

Isaac Minet's account by Dan Rafiqi and Bert Portal

This is a transcript of the first half of an event by the Huguenot Museum at Rochester Cathedral on the evening of 8th November 2022.

Introduction by Dan Rafiqi

Hello, good evening everybody. My name is Dan Rafiqi, a doctoral candidate in history from King's College London.

Our event today has grown out of conversations between myself and Tessa Murdoch, the Acting Chair of the Huguenot Museum. Our aim today is to bring you face to face with stories from the past, stories written by Huguenot refugees describing their persecution and flight from France.

So who were the Huguenots? Why did many of them come here? I am sure many in the room are familiar with the broad story of their persecution and migration out of France. A basic refresher is helpful however because their story is a complex one.

In 1685 Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, a law which guaranteed religious toleration for Protestants from France, or *Huguenots* as we have come to call them in modern parlance. France's Protestant population were subjected to a wave of political repression. This culminated in the infamous Dragonnades which reached their peak during the year of 1685. French soldiers forced themselves into Protestant homes; There the soldiers would demand to be fed, housed and entertained. Acting under the instructions of their superiors, they would use violence, the threat of financial ruin and other coercive measures to force Protestants to abandon their religion and convert to Catholicism. Other Huguenots who did not want to change their religion faced imprisonment in dungeons throughout France or being sent as galley slaves forced to row the French navy's ships.

Given such conditions it is not surprising that approximately 150 000, roughly one fifth of the entire French Protestant population, opted to flee their homes and make a new life abroad in the decades following persecution. They resettled in parts of Europe including the Netherlands, Britain and Germany and but also much further afield travelling to Americas and Africa.

Fleeing from France was not for the fainthearted. Louis XIV declared Protestants' flight an illegal act. As the French historian Patrick Cabanel notes this detail makes the flight of the Huguenots unusual and particularly historically interesting. In parallel examples from a

simple? time period, such as expulsions as those of the Muslims and Jews from Spain a century earlier, victims of persecution were actively turfed out of the country. The Huguenots were in the unusual position of being repressed at home but also formally banned from making a new life abroad.

In practice the extent to which attempts to prevent flight were rigorously enforced is an area of some debate among historians. No doubt some local areas were heavily patrolled, while in others attempts to prevent escapees were less energetic. There can be no doubt that for many who fled France, they were the heroes of a 'David and Goliath' story. They had cannily outwitted civil servants, royal soldiers and customs officials, and escaped the clutches of the France of the 'Sun King', Louis XIV himself.

Given the stakes at play and improbable odds which sometimes accompanied making such escapes it is not surprising that many Huguenot refugees wanted to tell their own story. One way to do so was by writing their experiences down.

I remember the first time I came across such writings in the very early years of working on my PhD. That text is a well-known memoir written by a Huguenot minister named Jacques Fontaine. His account provides a pulsating narrative retelling the way he escaped by himself in a ship departing from near La Rochelle. He too provides anguished reflections on frustrating encounters as he tries to create a new life in Taunton in Devon, such as trying to claim charity and fighting with local merchants who resented the cheap prices he offered in his small shop.

When I first came across this text, I recall that the hair stood up on the back of my neck. The world Fontaine was describing felt so distant yet in some ways so familiar. Myself, neither French nor Protestant, but someone of Indian descent from Birmingham, felt in important ways that the narrative beats and reflections of Fontaine's account mirrored my own family's experience. In the last few four years I have spent my time identifying and analysing Huguenot refugees' stories of escape. At least 90 texts written by those who fled France in the decades following 1685 can be identified in archives across the world.

Today we bring you two of these texts, intending to restore them in certain senses to how their authors initially envisaged them. Such documents were not simply meant to be read in private, they were intended to be read aloud in social settings in front of members of a family or group. They were a means for communities to remember the hardship and celebrate the courage of those who had seen their world in important senses crumble before them. Those who wrote hoped that by telling their story they might strengthen the communal bonds of listeners and engender a curiosity about the country they felt behind.

In reading these escape stories, we seek to continue this tradition stretching across centuries.

Let us come on then to the first autobiographical account we will hear today. The story is offered by a man named Isaac Minet. Isaac was a shop keeper's son born in Calais in 1660. He was fiercely proud of his family's status as artisans, noting with pride in his account that his father was 'the only man in France who had from London an engine for cutting tobacco'.

