Books and Border Crossings in the Age of Enlightenment

Roland Mortier was a dix-huitiémiste sans frontières. He loved literature, history, art, and the play of ideas in all fields of inquiry. He paid little heed to disciplinary boundaries. As a scholar of the Enlightenment, his interests spilled across national borders. He was cosmopolitan, very much at home in many countries and many languages. I learned to appreciate this aspect of his character and career in 1986, when I drove with him and his devoted wife Loyse from Brussels to Budapest, where we were to join our Hungarian colleagues in preparing the next congress of the International Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies. The congress promised to be a major event, not merely because it would attract hundreds of scholars from around the world and many fields of study, but also because it would take place for the first time in a country located in the Soviet sphere. Although Hungary was known to be relatively liberal and its minister of culture was to be one of our hosts, the Cold War still defined the boundaries of international relations and even of our personal views of the world. It still inspired fear.

When we reached the border, Roland was visibly nervous. His hands shook as he gave the passports to the hostile-looking border guard. The car was searched thoroughly, and it had to be driven over an elaborate apparatus with mirrors so that the guards could be sure that nothing was being smuggled underneath it from its chassis. After a long, tense delay, we were waved on towards Budapest, where we received a warm welcome. At dinner that evening, Roland, now relaxed, exchanged a few words with his hosts—in Hungarian! They joked about the happy era before nationalism tore Europe apart, a time two hundred years ago when Brussels and Budapest were sister cities and could be embraced in the ample bosom of their common sovereign, Maria Theresa. Everything came off perfectly. Thanks to Roland's diplomacy and his guiding hand as president of ISECS, the Congress of 1987 turned out to be a great success. Cosmopolitanism, the spirit of Enlightenment, triumphed. Yet I never forgot the anxiety Roland exhibited at the border of the Iron Curtain. Border crossings are not easy.

With that thought in mind, I would like to pay homage to Roland with an essay about how books crossed the borders of France in the age of Enlightenment. Owing to censorship, the monopoly of the Communauté des libraires et des imprimeurs de Paris, and the active book police, most works of the Enlightenment had to be printed outside the kingdom in publishing houses that extended all the way from Amsterdam, The Hague, Brussels, and Liège through the Rhineland to Basel, Neuchâtel, Lausanne, and Geneva. They were smuggled across the border and distributed through underground networks of booksellers and peddlers. By 1750, the growth of the reading public and the demand for illegal literature had transformed this peripheral trade into a major industry, which produced vast amounts of pirated works as well as everything that could not get past the French censorship. Scholars have appreciated the importance of this aspect of book history ever since the publication of <u>Le Commerce des livres prohibés à Paris de 1750 à 1789</u> by J.-P. Belin in 1913. But they have never had much information about the most important link in the chain of distribution—that is, smuggling. Although the occasional smuggler turns up in police archives, little is known about smuggling as a systematic activity operated on a large scale by professionals.

Smuggling was an important industry in the border towns of Switzerland during the eighteenth century—and it continued to thrive until quite recently: I was informed in the 1960s that Swiss peasants backpacked cheap cigarettes across clandestine mountain trails to France and Italy, where taxes made cigarettes especially expensive, and that the loads had a standard weight of 40 kilos, about 80 pounds, exactly as the book packs did among the smugglers of the eighteenth century. The following reproduction of a postcard, probably from the interwar years, provides a glimpse of men at this kind of work, shortly before it became obsolete.

To picture smugglers two to three centuries ago may not be possible, but their operations can be reconstructed in minute detail, thanks to the archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), one of the most important publishers of French books outside France. The STN used various techniques to get its pirated and prohibited books across the border during the 1770s and 1780s. Books were normally shipped as unbound sheets gathered into "bales" ("balles") weighing 500 pounds or more. The bales were sealed by customs officials in stations at the border ("bureaux d'entrée") and then were forwarded for inspection by officers of a booksellers' guild ("chambre syndicale") in a designated city ("ville d'entrée") farther along their route. With the help of bribery, quick-witted shipping agents ("commissionnaires"), and well-placed allies within the guilds, the STN could count on superficial inspections. It then was able to slip the sheets of illegal works between those of books that aroused no suspicion, and it could send its shipments along the normal commercial routes. But it often preferred to avoid the risk of an inspection that might go wrong, especially if a state official ("inspecteur de la librairie") accompanied the syndics of the guild in picking through the bales; and when it shipped particularly dangerous works—atheistic tracts, political libels and pornographic works known in the trade as "livres philosophiques"—it needed to steer clear of the border stations and

