

---

H-France Review Vol. 2 (June 2002), No. 49

David Parrott, *Richelieu's Army. War, government and society in France, 1624-1642*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xxiv + 599 pp. \$90.00 U.S. ISBN: 0521792096.

Review by Stuart Carroll, University of York.

The edifice of nineteenth-century republican-nationalist history was constructed upon the certainty that the story of France was essentially about the integrity of the patrie and the genesis of the modern bureaucratic centralised state. Lavissee's monumental *Histoire de France* marked the completion of the project during the Third Republic: the liberal idea of history as progress was fused with the story of the rise and consolidation of the nation state. Post-1870, the developments of the seventeenth-century had taken on a greater significance than hitherto; here was an age that had achieved consolidation and harmony after the chaos of civil war and foreign invasion, that offered increasing opportunities of employment to an expanding and confident bourgeoisie, that witnessed the triumph of French arms, culminating in *la gloire louisquatorziègne*. During the *raillement*, Richelieu and Louis XIV, once the bogeymen of liberal historiography, were pressed into service as exemplars of visionary statesmanship and of disinterested service to the *patrie*.

Contemptuously shunning the study of the state and politics as "positivist" *histoire événementielle*. *Annales*, paradoxically, ensured the survival of this Gallic version of the Whig interpretation of history. Only with *Annales'* ossification in the 1970s did the edifice begin to crumble. Anglophone historiography has made a number of significant contributions to the work of demolition. In the 1980s, Roger Mettam and William Beik came to similar conclusions about the structure of the seventeenth-century state from differing ideological and methodological approaches; they argued that Louis XIV's reign, far from marking the culmination of a process of monarchical absolutism begun by Richelieu, achieved stability precisely because it was a reaction against the innovative and divisive policies of the cardinal-ministers.[1] Liberal and Marxist historians are now agreed on the continued social and political dominance of the aristocracy and of the importance of clientage and patronage in structuring power relations into the eighteenth century. But the belated and eagerly anticipated publication of David Parrott's much-expanded 1985 PhD thesis does rather more than dot the "i's" and cross the "t's" of 1980s revisionism; it demolishes what remains standing of the classical teleology of the genesis of the modern state and buries the foundation myth that Richelieu's ministry marks a pivotal stage in the development of bureaucratic centralism.

The originality of this book lies in Parrott's mastery of the literature on seventeenth-century warfare written in all the major Western European languages. It is a triumph of scholarship that, by placing French developments in a wider European context, will have an impact well beyond the *hexagone*. Although working firmly within the English empirical tradition, Parrot does not neglect to refute recent sociological attempts to revive the Weberian model of state-building and will have no truck with attempts to link warfare and governmental change. Far from being in the vanguard of the seventeenth-century arms race, France, for long held up as the model for European absolutism, lagged behind its competitors in both the theory and practice of war. It doggedly clung to structures largely developed during the sixteenth century and did not fully adopt the system of military entrepreneurship that proved so effective elsewhere in Europe.

The administrative and tax system worked adequately when it was directed to fighting a single campaign, but when after 1635 France was committed to fielding six and sometimes seven army corps it broke down with disastrous consequences for the war effort. The story of financial and administrative chaos from 1635 to 1643, the inadequacies of control and command, the jurisdictional overlaps and squabbles between various interest groups, and the ad hoc and contradictory nature of policy-making will come as no great surprise to experts on French royal administration, but this study surpasses all others in its use of formidable archival detail and vivid case studies.[2] Far from centralising and increasing royal authority, the burden of sustaining the army under Richelieu and Mazarin "greatly worsened existing weaknesses of control and authority in French society" (p. 551).

Complete collapse was avoided only because the crown was able to transfer many of its financial burdens onto its unit officers who in turn manipulated internal checks on troop numbers, ensuring that the actual strength of the army corps was far lower than previous calculations have suggested. In the final analysis, patronage and clientage were able to offset some of the failures of bureaucracy and administration, and Parrott brilliantly analyses the political consequences of this for the regime: "Richelieu's ministry combined general dependence upon the goodwill and resources of the officer-corps to keep the forces operational with individual acts of heavy-handed intervention and intimidation" (p. 553). It is traditionally accepted that Richelieu's position was unassailable after 1630, but the picture that emerges is that of a minister whose political anxieties after 1635 were even greater than his military anxieties. While Richelieu sought to justify his foreign policy and prosecute the war successfully, policies which might have improved the effectiveness of the army, such as the delegation of power and the promotion of talented commanders, had to be sacrificed to the need to retain control of patronage and to further the careers of ministerial clients. Ministerial abuse of patronage caused widespread hostility among the political elite. A better financed, maintained, and controlled army was built after 1660 not only through organizational and administrative reform, largely initiated as a reaction to the failures of ministerial policy, but also by the more judicious distribution of patronage and by integrating the broader networks of clientage more effectively with royal administration.[3]

The overall impact of this book is in line with the broader revisionist agenda to place much greater emphasis on political history in general and issues of patronage and clientage in particular. As such, *Richelieu's Army* marks the culmination of previous developments rather than a pointer to what lies over the historiographical horizon. Though they made common cause in the killing off of the meta-narrative of state-building, historians of differing political hues will probably argue as they pick over the corpse of seventeenth-century French absolutism. Although most would now agree on the importance of politics in understanding the state and wider historical change, there is less consensus about what constitutes politics and political society. For conservatives the answer is clear: the end of explanatory meta-narratives, Marxist and nationalist alike, means the triumph of a very old-fashioned conception of politics. In their view history is made by chaps poring over maps.

