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**St. Roch Military Marches in Wallonia:
Memory, Commemoration, and Identity, 1866-1940**

Erik Hadley
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Ritualized public processions known as military saint marches thrive in popular memory and define local identity in Francophone Belgium (Wallonia). The annual processions involve thousands of marchers dressed in Napoleonic-era military uniforms, carrying authentic muskets and escorting a statue of St. Roch, the patron saint of disease protection. Many of these marchers trace family participation through multiple generations and two St. Roch marches received UNESCO recognition as examples of “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” in 2012. While participants claim there is no historical rupture between the modern marches and the processions celebrated prior to the French Revolution, there is a fictive, inventive origin to these marches. Like many religious processions in Belgium, the St. Roch marches ended during the radical phase of the French Revolution (1794) and only reemerged in the 1860s. The processions evolved in structure, rituals, and costume through the 1930s. Participants and spectators share in the creation of historical memory, infuse the marches with notions of local identity and socialization, and create new narratives that legitimize ritual elements and participant costuming. This paper explores the tension between historical experience and modern commemoration of St. Roch military marches, as expressed by their organizers, marchers, and spectators.

On the evening of the third Saturday in May, townspeople gather in the market square in Thuin, a small city in Wallonia, Belgium’s Francophone region. Firing an antique cannon, they light torches and march through medieval streets, completing a ritual known as the *retraite aux flambeaux*, eventually arriving at a monument called *Au Marcheur*, where the president of the St. Roch Military March Committee ceremonially inaugurates the three-day festive procession.¹ The following day, the sounds of fifes, drums and musket shots echo through the fortified upper town sprawling on a bluff and the riverside lower town below it. Hundreds of marchers dressed in

¹ *Retraite aux flambeaux* translates to “torchlight procession.” Foulon, *Marches militaires et folkloriques de l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 110.

Napoleonic-era uniforms form companies complete with officers, musical accompaniment, and cavalry. They trace a route through both parts of the city, the neighboring countryside, and pass by a chapel dedicated to St. Roch. At the end of the processional, a group known as *zouaves*, wearing French North African colonial military-style costumes and accompanied by local clergy, carry a statue of St. Roch. More than 2,000 people participate in the march. They pass the *Au Marcheur* memorial, for recognition from local officials and to pay homage to past generations of marchers and veterans of both world wars. A military mass is held in honor of the marchers on Monday morning, followed by another day of marching the geographical limits of the commune. Each evening, marchers and spectators mingle in open-air bars and cafés, and festivities fill the town square, complete with carnival rides and games. Spectators include locals as well as visitors from other Belgian provinces and nearby France. A similar march occurs in August in nearby Ham-sur-Heure; many of the marching companies and spectators overlap between the two events. On the first night, a religious processional accompanied by several members of each marching company transfer a St. Roch statue from a chapel to the local church. Three days of marching ensue, each ending with a *retraite aux flambeaux*. On Monday, the marchers end their circuit at the medieval-era chateau of Ham-sur-Heure, where city government representatives host the marchers at a reception. The festival ends with a fireworks show, carnival rides, and late-night visits.

These marches are prominent examples of the saint military marching tradition in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region: the communities located between the Sambre and Meuse rivers in central Wallonia. The Thuin and Ham-sur-Heure St. Roch marches count among the most famous military marches in the region.² Additionally, there are dozens of smaller marches in the region, including

² Marches are dedicated to a variety of saints, including Peter, Paul and Anne. The five most famous marches in the region, also known as *grandes marches* for their size and historical pedigree, are those of Thuin, Ham-sur-Heure, Fosses, Gerpinnes, and Walcourt.

five additional St. Roch marches.³ Few of these marches overlap; the marching season begins in May and lasts until October. Thus on any summer weekend, it is likely that marchers in Napoleonic-era uniforms escort a saint statue somewhere in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region.

After viewing both marches firsthand, I interviewed participants about the marches' origin and purpose.⁴ Answers varied, but generally pinpointed the origin of the Thuin march to 1654, when Spanish forces besieged the city. Thuin was on the verge of capitulating when plague struck the besieging force, forcing their retreat. The townspeople celebrated with a procession dedicated to St. Roch, whom they believed had deployed disease to protect the town. The militia, still carrying weapons and wearing uniforms, escorted the procession outside the city walls. According to popular tradition, every year, the town commemorated their miraculous salvation with the same march. During the 1820s, the uniforms changed as Napoleonic war veterans accompanied the procession, and the tradition continues unabated to the present day. The popular response regarding the Ham-sur-Heure march was less dramatic but claimed an older pedigree: after an outbreak of plague in the town in 1636, the townspeople beseeched the local *curé* for a procession to stave off disaster. In 1638, a confraternity dedicated to Saint Roch was founded and a chapel built off the main square.⁵ A military escort for the ensuing procession was necessary because of the precarious security at the time, with French and Spanish soldiers fighting in the region during the Thirty Years War.⁶ Like Thuin, locals claim the procession became a central focus of the town's liturgical calendar.

