

Safeguarding the Nation's Past: Chamfort's Brief Career at the Bibliothèque Nationale

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Although Chamfort (1740–1794) is remembered primarily as an aphorist, his talents encompassed careers as a journalist, playwright, and, briefly, as a director of the Bibliothèque Nationale after the Revolution of 1789. While initially supporting the Revolution, he later turned against its excesses and helped to safeguard the books and other treasures housed in the national library. His efforts to preserve the nation's heritage, and the difficulties involved, are the topic of this article.

Libraries, along with other institutions in France, underwent significant changes following the Revolution of 1789. The edict of 1789 transformed the Bibliothèque Royale into the Bibliothèque Nationale and designated that a college, or *directoire*, of eight senior officials elect a director from among themselves.¹ On 23 December 1789, Lefèvre d'Ormesson de Noyseau was named to that position; however, he would serve only two and one-half years, until 10 August 1792, when he was replaced by "the patriots" Chamfort and Carra as co-directors of the library.

The contrast between d'Ormesson, who came from a notable parliamentary family and was a Hellenistic scholar, and Chamfort, a playwright, aphorist, journalist, and revolutionary enthusiast, reflected the differences in personnel experienced by major French institutions during this tumultuous period.² Serving at the discretion of revolutionary leaders became even more precarious in 1792 and 1793, when the Terror began, and Chamfort was named to manage the Bibliothèque Nationale. It was a task he undertook with initial reluctance, later followed by a determination to safeguard the nation's heritage. He had supported the ideals of the Revolution and had participated with Mirabeau and Talleyrand in the Club of Thirty. He had even rationalized the early restrictions under the Terror, believing, like many others, that the new age necessitated some amount of hardship.³

Chamfort, born illegitimately as Sébastien Roch Nicolas in 1740 in Clermont-Ferrand, had attained his present position through a

combination of intelligence, wit, hard work, and opportunism. Raised by a grocer and his wife, his precocity had served him well, so that by fifteen he was sent to Paris to study. There he remained, first as a tutor and then as a journalist and playwright under the name of Chamfort.⁴ He busied himself taking advantage of the opportunities offered by literary success—finding patrons, socializing with successful men of letters and with aristocrats, and, in 1781, being elected to the Académie Française. He also served as the principal secretary to Madame Elisabeth, Louis XVI's sister, in 1784, even as he espoused early revolutionary ideas.⁵

The Minister of the Interior Roland offered Chamfort, a patriot of good standing and a Girondin supporter, the codirectorship of the Bibliothèque Nationale in August 1792. The post would be shared with Jean-Louis Carra, a member of the Convention, or revolutionary government, who had founded, with Louis-Sébastien Mercier, the *Annales Patriotiques*, a popular newspaper. However, since Carra was frequently absent on assignment, the responsibility for running the library fell to Chamfort. The co-directors were to share the 8,000 livres salary and also the apartment at 49, rue de Richelieu.⁶ Thus began Chamfort's brief career at the Bibliothèque Nationale. It proved to be anything but a bookish retreat from the dangerous activities of life in revolutionary Paris.

The personnel of the Bibliothèque Nationale, men who had devoted their working years to the preservation of its valuable contents, found that patriotic zeal apparently counted for more with the revolutionary government than scholarship and experience. Chamfort endeavored to follow Roland's directives and set about replacing many old and trusted employees. The archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Archives Nationales provide evidence of this process, often in the form of terse letters requesting that "retiring" personnel turn in their keys.⁷ Chamfort's letter of 30 October 1792 to Hugues-Adrien Joly, (père), who had worked for years in the Department of Prints and Engravings, is typical—concise and to the point. Chamfort explained that the minister had ordered that Joly give up his position and lodging, and turn in his keys promptly.⁸ Joly was replaced by a painter/restorer, Michel-Honoré Bounieu, an "excellent patriot" with no qualifications for library work.⁹ The elder Joly's son, Jean-Adrien, known as Joly (fils), received a termination letter the same day and protested both his and his father's removal, but to no effect. The younger Joly was replaced by Pierre-Ancher Tobiésen-Duby, a library employee who had a reputation as a malcontent. Ultimately, he would cause Chamfort and the library their most serious problems.¹⁰

