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Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2006. xii + 369 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$110.00 (hb). ISBN 0-19-929045-8.

Review Essay by David Parrott, Oxford University.

A flood of works over the last two decades has testified to the interest of early modern historians in the intersection between social and cultural studies and political history. In spheres such as court studies, the institutionalization of patron and client relations, 'new' military history, and administrative and legal studies, historians have taken as their starting point the assumption that political structures, their persistence or transformation, can be understood only through the assumptions and aspirations of those who act within them, and no less through the responses and reactions of those who are on the receiving end. The reification of the State, for so long the touchstone of early modern political history, has been eclipsed by political studies which have focused upon social and cultural context. In place of a political history which drew its evidence from administrative ordinances and decrees and the self-serving correspondence of government officials to tell a familiar story of triumphant centralization and administrative rationalization, we have an approach which is concerned with the viability, practicalities and compromises of politics seen through the eyes of those for whom the state, even if presented in contemporary terms of royal authority or the maintenance of order, was set in a complex nexus of assumptions about social relations, self- and collective perception, cultural, moral, and religious values. Without such an appreciation of social structures and dynamics, *mentalités* and honour-codes, gender and kin relations, attempts to portray the political structures of early modern European states appear little more than the futile imposition of social-science abstractions upon a complex, multi-faceted and diverse historical environment. This recognition that political life is inseparable from the social and cultural context in which it takes its shape, and which moulds its aims, methods, and outcomes, has led to a rich and diverse range of studies, above all in relation to early modern France. Yet missing to date from this has been any study of private violence in the wider political context. While violence institutionalized through military organization has been studied in detail, and the public violence of criminal justice or popular rebellion have also received attention, interpersonal violence has attracted no more than passing comment from historians. This neglect is more striking given broad agreement that informal, private violence was a ubiquitous element of life in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France.

Stuart Carroll's new book represents an impressive, and in key respects definitive, scholarly bid to fill this substantial historical lacuna. *Blood and Violence* is not a general history of violence in early modern France, but a focused study of violence perpetrated by the nobility. And it is not, except through passing examples, a study of the most typical form of noble violence, that inflicted by nobles upon their social inferiors. Carroll leaves no doubt about both the extent and the severity of noble ill-treatment of their tenants and economic dependents, subordinate officials, and other commoners. Revealing though this is about the social structures and assumptions of French society, it is not his focus. [1] What concerns him in the present study is noble violence perpetrated against other nobles and undertaken deliberately in response to perceived challenges to interests, status, or to self-perception. And by making this choice, Carroll selects a subject which stands at the heart of the relationship between political history and its socio-cultural context. *Blood and Violence* has a lot to say about a subject neglected in its own right: the alarming extent to which early modern French nobles considered themselves both empowered and obligated to meet challenges to their status, interests, and self-perception with murderous violence. But it is perhaps even more important in emphasizing and elaborating a vital context in which early modern political development needs to be understood. How did the prevalence of violence within the ruling elites shape the structures, aims, and effectiveness of government in early modern France?

Blood and Violence is divided into three sections which consider in turn the motivations, structures, and characteristics of inter-noble violence, the wider impact of, and responses to, this violence across society, and finally the issue of noble violence and our understanding of political life in early modern France. The immediate strength of this book is that it is written out of the archives and on the basis of a thorough assimilation of material in both Paris and the *archives départementales*. The most fruitful single category of source, and the basis of much of the attention-grabbing detail in the case-studies of noble violence, are the letters of remission, the “pardon tales” that were laboriously transcribed and kept by the Chancery. Famously used by Natalie Zemon Davis,^[2] Carroll takes as given that the pardon tales are self-exculpatory narratives of limited validity as accounts of events, but hugely rich in individual or particular details of the dynamics of insult, response and violent escalation. Using these as the starting point for innumerable accounts of insult and vengeance, he has chased many of the cases through the *parlementaire* and departmental archives, fleshing out detail, following up hints of previous incidents, and above all seeking to find the embedded stories of the other parties in the disputes. It is a further strength of the study that it makes such effective use of secondary works written in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries by local *érudits*, who understood their own material but had limited capacity or opportunity to set this into a wider historical context. As might be expected, some of the evidence of the archives makes for lurid reading—though it gives an authentic sense of the savagery with which noble disputes might be pursued and belies contemporary assertions that vindictory violence was an essentially rational process of defending honour and exacting calculated retribution.

