

René Belbenoit:

An Inventory of His Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Belbenoit, René, 1899-1959
Title:	René Belbenoit Collection
Dates:	1926-1943, undated
Extent:	1 custom box, 1 document box (1.25 linear feet)
Abstract:	The René Belbenoit Collection consists of materials gathered by the French author and prisoner René Belbenoit for his books <i>Dry Guillotine</i> (1938) and <i>Hell on Trial</i> (1940), including drawings and a painting by prison inmates, an official prisoner booklet, and an official prison record book from French Guiana.
Call Number:	Manuscript Collection MS-0315
Language:	French, with some English throughout, and one item in Spanish
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchase, 1967 (R3844)
Processed by:	Kelsey Handler, 2012
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

René Lucien Belbenoit was born in Paris on April 4, 1899, to a mother who was a teacher and a father who was a French railway conductor. After a childhood in which he was abandoned by his mother as an infant and left to grandparents by his working father, he joined the French army at the age of fifteen and fought in World War I. Upon release from the military, he held many odd jobs. At one point, while working as a dishwasher in a restaurant, he stole a wallet. At a later job, he stole a pearl necklace from a wealthy employer. Arrested for this crime, he was condemned in 1921 to eight years of hard labor in French Guiana.

Belbenoit first arrived at the penal colony in Saint-Laurent du Maroni, French Guiana on June 21, 1923, where he received convict number 46635. His first escape attempt came just two weeks after his arrival, but within a matter of days he was discovered by Dutch officials in Dutch Guiana (now Suriname) and sent back to the French camp. He again unsuccessfully attempted escape in 1924.

In 1926, Belbenoit met the American author Blair Niles on her visit to French Guiana and supplied her with details for her book *Condemned to Devil's Island* (1928). Using money given by Niles, Belbenoit escaped for a third time. Upon his capture, he was sent to Devil's Island for the first time for six months of solitary confinement, an experience he described as horrible. However, this punishment for 'incurable' behavior did not stop him from attempting a fourth escape.

Belbenoit began writing about his experiences in 1926, although many of these early writings were destroyed by prison guards. When possible, he gave his writings to the mother superior of the local nunnery for safekeeping. He carried his writings with him on every escape attempt, and many were ruined along the way. Anytime something was destroyed, he would simply rewrite it.

In 1931, Belbenoit was released as a *libéré*. He was no longer a prisoner, but by law he was forced to stay in the penal colony for the length of his original labor sentence. He received a parole of one year to leave the colony, but was not allowed to return to France. After working a labor job in Panama for most of the year, he broke his parole and took a ship to France. He was promptly arrested in Le Havre and sent back to Devil's Island for more solitary confinement.

After serving additional time for parole violation, Belbenoit was officially released on November 2, 1934. Unable to tolerate his status as *libéré*, he planned yet another escape. This one would finally prove successful.

On May 2, 1935, he and five other convicts escaped the colony by sea. After traveling for seventeen days in a nineteen-foot boat, they washed up on the island of Trinidad. The British authorities let them go and they set out for Florida. A storm threw them adrift and they found themselves instead in Colombia, where they were again rounded up by authorities. Belbenoit managed to separate from the other prisoners and escape, heading for Panama. After a few months in Panama, he slowly continued up the west coast of Central America by foot and stolen canoe, often staying with native tribes he encountered along the way. When he reached El Salvador, he stowed away on a ship to

the United States and arrived in Los Angeles in 1937, more than two years after he had left French Guiana.

Belbenoit made his way to New York City, where he published his first book, *Dry Guillotine*, in 1938. It was quickly reprinted in several different languages. Two years later, he published *Hell on Trial* (1940). His hope in publishing the memoirs was to expose Devil's Island for its horrible conditions. France had actually stopped sending prisoners to the penal colony in 1938, and officially closed the prison in 1946.

Once Belbenoit's books caught the eyes of U.S. Immigration officers, he was deported as an illegal immigrant in 1940. A few months later, he was caught reentering the country in Brownsville, Texas and served almost a year in prison.

After his release from prison, Belbenoit moved to California and was employed by Warner Bros. for a time. He worked on the 1944 film *Passage to Marseille*.

In the 1950s, Belbenoit opened René's Ranch Store in Lucerne Valley, California. By 1951, he was married to Lee Gumpert. In 1956, after a long battle, he gained United States citizenship.

Belbenoit died of a heart attack on February 26, 1959, in Lucerne Valley, California. He was survived by his wife and a stepson.

Sources:

In addition to manuscripts in this collection, the following published biographical sources were used:

Belbenoit, René. "Devil's Isle 'Hell' Etched by Fugitive." *New York Times*, 9 August 1936, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 20 February 2012).

"Devil's Island Escape Stories Writer Dies." *Los Angeles Times*, 27 February 1959, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 1 March 2012).

"Devil's Island Escapee Wins His Citizenship." *Los Angeles Times*, 19 January 1956, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 1 March 2012).

"Fugitive Gets Prison Term." *Los Angeles Times*, 2 December 1941, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 1 March 2012).

Linze, Dewey. "Fugitive Recounts Devil's Island Flight." *Los Angeles Times*, 21 May 1951, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 2 March 2012).

"René Belbenoit, Author, 59, Dies." *New York Times*, 27 February 1959, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 20 February 2012).

