BOISGUILBERT

ECONOMIST
OF THE REIGN OF LOUIS XIV

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TO
THE MEMORY
OF
MY FATHER

PREFACE

THE writings of Boisguilbert should have a peculiar interest for all students of the social sciences. For the political scientist there is an intimate view of the working of a political system. In a world in which it has become fashionable to decry the ineptitude of democracy, it is not amiss to see set forth the indifference to the general welfare and the corruption of absolutism and the depths to which it can sink. At the same time, principles of government are enunciated which are yet to be put into practice.

The sociologist may find a contemporary record of much of the life and poverty of the masses, a life in which the amenities of the community were disrupted by suspicion and hatred toward one's neighbors. He may find an ideal of voluntary submission of the individual to the group, not for the purpose of subordinating the individual to the State, but to prevent the oppression of any class.

The historian who "has not read these pages scintillating with irony, this eloquent accusation where passion is placed in the service of justice and reason, knows only imperfectly the France of the seventeenth century. If history is more than the recital of battles, or the biography of princes and their ministers, or even than a picture of letters and of arts; if it wishes to see brought to life the people whose annals it retraces, and is not content with some brilliant personalities, it is indeed in Boisguilbert, as in a perfect mirror, that the image of that unhappy society must be sought. None has thrown more light on this sad past; none has better depicted, in order to flay it, in order to enlighten and to save his fellow citizens, the wretched financial system of the fatherland of the Corneilles and of the Racines, of the Pascals and of the Bossuets, that world of which it has been said with a great felicity of expression that heaven seemed to produce great men only to have bad institutions patiently accepted."

For the economist he is an example of one who saw the significance of the details of the business of everyday life, little of which escaped his keen observation; who set forth these details with meticulous care, yet who was never lost in them; who reasoned so clearly with respect to them that they were marshaled to form a perfect whole. This whole is the magnificent conception of economic interdependence, which the world has not yet fully grasped. But there is not only the idea of economic interdependence: intimate relationship is also shown to exist between the political and the economic life of a people. "However important are the qualities of the climate and the soil of a country . . . in determining its wealth . . . the skill or the errors of those who govern contribute not less to it than does nature." Boisguilbert "merits truly, as a thinker, to be called the Christopher Columbus of the economic world." "In his writings are found posited the expression of the fundamental principles of the science." Indeed it may be said that the economist who has not at least a bowing acquaintance with Boisguilbert lacks a knowledge of the richest single source of his own field of thought, and the statesman who does not know him is ignorant of one who set forth some of the profoundest ideas of practical government and the noblest ideals of statesmanship.

It is not without reason that, from Mirabeau on, the few who have known Boisguilbert's writings well have been characterized by enthusiasm for him; for "a citizen whose simplicity caused him to be neglected in a dazzling age, and to whom posterity must render the homage merited." When Félix Cadet refers to him as "my hero" it is understandable, as is the fact that I. E. Horn's study, *L'Économie politique avant les physiocrates,* is so largely devoted to him.

His writings still richly reward one for the time spent upon them. With the developing concern for price parities and the circulation of income his thought takes on a renewed interest. There is, in truth, a curious similarity between much that is being said and written about present-day economic difficulties and what he wrote so long ago. Leaving out of consideration his language, and taking into account the economic development of his

time, it is obvious that his ideas are fundamentally modern. It is this which leads me to an appreciative exposition of his writings rather than to a critical analysis of them. The latter would lead to a history of static and dynamic theory and statistical development. Indeed Boisguilbert lends himself to interpretation rather than to negative criticism. He goes the long way around at times, but, as Horn says, if he departs from the right track, he nevertheless arrives at the correct place. Again, he covers so much ground that it would appear little short of ungracious to criticize him for omissions, viewed in the light of developments in economic thought over a period of more than two centuries. Fully to be appreciated he must be considered in relation to his time, and to his purpose, which was not to write a formal exposition of economic theory, but to awaken a politically, economically, and socially decadent people.

Especial emphasis has been placed upon Boisguilbert's own descriptions of trade restraints and their effects, because the student of economics who is not familiar with these restraints and their effects in seventeenth-century France has but the vaguest idea as to the origin of the theory of *laissez faire*. Properly to be appreciated it must be seen, not as of spontaneous origin, but as the expression of a protest against impossible restrictions and conditions.

In spite of efforts to eliminate repetitions, many are unavoidable. This is due to Boisguilbert's own informal development of theory, which is interjected, as it were, in what was intended only to be an explanation of the current economic problems, and due to the fact that he saw them all as interrelated. Thus it is impossible, for instance, to separate his theories of trade and of money without some overlapping, as is the case with value, rent, and laissez faire, while they are all tied up with his theories of taxation and fiscal administration.

Because of the nature of the context, translations have been made as literal as is possible in reasonably clear English. Where any especially free translation has been resorted to the French has been given. The only liberty which has been taken which is not shown in the text is the breaking up of Boisguilbert's inter-

minable and involved sentences wherever this has seemed desirable and possible. Perhaps I should add that I have quoted freely because Boisguilbert's own writings are not accessible to many readers.

Acknowledgment is gratefully made to Professor Wesley C. Mitchell for his painstaking reading of the manuscript and his suggestions, and to Professor H. Parker Willis and Professor Emeritus Edwin R. A. Seligman for their criticisms and encouragement. Professor Seligman, especially, was under no obligation to perform what may well have been an onerous task. It would have been difficult, however, not to seek his advice on a historical work dealing so largely with public finance. I have developed the material, however, in my own way, and in so far as any part of the study is controversial I absolve them of any responsibility for the views set forth.

Finally, I should be remiss if I failed to mention the fortitude of my family and of my friends, who have patiently endured Boisguilbert's idiosyncrasies while I have been striving to understand them.

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INTRODUCTION: ECONOMIC CONDITIONS UNDER LOUIS XIV

Scattered over the country certain wild animals, males and females, dark, livid and all sunburned, are seen bent over the ground which they work and which they turn with an invincible persistency. They have articulate voices, and when they stand upright they disclose human faces, and in truth they are men. At night they retire into dens where they live on black bread, water and roots. They spare other men the pain of sowing, of cultivating and of reaping in order to live, and thus deserve not to lack this bread which they have sown.

LA BRUYÈRE

WHO does not know La Bruyère's vivid description of men reduced to an animal-like existence? On their bent shoulders rested the burden of an ambitious monarch, and the weight of an aristocracy which had forgotten that privilege entails responsibility. The wretchedness of the cultivators of the soil, of *les misérables,*[1] was accepted as in the nature of things. Suppose they had only bread to eat. Why should they expect more? Yet there arose to champion them a man who was to give the world strangely new ideas: that the consumption of the masses is as important in a national economy as their production; that no nation can endure if it rests upon human misery; that no one class can be permanently prosperous unless other groups thrive. This man was Pierre le Pesant de Boisguilbert, an all-but-forgotten Norman magistrate, who in one of the darkest periods in French history felt himself called to save his native land almost as certainly as had Joan of Arc three centuries before. Constituting himself adviser to the ministry of finance, he vainly gave counsel which had it been followed would have gone far toward saving France a century of fiscal disorder and the terrors of the Revolution. In his efforts to awaken as stupid and selfish a governing class as the modern world has known he was not quite

[1] *Les misérables* were those "having only their arms for their subsistence," the propertyless.—*Factum de la France,* Paris, 1843, p. 322.