After fleeing France in 1686, Isaac made a new home in England. He worked for some years as a shopkeeper selling perfume and liquor in London before moving to Dover. His family is well known amongst those with a keen interest in Huguenot memories today. In particular, Isaac is remembered for the role he played in overseeing Minet and Fector Bank in Dover, an institution bought out in the mid-nineteenth century and today part of the Natwest group. The family is also associated with the Minet Library, a public library in Lambeth established by William Minet in the later nineteenth century, one of Isaac's descendants.

Isaac's account was written in 1737, aged 71 and 56 years after his flight from France. It seems likely it was written with a view to its being read by members of his immediate family and his future descendants. It is highly unusual among texts written by Huguenot refugees in its being written in English. That he would opt for this language in a text primarily aimed at family points to the confident way he and others had assimilated to his life in England and likely integrated into local communities.

The early part of Isaac's account outlines some genealogical details which we have excluded here, focusing instead on his autobiographical narrative. The scene I will present you with to the kick off our story is Isaac being imprisoned after his refusal to convert to Catholicism in an earlier attempt to flee. Only after several weeks imprisonment and at the urging of the *intendant*, a local representative of the crown, did he accept to formally deny the truth of the Protestantism. A development which meant the authorities decided they were able to release him.

Isaac Minet's Escape read by Bert Portal

On ye 30 of October about 9 at night came an officer with a company of solders & took out of ye prison such as had consented to signe which was about 34 persons & conducted them to that great church of which number my mother & I were-in said church wee mett severall of our Protestant friends whose patience being wore out by the hard usage of the dragoons

came to make also abjuration. There wee all shedd teares lamenting our sad conditions. Wee were ledd to a Cbapell where the form of abjuration was read to us (as falloweth or to that porpos)-

Wee whose names are underwritten do acknowledge before God the father etcra, the holy virgin Mary St petter St Paul etcra The church & the holy father the pope' that wee were born & have heitherto lived in an Heretickall & Damnable Religion and that by ye inspiration of ye holly ghost, without any .force or constraint wee do believe the Catholick apostolick & Romish Religion to be the only Religion in which is Salvation & I do hartly embrace the same & promise to live & dye in the same & do abjure & detest the Religon in which I was born etcra-and although wee protested that wee' could not in our concienes signe nor approve ye same &; easin shedding teare declared it was contrary to our will & inclination, to which some there present said-' Its no matter, come sign your name'- so that wee did all sign that were there and after that all our hands were layd on a book & an oath was reade by which we promised to perform what had bene signd, after which wee were conducted to ye great Altar where the chief preist was in a suplice who made a discourse giving thanks for our conversion, & as- hee was perswaded that wee were cincer & hartly in what wee did hee receivd us into ye bosom of the church & as we were new born babbes hee would inflict us an easy penance which was that everyone of us should before we went to bed say three Paternosters & that such as could not say it in Latin may say it in French & about t past ten wee were dismissed & came out of church.

When wee. came to our house we found 3 persons who had bene ordered there to look after what was there who had burnt eaten & drinkt all that was found there & wee could not come in possession without an order from ye president which I went for, but ye president. told me I must have a certificate from ye priest of my abjurationn. I went to ye church again & got a certificat & then an order from ye president & between 12 & one at night ye 3 men left our house & 'wee were in possession of what. little was left, we did gitt some linen from a neighbour where we had caryed it before we left the house.

We were obligd to pay Sd 3 'men 30 Sous a day each for ye time they were in .our house, from yt time we were free at home but on Sundays we went to Church to ye sermon but did not stay to hear the latter part of ye mass but came out so soon as ye sermon was done as did also all the old Roman Catholick who had bene at mas that morning it not being requir'd of them to assist at 2 mases in one day.

Sunday morning messrs. Isaac Sigart, James Hays, Jn Hays, Adrien Lernoult, Abraham le Maire, Jonas Duriz etcra those persons came to my Mothers house and I went with them to heare ye sermon wch sometimes were very good. I was left alone of ye family wth my mother and wee continued there till ye month of Augt 1686 when I did order my brother Stephen who was at Dover to send a boat to fetch my mother & I and Brother & Sister Destrier & family Sd boat to bee abt 2 miles eastward of Calais at midnight Sunday ye 31 July old stile & to make more sure I agreed to give ye ryding officers 30 Louis d'or for attending ye coming of ye boat, giving us notice of it & seeing us on bord.

