

**FROM SAVOY TO AGRA:
THE CROSS-CULTURAL NARRATIVE OF BENOÎT DE BOIGNE**
Christopher Rollason, Ph.D

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Chambéry, the capital of the French department of Savoie, is unlikely to be known to many except as a stopping-off place for ski resorts or a staging-post on the way to Italy. However, those who do linger in this beautifully preserved town of 55 000 inhabitants, with its breathtaking mountain vistas and mysterious courtyards and alleyways, will not be disappointed. It offers a chequered and complex history in one of Europe’s border regions, and not least among the tales that Chambéry has to tell is the epic story of its son Benoît de Boigne, the “Nabob from Savoy”: adventurer and mercenary in India, general to a maharajah, protector of the Taj Mahal, benefactor and rebuilder of his Savoyard birthplace, and, most recently, a character in an acclaimed Indian novel.

For most, the territory known as Savoie or Savoy will need some definition. The old County (later Duchy) of Savoy, which dated back to 1189, once stretched as far as Turin and Nice: it was later merged into the Kingdom of Sardinia, but the ruling family remained the House of Savoy, and later produced the first monarchs of united Italy. Savoy (meaning the French-speaking Alpine part of the Kingdom of Sardinia) was absorbed into France during the Revolutionary-Napoleonic period from 1792, was returned to Sardinia in 1815, and was definitively made part of France in 1860, under a deal by which Italy accepted to hand over Nice and Savoy in return for Napoleon III’s support for the new Italian state. Today, the two French departments of Savoie (capital: Chambéry) and Haute-Savoie (capital: Annecy) are, if mentioned in the same breath, liable to be called either “les deux Savoies” or “les pays de Savoie.” There is, however, no Savoie region, as the two departments are part of the larger Rhône-Alpes region based in Lyon. The adjectives “savoyard” and “savoisien” are used interchangeably, to refer variously to the old state of Savoy, the department of Savoie, or the two departments combined. The notion of modern Savoyard identity is thus rather ill-defined and fluid, as no official, or even generally agreed, name exists in French for the whole territory (which also includes the spas of Evian and Aix-les-Bains, and, of course, the ski stations). In English, it seems preferable to use the term “Savoy” only historically and up to 1860: the existing department of Savoie is only a small part of the old Duchy, the names of French departments are usually left untranslated in English, and if one called the department of Savoie “Savoy,” what would one call its neighbour Haute-Savoie? The nomenclature adopted in this article will therefore be Savoy for the old state, and Savoie for the modern-day department of which Chambéry is the capital.

Chambéry was, in fact, the capital of the old independent state from 1295 till 1563, when the Dukes of Savoy moved their headquarters to Turin: indeed, from 1502 to 1578 the famous object of devotion now known as the Turin Shroud had its home in the chapel of the Castle of the Dukes of Savoy in Chambéry. When the Dukes left for Turin, local pride was assuaged by the continued presence in the city of Savoy’s Senate, and a certain metropolitan prestige thus remained. A degree of cosmopolitanism was ensured by the current use of both French and Italian (many Savoyards went to study in Turin and made their careers there) and by the town’s strategic geographical position en route to Switzerland and Italy. Historical figures associated with Chambéry include Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a frequent visitor for reasons of

the heart, and the poet Alphonse de Lamartine, whose marriage was solemnised in the ducal chapel in 1820. Born in Chambéry in the mid-eighteenth century were the de Maistre brothers, the conservative Catholic and legitimist ideologue Joseph, and the writer, painter and Russian traveller Xavier, who in 1784 masterminded one of the earliest balloon ascents in history from the Parc de Buisson-Rond.

Today, Chambéry offers the visitor the pleasures of ambling through the labyrinthine streets of the old town, with its pastel façades, generous archways and vast town mansions with multiple courtyards. The most obvious landmark is the former Castle of the Dukes of Savoy (now used for local government purposes), a turreted edifice that would not be out of place in a Brothers Grimm tale. A narrow, perfectly straight artery that strikes the eye as a masterpiece of self-confident urban planning, with Italianate porticoes housing shops on both sides, bisects the centre, linking the Castle to the town's other focal point, the Fountain of the Elephants. This monument consists of four elephants, or, rather, half-elephants surrounding sculptured friezes of historico-military scenes, and is surmounted by a statue of a uniformed gentleman brandishing a rolled-up document in his hand. The statue is of General Benoît de Boigne, and the road leading up to the fountain is the rue de Boigne. Behind these landmarks lies the tale of the adventurer whom the Indian State Railways Magazine dubbed, in 1928, "one of the most remarkable men who ever lived."

