

## ST. ROCH MILITARY MARCHES IN WALLONIA : HISTORICAL MEMORY, COMMEMORATION AND IDENTITY

- Erik J. Hadley -

*Qu'est-ce qu'une Marche ? Ce n'est ni une procession ni un cortège civil ou militaire, mais un ensemble de tout cela : LA MARCHE.<sup>1</sup>*

From well-known celebrations of Carnival and la ducasse, to obscure saint commemorations, ritualized festivals and processions in Francophone Belgium survive in popular memory and influence contemporary conceptions of local identity. Several St. Roch military marches in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region in Wallonia received UNESCO recognition as examples of "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" in 2012. The annual, multi-day processions involve hundreds of marchers from local communities dressed in Napoleonic-era military uniforms, carrying authentic muskets and escorting a statue of St. Roch. Many of these marchers trace family involvement back through multiple generations.

On the evening of the third Saturday in May, townspeople gather in the market square in Thuin, a small city in Belgium's Francophone region. After firing an old cannon, they light torches and march through medieval streets, completing a ritual known as the *retraite aux flambeaux*, eventually arriving at a monument called *Au Marcheur*, where the president of the St. Roch Military March Committee ceremonially inaugurates the three-day festive processional<sup>2</sup>. The following day, the sounds of fifes, drums and musket shots echo through the fortified upper town sprawling on a bluff and the riverside lower town below it. Hundreds of marchers dressed in Napoleonic-era uniforms form companies complete with officers, musical accompaniment, and cavalry; each company counts between 60-120 members. They trace a route through both parts of the city, the countryside around it and pass by a chapel dedicated to St. Roch. Young women called *cantinières*, also in military uniform, march alongside, selling shots of alcohol carried in small wooden casks to spectators. At the end of the processional, a group known as *zouaves*, wearing uniforms representative of French North African colonials and accompanied by local clergy, carry a statue of St. Roch. More than 2,000 people participate in the march. They pass a grandstand filled with governmental officials, stationed near the *Au Marcheur* memorial, for recognition and to pay homage to past generations of marchers and servicemen of both world wars. A military mass is held in honor of the marchers on Monday morning, followed by another day of marching the geographical limits of the com-

mune. At the end of each day, marchers and spectators mingle in open-air bars and temporary cafés. Festival activities fill the town square, complete with carousel, bumper cars and games. Spectators include locals as well as visitors from other Belgian provinces and even France; it is the largest event held each year in Thuin and festivities stretch late into the night.

A similar march occurs in August in nearby Ham-sur-Heure; many of the marching companies and spectators overlap between the two events. In Ham-sur-Heure, the march spans five days, from the first Saturday on or after 15 August until Wednesday night (see Figure 1). On the first night, a religious processional accompanied by several members of each marching company transfer a St. Roch statue from a chapel to the local church. Three days of marching ensue, each ending with a *retraite aux flambeaux*. On Monday, the marchers end their circuit at a medieval chateau, where communal representatives host the marchers at a reception. The festival ends on Wednesday with a fireworks show and, again, carnival rides and late-night cafés.

These marches are prominent examples of the St. Roch military marching tradition in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region: the communities between the Sambre and Meuse rivers in central Wallonia. The Thuin and Ham-sur-Heure St. Roch marches count among the fifteen most famous military marches in the region; the remaining marches are dedicated to other saints, including Peter, Paul and Anne<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, there are dozens of smaller

1. *Union de Charleroi*, Aug. 8, 1892. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome 1: 1839-1914*, Gerpinnes, Belgium, 1985, p. 132. 2. *Retraite aux flambeaux* translates to "torchlight processional". ROGER FOULON, *Marches militaires et folkloriques de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, Brussels, 1976, p. 110. 3. The three most famous marches in the region, also known as *grandes marches* for their size and historical pedigree, are those of Fosses, Gerpinnes and Walcourt.

marches in the region, including five additional St. Roch marches<sup>4</sup>. Few of these marches overlap; the marching season begins in early May and lasts until mid-October. Thus on any summer weekend, it is likely that marchers in Napoleonic-era uniforms escort a saint statue somewhere in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse.

I chose these two marches (out of dozens) because both center on St. Roch, both are considered *grandes marches* of the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region recognized by UNESCO as objects of cultural world heritage, and the two municipalities are close in proximity to one another, which allows one to compare common historical patterns as well as investigate potential variations between the two marches. Much of the published research done to date on these marches has originated with local, amateur historians who often march themselves, including works cited in this study by Michel Conreur, Roger Foulon, and Joseph Roland. While these studies are valuable, particularly with regard to the documentation of precise historical details regarding the marches, these historians identify closely with the marches and tend to view them in exclusion of wider theoretical and methodological frameworks for analyzing communal ritual behavior. This study examines how participants and observers historically conceptualized and commemorated the St. Roch military marches in popular culture, as well as the portrayal of tensions during

the course of marching, particularly regarding popular participation versus expectations of orderly conduct by ecclesiastical or municipal authorities. Accordingly, documentary evidence for this study centers on publicly published sources that describe and commemorate the Thuin and Ham-sur-Heure St. Roch marches: primarily newspaper and journal articles published in Charleroi and Namur between 1860-1940, as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century histories of the marches. Additionally, the article utilizes primary documentation of the post 1860-marches themselves, including event pamphlets, marching association publications, and personal interviews with spectators, marchers, and members of the marching organizational committees<sup>5</sup>.

After viewing both marches firsthand, I interviewed local spectators and participants regarding the marches' origin and purpose<sup>6</sup>. Answers varied, but the most common response regarding the Thuin march was that Spanish forces besieged the city in 1654. Thuin was on the verge of capitulating when plague struck the besieging force, forcing their retreat. The townspeople celebrated with a procession dedicated to St. Roch, whom they believed had deployed disease to protect the town. The militia, still carrying weapons and uniforms, escorted the procession outside the city walls. Every year, the town commemorated their miraculous salvation with the same march. During the 1820s, the uniforms changed as Napoleonic war vet-

4. JOSEPH ROLAND, *Les "marches" militaires de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, Liège, 1951, p. 54.

5. There is minimal archival information regarding the marches prior to their re-establishment in the 1860s. 6. Author observance of the marches and interviews, Thuin, May, 2002 and 2004; Ham-sur-Heure, August, 2013 and 2015. In Thuin, the author interviewed numerous spectators and marchers during the course of the march observance. In Ham-sur-Heure, the author interviewed spectators, several marchers, members of the Ham-sur-Heure municipal commune, and members of the Executive Committee for the Procession et Marche Militaire St. Roch de Ham-sur-Heure, including the president of the committee, Dominique Gagliardini (August, 2015).

erans accompanied the processional, and the tradition continues unabated to the present day. The popular response regarding the Ham-sur-Heure march was less dramatic but claimed an older historical pedigree: after an outbreak of plague in the town in 1636, the townspeople beseeched the local *curé* for a processional to stave off disaster. In 1638, a confraternity dedicated to Saint Roch was founded and a chapel built off the main square<sup>7</sup>. A military escort for the ensuing processional was necessary because of the precarious security at the time, with French and Spanish soldiers fighting in the region during the 30 Years War<sup>8</sup>. Like Thuin, locals claim the processional became a central focus of the town's liturgical calendar.

Thus, to the modern viewer, the marches compress notable events from the last 400 years: St. Roch and medieval saint processions, plague outbreaks, and military campaigns between the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The marches testify to the rich history of the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region, its centrality as a theatre of war, and traditions of Catholic saint commemoration<sup>9</sup>. Yet problems emerge with the description of the march's popular history. St. Roch's official day is 16 August and the 1654 siege of Thuin occurred during January. Why is the military march held during the third weekend of May? Additionally, the St. Roch processions ceased completely during the French Revolutionary era and only re-emerged as marches 70 years later. If the marches didn't exist until the 1860s, why are marchers costumed in Napoleonic-era uni-

forms? Finally, given the fact that modern marches are managed by secular organizations and partially funded by communal governments, what happened to the Catholic church's role and the religious character of the processions?

In fact, despite Old Regime historical claims and appearances, the modern St. Roch military marches originated in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently, through commemorative efforts, were integrated into an Old Regime historical narrative. Generations of participants added rituals, dates, and memorabilia, filtering commemoration through innovative explanations linking the march (as experienced) to history (as imagined). The marches are not conceptualized as having originated during the 1860s and inspired from Old Regime processions; rather, the modern marches are associated with the ancient processions through invented stories of continuity, and the historical rupture between the two has been ignored or reinterpreted. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a full apparatus of commemorative structures standardized, promoted and preserved the marches as historical rituals dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

19<sup>th</sup> century struggles between the clergy and popular participants over the tenor of the marches, and debates over secular festivities during a supposedly sacred event echo critiques of populist participation in religious processions made by the church and aristocracy during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. While polit-

7. ROGER FOULON, *Marches militaires et folkloriques...* p. 39. 8. ADRIEN DOLIMONT, *Procession et Marche Militaire Saint-Roch, 375<sup>ème</sup> Anniversaire (1638-2013)*, Nalinnes, 2013, p. 1. 9. ROGER FOULON emphasizes the strategic value of the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse during the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly in the number of fortified towns and chateaux. For example, in addition to the 1654 Spanish siege, Thuin was sacked twice during the period (1466 and 1675), *Marches militaires et folkloriques...* p. 14-17.



*The St. Roch Military March in Ham-sur-Heure, 2015 (Source : Erik Hadley, 15 August 2015, Ham-Sur-Heure).*

ical elites sided with the church during the 18<sup>th</sup> century to suppress carnivalesque additions to religious commemoration, in the re-constructed rituals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the clergy that found itself without political allies to regulate popular discipline and piety. What accounts for this change? It is likely due to the assumption by the clergy that modern invented traditions served the same communal purposes as those of the Old Regime. Alain Babadzan remarked on the discrepancy in meaning of rituals in historical societies versus modern acts of commemoration: "Invented traditions, in particular as part of ethno-cultural nationalism, are used to fulfill purposes that are no longer traditional... [and] are characterized by the specifically modern relationship they entertain with tradition and culture."<sup>10</sup> Modern marching has nothing to do with protection from disease or public affirmation of clerical hierarchy and ecclesiastical power; rather, it demonstrates and validates a community's historical legacy.

On the other hand, if the modern marches lack continuity with their Old Regime antecedents, they nonetheless retain the vibrancy and cultural relevance that define a 'living' or functional communal rite. The marches annually re-enact local historical traditions, present overlapping and unstable declarations of local and regional identity, and reinforce social hierarchies. Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger's seminal work *The Invention of Tradition* discuss a similar phenomenon regarding the invention of British, French and German traditions, which were utilized primarily for nationalistic purposes in the

late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both Hobsbawn and Ernest Gellner linked the 'invention of tradition' to the arbitrary construction of national identities during the era of Western European urbanization and industrialization, a pattern, which, at first glance, seems applicable to the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse saint marches<sup>11</sup>. Hobsbawn identified two types of invention common to European nationalistic rituals: first, the 'rediscovery' of historical traditions from collective memory; and, second, the creation of new traditions legitimized through specious historical claims<sup>12</sup>. Both forms of reconstruction are identifiable in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century re-imagination of the St. Roch marches. During the cholera epidemic of the 1860s, communities "rediscovered" the Old Regime St. Roch processions and initially utilized them for a similar purpose as their ancestors: protection from disease through the deployment of church relics and public, pious ritual behavior. But the underlying communal motivations for continuing the saint marches quickly transformed into secular festive celebrations, frustrating and alienating clergy and lay pilgrims alike. Between 1860 and 1940, innovations in costume, ritual behavior and communal understanding of the purpose and history of the march fundamentally transformed the ritual. Nevertheless, while fundamentally revising the historical origins and traditions of the march, participants claimed that they were in fact engaged in authentic historical re-creation of an event dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The close link between invented traditions and the construction of popular national con-

10. ALAIN BABADZAN, "Anthropology, nationalism and the 'invention of tradition'", *Anthropological Forum*, 2, 2000 (10), p. 141. 11. ERNEST GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism*, New York, 1983, p. 73.74. 12. ERIC HOBSBAWN and TERENCE RANGER (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, New York, 1983, p. 2.