alone. He was assisted by two of the great figures of the age. Fénelon appealed to human sentiment to have conditions changed; Vauban, to justice. Boisguilbert relied upon justice and reason. In doing so he gave modern capitalistic economics its form, but his was no philosophy of *sauve qui peut.*

France was in the midst of the War of the League of Augsburg when Boisguilbert published *Le Détail de la France* in 1695. The finances of the government were in serious condition. The current expenditures, exclusive of interest, exceeded 116 million *livres.* The revenue from taxation was 119 millions. But of the latter sum 50 millions were absorbed by interest due on sums obtained by means of *affaires extraordinaires* [2] and *rentes sur l'Hôtel-de-Ville.*[3] There was accordingly an annual deficit of almost 50 millions.[4] Thereafter, under the amazing ineptitude of the controllers general of finance,[5] Pontchartrain and Chamillart, and the increased expenditures incident to war, the condition of the finances grew steadily worse. When *Factum de la France* was published in 1707, the War of the League of Augsburg was over, but the country was involved in the War of the Spanish Succession. In February 1708, Desmaretz, "the most skilful, modest and incorruptible financier of this epoch," succeeded Chamillart. On account of the condition of the finances he took over their control only out of devotion to the king. Small wonder

[2] Certain methods used to obtain extraordinary revenue. See below, p. 122. This term will not be translated because there is no English equivalent for the exact thought.

[3] *Rentes sur l'Hôtel-de-Ville de Paris* constituted a large part of the funded debt of France. They (but not borrowing as such) were first used by Francis I. Unsecured by any specific revenue, their name was derived from the fact that it was the custom for an entire issue to be purchased by the provost and municipal magistrates, who resold them, or were otherwise interested in them.—Daire note, *Factum de la France,* p. 295. All references to Boisguilbert's writings, unless otherwise specified, are to *Économistes financiers du 18e siècle,* E. Daire, editor, Paris, 1843.

[4] *Ibid.,* "Notice historique sur Boisguillebert," pp. 165–166.

[5] The *contrôle général des finances* was "an institution the functions of which varied greatly. Before Louis XIV, the controller general was an official subordinated to the superintendent of finances. Louis XIV, in 1661, suppressed the superintendency and ascribed its functions to the controller general, who became a veritable minister of finances. The successors of Colbert retained these functions. The controller general joined in his hands the powers of our ministers of the interior, of commerce, of industry and of public works."—A. Talbot, *Les Théories de Boisguilbert,* Paris, 1903, p. 4, note 1.

he did not wish to assume the burden that was being thrust upon him! There was short-time paper outstanding amounting to 482,844,611 livres; the current expenditures for the year 1708 amounted to 202,788,354 livres. Yet the revenue for the year had been so consumed in advance that only 20,388,338 livres remained free to meet these demands on the treasury. One can understand that he "felt all the weight of such a commission." But the king also "understood perfectly the state of his finances," and he assured Desmaretz "that he did not demand the impossible."

With Europe coalesced against France, extraordinary revenues had to be obtained. There was no choice, Desmaretz thought, as to the means to raise them. He resorted to the methods used by his predecessors, "although the success of them was very doubtful." New *rentes* on the Hôtel-de-Ville were issued; new *traités* [6] were made. Paper money continued to be issued and "created a great disorder in commerce" so that it was necessary to try to eliminate it. The embarrassment of the government could not be made public; nevertheless concealment was impossible because the "discredited papers due to the public" made the condition obvious.

Desmaretz thus summed up the results of his seven years' administration of the finances: from January 1, 1708, to December 31, 1714, the total expenditures amounted to 1,533,201,176 livres, or an average expenditure of 219,023,027 livres. For the same period the ordinary revenue plus the capitation and an income tax of one-tenth (the latter established in 1710) produced on the average, "after deduction made for ordinary charges," only 75,000,000 livres. There was therefore an average annual deficit of 144,023,027 livres, or a total of 1,008,161,189 livres for which funds had to be obtained. But during the same period, by all the extraordinary methods resorted to it had only been possible to raise 691,660,338 livres, leaving an actual deficit of 316,540,813 livres to be covered at the end of 1714.[7]

[6] See below, p. 119.

[7] Desmaretz, *Mémoire sur l'administration des finances*, Paris, 1715, pp. 4–8, 12–14, 47–49. (The slight discrepancies in the figures are those of the report itself.) Such was the condition inherited by the regent which induced him later

The financial requirements of the government had never been greater. Why were the ordinary revenues falling at a time when every effort was being made to increase them? Why had it become impossible to provide the extraordinary funds required?

The answer is to be found in the economic condition of the country. The countryside was desolate; industry was unbelievably depressed; the people on the land were reduced to a diet of "black bread, water and roots"; the inhabitants of cities and towns were hungry. Boisguilbert described the conditions in *Le Détail de la France*. Reading this one feels that his account must surely be an exaggeration; but that he understated rather than exaggerated is shown by other contemporary records.

Horn, in his study of Boisguilbert, devoted a chapter to a description of *la misère* from sources of the day which cannot be regarded as "suspect." [8] Fénelon, for instance, addressed an anonymous remonstrance to the king which does not lack frankness:

> Your people whom you should love as your children and who until now have been devoted to you, die of hunger. The cultivation of the land is almost abandoned; the cities and the country are depopulated; all the trades languish and no longer nourish the workmen. All commerce is destroyed. . . . Instead of drawing money from these poor people it is necessary to give them alms and to feed them. All France is no more than a great almshouse desolated and without provisions. . . . You are importuned by the crowds of people who demand and who murmur.

Fénelon, as tutor to the duke of Burgundy, heir presumptive to the throne, was responsible for inducing Louis XIV to obtain from each intendant a complete summary of conditions in his generality, for the instruction of his royal charge. The memoir to the intendants in 1697 bears the imprint, in the information requested with regard to the administration of the *tailles*, *aides*, and *duanes*,[9] of having been inspired by Boisguilbert's description

to lend an ear to the proposals of John Law to relieve the government of its embarrassment. The system of Louis XIV, it may be added, was one which bred deficits. Expenditures were made by the king in consultation with his Secretaries of State without being planned with the controller general. The latter was simply charged to obtain the funds required.—*Ibid.*, p. 51.

[8] J. E. Horn, *L'Économie politique avant les Physiocrates*, Paris, 1867, chap. i.

[9] Property taxes, excises, and customs duties.

of abuses set forth in *Le Détail de la France* two years before.[10]

The intendants who made the reports cannot be suspected of being interested in showing conditions worse than they were. They were among the chief beneficiaries of the system. Likewise Boulainvilliers, who compiled the reports, was "a product of his time, and especially of his class." His concern was for the state into which the old nobility had fallen rather than for the people as such. But he declared that the reports of the intendants showed either "lack of application, or incapacity, or an interested reticence." [11] At that, a more dismal picture of economic decay could scarcely be drawn.