chambres syndicales altogether. In such cases, it relied on professional smugglers. Several of them appear at crucial junctures in the stories that run through the STN archives. One especially rich dossier, that of Guillon l'aîné from Clairvaux-les-Lacs high up in the Jura Mountains on the French side of the border, illustrates the way they did business.

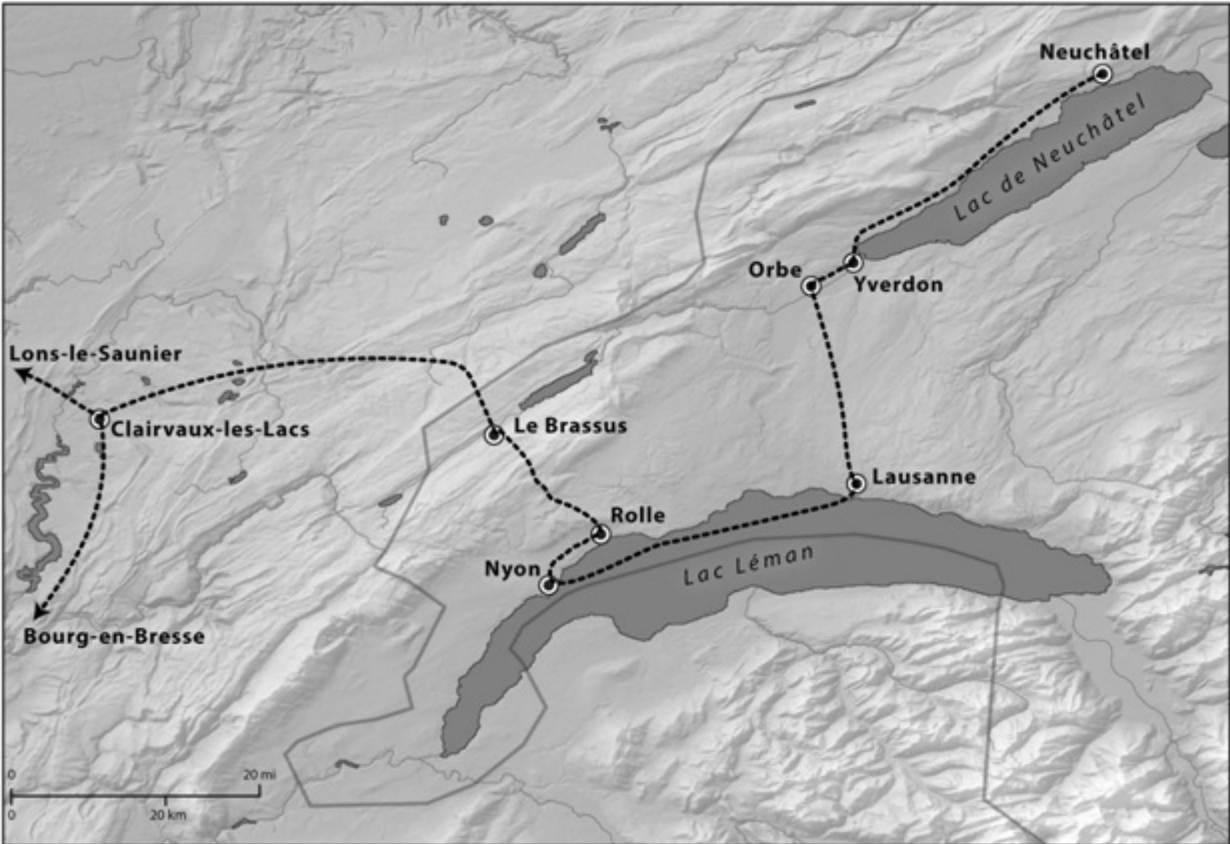
They actually were businessmen, entrepreneurs with a fair amount of capital, who calculated profits and risks with care. Far from carrying loads of books on their own backs, they hired teams of peasants to do the labor. They remained in the background, organizing operations and handling finances. They kept careful accounts and wrote highly literate business letters. In dealing with publishers, they negotiated with considerable skill and drew up formal contracts. And when they referred to their trade in their commercial correspondence, they called it "insurance" ("assurance") rather than "smuggling" ("contrebande"). The terminology may strike the modern reader as pretentious or odd, but it corresponded to what they did. They guaranteed to get books from a depot near the border in Switzerland to a clandestine warehouse in France. Their workers, called "porters" ("porteurs" or occasionally "colporteurs"), were local peasants who knew the country well and could carry packs along obscure mountain trails to the designated location. But the men had to dodge squadrons of the Ferme Générale (the tax-collecting corporation that ran customs for the state) who patrolled the border. If caught, the porters could be severely punished. At the worst, they might be branded with the letters GAL for "galérien" and sentenced to nine years in the galleys of Toulon. While they went to prison, the insurer would reimburse the STN for the value of the books, which would be confiscated and pulped.