1938 Program, St. Roch March, Ham-sur-Heure (Source : Erik Hadley).

sciousness advanced by Hobsbawn, Gellner and Benedict Anderson, all of whom connected symbolic acts to nascent national identity construction (directed by the nation-state itself), emerged in Belgium as, ironically, a mechanism for advancing intra-state nationalism<sup>13</sup>. Proponents for regional autonomy (the *Mouvement Wallon*, for example) or outright independence, particularly within the Flemish language (*Flamingant*) movement, problematized the very notion of Belgium as a 'natural' nation-state; the artificiality of nation-state construction, as asserted by Hobsbawn, Gellner and Anderson, echoes populist regional movements that belie the very existence of a common national culture<sup>14</sup>. In the midst of the modern political and cultural deconstruction of Belgium into autonomous linguistic regions bound by tenuous federalism, the invention of tradition in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse military marches intensifies the commemoration of local identity. That is to say, the celebration of regional or local identity fuels commemorative efforts that were once theorized as being purely nationalistic, yet ultimately serves to undermine Belgian national identity. As Céline Bouchat notes, "Without doubt, the village constitutes the visible social center around which the March constructs social relations: a March organizes a hierarchy of a locality and circumscribes its physical space"<sup>15</sup>.

## I. Old Regime Origins

Communities in the Burgundian/Habsburg Low Countries and the independent Principality of Liège were central to the medieval processional movement. The Corpus Christi processional, for example, began in Liège during the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century as a tribute to the Eucharist. In Tournai, a processional originated with an outbreak of disease in the city in 1092. The annual Processional of the Holy Blood, dating to 1290, occurs on Ascension Day in Bruges, where the local cathedral claimed possession of a vial of Christ's blood obtained during the Second Crusade. Ypres, Nivelles, and Brussels (among other Belgian municipalities) also have traditions of religious processions. In several Francophone provinces, including Artois and Hainaut, communities developed saint processions called *dedicaces*, later known as *ducasses*. A pilgrimage atmosphere permeated the processions; clergy and participants emphasized piety, discipline and the power of relics in protecting Catholic communities<sup>16</sup>.

One such processional centered on St. Roch, a late-13<sup>th</sup> century pilgrim from southern France. He legendarily recovered from the plague during a pilgrimage to Rome and was thereafter known for his miraculous healing.

13. BENEDICT ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, New York, 1983, p. 86-90. 14. The *Flamingant* and *Wallon* movements were already well established prior to WWI. In Wallonia, Walloon identity was even appropriated by the Socialists, notable, as Carl Strikwerda notes, in Jules Destée's "'Letter to the King on the separation of Wallonie and Flanders" in 1912, "There are no Belgians," there were only Flemings and Walloons." CARL STRIKWERDA, *A House Divided: Catholics, Socialists and Flemish Nationalists in Nineteenth-Century Belgium*, Lanham, Maryland, 1997, p. 37. 15. CÉLINE BOUCHAT, "Savoir y être. Production de localité par l'engagement dans un folklore festif", *Journal of Urban Research*, No. 3, 2010, p. 10. 16. For example, in 1703, pilgrims from Mons traveled to Thuin to pray for salvation against an outbreak of disease in Mons. MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudinen, Tome I: L'ancienne procession St. Roch et son ancêtre Notre-Dame d'el Vaulx*, Thuin, 2004, p. 12.



After his death, St. Roch became a regionally celebrated figure for protection from disease. Cults devoted to St. Roch spread northward during the outbreak of the Black Death in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. The first written evidence of St. Roch veneration in the Burgundian/Habsburg Low Countries dates to the 1485 *The Life of St. Roch*, written in Louvain, while the first recorded processional in the Principality of Liège occurred in 1599 in Châtelet, when a local confraternity, “sung a mass to Monsigneur St. Roch and held a processional”<sup>17</sup>. Two decades later, the town magistrate requested permission from the bishop to build a chapel dedicated to St. Roch.

During a plague outbreak in 1636, eight St. Roch chapels were built in the region, including in Thuin in 1637 and Ham-sur-Heure in 1638 (both communities of the ancient Principality of Liège), suggesting that the popular oral tradition of Ham-sur-Heure’s march has historical merit. A Catholic region, the l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse communities had numerous saint days involving ritual processions; St. Roch veneration became a common addition to the liturgical calendar by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Confraternities – piety-based lay organizations – supported chapels dedicated to specific saints, paid for saint-day masses and often organized annual processions for the chosen saint. In Ham-sur-

Heure, for example, a local St. Roch confraternity supported the saint’s chapel. Thuin also hosted multiple saint processions. The most significant of these was that of Notre Dame d’el Vaulx, held on 15 August and organized by a local confraternity, which venerated a 12<sup>th</sup>-century statue of Mary. Evidence suggests the existence of a St. Roch confraternity and processional in Thuin during the 17<sup>th</sup> century: after the construction of the St. Roch chapel, parish records in 1637 document a donation of, “20 *pataçons* to the confraternity of St. Roch”<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, in a 1652 receipt, the Magistrate of Thuin indicates reimbursement to a “Jean Lescourseul for refreshments given to the *confrères des harquebusiers* of Lobbes who accompanied the procession in the town”, indicating the presence of an armed escort for a saint processional<sup>19</sup>.

This references a wider trend: across the l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region, these processions were accompanied by armed escorts of bourgeois, rural militias, or youth societies<sup>20</sup>. A decade later, a *curé* in Thuin witnessed a St. Roch processional the day after the Notre Dame d’el Vaulx processional on 15 August 1662<sup>21</sup>. That same year, the Thuin Magistrate recorded distributing 70 pounds of gunpowder, “as was the custom for the youth societies in this town, for the day of St. Sacrament 35 pounds and for *la dédicace*, the same amount”<sup>22</sup>. The St. Roch

17. *Idem*, p. 57. 18. GEORGES-HENRI CONREUR, “Les origines de la procession et de la Marche militaire Saint-Roch à Thuin”, *Haut Pays de Sambre*, No. 16, May, 1990, p. 9. 19. JOSEPH ROLAND, *Les “marches” militaires...* p. 21, quoting from unedited archival documents given to him by the archivist of Thuin. 20. *Idem*. There is widespread evidence for this in Roland’s research and echoed in other works such as Roger Foulon, *Marches militaires et folkloriques...* Foulon quotes a 1611 edict by the Prince-Bishop of Liège regulating the use of archers and harquebusiers in a local saint march. *Marches militaires et folkloriques...* p. 25. 21. GEORGES-HENRI CONREUR, “Les Origines de la procession...”, p. 13. 22. JOSEPH ROLAND, *Les “marches” militaires...* p. 33-34. In addition, GEORGES-HENRI CONREUR documented the deployment of Thudinien pikemen at the 14 Jan 1662 processional in memory of the siege of 1654. *Les origines de la procession...*, p. 15.

confraternities lasted until 1794, when French revolutionaries invaded the region, sacked local churches and banned church-related public festivals, including the *ducasses* – a pattern repeated in communities throughout the Southern Low Countries<sup>23</sup>.

Suppression by revolutionaries was only the last, and most extreme, of a series of challenges to church-organized processions during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The disappearance of the plague in Europe after 1720 likely contributed to a decline in the prophylactic element, and associated solemnity, of Saint Roch processions. By the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, saint processions in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region were dominated by secular organizations, particularly the escorting militias and youth societies<sup>24</sup>. Due to the increased professionalization of military units and new tactics that deemphasized urban fortifications and garrisons, the local militia ceased to act in an official capacity or as a deterrent to brigands. Accompanying militia units became privatized societies lacking discipline and modern weaponry<sup>25</sup>. This created a potential tension for the 18<sup>th</sup>-century *ducasse*: sacred processions requiring relics or statues and participation by the clergy, who emphasized discipline and piety, conflicted with lay

groups (particularly young men) who used the occasion as a means for public celebration. Church officials increasingly sought to distance saint processions from the popular folkloric traditions that surrounded them. For example, in Douai and Lille in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, both cities with traditions of parading *géants* – giant puppets – alongside the saint processional, bishops directed that, “the profane and religious elements [of saint processions] be separated from one another”<sup>26</sup>.

Another obstacle for religious processions emerged with the Enlightenment. To some Enlightenment-influenced monarchs, such as Emperor Joseph II, saint processions were vestiges of medieval barbarism and superstition and a threat to civil and religious order; particularly as militias and youth organizations disrupted the processions with the addition of costumed ‘wild men’ and undisciplined festivities, including the discharge of weapons. Denise Pop noted, in her analysis of l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse processions, that: “During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, *les cortèges* “processions” continued to assemble, but discipline was relaxed... the eccentricity of [popular] costumes transformed the processional into a grotesque masquerade”<sup>27</sup>.

23. In Mons, for example, the St. Waudru procession survived the first French occupation of 1792-3, yet was suppressed following the second invasion in 1794. The St. Waudru chapter was abolished and the procession ceased. FRANÇOIS DE VRIENDT, “Entre réformes autrichiennes et Révolution française”, *La Ducasse, rituelle de Mons*, Brussels, 2013, p. 92-93. 24. JOSEPH ROLAND, *Les “marches” militaires...* p. 36-38, regarding the 18<sup>th</sup> century efforts to regulate and suppress music, costuming, “disrespectful behavior” and indiscriminate firing of weapons at saint processions by the Prince-Bishop of Liège, Councils of Luxembourg and Hainaut, Empress Maria-Theresa, the Magistrate of Mons and Joseph II. 25. GEORGES-HENRI CONREUR, *Les origines de la procession...*, p. 20; Joseph Roland, *Les “marches” militaires...*, p. 36. Roland notes an edict on 4 December 1751 by the Bishop of Liège that forbid the firing of weapons by accompanying escorts of saint processions without his express permission. 26. RENÉ MEURENT, “Contribution à l’Étude des Géants Processionnels et de Cortège dans le Nord de la France, la Belgique et les Pays-Bas”, *Arts et traditions populaires*, No. 2, Apr-Jun. 1967 (15), p. 141.

In 1783, the Bishop of Liège suspended the Notre Dame d'el Vaulx processional in Thuin. Three years later, Joseph II attempted to regulate religious festivals in the Habsburg Low Countries, limiting religious processions to three annually, fixing their dates and removing "music, statues, images, or extravagant clothing" as a means of reducing the carnivalesque character of the 18<sup>th</sup> century processions<sup>28</sup>. In Mons, this meant that the St. George/Dragon combat portion of the *ducasse* (*Le Lumeçon*) was forbidden; only the solemn Saint Waudru processional was allowed<sup>29</sup>. These limitations remained in force until 1790, when, following the Brabantine Revolution, religious liberties were restored to the Habsburg Low Countries communities.