"Screen News Here and in Hollywood." *New York Times*, 11 June 1943, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 1 March 2012).

"These Pictures May Abolish Devil's Island." *Life*, 4 April 1938, *Google Books* (accessed 20 February 2012).

"Witnesses Praise Man Who Fled Devil's Island." *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 1951, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 1 March 2012).

Scope and Contents

The René Belbenoit Collection consists of the bound composite manuscript for Belbenoit's books *Dry Guillotine* and *Hell on Trial*, and related materials from French Guiana including drawings and a painting by prison inmates, an official prisoner booklet, and an official prison record book. Some of the material in the manuscript can be dated to 1926, and nothing in the collection dates after 1943. Most of the material is written in French, although a few parts, including handwritten notes on sections of typed manuscript, are in English.

The bound manuscript contains 70 chapters, each with a hand-illustrated heading page. A table of contents is included near the end of the manuscript. It makes note of some of the original material written while Belbenoit was in French Guiana. The "History of this Manuscript" is located in the front, signed by Belbenoit in Hollywood, 1943. In it, he claims that the entire manuscript is in his hand and true to his memory.

The majority of the manuscript focuses on Belbenoit's time in French Guiana and his escape attempts. It reads more like a scrapbook, as photographs, drawings, correspondence, and official documents are interleaved throughout. According to Belbenoit's note in the table of contents, the manuscript includes 45 drawings, 20 maps, and 16 photographs.

The bulk of the correspondence includes handwritten letters dated September 1936 through August 1938 from Edouard Durand, a friend and fellow inmate of Belbenoit. Durand was one of the men who escaped with Belbenoit in 1935, only to be captured in Colombia and sent back to Guiana. A typed letter concerning Durand is addressed to Belbenoit from Andres A. Lugo, the warden of the Puerto Rico District Jail. The letter, dated February 1938, is in Spanish.

A letter from another friend, Pierre Bessonard, dated February 1938, is included with a returned envelope addressed to Bessonard from Belbenoit. The envelope, dated May 1938, is stamped "Return to Sender" and a note from Belbenoit indicates that Pierre had passed away before receiving his letter.

Chapter 43 includes correspondence from Jean Courrèges, a prisoner of Guiana falsely accused of espionage, dated October 1937.

The final chapter of the manuscript contains Belbenoit's handwritten critiques of other literature about Devil's Island and the penal colony. At the end of the manuscript are three pages of flattened cigarette packets, each with notes written on the back. These are presumably from the time Belbenoit spent in prison.

Accompanying the manuscript are materials from the penal colony in French Guiana. Most of these materials are signed by Belbenoit, indicating that they were likely in his possession at one time, although exactly how they came to be in his hands is unknown.

There are a total of 46 ink and pencil drawings of various scenes around the colony, some in color. These drawings have been arranged into four categories for easier access: Boats and buildings, Islands, People, and Prisoners. Several of the drawings appear to be duplicates of the same scene. Most of the drawings have a name and convict number at the bottom. As several drawings with similar styles have different names on them, it is unclear whether the name belongs to the artist or owner of the drawing. Only one of the drawings is dated. It is signed "J. Lépagnot Mle 49925. 11 Mai 1939" and is located with the Boats and buildings drawings.

There is one oil painting titled "Iles du Salut." It is signed by J. Lépagnot, 49925, the supposed artist of about 15 of the drawings, including the only dated one.

An official prison record book records the movement of convicts from camp to camp from August 1936 to August 1937. It includes an introduction by Belbenoit explaining the layout of the book. Each day, the number of transferred convicts was added to or subtracted from the standing prisoner count and a new total given. The names of the transferring prisoners are listed.

An official prisoner booklet contains handwritten information concerning the inmate Elie Beaupère, 51289. Physical features, distinguishing marks, and date and length of sentence are among the entries recorded. Beaupère, born in Guadeloupe, was convicted of robbery and began his sentence in September 1930. He had seven prior convictions.

Related Material

Additional archival materials for Belbenoit are located in the E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc. Records at Syracuse University, in the Crede H. Calhoun papers at the University of Wyoming's American Heritage Center, in the Warner Brothers Archive at the University of Southern California, and in the Ralph Edwards Productions Production Records at the University of California at Los Angeles, including film of Belbenoit's appearance on *This Is Your Life* on 4 May 1955.

Index Terms

Subjects

- Crime--France.
- Escapes.
- Exiles--French Guiana.
- Prisons.
- Prisoners.
- Safety Islands (French Guiana).

Places

Devil's Island (French Guiana).

Document Types

Drawings.

Paintings.

Photographs.

Un document humain: Le bagné de la Guyane Française, "Devil's Island" (segments published as *Dry Guillotine*, 1938 and *Hell on Trial*, 1940), composite handwritten and typed manuscript with photographs, drawings, correspondence, documents, and maps interleaved, approximately 987 pages bound, 1926-1943 **Container 1.1**

Related materials:

Drawings:

Boats and buildings, 7 items, 1939, undated	Container 2.1
Islands, 14 items, undated	Container 2.2
People, 5 items, undated	Container 2.3
Prisoners, 20 items, undated	Container 2.4
Painting, 1 item, undated	Container 2.5
Prison record book with handwritten entries, approximately 180 pages bound, 1936-1937	Container 2.6
Prisoner booklet for Elie Beaupère with handwritten entries, 80 pages bound, 1931	Container 2.7