the Old Regime, we know very little of the commoner agents in charge of overseeing their possessions. Such agents were particularly important during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as substantial elements of the aristocracy began leaving their traditional lands in the countryside to take up residence in Paris or in other large towns of the kingdom. Here I would like briefly to examine the case of one such agent, Adrien-Joseph Colson, a lawyer by training who served for almost forty years as the Paris-based intendant of the Longaunay family. We have a remarkable picture of Colson and his activities because of the preservation of over a thousand letters addressed to Roch Lemaigre, the local steward on the Longaunay lands in Berry, a correspondence pursued for almost eighteen years before and during the French Revolution. The letters are all the more revealing in that Colson makes it clear that Lemaigre was his closest friend in the world.¹

The Longaunays were an ancient family of sword nobles, who could trace their lineage back to at least the thirteenth century. Colson seems to have assumed responsibilities with the family in the late 1750s.² His appointment may well have marked an effort on the part of the recently widowed Marquise de Longaunay to control more closely the family's possessions, with a single intendant following all their far-flung affairs. In this she would have followed a process of centralization apparently being initiated by many other noble families of the period.³

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¹ Archives départementales de l'Indre, 2 J 10-12, a total of 1,080 letters addressed to Roch Lemaigre from 1778 through 1795 (hereafter, cited only by date). Excerpts from a portion of this correspondence has been published in Chantal Plantier-Sanson, *Lettres d'un bourgeois de Paris à un ami de province*, but this book contains many errors, especially in the introduction. The present article is drawn in part from the author's upcoming book, *The Glory and the Sorrow. A Parisian and His World in the Age of French Revolution*. On the friendship of Colson and Lemaigre, see *ibid.*, chap. 3. On the rich possibilities for the use of contemporary correspondence for insight into the late Old Regime and the Revolution, see the author's *Becoming a Revolutionary*; and *The Coming of the Terror*.

² In a letter of Apr. 26, 1791 Colson could recall a dossier written for the family some 35 years earlier, which would suggest he began working for the family in the late 1750s – about the time he had completed his law degree and returned to Varennes to make arrangements for his father's anticipated death. On the history of the Longaunay family, see entries in Woelmont de Brumagne, *Notices généalogiques*; and Jouglu de Morenas, *Grand armorial de France*.

³ Cf. Forster, *The House of Saulx-Tavannes*, 61–63 and 207. See also Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre, 1398–1789*.

In the eighteenth century the Longaunay's family property and seigniorial domains were located in two widely separated regions. Their original holdings were in Lower Normandy, centered on the château of Courvaudan, not far from the road between Caen and Saint-Lô. It was in the seventeenth century that a judicious marriage had also brought the family property and noble holdings in the rich grain-growing province of Berry in central France, including the château and seigniorial domain of Romsac, as well as lucrative seigniorial rights over the small town of Levroux some 10 kilometers north of Châteauroux. With their extensive lands and seigniorial holdings, the family was clearly quite wealthy, though hardly as rich as some of the great dukes and princes of the realm. Like so many other members of the upper nobility, they had chosen sometime in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century to move their principal residence to Paris. Yet they seem never to have had the requisite status for regular attendance at the court in Versailles nor had they sufficient funds to acquire their own townhouse in the capital, where they invariably relied on rental quarters of one sort or another.⁴

Throughout his career Colson would continue to correspond with the widowed Marquise. But his principal contacts from the 1780s onward, after they had attained their majority, would be with her two sons: the older Marquis (1757–99) and the younger Count of Longaunay (1759–1846). Like their mother, the two brothers would divide their time between Paris and one or the other of their two principal châteaux. But they also took their status as sword nobles seriously, purchasing or inheriting commissions in the military. When they were younger and especially during the War of American Independence, both spent a certain amount of time each year on active duty along the Austrian and German frontiers.⁵

Colson was clearly the Longaunay's principal intendant in Paris, taking charge of all manner of legal, financial, and practical issues concerning the family. He was the point man following the numerous legal cases involving the family, as those cases made their way through the various courts. Sometimes it was a question of compelling those leasing the lords' holdings to pay the full amount that was due. As all nobles making Paris their principal residence, the Longaunays were compelled to exploit their property by means of lease farmers, who paid a guaranteed amount in a lump sum once a year. The failure of these individuals to pay up could pose especially difficult problems when there was a change in lease holders and those previously controlling the lease tried to slip away without making their final payments.⁶

Sometimes there were also squabbles with the peasantry over the diverse seigniorial dues, for which the rates and the specific types of production taxed – on grain and livestock or fruits and vegetables, etc. – were extremely complex and varied from village to village. There were also questions involving the town of Levroux, such as the right to collect dues for fairs and markets and responsibilities for repairing the pavement in the streets of the small town. As we know, the late eighteenth century was an exceptionally litigious age, and peasants, lease holders, and townsmen took advantage of every ambiguity in the laws and customs in an attempt to reduce their payments or to prolong through lengthy suits that might drag on for years the moment at which such payments would have to be made.⁷

⁴ Marraud, *La noblesse de Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, 124–25. On nobles' movement from the countryside to the towns and especially to Paris, see also Forster, *The House of Saulx-Tavannes*, 23–30. Also Bluche, *Les honneurs de la cour*.