A mere four years later, the St. Roch processions disappeared with the French invasion in 1794. However, during the French imperial occupation, some saint processions, such as the Notre Dame d'el Vaulx processional in Thuin, reemerged. The 1801 Concordat between Pope Pius VII and Bonaparte restored

clerical hierarchy and religious observance, allowing the Magistrate of Thuin to petition the imperial prefect for resumption of the processional in 1803<sup>30</sup>. This was done without church participation, as the collegiate chapter that traditionally organized the processional had been suppressed during the Revolution and its property taken and sold. Rather it was the mayor of Thuin, an admirer of Napoleon, who used the 15 August date not only to re-establish Notre Dame d'el Vaulx, but also to celebrate the Emperor himself, as the date happened to be Bonaparte's birthday. In this, we see the birth of a secular-led processional that conflated religious traditions with commemoration of the nation-state<sup>31</sup>. By 1808, the processional included a *retraite aux flambeaux* and a military escort of young men marching in white and blue uniforms<sup>32</sup>.

At the Congress of Vienna after Napoleon's defeat in 1815, the former Habsburg Low Countries and Principality of Liège merged with the United Provinces to create a new Kingdom of the Netherlands under Dutch

27. DENISE POP, "Le tablier des sapeurs", *Ethnologie française*, nouvelle série, No. 2, Apr-Jun 1986 (16), p. 178. Also see PHILIPPE DESMETTE's study regarding Joseph II's motivations in suppressing confraternities and processions in Hainaut: "La suppression des confréries en Hainaut par Joseph II: autopsie d'un échec (1786-1791)", *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, p. 448-449. 28. Regarding the French Revolutionary suppression of the Ducasse of Ath, see JEAN-PIERRE DUCASTELLE and LAURENT DUBUISSON, *La Ducasse d'Ath: passé et présent*, Belgium, 2014, p. 48-49. 29. CORENTIN ROUSMAN, "Les Origines du Combat", *La Ducasse, rituelle de Mons*, p. 172. 30. JOSEPH ROLAND, "Deuxième partie: Les marches aux XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles", *Enquêtes du Musée de la vie Wallonne*, No. 59-60, 1950, p. 322. Similarly in Mons, relics were returned in 1803-4, BENOÎT KANABUS & BENOÎT VAN CAENEGEM, "Un corps saint, des reliques sacrées", *La Ducasse rituelle de Mons*, p. 51. Also as part of the Concordat, Thuin left the diocese of Liège and was placed under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Tournai as part of provincial realignment and diocese reform. 31. Thuin's Notre-Dame d'el Vaulx march was not the only example of the conflation of local traditions with national commemoration. In Fosses, a statue of Bonaparte presided over the marchers and, on 15 August 1813, the village of Beaumont held a saint processional with armed escort (who fired their weapons) and celebrated Bonaparte on his birthday. JOSEPH ROLAND, *Les "marches" militaires...*, p. 46-47. 32. MICHEL CONREUR, *L'ancienne procession Saint-Roch...*, p. 76. Walcourt also received permission for a Trinity processional between 1803-1805, though starting in 1806, the imperial prefect refused the town's request. JOSEPH ROLAND, "Escortes militaires et processions", *Enquêtes du Musée de la vie Wallonne*, No. 73-76, 1954, p. 84.

hegemony. The Dutch rulers, Protestant and anti-Bonaparte, forbid any celebration of Napoleon or unauthorized saint military marches<sup>33</sup>. Even some processions that had officially reemerged during the Empire withered away during the Dutch era. One response to the restrictions on military marching was to alter the uniform: instead of marching with standard infantry or cavalry uniforms, some turned to specialized support regiments, such as the *sapeurs*, military engineers who carried shovels<sup>34</sup>. Alternatively, unarmed *gendarme* and *pompier* (firemen) regiments were allowed. The tradition of *sapeur* and *pompier* regiments in the present-day marches in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse dates to the Dutch era. In 1830, with the Belgian revolution against the Dutch, some *ducasses* returned in a specifically nationalistic context. In Thuin, for example, a *ducasse* was established in late September that commemorated the Brussels uprising against the Dutch. This festival was exclusively secular, with no participation or direction from the church<sup>35</sup>. During this period, despite the emergence of the independent nation-state of Belgium in 1830, there is no evidence of the continuation of the Old Regime St. Roch pro-

cessionals: they had simply disappeared during the tumultuous years of the French Revolution and Napoleonic First Empire.

## II. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Revival of St. Roch Processionals

Several factors influenced the reconstruction of marches in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. One catalyst was the outbreak of cholera, which proliferated in the densely urbanized Wallonian industrial communities. Though the St. Roch confraternities, chapels and processions disappeared in 1794, Catholic practices and worship had not, and acceptance of St. Roch as a healing saint endured. For example, after the 1801 Concordat, the Notre-Dame du Val church in Thuin maintained a weekly Tuesday mass for St. Roch<sup>36</sup>. During the same era, the Napoleonic legacy became fashionable, in part due to Napoleon III's Second Empire, which commemorated veterans of the Napoleonic wars<sup>37</sup>. Commemoration occurred in Wallonia as well; surviving First Empire soldiers received service medals and donned old uniforms to

33. JEAN STENGERS, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, Tome I, *Les Racines de la Belgique*, Brussels, 2000, p. 173-4. Joseph Roland notes that William I's government passed an ordinance on 29 May 1819 forbidding "exhibition in processions of extraordinary clothing, colored patterns or unseemly representations" and that the town of Gerpinnes, could not hold a procession without explicit approval from the Dutch government. JOSEPH ROLAND, "Deuxième partie: Les marches aux XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles", *Enquêtes du Musée de la vie Wallonne*, n. 59-60, 1950, p. 327. 34. DENISE POP, *Le tablier des sapeurs...*, p. 179-181. 35. MICHEL CONREUR, *L'ancienne procession Saint-Roch...*, p. 77-78. 36. GEORGES-HENRI CONREUR, *Les origines de la procession...*, p. 24. 37. DENISE POP, *Le tablier des sapeurs...*, p. 178. 38. J. WAUTHY, "Quelle est l'origine des Marches Militaires qui font la richesse du Folklore de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse?", *Le Marcheur de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, No. 1, May 1961, p. 17. Wauthy quotes Namur archivist Felix Rousseau, "In the middle of the 19th century, old Napoleonic-era veterans in the region of Lesvres formed a special peloton under the orders of Ferdinand Legros. They rented 1st Empire military uniforms at Givet. The appearance of these old soldiers of the Grand Emperor, advancing proudly in their uniforms, provoked a strong impression among the spectators." Georges-Henri Conreur documented an 1854 request by l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse veterans for a special mass for Napoleon I's soul and an 1856 ceremony for Thuin veterans to receive a St. Helena medal. *Les origines de la procession...*, p. 25.

receive official accolades<sup>38</sup>. The Napoleonic era provided nostalgic cultural references for organizers developing new saint marches, and recalled older traditions of religious relics accompanied by military escorts.

Several other factors assisted the logistics of marching. The construction of a railroad in the region between 1848-62 (a side effect of mid-century industrialization) greatly facilitated communication between towns and allowed both marchers and spectators to travel easily. Second, there was a large military depot in the French garrison town of Givet on the Franco-Belgian border, which included an enormous collection of surplus uniforms from the Napoleonic era; these could be rented or purchased by marchers<sup>39</sup>. A third factor was the resurgence of Catholic pilgrimages and saint worship during the 1850s, spurred by Pope Pius IX's declaration on the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the purported appearance of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in 1858. This precipitated enormous tourist-pilgrimages to southern France and similar pilgrimages occurred on saint-days across France and Belgium. Religious appeal and secular patriotism intersected in the form of reimagined saint-military marches.

Walcourt established the first of these reconstructed saint marches in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region in 1849 with a Notre-Dame/Trin-

ity processional with accompanying escorts<sup>40</sup>. In 1851, thirteen companies led by two veterans of the Napoleonic wars marched in Fosses, accompanying a St. Feuillien processional<sup>41</sup>. The following year, in Gerpinnes, eight companies marched in a St. Rolende processional. It was not just military marches that returned; during the same era, there was a general resurgence of Old Regime festivals across Wallonia. Often the character of the new *ducasses* was selectively filtered, bringing back the most distinctive elements of old festivals, such as the *géants* in Ath or *Le Lumeçon* in Mons, while minimizing the saint processions that preceded them. That is to say, the organizers of these reconstructed festivals sought distinctiveness through specific themes, dates or activities that distinguished one event from another, emphasizing folkloric celebratory characteristics over piety and religious austerity. Within military marches dedicated to the same saint, towns chose different dates to avoid competing festivals – a deviation from honoring the saint on his or her designated day. This suggests that secular, commercial, and popular concerns in the revived of saint processions overwhelmed interest in ritual content and piety<sup>42</sup>.

The *Ducasse d'Ath* offers an example of evolving public rituals in 19<sup>th</sup> century Wallonia. The *Ducasse*, a three-day festival in Ath, held on the fourth weekend in August, originated in the late-14<sup>th</sup> century as a St. Christopher pro-

39. Verified by numerous studies: ALBERT MARINUS, "Les Marches de Sambre et Meuse", *Le folklore belge: Tome I*, Brussels, 1930, p. 134; JOSEPH ROLAND, *Deuxième partie: Les marches aux XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles...*, p.329; Denise Pop, *Le tablier des sapeurs...*, p. 179. 40. Journal de Charleroi, 30 May 1848. Roger Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I*, p. 183. 41. JOSEPH ROLAND, *Les 'marches' militaires de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse...*, p. 47. 42. Contemporary examples of the modern *ducasse* appear in literature of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. Émile Zola's *Germinal*, written in 1885 but set in the 1860s, includes a memorable scene in the fictional Artois mining town of Montsou depicting the popular attraction of the *ducasse* as well as its general carnivalesque dimension for working class miners, involving dancing, widespread public drunkenness and violence. ÉMILE ZOLA, *Germinal*, Paris, 1964 (1885 original), p. 141-154.

cessional. During the 1460s, the processional included a giant puppet named Goliath. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, classical influences appeared with giant Roman gods and, in the 1700s, the *Ducasse* involved the mock marriage of Goliath to a giant bride. Like the saint marches, the *Ducasse* was suppressed during the French Revolution – all the giants were burned – and the festival, like the St. Roch marches, reappeared in the 1860s<sup>43</sup>. For the reconstructed *Ducasse*, new giants were built, becoming the central aspect of the festival; other aspects from the Old Regime *ducasse* (including the St. Christopher processional) were minimized<sup>44</sup>.

Likewise in Thuin, the young male societies that accompanied the traditional Notre Dame d'el Vaulx processional on 15 August petitioned the communal government in 1882 to switch the date of their *ducasse* to the first

Sunday in August, diverging from the religious *cortège* and separating festive activities from the more solemn religious processional<sup>45</sup>. Jacques Bertrand, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Charleroi musician, wrote “El Ducasse du Bos” in the Walloon language spoken by l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse rural and working class 1860s population. The song epitomizes the popular impression of the *ducasse* experience. In the song, a young woman recounts her night celebrating the *Ducasse de Notre-Dame au Bois*, a saint processional on Ascension Day at an 18<sup>th</sup>-century chapel dedicated to Mary in the woods outside Charleroi<sup>46</sup>. Following the general historical trajectory of saint marches in the region, the chapel (and associated processional) was reconstructed in the 1840s and the *ducasse* revived. In Bertrand’s 1861 retelling, the predictable tension between piety and profanity emerges :

#### REFRAIN

Ah ! pour mi, qué djoûrnéye.  
Qui f’yèt bon drî l’uréye !  
Al ducace du bos,  
Dj’îré co, dj’îré co.

