

The Chevalier de Fretteville (c.1665-1688), an Innocent in Siam

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Some years back I published an article on the fortunes and misfortunes of Lieutenant Beauregard, a young French officer attached to the first French embassy to Siam in 1685, who, after defying death at the hand of the Makassars in 1686, and being made successively governor of Bangkok and Mergui, ended his life in perpetual slavery in Pegu about 1692 (Smithies 1998).

The name of another young officer, the Chevalier (sometimes ‘Sieur’, sometimes ‘Monsieur’) de Fretteville, appears intermittently in the texts of the period, one whose death was also untoward, and who emerges as one of the few persons of principles in the scandalous story centring around the treatment accorded by the French General Desfarges to the widow of Phaulkon, generally referred to in the texts as Mme Constance.

De Fretteville, though young, was an important actor at key stages of the tumultuous events of the “revolution” of 1688. No novice to the situation in Siam, he had accompanied the Chaumont-Choisy embassy in 1685, and returned to Siam in 1687 with the La Loubère-Céberet embassy of 1687.

He is noted as being a midshipman by Choisy, on the *Oiseau* which left Brest on 3 March 1685 (Choisy 1993: 41). According to Chaumont, he was one of twelve officers and “marine guards” accompanying the ambassador in an honorific capacity (Chaumont and Choisy 1997: 129). Apart from these references, no text speaks of de Fretteville in the different activities of the 1685 embassy.

He must have taken part in all the formal occasions, including the presentation in Ayutthaya of Louis XIV’s letter to King Narai on 18 October 1685, and the entertainments laid on for the ambassadors, from elephant hunting to Chinese dinners and gymnastics. Forbin (1996 [1729]), in his account of the 1685 embassy, in which he took part, does not mention de Fretteville, and Tachard (1688/1981: 18) does not bother to name him as being among “the twelve Gentlemen named by the King to wait on the Ambassador”. This is all the more surprising as another Jesuit taking part in the subsequent embassy remarked on de Fretteville’s piety (Hutchinson 1968: 102), and Tachard was not one to overlook such meritorious conduct.

When the first embassy was over (and with nothing accomplished, certainly not the conversion of King Narai), it departed from the bar of Siam on 22 December 1685 to return to France, taking the three Siamese envoys to Louis XIV. We learn nothing about

de Fretteville on the return journey; Chaumont lists those who stayed behind, but de Fretteville is not one of them. The embassy landed at Brest on 18 June 1686.

De Fretteville must nevertheless have made a good impression both while the embassy was in Siam and on the return journey, for, as noted above, he returned to Siam with the subsequent La Loubère-Céberet embassy of 1687, which set sail from Brest on 1 March. While we do not know what de Fretteville did between returning to Brest in 1686 and leaving again for Siam in March 1687, he appears to have used his time profitably, in order to be included among the officers accompanying the second embassy. Clearly his experience counted for something, and certainly so must have parental push. Unfortunately we also know nothing about de Fretteville's family, except that his father had recommended his son to Céberet (Céberet 20 October 1687 cited in Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992: 67), a director of the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* and married to a relative of Madame de Maintenon, the current favourite (and perhaps already the secret wife) of Louis XIV.

Back in Siam again, de Fretteville rose to prominence in the dispute over the control of the troops stationed in the fort at Bangkok (on the left or east bank of the Chao Phraya). The French envoys had expected that only French troops would be posted there, but were forced to accept the presence of Siamese troops as well. Phaulkon acted without reference to the envoys, placing de Fretteville in command. When the envoys remonstrated, Phaulkon replied by saying he had to place someone he could trust in the position, and he knew no one else except de Fretteville (cited in Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992: 216). This might have been true, but he could have made the effort to discuss the matter with the official French envoys, already angered at the unexpected presence of Siamese troops, and at the self-appointed role of the Jesuit Tachard as intermediary between the embassy and the Siamese.

Tachard himself wrote in his unpublished account of the second embassy that de Fretteville was:

young, docile, wise, and full of good intentions, [and] he will be very useful in the service of the King and of Religion. He is forthwith learning the Siamese language, and it is hoped to set him up as the judge in cases of dispute between Christians and pagans, and Monsieur de Constance will use him as necessary as his lieutenant for all kinds of matters. He [Phaulkon] has already made him colonel of all the troops of the King of Siam under Monsieur Desfarges (Tachard AN Col C1 24: f.181v-183r, cited in Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992: 217).