To the historical generalist, two obvious concepts are linked with noble violence: the feud and the duel. Carroll deals interestingly with each of these. Feud has a particular and distinctive character in an early modern French context, Carroll suggests, and is not simply a euphemism for violence between rival kin-groups. And though the comprehensive definition of feud he favours is drawn from Saga Iceland, an archetypal feuding society based on simple kinship structures,^[3] in a larger argument that gathers force through the book he argues that it is the failure of social and political stabilization in sixteenth-century France which facilitated the rise of the blood feud and its enduring legacy through the seventeenth century. Such patterns of violence and counter-violence were not a significant feature of late medieval France, when mechanisms of control and arbitration could still work with some efficiency to restrain protracted cycles of inter-noble violence. The noble duel and the culture of duelling is one area in which there has been significant scholarly work prior to the present book.^[4] Carroll offers important correctives to assumptions that may have been formed by the existing discussion of the subject. Most obviously he shows that the formal duel, the result of a particular challenge, fought to defend a point of honour or status, often with the involvement of seconds and taking place in a prearranged and public location, was simply the tip of an iceberg of noble violence. Essential to understanding elite society of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and the violent anarchy which lay beneath its surface, is a recognition that most violence was either spontaneous, impulsive aggression in return for some perceived slight which left minimal time for reaction or defence, or it took the form of revenge killing involving premeditation, lengthy planning usually to ensure surprise, and the frequent employment of servants, clients, or hired assassins. Even when duels took place, the literary-based notion that they were an extension of a chivalric honour-code in which nobles used ritual violence in order to purge perceived insults represents a complete misunderstanding of a quick, brutal and murderous reality. A paradox emerges in Carroll’s discussion here, and the duel may prefigure larger problems of explanation when confronted with the upsurge of noble violence in early modern France. For though the duel, especially in its unconstrained *alla mazza* form, was an Italian importation, eagerly adopted by French troops and spread through the French nobility as they returned from the Habsburg/Valois wars, the murderous way in which it was fought in all these accounts seems to have been distinctively French.

It is the larger issue of the exceptional scale and intensity of noble violence in France, above all between 1560 and 1660, which stands at the centre of the discussion in part three of the book and which offers some key problems of interpretation in its own right as well as presenting some different perspectives

on the already shifting sands of our understanding of state power in early modern France. Doubts about the scale of noble violence are quickly despatched, and the maturity and self-restraint of nobles such as the sixteenth-century Norman Gilles de Gouberville is shown to be sadly untypical of the caste. Even on the basis of what the author acknowledges to be an inevitably rough and patchy quantification, there is no reason to doubt that noble life by any past or present-day standards was deeply coloured by violence and its threat, and few families would not have been touched by conflict stemming from the assertion, defence, or challenges to the shared honour-code. Moreover, if widely-held notions of an early modern “Civilizing Process” are to be retained, then it is evident that competition for status conducted through appropriate behaviour at Court or in the salon was not at all incompatible with the persistence of high levels of noble violence. But why was such violence becoming worse during this period, traditionally presented as one of state-building and the taming of the nobility? In tackling this problem Stuart Carroll has little truck with the most obvious hypothesis, that religious conflict intensified noble antagonisms to fever pitch, which then took decades to die down again. While quarrels between nobles with different confessional allegiances might heighten violence, there is also evidence that religious conflict assuaged quarrels amongst co-religionaries. A particular factor in the intensity and duration of the Wars of Religion, the collapse of the power and credibility of royal authority and the inability of successive rulers to play their role as arbitrators and pacifiers of noble quarrels and violent disputes, he considers to be a more obvious suspect. But the fundamental cause, Carroll suggests, is less particular and personal and derives from the economic and social challenges posed to a traditional medieval society of provincial nobility with mutually-assured status in the face of the new prosperity of office-holders and other *anoblis*. Confronted by the fluidity of a society in which the caste of “nobles” was becoming larger and more diverse, and where traditional assumptions about hierarchy seemed everywhere under challenge through new wealth and changing patterns of power and influence, nobles—old and new—became increasingly belligerent and aggressive in defending their perceived rank and status.

