

---

H-France Review Vol. 16 (August 2016), No. 156

Yannick Nexon, *Le Chancelier Séguier (1588-1672). Ministre, dévot et mécène au Grand Siècle*. Paris: Champ Vallon, 2015. 515 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. €29.00 (pb). ISBN 979-10-267-0016-6.

Review by Darryl Dee, Wilfrid Laurier University.

Of all the great women and men of France's great century, Pierre Séguier remains perhaps the most still in shadow. This is in spite of his forty-year-long career as Chancellor and Keeper of the Seals under Louis XIII and Louis XIV as well as his fame as a collector and patron of the arts. The last major study of Séguier dates back to 1874. Since then there have only been a scattering of articles and chapters by Roland Mousnier, George Huppert, and Denis Richet. Yannick Nexon's book therefore sheds welcome light on this unjustly neglected man. The author, though, makes no claim to have produced a definitive biography. He has instead chosen to focus on Séguier as patron of the arts—the word *mécène* was coined in 1657 to describe him—and *dévot*. Such an approach, he argues, reveals the essence of Séguier's character, contributions, and significance.

A major challenge Nexon faced was the sources on Séguier. The surviving personal papers of Séguier are voluminous but dispersed. Nexon was able to delve comprehensively into the materials preserved in the libraries, archives, and museums of Paris and London. However, a significant part of Séguier's private archive as well as manuscripts from his library were acquired during the French Revolution by the Russian diplomat and collector, Peter Dubrovsky, who brought them back to Saint Petersburg. These documents and books eventually ended up in the Russian Imperial (today National) Library. Many of the Saint Petersburg letters were published in the 1960s during the famous debate between Mousnier and the Soviet historian Boris Porchnev on the nature of popular revolts. Nexon was not able to examine the Dubrovsky collection. Nevertheless, his arguments are based on the majority of Séguier's surviving records and artifacts.

Nexon capably traces Séguier's long career of service to two Bourbon kings. The scion of a family originally from the Bourbonnais that successfully planted itself in Paris then rose rapidly into the judicial elite, Pierre Séguier followed a *cursus honorum* typical of men of his social background, occupying a series of increasingly important judicial and administrative posts. Also typical was the indispensable assistance of patronage in this ascent. Séguier's first two key patrons were his uncle, Antoine, from whom he inherited the office of president in the Parlement of Paris in 1624, and a powerful aristocrat, the duc d'Épernon. But by far his most important patron was Cardinal Richelieu, who appointed Séguier Keeper of the Seals in 1633, then Chancellor of France in 1635.

Richelieu chose Séguier to fill the highest-ranking Great Office of France because, not in spite, of his identity as a leading *dévot*. Nexon convincingly shows that, far from being a monolithic party, the *dévots* were in fact a diverse movement. Séguier was closely tied by belief and kinship to Michel de Marillac and Cardinal de Bérulle, the two most prominent *dévots* in the king's councils and Richelieu's principal

enemies. Yet he conspicuously refrained from supporting Marillac in the struggle for power that culminated in the Day of Dupes of November 1630.

After 1633, Nexon argues, Séguier became Richelieu's *créature*. Among the services he rendered to the Cardinal-Minister, he played a prominent role in the trials of the Cinq-Mars conspirators and led the punitive military expedition to Normandy in the wake of the rebellion of the Nu Pieds. However, his loyalty to Richelieu almost ended his political career in 1643. After the deaths of Richelieu and Louis XIII, the Regency of Queen Anne of Austria sought to purge the Cardinal-Minister's *créatures* from the government. Nexon shows how Séguier's *dévo*t connections saved him. His sister, Jeanne de Jésus, the influential prioress of the Carmelite convent of Pontoise, interceded with the Queen-Regent, helping to convince her that she and Séguier shared the same religious values and political goals. Jeanne de Jésus' part in this affair as well as her longer-term role as her brother's trusted spiritual advisor offer a striking example of the considerable informal influence that elite *dév*otes could exercise.

Séguier faced another crisis during the Fronde. In 1650, as a result of political jockeying between Mazarin and the Cardinal de Retz, he was stripped of the office of Keeper of the Seals. Without it, he was reduced to a mere figurehead lacking practical power. Worse still, in 1652, his relative, the duc de Sully, permitted a Frondeur army safe passage through Mantes. Although the Chancellor hotly denied any involvement in Sully's action, the stains of disloyalty and rebellion against the crown permanently tarnished his reputation. There was therefore almost universal surprise when the seals were restored to him in 1656. Mazarin, however, needed his political experience and his extensive network of clients. After his rehabilitation, he was a faithful agent of Mazarin and Louis XIV. His last major act was to preside over the trial of Nicolas Fouquet.

During his long tenure in office, Séguier strove to balance efforts to increase royal authority with pursuit of *dévo*t policies. Although Nexon does not believe that he formally belonged to the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, he nevertheless sympathized with its mission and kept in touch with it through his many clients and kinsmen who were members of the secret society. With the Huguenots, he adopted an extremely restrictive interpretation of the terms of the Edict of Nantes. In contrast to many of the Parisian high robe, Séguier was devoted to an ultramontane brand of Catholicism; he therefore did his best to hamper the publication of Gallican books. Séguier reserved his greatest enmity for the Jansenists, whom he considered dangerous enemies of both pope and king. Nexon examines his role in the Sorbonne Faculty of Theology's condemnation of two letters by the Jansenist theologian Antoine Arnauld in 1656. In an unprecedented move by a Chancellor of France, Séguier personally attended the Faculty's sessions in order to influence the learned doctors' deliberations and ensure their outcome. The condemnation of Arnauld, however, had an unexpected sting for the Chancellor as it provoked Blaise Pascal to write his celebrated *Lettres provinciales*.

