

H-France Review Vol. 7 (August 2007), No. 102

**Kevin Gould**, *Catholic Activism in South-West France, 1540-1570*. St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History. Aldershot, U.K. and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. vii + 190 pp. Maps, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S./£50.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 0-7546-5226-2.

Review by Glenn Richardson, St. Mary's University College, UK.

In his *Commentaires*, the staunchly Catholic Gascon nobleman Blaise de Monluc reflected on the growth of Calvinist adherence in south-west France in the early 1560s. Advancing his own appointment as royal lieutenant in Guyenne in 1561 as a vital aspect of the crown's response to it, he commented:

And had the Queen delayed sending me with this commission but three months only, all the people had been constrained to turn to this religion or have lost their lives, for everyone was so terrified with the severity that by the judges was exercised upon the Catholics that there was no other way left them but either to abandon their habitations, to lose their lives, or to turn to that party.[1]

Monluc's words capture well the combination of panic, distress, and determination felt among the ranks of his co-religionists in the face of the rapid spread of the reformed faith. They patently felt they needed to do something urgently; what they did is the subject of Kevin Gould's study of Catholic activism in south-west France between 1540 and 1570.

Dr. Gould locates his work within the growing number of local studies of civic and noble patronage networks and the impact of religious change on them, such as those undertaken by Stuart Carroll, Penny Roberts, Barbara Diefendorf, and James Wood, among many others. Gould offers an account of the active defence of Catholicism in Guyenne and western Languedoc which was, he contends, so vigorous by the 1560s that it "would witness Catholic 'leaguings' on a scale rarely seen elsewhere in France at this time" (pp. 4-5). A particular aim of this study is to remedy a perceived lack of detail and clarity in existing discussions of Catholic activism in the area. These, Gould argues, are based on a number of unwarranted assumptions about the tentative origins and limited nature of Catholic resistance and do not, therefore, appreciate the significance of Catholic militancy, nor how early in the century it became evident in the south-west. He also argues that a major, but thus far largely unrecognized, factor in both the rapidity of Protestant adherence and the militancy of the Catholic response at all social levels was the power vacuum caused by the absence on the ground of the royal governors in Guyenne and Languedoc. It was this vacuum that Monluc was charged with at least diminishing, if not filling, with his appointment as *lieutenant-général* from December 1561.

The main chapters of the book deal with Catholic activism in Bordeaux and the Bordelais, Agen, and Toulouse. In each of these case studies, Gould surveys the important institutions of town and regional government, highlighting the extent of infiltration by adherents of the reformed faith and its principal standard-bearers before assessing the nature and extent of the Catholic counter-attack. In each case, he draws together the evidence from the institutions of municipal government and the royal judicial bodies of various kinds with that from professional associations, a number of confraternities, and especially the *basoche* to demonstrate his contention that Catholics challenged the emergent Protestantism much earlier than has hitherto been thought. For example, at Bordeaux, the emergence of a Catholic syndicate in November 1561 was the culmination of nearly a decade of opposition to growing Calvinist infiltration. Even if the syndicate was effectively suppressed by royal officials acting under the edict of Amboise and by Lagebâton the moderate *premier président* of the Parlement, the syndicate nevertheless proved to be a springboard for wider noble opposition to Protestant influence throughout Guyenne. With the outbreak of war in 1567 the Catholic militants regrouped and saw off Lagebâton and his fellow moderates. Supported now by Monluc, they secured and consolidated their control over political and

administrative institutions of the town and region and took the fight against reform to the academic institutions of the city, where it still held sway. Gould finds a similar story at Agen where, again assisted by Monluc, local Catholic militants eventually triumphed over reformed zealots, establishing the town alongside the provincial capital as one of the “twin citadels of orthodoxy in Guyenne” (p. 96). The study of Toulouse, where the Parlement was determinedly Catholic, offers something of a contrast to that of Bordeaux. Here, too, the students of the city’s academic communities were sympathetic to the reformed faith. But more than was the case in Bordeaux, the forces of the nobility, magistrates, town officials, and the *basoche* acted in concert with the Parlement and with the support of the local Catholic community on the streets, to circumscribe wider Protestant activities. A heavily Catholic military presence in the town and convocation of the *ban-et-arrière-ban* in May 1562 provoked the very insurrection it was intended to suppress. Although alarming to Catholics, their capacity to rally assistance within and beyond the city’s walls quickly brought the insurrection under control, and the almost inevitable score-settling followed. During the following eight years the Catholic ascendancy in Toulouse and surrounding areas became absolute.