The STN took up this business-like approach to smuggling in response to a suggestion from Robert, Gauthier et Vernarel, a bookseller in Bourg-en-Bresse whose clients were hungry for illegal literature. In a letter of July 22, 1772, Jacques Robert, the senior partner in the firm, suggested that the STN seek out "assureurs" such as those who smuggled calicoes ("indiennes") from Swiss factories into France for 20 to 25 livres per hundredweight.[1] The French had tried to keep cheap calicoes out of the kingdom in order to protect the domestic silk industry, and the STN could get all the information it needed by consulting some nearby manufacturers. (In fact, Abram Bosset de Luze, who joined the STN as a partner in 1777, was also part owner of an important calico factory located near Neuchâtel.) Two months later Robert wrote that he had found just the man for the job: Guillon l'ainé, the "commissionnaire" in Clairvaux-les-Lacs, who could get shipments from Nyon on Lac Léman to Lons-le-Saunier in the French Jura for 12 percent of the value of the merchandise. Robert, Gauthier, et Vernarel would split the cost of the insurance with the STN, and soon they would be doing business on a large

scale.

It was an attractive prospect. The little Jura village of Clairvaux-les-Lacs could serve as the thin edge of a wedge that would pry open markets not only in Lons-le-Saunier, but also in Bourg-en-Bresse, Chalon-sur-Saône, Lyon, Dijon, and even Paris, provided that the STN and Guillon could coordinate the work of wagon drivers and shipping agents along the routes. Once inside France, the bales of books could be forwarded to the STN's customers as domestic shipments, avoiding the heavy import duty on books: 28 livres per hundredweight in 1772. They also would be spared inspection in the chambres syndicales of "villes d'entrée" such as Lyon, and therefore they could contain prohibited "livres philosophiques" as well as the less dangerous variety of pirated books. By mid-October 1772, the STN was corresponding directly with Guillon, and by mid-November he had received its first shipment.

At that point, he and the STN had to fine tune the details of their agreement, which ultimately took the form of a written contract negotiated at a meeting in Neuchâtel. Shipments were normally financed through a c.o.d. (collect on delivery) system, whereby each middleman, usually a shipping agent or "commissionnaire," paid for all the costs accumulated up to that point and then forwarded the goods to the next agent, who would reimburse him. The STN sent its books for Guillon in packs ("ballots" rather than large bales or "balles") suitable for being carried on the backs of porters. It dispatched the load by wagon along the Lac de Neuchâtel to the town of Orbe, then south to Ouchy on Lac Léman, where they were loaded on barges and transported to Nyon near the Genevan end of the lake, then loaded again onto wagons and delivered via Rolle to Le Brassus, a village high up in the Jura, which served as the departure point for Guillon's porters. An innkeeper named Rochat stored the packs until the porters gathered at the inn for the hazardous trek across the mountain to Clairvaux-les-Lacs, Guillon's headquarters at an inn, Aux Treize Cantons, run by a Mme Chapuis. After their arrival, Guillon would pay the porters, combine the packs into large bales, and forward them to Robert, Gauthier et Vernarel in Lons-le-Saunier or to their principal bookshop in Bourg-en-Bresse. Guillon and Robert warned the STN to take care with its communications: its letters to Guillon should be hidden inside an outer letter addressed to Mme Chapuis; and in notifying Robert of a shipment, it should put only "R.G.V." (for Robert, Gauthier et Vernarel) on the invoice, "à cause du risque."



