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Elie Haddad, *Fondation et ruine d'une "maison": Histoire sociale des comtes de Belin (1582-1706)*. Limoges: Presses Universitaires de Limoges, 2009. 560 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €28.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-84287-485-8.

Review by Darryl Dee, Wilfrid Laurier University.

For many years, studies of the early modern French nobility have tended to stress success. The second order, these studies argue, adapted to rapid, frequently wrenching social change, learned to profit from the rise of a market economy, embraced new cultural and intellectual traditions, and entered into collaboration with an increasingly powerful royal state. [1] In his fine new book, *Fondation et ruine d'une "maison": Histoire sociale des comtes de Belin (1582-1706)*, Elie Haddad explores failure and argues that failure reveals just as much about the nature of the French nobility and the changes it experienced during the early modern period as does success.

Haddad focuses on the foundation and ruin of a single noble line, the counts of Belin. The Belins were members of the *moyenne noblesse*, the titled provincial nobles who ranked immediately below the *Grands* in the social hierarchy and who remain relatively understudied by historians. Haddad closely examines the political, social, and cultural practices of the Belins over the course of their line's 125-year existence. He also seeks to offer more, however, than just a microanalysis of action. Drawing concepts and methods from anthropology, he uses kinship as a device to analyze the Belins' practices in the wider contexts of the evolution of the nobility and of French society as a whole (pp. 18-19). To reconstruct the Belins' kinship ties and the uses they made of them, Haddad carried out exhaustive research in the acts of the notaries of Paris preserved in the Minutier central in the Archives nationales. He supplemented these sources with the few surviving family papers of the Belins as well as with genealogical records from the Cabinet des titres of the Bibliothèque nationale.

Central to Haddad's argument is his contention that the Belins represented a distinctive system of kinship that Claude Levi-Strauss identified as a *maison* or house, which Levi-Strauss defined as:

Une personne morale détentrice d'un domaine composé à la fois de biens matériels et immatériels, qui se perpétue par la transmission de son nom, de sa fortune et de ses titres en ligne réelle ou fictive, tenue pour légitime à la seule condition que cette continuité puisse s'exprimer dans le langage de la parenté ou de l'alliance, et, le plus souvent, des deux ensemble (p. 138).

The house of Belin was created in 1582 when Jean-François de Fautoas-Sérillac, a Gascon noble then serving as maître de camp in the régiment de Picardie, married Renée d'Averton, a rich heiress from Maine. Both bride and groom drew invaluable advantages from the match. For Renée, it allowed her to continue her lineage. As a condition of the marriage, she required Jean-François to assimilate into her house, adopting its name and coat of arms as his own; he would henceforth call himself François I d'Averton. For his part, the marriage gave him the wealth, status, and prestige he needed to pursue his political and social ambitions. The house of Belin that they created developed into a distinct entity with its own name, titles, honor and reputation as well as landed wealth and other benefices. It was also

always an artificial creation, constantly evolving according to such factors as its membership, its alliances, the growth or shrinkage of its lands, the offices and royal appointments held by its members, and the vagaries of inheritance (p. 142). Yet, when its members possessed sufficient solidarity, the house possessed what Haddad terms a “crypto-corporative” nature, by which he means that it functioned as a unit that acquired a social visibility and a capacity for action (p. 146). The house therefore both shaped the possibilities and imposed limits on the actions of those who belonged to it.

The fate of the house of Belin was determined by the actions of its members over four generations as they faced the social, political, and cultural forces that buffeted the French nobility during the seventeenth century. At first, the prospects of the house appeared bright. Under François I d’Averton, the Belins possessed considerable lands around Alençon and Le Mans, and another advantageous marriage in the next generation added estates in the Dauphiné and Franche-Comté. Possession of this considerable domain allowed the Belins to claim to be the leading noble house in Maine. Moreover, François I was well-established at the royal court, holding the important and lucrative charge of governor to the young prince of Condé from 1600 to 1608. Thereafter, however, the fortunes of the Belins began to decline.

The principal reason for this decline was a steady erosion of the wealth of the house. One of the most important causes of this erosion was a change in how property was transmitted among the nobility. A particularly distinctive and critical characteristic of the house structure was the cognatic transmission of property through women. Haddad makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the power and importance of aristocratic women by demonstrating the vital role they played in the circulation of property among noble lineages. During the Belins’ first two generations, their landed wealth was due mainly to wealthy heiresses bringing their inheritance into their marriages and integrating them into the patrimony of the house. This practice ended with the third generation. The sons of François II, the second count of Belin, married wives from families of the rising robe nobility. Haddad argues that the Belins made what turned out to be a fateful decision in order to strengthen their deteriorating ties to the royal government and thus increase their likelihood of securing royal charges. But the robe nobility was at that very moment drastically reinforcing patrilineal inheritance. The cause was the rapid increase in the value of venal offices following the introduction of the *paulette* in 1604, a development that in turn led to a rise in robe noble dowries. Unwilling permanently to lose control of what amounted to a significant part of their patrimonies, the heads of robe families hedged their daughters’ dowries with strict conditions. The sons of François II were prohibited from adding their wives’ properties to their house’s domain. When they died, the Belins were required to return their dowries to their families and were also obligated to furnish the widows with large dowers.