3 Roland, *Les "marches" militaires de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 54.

4 Author observance of the marches and interviews, Thuin (May 2004); Ham-sur-Heure (August 2015). In Thuin, the author interviewed numerous spectators and marchers during the course of the march. In Ham-sur-Heure, the author interviewed spectators, several marchers, members of the Ham-sur-Heure municipal commune, and members of the Executive Committee for the Procession et Marche Militaire St. Roch de Ham-sur-Heure, including the president of the committee, Dominique Gagliardini.

5 Foulon, *Marches militaires et folkloriques de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 39.

6 Dolimont, *Procession et Marche Militaire Saint-Roch, 375e Anniversaire*, 1.

To the modern spectator and participant, the marches compress notable events from the last 400 years: late-medieval saint processions, plague outbreaks, and military campaigns. Yet discrepancies emerge with the popular memory of the march's history. St. Roch's official day is 16 August and the 1654 siege of Thuin occurred during January. Why is the military march held during the third weekend of May? Additionally, the St. Roch processions ceased completely during the French Revolutionary era and only re-emerged as military marches some seventy years later. If the marches didn't exist until the 1860s, why are marchers costumed in Napoleonic-era uniforms? Despite Old Regime historical claims and appearances, the modern St. Roch military marches originated in the mid-19th century and subsequently, through commemorative efforts, were integrated into an Old Regime historical narrative by 1940. Generations of participants added rituals, dates, and memorabilia, filtering commemoration through innovative explanations linking the march (as experienced) to history (as imagined). The marches are not conceptualized as having originated during the 1860s and inspired by Old Regime processions; rather, the modern marches are associated with the ancient processions through invented stories of continuity and the historical rupture between the two has been ignored or reinterpreted. In the present day, a full apparatus of commemorative structures standardize, promote, and preserve the marches as historical rituals dating to the early 17th century.

If the modern marches lack continuity with their Old Regime antecedents, they nonetheless retain the vibrancy and cultural relevance that define a 'living' or functional communal rite. The marches annually re-enact local historical traditions, present overlapping and unstable declarations of local and regional identity, and reinforce social hierarchies. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's seminal work *The Invention of Tradition* analyzes a similar phenomenon regarding the invention of British, French, and German traditions, which were utilized primarily for nationalistic purposes in the middle-to-late 19th century.⁷ Both Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner linked the 'invention of tradition' to the arbitrary construction of

⁷ Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1-15.

national identities during the era of Western European urbanization and industrialization, a pattern, which, at first glance, seems applicable to the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse saint marches.⁸ Hobsbawn identified two types of invention common to European nationalistic rituals: first, the 'rediscovery' of historical traditions from collective memory; and, second, the creation of new traditions legitimized through specious historical claims.⁹ Both forms of reconstruction are identifiable in the 19th-century re-imagination of the St. Roch marches. During a cholera epidemic in the 1860s, communities "re-discovered" the Old Regime St. Roch processions and initially utilized them for a similar purpose as their ancestors: protection from disease through the deployment of church relics and public, pious rituals. But the underlying communal motivations for continuing the saint marches quickly transformed into secular festive celebrations, frustrating and alienating clergy and lay pilgrims alike. Between 1866 and 1940, innovations in costume, ritual behavior, and communal understanding of the purpose and history of the march fundamentally transformed the ritual. Nevertheless, while revising the historical origins and traditions of the march, participants claimed that they were in fact engaged in authentic historical re-creation of an event dating back to the 17th century.

This study examines how participants and observers historically conceptualized and commemorated the St. Roch military marches in popular culture. Accordingly, documentary evidence for this study centers on publicly published sources that describe and commemorate the Thuin and Ham-sur-Heure St. Roch marches: primarily newspaper and journal articles published in Charleroi and Namur between 1866-1940. Additionally, the paper utilizes primary documentation of the post-1860 marches themselves, including event pamphlets, marching association publications, and personal interviews with spectators, marchers, and members of the marching organizational committees.¹⁰

8 Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 73-74.

9 Hobsbawn and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 2.

10 There is minimal archival information regarding the marches prior to their re-establishment in the 1860s.

Old Regime Origins

Communities in the Burgundian Low Countries were central to the medieval processional movement. The Corpus Christi processional, for example, began in Liège during the mid-13th century as a tribute to the Eucharist. The annual Processional of the Holy Blood, dating to 1290, occurs on Ascension Day in Bruges, where the local cathedral claimed possession of a vial of Christ's blood obtained during the Second Crusade. Brussels, Ypres, and Nivelles also have traditions of religious processions. Many communities developed saint processions called *dedicaces*, later known as *ducasses*. A pilgrimage atmosphere permeated the processions: clergy and participants emphasized piety, discipline and the power of relics in protecting Catholic communities.¹¹

One such processional centered on St. Roch, a late-13th century pilgrim from southern France. He legendarily recovered from the plague and was thereafter known for his miraculous healing. After his death, St. Roch became a regionally celebrated figure for protection from disease. Cults devoted to St. Roch spread northward during the outbreak of the Black Death in the mid-14th century. The first written evidence of St. Roch veneration in the Burgundian Low Countries dates to 1485, while the first recorded processional occurred in 1599 in Châtelet.¹² Two decades later, the town magistrate requested permission from the bishop to build a chapel dedicated to St. Roch. During a plague outbreak in 1636, eight St. Roch chapels were built in the region, including in Thuin and Ham-sur-Heure. Confraternities supported chapels dedicated to specific saints, paid for saint-day masses, and organized annual processions for the chosen saint. A Catholic region, the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse communities had numerous saint days involving ritual processions; St. Roch veneration became a common addition to the liturgical calendar by the mid-17th century. Confraternities—piety-based lay

11 For example, in 1703, pilgrims from Mons traveled to Thuin to pray for salvation against an outbreak of disease in Mons. Conreur, *Folklore thudinien*, Tome I, 12.