Not only did the personnel undergo changes at the library, but the hours of operation also were expanded, thus adding to the workload of fewer and less experienced librarians. A letter to Chamfort from the

minister of the interior specified that “the library will be open every day to the public,” as befitted a proper republican institution, rather than for several hours three days a week to specialists, as it had before the Revolution.¹¹ Later, in 1793, Chamfort would be advised by the new interior minister Garat to reduce the number of employees if he could not stay within the budget allotted for the library expenses. By that time, both Chamfort and Carra were receiving only 1,000 livres each.¹²

The new employees and their director worked enthusiastically to turn the former royal library into a symbol of republican pride. Chamfort, with the help of several loyal and experienced employees, did his best to preserve the national heritage, which included Louis XVI’s library and Talleyrand’s as well; the latter had emigrated in September of 1792. Chamfort rescued objects and books from the Royal Depository and the Tuileries Palace that might have been pillaged or destroyed. With the help of the Abbé Barthélemy, the longtime supervisor of the library’s Medals Department, Chamfort managed to save objects destined to be melted down for the war effort. These included the Prince de Condé’s medals, 17,000 gold objects from the church of St. Geneviève, and objects from the St. Denis mausoleum. In anticipation of possible theft or destruction, valuable manuscripts from the Sorbonne and St. Germain-des-Prés were stored in the national library. Chamfort even disobeyed Roland’s orders and saved the genealogies of aristocrats and other papers and books deemed “useless” by the government.¹³ He was fortunate to have Joseph Van Praet, the learned and experienced Conservator of Printed Books at the Bibliothèque Nationale, to assist him with preservation and acquisition efforts. Van Praet chose wisely from the diverse holdings of confiscated materials at the literary depots in Paris and Versailles, and from offerings at public sales during the revolutionary period and under the First Empire. His expertise greatly enriched the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he served from 1784 until his death in 1837. In addition to his position as Conservateur des livres imprimés, Van Praet was also the founder of the *Reserve des livres rares et précieux* at the Bibliothèque Nationale.¹⁴ Although not to the same extent as Chamfort, he also would suffer from the denunciations of that over-zealous citizen-librarian Tobiésen-Duby.

As the revolutionary government moved leftward into the period of the Terror, Chamfort still felt somewhat secure, although Jean Paul Marat, the editor of *L’Ami du Peuple*, had accused him of being too bourgeois. In addition, accusations were routinely issued in the radical press and at meetings of the Jacobin clubs, and the Girondin purge of 31 May had resulted in the indictment of the library’s co-director Carra. When Marat was assassinated on 13 July 1794 by Charlotte Corday, Chamfort did not help his own cause by exclaiming gleefully, “King Marat is dead!”

He even praised Charlotte Corday for having the courage to rid Paris of such a rabble-rouser. That was all the ammunition that Tobiésen-Duby needed to denounce Chamfort's criminal and counterrevolutionary behavior.¹⁵

Generally disliked by the library staff for his self-pitying attitude, Tobiésen-Duby had worked in the Prints Collection for ten years. He had tried many times for a transfer to a better-paying position, claiming that he deserved fairer treatment. For example, in a letter of 28 October 1792 to the minister of the interior, Tobiésen-Duby insisted that he should have received the elder Joly's position, not Bounieu, because he had worked for the library for nine years and his father had worked there for thirty-three years. He protested that Bounieu received better pay than he did, and that such treatment was unfair. He closed by proclaiming his ardent patriotism for the republic.¹⁶

In a letter of 21 July 1793 to the Committee of Public Safety, Tobiésen-Duby denounced Chamfort and other library employees as well. He compared these "sly aristocrats" and "false patriots" to himself, an "ardent Jacobin" and the only other patriot besides Bounieu at the library. In August those staff members who had been denounced were replaced by suitably patriotic employees.¹⁷