In the generality of Orléans commerce was so reduced, and the number of taxes so multiplied, that there were fewer merchants (6,182) than officials (7,747).[12] In the generality of Rouen, one of the richest generalities in the kingdom, with a population of 700,000 persons, there were not fifty thousand who ate all the bread they wished, and who did not sleep on straw. The population of the city of Rouen had decreased from eighty thousand to less than sixty thousand.[13] In the generality of Alençon half the houses were falling to pieces. "Poverty spreads everywhere a sadness and a ferocity which is surprising." [14]

In Lille there were more than four thousand merchants or masters, some of whom had employed as many as twelve hundred workers, with a total output forty years before of five hundred thousand pieces of goods. *La misère* had practically killed the industry. The *sagetteurs* and the *bourgeteurs* were the two principal manufacturers of serges. The "jealousy existing between these two bodies formerly produced a very profitable emulation,

[10] Comte Henri de Boulainvilliers, *État de la France* [London, 1727–1728] 2d ed., London, 1737, Vol. I, pp. 10–21. All references are to the second edition.
[11] *Ibid.*, "Préface de l'auteur," Vol. I, p. 43. "Interested reticence" is a free translation of *prévention,* but it is obviously the sense in which Boulainvilliers intended to use it. It is thus expressed by Horn, while in Lavisse (*Histoire de France,* Vol. VIII [1], p. 214) it is stated that in comparing these memoirs of the intendants with their letters to the controller general "there are found obvious differences, even contradictions. One is astonished at the silence which many of them maintain on capital facts. . . . One suspects alterations, or, at least, mitigations of the truth."
[12] *État de la France,* Vol. II, pp. 321–322.
[13] *Ibid.,* Vol. IV, pp. 6, 9, 32.
[14] *Ibid.,* Vol. IV, p. 106.

but it has degenerated into hate and envy which ruins both." The population of Lille had increased, "but in a manner which brought no profit." [15]

In Auvergne the pay of the lace workers, which had formerly been sixty or seventy thousand livres, was reduced to thirty thousand livres. Auvergne had also produced very fine paper "for all Europe." This industry was likewise reduced one-half.[16] In Touraine twenty thousand workers in silk, eight thousand looms, seven hundred mills for the preparation of the silk, and forty thousand spinners which had been in existence in the days of Richelieu had been reduced to one thousand looms, seventy mills, and a total employment of perhaps four thousand. The number of looms making ribbons had been reduced from three thousand to sixty.[17] Almost everywhere the story was the same: houses falling to pieces for lack of repair; lack of ability to buy food even at the low prices prevailing; decreasing population; high infant mortality. Practically the only exception to this sad state was the metal industry which was making war supplies, and that portion of the textile industry producing coarse cloth for uniforms. Even the war, however, seems to have been of dubious importance as a stimulant to these industries. Officers as well as troops were exceedingly underequipped. The difficulty the government experienced in paying for supplies did not create an eagerness to provide them.

Hear what Vauban, who knew the country as a whole perhaps better than any person in France, has to say:

> As a result of all the researches which I have been able to make in the many years that I have applied myself thereto, I have indeed vigorously asserted that recently almost the tenth part of the people is reduced to beggary, and actually beg. Of the nine other parts, there are five which are not in a condition to give alms to the former, because they themselves are reduced almost to that unhappy state. Of the four other parts which remain, three are very uncomfortable and embarrassed with debts and suits. In the tenth where I place all the persons of the sword, robe, ecclesiastics, laity, high nobility, distinguished nobility, those in military and civil service, the larger

[15] *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 483.
[16] *Ibid.*, Vol. V, pp. 168–169.
[17] *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 377.

(*bon*) merchants, the *bourgeois* living on *rentes* and the most well-to-do, one cannot count over a hundred thousand families, and I do not believe I am untruthful when I say that there are not ten thousand of them, little or great, who are completely comfortable. . . .[18]

Boisguilbert, writing before Fénelon, the intendants, or Vauban, maintained that the national income had decreased to one-half that of 1661.[19] Let one count the loss of income of a house, of a farm, of a village, he said, and from this can be deduced what the loss is for the kingdom. In the election[20] of Mantes, for instance, the loss is two million four hundred thousand livres "by count made through a correct and certain calculation verified on the estates." This, he added, does not include industry, which produces four times as much as the land; accordingly for a single election there has been a loss of at least ten millions. Of this canton, where the vineyards were being destroyed to escape the ruinous taxes levied upon their product, he exclaimed: "Let one not lose sight of the vines of Mantes, because they are truly the measure of which it is necessary to make use in order to evaluate the disasters of the entire kingdom."[21]

Time after time Boisguilbert returned to the condition in Mantes. Did he quote it so often because it represented the worst condition, or because its losses had been most carefully calculated? Both, perhaps. But there are other indices of the diminution of the national income. The loss of one-half of the income of France, he asserted, is also shown by the registers, leases, and contracts, as well as by the evidence of men. Everywhere "the disorders are inescapably apparent." In "the canton of Bourbon alone one hundred and fifty domains or farms [are] abandoned to the crows and to the owls." Half the kingdom is useless to the prince and to the people, and he feared the contradiction neither of God nor of man as to what he said relative to its state. Again, he would be subjected to bodily punishment if he were exaggerating the evils which he combated. The kingdom is witness to it. "The cadaver we have under our eyes on

[18] Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, *Dime royale*, Daire edition, Paris, 1843, Preface, pp. 34–35.
[19] *Le Détail de la France*, Pt. I, chap. iii.
[20] Subdivision of a generality.
[21] *Factum*, pp. 273, 290.

account of the desolation of lands and commerce, purges this pronouncement of all suspicion of calumny." [22]

As a result of the state of the kingdom, a few individuals lived in the most extreme magnificence and abundance, but the greater part were in the most abject poverty.[23]

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 273, 290, 327, 340, 347. *Le Détail*, p. 218. Letter to Desmaretz, Sept. 16, 1708.
[23] *Le Détail*, p. 177.

I

THE TIME PRODUCES THE MAN

The hope of the public felicity is perhaps the sole real good, or rather the sole consolation which exists on earth for the upright man. Is he not too happy to have in the fatherland a friend, with whose happiness he may occupy himself, and whom he may have no fear of surviving? But, it may be added, who has charged him with the public cause? Nature, when she gave him sympathy and courage.

CONDORCET.

IN THE middle of the seventeenth century there was growing up in Rouen an intelligent and inquiring son of a prosperous Norman family. His was no ordinary environment. Son of a lawyer, a local councillor of the king, cousin to one of the great poets of France, and through him, indirectly connected with her great military hero, Vauban; to this family background there must be added bustling Rouen, the busiest commercial center of France, and finally Normandy itself. Normandy! With what pride and love this son was later to refer to the province as the "Greece of France." Normandy, mother of so many illustrious sons; Normandy, with her ancient charter; Normandy, the garden spot of France so lovingly cultivated. Out of this superior and composite environment came one who was to "open to the human mind a new career."

Pierre le Pesant de Boisguilbert[1] was born in Rouen on February 17, 1646. His life was just to span the reign to which he would devote all his efforts. Service to the king was the family

[1] Boisguilbert himself except in two or three instances spelled his name Boisguillebert. This is obviously an older form, and may have been preferred as a result of his interest in languages and love of history. His father and brother used the shorter form. As both sons were seigneurs de Boisguilbert, "Boisguillebert" may also have been a method of differentiation resorted to by the one. Boisguilbert is the common spelling of the locality from which the family derived its name (also spelled Bosc-Guillebert, it is located between Rouen and Fourges), and is also used by Boisguilbert's descendants. Arthur de Boislisle and Félix Cadet, the foremost authorities on the life of Boisguilbert, used the shorter form, which is also followed by the present writer.

tradition. His father and grandfather had been respectively local councillor and secretary to the king. The family was ennobled in 1620 by Louis XIII. Boisguilbert thus belonged to that hybrid class, the nobility of the robe. Its roots and traditions, and something of its virtues, were those of the *bourgeoisie*. Lifted above the latter socially, in its growing importance, in its manner of life, this magisterial class was taking on some of the characteristics of the old nobility. Essentially it was to remain a distinct, bureaucratic class, a fourth estate, indeed, in point of number.