12 A local confraternity “sang a mass to Monsigneur St. Roch and held a processional.” Conreur, *Folklore thudinien*, Tome I, 57.

organizations—supported chapels dedicated to specific saints, paid for saint-day masses, and often organized annual processions for the chosen saint. In Ham-sur-Heure, for example, a local St. Roch confraternity supported the saint’s chapel. Thuin also hosted multiple saint processions. The most significant of these was that of Notre Dame d’el Vault, organized by a local confraternity, which venerated a 12th-century statue of Mary. Yet evidence also suggests the existence of a St. Roch confraternity and procession in Thuin during the 17th century.¹³ Armed escorts of bourgeois, rural militias, or youth societies accompanied these processions.¹⁴ One *curé* in Thuin, for example, witnessed a St. Roch procession with military escort on 15 August 1662.¹⁵ That same year, the Thuin city magistrate recorded distributing 70 pounds of gunpowder, “as was the custom for the youth societies in this town, for the day of St. Sacrament 35 pounds and for *la dédicace*, the same amount.”¹⁶

The St. Roch confraternities lasted until 1794, when French revolutionaries invaded the region, sacked local churches, and banned church-related public festivals, including the *ducasses*—a pattern repeated in communities throughout the Austrian Low Countries.¹⁷ At the Congress of Vienna after Napoleon’s defeat in

13 After the construction of the St. Roch chapel, parish records in 1637 document a donation of, “20 *pataçons* to the confraternity of St. Roch.” Moreover, in a 1652 receipt, the Magistrate of Thuin indicates reimbursement to a “Jean Lescourseul for refreshments given to the *confrères des harquebusiers* of Lobbes who accompanied the procession in the town,” indicating the presence of an armed escort for a saint procession. Roland, *Les “marches” militaires de l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 21.

14 Roland, *Les “marches” militaires de l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 21; Foulon, *Marches militaires et folkloriques*, 25. Foulon quotes a 1611 edict by the Prince-Bishop of Liège regulating the use of archers and harquebusiers in a local saint march.

15 Conreur, “Les origines de la procession et de la Marche militaire Saint-Roch à Thuin,” 13.

16 Roland, *Les “marches” militaires de l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 33-34. Conreur also documented the deployment of Thudinien pikemen at a procession in memory of the siege of 1654 (14 Jan. 1662). Conreur, “Les origines de la procession et de la Marche militaire Saint-Roch à Thuin,” 15.

17 In Mons, for example, the St. Waudru procession survived the first French occupation of 1792-93, yet was suppressed following the second invasion in 1794. The St. Waudru chapter was abolished and the procession ceased. De Vriendt, “Entre réformes autrichiennes et Révolution française,” *La Ducasse, rituelle de Mons*, 92-93.

1815, the former Austrian Low Countries and Principality of Liège merged with the United Provinces to create a new Kingdom of the Netherlands under Dutch hegemony. The Dutch rulers, Protestant and anti-Bonaparte, forbid any celebration of Napoleon or unauthorized saint military marches.¹⁸ Even some processions that had officially reemerged during the Napoleonic Empire withered away during the Dutch era. During this period, despite the emergence of the independent nation-state of Belgium in 1830, there is no evidence of the continuation of the Old Regime St. Roch processions: they had simply disappeared during the tumultuous years of the French Revolution and Napoleonic First Empire.

Reconstructing Processions in the 19th Century

Several factors influenced the reconstruction of marches in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region during the mid-19th century. One catalyst was the outbreak of cholera, which proliferated in the densely urbanized Wallonian industrial communities. Though the St. Roch confraternities, chapels, and processions disappeared in 1794, Catholic practices and worship had not and acceptance of St. Roch as a healing saint endured. For example, after the 1801 Concordat, the Notre-Dame du Val church in Thuin maintained a weekly Tuesday mass for St. Roch.¹⁹ During the same era, the Napoleonic legacy became fashionable, in part due to Napoleon III's Second Empire, which commemorated veterans of the Napoleonic wars.²⁰ Commemoration occurred in Wallonia as well; surviving First Empire soldiers received service medals and donned old uniforms to

18 Stengers, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, Tome I, 173-174. Joseph Roland noted that William I's government passed an ordinance on 29 May 1819 forbidding "exhibition in processions of extraordinary clothing, colored patterns or unseemly representations" and that the town of Gerpinnes, could not hold a procession without explicit approval from the Dutch government. Roland, "Deuxième partie: Les marches aux XIXe et XXe siècles," 327.