De Boigne was, certainly, one of the most prominent of a special breed of Europeans who 'went out to India' in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some of them less to colonise than to seek adventures, and ended up at least half assimilated to the ways and world-views of the subcontinent. Among them were the Irish mercenary George Thomas (1756-1802), who blended into India to the point of forgetting how to speak English; the French soldier Michel Raymond (1755-1798), who converted to Islam and is honoured to this day with a statue in Hyderabad; and James Achilles Kirkpatrick (1764-1805), who, as British Resident at the Nizam's court in that same city, learnt Persian and Urdu and married a Mughal princess. Kirkpatrick's tale of part-Indianisation has been ably chronicled by William Dalrymple in his best-selling biography of 2002, *White Mughals*; and Benoît de Boigne, who makes a walk-on appearance in Dalrymple's book, can offer a modern audience a life similarly studded with interest and surprises.

The future General de Boigne was born Benoît Leborgne, in 1751. He saw the light of day in a petit-bourgeois dwelling (no longer standing) in Place Saint Léger, the square which still marks the heart of the old town, just a stone's throw from the Rue Couverte, at that time the bazaar of Chambéry, with its promiscuous hodgepodge of *cabornes* - squalid, disease-infested huts occupied by tradesmen and artisans. His father, Jean-Baptiste Leborgne, was a dealer in furs who had married a notary's daughter; they had thirteen children, five of whom survived into adulthood. Benoît's brother Claude-Pierre had a brief political career in what is now Haiti, before becoming governor of Martinique for the French and, later, a Sardinian baron.

Benoît began life as a subject of the King of Sardinia, was a French citizen from 1792 to 1815, and became a Sardinian again with the fall of Napoleon. The Count-General de Boigne was the only member of his family to change surname from the original Leborgne: the addition of the aristocratic "de" speaks for itself, and we may presume that he abandoned Leborgne thanks to the name's "undignified" connotations ("borgne" means "one-eyed").

Educated at Chambéry's Collège Royal, an institution run by ecclesiastics where he distinguished himself in French, Italian and, interestingly, English, the young Benoît appears

not to have considered going to university, and opted early for a military career. He began his soldier's life as a mercenary in an Irish regiment in the service of the French crown, thus - for he was no French citizen himself - placing himself under the sign of a cosmopolitanism that was to soon to entice him outside of Europe and make him part of the complex interaction of races, cultures and empires that characterised his time, forerunning the process we now call globalisation. 1772 found him in the ranks of the Russian army, swearing allegiance to Catherine the Great. Legend has it that the handsome young soldier found himself offering the Russian queen services whose nature went well beyond the purely military. His adventures in the picaresque mode took him through Greece, Turkey, Syria and Egypt: it is claimed by some that at one point he was sold as a slave in Constantinople, and was kept as a drawer of water until a British notable passing through in the Ottoman capital bought him out. These tales may or may not be apocryphal, but there is no doubt that, in January of 1778, Benoît Leborgne trod the soil of India for the first time as he disembarked in the port of Madras (now Chennai), headquarters of the British East India Company. For almost two decades from that moment on, India would be his home.

India was then a battleground between multiple forces, British, French and native. The local powers, bitter rivals among themselves, included the Delhi-based Mughals, their empire now in terminal decline, the bellicose Rajputs, and the even more warlike Mahrattas, who had fanned out from their power-base in Poona (today Pune) to control much of northern India. In those pre-Raj days, the British were centred on the three East India Company settlements of Bombay (now Mumbai), Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Madras, but were fast expanding both their territorial grip and their political influence. The French had a number of *comptoirs*, notably Pondicherry, on Indian territory, and had not yet given up all ambition of wresting hegemony in the subcontinent from the British. In this environment of instability and flux, many were the European mercenaries who arrived on India's shores in search of fame and fortune, and one of those who succeeded was the young Leborgne.

The Savoyard adventurer had no a priori loyalty to either Britain or France, and served in the subcontinental forces of both before finding his place on India's politico-military chessboard. In 1784, he entered the service of Maharajah Scindia, leader of the Mahrattas and the most successful and prestigious Indian military commander of the time, then already dubbed "the rising star of Hindustan." Leborgne soon won his employer's confidence, had control over the Mahratta troops confided to him, and after a run of signal victories against various rivals was promoted - in 1789, far away from that year's turbulence in France and Europe - to the rank of general. In effect, he became Scindia's right-hand-man. He was known for his efficiency and probity as a commander, and was renowned for always paying his troops on time. It was at this point that he changed his name, dropping the plebeian Leborgne for the higher-sounding de Boigne.