Avè m’galant Ignace,  
Dj’é stî yêr al ducace  
A Notre-Dame-au-Bos ;  
On s’amûsèt d’asto.  
Gârçons èt djonnès fîyes,  
Dèssus les yèbes florîyes,  
Fèyént des rigodons  
Au son des viyolons.

Oh my ! What a day.  
so good out here behind the hay !  
At the *ducasse* in the woods,  
I will go again, I will go again.

With my boyfriend Ignace,  
I went to the dance yesterday  
In Notre Dame au Bois ;  
We were having so much fun.  
Boys and young girls,  
On top of flowers beds,  
Jumping up and down  
To the tune of the violins.

43. The giants were burned in an *autodafé* in the town central square on Aug. 28, 1794 on orders of the French civil commissioner for the Jemappes department. Ironically, this symbolic act was done during the same time of year that the *Ducasse* would have been held. JEAN-PIERRE DUCASTELLE and LAURENT DUBUISSON, *La Ducasse d’Ath...*, p. 49-50. 44. RENÉ MEURANT, *Contribution à l’Étude des géants processionels...*, p. 145. 45. MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudinien, Tome 2: Historique de la Marche militaire St. Roch de Thuin*, Thuin, 2003, p. 37. 46. <http://www.charleroi-decouverte.be/index.php?id=396>.



**(REFRAIN)**

Quand l'danse a stî finiye,  
 Ignace èm'dit : « Laliye,  
 Alèsons nos r'pôser ;  
 T'as dandji d't'èrsoufler. »  
 Alôrs, toudis sins rîre,  
 I n'djokèt nén dè m'dîre  
 Què ça s'rèt toudis mi  
 Qu'i vîret l'pus voltî.

When the dance was over,  
 Ignace told me : "Laliye  
 Let's have a rest ;  
 You need to catch your breath."  
 So, very seriously,  
 He wouldn't stop telling me  
 That it would always be me  
 He would love the most.

**(REFRAIN)**

L'baragwin dèl fauvète  
 Et l'doûs tchant d'l'auluwète  
 Vènît nos raguéyi.  
 Joûr de Dieu, qué pléji !  
 Et pwîs, au fond dèl taye,  
 Tout près d'in gros sto d'aye,  
 I coudèt du muguet  
 Qui fôûrèt dins m'côrset.

The voice of the bird  
 And the sweet song of the lark  
 Gave us new vigor  
 Day of the Lord, such pleasure !  
 And then, at the bottom of the clearing,  
 Beside the big tree stump,  
 He picked some lily of the valley  
 That he placed in my corsage.

**(REFRAIN)**

Al fin, dins mes deûs djambes,  
 V'la bén qui m'prind des crampes.  
 Dj'è n'savè pus mârchi.  
 Ignace ét las' oussi.  
 Més dj'intind co l'musique :  
 Malgrè toute èm'fatigue,  
 Djè radaye squ'au matin  
 Au bal dèl tchausse qui pind.

At the end, in my two legs,  
 I could feel cramps coming  
 I couldn't walk any more.  
 Ignace was tired as well  
 But I can still hear the music :  
 In spite of all my tiredness,  
 I am going back until the morning  
 To the ball of the Hanging Sock<sup>47</sup>

The song is a celebration of youth, dancing, freedom and love – and lust. The couple attends the *ducasse*, dances, becomes tired, and lingers alone in the woods. The boy gives the girl flowers, a metaphor for sex, and they spend the night together. There is only a single passing reference to the religious origins of

the *ducasse* ("Day of the Lord, such pleasure!") and this declaration is deliberately suggestive in its meaning. The 19<sup>th</sup> century *ducasse* thus had become a contested space, appropriated by the people in starkly profane terms that emphasized music, dancing, drinking and freedom from both work and communal mores.

47. JACQUES BERTRAND, *Les oeuvres wallonnes de Jacques Bertrand*, Charleroi, 1861, p. 61-62.  
 Stephanie Macaluso and Betty Lièvin, translators (unpublished translation), Nivelles and Biesme-sous-Thuin, 2017.

Cholera struck the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region in 1863; by 1866, over 700 people had died in the town of Châtelet, ironically the first site of St. Roch veneration during the 1636 plague<sup>48</sup>. Duplicating its 16<sup>th</sup> century leadership in saint veneration, the town held the first modern St. Roch procession in 1865, on the day of the local saint (Eloi) by carrying a St. Roch statue accompanied by a military escort "wearing French uniforms"<sup>49</sup>. The following year, a St. Roch procession began in Ham-sur-Heure. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century chapel had survived the Revolution and the saint's confraternity congregated anew. The *Union de Charleroi*, a pro-Liberal Party (and thus anti-clerical) journal, reported in 1866 that, "St. Roch was celebrated by religious and military attendees" including 350 "soldiers" and that the St. Roch statue was "carried by eight young officers in the religious group"<sup>50</sup>.

Thuin's modern march began in 1867, a year after that of Ham-sur-Heure. St. Roch had not been celebrated in Thuin since 1794; the old St. Roch chapel at Tienne-Trappe had been abandoned and the only historically documented march in Thuin was the Notre Dame d'elVaulx procession. During the 1866 cholera epidemic, the St. Roch confraternity was re-established by the *curé*, Félicien Grard of the Notre-Dame du Val church, and a mass and impromptu procession were held in the saint's honor on 16 August<sup>51</sup>. The following year, Grard announced a St. Roch military march on the third Sunday in May. This was a curious

change in date. During the Old Regime, that part of May was typically reserved for the rogations: annual processions in which participants walked the parish boundaries to ensure a good harvest and denote the physical limits of the community. The rogation days were typically the three days prior to Ascension and often fell in middle to late May.

The Thuin Liberal communal government had lobbied for the change in order to avoid competition with Ham-sur-Heure, which held a St. Roch march on the traditional 16 August date<sup>52</sup>. This decision indicates secular business interests, for whom sacred dates were negotiable in the reconstructed ritual. The *curé* consented, though he continued to conduct a purely religious procession on 16 August to the recently reconstructed St. Roch chapel at Tienne-Trappe. The commune's influence was apparent in an additional innovation: volunteer marchers in military uniforms accompanying the procession. An 1868 *Journal de Charleroi* (also a pro-Liberal Party paper) article noted, "Today in Thuin will be the procession instituted last year in honor of St. Roch; the communal administration voted 250BF for costs associated and named a commission charged with directing *le cortège* and inviting outside [marching] societies"<sup>53</sup>. Companies of marchers headed the march, followed by the *curé* and new confraternity carrying a statue of St. Roch. The *curé* also presided over a "military mass" requested by the marching companies on Monday morning following the Sunday march. In 1869, he wrote:

48. MICHEL CONREUR, *Historique de la Marche militaire...*, p. 19. 49. GEORGES-HENRI CONREUR asserted that 43,000 Belgians died of cholera in 1866. *Les origines de la procession...*, p. 26.

50. *Union de Charleroi*, 24 August 1866. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I*, p. 126-127. 51. GEORGES-HENRI CONREUR, *Les origines de la procession...*, p. 26.

52. MICHEL CONREUR, *Historique de la Marche militaire...*, p. 29. 53. *Journal de Charleroi*, 17 May 1868. MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II: Historique de la Marche militaire de Saint Roch...*, p. 31.

"Today [Sunday, 9 May] the procession will leave in two hours... On Monday, 10 May at 10am : the military mass in honor of St. Roch"<sup>54</sup>.

### III. Tensions with the Catholic Church

In response to an incipient popular piety movement, *curés* performed an act of historical reconstruction themselves in seeking to exert clerical control over the marches in a manner that paralleled the organization of late medieval processions rather than the more recent (18<sup>th</sup> century) popular festivals that clerical and political authorities actually sought to abolish or heavily regulate. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, however, local political authorities, which were largely dominated by the Liberal Party, were no longer the ally of the clergy. Late 19<sup>th</sup>-century struggles over the character of and participation in the marches would fall along the fault line of party politics, reflecting the larger populist struggle in the industrial Borinage communities of Wallonia.

Three years after the first march, Grard wrote that he had, "insisted on order and devotion" during the processional<sup>55</sup>. By 1872, the priest was out of patience: he forbade the participation of clergy or the use of the St. Roch

statue for the march; nor would he participate in a military mass for the St. Roch marchers on Monday morning. Despite the loss of the church's participation, and thus the entire structural foundation for the march, the event continued, and would, for a decade, exclusively under the direction of the commune<sup>56</sup>. The (pro-Liberal) newspaper *Gazette de Charleroi* defended the strange situation of a saint march without clergy, claiming, "It remains religious! These *Thudiniens* replaced the clergy with infantry and cavalry. In the middle of this parade advanced [a statue of] the Virgin, dressed in white, carried by young women and escorted by young men on horseback"<sup>57</sup>.

Political struggles also intruded on the St. Roch marches. In 1873, a journalist writing for the *Journal de Charleroi* noted, "Ecclesiastical authorities had suppressed the pilgrimage because no Catholic [party members] had been elected [in the municipal council] in 1870"<sup>58</sup>. This speaks to a wider regional conflict between the Liberal and Catholic parties, which intensified during the 1880s<sup>59</sup>. Belgium had a limited male franchise dominated by middle-class Liberals<sup>60</sup>. Industrialization and the Socialist call for workers' rights increasingly pushed the Liberals into anti-clerical stances<sup>61</sup>. In Thuin, the Liberals dominated the commune

54. *Idem*, p. 32. 55. Grard's predecessor complained of "young men joining [the Notre-Dame d'el Vaulx] procession in military costumes". GEORGES-HENRI CONREUR, *Les origines de la procession...*, p. 29. 56. There was a similar situation in the Chastres St. Roch processional: the clergy refused to participate or allow the use of the statue. ALBERT MARINUS, *Les Marches de Sambre-et-Meuse...*, p. 128. 57. *Gazette de Charleroi*, 4 June 1879. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I*, p. 170. 58. *Journal de Charleroi*, 11 May 1873. *Idem*, p. 169. Again, this journal was sympathetic to the Liberal Party. 59. CARL STRIKWERDA, *A House Divided...*, p. 30. The détente between the two parties ended in the 1880s with a Liberal struggle to end Roman Catholic control of the public school system. 60. *Idem*, p. 28-29. Belgium did not legalize universal male suffrage until 1894. 61. The l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse St. Roch marches were not isolated examples of Liberal/Catholic animosity. In 1863, conflict erupted at the Tournai processional between Catholic and Liberal factions, resulting in the collapse of a unified processional. JEAN DUMOULIN and JACQUES PYKE, *La Grande Procession de Tournai (1090-1992)*, Tournai, 1992, p. 97.

between 1850 and 1920. Blue was the color typically associated with the party. In nearby Jumet in 1878, “The *curé* of the parish forbid those [in blue uniforms] from following the procession in that costume, being of the opinion that this color was hostile to the Catholic religion”<sup>62</sup>. In 1892, the pro-Liberal journal *Union de Charleroi* noted that, “in this country where political struggles are so strong, the St. Roch march is an object of struggle. Zealous rivalries occur between Catholic and Liberal [marching] groups.”<sup>63</sup>. Twenty-four years earlier, another *Union de Charleroi* journalist noted precisely this “dual-character” of the march in Ham-sur-Heure<sup>64</sup>. It wasn’t until 1875 that the ecclesiastical contingent (the *curé* and the confraternity of St. Roch) worked in conjunction with the secular marching groups to present a single, if divisible, procession in Ham-sur-Heure<sup>65</sup>.