19 Conreur, "Les origines de la procession et de la Marche militaire Saint-Roch à Thuin," 24.

20 Pop, "Le tablier des sapeurs," 178.

receive official accolades.²¹ The Napoleonic era provided nostalgic cultural references for organizers developing new saint marches, and recalled older traditions of religious relics accompanied by military escorts.

Several other factors assisted the logistics of marching. The construction of a railroad in the region between 1848-62 (a side effect of mid-century industrialization) greatly facilitated communication between towns and allowed both marchers and spectators to travel easily. Second, there was a large military depot in the French garrison town of Givet on the Franco-Belgian border, which included an enormous collection of surplus uniforms from the Napoleonic era; these could be rented or purchased by marchers.²² A third factor was the resurgence of Catholic pilgrimages and saint worship during the 1850s, spurred by Pope Pius IX's declaration on the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the purported appearance of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in 1858. This precipitated enormous tourist-pilgrimages to southern France and similar pilgrimages occurred on saint-days across both France and Belgium. Religious appeal and secular patriotism intersected in the form of reimagined saint-military marches.

In 1863, cholera struck the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region. By 1866, over 700 people had died in the town of Châtelet, ironically the first site of St. Roch veneration during the 1636 plague.²³ Duplicating its leadership in saint veneration, the town held the first modern St. Roch processional in 1865 by carrying a statue accom-

21 Wauthy, "Quelle est l'origine des Marches militaires qui font la richesse du Folklore de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse," 17. Wauthy quotes Namur archivist Felix Rousseau, "In the middle of the 19th century, old Napoleonic-era veterans in the region of Lesvres formed a special peloton under the orders of Ferdinand Legros. They rented 1st Empire military uniforms at Givet. The appearance of these old soldiers of the Grand Emperor, advancing proudly in their uniforms, provoked a strong impression among the spectators." Georges-Henri Conreur documented an 1854 request by l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse veterans for a special mass for Napoleon I's soul and an 1856 ceremony for Thuin veterans to receive a St. Helena medal. Conreur, "Les origines de la procession et de la Marche militaire Saint-Roch à Thuin," 25.

22 Verified by numerous studies: Marinus, "Les Marches de Sambre et Meuse," 134; Roland, "Deuxième partie: Les marches aux XIXe et XXe siècles," 329; Pop, "Le tablier des sapeurs," 179.

23 Conreur. *Folklore thudinien, Tome II*, 19.

panied by a military escort “wearing French uniforms.”²⁴ The following year, a St. Roch processional began in Ham-sur-Heure. The 17th-century chapel survived the Revolution and the saint’s confraternity congregated anew. In 1866, a journalist reported that, “St. Roch was celebrated by religious and military attendees” including 350 “soldiers” and that the St. Roch statue was “carried by eight young officers in the religious group.”²⁵

Thuin’s modern march began in 1867, a year after that of Ham-sur-Heure. During the cholera epidemic, the St. Roch confraternity was re-established by the *curé* and a mass and impromptu processional were held in the saint’s honor on 16 August.²⁶ The following year, the *curé* announced a St. Roch military march on the third Sunday in May. The communal government lobbied for the change in order to avoid competition with Ham-sur-Heure, which held their St. Roch march on the traditional 16 August date.²⁷ This decision indicates secular business interests, for whom sacred dates were negotiable in the reconstructed ritual. The *curé* consented, though he continued to conduct a purely religious processional on 16 August to the recently reconstructed St. Roch chapel. The commune’s influence was apparent in an additional innovation: volunteer marchers in military uniforms accompanying the processional.²⁸ Companies of marchers headed the march, followed by the *curé* and new confraternity carrying a statue of St. Roch. The *curé* also presided over a “military mass” requested by the marching companies on Monday morning following the Sunday march.²⁹

24 Conreur estimated that 43,000 Belgians died of cholera in 1866, Conreur, “Les origines de la procession et de la Marche militaire Saint-Roch à Thuin,” 26.

25 *Union de Charleroi*, 24 August 1866. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées, Tome I*, 126-127.

26 Conreur, “Les origines de la procession et de la Marche militaire Saint-Roch à Thuin,” 26.

27 Conreur. *Folklore thudinien, Tome II*, 29.

28 “Today in Thuin will be the processional instituted last year in honor of St. Roch; the communal administration voted 250BF for costs associated and named a commission charged with directing *le cortège* and inviting outside [marching] societies.” *Journal de Charleroi*, 17 May 1868. Conreur, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II*, 31.

29 “Today [Sunday, 9 May] the procession will leave in two hours. . . . On Monday, 10 May [1869] at 10am: the military mass in honor of St. Roch.” Conreur, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II*, 32.