Nexon's most original and significant contribution is his analysis of Séguier as collector and patron of the arts. As soon as he was appointed to high office, Séguier acquired a handsome residence in Paris' ministerial quarter neighboring the Louvre. The Hôtel Séguier was more than just a home for a minister and his household and an administrative seat; it was also a gallery for a sumptuous art collection and one of the most impressive libraries in France. Nexon makes admirably effective use of the *inventaires après décès* of Séguier and his wife to reconstruct the Chancellor's art collection. It included at least 176 paintings, the largest number by Charles Le Brun, Séguier's great protégé. This collection allowed the Chancellor to display his wealth and power. But it was also a product of his particular tastes. All but thirty-two paintings were copies of works mostly by Italian masters, especially Raphael. Furthermore, as befitted a staunch *dévo*t, religious, particularly biblical, themes predominated. Even more than his art collection, Séguier lavished attention and resources on his library. According to Henri Sauval, in the 1650s, it contained 24,000 volumes, which made it second in size only to Mazarin's library. In range, it was catholic: illuminated medieval manuscripts (many of which have ended up in Saint Petersburg), Greek, Arabic and Ethiopian texts, and printed works on law, history, philosophy,

science, literature and religion. The Chancellor considered it his principal treasure, “le lieu où toutes les passions du propriétaire s’expriment l’amour des livres, l’esprit de collection, le goût de l’érudition, la pratique du dévot et l’arsenal de l’homme politique et du juriste” (p. 181).

Séguier was one of the greatest collectors of his era, yet Nexon argues that he was an even more important patron of the arts and letters. As a royal minister second only to the prime minister or the king, he wielded considerable personal power and influence. As Chancellor, he controlled appointments to a wide range of judicial, financial and administrative posts, and, as Keeper of the Seals, he had access to his own well-funded treasury. Séguier used these resources to construct and maintain an extensive network of literary and artistic clients. His closest clients were gathered around his own person, forming part of his “maison,” filling posts in his household, living in his home, or sharing his table. These “Messieurs de l’hôtel Séguier” included the bibliophile Jean Ballesdens, his secretary, the philosopher Marin Cureau de La Chambre, his personal physician, and the poet Germain Habert. A key function of this most intimate circle was to help channel Séguier’s patronage by introducing him to worthy artists and men of letters. Another important circle of clients was the Académie Française. After 1635, Séguier became the Académie’s protector; it held its sessions in his *hôtel*. The academicians owed their seats to him and were his *créatures* to a man. Finally, the most distant circles of clients received Séguier’s protection as well as often pensions from the treasury of the Keeper of the Seals.

For Séguier, the benefits of his patronage were great. Patronage allowed him to demonstrate his refinement and taste. His network of clients mimicked a princely entourage. Above all, these clients glorified him in their works, producing a form of personal propaganda. François le Métel de Boisrobert, François Mainard, Jean Ogier de Gombauld, Charles Beys, and Guillaume Colletet all wrote multiple poems in praise of Séguier. Other literary clients produced no less than 164 dedicatory epistles to him during his forty years in office. Artists too played their part in the exaltation of the Chancellor. Numerous portraits appeared as engravings, medals, and, most importantly, paintings. Easily the finest and most famous of these is Charles Le Brun’s great equestrian portrait that today hangs in the Louvre.

Séguier’s patronage of literature and the arts benefitted not only himself. He also placed it at the disposal of the king. As Chancellor, Séguier was charged with policing print: only after a book received his approval could it be published. He used this power to surveil the internal opponents of the government and to censor any works that he deemed hostile to his royal master. In addition, Séguier strove to exalt the king’s reputation. He appointed the royal historiographers and paid them pensions from the treasury of the Keeper of the Seals. Their main tasks were to find precedents to support royal policies and to produce historical justifications for French claims to disputed territories. Séguier was also active in the war of words against France’s external enemies, enlisting his closest and most important clients, the “Messieurs de l’hôtel Séguier,” in this struggle. Jean Ballesdens, for example, read anti-French polemics and reported on them to his patron. In 1638, another intimate of the Chancellor, Daniel de Priézac, composed the official French reply to Cornelius Jansen’s philippic *Mars Gallicus*. Given the scope and intensity of Séguier’s activities defending and glorifying royal power, Nexon concludes “il est ainsi possible de reconnaître en lui un des fervents défenseurs de la monarchie française et l’un de ses plus zélés propagandistes” (p. 462).

In sum, Yannick Nexon’s book provides significant new insights on an unjustly neglected figure. It also offers fresh perspectives on the *dévots* and their politics, broadens the understanding of artistic patronage, and illuminates the links connecting power and culture during the *Grand Siècle*.

Darryl Dee  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
[ddee@wlu.ca](mailto:ddee@wlu.ca)

---

Copyright © 2016 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