De Fretteville père feared “apparently with some reason, that his son, apprised by Fr Tachard, might bind himself inopportunely to the King of Siam's service without obtaining particular advantages” (idem: 67). Clearly his father was chary of Tachard's influence on de Fretteville, and considered his son too easily impressionable.

One of Tachard's fourteen specially selected Jesuits for the 1687 embassy, de Bèze, was impressed by the piety, not only of Phaulkon, but also de Fretteville.

No matter how overburdened he [Phaulkon] might be by Affairs of State he would still set aside no small portion of the time at his disposal and employed it in prayer to God. This I witnessed myself when we were together at Thlépousson [Thalé Chupson] the royal pleasance some three miles from Louvo [Lopburi]. Having no house of his own there, Constans bade me share the bedroom with himself and Mr de Fretteville (a man whom Constans esteemed for his piety). Both men (Constans especially), fascinated me by the devout manner of their yielding their hearts to God in prayer... (Hutchinson 1968: 101–2).

One needs remember here that de Bèze was instructed by his Jesuit superior Fr de La Chaise, Louis XIV's confessor, to write an account of all that he knew concerning the "revolution" in Siam, of which he was a witness. Already Phaulkon was considered by the Jesuit party as a martyr; the first hagiography by the Père d'Orléans, who never set foot in Siam, was to appear in 1690, only two years after Phaulkon's death.

De Fretteville appears to have been used by Tachard and Phaulkon as a go-between with the French envoys; for example, on 24 October 1687, "the Sieur de Fretteville came on behalf of M. Constance to pay us his respects" (Smithies 2002: 108). The envoys did likewise: on 23 October 1687, on the occasion of the presentation by the senior envoy, La Loubère, of the insignia of St Michael to Phaulkon, La Loubère sent de Fretteville to inform Laneau, Bishop of Metellopolis, that he was ready to officiate and requesting him to prepare the chapel accordingly (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992: 113).

In his unpublished manuscript, Tachard defended having presented the naval ensigns Joncoux and de Fretteville to Phaulkon before the envoys had met him.

I presented M. de Fretteville to him and M. de Joncoux, both lieutenants of the Royal Navy, whom he had asked for from His Majesty. They implored their commander to permit them to pay their respects to the minister, knowing he was close by. Mr de Fretteville remained with him, having received permission from the king and the Marquis de Seignelay [the Secretary of State for the Navy] (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992: 216–7)

This specific permission seems highly unlikely, and is probably an invention of Tachard.

The embassy proper ended with the hasty overland journey of Céberet begun on 13 December 1687 and the acrimonious departure of La Loubère on 3 January 1688 (whose vessel also transported Tachard, by then envoy of King Narai to Pope

Innocent XI and King Louis XIV). The embassy had accomplished nothing, thanks largely to the meddling of Tachard, who showed signs of paranoia on board, accusing La Loubère of reading his documents through a spy-hole he had fabricated (Tachard, *Voyage du Père Tachard à Siam*, mss 210v).

The troops remained, ostensibly in support of King Narai, and to secure the proposed French bases in the east fort of Bangkok and at Mergui. We are following here the adventures of de Fretteville rather than the broader flow of events leading up to and following Phetracha's palace coup of 18 May, in which de Fretteville was directly involved. Suffice it to say that, at this stage, with King Narai seriously ill in his palace, Phetracha moved to confine the king and dominate the court, always giving commands in the name of the monarch.

On hearing the news of Phetracha's move on 18 May 1688, Beauchamp, second in command, the younger son of the general, the Chevalier Desfarges, and de Fretteville,¹ armed only with their swords, according to most accounts, accompanied Phaulkon to the palace in Lopburi with the intention of securing the throne. Only three texts seemed to think it worthy of noting that Phaulkon, in addition to being accompanied by the three French officers, was attended by "his bodyguard of fifteen Englishmen with their Captain and several Portuguese, all well armed" (Hutchinson 1968: 88; Beauchamp AN Col. C1/25 f.75v), and Vollant des Verquains (1691/2002: 124) noted that Phaulkon was "accompanied by his escort".

All were apprehended by Phetracha and his party on entering the Lopburi palace. The French officers waited for an order from Phaulkon to despatch Phetracha, but the order never came, according to Beauchamp (BN Ms Fr 8210 f.522r-v); they were certainly outnumbered and in no position to offer serious resistance. The French officers were locked up for a few days in the summer palace of Thale Chupson, initially without food or a change of clothes. Beauchamp writes "also placed in prison were the guards of Monsieur Constance and their captain. I asked him why he had not followed his master. He replied that he had not been ordered to" (ibid f.523r).

