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**THE *COMMENTAIRES DE BLAISE DE MONLUC*
IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE
FRENCH WARS OF RELIGION**

**DR KEVIN GOULD
(NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY)**

The memoirs and correspondence of commentators such as Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné, Jacques-Auguste de Thou, Théodore de Bèze, Claude Haton, Gaspard de Saulx-Tavannes, and François de la Noue, offer valuable insights into the sectarian conflict that ravaged the kingdom of France during the second half of the sixteenth century. Their writings add colour and depth to our understanding of the tumultuous period now known as the Wars of Religion (1562-1598), and open windows into the soul of France's fractured communities. Yet the intensely personal nature of their work makes much of this material a minefield of deceit and misinformation, with bias and confessional prejudice endemic. One has only to compare surviving Catholic wartime accounts with Protestant equivalents to note the contradictions and disparity of factual descriptions inherent to each narrative; in some

instances, the same commonplaces and images are employed to impute crimes and injustices to the other party. As the historian Gabriel Daniel warns, caution should be exercised when engaging with memoirs and accounts of civil wars, sources that are ‘particularly liable to partiality and animosity’.¹ This article will consider the general sense of unease felt by scholars when dealing with memoirs and correspondence by examining the contribution of one of the more controversial accounts of this period, the *Commentaires de Blaise de Monluc*, to the historiography of the Wars of Religion.²

The *Commentaires de Monluc* chronicle the military career of a Gascon captain, from meagre beginnings as an archer in the expeditionary forces of Francis I in the 1520s through to promotion to the high office of Marshal of France in the 1570s. Written between 1570 and 1577, the twilight of Monluc’s professional life, the seven *livres* that comprise the *Commentaires* are ostensibly *mémoires et souvenirs*, intended to laud the deeds of a loyal captain but also to serve as a military manual for subsequent commanders within the royal army. Indeed, Claude Gilbert Dubois has shown that extant early manuscript versions of Monluc’s text within the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris are catalogued as ‘Mémoires’, with the first use of the title *Commentaires* appearing only in 1592, with Florimond de Raemonde’s edition that sought partly to defer to Monluc’s own aspirations for his writings – ‘ce qui liront ces Commentaires’,³ – and partly to associate the new publication with prestigious texts such as Julius Caesar’s *Commentarii de bello gallico*, the work of a military commander and commentator which was similarly an historiography and an apologia.⁴

The *Commentaires de Monluc* offers a vibrant narrative of service within the royal army. The first four *livres* concentrate on notable French campaigns against the imperial forces of Charles V: the crown’s successful operations in Picardy, Naples, and Piedmont during the 1530s and ’40s; the much-publicised defence of Siena in 1555, at which Monluc’s garrison force held out for over eight months against overwhelming odds – resistance that won plaudits from both French and imperial commentators alike; and the French recovery of Thionville in 1558, which saw Monluc promoted to *colonel-général* of France’s

¹ Père Gabriel Daniel, *Histoire de France depuis l’établissement de la monarchie française dans les Gaules* (Paris, 1713), quoted in J. Héritier, *Catherine de Medici* (London, 1963), p. 122.

² Blaise de Monluc, *Commentaires 1521-1576*, ed. Paul Courteault and J. Giono (Paris, 1964); Blaise de Monluc, *Commentaires et lettres de Blaise de Monluc, maréchal de France*, ed. A. de Ruble, 5 vols. (Paris, 1864-1872).

³ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, p. 21.

⁴ See Claude Gilbert Dubois, *La Conception de l’Histoire en France au XVIe Siècle* (Paris, 1977), p. 219.

infantry and secure a position within the clientele of the powerful Guise family.⁵ The final three *livres* deal with Monluc's appointment to the office of *lieutenant du roi* for the south-western province of Guyenne in the early 1560s, and his subsequent *travaux* in attempting to maintain peace and stability in a region struggling to cope with the violent expansion of Reform evangelism. With the communities of the south-west bearing the brunt of confrontations between the faiths during his tenure, Monluc was well placed to record the severity of these rivalries. His memoirs, therefore, should stand as an important source of evidence for these events, an eye-witness account of troubled times. Yet there is a reticence among the historical community to engage fully with the *Commentaires* as an authoritative, objective document, a convention predicated on the principle that this is a polemical tract, the work of a biased sectarian.⁶ Four factors explain this hesitancy, and will be explored below: the contention over the motivations behind Monluc's authorship; the question of the reliability of the manuscript and printed editions; a tendency of scholars to dismiss texts which are brash and confrontational, as Monluc's rhetoric often is; and sensitivity over 'gaps' within the timeline of his testimony.

