

H-France Review Vol. 11 (February 2011), No. 39

Edward Benson, trans., Roger Schlesinger, ed., André Thevet, *Portraits from the French Renaissance and the Wars of Religion*. Early Modern Studies 3, Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2010. xxxiv + 214 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$ 39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-931112-98-7.

Review by Luc Racaut, Newcastle University

André Thevet served as royal cosmographer to four of the Valois kings of sixteenth-century France, but it is not in this capacity that he compiled the *vrais portraits et vies des hommes illustres*, some of which are translated here by Benson. The implicit aim of the editor, Schlesinger, is to illustrate the French Renaissance and Reformation using choice portraits of famous men of their time, including Kings Francis I, Henry II, and Charles IX, whom Thevet had occasion to meet and to serve. In this respect, Thevet's narrative of famous battles and feats of arms of his subjects, with brief outlines of their physical appearance and character (complemented by woodcuts reproduced in this edition); constitutes an invaluable testimony of his time. Reflecting changing attitudes towards *noblesse de robe* and the new learning, the editor also picked a few great lawyers and men of letters that were Thevet's contemporaries. Those include the chancellor Michel de L'Hôpital, instrumental in changing the crown policy towards conciliation, and the scholars Guillaume Budé, founder of the Collège de France, Guillaume Postel and Guillaume du Bellay.

The translation of the original French is impeccable and one can only deplore that the editor chose not to offer a bilingual edition, which could serve for research as well as for teaching. This book is a valuable teaching aid, with maps of France and Northern Italy, a genealogy of the kings of France, illustrating the narratives of the great battles of the Franco-Hapsburg war included in many of Thevet's portraits. This is where, I think, editorial choices could have been made clearer in the introduction: although Thevet was an eyewitness of the Wars of Religion, he chose, like many of his contemporaries, to gloss over the subject, passing under silence the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day for instance. When Thevet wrote about characters that were sympathetic or conciliatory towards the Protestant Reformation, he kept his entrenched Catholicism (Thevet was a Franciscan) in check and deplored the loss of life on both sides. This is not uncharacteristic and can easily be justified in this period: under the terms of the Edicts of Pacification vitriolic or *ad hominem* attacks on individuals were specifically banned by the crown that gradually reclaimed control of the printing presses from the Sorbonne and the *Parlement*. Although this interdict was flouted by many of Thevet's contemporaries, notably during the League, it seems natural for a civil servant to observe the royal injunctions.

So, for this reason, the inclusion in the compilation of the Guise brothers, François duc de Guise, and Charles, Cardinal de Lorraine, as well as their rivals at court, Admiral Coligny and Anne de Montmorency yields fewer insights into the wars of religion that one might expect. One glaring omission, in my view, is Henry III himself; the monarch that Thevet probably knew best and was still on the throne at time; and members of the Bourbon family who featured in the original edition. Great captains, such as Gaston de Foix and Blaise de Montluc, who distinguished themselves in the Italian wars, were chosen instead, complete with tales of daring do and battle scars for which Thevet seems to have had a particular affection. The end result is mixed, at once offering valuable insights into the Italian wars but not on the wars of religion (in spite of the editor's choice of its key actors), all the while paying lip service to the rise of the *noblesse de robe* and men of letters. More space could have been devoted to the justification of the editorial choices (from Thevet's original text that comprised over two hundred portraits from antiquity to his own time) than to his role as royal

cosmographer and discovery of the new world which forms a sizeable part of the introduction. Finally, the analysis offered in exergue of the biographies is historiographically naïve in places and omits important recent scholarship on the subject (notably French).

Notwithstanding these reservations, the book is very well put together, with the original engravings and marginal notes mirroring the original edition, complete with a scholarly apparatus explaining difficulties in the original French. The book is a welcome addition to the bibliography of sources available in English for the teaching of the history and literature of sixteenth-century France, and makes for enjoyable reading. The bibliography, organized thematically, as well as the maps and genealogy clearly designates Benson and Schlesinger's *Portraits from the French Renaissance and the Wars of Religion* as a useful teaching aid and textbook for scholars and students of sixteenth-century France everywhere.

Luc Racaut
Newcastle University, UK
luc.racaut@ncl.ac.uk

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172