A second source of clerical animosity with the newly established marches was the disorderly and often drunken revelry of spectators and participants alike and the *cantinières* who accompanied many of the marching companies dispensing alcohol<sup>66</sup>. In Ham-sur-Heure in 1891, one journalist noted that the *cantinières* “travel the whole route... At all the caba-

rets they re-provision, as their bottles empty quickly during the march”<sup>67</sup>. Another journalist duly reported the role of the *cantinière* in 1908, relating that he was offered “a little cup of gin”<sup>68</sup>. There were repeated attempts by the clergy to reprimand the marchers for allowing the *cantinières*. The Bishop of Tournai made a formal request to the companies in Ham-sur-Heure to, “rid themselves of their *cantinières*. Yet, given the unwillingness of the companies to comply, the *curé* of Ham-sur-Heure made this request optional, rather than issue injunctions”<sup>69</sup>. Attending journalists, even those writing for Liberal-oriented publications such as the *Union de Charleroi*, occasionally criticized the companies for allowing the women to participate: in 1876, in Ham-sur-Heure, “By invitation of the *curé*, on behalf of the bishop, the companies were presenting without their *cantinières*. There was only one exception.” Regarding this exception the journalist sarcastically noted, “Honor to these Messieurs du Mont! They have shown the honor of their heart!”<sup>70</sup>. In Thuin, 1901, a journalist complained, “The origins of this march was absolutely religious... The *cantinières* have spoiled the event... the March risks becoming a purely civil affair if the ‘foreign’ [i.e., outside of Thuin]

62. *Journal de Charleroi*, 20 July 1878. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I*, p. 138. 63. *Union de Charleroi*, 24 August 1892. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 132. 64. *Idem*, 21 August 1868. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 128. 65. MICHEL CONREUR, *Historique de la Marche militaire...*, p. 22. 66. ALBERT MARINUS, *Les Marches de Sambre-et-Meuse...*, p. 134, characterized the *cantinières* as “est un buffet ambulante”. Notably, this history of the marches was published during the 1930s, and indicates the casual regard toward objectification of women during that era. 67. *Gazette de Charleroi*, 18 August 1891. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 130-31. 68. *Idem*, 9 July 1908. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 133. 69. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 36. 70. *Union de Charleroi*, 23 August 1876. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I*, p. 129. Also see ALBERT MARINUS, “Marches de Sambre-et-Meuse”, p. 127-128 regarding clerical conflict in Biesmes in 1847 over a St. Peter march that escalated rapidly, from the local *curé* to the Bishop of Namur. Eventually, the bishop attempted to forbid the march from occurring with clerical approval. When the marchers ignored his demand, he placed the town under the interdict.

companies continue marching with one or more *cantinières*. Always the women!”<sup>71</sup>.

A third criticism of the reconstructed marches was the threat of conflict amongst the marchers (and even spectators). During the 1870s, the marches were increasingly punctuated with reports of excessive alcohol consumption and violence. The marchers shot their weapons repeatedly during each march and there were multiple published incidents of accidental shootings. Referencing Walcourt, the *Journal de Charleroi* noted in 1873 that the marching companies “burned 800 kg of gunpowder in the annual processional”, indicating a significant level of gunfire<sup>72</sup>. Late-night disagreements could turn violent; in Jumet, 1910, several of the marchers nearly killed one another: “it was 3am in a heated [drunken] atmosphere and some of them drew their sabers”<sup>73</sup>. Bayonet and saber wounds dealt by marchers are documented from the 1860s onward. Political struggles, *cantinières* and inebriated, violent episodes all figured in the Liberal-oriented journalistic depictions of clerical criticism of popular participation in the St. Roch marches.

The standoff with the church in Thuin was only resolved after a decade, when a new *curé*

(Lagache) and a newly elected *bourgmestre* (J-B t'Serstevens) negotiated the clergy's return to the May processional in 1883. In return for the use of the statue and the Monday military mass, the commune promised order and discipline<sup>74</sup>. Despite patching up relations, there was clearly a widening gap between the Liberal politicians who saw the marches as first and foremost a tourist attraction and point of local pride and the clergy who sought traditional expressions of piety, reverence and restraint<sup>75</sup>. Caught between the businessmen, politicians and clergy jostling for control and direction of the marches were the volunteer marchers and working-class *Thudiniens* who appreciated the spectacle and holiday freedoms the Thuin march afforded them.

The saint military marches were clearly popular. At the St. Feuillien march in Fosses in 1851, one journalist reported that “at least 50,000 people” attended<sup>76</sup>. Many of these attendees were not locals, or even Belgians, but rather “pilgrims” from France; in 1883, the *Union de Charleroi*, in an article on Walcourt, noted, “the trains principally come from France”<sup>77</sup>. In Ham-sur-Heure, a journalist reported that at least a dozen companies participated in the 1867 processional, mostly “foreign” to the town; that marchers

71. *Idem*, 21 May 1901. Quoted numerous times: see ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome 1..., p. 173; ALBERT MARINUS, *Les Marches de Sambre-et-Meuse...*, p. 132; and ROGER FOULON, *Marches militaires et folkloriques...*, p. 74. It is notable to find such a pro-clerical sentiment in the *Gazette de Charleroi*, which was more or less the unofficial voice of the Liberal Party. 72. *Journal de Charleroi*, 10 June 1873. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome 1, p. 189. 73. *Gazette de Charleroi*, 27 July 1910. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome 1, p. 148. 74. Magistrate of Thuin, 10 March 1883. GEORGES-HENRI CONREUR, “Les origines de la procession...”, p. 31. 75. As late as 1909, J. Vandereuse, a local historian of the Walcourt processional, warned of a growing divide between the clergy and popular participants: “The marches have completely lost their religious character and one can anticipate that in the near future, the abuses will be so serious that they clergy, to avoid looking ridiculous, will be forced to abstain from participating, despite the pleas of the townspeople.” Quoted in JOSEPH ROLAND, *Les ‘marches’ militaires...* p. 51-52. 76. *Journal de Charleroi*, 3 October 1851. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome 1..., p. 83. 77. *Union de Charleroi*, 23 May 1883. *Id.*, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome 1..., p. 192.

obtained uniforms at the Givet depot, and that “special trains” were also organized to bring in an “enormous” number of spectators<sup>78</sup>. By the 1890s, attendance had even recovered from the 1880s recession: the *Pays Wallon*, a Catholic journal from Charleroi, reported 30,000 people traveling to Walcourt in 1898, and, according to *La Rappel*, another Catholic journal, 50,000 to Fosses in 1900<sup>79</sup>. Between 1860 and 1890, tourists would replace pilgrims.

#### IV. Constructing Historical Continuities

During the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, participants appeared to have viewed the marches as modern creations and journalists rarely referenced Old Regime antecedents. Reporting on the 1866 Ham-sur-Heure march, one journalist seemed unaware of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century processional, noting, “this procession was instituted in the [18<sup>th</sup>] century in honor of St. Roch following an outbreak of dysentery in l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region... At our demand, Monseigneur our bishop authorized an annual processional.”<sup>80</sup>. In 1892, the newspaper simply stated that the processional originated in, “time immemorial”<sup>81</sup>. In Thuin, organizers referenced the anniversary date for the march from the year 1867. As late as 1909, the march was characterized as, “the 42<sup>nd</sup> annual Grand

Military March of St. Roch... organized by the commune”<sup>82</sup>. By the turn of the century, however, participants began re-conceptualizing the origins of the military marches. In Ham-sur-Heure, organizers stressed continuity with Old Regime processions and ignored the 72-year gap. In 1904, one journal claimed that the march “had been going on for centuries”; in 1908, the claim was more specific: “the annual march has been consecrated for three centuries”<sup>83</sup>.

By the following year, a particular date was attributed to the processional: “Ham-sur-Heure celebrates the 271<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the St. Roch march”, linking the processional back to the outbreak of disease in the 1630s<sup>84</sup>. In Thuin, admirers also framed the march as a continuation of the Old Regime processional. The *Sapeurs et Grenadiers* marching society wrote a letter to the *Gazette de Charleroi* in 1911, protesting the characterization of the Thuin march as having been recently established: “This is an error. The March was suppressed like all others at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the French Revolution. The *Marche de Thuin*, once known as “The Procession of Saint-Roch”, was reestablished in 1866 after the outbreak of cholera”<sup>85</sup>. Journals reporting on the Thuin march connected the Old Regime saint processional to a famous event: the siege of the city in 1654<sup>86</sup>. The poster painted to advertise the march in

78. *Journal de Charleroi*, 18 August 1867. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 128. 79. *Pays Wallon*, 6 June 1898. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 197. *Le Rappel*, 1 October 1900. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 96. Given possible journalistic bias, these estimates could obviously be inflated. 80. *Union de Charleroi*, 24 August 1866. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 126-27. 81. *Idem*, 24 August 1892. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 132. 82. *Gazette de Charleroi*, 14 May 1909. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 179; also see the 1907 marching program titled “40<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire” (Thuin, 1907). 83. *Gazette de Charleroi*, 20 August 1904 and 29 August 1908. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 133-134. 84. *Idem*, 21 August 1909. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 135. 85. *Idem*, 16 September 1911. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 179.



1901, painted by Brussels artist Léon Belloguet, depicted marchers in Imperial uniforms carrying St. Roch, behind which was the *belfroi* of the upper town (see figure on page 155). In 1904, a local journalist asserted, “The military march of St. Roch is one of the oldest in the l’Entre Sambre-et-Meuse. It was founded after the siege of Thuin in 1654 and continued until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It returned in 1866 during the epidemic of cholera which ravaged the region,” illustrating the perceived continuity between the ancient and modern St. Roch processions<sup>87</sup>.

This historical revisionism regarding the origins of the St. Roch marches may have been related to the larger regional cultural renaissance called the *Mouvement Wallon*. The movement was initially a late-19<sup>th</sup> century Francophone response to the increasing politicization of language between French and Flemish-speaking communities, particularly regarding the communities surrounding Brussels. As it grew in popularity, however, the movement sought to elevate Wallonian identity and pride through the commemoration of Wallonian cultural achievements<sup>88</sup>. A logical application of this regional cultural commemoration was the rebranding of prominent examples of communal traditions as permanent fixtures of Wallonian patrimony. Thus the nostalgia elicited by characterizing the St. Roch marches as having originated in ‘time immemorial’ was far more powerful than regarding them as recent crea-

tions. That is to say that Wallonian commemoration during the *Mouvement Wallon* went hand-in-hand with the historical revisionism of the St. Roch marches.

