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Octet and Discours

Nicolas Le Challeux

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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Nicolas Le Challeux, Octet and Discours

Carpenter and Protestant lay minister Nicolas Le Challeux documented his experiences in Florida in Discours de l'histoire de la florite contenant la trahison del Espangnols, contre les sujets du Roy (1579). Along with the chronicle of his journey, he also wrote two poems, one of which wittily warns future travelers about less-than-appealing prospects in a now "lost colony." As many Frenchmen were starving during their time in the New World, Le Challeux eerily named his octet, "Hungry." The poem has been translated and reprinted in anthologies; the selection of his Discours below appears in English for the first time.

Having escaped the Spanish raid upon Fort Caroline, Le Challeux's reveals first-hand the nature of European competition in the New World. Gaspard de Coligny appointed Captain Jean Ribaut, an established member of the Huguenot Reform Constituency, to lead a colonization party to Florida. In April of 1564, Ribaut and his crew found themselves at the mouth of the St. John's River, and with the help and guidance of Rene de Laudonniere, they erected Fort Caroline.

Even though Fort Caroline had an established presence, Spain never recognized France's claim to America's southeast. As a result, Phillip II tasked Pedro Menéndez de Avilés to eradicate the French settlement. Menéndez established St. Augustine, a fortified position, in which he planned his assault upon Fort Caroline. The Spanish surprised the French in the early morning of September 20, 1565 and slaughtered a vast majority of the Huguenot population. Rene de Laudonniere and Nicolas Le Challeux were among the few who managed to escape the massacre.

Meanwhile, Ribaut and fellow shipwrecked members proceeded to St. Augustine and pleaded with the Spanish to spare their lives, but the aggressors were unsympathetic to the Protestant pleas and declared the Huguenots heretics. Ribaut then addressed his men and stated that it was in their best interest to surrender to the Spanish. Two hundred of Ribaut's men fled to the wilderness, while one hundred and fifty surrendered with Ribaut.

According to various French accounts, the Spaniards deceptively indicated that the lives of the French would be spared upon the conditions of their surrender. The Huguenots were then bound two-by-two and slaughtered by the Spanish. Afterward, Menéndez pursued the remaining two

hundred that had fled and took them as slaves. Upon the entrance to Fort Caroline, Menendez hung a tablet proclaiming, "Hung not as Frenchmen, but as Lutherans."

The following, the final four chapters of Le Challeux's Discours, recounts Ribaut's last voyage to Florida in 1565. This translation focuses on the events immediately preceding the Spanish attack and progresses through to the extinction of Fort Caroline.

Le Challeux's Discours sets experiences in a vivid Biblical context, while drawing comparisons between his fleeing episode to that of the Israelites escaping Pharaoh in Egypt. Le Challeux constantly engages in prayer, pleading not only for his life to be spared, but for his soul to be saved. Continuously, Le Challeux describes the wilderness as a rugged, savage, and unforgiving environment, and he longs for a parting of the "Red Sea" event to secure his safety. During the midst of his escape, he stumbles upon some of his fellow countrymen, and they decide to secure a scout in a tree with the intention of spotting assistance. Fortunately, they manage to signal a ship, and they board passage to France.

Edited by Peter J. Morrone, University of Mississippi; James Everett, University of Mississippi; Val Lanham, University of South Florida, St. Petersburg;

Further Reading

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Nicholas Le Challeux, "Octet" [1565]. Transl. Maurice O'Sullivan.

Whoever wishes to go to Florida,

Let him go where I have been,

And return dry and arid,

And worn out by rot.

For the only good I have brought back—

A single silvery stick in my hand.

But I am safe, not defeated:

It's time to eat; I die of hunger.

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Chapter Seven: The Spanish called to the French who were left after their surrender. The French rejected them. Others purged their rage for the dead.