The first concern expressed by historians relates to the motivation behind the writing of the *Commentaires*. While Monluc's military career was long and illustrious, it ended somewhat ignominiously with forced retirement in 1570 – the general falling victim to accusations of corruption and malpractice from enemies within royal and provincial circles. As Monluc began to compile the commentary of his life's deeds only after this episode, scholars have suspected that his writings are therefore an attempt to extol a virtuous life, answer his detractors, and vindicate a once-proud reputation. The impartiality of his account is thus called into question, especially where events involving his adversaries are discussed. Moreover, despite the fact that the first draft of the *Commentaires* was completed in 1572, Monluc's recall to favour and subsequent promotion to Marshal of France at the accession of Henry III in 1574 complicated matters further. Keen to re-pay the loyalty of his former field commander, Monluc set about amending his text to strengthen its condemnation of those who had slandered him, and included lengthy eulogies to the new

⁵ For further details of Monluc's military career, see Paul Courteault, *Blaise de Monluc, Historien* (Geneva, 1970).

⁶ See, for example, Dubois's discussion of 'authenticité ou dissimulation' within the *Commentaires*. Dubois, *La Conception de l'Histoire en France*, pp. 244-48. For recent work on Monluc, see the entry 'Monluc (Blaise de)' (revised by Étienne Vaucheret), in M. Simonin *et al.*, eds., *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises. Le XVI^e siècle, Encyclopédies d'aujourd'hui, La Pochothèque* (Paris: Fayard, 2001). See also Kevin Gould, *Catholic Activism in the Southwest of France, 1540-1570* (forthcoming with Ashgate, 2005).

king.⁷ Numerous passages were re-written, and a number of fresh sections added, with Monluc ‘borrowing’ from the collected works of Guillaume and Martin du Bellay whenever his memory failed or his recollection became confused.⁸ It is hardly surprising that historians have found such a tangled writing process non-conducive to the production of balanced evidence.

The second factor governing scholarly reticence concerns the complicated pedigree of the *Commentaires* from manuscript to printed text. Two printed editions of the *Commentaires* are accepted as standard by the historical community: the nineteenth-century five-volume set edited by the baron Alphonse de Ruble, the final two volumes of which contain additional transcriptions of letters sent and received by Monluc during his career; and Paul Courteault’s edition, republished in 1964, which features extensive notes and variants.⁹ It is apparent that Ruble and Courteault compiled their editions from three distinct versions of the *Commentaires*: the extant original manuscript; the 1592 text, published by Florimond de Raemonde; and a later incomplete edition held by Monluc’s nephew, Jean de Monluc de Balagny, which features Jean’s additional notes in the margins. Yet Ruble and Courteault adopted quite different approaches to compiling their works. Ruble uses Balagny’s manuscript as the basis for his edition, drawing on the other two sources to fill the gaps as required. Although much of the content and orthography of the original is retained, Ruble corrects many of Florimond’s alterations, and restores proper names throughout. Courteault, on the other hand, prefers to use the original manuscript as his copy-text, with Florimond and Balagny’s texts cited where necessary. Where the different editions offer supplementary original information, Courteault supplies multiple versions; something Ruble does not, highlighting text from alternate editions by the use of italics,

⁷ The *Histoire et Dictionnaire des Guerres de Religion* notes that when Monluc originally dedicated his ‘souvenirs’ to Henry, in early 1573, this third son of Catherine de’ Medici was titled the duke of Anjou, and was heir to the throne, not king (his elder brother Charles IX would still reign for another year). As a final gesture, Monluc would add a second dedication to Henry, and it is supposed that on the completion of the *Commentaires*, in February 1577, a printed edition of the finished manuscript was presented to the king and read aloud before a private audience in the cabinet du roi. See A. Jouanna, J. Boucher, D. Biloghi, and G. Le Thiec, eds., *Histoire et Dictionnaire des Guerres de Religion* (Paris, 1998), p. 1114.