In the wake of revisionism, debate is urgently needed about what constituted the early modern state, about how it changed and developed. If war no longer makes the state, then what does? Recognition of the role played by clientage and patronage needs to be supplemented with new avenues of research. In the future will be required a more integrated approach to the problem of state formation which brings together the methodologies and insights of political, religious, and intellectual history.[4] Robert Muchembled's work offers some stimulating, if sometimes overly determinist, ways of considering issues of community, individuality, and state formation.[5] A more nuanced approach to the fragile emergence of central authority in the localities, which combines social, political and intellectual developments with a sophisticated theoretical analysis that avoids teleology, is provided by two recent syntheses on early modern England.[6]

Parrott's book also marks the culmination of a tradition of military history that reached its previous highpoint with Geoffrey Parker's *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road*. Although Parker,

influenced by *Annales*, places much greater emphasis on geo-political factors, both works succeed largely because they combine detailed archival research with the insights of the social historian. A new generation of students will be required to find new sources and to ask a different set of questions framed more by cultural history and its concerns with subjectivity. What was it like to fight and die in early modern combat? [7] What was life like for the thousands of non-combatants on campaign? How did perceptions of soldiers change in an age of cheap print?

The polemical debates of the Wars of Religion had transformed the urban population's relationship to war: ballads and broadsheets increasingly fed the appetite of a public hungry for scandal, as well as for news from the front. In a society where honour was public stock, a noble's credit was increasingly subject to the fickle wind of public approval. Fear of failure and disgrace blunted the offensive spirit of the high command. Failure on the field of battle could be offset by ministerial patronage, as the cover-up of Condé's part in the debacle at Fuentarrabia shows. Martial prowess was fundamental to charismatic power and, as Henri duc de Guise and Henri IV had shown, essential to cultivating popularity among aristocracy and people alike. Richelieu, of course, feared anyone who might challenge his power, and this fact partly explains his elevation of so many mediocrities and men of relatively low social status to army command. While the regime was moderately successful in war this mattered little, but as the failures mounted the vicious satires of its ministerial clients began to damage its credibility. The lampooning of the maréchal de Gramont for his homosexuality and cowardice reveals much about the wider interplay between military success and politics, elite and popular:

Quand il fut dans Saint-Quentin, □ On luy presenta du vin □ Monseigneur, prenez courage, □ Il vous reste encore un page. □ Lampon! Lampon! □ Camarade Lampon! [8]

Unfortunately, it will be more difficult in the future for scholars to explore new fields of enquiry. Cambridge University Press has taken the shameful decision to discontinue the celebrated series in which this book, and that of Parker, are among the outstanding highlights. We can only congratulate David Parrott on producing such a fine monument while regretting the fact that it will serve as a memorial to a once fine series.

#### NOTES:

[1] W. Beik, *Absolutism and society in seventeenth-century France: state power and provincial aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge, 1985); R. Mettam, *Power and faction in Louis XIV's France* (London, 1987). For a stimulating overview: W. Beik "A social interpretation of the reign of Louis XIV" in N. Bulst, R. Descimon, and A. Guerreau eds., *L'État ou le roi: les fondations de la modernité monarchique en France, XIVe-XVIIe siècles* (Paris, 1996).

[2] As the vicomte d'Avenel pointed out a century ago in *La noblesse française sous Richelieu* (Paris, 1901): "Beaucoup, dit-on, cherchent plutôt du profit dans la guerre que le péril" (p. 80). On the military and logistical failures of the veteran royal army in the civil wars of the sixteenth century: J. B. Wood, *The King's Army: Warfare, soldiers and society during the Wars of Religion in France, 1562-1576* (Cambridge, 1996).

[3] For a synthesis that, *pace* Michael Roberts' classic chronology of the "Military Revolution," places the accent on developments post-1660: J. Black, *A Military Revolution? Military change and European society, 1550-1800* (London, 1991).

[4] For a recent, ambitious attempt at synthesis: P. Monod, *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe, 1589-1715* (Yale, 1999).

[5] R. Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des Élités dans la France moderne, XVe-XVIIIe siècles* (Paris,

---

1978), and *L'invention de l'homme moderne: culture et sensibilités en France du XVe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1994).

[6] M. J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c. 1550-1700* (Cambridge, 2000); and S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c. 1550-1640* (London, 2000).

[7] For the impact of the Counter-Reformation on noble attitudes to death and its implication for royal service: H. Germa-Romann, *Du Bel Mourir au Bien Mourir: le Sentiment de la Mort chez les Gentilshommes Français, 1515-1643* (Geneva, 2001).

[8] *Tallemant des Réaux, Les Historiettes*, ed. G. Mongrédien (8 vols. Paris, 1932), vol. iii, p. 98.

Stuart Carroll □  
University of York  
[smc4@york.ac.uk](mailto:smc4@york.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2002 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 redistribution/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