After "five or six days" at Thale Chupson, the French officers were allowed to return to Lopburi. There they found their effects and clothes had been seized; they were offered in lieu those of Phaulkon, which they refused (Beauchamp in BN 8210 f.523v).² The former second ambassador to France brought horses for them to take

¹ Most texts have three French officers going to the Lopburi palace in support of Phaulkon: Beauchamp, the Chevalier Desfarges (the younger son of the general), and de Fretteville; only Vollant des Verquains (1691/2002: 124) has four, all unnamed. The reason for the discrepancy is probably that Vollant was relying on hearsay as he was in Bangkok and the event he describes took place in Lopburi.

² Phaulkon's "most precious clothes" were brought, with "all kinds of other effects... the mandarins said that, not being able to restore the same things" the king (in whose name Phetracha acted) offered these. Beauchamp said they could not accept them, "as people from our class never wore other people's clothes... The mandarins replied it was the custom in the Indies to refuse nothing given by a king" (BN 8210 f.523v).

exercise. Phaulkon was taken away and tortured mercilessly. Beauchamp remarks that while still in the palace “They started by burning the soles of his feet.” He was killed in the forest outside Thale Chupson (on 5 June according to Le Blanc 2003: 59–60).

The French officers in Louvo were gradually allowed some freedom. Six,³ including de Fretteville, secretly decided to make a dash for Ayutthaya and the forts at Bangkok. This they did, but were soon caught, and brought back tied to the tails of their horses, which were made to gallop as fast as possible. Bressy, the engineer in the group, died from this treatment (Saint-Vandril 111.v), being unable to keep up with his horse.

King Narai died in Lopburi on 10 July (Hutchinson 1968: 109). According to the often reliable La Touche, Phetracha left Louvo on 31 July for Ayutthaya to have himself crowned. Vollant (1691/2002: 146–7) notes that “on 1st August he [Phetracha] left Louvo with his [Phra Narai’s] body” for the capital, “where he had himself proclaimed king and then crowned”. On 1 August, La Touche informs us that “all the French and English” were taken from Lopburi to Ayutthaya, where they arrived on 3 August; La Touche, by then prisoner in Lopburi, wrote (1998: 336) that he was among them, together with de Fretteville, Saint-Vendry [sic], des Targes and de Lasse. On 9 August, again according to La Touche (idem) all five French officers (including La Touche) were sent by Phetracha, “by then king”, to Bangkok, not to General Desfarges, but to “the general of the Malays” (presumably a senior mercenary of the Siamese, commanding the fort on the Thonburi side of the river), who retained them as prisoners for almost a month, and then handed them over to Desfarges (thus in early September).

The usually factually correct “An Account of what Occurred in Louvo in the Kingdom of Siam, and a Summary of what Occurred in Bangkok during the Siege of 1688” (hereafter “What Occurred”), which recorded on a day-to-day basis the events in Bangkok, noted:

The 12th [August 1688] there arrived on the other bank [the Thonburi side, held by the Siamese] nine Frenchmen who were the officers detained in Louvo, namely Messieurs de Fretteville, de Saint-Vandril, des Targes, de Larre, and de La Touche, one soldier and [three?] valets, with orders not to let them pass over to our side, if we were not ready to embark. (Smithies 2004: 112; “What Occurred” AN Paris Col. C1 24 f.158v).

This gives a difference of three days from La Touche’s record, but he wrote up his account after the events he describes, probably several months later. We shall return to this anonymous text.

³ Le Blanc (2003: 60) has the Chevalier Desfarges (the general’s younger son), de Fretteville, Saint-Vandril, des Targes, and the engineer Bressy, but omits de Lasse, whom La Touche (1998: 315) includes, but also incorrectly includes Beauchamp.

At this stage we must refer to the protracted episode concerning Mme Constance's jewels, discussed in detail in an earlier article (Smithies 2000). To summarise, the Siamese were anxious to lay hands on what they correctly thought was Phaulkon's considerable fortune, even though he had given a huge sum to Céberet in order to become a director of the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales*. Jewels and gold were the preferred investments, so Mme Constance's anticipated hoard was a prime target. Seeing herself vulnerable, she divided her jewels into three lots. Two were handed to the superior of the Jesuits, who gave them to Beauchamp to give to the Jesuit fathers in Bangkok. Beauchamp, "seeing in his possession two important packets, which he knew did not contain trifles, kept them with him, proposing to hand them over to the persons to whom they were addressed as soon as they knew he was in possession of them" (BN Ms Fr. 6106 59v); in other words, he would not hand them over until they asked for them. The third packet "was confided to a captain in the infantry, who on entering the fortress [in Bangkok] declared he would not relinquish it except on the orders of the person who had placed it in his hands" (Anon BN Ms Fr 6105 ff.59v-60r). This person is the trusted de Fretteville, "an infantry captain whom she [Mme Constance] knew to be a man of honour and good faith" (Vollant 1691/2002: 157). She had known him from the time of the first embassy in 1685, and, being a "dévoté" herself, was undoubtedly aware of his devout character.