After a six-year suspension during WWI, the rebranding of Thuin’s St. Roch march was complete. Posters and pamphlets now ignored the 1867 anniversary in favor of 1654. That same year, the Catholics finally won the municipal election. The St. Roch march was reorganized and, either coincidentally or specifically as a reward by the clergy for the Catholic win, the marching companies and religious contingent formed a single procession, though the papal *zouaves*, clergy and St. Roch statue marched as a distinct, distinguished rear-guard. The new Catholic mayor, Baron Paul Gendebien, collaborated with a religious instructor named Abbot Mathon, to construct an intellectual defense of the revised history. In a 1923 article in the pro-Catholic journal *Pays Wallon*, Mathon (using the pseudonym ‘Thudi’) linked the Old Regime procession to the modern military march without mentioning differences in organization, purpose or date. In effect, he treated the 1794-1866 period as a pause in a continuous, homogeneous process, ignoring the tenuous links between the two eras<sup>89</sup>. Three weeks later, ‘Thudi’ reiterated the perceived continuity, noting:

The St. Roch procession in Ham-sur-Heure is two hundred years old, as are the proces-

86. *Idem*, and *Journal de Charleroi*, 14 May 1904. *Id.*, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, p. 176. 87. *Emphasis mine. Gazette de Charleroi*, 14 May 1904. *Id.*, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I..., p. 176. 88. BRUNO DEMOULIN and JEAN-LOUIS KUPPER, eds., *Histoire de la Wallonie – De la préhistoire au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Toulouse, 2004, p. 270-271; PHILIPPE RAXHON, “Les contours d’une quête en pointillé”, *Histoire Culturelle de la Wallonie*, Brussels, 2012, p. 115-118; CARL STRIKWERDA, *A House Divided...*, p. 37-39. 89. *Pays Wallon – Billets Thudinien*, 21 May 1923. MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudinien*, Tome II: *Historique de la Marche militaire...*, p. 51.



Military March of St. Roch in Thuin Poster (Source: Léon Belloguet, *Grande Marche militaire de St. Roch, Thuin*, 1939 print from 1901 original, Boise, ID USA. Photo credit: Erik Hadley).

sionals in Walcourt and Florennes. But that of Thuin is the oldest of all... We won't forget, I hope, that [the processional] began with the siege of 1654 and the pause, a product of the European revolutions, could not destroy it<sup>90</sup>.

This is a stunning assertion, both in claiming that the Thuin processional was the oldest, as well as suggesting that the modern march was in fact a continuation of the Old Regime processional<sup>91</sup>. This commemorative effort transcended the old regional political rivalries. A 1926 article in the Liberal-minded *Gazette de Charleroi* echoed Mathon's claim: "The march in Thuin is one of the oldest in the Pays de l'Entre Sambre-et-Meuse. It was founded after the siege of 1654"<sup>92</sup>. The journalist then conflated this revised history of Thuin's St. Roch military march with the Notre Dame d'el Vaulx processional, borrowing from the latter's reappearance in 1803, as proof of the durability of the St. Roch march<sup>93</sup>. As late as 1928, ambiguity remained in determining the correct commemoration date. The announcement proclaimed the "63<sup>rd</sup> anniversary" of the march, while also asserting that the processional was "founded after the siege of Thuin in 1654"<sup>94</sup>.

Refuting these claims was difficult, as chroniclers utilized popular oral tradition to link the Old Regime processionals with the recon-

structed military marches. The processionals were an established folkloric tradition while the modern marches were, by the 1920s, already a lifelong memory for most locals. In 1927, the *Gazette de Charleroi* noted, "This festival is a local event to which the *Thudinien* population is most attached, due to the fact that it is central to the history of the town and, *transmitted from generation to generation*, remains alive today"<sup>95</sup>. The dearth of historical records facilitated the fancied link between the two eras. The St. Roch processional remained shrouded in mystery ("time immemorial"), which assisted in the imagining process. *Thudiniens* knew an Old Regime processional existed, but not exactly when or how it was celebrated. Important dates such as the siege of 1654 emerged from the historical fog and facilitated the commemoration process.

Organizers supplemented their claim by appropriating local historical artifacts. An old cannon, still in the possession of the city commune, was purported to be a prize taken during the brief siege. The cannon's popular nickname, *Spantole*, simultaneously reflected its Spanish origins and centrality to the conflict. In 1925, *Spantole* was adorned with a new inscription that associated the cannon with the siege, turning oral tradition into written commemoration. The ancient weapon functioned as an artifact that connected onlookers

90. *Idem*, 27 May 1923. MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II...*, p. 52. 91. That honor would go to the town of Châtelet; he also ignored the plague of 1636 and the St. Roch chapel and confraternity founded during the 1630s. 92. *Gazette de Charleroi*, 26 June 1926. MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II...*, p. 52. 93. "During the French Revolution [the St. Roch march] was suppressed. On 25 Thermidor of Year XII [13 Aug. 1803], the youth of Thuin demanded from their mayor Mr. Boursault the authorization to march while carrying arms. The mayor referred the matter to the prefect... who authorized the march; the sub-prefect ordered the commander of the local gendarmes to maintain order. On 29 Thermidor, [17 Aug] Mr. Boursault informed the sous-prefect that the festival passed with decency and tranquility." MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II...*, p. 52. 94. *Idem*, p. 54. 95. Emphasis mine, *Gazette de Charleroi*, May 1927. MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II...*, p. 53.

to the 1654 event. Yet archival evidence does not support this: the cannon was listed in the town's military inventory prior to the siege and specialists date it to the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>96</sup>. It was never used by the Spanish, nor captured by the defenders. Facts notwithstanding, the physical presence of the ancient cannon, carried around town by marching groups on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century siege (1954) helped fuse the historical claim in popular memory<sup>97</sup>.

Some admirers constructed elaborate histories that wove together threads of famous historical events. A 1958 article postulated that military escorts became necessary during the 16<sup>th</sup>-century religious wars to protect relics from iconoclastic Protestants. Referencing the 1654 siege, author André Miot reiterated the *Spantole* connection and hypothesized that the processional emerged as a consequence of a grateful population. He then turned to the 1866 cholera outbreak and revitalized march, noting, "Since then, there have been no more interruptions," apparently viewing the 70-year gap as a mere pause and ignoring the WWI/II suspensions altogether<sup>98</sup>. As for the distinctive Napoleonic costumes, promoters and amateur historians advanced two theories: either local Napoleonic-era veterans marched in their old uniforms<sup>99</sup> or youth societies in the post-Waterloo era commemorated veterans

by adopting Napoleonic uniforms<sup>100</sup>. This history, self-referencing and tidy, remains in present-day descriptions of the military marches.

By the mid-1920s, the presence of regional governmental representatives lent the marches an official atmosphere. While a subcommittee of the city commune supervised the Thuin march, a local commercial association (the *Association des Commerçants Indépendant et Propriétaires* or ACIP) was increasingly involved in the years just prior to WWI in an effort to coordinate and promote the march with local businessmen<sup>101</sup>. Communal delegates and members of the ACIP opened the festivities with an official reception at the *hôtel de ville*, complete with a champagne toast. Following the Tuesday military mass, officials held a banquet that recognized individual marchers with service medals.

The Ham-sur-Heure march, now organized by an executive committee like that of Thuin, also used historical artifacts to reinforce the authenticity of the St. Roch march. The two focal points of the march are the 17<sup>th</sup>-century St. Roch chapel and the 'Court of Honor' in the medieval castle of the Mérode family, just across the Eau d'Heure River. Maximilien de Mérode, seigneur of the town and chateau, founded the chapel in 1636. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the chateau was occupied by French

96. *Idem*. 97. *Troisième Centenaire de la Procession St. Roch [et] Grand Marche Militaire, organisée par l'administration communale avec le concours du Comité St. Roch* (Event pamphlet), Thuin, 1954, p. 2. 98. *La Nouvelle Gazette*, 1958. MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudiniens, Tome II...*, p. 64. This journal transformed into the *Gazette de Charleroi* in 1878 and would become *La Nouvelle Gazette* in 1945. As noted earlier, this journal had Liberal Party sympathies. 99. JEAN LEFÈVRE reiterates this: "En l'on marche en costumes de 1<sup>er</sup> Empire à la fois parce que beaucoup des jeunes ont servi dans les armées impériales." *Traditions en Wallonie*, Verviers, 1977, p. 265. 100. ROGER FOULON, *Marches militaires et folkloriques...* p. 25: "Après la grande aventure napoléonienne, les compagnies de 'jeunesse' de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse, marquées par l'épopée, adoptent bientôt pour uniforme les restes vestimentaires de l'Empire." 101. In 1924 the subcommittee was named the *Comité St. Roch*.

forces including, legend has it, Louis XIV himself, who ordered the demolition of one of the towers, reducing the castle from a square defensive structure to an open courtyard, which now serves as the 'Court of Honor' for the reception of marching companies by communal officials and dignitaries. The St. Martin church, constructed a decade after the commencement of the march, sits in the middle of the town square, between the chapel and the chateau. The church serves as a nexus between these two symbolic locations: the Ham-sur-Heure marching companies remove the St. Roch statue from the chapel and carry it to the St. Martin church at the beginning of the festival, where it will remain for the duration of the five-day event (when not touring with the marchers). As in Thuin, physical artifacts and locations serve to reinforce the historical claims perpetuated by the marching companies and organizers as theatrical scenery for the performance of folkloric expression.

On the 1954 tri-centennial commemoration pamphlet of the siege of Thuin, the 1867 date for the St. Roch march appears only in the fine print<sup>102</sup>. The post-war era saw widespread popularity for the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches; numerous new marches appeared and new marching companies were founded. Six of the seventeen present-day Ham-sur-

Heure St. Roch marching regiments originated in the 1950s-60s and fifteen l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse towns created new marches between 1947-1968<sup>103</sup>. One example of commemorative bricolage is *Les Volontaires de la Révolution brabançonne*, a marching group that formed in 1957 in Ham-sur-Heure. The town was part of the Principality of Liège, and marchers marched under the family heraldry of the Mérode family, having received permission from a Mérode family member<sup>104</sup>. However, the marching company adopted the uniforms and name from the historical *Volontaires Réunis* of Mons circa 1780, which under the Old Regime was within the Habsburg Low Countries. The *Volontaires* commemorate a conflation of simultaneous yet separate events of 1789: the well-known revolution against Austrian Emperor Joseph II (the Brabantine Revolution) and the second uprising within the Principality of Liège against Prince-Bishop de Hoensbroeck (the Liège Revolution). Their chosen era (pre-Napoleonic) required expensive hand-made uniforms, which made the group much more exclusive than the groups wearing the more common (and often rented) 1<sup>st</sup> Empire uniforms<sup>105</sup>.

By the early 1970s, attendance and participation at the marches declined precipitously, particularly among young adults. The Notre

102. *Troisième Centenaire de la Procession St. Roch [et] Grand Marche Militaire, organisée par l'administration communale avec le concours du Comité St. Roch* (Event pamphlet), Thuin, 1954, p. 4. CÉLINE BOUCHAT has documented the widespread popularity of l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches during the 1960s: Bouchat, "Le village magique" Pluralité des engagements dans les Marches de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse", *Uzance*, 2011, Vol., 1, p. 113.

103. Marching program: *Procession et Marche Militaire Saint-Roch, 375<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire*. (Ham-sur-Heure, 2013); On the formation of new l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches, see ROGER FOULON, *Marches militaires et folkloriques...*, p. 31. 104. ROGER FOULON, *Marches militaires et folkloriques...*, p. 68-69. 105. Notably on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the company, King Albert II granted the *Volontaires* the right to use the title 'royal' in their name.

<http://volontairesreunis.be/index.php/un-peu-d-histoire/l-histoire-de-la-compagnie>, accessed July 31, 2017.