In return for services rendered, the general from Chambéry found himself awarded administrative responsibilities too. In 1791, Scindia made him governor of the territory known as the Doab - a small but symbolically important area in north-central India, relatively close to Delhi, which included as the jewel in its crown the historic city of Agra, famous then as now as the home of no less a monument than the Taj Mahal. 1794 witnessed a lively correspondence between de Boigne and John Murray, of the East India Company in Calcutta, concerning the possibilities of restoring the famous Mughal mausoleum and saving it for posterity. Pressed by Murray, de Boigne asked Scindia for funding, but had to admit that while some cash was forthcoming 'for the upkeep of the building and the garden', it would not ensure restoration: the Hindu Scindia remained lukewarm about investing in a monument

built by and for a Muslim dynasty. De Boigne, in his further remonstrances with his patron, proposed recouping the expenses by charging for entrance; and in a letter to Murray, he stressed the symbolic value which restoration would have for Hindu-Muslim intercommunal relations. All in all, his attitude to the Taj seems remarkably advanced for his day, and de Boigne, beyond any doubt, helped start the process that led to its preservation. Without Benoît de Boigne the Taj Mahal might not be here today.

Scindia died that same year, and was succeeded by his nephew, a far less forceful individual. Two years later, in 1796, for health reasons but also no doubt sensing that the Mahratta star was on the wane, de Boigne decided to leave India for good. He had amassed a huge fortune in Scindia's service; he had invested part of those monies in the indigo business, acquiring an interest in a European-run concern that specialised in producing the dye for sale in the West. He had also got married, at least de facto, to a woman known under the Europeanised name of H el ene Bennett, the daughter of a Persian colonel, by whom he had two children.

January 1797 saw the adventurer's return to Europe. Owing to the revolutionary instability in France, and given his own royalist and legitimist sympathies, he took up residence in London. He successfully masterminded the return of his fortune: the 'Cronberg', a vessel loaded with his possessions and trophies from India, sank off the coast of Denmark, but de Boigne sent divers who, miraculously, managed to rescue almost the entire cargo. He had brought his Persian consort to England with him, but at a society gathering he met Ad ele Osmond, the daughter of a French  migr  aristocrat. The general fell for Ad ele's charms, and, while he continued to provide for H el ene, whom he settled in England, six months after meeting Ad ele he entered a stormy second marriage which lasted less than three years and produced no issue. In 1802, de Boigne returned to settle in a Chamb ery now part of France, but his marriage was now no more than a shell, and for the rest of his life the twain remained effectively separated, meeting on only the coldest and most official of terms. Ad ele the Countess de Boigne later became celebrated for her high-society lifestyle, and wrote a set of memoirs which are still in print today.

In Chamb ery, de Boigne acquired the Ch ateau de Buisson-Rond, a mansion set in a vast domain with superb Alpine vistas, which had previously been best-known as the scene of Xavier de Maistre's ballooning experiment. He housed his substantial collection of Indian artworks and artefacts - including two engravings of the Taj - in his new stately home. He was now, and would be for the next thirteen years, a resident and citizen of France. 1815 and the aftermath of Waterloo, however, restored the Kingdom of Sardinia, and de Boigne became once again a subject of the House of Savoy. In 1816, King Victor Emmanuel I made him a hereditary count, and in 1822, King Charles Felix honoured him with the rank of general: the position he had earned by merit in India was now re-conferred on him in Europe as an honorary title. By then, de Boigne appears to have felt that the political situation in Savoy and Europe was now stable enough to justify him making a substantial investment of his fortune in and for his native town, and so it was that on 1 March 1822 he addressed a long and detailed memoir to the Chamb ery municipal council, setting out his proposals for the rebuilding, embellishment and, indeed, transformation of the town - all at his own expense. It is estimated that the total cost came to one-third of his personal fortune: the offer was gratefully accepted.

In the memoir, explaining that he had "had to wait until Heaven called the legitimate monarchs back to the thrones of civilised Europe", de Boigne expounded his project, declaring: "I dare flatter myself that we will succeed in bringing about a great many changes

and improvements in the town, which will make it healthier and more agreeable for all". His carefully budgeted proposals - all of which came to pass - included a new façade for the town hall, a theatre, a new school to be run by the Jesuits, a workhouse for the destitute, and hospital facilities for those with contagious diseases and for sick foreign travellers. With an eye, here as in Agra, to the emergent tourist industry, he argued that this rebuilding will allow Savoy, with "its natural beauties and the richness of its soil", to emulate Switzerland and attract foreign visitors - especially, he noted, given "the proximity of the thermal waters of Aix[-les-Bains]."