In his study of social and economic problems it was perhaps this division of class interest, combined with his judicial training and experience and his inherent spirit of justice, which gave Boisguilbert his ability to see the relation of all the parts, rather than the parts alone. Superficially he was *bourgeois* in sympathy. He regarded himself as the spokesman of the people, the cultivators, the business men. But essentially he rose above class or distinction. His concern was the common good of the whole. To see a prosperous France, rooted in prosperous individuals and classes; to have each individual and class see his or its part in the national economy, such was his fundamental interest.[2]

Boisguilbert's early education was with the Jesuits at Rouen. He was then sent with his brother to Paris to complete his studies. There he was a student at Port-Royal,[3] and in the family

[2] Prior to the early part of the 1860's when Arthur de Boislisle discovered the letters of Boisguilbert to the controllers general, nothing was known of his life except what is given by the Duke of Saint-Simon, who knew and respected him. This correspondence is found in Volumes II and III of the *Correspondance des contrôleurs généraux des finances*. In 1865 *L'Académie des sciences morales et politiques* made Boisguilbert the subject of a competition for the following year. Two works were crowned at the annual public session on July 14, 1866: I. E. Horn's *L'Économie politique avant les Physiocrates*, and Félix Cadet's *Pierre de Boisguilbert, précurseur des économistes, sa vie—ses travaux—son influence*. Boislisle's *Mémoire sur Boisguilbert* received only honorable mention because it did not deal with the theories. The latter was never published as a whole, but its contents were utilized in "La Proscription du projet de dime royale et la mort de Vauban," in *Comte rendu de l'acad. des sc. mor. et pol.*, (Paris, 1875), and in the *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, Paris, 1879–1928, Vol. XIV, appendix xii.

[3] Cadet infers this from the short preface to Boisguilbert's translation of Herodien's *Histoire romaine*, in which reference is made to "'Monsieur d'Andilly'" and "'those famous *Anonymes* so famous throughout France'" to whom is due "'whatever education I have had among them in my youth.'"—Cadet, p. 6.

tradition completed his education at the *École de droit,* obtaining the title of *avocat.*[4]

Boisguilbert may have owed much of his religious toleration and courage to an intimate association with Jansenists at Port-Royal, and Jesuits and Calvinists at Rouen as well as to his own spirit of independence and of justice. It is impossible to determine his religious affiliations from his writings. It is only obvious that he was a deeply religious individual who looked upon creeds with an objectiveness unusual in a day of creedal strife. Cadet especially speaks of his courage in referring to "the new religion" in view of the fact that the government had ordered it to be called "the so-called reformed religion." [5]

Through his father, Nicholas le Pesant, who was a nephew of Martha le Pesant Corneille, mother of Pierre and Thomas

[4] Horn, p. 48. Boisguilbert may have been speaking from experience gained in his own student days when he later said that the three years spent at the law school were largely wasted. The students, he declared, were debauched by bad associates, and learned only to spend. Furthermore, there appeared to have been connivance in obtaining their degrees, which permitted these young boys to return home and act as magistrates. In suggesting reforms for the French lower judicial system, he declared that these graduates who returned to become magistrates were unqualified for their work. The universities taught only Roman and canon law, he remarked. In practice, however, common law, he said, was followed in many of the provinces, which rendered the young bachelors of civil or canon law unfit to carry on judicial functions. He suggested, in view of this, and of the idling away of time on the part of students, that the three years of university study be changed to three months, and that thereafter they spend three or four years as subordinates in a royal court. (*Projet du rétablissement de tous les premiers juges de France.* Memoir with letter of August 21, 1709.) Back of this proposal much is indicated both as to the state of the French judiciary, rapidly becoming a major problem at the time, and as to Boisguilbert's ideas. He was writing at a time when the nobility of the robe was being ruined by affaires extraordinaires. The bench was being deserted until there were not sufficient judges to sit on cases. The judges were giving up their offices rather than be ruined by the taxes upon them, and the families from which the magistracy was normally replenished could no longer afford to educate their sons at the universities. The courts were also losing their dignity because of the youth and inexperience of the judges.

The inference is that Boisguilbert, with his alert mind and power of concentration, thought that by hard work the students could learn in three months what they actually obtained in three years. The sounder proposal, as far as legal training was concerned, would have been to suggest that common law be taught in the universities. But in the actual proposal is to be found a fundamental principle underlying Boisguilbert's thinking, namely, the necessity of combining theory and practice.

[5] Cadet, pp. 9–11, quoting Depping, *Correspondance administrative,* Vol. IV, p. xxviii.

Corneille, Boisguilbert was related to two great poets of his time. Pierre Corneille, forty years older than Boisguilbert, was at the height of his career and a great figure in the literary life of France when Boisguilbert was an impressionable youth. The decision to forsake the family tradition of the law for a literary career may be attributed to the influence of the dramatic poet on the boy's thinking. The classical and historical themes of the Corneille dramas could well have interested the student in history and in the study of Greek and Latin. He translated *Dion Cassius de Nicée, abrégé par Xiphilin,* and Herodien's *Histoire romaine,* which seem to have been sorry failures. He had, as Cadet says, the proper ideal for a translator: that, as Boisguilbert explained in his preface, one must not only make known " 'the thoughts of an author in translating, but that it is necessary to render beauty for beauty.' " But it is humorous to think of the realistic economist of a few years later attempting to satisfy a literary public enamored of elegance, of propriety, and affectation. If the good Abbé Mongault, whom Cadet quotes as later objecting to such statements as " 'the emperor had to go *décharger son ventre,*' " thought Boisguilbert too literal minded, he must indeed have shocked the delicate sensibilities of *les précieuses* who were his literary contemporaries.

Boisguilbert, during this early period devoted to literature, also wrote a now-forgotten life of *Marie Stuart, reine d'Écosse,* which went through two editions in 1674 and 1675. The author's preface is worth quoting, because it shows that the habits of thought so characteristic of Boisguilbert in his economic writings a quarter of a century later were formed at an early date.

The Reader is not to be impos'd upon, as if I design'd to entertain him with a Romance, when I give this Book the Title of an Historical Novel; for I assure him, That my View in writing it, was not only to tell the truth in the general, but even not to deviate from it in any one Circumstance of my History, which alas! Too many are ignorant of; since one Party with Father Caussin extol Her for a Saint, and a Martyr; and the other, by giving a blind and implicit Faith to Buchanan's wicked and unjust Calumnies, represent Her in the odious shape and Character of a Prostitute or worse; but begging their Pardon, I may with Truth affirm, That both have

err'd, tho' in a very different Manner; the one out of an Excess of Charity; and the other, from an inexhaustible Source of Malice: However a Probability of Truth is not wanting in what either advance; since on the one hand, Her Subjects cloaked their Rebellion under a Pretence of Zeal for maintaining the Protestant Religion; and She on the other, had always the Misfortune to be caught in all the Snares, which her Enemies laid against her Honor: Having only the inward Consolation, That the Ills, which befel Herself or her Subjects, were not owing to her own Inclinations or Commands, which is fully justified in the following History, which I have copied from fifteen or sixteen different Authors. And if I appeal to Camden oftener than to any other, it is, because being a Subject of Queen Elizabeth, whatever he advanced in Favor of Queen Mary, ought without any Scruple, to be accepted as undeniable Truth.[6]

Having attempted two literary forms and failed, Boisguilbert gave up any further attempt at a purely literary career. It is possible that his turning to a new field was due to a developing interest in current affairs which he later spoke of as having arisen during this period,[7] as well as to his difficulty in obtaining a livelihood with his pen.