I did not want to speak here of an example of extreme cruelty. Jaques Ribaut,^[1] captain of the Pearl, had his ships at anchor 100 paces near that butchery, where he received many of those who escaped from this massacre. Now the Spanish had big hearts because of their victory, and cruelly bent against outright murdering^[2] the rest of the French, sounding the fort's cannons against the ships and boats: but owing to the rainy time, and that the cannons also stood poorly prepared, they didn't make any damage to our people: but they made to march a trumpet until they sound the retreat. And when they saw that they were in no way intimidated, they sent one of their men as far as the ships, put in by the authority of Don Pedro de Malvendo, Colonel of their company, to come to terms with our people, to such conditions that they leave the ships, and that they withdraw with the boats, safe and sound, to the other ships which stayed low to the mouth of the river, far away from the Fort environment and scene. To that our people responded that they didn't intend there to be any war between themselves: that after six months they had received commandment from the King to make this voyage: that not by a long way was it an undertaking to make fault or exaction to any, when he to them expressly defended his majesty, and same of his Admiral, of not making descent in any Spanish land, nor same approached, out of fear of offending them. "We had inviolably guarded and observed the commandment of the King. And you cannot speak against us, that we had been cause of a massacre that you had made of our men, against all custom of war: this which we do to see the heart, and to what end you will well remember in time and place. As for the ships that you demand, you would rather have our lives: and where you would want us to labor, we will employ the ways that God and nature have given us for our defense."

The Spanish returned report that our people incited nothing, as well as that they stood resolute to defend themselves well. Then this furious little troop blushed and bloodily spat on the dead, and exposed them in mass to the French who stayed the cause, and endeavored to upset the heart of this, which they did, like they well wanted to, dismembering the corpses. As they tore out the eyes of the dead, stuck them on the tips of daggers, and then with cries, howling, and all merriment, threw them towards the water against us French.

Chapter Eight: Some French escaped from the massacre reach the shore of the sea, and met several of their companions.

As for us who sojourned in the woods, we continued to cross them, drawing our direction^[3] mostly from the sea. And as it rains, God also drives our steps and draws our path, very swiftly we come to the rump of the mountain, and from it began to see the sea. But there were more grand distances, and which were worst, the path that we had held appeared marvelously strange and difficult. Primarily, the mountain, which it goes down, is necessary for us, is of such height and so rough, that it isn't possible for a man to descend holding himself upright, and never having dared so we put to descending, without hope that we would have branches of bushes to hold against, which were frequent on the little hills of the mountain, and in order to save lives, we couldn't spare our hands, which we had all gashed and covered in blood, same with our legs, and almost all bodies mangled.

Now descending the mountain, we lost the view of the sea, to the cause of a small wood which was against us, planted on a very little hill: and in order to get to the wood we needed to cross a large meadow all of silt and muddy bogs, covered with reeds and other sorts of strange herbs: because the pipes were hard like wood, and the saw-like leaves slicing our feet and legs all with blood were always in water as far as the source. And which often doubled our misery and calamity, the rain fell so from the sky on us, that like in a deluge we were all the time between two waters: and more we had marched through long before, therefore we found the water profound.

And when we really thought we were at the last period of our lives we hugged one another, and with communal affection we began to sigh and to cry to the Lord, complaining of our sins, and recognizing the rigors of his judgment on us: "Alas, Lord, dividing us, that some of us no more than poor little land worms, our souls all changed from grief repair between your arms: O Father of mercy, and God of charity, of our book of this pace of the dead: now if you see that in this desert we have drawn the last short breaths of life, assist us in what death, of all things the most terrible, we come to seize, not our amazed advantages, but that we abide firm and stable to the spirit of your favor and good will, that we have less and less to prove in cause to your Christ, in place given over to the spirit of Satan, the spirit of despair and of defiance: because very much that we mourn, we protest now before your majesty, that we would die for thee: so be it that we live, that will be for recounting your marvels to the assemblies of your servants."

Our prayers said, we marched with great pain straight to the wood, as long as we stayed close to one large river which ran through the middle of that meadow. The canal was enough narrow, but very deep^[4]: and the water ran with great quickness, as much as that all the field hangs towards

the sea. This was another increase^[5] of our feeling of suffocation, because there wasn't a man who wanted to attempt to cross the river by swimming. But this confusion of our thoughts, as far as finding an other means to cross, it calls to mind the woods that we had left behind us: and after having exhorted my brothers to patience, and to continue in good spirits of the Lord, I returned to the wood and cut a long *perche*.^[6] with a staff of big enough to hold in my hand, of the hour for was taken: and returned to the others who attended me in grand perplexity. "Where," said I, "brothers, we say if God by the middle of this baton we go we want to give some advantage to perfect our road. When we lay down this *perche* on top of the water, one of us, and everyone to his all: and have it by the tip, and enter in the water carrying the *perche* the same and himself. And to the middle of the canal, as we lose sight, we push against the force enough near to the other shore, where it takes land, with the help of canes and other plants which stay on the other side. And to this example passing thus in time: but this won't be with grand peril, or without a good drink of this salt water, indeed and so that we come to the other side we have hearts all wiped down, and we are also grown waterish, as if we came to be half-drowned. After that I returned, and we renewed courage: we always had this wood, that we had marked approaching the sea, the *perche* the that was necessary for us to cross one other arm of water, which didn't give us less vexation than the first: but grace to God, we crossed it, and entered the evening inside the woods, where we remained for the night in great fear and trembling, standing against the trees. And how far that we could have traveled more or less, if we hadn't wanted to sleep. Because what can be rest of spirits in such fright? Likewise we also saw for about a day one grand beast like a stag, fifteen paces near to us, which had a very large head, eyes flaming and open, ears dangling, having the struggle of their last eminence. She resembled a monstrosity, to cause eyes to spark, and grandly marvelous: which notwithstanding it could not approach us to make any nuisance to us.