This schematic map shows the main stops in the route of Guillon's smuggling operation.

Despite these complications, the first shipment arrived without difficulty at Clairvaux-les-Lacs, but it had accumulated so much in shipping charges that Guillon did not clear any profit. He therefore wrote that he would have to increase the insurance rate from 12 to 16 percent of the value of the merchandise. To understand his strategy, it is necessary to calculate the cost of the constraints within the system. The STN set a standard wholesale price for its books at one sou per sheet. An unbound octavo volume of 320 pages would contain 20 sheets and would therefore cost 20 sous or one livre tournois to a retail bookseller. Reams composed of 500 sheets normally weighed 16 pounds (poids de marc). So it would take 6 reams (3,000 sheets) to make a hundredweight or quintal, and the hundredweight of printed sheets would have a value of 150 livres. Compared with many imported goods, books had relatively little intrinsic value: their price per pound (wholesale and unbound) was typically one and a half times their weight.

In setting his price, Guillon also had to take into account the import duty that the French levied on books. If he charged nearly as much as the cost of the duty, the STN would be likely to ship its books through normal

channels, pay the duty, and count on its allies in the chambres syndicales to do a superficial job of inspecting the bales. In 1772, the duty was 28 livres per hundredweight (technically 20 livres plus a surtax of 8 sous per livre, which made a total of 28 livres, a very steep tax.) That amounted to 18.5 percent (28/150) of the value of the merchandise. By setting his rate at 16 percent, Guillon kept it just far enough below the cost of the duty to make his insurance service worthwhile.

But he had miscalculated how much his porters could carry relative to the value of the merchandise, probably because he had more experience with calicoes than with books. He had thought that a man could carry a load worth 300 livres; but at the STN's price, that would have come to about 200 pounds. Under normal conditions, porters hauled packs that weighed 80 pounds maximum and that contained books worth about 120 livres. So Guillon had badly underestimated how much labor it would take to get a shipment across the border—that is, how much he would have to pay his porters. He did not mention their wages, but 3 sous per pound was a typical rate. In a letter to the STN of October 19, 1787, for example, Jérémie Witel—who by then had set up business as a printer and bookseller near the French border in Les Verrières—offered his service on the following terms, which were meant to undercut the STN's usual smuggler-insurer at that time, Ignace Faivre of Pontarlier:

> Je me chargerais volontiers pour votre maison de l'introduction de vos expéditions en France, et je réponds de l'événement jusqu'à Pontarlier. Je ne puis le faire à [here there is a hold in the paper; the missing words probably were "moins de"] 15 livres du quintal, parce que je ne veux rien hasarder par la [another hole occurs here] Pion peut vous dire que je paye 3 sous la livre au porteur. Vous pouvez compter sur l'exactitude et la plus grande célérité, ce que vous n'aviez pas avec Faivre.

At 3 sous per pound, an 80-pound load would bring a porter 12 livres in wages—good pay for two or three days of work, although the risk was commensurately great. At an insurance rate of 16 percent of the value, the load, valued at 120 livres, would cost 19 livres, leaving the insurer with a profit of 7 livres. Those figures are approximate, but they are close enough to explain the economics of "insurance." Guillon could sustain his business at an insurance rate of 16 percent, but his initial proposal, 12 percent, was not feasible. He therefore raised his rate, and the STN agreed. It also promised to suit the needs of his porters by making its bundles narrower and longer.