⁵ See, for example, letters of Mar. 24 and June 2, 1782. And genealogical research kindly provided to me by Mary Kergall.

⁶ See, for example, letter of June 11, 1782.

⁷ See, for example, Root, *Peasants and King in Burgundy*, esp. chap. 5.

Though Colson was himself a trained lawyer, he frequently called on the specialized legal expertise of others for cases involving ecclesiastical affairs or specific provincial customary laws. On occasion he spent time in the Library of the Order of Lawyers located in the complex of the Palace of Justice – one of the largest libraries in France, said to contain some 40,000 volumes – in order to pursue his own research on the extraordinarily complex laws of Old Regime France. He might also stop by to talk with the magistrates overseeing a case in the Châtelet or the Parlement of Paris and lobby them for more expeditious, and hopefully favorable judgments.⁸

In addition, it was Colson's responsibility to oversee the reception of revenues coming in from the family's two sets of widely separated possessions, both from their lands held in full property and from the dues owed by the inhabitants within their seigniorial domains – dues that were especially remunerative in Berry, since they were paid in kind, as a fixed proportion of the harvest (either as a *champart* or a *dîme inféodée*). For this Colson maintained regular correspondence with the Longaunay's local agents living in the provinces and sometimes with the lease farmers collecting the dues.⁹ But at the same time he had to ensure coverage of the Longaunay's various taxes and debts incurred over the years, and to explore sources for new loans when expenditures exceeded income – the normal state of affairs after the two sons took over.

Indeed, at the end of the Old Regime and especially once the Revolution began, the Marquis' perpetual search for money to maintain his lifestyle while holding his creditors at bay became an all but desperate operation.¹⁰ Many of Colson's letters are dominated by his efforts to raise more funds and to convince the brothers to cut back on at least some of their expenses. Colson was visibly discouraged when in 1784 the Marquis spent over 5,000 *livres* on furnishings for a single room in his newly rented apartment, while maintaining a second apartment in the Marais as his "office"; and when he lost a large sum of money on the national lottery in 1789 – following a "system" that he thought was sure to pay off. In such a state of affairs, the Marquis was sometimes compelled to ask Colson himself for a small loan to help tide him over, a loan that the lawyer could scarcely refuse, even though "in relation to my personal income," as he confessed in a letter, "this places me in real financial difficulty."¹¹ For the sake of economy the Marquis also periodically ordered a halt in the rebuilding and remodeling of his Romsac château. But here, as often as not, he would soon reconsider. After all, how could he be expected to spend time in a château where the wind whistled through the walls of his sitting room and bedroom; and where his horses and hunting dogs lacked sufficiently comfortable facilities?¹²

Under constant pressure to produce more revenues, Colson passed along urgent messages to the local agents in Normandy and Berry to squeeze out every bit they could from the local lease farmers and peasants. And he attempted several other strategies. He urged the Marquis to travel himself to his lands in Berry and exert his influence, since his direct personal commands were always considered more persuasive than those of his agents. He also followed up on the traditional fishing rights held by the Longaunay family over the waters flowing through their

⁸ See, for example, letters of Mar. 12, Apr. 7, May 7, and Oct. 27, 1782; and Aug. 5, 1787. Also, Fitzsimmons, *The Parisian Order of Barristers and the French Revolution*, 17–18.

⁹ See, for example, letter of Feb. 24, 1784.

¹⁰ Letter of Mar. 6, 1786. See also Marraud, *La noblesse de Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, 48–49 and 305.

¹¹ Letter of Oct. 1, 1786. On at least two occasions, Colson even convinced his own landlord, the candlemaker Jean-Louis Ladoubé, to contribute to the cause: letters of Oct. 1 and November 7, 1786. Though the Marquis seems never to have given Colson an IOU, he seems always to have paid him back, at least until his finances were entirely overwhelmed by the effects of the Revolution.