Chamfort still hoped that his situation might improve, even as he busied himself in helping Carra by hiring a lawyer, Tronson du Coudray, for his defense.¹⁸ Soon, however, he realized that his "counterrevolutionary attitude" would have serious repercussions. At dawn on 2 September 1793, Chamfort and some of his library colleagues were arrested and taken to the Madelonettes prison, one of the worst in Paris.¹⁹ His friend Van Praet had managed to take refuge at a friend's house, but Barthélemy, Desaulnays, Cappronier, and others were not so fortunate. Although they were released within two days, Chamfort and two other employees were assigned a guard to watch over them in housing near the library.²⁰ The prison experience had horrified Chamfort, a fastidious person who avoided crowds and valued fresh air and nutritious food. The Madelonettes, once a convent, had been transformed into a prison during the Revolution and was known for its unhygienic conditions, which included overflowing toilets, foul air, vermin, and poor food.²¹

Tobiésen-Duby continued his attacks after Chamfort and the others had been arrested. His letter to the editor of the *Journal de la Montagne*, dated 4 September, denounced Chamfort as an "aristocrat." In an effort to refute such a false accusation, Chamfort replied in a letter of 8 September and cited evidence of his egalitarian sentiments. He also suggested that Tobiésen-Duby really wanted to be named director of the library but that he would never succeed. Chamfort resigned from his position as director the following day.²²

Chamfort tried to defend himself from counterrevolutionary charges. On 18 September he placed one hundred copies of the journal, in which his reply to the accusations had appeared, on the walls of Paris. His efforts were futile.²³ The execution of his former co-director Carra soon thereafter offered proof of Chamfort's precarious position. Even so, he spoke openly in front of his guard, who had told him that Parisian theaters lacked audiences. Chamfort replied characteristically, "Tragedy no longer has the same effect once it roams the streets."²⁴

Perhaps Chamfort was not too surprised when, as he and several colleagues were finishing dinner on 15 November 1793, the guard announced that he must return to prison. Chamfort rose, and went to his dressing room, ostensibly to pack a few belongings. However, he locked the door behind him and attempted to commit suicide, first with a pistol and then with a razor. The bullet, aimed at his temple, was diverted through his right eye. Desperate to succeed, he slashed his throat, chest, and legs with the razor. Finally, crying out in pain, he unlocked the door, and his housekeeper rushed in to help stop the flow of blood. Chamfort had failed, but he told the police commissioner that he would rather die than to return to prison.²⁵ He need not have worried. His wounds were many and serious, and the bullet which had shattered his nasal wall would have to remain in his head, because surgery appeared too dangerous.²⁶

Although his health had been destroyed, Chamfort was given complete freedom by the Committee of Public Safety in January 1794.²⁷ The previous December, he and eleven of his former library colleagues had been designated pensioners of the republic at 2,000 livres per year.²⁸ The director's position was filled by Jean-Baptiste Lefebvre de Villebrune, a scholar-librarian who had denounced many of those who had been arrested or executed. His unpopularity with the remaining thirty-three staff members ensured that his tenure would be brief, and he left the position at the end of 1795, to be followed by Jean-Augustin Capperonnier as administrator of the newly organized library.²⁹

Chamfort, as a last literary effort, joined with his friend Pierre-Louis Guingéné, a former minister of public instruction, and several journalists to create a new publication, *La Décade Philosophique*. Backed by Madame Helvétius and edited by Guingéné, the review sought to strengthen the ideals of the Enlightenment.³⁰

Chamfort died in a small apartment near the Bibliothèque Nationale on 13 April 1794. His loyal friend Guingéné saved what he could of Chamfort's literary output, publishing four volumes of his work in 1795. Other manuscripts had apparently been stolen before they could be retrieved, and their location remains a mystery. The works that survived to be published, however—aphorisms, thoughts, and anecdotes—sufficed

to ensure Chamfort's reputation as a sharp observer of his society. His observations, "the products of the perfected civilization," as their author had ironically entitled them, were written over a period of many years on small squares of paper and deposited into boxes in Chamfort's bedroom. Some assumed that he had intended to write a history of manners but had never found the time. Nevertheless, it is these trenchant observations that have made Chamfort's ideas known to later generations, rather than his early plays or journalism, his contributions to the Revolution, or his work as co-director of the Bibliothèque Nationale.³¹

An inventory of Chamfort's effects after his death provides evidence that he valued books on a personal level. The inventory lists over 1,600 volumes, classified as to author and subject, a working library of philosophy, dramatic works, histories, literature, and dictionaries. Most were in French, but some were in Latin or English, including copies of the *Spectator*. Homer, Molière, Cicero, Helvétius, Voltaire, Diderot, and Pascal were well represented. These books were the most valuable possessions left to Chamfort, and the inventory lists very little else.³² From his youth, he had sought to enrich his life through books, and he had succeeded, even in his brief tenure at the Bibliothèque Nationale during its most tumultuous period.