The most ambitious project, and the one that allows de Boigne to be seen as a forerunner on a smaller scale of Baron Haussmann, the great reshaper of nineteenth-century Paris, was for the building of a new perpendicular avenue to link the Castle of the Dukes of Savoy to the upper town. De Boigne justified this scheme partly on public health grounds. The *cabornes*, the medieval-type tradesmen's huts which disfigured the Rue Couverte, were, he wrote in his memoir, "bad for their dwellers' health," "projected an image of poverty and ugliness," and were "a dishonour to the town." In their place he proposed to build a "large and beautiful street with arcades," declaring: "Should this project be realised, there is no doubt that the town would gain greatly, in both salubriousness and elegance." It happened as de Boigne proposed: the area occupied by the *cabornes* was taken over by compulsory purchase, with the owners duly compensated (Haussmann would use the same system), and the old rue Couverte made way for the rue de Boigne as it is today. The street bearing the general's name is flanked on both sides by Italian-style porticoes housing elegant shops and recalling the Turin of de Boigne's Savoy, but also the *passages couverts*, or arcades, which, built in Paris from 1800 on, embodied a nineteenth-century consumer's dream. De Boigne's street has something utopian about it, inviting parallels with the most advanced architectural visions of his day.

The "Nabob from Savoy" died in 1830, before his plans came to complete fruition. He was buried in the Eglise de Lémenc above the town, where his tomb may still be visited. The austere tomb is in pure European-Christian style, with no allusion to his time in India. However, Chambéry's oriental connections were amply immortalised in the Fountain of the Elephants, designed by the French artist Pierre-Victor Sappey and erected by public subscription in 1838. It effectively completes the general's architectural vision, closing the upper end of the rue de Boigne and counterpointing the view of the Dukes' Castle at the lower end. The document which de Boigne's effigy grasps is none other than the memoir of 1822 that set out his vision of the future of his town. Chambéry's hero appears on the pedestal in a Sardinian general's outfit, but after little more than two decades the Fountain of the Elephants became a French monument. In 1858, in Plombières-les-Bains, a tiny spa in France's Vosges region, Napoleon III and the Italian statesman Cavour signed the treaty that, ratified by a popular referendum, marked the absorption into France, two years later, of what became the departments of Savoie and Haute-Savoie.

One might say that de Boigne rebuilt Chambéry on Indian gold. However, while he certainly may be considered a foreign direct investor there, it is hard to write him off as a colonial exploiter as such. In this, he differed from other "nabobs" or "India returnees" in nineteenth-century Europe. As Scindia's general, he represented no European power, and the wealth he acquired came as payment for his professional services to a local ruler. De Boigne's attitudes as a military and administrative figure in India seem to have been rational and enlightened, and he always retained a healthy respect for the culture and country he had left behind. Today,

the Fountain of the Elephants appears as the emblem of a symbiosis of Asian and European ways that can offer a pointer to the future in today's globalising world.

The Château de Buisson-Rond now belongs to the town of Chambéry, and is not open to the public, though its glorious park still is. The de Boigne family - descendants of Benoît through his Persian first consort, and therefore all ultimately the products of a cultural miscegenation - still flourishes, with a count and engineer named Pierre-Edouard at its head, but now has its seat at the Château d'Imbleville, on the other side of France in Normandy, where the de Boigne archives and memorabilia are now housed. Meanwhile, and in an unexpected twist of cultural history, Benoît de Boigne has become a character in the literature of contemporary India.

In 1995, the Bombay-born Vikram Chandra, a part-India, part-US resident, published his first work of fiction, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. This novel, an epic creation in the magic-realist vein spanning several continents and centuries and strongly influenced by the ancient Indian narrative tradition, was an immediate success, winning its author the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Published Book. One of its episodes features none other than Benoît de Boigne, tracing a fictionalised version of his career which, while allowing itself a degree of the poetic licence that magic realism permits, transmits the essence of the story to the modern age ("Even as he grew up in Chambéry, in that part of Europe known as Savoy, a hot wind whistled through the soul of ... de Boigne, bringing with it fancies very much out of place"). Chandra writes: " 'My life has been a dream,' Benoît de Boigne was often heard to say in Parisian drawing rooms as his life drew to a close, and was understood by the fashionable, secretly contemptuous inhabitants of those rooms to mean that his adventures in the faraway, unreal land of Hindustan now seemed fantastical and fictional. But ... he meant that he had encountered ... the unbearably real sensations and colours of a dream." Vikram Chandra's postcolonial text reappropriates de Boigne's Asian dream as the legacy of a complex and hybrid past, to be learnt from anew by both India and the world. Meanwhile in Chambéry, the four elephants loyally guard the entrance to the rue de Boigne.

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