¹² See notably the letters of Aug. 21 and 29, Sept. 5, and Oct. 31, 1784.

lands. He sent the local steward to carefully measure the width of the streams in question, since by local feudal custom, the fish in any creek wider than seven feet were said to belong to the lord. In addition, Colson explored the possibility of discovering and reinvigorating seigniorial dues that might have been neglected over the centuries.¹³ Yet as far as we can tell, such efforts led to little or nothing. In the case of the Longaunay family, at least, it seems ultimately inappropriate to speak of a “feudal reaction” sometimes stipulated by historians for the end of the Old Regime.¹⁴

Beyond the basic charge of keeping the family’s economic situation afloat, there was a whole range of additional duties that could never have been part of Colson’s initial job description. When the two brothers he represented were in Paris, he could be asked to ensure the dispatch back to the capital of specialty food items originating in Berry – like a side of mutton or a deer shot in the family’s forest (though unfortunately, without refrigeration, the meat was often inedible by the time it arrived).¹⁵ Colson was also asked to coordinate repairs and upkeep on the château itself. As long as some funds were available, there were the stables to improve, new fruit trees to be planted and grafted in the orchard, the moat and the pond to be stocked with fish, and arrangements to be made to kill the river otters eating the fish. The Marquis was also fondly concerned about the condition of his dogs, and he urged Colson to determine the number and names of the hounds who had died recently and of the training for the hunt of the new young dogs.¹⁶

When the brothers were planning to travel to Romsac, Colson had to coordinate the stocking of the château larders with provisions and the hiring of a local cook, ensuring that the cook learned the recipes for their favorite dishes – like macaroni and cheese and egg soufflé.¹⁷ And when one or the other of the two nobles was in residence in Berry, he could be asked to see that clothing items forgotten in Paris were sent down, or that copies of the latest newspapers or medical concoctions only available in the capital were forwarded. The Marquis was often a bit sickly and it was necessary to keep him stocked with the mysterious concoction known as “blue water number two” only available in Paris.¹⁸

Much has been written about the relations between nobles and commoners before the Revolution. Biographies of almost any successful members of the Third Estate – of Robespierre, Vergniaud, Brissot, or Barnave, for example – invariably point to their links with diverse lay or ecclesiastical aristocrats, essential for advancing their education and careers. Hardly anyone would have imagined that the patron-client system which undergirded Old Regime society could ever be any different. Yet there can be little doubt that many individuals among both wealthy commoners and the newly ennobled dreamed of a system that would open up positions based on talent rather than on birth. No single demand in the statements of grievances of 1789 would be more common than urging “positions open to talent.”¹⁹

Colson’s interaction with the noble family he represented epitomized many of these complexities. Clearly he sometimes felt bitterness over the way he was treated by the widowed Marquise. Especially as she became elderly, she could be crotchety and irascible. She rarely seemed satisfied with his efforts on the part of the family, and she occasionally went over his

¹³ Letters of Aug. 4, 1782; June 6 and July 12, 1785; and May 2 and July 25, 1786.

¹⁴ See, for example, Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, esp. 196–98.

¹⁵ Letters of Apr. 25, 1784; Mar. 28, 1786; and May 19, 1789.

¹⁶ See, for example, letters July 4, 1784 and Mar. 20, 1787.

¹⁷ See, for example, letter of November 14 and 23, 1784; and Mar. 21 and 23, 1790.

¹⁸ Letters of Apr. 20 and 27, 1784.

¹⁹ See Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, esp. pp. 28–35, and 106.

head, corresponding directly with local agents as though he did not exist. In one instance he worked day and night for a week to develop a general accounting of the family's balance sheet. She then rapidly perused it, capriciously changing some of the figures to make the family's situation look better than it actually was, apparently without any concern for the reality of the situation. And when Colson asked to be reimbursed for his supplementary expenses in drawing up the account – some 1000 *livres* by his estimation – she refused, maintaining that he had spent too much. If he was unhappy, she said, it would be easy to find his replacement. “May God preserve me in the future,” he wrote in frustration, “from such a thankless task.”²⁰

Yet his relations with the Marquis and the Count were very different. He had known the two since they were young boys and at times he seemed to display an almost fatherly solicitude and affection towards them. In fact, the two brothers had very different personalities. Colson often praised the Marquis for his generosity and kindness to his “vassals.” With a strong sense of *noblesse oblige* he insisted that money for bread be given to the poor on his lands in times of famine, while also designating gardening tasks to provide work for the local unemployed. But he could also be volatile and irresolute. And, as we have seen, he was particularly prone to overspending. Twice he rejected Colson's gentle suggestions that he seek to marry a wealthy woman whose dowry might not only solve his financial difficulties but perhaps even qualify him for a dukedom. By and large, the Count seems to have been more stable and frugal – partly because, as the younger son, he had little control over the family's purse strings. He also spent several years of medical studies with a doctor in Vincennes, and he would attempt to make use of his knowledge to treat the peasants on their lands in Berry. Colson was hopeful that “such activities would perhaps bring him closer to the affection and respect of the local inhabitants”²¹