The day coming we left the wood and revisited the sea, which inspired us after God, as he alone in the middle of saving our lives. But we the same once again angered and troubled: Because we perceive a country of marshes and their blood, rain water and coverlets of reeds, like those which we have passed the days preceding. We march thus through the shortcomings of this meadow, and the closer to the route that we have to make, we perceive the reeds one flock of men that were to be to us on first sight our enemies, who were the lechers for our cut path: but when we had seen how close they were distressed to us, naked and frayed, we understood forthwith that they were our men: also, there was the captain Lauduniere, his chamber girl, Jaques Morgues de Dieppe, François du Val de Rouen, threads from the wreath of iron from Rouen, Nicaife de la Crotte, Nicolas Le Menuizier, the trumpet of the sieur^[7] of Lauduniere, and others, who all assembled made the number twenty-five men.

On the deliberation of what we had to do, two of the men ascended a small knock of one of the arbors, the most high, and discovered one of our small ships, which was there of the captain Maillard, to which they gave the signal, by which it was word was sent that we had need of their help. Soon the small boat did arrive for us: but to approach the shore, it was necessary to traverse the reeds, and other two rivers, seeming to some how we had passed the previous day. How they were useful to us and necessary, the *perches* I had cut the other morning, and two others, of which those of Lauduniere's sawyer were provisioned, and aimed also close to the small boat. But our hearts were lacking, and hunger and travails, otherwise the sailors had nimble hands, which appeared strongly helpful, and they carried us one after the other along into the boat, and returned us all to the ship, where we all well and admittedly cheered. They gave us bread and water, and

after have eaten, we began little by little to recover strength and vigor: it was our argument very certain of recognition of the salvation of the Lord, who had saved us: against the experiences of an infinity of dangers of death, which had been around us and besieged us at all time, thanks be to him, and praise always. We passed, too, all the night, we told the marvels of the Lord, and we consoled the other ones in the remembrance of our salvation.

Chapter Nine: The French escaped the massacre of Florida, returning to France. They gave chase to a Spanish ship, and arrived at Rochelle.

Now that day was come, Jaques Ribaut, captain of the Pearl boards, approached us, to confer with us of what we might be able to do, and of a way that we could have saved the rest of the our men and vassals, and then he was shown the few lives that we had, our forces routed, our munitions and provisions of defense seized, the uncertainty of the existence of our colonel, not knowing what befell him in some cost, far behind us, removed from torments. We concluded therefore that we couldn't do better then to attempt to return to France. And was of the opinion the majority of our company, separated into parties of those who had escaped from the day of battle at the Fort: and that one abided on the Pearl, and the other retired to the charge of captain Maillard.

Now Thursday, 25th day of the month of September, we left this coast in the favor of a large North wind, determined to return to France. And on the first day, our two ships were so scattered, that we no more found each other on the seas.

We cut the sea five of those leagues happily enough: and then nigh into daybreak sunlight broke, we were still assailed by a Spanish ship, which we upheld as possible: and they shot a cannon so strong that we resorted to quickly to our devotions, and we developed such so that one saw blood spewed by the shipwrecks. We had given back to them likewise, and descended low: but there wasn't any way to caulk them, because of the weather which was strongly moving with great force[8]: since there was danger in the caulking enduring,[9] which was spoiled by our beating, and making us sink low. They well satisfied of that charge gave us leave: and we relinquished joy, yielding unto God, of whom that any of us were blessed in this skirmish not killed, we finished our cooking.