Participants at the time viewed the marches as modern creations and journalists rarely referenced Old Regime antecedents. Reporting on the 1866 Ham-sur-Heure march, one journalist seemed unaware of the 17th-century processional, noting, “this procession was instituted in the [18th] century in honor of St. Roch following an outbreak of dysentery in l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region... At our demand, Monseigneur [our bishop] authorized an annual processional.”³⁰ In 1892, another journalist simply stated that the processional originated in, “time immemorial.”³¹ In Thuin, organizers referenced the anniversary date for the march from 1867. As late as 1909, the march was characterized as, “the 42nd annual Grand Military March of St. Roch...organized by the commune.”³²

By the turn of the century, however, participants started reconceptualizing the origins of the saint military marches. In Ham-sur-Heure, organizers began emphasizing continuity with Old Regime processionals and ignored the 72-year gap. In 1904, one journal claimed that the march “had been going on for centuries”; in 1908, the claim was more specific: “the annual march has been consecrated for three centuries.”³³ By the following year, a particular date was attributed to the processional: “Ham-sur-Heure celebrates the 271st anniversary of the St. Roch march,” linking the processional back to the 1630s.³⁴ In Thuin, admirers also framed the march as a continuation of the Old Regime processional. One marching society protested the characterization of the march as having been recently established: “This is an error. The March was suppressed like all others at the end of the 18th century, during the French Revolution.

30 *Union de Charleroi*, 24 August 1866. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 126-27.

31 *Union de Charleroi*, 24 August 1892. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 132.

32 *Gazette de Charleroi*, 14 May 1909. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 179; also see the 1907 marching program titled “40^{me} anniversaire” (Thuin 1907).

33 *Gazette de Charleroi*, 20 August 1904 and 29 August 1908. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 133-134.

34 *Gazette de Charleroi*, 21 August 1909. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 135.

The *Marche de Thuin*, once known as “The Procession of Saint-Roch,” was reestablished in 1866 after the outbreak of cholera.³⁵ Journals reporting on the Thuin march connected the Old Regime processional to a famous event: the siege of the city in 1654.³⁶ The poster painted to advertise the march in 1901, painted by Brussels artist Léon Belloguet, depicted marchers in Imperial uniforms carrying St. Roch, behind which was the *beffroi* of the upper town. In 1904, a local journalist asserted, “The military march of St. Roch is one of the oldest in the l’Entre Sambre-et-Meuse. It was founded after the siege of Thuin in 1654 and continued until the end of the 18th century. *It returned* in 1866 during the epidemic of cholera which ravaged the region,” illustrating the perceived continuity between the ancient and modern St. Roch processions.³⁷

This historical revisionism regarding the origins of the St. Roch marches was related to the larger regional cultural renaissance called the *Mouvement Wallon*. The movement was initially a late-19th century Francophone response to the increasing politicization of language between French and Flemish-speaking communities in Belgium. As it grew in popularity, however, the movement sought to elevate Wallonian identity and pride through the commemoration of cultural achievements.³⁸ A logical application of this regional cultural commemoration was the revision of prominent examples of local tradition as permanent fixtures of Wallonian patrimony. Thus the nostalgia elicited by characterizing the St. Roch marches as having originated in ‘time immemorial’ was far more compelling than regarding them as recent creations.

By 1920, the rebranding of Thuin’s St. Roch march was complete. Posters and pamphlets now ignored the 1867 anniversary

35 *Gazette de Charleroi*, 16 September 1911. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 179.

36 *Journal de Charleroi*, 14 May 1904. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 176.

37 *Gazette de Charleroi*, 14 May 1904. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 176. Emphasis mine.

38 Demoulin and Kupper, *Histoire de la Wallonie*, 270-271; Philippe Raxhon, “Les contours d’une quête en pointillé,” *Histoire Culturelle de la Wallonie*, 115-118; Strikwerda, *A House Divided*, 37-39.

in favor of 1654. The mayor collaborated with a religious instructor named Abbot Mathon to defend the revised history. In a 1923 article, Mathon linked the Old Regime processional to the modern march without mentioning differences in organization, purpose or date. In effect, he treated the 1794-1866 period as a pause in a continuous, homogeneous evolution.³⁹ Three weeks later, Mathon reiterated the perceived continuity, noting:

The St. Roch processional in Ham-sur-Heure is two hundred years old. But that of Thuin is the oldest of all... We won't forget, I hope, that [the processional] began with the siege of 1654 and the pause, a product of the European revolutions, could not destroy it.⁴⁰

This is a stunning assertion, both in claiming that the Thuin processional was the oldest, as well as suggesting that the modern march was in fact a continuation of the Old Regime processional.⁴¹ Refuting these claims was difficult, as chroniclers utilized popular oral tradition to link the Old Regime processionals with the reconstructed military marches. The processionals were an established folkloric tradition while the modern marches were, by the 1920s, already a lifelong memory for most participants. In 1927, the *Gazette de Charleroi* noted, "This festival is a local event to which the *Thudinien* population is most attached, due to the fact that it is central to the history of the town and, *transmitted from generation to generation*, remains alive today."⁴² The dearth of historical records facilitated the fancied link between the two eras. The St. Roch processional remained shrouded in mystery ("time immemorial"), which assisted in the imagining process. *Thudiniens* knew an Old Regime processional existed, but not exactly when or how it was

³⁹ *Pays Wallon – Billets Thudinien*, 6 May 1923. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome II, 342.

