
«Facing the Revocation. Huguenot families, Faith, and the King’s Will» is a family saga, that of the Robillard de Champagné family in the period around 1685. Based on meticulous research carried out in a number of European archives, the book wants to tell the story of this noble family from the Saintonge region.

When in 1598, the Edict of Nantes put an end to the French wars of religion, Calvinism became – to some extent – a tolerated denomination («tolerated» in the early modern sense of the word)\(^1\). At the latest from the 1660s, Louis XIV of France made attempts to cut back the privileges granted in 1598. With the Edict of Fontainebleau of 1685 came the revocation of the 1598 stipulations: Calvinism and its institutions were to be suppressed, Huguenots were meant to convert to Catholicism, their children were forcibly brought up as Catholics, Protestants were banned from emigration. The Edict of Fontainebleau left French Calvinists with difficult options: conversion or flight? At which risks? With a view of returning some day?

Caroline Chappell Lougee tackles these questions through the lens of family history. The story of the Robillard de Champagné family is told through four parts. The book starts out with the family’s social (and material) framework back in France and discusses the multi-faceted decision-making processes for family members deciding to leave France or to stay behind. Part two considers the difficult experience of flight, part three that of the family members who preferred to stay in France and convert to Catholicism. The fourth and last part discusses the experience of exile, mostly the Dutch and Irish refuge – all of this in great detail.

The book’s aim – as Caroline Chappell Lougee notes in both the introduction and the conclusions – is to challenge too simplistic narratives with regard to Huguenot history and the Revocation period in particular: 1) that staunch Protestantism was the driving force for Huguenots choosing exile, 2) the rigorous persecution of those who left the country without permission, 3) the number of Huguenot conversions prior to the Revocation, and 4) the «modernization» narrative, that is that Huguenots enhanced the modernization of the economies and cultures of the countries of refuge (that is of exile). Through the detailed stories of the Robillard de Champagné family members she contributes indeed to a more nuanced and more complex understanding of how Protestant and noble individuals reacted (and could react) to the Revocation, how they tried to reconcile themselves with choices made – at home and abroad, how family stories built a powerful narrative of what Bertrand van Ruymbekë has dubbed «Huguenot exceptionalism».

While Caroline Chappell Lougee intends her narrative to be a revisionist one, one that questions narratives promoted by Huguenots and Huguenot descendants from the Revocation onwards, while she wants to question «widely assumed features of the Huguenot story» (p. 3), her narrative does not embrace, though, what studies on early
modern migrations and diasporas have on offer for a truly revisionist, more complex and more integrated narrative of the Huguenot story: how much features of persecution, decisions on whether to leave or to stay, experiences of flight and exile resemble other early modern persecuted minorities' experiences – e.g. Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, Bohemians, Salzburg Protestants – so where the Huguenots' history is specific and where it is typical of early modern persecutions and migrations. In many ways, Chappell Lougee thus reproduces the story of “Huguenot exceptionalism” and some of the narratives she intended to challenge in the first place – narratives which by the way have been revised by specialists of the Huguenot refuge over the last thirty years.1

Thus, with regard to the claims towards revisionism, the book is in many ways old wine in new skins. For those not familiar with the developments in early modern migration history and the history of Huguenots more specifically, the book might – as others have done before – instead add to some of the persistent simplistic narratives that need revision. For specialists of Huguenot history the book offers great detail on the Robillard de Champagné family – which scholars might then use to compare it to their findings on other Huguenot families and early modern migrations at large.


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