⁸ See Martin du Bellay, *Les Memoires de Mess. M. du Bellay [...] contenant le discours de plusieurs choses advenues au Royaume de France* (Paris, 1569); Guillaume du Bellay, *Épitome de l’antiquité des Gaules et de France* (Paris, 1556). For the influence of Guillaume and Martin du Bellay on the text of Monluc’s *Commentaires*, and on his desire for vindication, see Robert J. Knecht, ‘The Sword and the Pen: Blaise de Monluc and his *Commentaires*’, *Renaissance Studies*, 9 (1995), pp. 104-18.

⁹ [Monluc], *Commentaires et lettres*; [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*.

parentheses, and footnotes. He corrects the pre-1564 calendar, by which New Year began at Easter, to the modern equivalent, an amendment that Ruble also ignored. In fact, Courteault is extremely critical of Ruble's editorial method, describing it as '*un amalgame perpétuel, impossible à contrôler*'.¹⁰ For Courteault, Ruble interchanged the different texts too often and too readily, with the result that a less than authentic composite work is created from incomplete materials. The variety in content and editorial style of the various manuscript and printed editions of the *Commentaires* make them something of an enigma, and another reason for historians to hesitate before citing its text with confidence.

The third issue considered here is the contention surrounding Monluc's role as Catholic zealot *par excellence* and key player in the defence of orthodoxy in the south-west during the 1560s. In late 1561 the crown appointed Monluc as *lieutenant-général* to Guyenne in an attempt to quell the rising tide of sectarian violence sweeping the region. Unfortunately, his unforgiving style of military governance raised the hackles of Protestant contemporaries, who reviled 'the king's butcher' for his harsh treatment of Huguenot communities and his support of Catholic militants.¹¹ This reputation for severity was cemented in the seventeenth- and eighteenth- centuries with the publication of two important Protestant histories of the wars: the *Histoire ecclésiastique*, and the *Mémoires de Condé*.¹² Both berate the 'savagery' of the Monlucoise and accuse the general of perpetrating massacres against Huguenot civilians and soldiery alike. Monluc did little to help his cause here, as his accounts of confrontations with Protestants offer stark reading. At St. Mézard (February 1562), for example, Monluc relates how he had summarily executed four ringleaders of a Protestant uprising, while a fifth, a Calvinist deacon, was whipped so badly that he died only days later.¹³ Monluc remarks of this event: 'men must begin with execution. If everyone that had charge of provinces had done the same, they would have put out the fire that has since consumed all'.¹⁴ Protestant garrison forces were especially vulnerable to Monluc's wrath. At the siege of Montségur (August 1562),

¹⁰ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*.

¹¹ For anonymous complaints from Protestant communities of Cadillac to the crown accusing Monluc of being 'the king's butcher', see Anonymous to Catherine de Medici (11/13 April 1563), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Français, 15 879, fos. 173, 195.

¹² Théodore de Bèze, *Histoire ecclésiastique des églises réformées au royaume de France*, G. Baum and E. Cunitz, eds., 3 vols (Nieuwkoop, 1974); Condé, *Mémoires de Condé, ou recueil pour servir à l'histoire de France, contenant ce qui s'est passé du plus mémorable dans le Royaume*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1743).

¹³ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, p. 485.

¹⁴ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, p. 485.

