How Laffite Became the Real-Life Byronic Hero

Pam Keyes

Since Lord Byron’s highly successful poem, “The Corsair,” was published in early 1814 well before the Battle of New Orleans, it couldn’t possibly have been inspired by Jean Laffite, could it? But indeed it well may have been. George Gordon, Lord Byron, had been following news about Laffite’s escapades at New Orleans and Barataria since at least 1813, and maybe even earlier, in the London Times. What’s more, it is quite possible that Laffite was the real-life role model for the Byronic hero first forged by the great romantic poet and found so frequently in literature, film and television even now.

“The Corsair” was a huge literary success with seven printings in its first publishing month of February 1814. It is widely known for a stanza that has been tied with Jean Laffite since the early 1800s:

“He left a Corsair’s name to other times,
Link’d with one virtue, and a thousand crimes.”

This stanza usually has been applied to Laffite in relation to his assistance to the US during the Battle of New Orleans campaign. It actually is about a little known incident that Byron read about. The proof of this may be found in a note Byron wrote about Laffite and Barataria that he inserted in the eighth edition of the Corsair, printed around April of 1814 in Baltimore.

“That the point of honour which is represented in one instance of Conrad’s character has not been carried beyond the bounds of probability may perhaps be in some degree confirmed by the following anecdote of a Brother Buccaneer in the present year 1814. Our readers have all seen the account of the enterprise against the pirates of Barrataria, (sic) but few, we believe, were informed of the situation, history, or nature of that establishment. For the information of such as were unacquainted with it, we have procured from a friend the following interesting narrative of the main facts, of which he has some personal knowledge, and which cannot fail to interest some of our readers.

Barrataria (sic) is a bayou, or a narrow arm of the Gulf of Mexico. It runs through a rich but very flat country, until it reaches within a mile or two of the Mississippi River, fifteen miles below the city of New Orleans. This bayou has branches almost unnumerable, (sic) in which persons can lie concealed from the severest scrutiny. It communicates with three lakes which lie on the northwest side, and these with the lake of the same name, and which lie contiguous to the sea, where there is an island formed by the two arms of this lake and the sea. The east and west points of this island were fortified in the year 1811 by a band of pirates, under the command of one Monsieur LaFitte. A large majority of these outlaws are of that class of the population of the state of Louisiana who fled from the Island of St. Domingo during the troubles there and took refuge in the Island of Cuba. And when the last war between France and Spain commenced, they were compelled to leave that Island with the short notice of a few days. Without ceremony, they entered the United States, the most of them the state of Louisiana, with all the negroes (sic) they had possessed in Cuba. They were notified by the Governor of that state of the clause in the constitution which
forbade the importation of slaves, but, at the same time, received the assurance of the governor that he would obtain, if possible, the approbation of the general government for their retaining this property. The conduct of this part of the favored emigrants, and the refusal of those who could not from local causes join in the illicit confederacy, to obey the draft in that state, which was required by the general government, and ordered by the state itself, prove the fidelity of the allegiance which was promised by these fugitives to the United States.

The Island of Barataria is situated about Lat. 29 deg 15 min Ion 92.30 and is as remarkable for its health as for the superior scale and shell fish with which its waters abound. The chief of this horde, like Charles De Moor, had mixed with his many vices some transcendant (sic) virtues. In the year 1813, this party had from its turpitude and boldness, claimed the attention of the governor of Louisiana, and, to break up the establishment, he thought proper to strike at the head. He therefore offered a reward of 500 dollars for the head of Monsieur LaFitte, who was well known to the inhabitants of the city of New Orleans, from his immediate connexion, (sic) and his having been a fencing master in that city of great reputation, which art he learnt in Bonaparte's army, where he was a captain. The reward, which was offered by the governor for the head of LaFitte, was answered by the offer of a reward from the latter of $5,000 for the head of the governor. The governor ordered out a company of to march from the city to LaFitte's island, and to burn and destroy all the property, and to bring to the City of New Orleans all his banditti. This company, under the command of a man who had been the intimate associate of this bold captain, approached very near to the fortified island before he saw a man or heard a sound until he heard a whistle, not unlike a boatswain's call. Then it was he found himself surrounded by armed men who had emerged from the secret avenues which led to this bayou. Here it was that this modern Charles De Moor developed his few noble traits, for to this man, who had come to destroy his life and all that was dear to him, he not only spared his life, but offered him that which would have made the honest soldier easy for the remainder of his days, which he indignantly refused. He then, with the approbation of his captor, returned to the city. This circumstance, and some concomitant events, proved that this band of pirates was not to be taken by land.