The rest of our navigation was without any encounter of enemies: but we were strongly tormented by winds, which kept menacingly pushing at the coast of the Spanish, which were the height of our misfortune, and the thing of which we were most afraid. We had endured, as well, on better waters other things, like cold and hunger: but it was understood that our others who were escaped from the land of Florida didn't have any vestments or accoutrements, as little for the day as for the night, except for a simple chemise, or some other small rag, which was a very little thing against for our defense against the injuries of the weather. And what was worse, the bread that we ate, we ate it very scarcely, and was all corrupted and foul, especially also the water that we had was all defiled with stench, of which nevertheless we didn't have much for all the long journey except one small cupful.

This malicious nourishment caused us to go down to land, we were much fallen with diverse maladies, which had angered several men who were in our company. And likewise at the end of this perilous and lamentable navigation, we restored to Rochelle, where we were received and

treated greatly humanely and graciously by the habitants of the country and of those of the city, we gave to their goodness as well as necessity required: and as well that we had been in their grace, whereto we were each returned to his region.

Chapter Ten: Captain Jean Ribaut searches for a battle against the Spaniards, but in the end, his men surrender to the Spaniards, who kill them in cold blood.

We have heard how Jean Ribaut boarded the ship with his soldiers in order to find the Spaniards, and after looking for five days without finding them, he recognized the admiral of his crew aboard the Trinity.^[10] Unaware of what happened to the fort and having been driven back, he decided to defend the shoreline against the Spanish advance: commanding the men against disloyal discipline. The weather was fierce, and the wind blew impetuously, and it rained incessantly. During the fifth day, the storm increased to a level that the sailors could not bear, forcing them to the coast fifty leagues from the River May.^[11] It was here that the ships became disabled and their weapons perished. However, the men found land, except Captain le Grange, who drowned having fallen upon the mast. His death was greatly regretted by the others, he was a good counselor and was said by them to have the fruits of a friendly acquaintance, he was so comforting to the men rendering his virtue.

Although they made it to land away from the fury of the waves, the soldiers faced another hardship. They suffered from a hunger that could only be remedied by eating sources from the land, that being made of, herbs, roots, and others of the kind, which had to appease their empty stomachs. There was neither anything to appease their thirst but foul water that made them ill. Nevertheless the rage of their great hunger and thirst made them eat what was available: and the passion (suffering) in this place remained for eight days.

During the ninth day they found a small vessel by fortune, and reviving comfort in them, for this was the manner enabling (making) them to return to the fort. And between them and the fort, their defenses are positioned twelve leagues away by land, and fifty by sea: was the Dolphins River whereby the soldiers needed a vessel to cross the large and wide waterway a quarter of a league.

Then Captain Jean Ribaut, with his grace and accustomed modesty, summoned the soldiers to his council, and pointed out to them: "Companions and friends, we cannot continue to live in this way of misery and calamity: we are better to long for death than live in such a way, unless God gives us hope in His Providence, if it pleases him to deliver to us: and now we employ to cease our hardships. I feel that some of us need to make haste to the fort and relay the extreme necessity to leave." The French collapsed onto the field and called upon the name of God in tears. Their prayers having been made, they conversed to look at who was best to make the voyage, and they named Thomas le Vasseur of Dieppe, of which Jean Ribaut made in charge. And with him went Vincent Simon, Michael Gouor and sixteen others.

Our men, as I have mentioned already, were beyond the fort and the river was between them and the army of men at the defense position. After they had cleaned themselves, they saw off in a distant place the Spanish bearing their flags: Our French fellow countrymen, for they were

extremely anxious about the advancing company, sent someone across the river to negotiate that their lives would be saved. These [The French] were received at first humanely.

The captain of the company of Spanish, whose name was Vallemande, stated that he was a gentleman and a Christian, and good will would be extended to the French. He explained that this was a common practice for a Spanish soldier to be content with victory. He demonstrated that violations will not occur between the nations. Quickly, he instructed that a barge be prepared and led by five Spaniards to transport the French. Words were made on behalf of Vallemade, and Captain Jean Ribaut went on the first barge with thirty others, who was received in a humane manner, but the others were tied, two by two, hands behind their backs.

All of us taken captive, thirty in all; however Vallemande entertained our good Captain Jean Ribaut with flattering speech. However all of us were tied two by two and made to leave the boat. Then the French and Spanish made their way toward the fort: Captain Jean Ribaut and the others, namely d'Ottigny, their disposition became altered when they saw their men in their present condition. Then they spoke to Vallemande, who told them it was for their protection to be tied until they arrived at the fort and whose promise would be honored.

