

David Potter (ed. & trans.), *The French Wars of Religion: Selected Documents*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. xxiv + 274 pp. Tables, maps, notes, suggested further reading, and index. \$45.00 US (cl). ISBN 312-17545-0.

Review by Henry Heller, University of Manitoba, for H-France, February 1999.

David Potter's collection of translated documents on the French wars of religion reflects the growing maturity of English speaking scholarship in this period. The research of British and American academics like Natalie Zemon Davis, John H. Salmon, Nancy Roelker, James Wood, Mark Greengrass, and Phillip Benedict have played an important part in helping to unravel the tangled story of religious, political, and social conflict which marked France in the late sixteenth century. Based on the research of these and many other Anglo-Saxon and French scholars an increasingly clear picture of this confused period has begun to emerge. Potter's work aims to make available to English speaking students a collection of primary documents which complements the impressive accumulation of scholarship in the field.

Part of a series of documentary collections on European history being published by St. Martin's Press, Potter's book seeks to provide students with a continuous narrative of the history of the wars of religion through a selection of primary documents from both published and archival sources. The greater part of the documents chosen are based on fresh translations most of which represent convincing renditions of syntactically difficult sixteenth century French. The documentary collection is followed by an up-to-date bibliography. To my knowledge Potter's collection is the only such modern collection of documents on the French wars of religion in any language.

Potter's view is that aristocratic factionalism and religious fanaticism were at the root of the wars. Accordingly the opening sections of the collection attempts to document the centrality of these problems to the outbreak of the war. Potter does a particularly good job illustrating the latter phenomenon based on documentation drawn from all over the kingdom. The student is persuaded thereby that religious fanaticism lies at the heart of the conflict.

The stress put on religious passion accords with current scholarly orthodoxy manifest in the work of Natalie Davis and Denis Crouzet. It would perhaps have been helpful, then, if Potter had selected some documents which would have better illustrated what doctrinally was at issue between Catholics and Protestants. But even then Potter's choice of documents does give rise to doubts. Thus, Potter cites the journal of the Sire de Gouberville to illustrate the sense of growing insecurity and anxiety in the Cotentin peninsula at the beginning of the religious wars. Gouberville records a conversation in which one of his companions remarks: "if I had my way, a new God would be made who was neither Papist nor Huguenot so that it could no longer be said that so-and-so

is a Papist and so-and-so a heretic or Huguenot." A student might be taken aback by the sudden discovery of a sixteenth century Feuerbach in the midst of this supposedly overwhelmingly confessional age.

In this collection of documents precedence is given to religious and political history. Accordingly, the accounts of courtiers, aristocrats, and diplomats are privileged. This stress works rather well in the case of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre where the student is exposed mainly to a variety of conflicting interpretations ranging from those of the king and foreign observers to those of the Huguenot victims. On the other hand, this emphasis does not work so well with respect to the Catholic League. The work of Elie Barnavi and Jean-Marie Constant have established the reality of a popular and urban League with a serious constitutional agenda. Potter's view of the League instead tends to favour an aristocratic and ecclesiastical view of the movement.

Potter is undoubtedly right to stress the aristocratic and religious nature of these civil wars. But it seems that his selection of documents obscures the importance of the towns in the conflict. The confessional issue arose in the context of deep-seated conflicts between contending urban factions. The rank-and-file of the Huguenot cause was drawn from this milieu. Moreover, the towns were the ultimate defensive redoubts of the Huguenots and the popular League.

Potter, for example, illustrates the spread of popular violence at the beginning of the wars by citing a remonstrance from the aldermen of Amiens in 1561. In it the aldermen complain about the inflammatory preaching of the friars which provoked elements of the common people to riot. But the aldermen's complaint makes it plain that the friars had been brought in by the bishop described as "the old enemy of the corporation of this town." The documents selected by Potter essentially ignore the effects of this kind of feud on the genesis of the religious conflict in the urban communities. Yet we know that in many towns the pre-history of the Reformation was rooted in considerable measure in the complex relationships between the urban secular and religious elites.

The course of these wars being notoriously confused, Potter attempts to order the narrative by dividing his documents up into chronological sections each introduced by a narrative of the course of events. The opening sections on France on the eve of the war and on the religious violence of the early years of the conflict are convincing as are those on the Saint Bartholomew's Massacre and the Estates-General of 1576. Likewise Potter's chapters on the League and on Henri IV's relation to the Protestants successfully order the material of the concluding phases of the war. On the other hand, three earlier sections which focus on the military conflicts of the first decade of the wars do not succeed in dissipating the reader's perennial sense of confusion about this

epoch. That being said Potter's documentary collection will be of great value to teachers of French history and early modern Europe.

Henry Heller
University of Manitoba
heller@cc.umanitoba.ca

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