When Desfarges learnt about these packets, he demanded that all the jewels be given to him, since he had lent 1,000 *écus* to Phaulkon, who, being now dead, was not in a position to repay the loan (*idem*). Two Jesuits were summoned to witness the opening of the packets, which were then inventoried and resealed. When subsequently opened in front of the Barcalon (Kosa Pan) they were found to be extremely deficient. Beauchamp tried to shift the blame on to Saint-Vandrillette and des Targes in one (BN Ms Fr.6106 ff.549v-550v) of his two accounts (both justificatory documents written from Holland where he was a prisoner of war), saying the two officers "came to him and told him they had saved the diamonds which Mme Constance had placed in the hands of de Fretteville when they were taken and searched when they were taken to Louvo, and that the Chevalier Desfarges had them, and they requested me to give them their share....". Beauchamp says he then informed General Desfarges, who said that it was outrageous to take advantage of the lady, summoned his son and ordered him to return the jewels to de Fretteville (Beauchamp BN Ms Fr. 8210 f.550v). This is highly unlikely: Desfarges' love of money was too well known, and his subsequent treatment of Mme Phaulkon demonstrated too clearly his cupidity. With her out of the way, handed back to the Siamese, he could keep the portion of her possessions he had obtained.

So while one account has all the jewels given over to Desfarges père, another, one far from reliable, claims the diamonds and jewels were returned to de Fretteville. Vollant, no friend of Desfarges, has the general going into transports of anger when he heard about Beauchamp and de Fretteville holding some of Mme Constance's

jewels, and insisting on both handing over their contents to him, because of the 1,000 *écus* lent to Phaulkon by Desfarges (1691/2002: 157).

We now need to turn attention to three consecutive entries in the anonymous account “What Occurred” (AN Col C1 23 ff.140-171) which, after discussing events in Louvo, mostly recorded on a day-to-day basis what occurred in the French-occupied fort at Bangkok. Its author noted: “On 1st October the second ambassador who had been to France brought one thousand *écus* to give to Mr Desfarges and dined with him.” Desfarges therefore had no further excuse to hang on to Mme Constance’s jewels (whether the original loan to Phaulkon was ever in fact made is not known; it may well have been an invention of Desfarges).

Nothing is recorded for 2 October, but on “The 3rd [October] Mr de Fretteville was drowned on leaving the *Siam*⁴ between 4 and 5 in the evening. He had received the Eucharist [that day] which he did many times each week” (“What Occurred” in Smithies 2004: 114). That de Fretteville probably could not swim is not in the least unusual for the 17th century; furthermore he was an infantry captain. But another account is more detailed, coming from Beauchamp, who is often a liar, and whose letters from the prisons of Middelburg are self-justifications of his conduct in Siam. He writes (Smithies 2004: 84):

The Chevalier de Fretteville, who was charged with the diamonds about which I have spoken, went to see Madame Constance, to whom he returned what he had managed to save. Two days later, as he was leaving one of the vessels in which all the officers were coming and going on visits, while he was on the plank, which I had just left, the vessel swinging at anchor with the tide shifted the plank to one side which fell into the water, together with the Chevalier de Fretteville, who was never seen again after entering the water. He was a devout youth who received Holy Communion frequently, who had made his devotions that day, and who had resolved to return to France overland and become a mendicant friar on his arrival.

This “accident” occurred in broad daylight, then, towards the end of the rainy season. But the same reliable day-to-day account gives, for its next entry after recording the death of de Fretteville, something in complete contradiction to Beauchamp:

[f.162r] The 4th Madame de Constance arrived in Bangkok with her son and three persons with her,⁵ led by Sainte-Marie, formerly a ship’s lieutenant [using the name] de Larre...

⁴ One of two Siamese vessels loaned to the French to facilitate their departure from Bangkok.

⁵ Two oarsmen and her maid, according to Le Blanc.