I had agreed with a man to bee ready to bring from Mark about 2 miles distance from the seaside my sister Elizabeth & her husband Jean Detrier & his mother & 2 children to whom I sent advice to be ready, all the night I did dream that I was betrayed & that my design was known which affected me soe much that I rose early & about 7 in the morning I went to the harbour & talked with one of ye custom officers asking him what news & found he knew nothing of my designe and soon after I mett mr Sollomon Lafarce a protestant with whom I went to a publick house where wee breakfasted so hearing nothing I was better satisfied & went home & some time after my mother and I went to church & after sermon we came home & took our diner, and soon after I desired my mother to go in the church by one door & out of it by the other & to goe out of the town & that at the Crucifix there would bee a man who she knew that would conduct her to the Rendezvous which was done,

soon after I went to the harbour & there saw a vessell which was come from Dunkirk & was to goe to sea the next tide to cruise for the boats that caryed over Protestant which made me uneasy, and I was more so when I came back to the market place where I saw a detachment made of 25 soldiers & an officer to go along the sea side to guard the coast & prevent Protestants from going away, yett by gods grace I had courage and considering that all things were disposed & my mother gone I took a Resolution to go through, & sent for 4 packet men to whom I gave what money I had in the house, Bookes & what I found more valuable of small volume that could go in their great pockets which they caryed on bord their vessel two severall times &

after that I went to a tavern & gave them 2 quarts of wine & took 2 or 3 glasses of it myself & I took with me James Lingo one of said packet men and desired him to walk with me out of town, it was then. about 8 0 clock when many people that had been walking out of town were coming back. I went along carelessly talking with Lingo, taking up smal stones and tossing them in ye aire, an acquaintance asked me where I was going soe late I told him not far & that we should be soon back-being got out of the gates we walked softly till we mett but few

people & taking towal'ds Gravelines Road Lingo asked whether I designed to go further, I then told him my designe & asked if he thought a boat could come from Dover as ye wind was, he said they must row for there was but little wind,

I desired him to go back & if anybody enquird for me he may say he left me going for Marke to see my sister. Soon after I left him I got to our Rendezvous, a house about a mile further where I found my mother, & about 11 oclock at night 4 Riding officers came to that house, at which I was some thing started having expected but 2 of them but ye chief of them told me it was the same & that I had nothing to fear from him I borrowed a horse of the man of the house & went with Sd officers by the sea side, to look out for the boat, till about 12 & seeing nothing coming, the said officers advised me to Ride from them & keep behind sand hills about 1 mile from ye sea & that so soon as ye boat appeard they would call & give me a signal with a wissell, which signall I heard soon after & being mounted againe (for I had lighted) I gallopt to the sea side & saw the boat, & spoake to Jos Dunstan one of the seamen, now my sister & brother Detrier not coming I went to meet them, to hasten them & after riding above a mile I found them & the wagoner mending a wheele of the wagon with Roaps

I desired him to make what hast he could & came back to the boatmen & told them the wagon was just coming, for they were in haste to be gone it being then past one & they would not stay for fear of daylight, I rid again to hasten the wagon which was then at hand & coming back to the boat I did see two farmers their wives & six children in the boat, I asked the boatmen; who they were & who ordered them there, they answerd they did not know & did think them to be of our company & said the boat could not carry us all I asked said farmers what made them be there with their wives & children & severall bundles ,of clothes which they had brought on horses backs, they said that they were told that a boat was to be there that night & they came there in hopes to find room to get over to England.

I told them I should be glad if there was room for them but as the said boat was come for my mother etc we must have room first & ordered them to get out which the men did tho much against stomack. My mother gott in the boat & also my Sister, her husband, his mother & their 2 children & 1. It being falling water ye boat was aground, the six seamen & the 2 farmers who were still on shore got in the water to the middle & gott the boat over 3 sand banks & at last to sea when the 2 farmers begged for god sake to be suffered to git on bord, the men told them that if any wind did rise they would be obliged to throw them over bord & their wives & all their baggage, to which they answered that if it was God's will they would submitt to it, but hoped that God in his mercy would preserve us all

the riding officers had of me 40 crownes that is 20 crownes of each family & soe by the grace of god we set saile & the seamen rowed sometimes about 2 hours after we Left the shore we spyed a Sloop & fearing ye Dunkirk Cruser, they spread a saile over all the passengers heads who layd down in the boat, & the fine wind & weather being favorable we landed at Dover on the shore about 8 of the clock ye same morning 1 for which mercy I shall ever give thanks to God, it being a very great deliverance.