Monluc ordered his prisoners to be executed to prevent them escaping and returning to the fight – an act that drew inevitable parallels with Henry V’s decision at Agincourt in 1415,¹⁵ while at Lectoure (September 1562), the execution of Huguenot defenders, and the disposal of their bodies into the castle well, was recorded as ‘a very good end to some very evil men’.¹⁶ At the siege of Penne (August 1562), Spanish troops sent to augment Monluc’s forces not only massacred the defeated garrison but also killed the women sheltering in the courtyard, claiming them to be ‘Lutherans in disguise’.¹⁷ In fact, Monluc would later capitalise on this event, rousing his Spanish contingent on the eve of the Battle of Vergt (October 1562) with the warning that: ‘this is God’s quarrel; it is against the Lutherans, who will cut you into a thousand pieces if you fall into their hands’.¹⁸ The *Commentaires* contain numerous other examples which confirm the maxim that brutality was a necessary evil of leadership during this time: on receiving news of an assassination plot hatched by local Protestants, Monluc resolved ‘to sell my skin as dear as I could... [and] to execute all the cruelty that I could, especially against those who spoke against the royal majesty; for I saw very well that gentle ways would never reclaim those cankered and inveterate rascals’.¹⁹ In a letter to the duke of Alva, himself no stranger to the use of extreme force to achieve an objective, Monluc notes his reservations about the progress of the war in France: ‘if everybody had only followed my example [...] to grant quarter to no one, all would be over now’;²⁰ while his pursuit of the Protestant leader, Duras, along the Dordogne is entered as follows: ‘You can see the route I took because the victims are found on the trees and along the roadside [...] one man hanged is worth one hundred killed in battle’.²¹

There is little doubt that the severity of such comments served to brand the *Commentaires* as little more than Catholic polemic. Yet the argument is not quite so simple. Ruble highlights this dark side of Monluc’s reputation, but sets it within the context of the duality of his character: ‘Terrible in war, he defended Protestant rights in peacetime. Blamed for the 1572 massacres, he is said to have advised the king to consider religious toleration [...] merciless and humane, violent and measured, ardent and wise, cruel to excess, moderate to the point of

¹⁵ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, p. 532.

¹⁶ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, p. 552.

¹⁷ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, pp. 537-38. The Spaniards had apparently discovered a deacon attempting to escape by dressing as a woman and hiding among the prisoners.

¹⁸ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, pp. 564-65.

¹⁹ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, p. 482.

²⁰ P. Van Dyke, *Catherine de Médicis*, 2 vols. (London, 1923), I, p. 261.

²¹ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, p. 529.

clemency'.²² This perspective is supported by A. W. Evans, who suggests that Monluc's brutality was a necessary expedient of leadership during these turbulent times: 'He was constrained, contrary to his own nature, to use not only severity, but even sometimes to be cruel'.²³ Evans sees the conflict as a degenerate civil war, a world turned upside down, in which extreme force was sometimes required over more conventional governance. Indeed, Monluc hints at such in his memoirs: 'these wars are not like foreign wars, where one fights for love and honour; in civil wars one fights masters and servants alike, as they share the same roof, and it is necessary to use harshness and cruelty, otherwise the attraction of gain will cause many to continue the war to an end'.²⁴ Certainly, few contemporaries accused Monluc of failing in his wider duties, especially in his obligation to serve the crown. In fact, several observers report that quite the opposite was true. Darmesteter and Hatzfeld assert that: 'his least praiseworthy actions were inspired by a respect for royal authority, which he carries to the length of fanaticism';²⁵ while Ruble remarks that: 'a profound feeling of loyalty breathes in the pages', an absolute devotion that sought to inspire the French military nobility into serving the crown more constructively.²⁶

Has too much, then, been made of Monluc's harsh reputation? Incongruities detected by Ruble within the texts of the various editions of the *Commentaires* suggest that this is indeed the case. In the early publications, for example, *livre V* begins: 'Je me délibéray d'uzer de toutes cruautés'. However, the word *cruautés* does not exist in the original manuscript, the sentence actually reads: 'Je me délibéray d'uzer de toutes les craintes'.²⁷ The distinction between *cruautés* and *craintes*, cruelty and fear, is an important one, as the replacement of the word *cruautés* for *craintes* – cruelty for fear – fundamentally alters the tone of Monluc's argument, a modification probably made by later editors keen to spice up the *Commentaires*.²⁸ It is possible, too, that Monluc exaggerated the harshness of many of his deeds to satisfy his audience at court; the new king, Henry III, had headed the royal army in France during the late 1560s, and so had been involved in many violent battlefield exchanges with the Protestant forces of the prince of Condé.

The reality, though, may lie somewhere between the two perceptions of Monluc. Certainly, the vicious nature of the warfare in Guyenne produced situations where experience dictated the

²² [Monluc], *Commentaires et Lettres*, I, p. iv.

