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Vincent J. Pitts, *Henri IV of France: His Reign and Age*. Baltimore MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xviii + 477 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-0818-9027-7.

Review by Eric Nelson, Missouri State University.

“De la poule au pot.”

“Paris vaut bien une messe.”

In the popular imagination, Henri IV is perhaps best remembered today for often repeated *bons mots* and equally colorful tales of his amorous adventures and chance meetings with peasants that underpin his reputation as the *Vert galant*. That many of these sayings and stories were the creation of his later biographers speaks to the difficulties that writers over the centuries have had in reconciling Henri's reputation with the limitations of the surviving sources. The problem of separating memory from history is further exacerbated by numerous reinventions of Henri through time. During the seventeenth century Henri was portrayed by his biographers as the good, conscientious and pious king; in the eighteenth century Henri's chroniclers redefined him as the tolerant and enlightened king; and during the Third Republic biographers recast him once again, this time as the crowned peasant.

Over the centuries 'the good king Henri' described by his biographers has in some ways overshadowed the historical Henri. Nonetheless, Henri's accomplishments—first as leader of the Huguenots and then during his twenty-one year reign that coincided with the reestablishment of peace and relative prosperity after decades of violent civil and religious wars—continue to attract scholarly attention. Over the past twenty years, scholars have made important strides towards a more nuanced understanding of Henri and his impact on France. Michael Wolfe, Ronald Love, Michel De Waele, Annette Finley-Croswhite and myself amongst others have written on specific aspects of Henri's life, often focusing on his relationship with particular groups of his subjects.[1] These studies have collectively offered new windows into Henri and his reign.

However, none of these recent studies were primarily biographical in conception or approach. This undoubtedly has something to do with the daunting prospect of writing a biography of a man whose lengthy and varied career spans one of the most complex periods of early modern French history. Before the appearance of this new volume, the last two serious scholarly biographies of Henri appeared during the 1980s as the 400th anniversary of his accession to the throne approached. In 1984, David Buisseret produced what has become the standard biography in English.[2] Buisseret focused primarily on Henri as a military commander and on Henri's efforts to stabilize the crown's finances. As for other parts of his life, Buisseret briefly summarized them. In 1982 (updated in 1997), Jean-Pierre Babelon produced his over 1000 page study of Henri in French, which has become the standard study in any language.[3] His approach was more comprehensive in that he sought to cover all phases of Henri's life in depth. With this relative dearth of recent scholarly biographies of Henri in mind, a new volume in English that takes into account recent scholarship on Henri and on France during the period more generally is a welcome addition to the field.

As its title indicates, this biography places Henri IV into the wider context of his age. Its strength lies in the author's meticulous research that includes both a deep reading of the primary sources and an admirable knowledge of the most recent research on Henri and early modern France. Pitts is equally at home describing the intrigues of Jeanne d'Albret following the death of her husband as he is in explaining the complex diplomatic maneuverings over the Jülich-Cleves succession in 1609. The sound research at the heart of the book is complemented and amplified by an engaging writing style, which makes even the most arcane dynastic squabbles amongst the aristocratic families of France understandable. The biography takes a traditional chronological format and is balanced in its coverage of Henri's life. Pitts's book puts forth no new interpretation of Henri that will fundamentally change how we understand him or his reign. However, by focusing on Henri as a member and then leader of one important aristocratic dynasty in France, this biography emphasizes the importance of noble culture and the relationship between leading aristocratic families to the course of the French Religious wars in a manner that refocuses attention on this important factor in the continued instability of France. Unlike many of his predecessors, Pitts does not delve in a sustained manner into the 'real' Henri behind the persona. Indeed a reader seeking Henri the person will be disappointed, since, especially in the opening chapters, Pitts examines Henri primarily in the context of his family as France descended into civil war. However, in this Pitts is merely following his sources, treating with healthy skepticism the *bons mots* and other tales that have underpinned previous attempts to peer into Henri's soul.

Louis Fischer once wrote that "Biography is history seen through the prism of a person."<sup>[4]</sup> In this context Henri IV is an ideal subject for a biography. Henri was an active player in one of the most complex periods of French history. He was born into the world of the French aristocracy, became king of Navarre, a leader of the Huguenots, and finally, king of France. Through Henri the complex and chaotic religious wars come into focus. For this reason, and for the biography's engagement with the most up-to-date scholarship on the period, I would highly recommend this book for any scholar or student seeking an entry into not only Henri and his reign but the wider field of sixteenth and early seventeenth century France.

## NOTES

[1] Michael Wolfe, *The Conversion of Henri IV* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard, 1993); Ronald Love, *Blood and Religion: The Conscience of Henri IV, 1553-1593* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Michel De Waele, *Les relations entre le parlement de Paris et Henri IV* (Paris: Publisud, 2000); S. Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Henry IV and the Towns: The Pursuit of Legitimacy in French Urban Society 1589-1610* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Eric Nelson, *The Jesuits and the Monarchy: Catholic Reform and Political Authority in France (1590-1615)* (Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2005).

[2] David Buisseret, *Henry IV* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984).

[3] Jean-Pierre Babelon, *Henri IV* (Paris: Fayard, 1982). An updated version of this book appeared in 1997.

[4] As quoted in the Editor's Preface of Richard L. Smith, *Ahmad al-Mansur: Islamic Visionary* (New York: Pearson, 2006), p. ix.

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