And when they arrived at the fort, they were asked to inquire of them who were mariners, carpenters of the ship, cannon operators, and others: they found thirty men. Soon after one of the companies of the fort got our men together and we were made to march behind Vallemande as if being led to the butcher shop. Then, at the time, drums, flutes, and trumpets sounded, and the Spanish disbanded their fury upon the French, still they were tied. They spurred each other on to see who could deliver the greatest strike. The contest of strength lasted half an hour, until the glorious victory was declared on the field very cruelly giving death to those who surrendered unto faith and honor.

During this act of cruelty, Captain Jean Ribaut made a great plea to save his life to Vallemande: the same was made by d'Ottigny at his feet,^[12] but nothing came of their wishes. Then, one of the soldiers marched behind Captain Jean Ribaut and stabbed him in the back until life had escaped him.

Finally, after the treatment of our men, there were the repercussions of the Spanish. And for their cruelty and barbarous behavior: they cut off the beard of the King's Lieutenant to demonstrate their power and it was made to be sent on an expedition to Seville, and some of our sailors, were sent on the same voyage also, one of us whose name was Christopher le Breton of Haure, Greece, having left Seville to the town of Bordeaux and boarded a ship to Dieppe. And it was by him that relayed the events that befell the body of the good and faithful subject of the King: and [the Spanish] quartered [Ribaut's body] and placed pieces at the four corners of the fort.

Here is where we finish the brief discourse of the voyage to Florida, written for those who have deceased. Of whom our Gentlemen Gascon, and for the others, who went to Florida. We make this reminder for those executed by the Spanish, for their fierce tragedy for some notable exploits, to make a beautiful large memory, of the bodies of men and women and small children, from different centers: a memorial for both Lutherans and new Christians.

To the sound of the rustle, after all that has been related by this account: enterprises were made by messengers of the Spanish campaign: rather the Huguenots were disruptors and enemies of the [Spanish] King: which contributed to the French wars. If by life or not, I report to them and Spanish residents.

Wherefore that is made, by the will of King Charles bothered by the relations that have occurred, demands a relationship of service to the King of Spain, and to give new information to the new Spanish. Moreover, the Spanish are hung up on the deaths of soldiers and the deaths of the messengers. Of the memory of men and their allegiance to God, He is still here to deliver His vengeance.

As for Florida, there is still the loss of the French, so much of their name and their memory and still so much love, to account for the brief Barbarous excesses (to reference the violence of which Captain Laudonniere and his men of necessity) who still fought for their new coming friends. And still they have made good fortune, which when upon their arrival to their ship, more beautiful things were recovered, that which has been said, "Of his and my thoughts" or "Good hours of God's volunteers which have conquered those." This is how they ask for the word of men, for favors or not from the French: that of the apparent country of the French prayers to God and to sing of Pfeaumes: or have returned to two or three words of the Pfeaumes, to hear and to sing for our men, wanting to evade disadvantage, where as the search for all can be found. And when upon their meeting however who hears the word and watches, and those who speak French, how carefully they become united, and they were able to prepare food and drink. When that *Rotizze* of the Spanish wanted to love those who wanted to eat, because their song, "Of His or My Thoughts," did not make them respond to the blow of the pistol.

[1] Jean Ribaut's son.

[2] *Acharnez à partuer*.

[3] *tirnas à nostre iugement*: from *tirer*, possibly, to draw, drag, pull, lead, tug.

[4] *mais sort profond*: with the period characteristic of printed "s" and "f," this phrase poses some difficulties; it most likely means "very deep," a simple statement, from "fort" meaning strongly or great and "profond" in the sense of a profound depth.

[5] *augmentation*.

[6] *perche* is a measure-stick, usually around 18 to 22 feet, or about 6 fathoms.

[7] *sieur*: in modern French, this word joking means "Master"; here, most likely, *sieur* is a shortened *sieurie*, an iteration from *seigneurie*, and meaning "to rule, govern, or play the lord." It has the sense of a ranking, as in "second in command."

[8] *impeueux*: impetuously.

[9] The sense here is reversed, the danger arising from the fact that the caulking might not hold. In chapter two, they caulk some of their boats with their shirts, no oakum being available.

[10] Captain Jean Ribaut, under orders from the French monarchy, undertook a voyage to Florida in 1565. Jean Ribaut was summoned to the French court where he received the commission to transport seven ships of men to the New World. Ribaut received the title of Lieutenant and was made commander-in-chief of all assigned soldiers.

[11] The River May, now the St. Johns, named because Ribaut first sailed there on May 1, 1565.

[12] "At his feet" most likely means that d'Ottigny made his plea for his life while begging on his knees.