Notes

1. Esdaile Arundell, *National Libraries of the World: Their History, Administration and Public Services*, 2nd ed. (London: The Library Association, 1957), 53.

2. Simone Balayé, "La Bibliothèque Nationale pendant la Révolution," *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises*, Vol. 4: *Les Bibliothèques de la Révolution et du XIXe siècle, 1789–1914*, edited by Dominique Varry (Paris: Editions du Cercle de la Librairie-Promodis, 1991), 70–83.

3. Claude Arnaud, *Chamfort, A Biography*, translated by Deke Dusinberre (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xiii–xvii.

4. *Ibid.*, xii. Chamfort's plays include *La jeune indienne* (1764), *Mustapha et Zeangir* (1767), and *Le Marchand de Smyrne* (1770).

5. John Renwick, *Chamfort devant la postérité, 1794–1984* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1986), 30.

6. Simone Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale des origines à 1800* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1988), 354–6.

7. Bibliothèque Nationale, Archive 47, "Correspondance relative à l'administration et au personnel de la Bibliothèque royale II, 1781–1792." See also the Archives Nationales F17 3439, "Dépenses de la Bibliothèque nationale, 1791—An X, états et traitements."

8. Bibliothèque Nationale, Archive 47, 417.

9. Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale*, 358.

10. Bibliothèque Nationale, Archive 47, 418. See also Balayé, "La Bibliothèque Nationale pendant la Révolution," *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises*, Vol. 4, 74–5.

11. Archives Nationales, T1458, letter dated 19 August 1792 from interior minister Roland to Chamfort.
12. Archives Nationales, F17 3439, "Dépenses de la Bibliothèque nationale 1791—An X, états et traitements."
13. Archives Nationales, F17 3439, "Dépenses de la Bibliothèque nationale 1791—An X, états de traitements." See also Arnaud, *Chamfort*, 224–5, and Bibliothèque Nationale, Papiers Van Praet.
14. Balayé, "La Bibliothèque Nationale pendant la Révolution," *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises*, Vol. 4, 75, 302.
15. Arnaud, *Chamfort*, 239, 240.
16. Bibliothèque Nationale, Archive 47, 407.
17. Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale*, 363–4.
18. Arnaud, *Chamfort*, 240, 241.
19. Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale*, 365. See also Bibliothèque Nationale, Papiers Van Praet, and Archives Nationales, F7 4638, dossier Chamfort.
20. Balayé, "La Bibliothèque Nationale pendant la Révolution," *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises*, Vol. 4, 75.
21. Arnaud, *Chamfort*, 244–5. See also Alain Sanders, *Petite Chronique de la Grande Terreur* (Maule: Editions de Présent, 1989), 39, 40.
22. Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale*, 366, 367. See also Arnaud, *Chamfort*, 246, 247.
23. Renwick, *Chamfort*, 33. See also Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale*, 367.
24. Arnaud, *Chamfort*, 248. See also *Oeuvres complètes de Chamfort* (Paris: Auguis, 1824–1825), 5: 340–1.
25. Arnaud, *Chamfort*, 249. See also Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale*, 368.
26. Arnaud, *Chamfort*, 249.
27. Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale*, 368, 369.
28. Renwick, *Chamfort*, 33.
29. Balayé, "La Bibliothèque Nationale pendant la Révolution," *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises*, Vol. 4, 75, 299.
30. Arnaud, *Chamfort*, 254.
31. *Ibid.*, 256–8. See *Oeuvres de Chamfort*, 4 vols., edited by Guingéné (Paris, 1795), and *Products of the Perfected Civilization*, translated and with an introduction by W. S. Merwin (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984).
32. Archives Nationales, T1458, "Inventaire" (20 pp.). See also Renwick, *Chamfort*, 34.