The Great Stroke of Stanley Faye

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Stanley Faye's works on the privateering activities of Pierre and Jean Laffite contain inexplicable contradictions and reversals. In this piece the author will point up some of these reversals and suggest possible explanations for these blunders.

In 1928 after years of prodigious research, Stanley Faye wrote *Privateers of the Gulf* which exists today in manuscript form at the University of Texas and has recently been published in book form. He was unsuccessful in getting the 429 page manuscript accepted for publication as an historical document. In desperation, or at least exasperation, he wrote a fictional chapter, inserted it into the manuscript and attempted to get the whole published as fiction through the influence of his friend J. Frank Dobie. In a letter to Dobie he described his fictional chapter as horrible; one cannot disagree. The chapter is totally out of place, inappropriate, annoying and distracting. He took care that this chapter should be understood as fiction. This attempt at fiction was a pathetic gesture. Dobie was apparently not impressed and could not have had the manuscript published as fiction even if he tried. There is no evidence that he tried to get it published. Faye sent the manuscript to Dobie in 1934 and in 1943 it was given to the University of Texas by the Dobie trust.

The manuscript reveals a detailed knowledge of the political and economic interaction and intrigues between the United States, Louisiana, Spain, Spanish possessions in North America and the Baratarian privateers, especially Jean and Pierre Laffite -- the brothers Laffite. Faye was fluent in French as well as English and knew the Spanish language as well. His research extended deep into documents in these languages. The manuscript is clearly a serious attempt at an historical account of Gulf coast privateering and pirating with the brothers Laffite as central characters in the story. In the years following 1928 he used the manuscript as the basis for five articles published in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly.* One of those articles was "The Great Stroke of Pierre Laffite." Published in 1940, [93 pages and 7 chapters] this article was inexplicably a reversal of many of the findings and conclusions he reached regarding Jean and Pierre Laffite in the meticulously researched *Privateers of the Gulf.* In *Privateers of the Gulf* he presented Jean Laffite as dominant and Pierre as the secondary character, while in the "Great Stroke of Pierre Laffite" their roles were reversed.

The following are examples of many such reversals.

Legend:

GS = Great Stroke of Pierre Laffite

MS = manuscript for Privateers of the Gulf.

Page numbers for the MS are as they appear in the recently published Privateers of the Gulf.

Regarding the brother's quality of mind and ability to write:

MS. (p.169) "If this composition passed through the hands of an editor ... the task of revision was left incomplete. The text bears undeniably the mark of the elder brother, the self-important Pierre, putting himself at the head of an enterprise that was carried out not by him but by his junior."

MS. (p.186) "Luis Payne, the Havana interpreter who put Pierre's French original into Spanish a century and a decade ago is unmistakably struggling not only with bad French grammar and diction but also with a turbidity of thought far different from John Lafittes lucidity."

MS. (p.85-A) "Although he [Pierre] had at least enough education to write an incompetent letter, his manners cannot have been of the best.

MS. (pp. 85-A, 86) "Of the thousands of letters that serve as sources for these printed pages, only a few stand out as literary compositions. Of the hundreds of contemporary writers from whose pens those letters came, priests, statesmen, officers of every sort, private citizens of many stations in life, only three distinguished themselves as masters of verbal expression. One is John Quincy Adams, a college professor of English literature, secretary of state and president of the United States. The second is Major Arsène Lacarrière Latour, graduate of the Polytechnical School of France and author
of the one standard American historical essay on the Battle of New Orleans. The third is John Lafitte."

Compare the above to the great stroke article items following.

GS. (p. 753) "Pierre Laffite possessed an orderly and disciplined mind..."

GS. (pp. 764-5) "Everywhere throughout the letter's length the little mind of Jean Laffite confessed its littleness.... The other letter .... reflected the light of the elder brother's thought."

GS. (p. 787) "No man in New Orleans could write more cleverly than Pierre Laffite."

GS. (p. 818) "Therefore he [Pierre] borrowed some of his brother's literary style.... [Faye seems to have been confused here since throughout this article he trounced Jean's literary style. He praised Jean's style in Privateers of the Gulf.]"