Although he was the elder son, Boisguilbert was for some reason disinherited by his father. It has been suggested that this was due to his decision to turn from the family tradition of the law. This, however, does not seem to be plausible in view of the fact that Boisguilbert was launched upon a successful legal career

[6] This excerpt, which shows Boisguilbert's sentence structure and punctuation, is quoted from *The Life of Mary Stewart, Queen of Scotland and France,* "Written Originally in French, and Now Done into English. With Notes illustrating and confirming the most material Passages of this History, collected from Contemporary and other Authors of the Greatest Character and Reputation." By James Freebairn, Edinburgh, 1725. With difficulty one finds that the work was written by one Sieur de Boisguilbert. The translation was published through private subscription, the list of subscribers including the most illustrious names in Scotland. The first paragraph of the "historical novel" may also be quoted: "The life of Mary Stewart, Queen of *Scotland* and of *France,* has something so extraordinary in its Conduct, and so fatal in its End, that without swerving from the Truth, the plain Narrative of it will appear no less surprising, than the Fictions of any modern Romance." It is interesting to compare the opinion expressed in the preface and in this paragraph with an opinion expressed in 1932: "Mary . . . is 'the great romantic subject,' the most maligned woman who ever lived and the most overpraised."—"Mary Stuart, Woman and Queen," review of *The Scottish Queen,* by Herbert Gorman. *New York Times Book Review,* Sunday, November 20, 1932.

[7] Letter of May 5, 1702. All letters from 1700 to 1708 are in *Correspondance des contrôleurs généraux des finances,* Vol. II, append. xii.

long before the death of his father. The latter bought for the younger son, Nicholas, an office as councillor in the *parlement* [8] in Normandy, and this son inherited the family estate. It is more probable that an important factor in the disinheritance of the elder son was a matter of personal conflict between father and son. Boisguilbert later was to show a peculiar inability to get along with people. If the father were of an equally domineering type, conflict would have been inevitable. Furthermore, if the father were a conservative, as is not improbable, the radicalism of this son must have been a source of extreme concern, whereas the younger son appears to have conformed easily and to have accepted the general view without too much questioning. There is indication that this disinheritance affected Boisguilbert deeply. Twice in his letters to Chamillart, the controller general, he spoke of being indebted for his fortune "after heaven, solely to myself." [9] There could be more than the mere pride of a self-made man in the remark, especially in its repetition. The restless energy, the subordination of every other interest to success in any undertaking, may well have sprung from a conscious or un-

[8] See note, pp. 20–21. Because the pre-Revolutionary French provincial *parlements*, or courts, were different in meaning from the English *parliament*, the French term will be retained

[9] Letters of Oct. 27, 1703 and Dec. 28, 1704. The father's epitaph doubtless was written by the elder son, the literary member of the family. It shows that there was either a remarkable similarity between the characteristics of father and son, or that the latter idealized the character of the father by endowing him in death with the substantial qualities which the son possessed to so singular a degree. The epitaph itself is not without interest:

"Here lies Messire Nicholas Lepesant, during his lifetime chevalier, seigneur, and patron of Boisguilbert, councillor of the king in his councils and master of his chamber of accounts in Normandy. His solid piety, his exact justice and his ardent charity attracted to him the esteem of all who knew him. He spent the last twenty years of his life in visiting the poor, in consoling and assisting them. He was so touched during the last year of the universal poverty caused by the extreme scarcity of grain that it has not been doubted that the sorrow which he experienced as a result of it shortened his days. He has founded in perpetuity a hundred livres of incomes to be spent for grain to be distributed every year to the poor. He died April 19, 1694. Pray God for the repose of his soul. Noble dame de Bonissant, his wife, has erected this epitaph and has rendered this duty to the memory of a husband, the sorrow of whose loss will endure until death. She lived until April 9, 1700, and returned her soul to her creator on holy Wednesday, and rests here." This inscription, says Cadet, is on a stone on the exterior tower of the château of Boisguilbert, having been saved at the time of the demolition of the church Sainte-Croix-Saint-Ouen, Rouen.—Cadet, pp. 4–6.

conscious rivalry with a brother who had supplanted him. Family conflict may thus have been a drive back of his striving to make a fortune and to rise in the legal profession until he had achieved for himself a position similar to the one which his brother had obtained so easily.

On September 26, 1677, Boisguilbert was married to Suzanne le Paige de Pinterville, daughter of the former procurer general of the Court of Aides in Normandy.[10] By her he had two daughters and three sons. Thus it is the tenderness and experience of a father which is indicated in his pages where is shown so much solicitude for the children of the poor, and so much knowledge and observation of the ills of under-nourished children, whose maladies, he said, are so likely to be fatal.[11]

On January 12, 1678, shortly after his marriage, Boisguilbert became Vicomte de Montivilliers, in Normandy, holding the position until 1689.[12] During these years he also engaged with success in agriculture and in commerce. He amassed what appears to have been a comfortable fortune for that time. It enabled him, in 1689, to buy two judicial offices in Rouen. As the wealthiest magistrate of his class in the generality, he was able to live for six years without drawing his salary; he was able to pay more than one hundred and sixty thousand livres of taxes on his offices between 1689 and 1709, and he spoke of having had twenty thousand livres on deposit in 1694 with the Sieurs le Couteux. His death record refers to him as "Seigneur of Boisguilbert, Pinterville, Maupertuy, and other places."

The intendant of Rouen, reporting on the generality in 1697, stated that because of their impoverishment, the old nobility could no longer maintain their former standards of living, and that the magnificence formerly associated with them had become instead a characteristic of the new nobility of the robe. From this, and from his position among the Norman magistrates, one may infer that Boisguilbert maintained his family in a certain elegance, and

[10] The two families were either friends or relatives. Her mother, Suzanne du Four, was Boisguilbert's god-mother.—Horn, notes, pp. 48, 50.

[11] Boislisle states that the family possesses a portrait of Boisguilbert and his wife, attributed to Largillière, which was exhibited at the Trocadéro exposition in 1877.

[12] See note, pp. 20–21, for the duties of the position.

even such splendor as he would consider to be in keeping with his position; but from his strictures on those who consume their capital, one may likewise assume that he never lived beyond his means.

This fortune made by his own efforts must have had a definite effect upon Boisguilbert's character and his conduct. It must have added to his feeling of confidence and superiority, and to the independence of spirit which was so characteristic of him. It was his financial independence, as well as his ability and his judicial position which placed him on an intimate footing with the great merchant, Thomas le Gendre, with the greatest bankers in France, the Sieurs le Couteux, and which gave him the benefit of their wide financial experience.