⁴⁰ *Pays Wallon – Billets Thudinien*, 27 May 1923. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome II, 344.

⁴¹ That honor would go to the town of Châtelet; he also ignored the plague of 1636 and the St. Roch chapel and confraternity founded during the 1630s.

⁴² *Gazette de Charleroi*, 16 May 1927. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome II, 357-358. Emphasis mine.

celebrated. Important dates such as the siege of 1654 emerged from the historical fog and facilitated the commemoration process.

Organizers supplemented their claim by appropriating local historical artifacts. An old cannon, still in the possession of the city commune, was purported to be a prize taken during the brief siege. The cannon's popular nickname, *Spantole*, simultaneously reflected its Spanish origins and centrality to the conflict. In 1925, *Spantole* was adorned with a new inscription that associated the cannon with the siege, turning oral tradition into written commemoration. The ancient weapon functioned as an artifact that connected onlookers to the 1654 event. Yet archival evidence does not support this: the cannon was listed in the town's military inventory prior to the siege and specialists date it to the 15th century.⁴³ It was never used by the Spanish, nor captured by the defenders. Facts notwithstanding, the physical presence of the ancient cannon, carried around town by marching groups on the 300th anniversary of the 17th-century siege (1954) helped fuse the historical claim in popular memory.⁴⁴

Some admirers constructed elaborate histories that wove together threads of famous historical events. A 1958 article postulated that military escorts became necessary during the 16th-century religious wars to protect relics from iconoclastic Protestants. Referencing the 1654 siege, author André Miot reiterated the *Spantole* connection and hypothesized that the procession emerged as a consequence of a grateful population. He then turned to the 1866 cholera outbreak and revitalized march, noting, "Since then, there have been no more interruptions," apparently viewing the 70-year hiatus as a mere pause and ignoring the WWI/II suspensions altogether.⁴⁵ As for the distinctive Napoleonic costumes, promoters, and amateur historians advanced two theories: either local Napoleonic-

43 Conreur, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II*, 53.

44 *Troisième Centenaire de la Procession St. Roch [et] Grand Marche Militaire*, organisée par l'administration communale avec le concours du Comité St. Roch (Event pamphlet, Thuin, 1954), 2.

45 *La Nouvelle Gazette*, 1958. Conreur, *Folklore thudinien, Tome II*, 64. The *Gazette de Charleroi* (1878 origin) became *La Nouvelle Gazette* in 1945.

era veterans marched in their old uniforms⁴⁶ or youth societies in the post-Waterloo era commemorated veterans by adopting Napoleonic uniforms.⁴⁷ This history, self-referencing and tidy, remains in present-day descriptions of the military marches.

By the mid-1920s, the presence of regional governmental representatives lent the marches an official atmosphere. While a subcommittee of the city commune supervised the Thuin march, a local commercial association (the *Association des Commerçants Independants et Propriétaires* or ACIP) was increasingly involved in the years just prior to WWI in an effort to coordinate and promote the march with local businessmen.⁴⁸ Communal delegates and members of the ACIP opened the festivities with an official reception at the *hôtel de ville*, complete with a champagne toast. Following the Tuesday military mass, officials held a banquet that recognized individual marchers with service medals.

The Ham-sur-Heure march, now organized by an executive committee like that of Thuin, also used historical artifacts to reinforce the authenticity of the St. Roch march. The two focal points of the march are the 17th-century St. Roch chapel and the ‘Court of Honor’ in the medieval castle of the Mérode family. Maximilien de Mérode, seigneur of the town and chateau, founded the chapel in 1636. In the 17th century, the chateau was occupied by French forces including Louis XIV himself, who ordered the demolition of one of the towers, reducing the castle from a square defensive structure to an open courtyard, which now serves as the ‘Court of Honor’ for the reception of marching companies by communal officials and dignitaries. The neo-Gothic St. Martin church, constructed a decade after the commencement of the march (1870s), sits in the middle of the town square, between the chapel and the chateau. The church

46 “En l’on marche en costumes de 1er Empire à la fois parce que beaucoup des jeunes ont servi dans les armées impériales.” Lefèvre, *Traditions en Wallonie*, 265.

47 “Après la grande aventure napoléonienne, les companies de ‘jeunesse’ de l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse, marquées par l’épopée, adoptent bientôt pour uniforme les restes vestimentaires de l’Empire.” Foulon, *Marches militaires et folkloriques de l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 25.

48 In 1924 the subcommittee was named the *Comité St. Roch*.

serves as a nexus between these two symbolic locations: the Ham-sur-Heure marching companies remove the St. Roch statue from the chapel and carry it to the St. Martin church at the beginning of the festival, where it will remain for the duration of the five-day event (when not touring with the marchers). As in Thuin, physical artifacts and locations serve to reinforce the historical claims perpetuated by the marching companies and organizers as theatrical scenery for the performance of folkloric expression.