On the brother's quality of mind and ability to read men's minds:

MS. (pp. 12-13) John Lafitte, "...dominated the minds of men about him, now and then by physical force but more often by exercise of a brain that always worked in advance of other men's thoughts. John Lafitte, whom tradition presents as a romantic, was by nature as clever a politician as America ever produced."

MS. (p. 49) "...John Lafitte with uncanny knowledge of men's minds...."

GS. (p. 740) "...in all New Orleans no man was more clever that Pierre Laffite. The smuggler boss was basing his new fortune on his ability to read men's minds...."

MS. (p. 15) "John Lafitte, it is true, had most of the family allotment of brains, but Pierre was the elder and therefore, according to European conventions, the one to whom the other must defer. The inconsistency of nature, whereby one brother gained superior position and the other the intelligence that position demanded, offered reason for the early development of the younger man's genius for diplomacy. His first task was to reverse the disparity existing between him and his senior. He succeeded, and succeeded so cleverly that not even his brother seems to have suspected a change in their relationship."

MS. (p. 91) "This is the self-important Pierre, the head of the family firm, approving his younger brother's acts and assuming command in Grande Terre by right of the command he had abandoned in New Orleans. This is the brother who John Laffite had besought John Blanque to free from imprisonment, "A brother who is dear to me.... He is ill." This is John Laffite's elder brother, his only link with the world but sometimes, perhaps, a heavy chain to bear with other loads of responsibility."

The brother's ability to exercise citizenship and leadership:

MS. (p. 170) "...because of a personal visit paid to him by the elder brother, Onis assumed that Pierre occupied the important place in the family firm. This assumption Onis had later to correct when John Lafitte took matters in his own hands."

MS. (p.14) "John Lafitte under proper guidance could have become a minor statesman. Without such direction he became for all time ... a master of intrigue...."

MS. (p. 12) "John Lafitte remains... the foremost citizen of New Orleans."

MS. References to Jean Laffite as the "Boss"or undisputed head of operations at Barataria and Galveston are ubiquitous, but in the GS it is a different story.

GS.(p. 750) "If Pierre Laffite indeed was known then as the Emperor of Barataria, his cadet acted on the coast and the bayous as viceroy."

GS. (p. 799) "The admiral of Barataria and father of Galveston [Pierre] came from New Orleans..."

GS. (p. 740) "In all of New Orleans no man was more clever than Pierre Laffite. "
In the manuscript John Laffite is portrayed at every turn as clever but in the GS we read, "Jean Laffite's one inspired moment of cleverness had long since come and gone."

Throughout this article Faye speaks of Pierre's prominence in New Orleans.

On Seeking the king's pardon:

In the "GS" it was Pierre who went to the priest to seek a pardon, while in the MS it was John. [Here Faye does introduce evidence to support his assertion].

On the Great Stroke:

Faye documented in Privateers of the Gulf that there were several great strokes planned and some attempted, all by John Lafitte. Not one stroke is attributed to Pierre. In the "Great Stroke" article many strokes were planned, none of which were ever successfully implemented. All were planned by Pierre. The following are representative.

Faye's presentation of Jean Laffite as he was seen by his contemporaries, was greeted without enthusiasm - it was an old story. What could be done? Reverse the story - claim that Jean was the dunce and Pierre the real leader! The strategy worked to the extent that Faye was able to get a "book" published in the form of a 93-page, seven chapter article in a respected journal. Was the reversal strategy Stanley Faye's Great Stroke?

The stroke of Stanley Faye was not just a great stroke; it was an amazing stroke. Jean Laffite, who in the Privateers of the Gulf was the master planner, the "Boss", brilliant writer (in a class with John Quincy Adams), more clever than all, so diplomatic he (in spite of European tradition) usurped the position accorded the elder brother without the elder realizing it. He, who was described as one of the cleverest politicians in America and was always ahead of his opponent, was reduced, by fiat, in "The Great Stroke" to a person who possessed none of the attributes described above; they

Clearly in Faye's 1928 work Jean Laffite was his hero. He missed no opportunity to heap praise on this hero who was presented as a bold, intelligent man of action capable of great literary composition, great loyalty and betrayal - clearly a complex character. He could coolly reverse course doing the unexpected. He could deceive with smoothness almost unequalled and still maintain as sense of dignity and integrity.