Although from external sources so little is known of his life, Boisguilbert has left a clear imprint of himself in his writings. Cultured and well-to-do, he was according to every indication a fairly extensive traveler for his day.[13] His intimate references to conditions in different parts of France, his close observation of the living habits of the English workers as contrasted with those of France, his description of the Rhone at Lake Geneva, seem to show more than second-hand information. With Paris and its officials his letters indicate almost as much familiarity as with Rouen itself. With his *entrée* to the Corneille household in Paris, familiarity with the theater one would expect him to have had, and his frequent use of the actor in illustrations causes no surprise; nor do his comparisons of France to a stage where a drama is being enacted. He indicates also a familiarity with chamber music when, in a figure of speech, he refers to the dominating importance of the one "who beats the measure and assigns to each his part." It is a scholar who refers approvingly to the efforts of Francis I to reëstablish letters in the kingdom by giving pensions to "attract people versed in all the sciences," and to his purchase of manuscripts "of the works of the best and rarest authors," with which France, on account of "the ignorance of the preceding

[13] Saint-Simon, contrasting Boisguilbert's life with the activity which had characterized Vauban's, refers to the former as *le sédentaire à Rouen.* (*Mémoires,* Vol. XIV, p. 330.) In comparison with the military activity of Vauban the characterization might have been applicable. But Boisguilbert appears to have led far from a sedentary existence, student though he was.

centuries, had been very badly provided." It is legal training and judicial experience which underlie the methods which approximate those of the modern research worker in the insistence on obtaining the facts which is noticeable in his writings. But it is the training of Port-Royal, renowned for its emphasis upon mathematics and philosophy, which is indicated in Boisguilbert's logical reasoning and his grasp of underlying principles.

In a day when the practice of agriculture in France was scorned by the elevated classes, Boisguilbert had the courage to engage in it, to master its details, and to become its great defender. Without emphasis on agriculture, the classicism of the French life of the period is shown as a thin veneer. Boisguilbert, a true classicist in spirit, modeled his life after that of a gentleman of Greece or Rome, who combined knowledge of practical agriculture with studious and rich leisure and devotion to the State. Or, it may be said, it was a return to the habits of a Montaigne, who passed from the activity of his garden to the seclusion of his study to meditate and to write, or of a Sully, who would reluctantly give up his farming and horse breeding for affairs of State.

Aside from the fact that he built up his fortune during the period, nothing is known of his life between 1678 when he became Vicomte de Montivilliers and 1689 when he came to Rouen. Did his position and the management of his property absorb all the extraordinary energy of the man who "never liked to lose his time"? Was Boisguilbert, who had first elected writing as a profession, inactive with his pen between 1676, the date of his last translation, and 1695, the date of the publication of *Le Détail de la France?* Was he referring only to the latter when he said in 1702 that his zeal and his anxiety for more than thirty years had enabled him to foresee, as he had publicly written, that the way France was governed would cause her to perish if it were not changed?[14] Was the inveterate letter writer silent during these years, or was he carrying on a correspondence with a broad acquaintanceship? Was he writing any of the numerous anonymous pamphlets attacking conditions and purporting to have been published in Brussels, Amsterdam, or Cologne? This cannot be determined without

[14] Letter of May 5, 1702.

a careful examination of the field with reference to content and style. There was nothing written at that time, certainly, that Boisguilbert cared to, or dared to, acknowledge and to include in his collected writings.[15]

In 1689 Boisguilbert bought the two magisterial offices of president and lieutenant general in the bailiwick and presidial seat of Rouen. His letter of investiture was issued on November 9, 1690.[16] Letters patent for the position were issued March 16, 1691. Boisguilbert, as Horn said, expecting to obtain only such a position as his younger brother possessed, as councillor in the parlement, fell unexpectedly into the two offices named, which were "more conformable than that of Vicomte de Montivilliers to the traditions of the family, and to the need of activity which tormented him." [17] Referring specifically to one of the offices purchased by

[15] There is a similarity in the economic ideas of certain of the writings and those of Boisguilbert which cannot be wholly ignored. *Soupirs de la France esclave,* for instance, obviously was not written by Boisguilbert. The style is completely different; there is a virulence which, strongly expressed as are Boisguilbert's writings, he never displays; many of the ideas are at variance with his; it attacks governmental expenditures, which Boisguilbert never does, and the gabelle, which he does not treat. Yet there are passages which could come from *Le Détail, Factum,* or *Traité du mérite,* and in which idioms characteristic of Boisguilbert are to be found, as well as the same attack upon Colbert and the dating of the difficulties of France from 1660. *Soupirs de la France* is attributed to Michel Vasson. Vasson, judging from the content of this work, appears to have been Jansenist or Calvinist. He was born in the adjoining generality of Orléans. He was born in the same year as Boisguilbert. They had a common interest in history. If they attended Port-Royal together they would have known each other. If they knew each other, they obviously continued the friendship in after years.

[16] The first paragraph of this investiture is as follows: "Louis, etc., to all those who shall see these presents, greetings. We have chosen and named our dear and well-beloved M. Pierre Lepesant de Boisguilbert, heretofore our councillor Vicomte de Montivilliers, to fill one of the offices of councillor in our court of parlement in Normandy, to which we had caused to be expedited our letters of dispensation because the Sieur de Boisguilbert, his brother, is councillor in the said parlement. But as the offices of our councillor president and lieutenant in the bailiwick and presidial seat of Rouen are vacant, through the voluntary resignation which the Sieur de Brevedent has placed in our hands, We have believed that a better choice could not be made than the person of the said Sieur de Boisguilbert, in the hope that he will fulfill our expectations, having the qualities required to perform its function[s] to the assuagement and satisfaction of our subjects." The complete letter is given by Horn, Appendix, pp. 363–365.

[17] In order to give some notion of the local administrative and judicial organization of Rouen, the generality of Rouen and the province of Normandy, in which Boisguilbert had a part, the following summary from the report of the intendant

Boisguilbert, the intendant said that the office "of lieutenant general has . . . become very considerable through the diverse functions which have been given to it; such, among others, as the inspection of police and the presidency of the *corps-de-ville*." [18]

Boisguilbert's enormous energy had indeed not been fully absorbed by his office of vicomte and the pursuit of his own fortune between 1678 and 1689. He had studied the economic and social conditions of France, and his reputation as an economist was established by the time he came to Rouen. His mind, which could encompass so much, had already led him to arrive at definite ideas

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of Rouen is furnished: The *corps-de-ville* (corresponding roughly to our municipal councils) of Rouen had, since the fourteenth century, been "composed of six magistrates *(echevins)* having at their head a bailiff (*bailly*) or his lieutenant general. This form . . . existed until 1695, there having been a creation then through all the kingdom of perpetual mayors in the cities." The Norman parlement (comparable to our court of appeals) consisted of a president and councillors (one of whom was Boisguilbert's brother Nicholas). It had jurisdiction over all Normandy, which was divided into four bailiwicks (*bailliages*). At the head of each bailiwick was a lieutenant general, who had jurisdiction over nobles and ecclesiastics, and had some inspection of trades until this function was taken away from the office with the creation of lieutenants of police in the provinces in 1699. Each bailiwick was divided into four *vicomtés*, each presided over by a *vicomte*, who had jurisdiction over the *roturiers*, or non-nobles and non-privileged. The *vicomtés* in turn were divided into *sergenteries*. In 1649 the office of bailiff of Rouen was "joined to the government." Thereafter the lieutenant general presided over the *corps-de-ville*. Consequently, this was one of the functions of Boisguilbert.—*État de la France*, Vol. II, pp. 8–9, 20–21.