Unable to acquire new lands through their old practices, the Belins relied increasingly on the revenues from their existing domain. Belying the image of careless and spendthrift noble landlords, the Belins were conscientious managers of their seigneuries. During the first half of the seventeenth century, their revenues were enough to pay for a lavish lifestyle and to support their pretensions of preeminence among the nobles of Maine. After 1650, the Belins’ landed revenues declined drastically. They suffered from the general deterioration of income from land that occurred in the second half of the seventeenth century. But the most significant causes of their distress flowed from their decision to marry into families of the robe nobility. The requirement to provide substantial dowers for the widows of the sons of François II forced the house to sell a number of its most profitable estates, which only accelerated the diminution of its income. The Belins consequently fell into a deep trough of indebtedness and further alienations of estates from which they would never emerge. The nadir was reached in 1669 when the creditors of Antoinette d’Averton, sole heiress of the house, forced her to accept their oversight of her properties.

The deterioration of the Belins’ landed revenues would not have been so dangerous if these revenues had been supplemented with income from royal offices and pensions. Haddad points out, however, that

the house did not possess lucrative charges after 1624. Their failure to acquire such charges stands in stark contrast to more successful noble families, which derived an ever larger proportion of their wealth from royal appointments. For example, the Roncherolles of Pont-St-Pierre in Upper Normandy held a series of royal military positions after 1560; by the later seventeenth century, the income that the marquis of Roncherolles received from his military governorship dwarfed the revenues he drew from his estates. [2]

The Belins' failure to acquire royal charges was due to their inability to develop a stable relationship with the increasingly powerful Bourbon monarchy. Haddad contends that their attitude towards royal power was always ambiguous, oscillating between proximity and distance, service and defiance (p. 377). François I d'Averton, for example, began as a moderate Catholic Leaguer and a client of the Guise duke of Mayenne, who made him governor of Paris in 1591. He then rallied to Henry IV after the king's conversion to Catholicism. It was to secure François I's loyalty that Henry IV appointed him governor to the prince of Condé. The decisive phase in the Belins' relationship with the Bourbon monarchy occurred with François II d'Averton. He sided with Marie des Medicis in her power struggle with Cardinal Richelieu. In 1624, he abandoned the court for his estates in Maine. François II's choice to establish his powerbase exclusively in his home province was fatal in the long run for the Belins because it cut them off from royal favor and robbed them of a large measure of political influence. François II's descendants attempted to rectify this mistake. During the 1640s, they were among the first nobles to side with Cardinal Mazarin. More importantly, the Belins elected to become officers in the king's army, hoping that military service would restore them to royal favor. This choice was, however, a dangerous gamble. Service as officers in the armies of Louis XIV involved not only financial but also mortal risks: three of François II's four sons were killed in battle. [3] The Belins' gamble failed disastrously when the last male of the house, Emmanuel-René, grandson of François II, died at the siege of Douai in 1667.

Haddad also examines how the social ties of the Belins helped to shape the matrimonial, political and religious choices they made. He criticizes the "functionalist" theory of clientage developed by Sharon Kettering, Mark Greengrass, and Mack Holt as failing to distinguish sufficiently between the varied types of links that nobles created and maintained with each other. The peregrinations of the Belins from patron to patron—Mayenne to Condé to Marie des Medicis to Mazarin—show the great fluidity of clientage links. Once made, however, these attachments proved to be durable and long lasting. They could lie dormant for many years, only to be mobilized again when needed. Clientage and other social links therefore created a range of possible engagements for the Belins. For example, François II's attachment to Marie de Medicis was largely determined by the numerous former moderate Leaguers in her clientele. The Belins had maintained links with these lineages since the creation of their house, constructing ties of marriage, friendship, and clientage with them.

The Belins were not only clients; they were also important patrons of the arts. After his return to his estates, François II d'Averton patronized a number of important writers, notable among them the playwright Jean Mairet. Haddad contends that the count of Belin's artistic patronage was largely motivated by the sociopolitical circumstances of his house. In exchange for his protection and support, François II's artist-clients extolled his virtues—his generosity, the high origins of his lineage, and his valor at arms. Patronage therefore served as a means for François II to maintain his name and the presence of his house at the royal court and capital that he had abandoned. The count of Belin's artistic activity culminated with his participation in the quarrel that broke out over Pierre Corneille's play *Le Cid*. Through a careful reading of the polemical works produced during the quarrel, Haddad demonstrates that François II was one of its principal protagonists as the opponent of Richelieu's efforts to exert royal control over artistic patronage. Yet his intervention was forgotten within a generation and left almost no trace in posterity. This effacement reveals the weakness of François II's efforts to maintain the name and reputation of his house through artistic patronage.

The house of Belin ended as it began—with an heiress, Antoinette d'Averton, widow of Emmanuel-René. Unlike the founder of her house, Renée d'Averton, Antoinette could not remarry because of the catastrophic state of the Belins' patrimony and their political feebleness. When she died in 1706, the house of Belin was ruined. Haddad convincingly argues that the examination of failure offers valuable insights into the evolution of the French nobility over the course of the seventeenth century. Furthermore, he provides an excellent model for other historians to follow.

NOTES

[1] Examples of such studies include Katia Béguin, *Les princes de Condé. Rebelles, courtisans et mécènes dans la France du Grand siècle* (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 1999); Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La Noblesse au XVIIIe siècle. De la Féodalité aux Lumières* (Paris: Hachette, 1976); Jonathan Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre, 1398-1789: Lordship, Community and Capitalism in Early Modern France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1987) and *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture: France 1570-1715* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1993); Robert Forster, *The Nobility of Toulouse in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1960) and *The House of Saulx-Tavannes: Versailles and Burgundy, 1700-1830* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

[2] Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre*, 178-180.

[3] On the financial and other costs of noble military service under Louis XIV, see Hervé Drévilion, *L'Impôt du Sang. Le Métier des armes sous Louis XIV* (Paris: Tallandier, 2005).

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