*Marcher Alfred Liévin, of 'Les Vrai Sapeurs d'Ham-sur-Heure', 1956 (age 34). (source: Erik Hadley)*



*Marcher Alfred Liévin, of 'Les Vrai Sapeurs d'Ham-sur-Heure', 1963 (age 41) (source: Erik Hadley)*



Dame d'el Vaulx processional, the only march in Thuin with a verifiable historical pedigree dating to the Old Regime, was discontinued in 1975. Likely contributing to the decline were the anti-clerical and anti-traditional attitudes of the generation coming to age in the 1960s. The agreements reached with the clergy at the turn of the century, emphasizing discipline and respect, and the formalized, rigid marching structure, failed to inspire the modern, anti-establishment post-war generation<sup>106</sup>. During the same era, however, festivals that emphasized carnivalesque participation, such as Binche's Carnival or Mon's *Doudou*, increased in notoriety and popularity, leading organizers in Thuin and Ham-sur-Heure to consider changing the structure of the St. Roch marches<sup>107</sup>.

Pierre-Jean Foulon, a drummer in the *Sapeurs et Grenadiers* society in Thuin, directed revisions to the march in the early 1970s. His goal was to increase participatory accessibility, both by reducing cost and hierarchy for prospective marchers and developing interactivity for spectators. The event was extended to three days, starting with a *retraite aux flambeaux* procession through the town in which anyone could participate<sup>108</sup>. This innovation was borrowed from the Ham-sur-Heure march, which ended each day with the *retraite aux flambeaux*. In Thuin, the ritual was used to inaugurate the military march on Saturday night.

Sunday remained the standard processional march through the upper and lower towns with stops at notable or sacred locations along the way: the Tienne-Trappe St. Roch chapel, town *belfroi*, the *Au Marcheur* memorial, and the Notre Dame du Val church. The day finished with a review of the marching companies by government officials, St. Roch committee members, journalists and others guests.

On Monday, the traditional relic veneration and military mass was followed by a second march through the countryside. Crucially, the expanded event was truly a festival – *cantinières* returned, regiments founded drinking societies, and carnival rides and pop-up bars became commonplace. Interviews with members of several marching societies indicate internal drinking rituals, sometimes starting at dawn as members marched from home to home symbolically collecting one marcher at a time, often offering a toast at each house<sup>109</sup>. Foulon also introduced a new marching society with a different leadership structure that was much more informal and egalitarian than the established regiments, where seniority was central to leadership roles. His new group, simply called the "St. Roch Company", had no permanent leadership. Each year, officers were named shortly before the event. Costumes and weapons were rented rather than owned, reducing cost and opening up the ranks to those without generational ties to a

**106.** A similar process can be found in the Dolomites with the Carnival festival, including the Val di Fassa inhabitants "rediscovering" Carnival in the 1970s after a decline in popular interest the festival. There is also parallels with commercial interests changing dates and structure of the event to those in Wallonia. The Carnival in Val di Fassa became less vulgar, less time consuming (because of the ski season in the Alps) while simultaneously turned into a tourist attraction for the community. CESARE POPPI, "The political economy of tradition in the Ladin Carnival of the Val di Fassa", JEREMY BOISSEVAIN (ed.), *Revitalizing European Rituals*, London, 1992, p. 122-127. **107.** AURÉLIE BAROILLER & BENOÎT KANABUS, "La restauration de la Procession", *La Ducasse, rituelle de Mons*, Brussels, 2013, p. 98. **108.** ROGER FOULON, *Marches militaires et folkloriques...*, p. 110. **109.** Author interview with marchers (Thuin, 7/15/2015).

specific marching society. The St. Roch Company became extremely popular, eventually splitting into five separate groups within one company; all five regiments remain in the Thuin march today.

By the late 1980s, the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches recovered from the 70s doldrums<sup>110</sup>. The *Comité St. Roch* in Thuin developed a formalized structure for the companies limiting the participating local groups to fourteen and mandating standardization of marcher uniforms. In Thuin, most companies used Napoleonic-era uniforms and many preserved the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century *sapeur/grenadier* tradition. Other societies included *pompriers* and two groups of *zouaves* (one colonial French and the other Papal), youth societies, and the 'Belgian Volunteers of 1830'. The five regiments of the St. Roch Company rounded out the permanent invitees to the march. In addition to the officially sanctioned groups, 'foreign' invitations were issued annually. 'Foreign' could mean nearby towns like Ham-sur-Heure or from as far away as Switzerland or southern France.

Ham-sur-Heure's march follows a similar trend. In the 2013 march, seventeen companies participated. Of these, seven originated in the 'classical' 1866-1914 era, including *Les Vrais Sapeurs*, military bands and the turn of the century Papal *zouaves*. Eight more appeared between 1945-1990, including *Les Volontaires de la Révolution brabançonne* (1957). Finally,

two new groups were allowed entrance in the 2000s, including a Ham-sur-Heure company of *zouaves* in French colonial garb<sup>111</sup>. Thus less than half (41%) of the companies have a historical pedigree dating prior to 1914. Like Thuin, all marching groups in Ham-sur-Heure are required to conform to specific uniform standards for Revolutionary, 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Empire costumes, weapons, and flags.

Pursuit of historical accuracy has become, ironically, a polemical debate within the marching companies in recent years. The oldest companies developed costumes based on contemporary knowledge of historical uniforms as well as the availability and cost of materials. For example, while the historical *sapeurs* of the 1<sup>st</sup> Empire armies wore white aprons (*tabliers*) made of leather, marchers in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century typically wore cloth aprons, given the prohibitively high price of leather<sup>112</sup>. Over time, the cloth aprons were embroidered with detailed lacework (*tabliers brodés*) and the use of lace aprons would become a veritable and distinctive folkloric tradition in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse<sup>113</sup>. Since the 1980s, however, newly founded companies as well as participants interested in 'authentic' historical re-enactment have adopted the leather aprons distinctive of the 'real' 1<sup>st</sup> Empire *sapeur* uniform, leading to widespread debate and internal conflict amongst marchers as to what constitutes a proper costume for historical re-enactment<sup>114</sup>.

**110.** In this, one notes similarities to Industrial Britain with the intersection high levels of unemployment during the 1970s and the "resurgence of festivals" in the 1980s following the reconstruction of local cultural traditions in wake of economic decline; eventually the English festivals became tourist attractions. SUSAN WRIGHT, "Heritage' and critical history in the reinvention of mining festivals in North-east England", *Revitalizing European Rituals...* p. 20-42. **111.** *Ham-sur-Heure Marche Militaire Saint-Roch*, 2013 (Event pamphlet) Thuin, 2013, p. 6-39. **112.** DENISE POP, *Les tabliers des sapeurs...*, p. 181-183. **113.** *Idem*, p. 184-186. **114.** CÉLINE BOUCHAT, 'Le village magique' *Pluralité des engagements dans les Marches...*, p. 120; Denise Pop, *Les tabliers des sapeurs...*, p. 187.

## V. Modern Cultural Recognition

One of the earliest modern efforts commemorating the 19<sup>th</sup>-century marching tradition in l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse occurred at an international exposition of Walloon art held in Charleroi in 1911<sup>115</sup>. As part of the *Mouvement Wallon*, highlighting cultural traditions in the region, a "*Tournoi historique des Marches de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*" was held on 1 October<sup>116</sup>. Marching companies from various l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse communities assembled for a march through the streets of Charleroi. The *Gazette de Charleroi* reported the participation of 1,300 marchers from 22 companies across the region, including Gerpennes, Walcourt, and Fosses, as well as the St. Roch marchers from Ham-sur-Heure and Thuin<sup>117</sup>. Philippe Passelecq, the *Président d'Honneur* of the organizing committee for the *tournoi*, gave a speech before the assembled companies in which he voiced an early vision of the modern folkloric origin of the marches: armed escorts, "the majority of which go back to the year 1300", protecting religious processions against banditry in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse<sup>118</sup>. He then directly addressed the marchers: "You possess, in your souls, the cult of memory; you honor the traditions of your fathers; you are the conscientious continuation of deep-rooted habitudes of your

forbearers and we congratulate you on your perseverance; this is how we honor our ancestors"<sup>119</sup>. In 1930, during the centenary celebration of Belgium's independence, the Thuin St. Roch march, despite having no association with the 1830 Belgian revolution, was included as part of the festivities leading up to the September commemoration<sup>120</sup>. By 1939, Thuin's march was unquestioningly a central contributor to local folkloric and tourist life. An article in *Le Rappel* noted this attachment, stating: "This military march forms part of our Wallonian folklore that we must maintain as our national patrimony, like that of *Les Gilles* of Binche or *Le Doudou* of Mons"<sup>121</sup>.

Cultural preservation and standardization efforts increased dramatically after 1945. In 1960, a historical association dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the saint-military marches was founded: *l'Association des Marches Folkloriques de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse (AMFESM)*. The governing association provided guidelines, promotion and official status to "authorized" marches with historical pedigrees. The association "guarantees the marches' authenticity and preserves their traditions" and certifies 66 marches<sup>122</sup>. Marchers began commemorating themselves – the AMFESM installed a memorial and statue to l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marchers

115. DEMOULIN and KUPPER, *Histoire de la Wallonie...*, p. 269. 116. ROGER GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 202. 117. *Gazette de Charleroi*, 2 October 1911. Id., *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I...*, p. 203-205. 118. Idem. GOLARD, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I*, p. 205. The article notably reports that each company marched with a *cantinière*. 119. Idem. 120. The marching program title in 1930 reads *Fêtes du centenaire – Procession St. Roch and Grande Marche militaire*, St. Roch March event pamphlet, Thuin, 1930, p. 1. This example of using an invented tradition for nationalistic or patriotic purposes follows the standard argument set forth in HOBBSBORN and RANGER's work, *The Invention of Tradition*, New York, 1983. 121. *Le Rappel*, 17 May 1939, MICHEL CONREUR, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II...*, p. 58. 122. PIERRE ARCQ and MARCEL LEROY, *Les Arpenteurs de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, Liège, 2014, p. 16.; Foulon, p. 119, Authenticity becomes a serious issue when so many of the marches and marching companies were founded in the 1960s-2000s.

dedicated to *Au Marcheur* in Thuin in 1964<sup>123</sup>. Also in 1960, the *Fédération des Groupes Folkloriques Wallon* was founded, following a folkloric exposition at the 1958 World Fair in Brussels. The association operates in a similar fashion as the *AMFESM* with regard to all Wallonian folkloric activities (promotion, protection and certification), and includes the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches in their list of 'authentic' Wallonian cultural expressions. In 1984, the governmental agency *Conseil Supérieur des Arts et Traditions populaires et du Folklore de la Communauté française* granted the *brevet d'authenticité* to fifteen marches, including the Thuin and Ham-sur-Heure St. Roch marches. Two years later, the *Musée des Marches Folkloriques* opened its doors in nearby Gerpinnes. The museum's purpose: "to promote the study and diffusion of knowledge relative to the history of folklore marches"<sup>124</sup>. That same year, the Belgian government passed a folkloric cultural preservation decree, recognizing the "*chefs-d'oeuvre du patrimoine oral et immatériel*"<sup>125</sup>. In 2004, six marches from l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse, including those of Thuin and Ham-sur-Heure, were recognized<sup>126</sup>. Finally, on 5 December 2012, UNESCO granted official designation to the marches as "cultural patrimony of humanity" and issued the following statement:

The l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches are one of the major elements of cultural identity in the region... They commemorate the dedication of

village churches that honor the specific saint dedicated to each religious edifice. All in the village participate... The marches play a key role as a factor of integration and *rapprochement* between men and women of diverse backgrounds and promote social cohesion<sup>127</sup>.