²³ A. W. Evans, *Blaise de Monluc* (London, 1909), p. 19.

²⁴ [Monluc], *Commentaires 1521-1576*, p. 519.

²⁵ Quoted in Evans, *Blaise de Monluc*, p. 29.

²⁶ [Ruble], *Commentaires et Lettres*, I, p. iii.

²⁷ [Ruble], *Commentaires et Lettres*, I, p. iv.

²⁸ [Ruble], *Commentaires et Lettres*, I, p. iv.

employment of expedient military force rather than conciliatory approaches, but such action invariably left a commander open to claims of brutality even when he was simply ensuring victory in the field. But it is also pertinent to note that while scholars recoil at Monluc's colourful language, they rarely question the accuracy of detail of the *Commentaires*. Pierre Michel, for example, sees no reason to dismiss Monluc as an unreliable source: 'The objectivity of Monluc is remarkable [...] Generally, historians and Protestant commentators confirm his versions of events'.²⁹ Similarly, Paul Courteault, Monluc's biographer, claims that the *Commentaires*: 'merit their place on the top rung of narrative histories of France during the sixteenth century'.³⁰ For Courteault, the *Commentaires* provide important insights into the activities of and dichotomies facing Catholic commanders during the religious wars, and he finds little to challenge the veracity of the detail described: 'Monluc is nearly always well informed, his accounts are exact, his detail is accurate, his judgements are moderate and circumspect'.³¹ It is also relevant that while the two behemoths of Protestant history, the *Histoire ecclésiastique* and the *Mémoires de Condé*, revile Monluc as a Catholic butcher, they do not dispute the factual detail of his text.

Finally, it is evident that 'missing' material, or what the author does not say, can often pose more of a dilemma for historians than inaccurate statements or confessional bias. For example, it is known that the correspondence of Théodore de Bèze and Jean Calvin were doctored upon their deaths to remove and destroy certain compromising documents that could have been used against the Calvinist church at a later date. This was also the case with many Catholic Leaguers, whose personal archives were deliberately expunged of all references to militant behaviour so as to allow the family name to survive uncensored under the conciliatory government of Henry IV after 1594. Monluc's *Commentaires* contain a similar lacuna in an otherwise comprehensive narrative of his career. Historians have noted that this gap in the timeline, between late-1559 to mid-1561, coincides with the moment at which Monluc is alleged to have flirted with membership of the fledgling Reform movement in Guyenne, even attending several Calvinist services, if Bèze is to be believed. So was Monluc attempting to extirpate his dalliance with Protestantism from the history books by omitting reference to these years within his own testimony? Ian Roy believes so, and suggests that this is why Protestants were so angered at Monluc's subsequent harsh treatment of the Reform

²⁹ Pierre Michel, *Blaise de Monluc* (Paris, 1971), pp. 128-29.

³⁰ Courteault, *Blaise de Monluc, Historien*, p. 618.

³¹ Courteault, *Blaise de Monluc, Historien*, p. 619.

communities of the south-west. After all, Monluc had once worshipped in their fold, and so, for many, he was an apostate and a barbarian.³²

This study has shown that while memoirs and correspondence can offer important insights into historical events, they can also be complicated documents that raise more problems than they solve. The *Commentaires* have proven especially troublesome as they reveal in microcosm the dilemmas faced by those attempting to access the past through personal recollections: contention over the motivation behind the authorship; the reliability of the manuscript and printed editions; and the problem of the ‘missing years’ within the testimony. But the *Commentaires* are especially controversial because of the key role played by their author in the sectarian confrontations of the 1560s. Monluc was an iconic figure in the south-west, lauded by Catholics and despised by Protestants. His perception of the troubles is described in brash and boastful tones, his rhetoric is colourful and self-aggrandising, and he rarely shrinks from elucidating the less sanguine aspects of military command during the civil wars. Nevertheless, despite these displays the *Commentaires* remain concise and detailed chronicles of the life of a military officer in sixteenth-century France, and have yet to be proved factually inaccurate. Such are the difficulties faced by those accessing personal documents and historical memoirs.



³² Ian Roy, *Blaise de Monluc* (London, 1971), p. 7.