[18] Horn, referring to the fact that Boisguilbert's appointment as lieutenant general failed to give general satisfaction, said it was because the duties of the office were not well defined as a result of the manner in which the office had gradually grown in importance. "When toward the end of the thirteenth century Roman law commenced to be substituted more and more for local and common law, the bailiffs and seneschals, for the greater part almost illiterate, found it impossible to exercise their functions. An ordinance of Charles VI (May 27, 1413) . . . permitted them to have lieutenants." This privilege was abused. In 1493 the number of lieutenants either a bailiff or seneschal could have was limited to two: "a lieutenant *général* (or principal) and a lieutenant *particulier*, replacing the other in case of impeachment. An ordinance of Louis XII (March 1498), decreed that judicial offices must henceforth be confided only to doctors and *licenciés*, and forbidding the bailiff and seneschal to exercise judicial duties unless they be graduated, forced them to abandon entirely their most important functions . . . to their lieutenants." At the same time the king took over the right to name the lieutenants, and the lieutenancy was thus transformed into an "office which was bought and became a veritable property." "Its value increases when, to put an end to the differences, an ordinance of Charles IX (January 1560) declared that in the future all the bailiffs and seneschals shall be of the short robe, that is to say, that the administration of justice shall belong wholly and exclusively to the lieutenants" (pp. 54–55).

as to the cause of the disorder in the kingdom and to formulate proposals for reform. In 1691 he could speak of his "system." As early as 1689 he had at least roughly drafted the text of *Le Détail de la France.* Scarcely was he settled in his new offices before he sought and obtained an interview with the controller general, Pontchartrain.[19] The audience cannot be said to have started auspiciously. The Duke of Saint-Simon gives us the picture. The brusque provincial was evidently not at all awed by the pomp and ceremony. When he had approached Pontchartrain, "he demanded of him that he listen with patience, and immediately said to him that at first he would think him crazy, that next he would see that he merited attention, and that in the end he would abide content with his system." But Pontchartrain, disagreeable at the best, was impatient as a result of the certain solutions to which he had listened. He "began to laugh, answered curtly that he would be satisfied with the first, and turned his back." [20]

So ended the conversation that Boisguilbert hoped would mark the beginning of the salvation of France. Most men would have been discouraged by the rebuff. But Boisguilbert seems never to have doubted that the key to the economic regeneration of France lay in the adoption of his system of reforms. No one else in the kingdom could do what he promised to do; [21] no one else so combined theoretical knowledge and practical experience. If others were reluctant to hear, or could not understand how this regeneration could be brought about, he must try that much more to make himself heard and understood.

Rebuffed by Pontchartrain, Boisguilbert continued to plan, to write, and to undertake the conversion of those around him to his ideas. In a land almost destroyed by those who put their own interest above the general welfare, he had "no other object than to render service to the king, to the public," and to the ministers themselves. After waiting four years for the adoption of financial measures which would introduce an element of hopefulness into

[19] The exact date is probably uncertain. Saint-Simon, writing in 1707, places it in 1691. It was before the publication of *Le Détail,* in which reference is made to it (p. 257).

[20] Saint-Simon, *Mémoires,* Vol. XIV, pp. 326–327.

[21] *Factum,* pp. 341–342.

the situation, he proceeded in 1695, after the distressing famine years of 1693–94, to publish *Le Détail de la France.* This work was without practical results, as Boisguilbert said later, because "there was still, as it were, oil in the lamp."

With little hope of accomplishment under Pontchartrain, during the period between 1695 and 1700 Boisguilbert's mind was turning more and more to theoretical speculation about conditions in France. In this time he seems to have thought out, if he did not actually write, *Traité des grains.* He was also in close touch with the intendant of Rouen, De la Bourdonnaye, and with him was evolving a plan for an important experiment. This plan was to try his administrative reforms in a limited area. He was confident that the results would serve as a model for all France. Hope for carrying out such an experiment was ended with the transfer of De la Bourdonnaye to Bordeaux.

In the meanwhile, there was a new creation of offices, among them that of lieutenant general of police. The functions of the magistracy of police were essentially the maintenance of law and order, economic justice, health and sanitation, and public morality, including the censorship of the press. These functions were largely derived from those of the office of lieutenant general which Boisguilbert already owned, the value of which was consequently reduced. He therefore bought this newly created office for one hundred thousand livres, which was in reality the re-purchase of, or a tax upon, his existing one.

So far as it had to do with commerce and industry this was a position for which Boisguilbert was especially qualified; but so far as it demanded restrictions it ran counter to his ideas. It was a position in which a person of his independent spirit, his knowledge and views, was certain to run into difficulties. They were not long in coming. Cadet takes up at length his troubles with Pontchartrain [22] over the question " 'of ignorance, or of irregularity in the permissions to print' " which Boisguilbert gave. The office, it seems, had no authority over publications passing the length of a *livret,* or over those dedicated to the king. Pontchartrain threatened to take the jurisdiction away from the "subaltern

[22] Who in 1699 became chancellor.

magistrate" who was inclined to exceed his authority and the spirit of censorship prevailing. Nevertheless, Rouen continued to be the center of forbidden publications in spite of complaints that " 'all sorts of forbidden books' " were published there " 'with more license than in any other place in the kingdom' "; that in that " 'city a great commerce was made, with license, in all sorts of bad books.' " The office of censor was indeed no position for the father of laissez faire. Boisguilbert knew too well on his own account the irksomeness of restraints on the freedom of the press, and was far too liberal in his views to be able to conform in this respect and to satisfy authority and conservatism. In his position as censor of the press at Rouen, Boisguilbert displayed a liberalism, as Cadet says, comparable to that great liberal of a later generation, Malesherbes.[23]

Even more interesting were his difficulties with the local authorities over the question of control of prices and of weights and measures. It is hard to decide who must have suffered most from the inevitable conflicts arising: the specialized Boisguilbert in contention with a group attempting to act upon matters about which, from his standpoint, they knew nothing, or this group over-ridden by a man impatient and domineering as a result both of temperament and of his superior knowledge. The differences of opinion began soon after his appointment to the new office of lieutenant general of police. On January 16, 1700, De Beuvron, lieutenant general of Normandy, wrote to the controller general that he had just met M. de Boisguilbert, with the members of the city council of Rouen, and that the former was determined to "have all that which appertains to him by the edict creating his office. I am burdened with asking your orders and explanations on all the difficulties and disputes which can arise, and in order that things may be done peaceably . . . [I would have you] make him understand that the less he can demand in the way of affairs and regulations, and the less he importunes you, the better this would be for him. I should indeed also be glad to please him, because he has asked it of me, and has shown me all sorts of

[23] Cadet, pp. 39–44.

courtesies in his advancement; but I do not know if his too great vivacity and his impetuous disposition do not make him have pretensions which are not always sound. . . . It would be desirable for him, as for many others, if he should wish to follow somewhat the counsel and advice of his brother the councillor." [24]

The argument had to do with the price of bread, in which Boisguilbert, the economist, was holding out against the hit-or-miss policy of the council. Incidentally, it was an argument in which Boisguilbert's theory of proportional prices was involved. One can imagine him giving involved, but heated, disquisitions on his theory while a bored and indifferent city council and the provincial parlement wondered what it was all about, and what it had to do with the price of bread which must be kept as low as possible.