This narrative is quite interesting as some informant near New Orleans had reported to the London Times or to some other Great Britain-based correspondent some exact details about LaFitte's smuggling enterprise at Grande Terre and how it was irritating the authorities. Also, there is the detail about the duel of reward offers between Gov. Claiborne and LaFitte, something that was not in the newspapers at the time it occurred in November of 1813. Laffite's rebellion against authority, his wit, and his kindness to the mysterious unnamed officer who was sent to destroy his operation obviously impressed Lord Byron. The little detail about the fencing master skills of LaFitte and his service for Napoleon has not been corroborated by research, and may have been invention. Or perhaps it is just something else about LaFitte that hasn't been discovered yet.

The Corsair was written between Dec. 22 and 31, 1813. It took about a month for a letter from the US to reach London by sea, so could Lord Byron have read about the reward incident from some correspondent in New Orleans before
he began writing his epic poem? There are no clues in Byron’s letters about what inspired him, but he was in London at the time, going to socials and visiting with many literary friends. One of those friends may have received a letter from a very special correspondent in America. Army Capt. Charles Wollstonecraft, a member of the US Artillery in Mississippi Territory.1

Wollstonecraft, the favorite uncle of Frankenstein author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, was a British sympathizer and quite possibly a double agent during the War of 1812. He kept a close eye on the Laffite operation through various agents, and is the only known British-born person working that area who could have relayed sensitive military information during wartime to London. He is the most likely candidate to have written the following to a British ambassador in New York, dated August 19, 1814, from New Orleans, and published in the Times on Nov. 1, 1814: 2

“New Orleans: “Some time since a number of reports were circulating here of the intended invasion of this country; at one time by the British, and another by the Spaniards, and again jointly by both. Latterly we have nothing further on the subject and I presume we are as secure as you are in New York. The government of the US are making arrangements (it may be only for appearances) for the supply of a large military force in this quarter. It is said there will be six thousand troops in addition to those already here (about 3500) for which rations have been ordered to be prepared by the contractors of the army. The smuggling business at Barrataria (sic) or Grand Isle, situated sixty or seventy miles from this place, continues to be carried on to a great extent as was ever done, in any other part of the world. One of the principal leaders of this banditti has been secured, and will be tried for piracy; but still that trade goes on. Within the two last weeks four new prizes have been brought into Grand Isle, one said to be a Russian, from England, bound to Pensacola, another a Dutch galliot, and strange to tell, of the number of vessels taken by these pirates, not one of their crews have ever been seen or heard of- -doubtless all murdered; and still stranger to remark, that the general rendezvous of those robbers should remain within 60 or 70 miles of this place, having 3,500 regular troops, and all the militia of the country, and not a single effort made to dislodge them.”

Curiously, in a near-synchronistic demonstration of Laffite’s topical newsworthiness, within three days of the appearance of this article in the London paper, across the Atlantic, the Boston Weekly Messenger of Nov. 4, 1814, reprinted Byron’s essay note about Laffite from “The Corsair,” adding at the end,

“Our naval forces having always been small in that quarter, exertions for the destruction of this illicit establishment could not be expected from them until augmented; for an officer of the navy, with most of the gunboats on that station, had to retreat from an overwhelming force of LaFitte’s. So soon as the augmentation of the navy authorized an attack, one was made; the overthrow of this banditti has been the result, and now the almost invulnerable point and key to New Orleans is clear of an enemy, it is to be hoped the government will hold it by a strong military force.”

The Britishers of London readily followed Lord Byron’s lead in thinking favorably of Laffite, for in the London Times’s Dec. 19, 1814, issue after telling about the successful raid by the US authorities against Barataria, the editor opined, “We doubt much that the Americans had any right to destroy the settlement in question. The title of LaFitte and his associates to the
contested ground may vie with that of his conquerors to Louisiana."

It is intriguing to speculate on whether or not Byron began the Laffite legend with *The Corsair* note in the American edition. One must keep in mind the British romanticist's profound, vast influence upon the public. One of Lord Byron's many lovers, Claire Clairmont, recalled that fame years later:

"In 1815, when I was a very young girl, Byron was the rage. When I say the rage, I mean what you people nowadays can perhaps hardly conceive. I suppose no man who ever lived has had the extraordinary celebrity of Lord Byron in such an intense, haunting, almost maddening degree. And this celebrity extended all over the Continent to as great an extent as in England; and remember, in those days there were no railways or telegraphs."

In his "Don Juan" poem, Lord Byron mentioned the speed at which the British public forgot about such great men as Nelson after he died. With Byron's help, Laffite's legend thrived and shows no sign of decline even in the 21st century.

Endnotes:

Wollstonecraft served under General Jackson and was in charge of an American artillery unit at Fort St. Philip, where he fought his own British countrymen's ships with exchanges of bombardment from Jan. 8 through the 18th, 1815. He was commended for his artillery proficiency by his commanding officer, W.H. Overton, in a letter to Gen. Jackson of Jan. 19, 1815. Wollstonecraft married a New Orleanian and owned a home there. According to his military record, he died in New Orleans in 1817.