Gould’s discussion of activism concludes with an interesting review of actions in Béarn and Navarre where Calvinism had spread rapidly with the support of Jeanne d’Albret, Queen of Navarre. Monluc and others intervened directly in the kingdom and the lands surrounding it in support of Catholic rebels against Jeanne. Gould argues persuasively that this activity should be seen as interconnected with that observed in the areas of the case studies. He demonstrates that many of the same prominent local Catholic nobles, not least Monluc, Armagnac, and Terride (who were involved in Bordeaux, Agen, and Toulouse), led the military efforts against Calvinism. They acted with the impressive, if not necessarily very effective, assistance of the papacy and the Spanish crown; the leadership they provided was built upon their individual and collective experience and successes in the south-west.

Gould’s study demonstrates clearly how many of the dilemmas at heart of the French Wars of Religion were played out in the south-west. He shows how royal authority was as tenuous there (and perhaps more so) than anywhere else in France and that the crown’s diffident response to religious dissent and its various attempts to impose settlements satisfied neither side of the confessional divide. Both sides were adept at side-stepping or simply ignoring royal injunctions and conventions of good government when acting in defence of entrenched confessional positions. Monluc’s interventions and those of his colleagues sprang as much from the Calvinist affront to their religion and a desire to assert their status as nobles in its defence as from a commitment to royal authority in the region. As many others in their position during the wars, they acted with complete double standards. They expected royal authority (as they interpreted it) to be obeyed in Bordeaux and Toulouse in support of Catholic orthodoxy, yet Monluc and his fellow Catholic nobles were frequently not the impartial upholders of royal justice, which moderates on both sides expected them to be. In Béarn and Navarre they were evidently untroubled at riding roughshod over the legitimate (albeit ever-contested) authority of Jeanne d’Albret when they wished to support Catholic rebels against her. Interventions at Bordeaux and elsewhere in mid 1562 involved the use of Spanish troops which, in the Protestant view, constituted a treasonable derogation of the very authority of the French monarchy that Catholics like Monluc and others were ostensibly defending.

Gould’s study is based on considerable archival research both in the region and in Paris. It does not present an exhaustive prosopographical account of confessional affiliations among *parlementaires*, particular families, or neighbourhoods of towns in the manner of analogous studies from other regions, but it does incorporate enough of these elements in each of the case studies to make effective argument. There is a strong narrative line through the cases studies and the book holds the reader’s interest easily. There is good cross-referencing about individuals and themes within the nine substantive chapters. The introduction is clear and the conclusion judicious in its findings. These qualities will doubtless appeal to specialist historians of the period, but will also be useful to graduate students as well as final year undergraduates looking for a clear exposition of the impact of the Wars of Religion on a local area and the relevant historiography. Given this, my one quibble is with the title. While an accurate statement of the material, it does not exactly leap off the page. This is a shame because, without any loss of academic rigour, Gould makes what could be a rather wearying subject in the wrong hands into one which is

interesting and thought-provoking. His book is written with clarity, conviction, and a certain verve; it perhaps deserved a more sprightly, evocative, title.

#### NOTES

[1] Ian Roy, ed., *Blaise de Monluc: The Habsburg-Valois Wars and French Wars of Religion* (London: Longman, 1971), p. 209.

Glenn Richardson St Mary's University College (UK) richardg@smuc.ac.uk

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Review* Vol. 7 (August 2007), No. 102

ISSN 1553-9172