On this argument the pacifying of the worst excesses of noble violence can be seen via the policies and personal rule of Louis XIV. More determined than that other great royal mediator, his grandfather Henri IV, Louis XIV’s personal aversion to violent settlement of noble quarrels and the useless expenditure thereby of lives which could be sacrificed more usefully and with greater *gloire* in the service of the king’s armies sent out an unambiguous signal to the nobility. Above all, as is now widely agreed, Louis XIV’s regime was about the defence and reinforcement of a traditional social order. If the Cardinal Ministers had played fast and loose with traditional hierarchy in their bid to finance war and bolster factional government, Louis’ regime represented a reassuring return to a past of established ranks and status. Nobles felt less compelled to resort to inter-personal violence to maintain their status or interests under a regime which, on appeal, would tend to maintain established interests and privilege. Moreover the concern with order and royal authority was balanced by a greater willingness to go half-way in allowing that noble self-perception might, in some cases, demand the defence of honour through violence. Policies like the “suppression of duelling” and the assertion of central authority over provincial nobles through the *Grands Jours* were, as Carroll shows, riddled with exceptions and characterized by half-hearted enforcement.

No explanation of something as complex as the rise and decline of noble violence is going to be monocausal, and *Blood and Violence* presents a number of interlocking arguments for its decline, while also questioning how far any permanent solution was achieved, drawing attention, for example, to the increase in the number of noble duels through the eighteenth century. Some questions remain. An impressionistic assessment of the book’s time-line of violent incidents suggests that seventeenth-century noble violence peaked not just as might be expected between 1649 and 1652, the years of the *Frondes*, but continued at a high level throughout the 1650s, well into the period in which Mazarin’s return to power, the majority of Louis XIV, and supposed elite revulsion at the excesses of the *Frondeurs* might be assumed to have begun a reaction. The transformation of noble assumptions seems to have been a feature of the 1660s and no earlier. Yet if this was the case, and nobles were more prepared to sublimate their violence in a social context which respected established status, how do we explain the persistence

of this restraint into the last decades of Louis XIV's reign, characterized by fiscal innovation, unfettered venality, and a climate in which wealth subverted most aspects of traditional society? The militarization of the nobility, when this was synonymous with an orderly and prestigious career in the 1660s and 1670s, would have done little to check the tendency of all early modern officer-corps to violent quarrels, albeit for reasons that owed more to boredom and booze than the prickly assertiveness and aggression of a status-threatened *noblesse seconde*. But from the 1680s and the huge expansion of the French army financed, as under Richelieu and Mazarin, by the resources of ambitious would-be officers whose only qualification was their wealth, the army would surely become the epicentre for the insecurities, status-assertion, and consequent violence of a fluid caste, in which traditional elites were being upstaged and outranked in the area that was, of all things, most vital to their self-perception. If noble violence was fundamentally the product of a society in which social boundaries were fluid and open to challenge, then it might be assumed that noble violence would peak in the last decades of Louis XIV's reign. In response, Carroll would affirm that successful warfare itself tends to reinforce social cohesion in warrior societies, but the centrifugal forces that he has described in the rest of the book were exceptionally strong, and, at least in the latter part of Louis XIV's reign, the reality was not war equated with military success but an armed struggle that just managed to hold political catastrophe at bay. Such questioning is by no means an outright rejection of the thesis for a military solution to the problem of noble violence, but simply highlights the richness, complexity, and ambiguity of the issues and relationships which *Blood and Violence* has so ably delineated.

NOTES

[1] For more detail of noble violence perpetrated against commoners in a particular province, see M. Greenshields, *An Economy of Violence in Early Modern France: Crime and justice in the Haute Auvergne, 1587-1664* (Pennsylvania: Penn. State UP, 1994).

[2] N.Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

[3] Carroll, pp. 6-7, drawing upon W. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1990).

[4] Most notably, and extensively discussed by Carroll, François Billaçois, *Le Duel dans la société française des XVIe-XVIIe siècles: essai de psychosociologie historique* (Paris: EHESS, 1986).

David Parrott
Oxford University
david.parrott@new.oxford.ac.uk

See also the Review Essays on this book by Kristen Neuschel, Jonathan Dewald, and James Collins, as well as Stuart Carroll's response to all four Review Essays.

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