The sequel to the complaint against him appears in two of Boisguilbert's letters to the controller general. In one, dated the 14th and 15th of June, 1700, he wrote that he had disagreed with the commissioners of parlement because it "would be necessary to increase and not to decrease [the price of bread], as you will see by the paper and by the estimates which I give myself the honor to send to you. The late M. Pellot had an authentic attempt made to find what bread should be worth in relation to the price of wheat. He found that when the *mine* [i.e., 6 bushels], a measure of Rouen which is a little more than half the *setier* of Paris, is worth six livres, brown bread (*pain bis*), which governs the other, must be sold at fourteen *deniers* [denier=1/12 a sou] a pound, and similarly in increasing or diminishing. In the six months that I have been in charge wheat has never been less, namely, from ten livres, ten sous the mine, and now it passes eleven livres; nevertheless, I have left bread at the price of eighteen deniers the pound, which is more than four deniers below what it ought to be according to the order established in 1683. The result is that I am tormented by the bakers to raise their price according to these papers and reasons, to which it seems to me there is no answer. All I can do is to lighten the penalty when the violation is only moderate. This seems to me less injurious

[24] *Correspondance des contrôleurs généraux*, Vol. II, No. 72, p. 22

than the increase which is a kind of alarm which never fails to cause wheat to go up in the markets afterward." [25]

On second thought Boisguilbert evidently decided that it might be well to play safe in the matter of winking somewhat at the law with regard to weights and measures as a means to give what he considered to be economic justice. Two weeks later, on July 2, he wrote that he would be obliged to close his eyes to the lack of weight, which causes "less rumor than the increase in price, which is a kind of alarm in the country at the beginning of the harvest. As there are some persons in this country who have care to inform you of all my conduct, I beg you to remember this when they will write you that I permit the bakers to make the bread too light." [26]

So it appears that Boisguilbert compromised with the commissioners by not changing the price of bread, but that he achieved his determination to be fair to the bakers in another manner. His persistence in this matter becomes clear when it is understood that his entire theory is built around the principle of a price to the producer which will cover all expenses and give a fair profit. So important was this to him in the maintenance of social well-being, that any means taken to bring it about would be justified.

This incident gives some insight into the character and disposition of the man. The few brush strokes which describe his peculiar temperament are vivid ones. Saint-Simon, for instance, says that *son esprit vif avoit du singulier*, while de Beuvron refers to *son trop vivacité et humeur bouillante*. These observations, combined with the content of his writings, the terrible persistence of his letters, his conflicts with his professional associates at Rouen, and his determination to see his ideas dominate, make it possible to reconstruct the personality of the man. We see the enthusiast, with an infinite compassion for the economically helpless and oppressed, with a profound contempt for human stupidity, with a relentless hatred for those who sought their own advancement

[25] *Ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 145, p. 41. To understand the full significance of the last remark it is necessary to know the content of *Traité des grains*, in which Boisguilbert explains the factors causing the price of grain to rise or fall at times out of all relation to the changes in the actual quantity of grain. The price of wheat in 1700 was just beginning to drop after the preceding shortage from 1696 to 1699, and continued to fall until the great famine of 1709.

[26] *Ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 157, p. 45.

and welfare without troubling themselves about the general interest, applying himself in a fiery impatience to securing economic justice and fiscal reform. In this effort he displayed the same fanatical zeal which Calvin and Knox had shown a century earlier in the field of religion. Boislisle says of him, that,

whether it was a question of administrative affairs or of judiciary powers, even of simple debates on precedence, he displayed everywhere the same feverish activity, the same mad ardor, the same need of innovation and, above all, of domination, as did that other precursor, Jean Bodin, who, sent to Rouen to reorganize the forests, was characterized by the provincial Estates as a "great disturber and transgressor of the laws and customs of the country and of the Norgeneral, with the magistrates of the secondary jurisdiction, Boisguilthe parlement, with the city council, with the gilds (*corps d'arts et métiers*), as with the intendant, with the governor or his lieutenant man charter," and even as "the principal enemy of France." With bert did not cease to raise conflicts, to sustain contests, struggles, where appeared always a character disturbing, restless, unsociable.[27]

Such is the picture drawn from Norman records through the decade prior to 1700. His contempt for authority and position was obviously as unusual as it was maddening to those who experienced it. The old Marquis de Beuvron, one of the most influential of the old Norman nobility, father of the lieutenant general of Normandy who complained of Boisguilbert a few years later,[28] as early as 1692 indignantly wrote to Pontchartrain:

The lieutenant general of this bailiwick is regarded by all those who know him as the most ungovernable and incompatible man in the world, with many other defects that I do not speak of, and although I regard him as a man who is not wise, and although I scorn the greater part of his discourse, nevertheless it is very disagreeable, in spite of all I can do, to see myself exposed to this, and to have to endure, in the presence of all the nobility of a country, all the excesses, raving, and lack of respect shown me by the said lieutenant general.[29]

Boisguilbert was not unaware that he differed from other men. In truth he prided himself upon the fact. It was both a certain *naïveté* and a consciousness of his own powers which led him to exclaim in reply to a criticism of him made to Chamillart: "I

[27] Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, Vol. XIV, append. xii, p. 581.
[28] See above, pp. 24–25. [29] *Op. cit.*, pp. 581–582.

glory in having a singular character, without which I should not have unusual ideas." [30]

How can one account for Boisguilbert's temperamental difficulties? Were they due to an innate contrariness and desire to dominate, or were they the result of the conditions under which he lived? The latter seems a much more plausible view to take. As an individual he possessed warm human sympathy and understanding, but intellectually he lived alone. From the standpoint of his economic ideas he belonged to a much later date. Everywhere he was faced with opposition on account of his liberalism. His offices required him to enforce laws in which he disbelieved. Mentally, therefore, he lived wholly in an atmosphere of constraint and restriction. The same had been true of Bodin, to a lesser degree, more than a century before. Such a condition must necessarily have affected their relations with others. Boisguilbert saw France being ruined by adherence to restraints and privileges; to change this became almost a religion with him. It was difficult for him to compromise with his ideas and ideals in which he had a sublime faith. He also believed implicitly that the people had only to learn wherein their true interest lay in order to demand a change. It was because he felt that he was the "author" of a great discovery in the same class with Copernicus, Galileo, and Columbus that he was willing to undergo martyrdom and a life of conflict in order to see his ideas prevail. It was this, rather than dominance for its own sake, which seems to have determined his behavior. His mission, he felt, was to save France, and "the safety of States is like that of souls, in which that which is called importunity and impudence in the one becomes an obligation in the other." [31]

It was this feeling of an obligation to devote himself to the welfare of France which gave him the courage to say to Chamillart, the controller general, the charming, well-meaning, but weak favorite of Louis XIV, that he looked upon and listened to as oracles those who dared propose methods contrary to common sense.[32] To complaints made and to petitions presented to Paris and Versailles for his removal from office he was immune, if not because there was sympathy with his ideas, certainly because of

[30] Letter of July 18, 1703.
[31] Letter of June 25, 1705. [32] Letter of Feb. 22, 1705.