Did Faye identify so closely with his hero that he adopted his attributes and strategy? He had spent many years researching the Privateers of the Gulf only to be thwarted in its publication. Perhaps the publication problem was not so unsolvable after all. Could Faye have adopted the modus operandi of his hero; reversing everything to get the attention of publishers?

The contemporary public of the Laffites overwhelmingly saw Jean as the dominant player. This was evident in the perception of the viceroy of Mexico and in the perception of Gov. Claiborne, who focused his attention mostly on Jean. It was evident in the actions of Andrew Jackson, who recruited Jean as an aide and Pierre as a private soldier. It was evident in the attention Onis and a host of officers, and diplomats gave Jean over Pierre - not to mention the British offer to Jean (and not Pierre) during the War of 1812. Could they have all been wrong?

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now belonged to the elder brother. Suddenly Jean was not the "Boss"; he had only one clever moment, he couldn't write without revealing the smallness of his mind, he never planned even one great stroke and was always subservient to his brother. Furthermore, whereas in the Privateers of the Gulf, the public looked to Jean, suddenly in the GS the public looked to Pierre as the leader, the clever one. It is an amazing transformation this -- made by Faye.

Some of the author's colleagues think this view is unfair, preferring to believe that he learned more in later research that changed his thinking. This argument is weakened by the fact that most of the evidence he used in the "Great Stroke" to support his presentation of Pierre is the same evidence he used in the manuscript to support Jean as the dominant brother. Little new evidence was presented in the "Great Stroke". In the opinion of this author he simply made contrary assertions without new evidence. The major new material he presented in the "Great Stroke" was his claim that Pierre's death in America occurred sometime after Andrew Jackson became president and that Pierre was John and went to the priest seeking the kings pardon. The information about Pierre's death is highly questionable. The argument is further weakened by lack of reference in the "Great Stroke" to the previous work that he was still trying to get published. As far as has been determined by this author he never gave any explanation of the conflicts in his written material. If both the manuscript and the great stroke article had been published in close proximity to each other with no explanation of their wide unexplained disparities, Faye would have been ridiculed. Historical distance may make the discrepancies less glaring but they are not completely obscured.

Why did he reverse his position in the great stroke article and make John the dunce and Pierre the hero? Both documents cannot be true so which is the more authentic? What was the rationale behind such a dramatic repudiation of so many of the conclusions he had reached after such careful study and documentation?

Were his efforts the product of frenetic activity perhaps arising from an existential crisis? He wrote for several historical associations and his writings had been published many times, so recognition was not lacking. Did he ever identify with Jean Laffite to the point that he also engaged in duplicity? Was he so hurt and angry by the rejection of his work by publishers that he decided to parallel his own story with that of the Laffites. Such a parallel would involve playing a role similar to that of a double agent - a deceiver. He would deceive those who had rejected him (publishers) by reversing his conclusion (i.e. present Pierre as dominant) in opposition to his documentation of Jean's (John's) dominance. This act would be parallel to the Laffites defection to Spain after their rejection by the Americans. The danger involved in playing the role of double agent no doubt has a thrilling aspect. Did Faye enjoy putting his professional career at risk as it would have been if both accounts had been published? A personal sense of power may have accompanied his successful deception of the journal editors and its readers.

Did Faye have an honest change of mind about the relative dominance/competence of the brothers Laffite? One would think an honest change of mind, in one so meticulous as Faye, would have been accompanied by documentation or at least an explanation of what had caused such a drastic change. No record of such documentation or explanation has been found. The lack of such explanation raises question about Faye's reliability.

Answers to these questions will likely never be known, but close reading of Privateers of the Gulf and "The Great Stroke" will however raise disturbing questions about this complicated man.

Endnotes

2. Ibid. p. 225.

16