Having made these adjustments, the STN and Guillon continued to

work together throughout the winter and spring of 1773. Complications set in, because Guillon pursued several other enterprises and was constantly on the road—to Lyon, to the fair in Beaucaire, and in June to Neuchâtel itself, where he and the STN agreed on further arrangements. Clairvaux-les-Lacs merely served as his base of operations. In March he informed the STN that four packs had arrived safely and soon would be forwarded to Robert, Gauthier, et Vernarel in Lons-le-Saunier. But everything took longer than he had anticipated. The snow had made the mountain trails hard going for his men. They probably used passes about 800 meters high along the range dominated by Mont Tendre, which rose to 1,679 meters, and therefore Guillon asked that the STN reduce the weight of its packs from 80 to 70 pounds. He also said that he had moved to Au Sauvage, another inn in Clairvaux-les-Lacs, and that he had taken on an associate, a young man named Joseph Janod, to look after the shipments.

Unfortunately, Janod was not much of a letter writer. The STN sent him notices of shipment after shipment and received no replies. It finally complained in a letter to Guillon that it did not know where the packs were: "Nous nous voyons avec beaucoup de peine dans une grande inquiétude causée par son silence, ce qui est (qu'il nous permette de dire) très irrégulier pour des faits de cette nature." Writing letters was a crucial aspect of long-distance shipping, especially in the case of illegal books, because publishers and their customers had to be able to track each stage of the journey and to alert the middlemen along the way. When the STN sent off shipments to booksellers, it notified them with a letter containing an invoice ("lettre d'avis" and "facture"), and it also dispatched letters to the main shipping agents who would pay the wagon drivers and forward the goods to the next stop.[2] In activating Guillon's smuggling system, it sent streams of letters to Robert, Gauthier et Vernarel, the booksellers located in Lons-le-Saunier and Bourg-en-Bresse; to Nicole et Gaillard, the key shipping agent in Nyon, who was to forward the packs to Le Brassus, where they would be stored by the innkeeper Rochat; and to Janod, who would arrange for the smugglers to haul the packs from Rochat's inn to Guillon's depot in Clairvaux-les-Lacs, where he would repack them as bales and ship them on to Lons-le-Saulnier or Bourg-en-Bresse.

Nicole et Gaillard, a seasoned expediter and careful correspondent, reported in March 1773 that they had relayed 13 packs to Le Brassus, but they did not know what had become of 7 of them, because they had received no word from Janod. Unnerved by a continuous lack of information, the STN sent one of its clerks to investigate the situation at Clairvaux-les-Lacs. He reported that Janod knew nothing about the missing packs. The STN then sent an angry letter to Janod, reproaching him for his silence and poor service. He replied that his porters must be at fault, for he had not been able to recruit "des gens habiles dans ce

métier. Les gens à qui nous avions donné commission de les prendre nous ont trompés. Ainsi il faut nous donner le temps de faire d'autres connaissances." Eventually, Nicole et Gaillard located the packs in the village of Burtigny, half way up the mountain to Le Brassus, where the porters had abandoned them, because they could not make further headway through the snow. Nicole et Gaillard reclaimed the packs in July and shipped them through Geneva, but after a long delay and at great expense.

Janod's complaints about his porters resulted from a problem far more serious than poor communications. Guillon explained it at length in a letter written during a stopover in Clairvaux-les-Lacs on April 6:

> Malgré tous les soins et diligences possibles de nos colporteurs, deux se sont laissés prendre avec leurs charges, qui sont celles marquées MM nº 24, AD nº 28 ["marques" written on the outside of shipments were used to identify them.] Dans ce dernier est renfermé 6 Questions sur l'Encyclopédie, avec quatre L'An 2440....Pour la marchandise, il n'y faut plus penser, et quant aux hommes, étant bien en danger d'être condamnés aux galères, parce que l'évêque de Saint-Claude a pris le fait en main. Nous fâchant beaucoup de cet accident, parce que c'est le chef de nos colporteurs. Cependant, nous faisons tous les efforts possibles pour les faire sortir. Nous employons le vert et le sec. Je ne sais si nous y réussirons.

If the confiscated packs had merely contained pirated books, Guillon explained, he could have intervened to get his porters released from jail. Prohibited books were another matter. Because one pack contained two highly illegal works, the porters stood a good chance of being condemned to the galleys. Guillon claimed that the STN should have warned him about shipments with prohibited works so that his men could abandon their packs and run for it when they were in danger of being caught by the border patrol. Although the bishop of St. Claude had threatened to demand severe punishment, the smugglers were released ten weeks later, as the STN learned from Robert. But the incident made it harder for Guillon and Janod to recruit new teams of porters, especially as the leader of the old team had been one of the pair sent to prison.