There is no reason to doubt this text, and every reason to doubt Beauchamp's sequence of events. It seems an extraordinary coincidence that de Fretteville drowned the day before the unexpected arrival of Mme Constance with her son at the Bangkok fort, and recorded by the same anonymous officer. Beauchamp's laying on with a trowel de Fretteville's religious fervour (probably in great contrast to Beauchamp himself) is, one feels, intended to make one feel happy that de Fretteville entered paradise with a clean slate.

Another possibility is that de Fretteville knew that Beauchamp had obtained possession of some if not most of the diamonds; they must have seen each other on board the *Siam*. There could have been an altercation between the two when on board. Beauchamp left the vessel, having pulled rank or even fought with de Fretteville, and triumphantly stormed off the ship to go in safety to the other vessel alongside, the *Louvo*. He could have deliberately kicked the plank linking the two vessels, thus causing de Fretteville to fall and drown. Beauchamp seems to write with a guilty conscience when he talks of de Fretteville returning to France to become a mendicant friar.

This seems less likely, or merely imaginative, when one takes into consideration yet another anonymous text, Anon BN Fr 6105, at ff.58r-v, unpublished in French, published in English translation in 2004 (Smithies 2004: 29). At this juncture, the author, undoubtedly one of Desfarges' officers, writes:

But Monsieur Desfarges, who desired more than anyone to leave Bangkok, growing lax in several small matters which he should have held out against for the glory of his master [Louis XIV], saw that the arrival of this lady [Mme Constance] brought a delay, and perhaps placed him at the point of restarting the war, as well as having to return her jewels which [58v] he had laid hands on when he learnt she had sent them to his stronghold.

This is perhaps the clearest statement in any contemporary text that Desfarges had gained control of Mme Constance's jewels.

This theme of Desfarges' cupidity is enlarged upon several times in Robert Challe's text published in 1979:

[his] vulgar avarice, his unreasonable jealousy, his interested trust... cowardly betraying the confidence of the King of Siam and Mr. Constance in him... Under his command, the French... in spite of themselves were responsible for a thousand vile cowardices and lost in that kingdom the reputation of the French name (Challe 1979: 510–1).

Asylum was refused to Mme Constance by the charitable Desfarges. La Touche hints (and Robert Challe repeats this the following year on several occasions) that

it was Desfarges' covetousness, his desire to lay hands on all her jewels, and depart Siam as soon as possible, which guided this decision.

It would seem therefore that de Fretteville had managed to save some of the jewels prior to the Louvo-Bangkok flight of the six French escapees, and that some of these may have somehow passed through the hands of Saint-Vandril and the Chevalier Desfarges (unless that incident is an invention of Beauchamp, which is entirely possible).

According to Beauchamp, Mme Constance arrived in Bangkok before de Fretteville died. The anonymous text "What Occurred" (Smithies 2004: 114) seems more likely to be true, since it is a day-by-day record of events. It would seem that de Fretteville was still in possession of some of Mme Constance's jewels until just prior to, or at the moment of, his death. Mme Constance's arrival in Bangkok was held to be unexpected; this is perhaps unlikely, but certainly the exact timing of her arrival was not known in advance.

La Touche certainly knew more than he lets on in his recently discovered account: Mme Constance

was held prisoner and very severely tortured in order to make her reveal where all her husband's previous stones and jewels had gone. She declared in truth that they had been confided to a person I shall not name and who was not to profit greatly by them. (La Touche in Challe 1998: 314)

This unnamed person is not likely to have been de Fretteville, who was known for both his piety and his honesty; it seems more likely to have been Beauchamp (who was relieved of all his possessions on the return journey when the two French ships put into the Cape without realising Holland and France were again at war). It also seems unlikely, but not impossible, to have been Desfarges himself, since La Touche could not have known when writing his account that Desfarges had died at sea on the way back to France.

To be charitable, one should ask if Beauchamp merely confused events in the heat of the withdrawal and his subsequent capture at the Cape and imprisonment in Holland. But his memory of what was in the packet given to de Fretteville is astonishingly detailed; he remembered what he wanted to remember.

What is not in doubt is that de Fretteville died from drowning in the Chao Phraya while still young, and the circumstances of his death are extremely suspicious. He may indeed have been upright and honest, sincere in his religious beliefs, but one has the feeling, on reading the contemporary texts, that he was put upon by others more ruthless than himself.

Thus ended ingloriously the career of yet another officer drawn into the Siamese imbroglio.

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