Commemoration, Memory and Identity

One of the earliest modern efforts commemorating the 19th-century marching tradition in l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse occurred at an international exposition of Walloon art held in Charleroi in 1911.⁴⁹ As part of the *Mouvement Wallon*, highlighting cultural traditions in the region, a *Tournoi historique des Marches de l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse* was held on October 1.⁵⁰ Marching companies from various l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse communities assembled for a march through the streets of Charleroi. The *Gazette de Charleroi* reported the participation of 1,300 marchers from 22 companies across the region, including St. Roch marchers from Ham-sur-Heure and Thuin.⁵¹ Philippe Passelecq, the *Président d'Honneur* of the organizing committee for the *tournoi*, gave a speech before the assembled companies in which he voiced an early vision of the modern folkloric origin of the marches: armed escorts, “the majority of which go back to the year 1300,” protecting religious processions against banditry in the l'Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse.⁵² He then directly addressed the marchers: “You possess, in your souls, the cult of memory; you honor the traditions of your fathers; you are the conscientious continuation of deep-rooted habitudes of your forbearers and we congratulate

49 Demoulin and Kupper, *Histoire de la Wallonie*, 269.

50 *Gazette de Charleroi*, 15 Sep., 1911, Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 202.

51 *Gazette de Charleroi*, 2 Oct. 1911. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 203-205.

52 *Gazette de Charleroi*, 2 Oct. 1911. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 205.

you on your perseverance; this is how we honor our ancestors.”⁵³ In 1930, during the centenary celebration of Belgium’s independence, the Thuin St. Roch march, despite having no association with the 1830 Belgian revolution, was included as part of the festivities leading up to the September commemoration.⁵⁴ By 1939, Thuin’s march was unquestioningly a central contributor to local folkloric and tourist life. An article in *Le Rappel* noted this attachment, stating: “This military march forms part of our Wallonian folklore that we must maintain as our national patrimony, like that of *Les Gilles* of Binche or *Le Doudou* of Mons.”⁵⁵

The act of constructing a linear and interconnected history for the marches continues in the present day. The 2015 Ham-sur-Heure program declares continuity with the Old Regime, referencing the origins of the march to the 1630s plague in the region and a “purely religious processional” in 1640. The military aspect is justified through a discussion on security concerns in the 17th century, notably a 1695 edict by the Bishop of Liège authorizing an escort to the processional. Yet there is no mention of the collapse of the processional in 1794, the cholera outbreak, or the re-establishment of the saint march in 1866. In fact, the only mention of the 19th century is a reference to the “passage of Napoleonic troops in the countryside during 1815” as a means of explaining the uniforms today.⁵⁶

If the modern marches lack a verifiable connection to the Old Regime saint processionals, does that mean that they are not authentic expressions of local cultural identity and tradition? Edward Muir defines ritual as an act that “appeals to the senses” which is

53 *Gazette de Charleroi*, 2 Oct. 1911. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome I, 205.

54 The marching program title in 1930 reads *Fêtes du centenaire – Procession St. Roch and Grand Marche militaire* (St. Roch March event pamphlet, Thuin, 1930, 1). This example of using an invented tradition for nationalistic or patriotic purposes follows the standard argument set forth in Hobsbawm and Ranger’s work, *The Invention of Tradition*.

55 *Le Rappel*, 17 May 1939. Golard, *Chroniques des Marches Passées*, Tome II, 395-396.

56 *Ham-sur-Heure Marche Militaire Saint-Roch*, 2015 (Event pamphlet, Thuin, 2015), 2.

both repetitive and seeks an emotional response.⁵⁷ Emile Durkheim similarly stressed the role that public rituals play in communal identity, acting as a mechanism for “social self-worship.”⁵⁸ While the marches retain significance in local historical memory, yet have changed focus and structure over time, then authenticity is surely less about outward appearance than emotive appeal and community identification. The marches perform authentic expressions of local culture, in so much as they remain relevant to those participating and observing.⁵⁹ The evolution of the Thuin St. Roch march reveals a conscious communal act of construction, which, like 19th-century novels and newspapers in France and Germany, projects a vision of an imagined community.⁶⁰ Unlike the invented rituals and traditions that Hobsbawn and Gellner asserted were instrumental in the construction (rather than reflection) of national culture, the St. Roch marches, in privileging a local identity that emphasizes both historic regional and trans-national traditions, undermine the very notion of nation-state construction as integral to the development of ‘invented traditions’.

Indeed, as Muir asserted, channeling Clifford Geertz: “rituals do not function to create social solidarity at all, but to provide enacted narratives that allow people to interpret their own experience... rituals produce a story people tell themselves about themselves.”⁶¹ Jay Winter similarly noted, “Historical remembrance borrows from [familial and liturgical remembrance] but uses them to construct a story about a shared past, the shape and content of which tell a group

57 Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, 2.

58 Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 56.

59 Darnton observed that rituals often function as model or mirror, either modeling an idealized form of society or mirroring a community as it was understood by community members themselves, providing a declarative, rather than instructional, purpose to the ritual. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, 122-124.