In any case, throughout his correspondence, Colson showed a constant concern for the health and welfare of the two young men, especially when they were away from Paris, a concern that was certainly more than mere politeness. He was grieved when the Marquis or the Count fell sick in Berry, and he became intensely worried when the two were away in military service on the German frontier and neglected to write. Once when the Marquis failed to arrive back in Paris as he had predicted and had neglected to contact him, “it all causes me more worry and sadness,” he wrote “than I can possibly express.” When the Marquis continued to overspend and found debts closing in on him, Colson even advanced some of his own funds to keep the wolf from the door. And he was prepared to be remarkably patient when his own salary was not paid for several years in a row because of the problems of liquidity.²² Indeed, Colson always revealed an extraordinary sense of devotion to his task. As he noted in one of his letters, it was through Divine Providence that he had received his position, and he felt obliged to treat his responsibilities with total dedication. With only a few exceptions – when he had directly to examine the family's lands, or to travel on business to other nearby localities or to his home town – he remained in residence in his apartment in Paris. Even when he was urged by the steward in Levroux, Roch Lemaigre, or by the Marquis himself to leave the city during the most violent moments of the Revolution, he refused to do so, arguing that the family depended on his presence there.²³

²⁰ Letter of Jan. 29, Feb. 9, Mar. 24, and Apr. 5 and 16, 1782. The Marquise ultimately agreed to give him 240 *livres*.

²¹ Letter of Apr. 27, 1783; Apr. 11 and 24, 1784; Jan. 7, 16, and 23, June 26, and July 9, 1787; and Nov. 2, 1790.

²² Letters of Sept. 22, 1782, June 14, 1785, and Sept. 29, 1789.

²³ Letter of July 21, 1789; and Feb. 6 and 8, 1791.

And there is ample evidence that Colson's affection for the two brothers was reciprocated. They frequently invited him to their residences, and seemingly respected and counted on his advice. The Count would chat with him in a friendly manner when they encountered one another on the Pont-Neuf. On at least one occasion he even came to Colson's residence in central Paris looking for him. And Colson underlined in his letters how the Marquis was always kind and courteous in relations with "his inferiors" – meaning himself, no doubt. "I'm delighted," he wrote, "with the Marquis' kindness, honesty, and friendliness toward everyone... These are excellent and essential qualities in a man of his condition." On another occasion, as the Marquis talked to someone else present in his apartment, he winked at Colson, as though only the two of them fully understood the situation. And they would join together in near giddy laughter when the Marquis was finally able to sell a large stand of wood in his forests, and Colson could tease him that he would now be "rich" and that the new revenues would help pay off all his debts.²⁴

Nevertheless, Colson always maintained formal relations in addressing his employers as "Monsieur le Marquis" or "Messieurs nos seigneurs." Indeed, he continued to use the seigniorial titles, even after such distinctions were formally abolished by the National Assembly in 1790, and after the Marquis himself urged him not to do so. Despite the new value system that would emerge in 1789, it was difficult for the son of a small-town tanner to feel himself in any way the equal of two former nobles, notwithstanding all the Revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and equality which Colson himself would embrace: "seeing myself as too far below them".²⁵

It is not possible here to follow the relations between Colson and the Longaunay family during the Revolution. I would note only the ever greater challenge he encountered in staving off bankruptcy following the August 4 decrees and the suppression of their feudal rights – especially the highly lucrative *champart* in Berry. Yet even in the face of such losses, the two brothers would long support the Revolutionary changes.²⁶ It was only in 1793 that the older brother would emigrate to Baden – where he joined his mother who had emigrated there three years earlier – and where he would die in 1799. The younger brother, however, the former count would remain and even marry in the midst of the Terror.²⁷ In the meantime, Colson himself would come to embrace a radical Revolutionary position, supporting Robespierre and even marching with his National Guard unit to coerce the arrest of the Girondins in the Convention on June 2, 1793. And nevertheless he would work diligently throughout this period to ensure that despite the emigration of two members of the family, their lands were never confiscated.²⁸ Although he would continually rail in his letters against "aristocrats" and "aristocratic conspiracies", he would remain ever faithful to the Longaunay family to the end of his life.

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²⁴ Letters of Feb. 17, 1782; Aug. 8 and Dec. 26, 1784; and Apr. 12 and Dec. 27, 1785.

²⁵ Letters of Aug. 24, 1790; and Apr. 10 and May 22, 1791.

²⁶ See, for example, letters of June 7 and Aug. 9 and 11, 1789; and Aug. 1, 1790.

²⁷ Genealogical research kindly carried out for me by Mary Kergall.

²⁸ See Tackett, *The Glory and the Sorrow*, chaps. 7 and 8.

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