Modern commemoration of the marches romanticizes old controversies, such as the clergy's protestations against the *cantinières*. Marching historians Pierre Arcq and Marcel Leroy dismissed this historical tension noting, "A *cantinière* might offer a 'little taste'. Don't refuse! It's a testimony of affection, a gauge of friendship, a sign that you are accepted. *La petite goutte*: it's a present, an homage, it's the 'orange of the Gille'"<sup>128</sup>. The presence of alcohol and revelry are no longer contentious issues, but rather function as acts of ritualistic inclusiveness for marchers and spectators.

In the present day, the carnivalesque is central to the march experience: the refined contingents of VIPs, clergy and organizers coexist with the bright lights and noise of mechanical rides and concession stands. Street bars play loud dance music and stay open into the late hours. *Cantinières* accompany virtually all the marching companies, selling alcohol to spectators along the marching route. At Ham-sur-Heure, carnival rides and games, beer stands and concessions surround the St. Martin church in the town square. VIPs gather at the chateau for a refined champagne recep-

123. NICOLAS MAIRY, *Marcheur de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, no. 212, June 2014, p. 20-22.

124. <http://www.museedesmarches.be>, accessed Feb. 01, 2016. 125. Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2-7 December 2013, Periodic report no. 00812/Belgium. 126. PIERRE ARCQ and MARCEL LEROY, *Les Arpenteurs...*, p. 9-10. 127. *Idem*, p. 9. 128. *Idem*. The authors references the prestige of the *Gilles*, native-born sons in Binche, who in masked costumes with giant plumed hats, have the privilege of throwing oranges to (or at) spectators at the Carnival.

tion and meal, review the marching companies in the Court of Honor, and participate in a disciplined ceremony distributing service medals for individual marchers. Afterwards, dispelling with formal ceremony, these same VIPs, spectators and marchers crowd into rooms where marching bands play music. It is a celebratory atmosphere characterized by drinking and singing for hours.

The act of constructing a linear and interconnected history for the marches continues in the present day. The 2015 Ham-sur-Heure program declares continuity with the Old Regime, referencing the origins of the march to the 1630s plague in the region and a “purely religious processional” in 1640. The military aspect is justified through a discussion on security concerns in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, notably a 1695 edict by the Bishop of Liège authorizing an escort to the processional. Yet there is no mention of the collapse of the processional in 1794, the cholera outbreak or the re-establishment of the saint march in 1866. In fact, the only mention of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a reference to the “passage of Napoleonic troops in the countryside during 1815” as a means of explaining the uniforms today<sup>129</sup>.

If the modern marches lack a verifiable connection to the Old Regime saint processions, does that mean that they are not authentic expressions of local cultural identity and

tradition? Edward Muir defines ritual as an act that “appeals to the senses” which is both repetitive and seeks an emotional response<sup>130</sup>. Emile Durkheim similarly stressed the role that public rituals play in communal identity, acting as a mechanism for “social self-worship”<sup>131</sup>. Additionally, rituals are constantly under revision and manipulation. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century history of the marches, with struggles over church approval due to alcohol consumption, *cantinières* and disruptive behavior, as well as direction by Liberal, anti-clerical and business-minded communal governments, indicate how countervailing perceptions as to the purpose and character of the public event hovered over the reimagined processions.

While the marches retain significance in local historical memory, yet have changed focus and structure over time, then authenticity is surely less about outward appearance than emotive appeal and community identification. In this interpretation, the marches perform authentic expressions of local culture, in so much as they remain relevant to those participating and observing<sup>132</sup>. The evolution of the Thuin St. Roch march reveals a conscious communal act of construction, which, like 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels and newspapers in France and Germany, projects a vision of an imagined community<sup>133</sup>. Unlike the invented rituals and traditions that Hobsbawm and Gellner asserted were instrumental in the construction (rather than reflec-

129. *Ham-sur-Heure Marche Militaire Saint-Roch*, 2015 (Event pamphlet) Thuin, 2015, p. 2.

130. EDWARD MUIR, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, 1997, p. 2. 131. ERNEST GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism...*, p. 56. 132. Robert Darnton observed that rituals often function as model or mirror, either modeling an idealized form of society or mirroring a community as it was understood by community members themselves, providing a declarative, rather than instructional, purpose to the ritual. ROBERT DARTON, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, New York, 1985, p. 122-124. 133. BENEDICT ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities...*, p. 25-36. For instance, a common expression one hears in at l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches is, “Les Marches, dans la région, on a ça dans le sang”

(CÉLINE BOUCHAT, ‘Le village magique’ ..., p. 113.)

tion) of national culture, the St. Roch marches, in privileging a local identity that emphasizes both historic regional and trans-national traditions, undermine the very notion of nation-state construction as integral to the development of 'invented traditions'.

Indeed, as Muir asserted, channeling Clifford Geertz: "rituals do not function to create social solidarity at all, but to provide enacted narratives that allow people to interpret their own experience... rituals produce a story people tell themselves about themselves"<sup>134</sup>. Jay Winter similarly noted, "Historical remembrance borrows from [familial and liturgical remembrance] but uses them to construct a story about a shared past, the shape and content of which tell a group of people who they are and from whence they have come"<sup>135</sup>. Muir, Geertz and Winter's observations on the use of ritual and performance to assert cultural identity is useful in considering the communal significance of the military marches. They re-enact a cohesive but unstable memory, which reinforces wider historical narratives proclaiming a particular vision of local identity. Symbols associated with the marches, including St. Roch statues and chapels, city *belfroi* or the 'Court of Honor,' serve as props on a public stage and stand as permanent physical reminders of this communal folkloric declaration. Marcher genealogies overlap with public commemoration, as children march in the same companies (and even the same costumes) as parents and grandparents. The marches are not dead rituals, observed but misunderstood; rather they remain vibrant ceremonial events that simul-

taneously declare and validate *Thudinien* and *Bourquis* cultural identity. A recent publication commemorating the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches emphasizes the potential for regenerative communal attachment, as well as the homage paid to social hierarchies, echoing Passelecq's speech a century earlier:

[Marching] renews the marcher's relationship with his community. For several days, he is proud to march amongst his equals, with devotion, simplicity and humility. The marcher marches like his ancestors; to the rhythm of fifes and drums, he rediscovers his roots. When he fires a salvo, he renders honor to both saints and local authorities<sup>136</sup>.

This is not to say that there is universal consensus on the act, meaning or communal regenerative capacity of marching. Like the conflicts over *cantinières*, firearms, and dancing during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, performing history in the present day can as easily complicate or problematize community relationships as it can renew social bonds. The current debate over the *sapeur* aprons exemplifies the potential for conflict: should marchers don the traditional embroidered late 19<sup>th</sup> century lace garments (*tabliers brodés*) or, obeying the new stringent rules regarding the requirements for 1<sup>st</sup> Empire costumes, should aprons be made of leather? Which is more authentic?

In addition, the rising cost of uniforms which has resulted from increasingly elaborate costuming requirements in modern marches threatens to exclude those in the community

134. MUIR, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe...*, p. 5. 135. JAY WINTER, "Introduction: The performance of the past: memory, history, identity", KAREN TILMANS, FRANK VAN VREE and JAY WINTER, eds., *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe*, Amsterdam, 2010, p. 15. 136. PIERRE ARCQ and MARCEL LEROY, *Les Arpenteurs...*, p. 7.



who cannot afford them, as well as alienate marchers opposed to 'authentic' 1<sup>st</sup> Empire revisions<sup>137</sup>. Newcomers to a community may find the march both intimidating and exclusionary, as it reinforces longstanding local attachments and marcher genealogies. Failure to engage in or validate certain ritualized traditions – such as refusing an offer of *la goutte* – can result in alienation or accusations that, "you can't understand the March!"<sup>138</sup>. Promotion of the presumed historical heritage of certain marches (such as "*Les Grandes Marches*") over smaller or newer marches, particularly those founded more recently, has the potential to create hierarchies and rivalries within the wider l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse patrimonial tradition. The same is true for marcher companies: those recently established lack the historical pedigree or privileges of long-established societies such as the *Sapeurs et Grenadiers* in Thuin.

Episodes of violence also mar claims that the marches are positive, unifying experiences. In Thuin in 2004, Julien Coster, a local young man drawn to the festive late-night café atmosphere, was stabbed to death in the early morning hours in an altercation with a spectator from outside Thuin<sup>139</sup>. With his tragic death, a second stone monument was installed in 2014 just down the road from *Au Marcheur*<sup>140</sup>. The monument commemorates a life cut short and intrinsically ties the popular experience of the event, one that uncomfortably highlights the consequences of alcohol consumption and uncontrolled emotions of the late-night rever-

ies, to the aggregated history of the St. Roch march. Coster's memorial serves as an antithesis to *Au Marcheur*, in the sense that the perpetual public reminder of the murder undermines wider claims of communal virtue and renewal associated with the event.

St. Roch, a relatively minor figure in saint commemoration between 1794-1865, became synonymous with the cultural identity of several l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse communities by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The St. Roch military marches evolved from a popular response to cholera in the form of a traditional Catholic ritual, to secular military marches commemorating the Napoleonic wars, while maintaining the trappings of saint processions. In Thuin, the rite linked the town to famous events including plague outbreaks, 17<sup>th</sup>-century wars and the Napoleonic era, offering the community a familiar historical narrative. Fading Belloguet posters and old pictures of marchers line the walls of cafés and private homes; the tourism bureau places the march foremost as a local attraction; and out-of-town family and friends vacation in Thuin during the festival. Oversight organizations ensure standardization and historical continuity, though there is no obvious standard for enforcing historical authenticity when the ritual itself is a largely an invented tradition and enforcement could actually impede folkloric traditions such as the *tabliers brodés*. As Ernest Renan noted, "Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation"<sup>141</sup>. This assertion applies to formation of local identity as well.

137. CÉLINE BOUCHAT, '*Le village magique*' ..., p. 120. 138. *Idem*, "Savoir y être. Production de localité par l'engagement dans un folklore festif", p. 15. 139. *La Dernière Heure*, 23 May 2004. <http://www.dhnet.be/archive/le-meurtre-de-thuin-resolu-51b82b21e4b-0de6db9a00302> 140. *La Nouvelle Gazette*, 28 September 2014. <http://www.lanouvellegazette.be/1111094/article/2014-09-26/thuin-la-stele-pour-julien-coster-enfin-posee>

141. ERNEST RENAN, *Qu'est-ce c'est une nation?*, Paris, 1882, p. 7-8.

Indeed, commemoration of the marches has increased dramatically in recent decades, a period during which the very concept of Belgian nationality has become increasingly problematized by regional linguistic identities. A full spectrum of static commemorative structures surround the marches, including a marching museum, chapels, memorials, organizing committees, folkloric associations, regulatory marching societies, and recognition by regional, national and international entities, including UNESCO. The annual marching performance offers a sensory demonstration of suspended time; participants are immersed in a repetitive communal memory that projects four centuries of local history. The authenticity of performance is reinforced through the use of commemorative celebrations, which allow

communities to “perform the past” using a historical pedigree of authenticity<sup>142</sup>. While the ritualized aspects of the march are largely modern constructions, the underlying themes remain historically similar to those of the 18<sup>th</sup> century processions: saint worship at a sacred time of year, volunteer military companies, declarations of local hierarchies and identity, and tensions with elites over sacred and profane behavior in ritual commemoration. Thus, the Old Regime rogations protecting the parish returned as Napoleonic marching companies carrying a St. Roch statue. All of this suggests that, despite the gaps, inventions and revisions, the St. Roch marches of l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse remain a meaningful and relevant, if perpetually evolving and contested, manifestation of regional historical commemoration.

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142. JAY WINTER, *The performance of the past ...*, p. 17.