The next recruits proved untrustworthy—or at least that was Janod's explanation of why the seven packs had been abandoned en route to Le Brassus when the snow proved to be too deep. Offended by the continuous reproaches in the letters he received from the STN—which, meanwhile, had to cope with the complaints from its own customers who had not received

their shipments—he wrote that he would leave the resolution of its difficulties up to Guillon. For his part, Guillon explained in a letter written from Beaucaire on July 20 that he had attempted to reconstruct the route from Le Brassus, using another group of porters. But they scattered after learning that the guards had planned to ambush them during a night-time border crossing. He also had to give up hope that Janod could take charge of any more operations: "Quel désagrément pour moi d'avoir eu affaire avec un jeune homme comme celui-là." And finally he had to settle with the STN for the two packs that had been seized during the arrest of his most reliable smugglers.

Guillon tried to evade reimbursing the STN for the value of the packs on the grounds that it had not warned him that one of them contained forbidden books. But the STN would have none of that argument. The whole purpose of the insurance, it objected, was to protect it from loss incurred by confiscation, whatever the nature of the books. Guillon conceded the point, stressing his integrity in business affairs: "Nous faisons profession d'honnête homme, et nous la remplissons du mieux qu'il nous est possible." Moreover, he still hoped to do business with the STN, because as he assured it in October, he had reorganized his smuggling operation, which was working well for other publishers. The STN replied that it would be ready to resume shipments once it had received compensation for its loss, a matter of 240 livres. Guillon finally settled the account on October 1, 1774 after several months of disagreement about the exact sum that he owed. He insisted until the end on his respectability as a businessman: "Il semblait, sans doute, Messieurs, que vous aviez une méfiance terrible sur mon compte....Cela me faisait beaucoup de peine....Je serais fâché de vous faire tort d'un denier." But by then the STN had found a better route into France.

Guillon's dossier in the archives ends at that point. What conclusions can one draw from it? Smuggling as practiced by Guillon was a highly professional enterprise, aptly called insurance, whose profits and losses were calculated with mathematical precision. To the insurer, books were the same as any other commodity, such as calicoes. But to make the system work, the activities of a dozen or more persons had to be coordinated, and the human material often proved recalcitrant. After the packs left on wagons from Neuchâtel, middlemen had to be ready to forward them all along the route—from Olive in Ouchy to Nicole et Galliard in Nyon, Rochat in Le Brassus, Janod in Clairvaux-les-Lacs, and shipping agents all the way to the shipment's final destination in a bookshop in France. Things could go wrong at any point, especially at the border between Le Brassus and Clairvaux-les-Lacs. That hazardous leg of the journey required teams of porters who had to summon up a certain degree of daring. They set out over mountain trails with eighty-pound packs on

their backs; carried the loads over high passes, often through deep layers of snow; risked ambushes from flying squadrons of the border patrol; and, if captured, faced the prospect of being branded by the public hangman and condemned to the galleys. Their employer assumed a different kind of risk. If the peddlers' loads were confiscated, he would have to reimburse his customers for the value of the merchandise, but that loss, he calculated, would be offset by substantial profits. The tone of the insurer's letters corresponded to the business-like character of his enterprise. What the porters endured cannot be known. It left no evidence in the archives.

Robert Darnton

[1] Archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel, Bibliothèque publique et universitaire, Neuchâtel, Switzerland. The following discussion is based on the dossiers of Guillon l'aîné and Robert et Gauthier in the STN archives. The documents and a great deal of related manuscript material can be consulted on my open-access website: www.robertdarnton.org.

[2] I have discussed the commercial conventions and paperwork involved in shipping books in "La Société typographique de Neuchâtel et la librairie française: un survol des documents," L'Edition neuchâteloise au siècle des Lumières. La Société typographique de Neuchâtel (1769-1789), Michel Schlup, ed. (Neuchâtel, 2002), pp. 211-232.