60 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25-36. For instance, a common expression one hears in at l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches is, “Les Marches, dans la region, on a ça dans le sang.” Bouchat, “‘Le village magique’ Pluralité des engagements dans les Marches,” 113.

61 Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, 5.

of people who they are and from whence they have come.”⁶² Muir, Geertz, and Winter’s observations on the use of ritual and performance to assert cultural identity is useful in considering the communal significance of the military marches. They re-enact a cohesive but unstable memory, which reinforces wider historical narratives proclaiming a particular vision of local identity. Symbols associated with the marches, including St. Roch statues and chapels, city *bef-froi*, and the ‘Court of Honor,’ serve as props on a public stage and stand as permanent physical reminders of this communal folkloric declaration. Marcher genealogies overlap with public commemoration, as children march in the same companies (and even the same costumes) as parents and grandparents. The marches are not dead rituals, observed but misunderstood; rather they remain vibrant ceremonial events that simultaneously declare and validate *Thudinien* and *Bourquis* cultural identity. A recent publication commemorating the l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse marches emphasizes the potential for regenerative communal attachment, as well as the homage paid to social hierarchies, echoing Passelecq’s speech a century earlier:

[Marching] renews the marcher’s relationship with his community. For several days, he is proud to march amongst his equals, with devotion, simplicity and humility. The marcher marches like his ancestors; to the rhythm of fifes and drums, he rediscovers his roots. When he fires a salvo, he renders honor to both saints and local authorities.⁶³

The close link between invented traditions and the construction of popular national consciousness advanced by Hobsbawn, Gellner and Benedict Anderson, all of whom connected symbolic acts to nascent national identity construction (directed by the nation-state itself), emerged in Belgium as, ironically, a mechanism for advancing intra-state nationalism.⁶⁴ Proponents for regional autonomy (the *Mouvement Wallon*, for example) or outright independence, particu-

62 Tilmans, van Vree, and Winter, *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe*, 15.

63 Arcq and Leroy, *Les Arpenteurs de l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse*, 7.

64 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 86-90.

larly within the Flemish language (*Flamingant*) movement, problematized the very notion of Belgium as a ‘natural’ nation-state; the artificiality of nation-state construction, as asserted by Hobsbawn, Gellner, and Anderson, echoes populist regional movements that belie the very existence of a common national culture.⁶⁵ In the midst of the modern political and cultural deconstruction of Belgium into autonomous linguistic regions bound by tenuous federalism, the invention of tradition in the l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse military marches intensified the commemoration of local identity. That is to say, the celebration of regional or local identity fuels commemorative efforts that were once theorized as being purely nationalistic, yet ultimately serves to undermine Belgian national identity. As Céline Bouchat notes, “Without doubt, the village constitutes the visible social center around which the March constructs social relations: a March organizes a hierarchy of a locality and circumscribes its physical space.”⁶⁶

Conclusion

St. Roch, a relatively obscure figure in saint commemoration, became synonymous with the cultural identity of several l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse communities by 1940. The St. Roch military marches evolved from a popular response to cholera in the form of a traditional Catholic ritual, to secular military marches commemorating the Napoleonic wars, while maintaining the trappings of Old Regime saint processions. In Thuin, the rite linked the town to famous events including plague outbreaks, 17th-century wars, and the Napoleonic era, offering the community a cohesive and powerful historical narrative. Today, fading Belloguet posters and old pictures of marchers line the walls of cafés and the tourism bureau places the march foremost as a local attraction. Oversight organizations ensure

65 The *Flamingant* and *Wallon* movements were already well established prior to WWI. Strikwerda notes Jules Destée’s “Letter to the King on the separation of Wallonie and Flanders” in 1912: “There are no Belgians, there are only Flemings and Walloons.” Strikwerda, *A House Divided*, 37.

66 Bouchat, “Savoir y être. Production de localité par l’engagement dans un folklore festif,” 10.

standardization and historical continuity, though there is no obvious standard for enforcing historical authenticity when the ritual itself is largely an invented tradition and enforcement could actually impede folkloric traditions. As Ernest Renan noted, “Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.”⁶⁷ This assertion applies to formation of regional identity as well.

Commemoration of the marches has increased dramatically in recent decades. A full spectrum of commemorative structures surround the marches, including a marching museum, chapels, memorial statues, organizing committees, folkloric associations, regulatory marching societies, and recognition by regional, national and international entities, including UNESCO. Annual marching performances offer a sensory demonstration of suspended time: participants are immersed in a repetitive communal memory that projects four centuries of local history as a form of living memory. The authenticity of performance is reinforced through the use of commemorative celebrations, which allow communities to “perform the past” using an historical pedigree.⁶⁸ While ritualized aspects of the march are largely modern constructions, underlying themes remain historically similar to those of the Old Regime processions: saint worship at a sacred time of year, volunteer military companies, and declarations of local hierarchies and identity. Despite the gaps, inventions and revisions, the St. Roch marches of l’Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse remain a meaningful and relevant, if perpetually evolving and contested, manifestation of regional historical commemoration.

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67 Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce c’est une nation?*, 7-8.

68 Tilmans, van Vree, and Winter, *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe*, 17.

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