

REVIEW ARTICLES

THE KING, THE ABBESS, AND THE GARDENER: SOME SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH AND SWEDISH REPUTATIONS

Angélique Arnauld. By Fabian Gastellier. Paris: Fayard, 1998. Pp. 505. ISBN 2-213-60043-0. FF 170.

The world of André Le Nôtre. By Thierry Mariage, translated by Graham Larkin. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. Pp. xv + 144. ISBN 0-8122-3468-5. £26.00.

Charles XI and Swedish absolutism. By Anthony F. Upton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xxiv + 281. ISBN 0-521-57390-4. £35.00.

A Jansenist abbess, a designer of French gardens, and a Swedish monarch seem to have little in common, and it would be pointless to contrive artificial similarities and contrasts. They nevertheless present the same problem for the historians who have used them as a focus, because their personalities are more elusive than their achievements. Angélique Arnauld deliberately withdrew from the world, labouring unceasingly to reform her order and to combat her own sinfulness. As every success only increased her fear of succumbing to vanity, she confided little of her personality to paper lest she appear even more vain by doing so. Her letters were largely concerned with the challenges facing her convent, and it is only the testimony of her admirers which permits a reconstruction of her life.

Charles XI has also left few personal reflections for scholars to interpret, although his extensive correspondence on the details of government gives an impression of the king at work. He was a diligent, exacting, and hyperactive ruler, involved in many facets of administration and tirelessly visiting all parts of his kingdom, from naval dockyards to mines. He disliked ceremony, speech-making, and courtly life, refusing to foster and project a public image of himself. As he also remained deeply pious and sexually monogamous, there is little anecdotal evidence about him, and none of the scurrilous kind upon which the biographers of his fellow European monarchs rely so heavily.

Pure biographies of Mère Angélique and Charles XI would clearly have been very slim volumes. Upton has therefore deliberately chosen to set the king in the widest context of his reign, whereas Gastellier has to search desperately for peripheral material to inflate the text into the familiar format of Fayard biographies. Thierry Mariage deliberately takes the opposite course. He is content to produce a short work, with much of the space occupied by illustrations, but its most remarkable feature is its orientation towards the systematic demolition of the reputation which André Le Nôtre has long enjoyed. This book might better be described as ‘a short history of some seventeenth-century gardens near Paris and Versailles’, in whose pages Le Nôtre makes occasional appearances but not as an heroic figure. Of these three volumes, it is only that of Upton

which can be described as an outstanding addition to the history of seventeenth-century Europe, and its many merits deserve to be examined at some length.

In 1693 the absolute monarch of Sweden, Charles XI, was at the peak of success, while the more notorious king of France, Louis XIV, was in grave difficulties. Charles had kept his realm out of recent wars, had balanced his budget, was loved by almost all of his subjects, and was at an advanced stage in implementing many of his plans for reform. Louis was over-committed in war, had lost the initiative in foreign affairs, was deeply in debt, was hated by numerous Frenchmen, and had abandoned many plans for reform in favour of short-term financial expedients. More strikingly, the recent increases in the power of the Swedish monarch had been endorsed, or even initiated, by the parliamentary body, the *riksdag*, a development which would have seemed incomprehensible to any contemporary English parliamentarian, who had seen arbitrary royal power at first hand and regarded representative institutions as an essential brake on potential tyranny.

These contrasts always fascinate British students, but the lack of books in accessible languages has been a barrier to their complete understanding of the unique Swedish experience. Between the substantial masterpieces of Michael Roberts on Gustav II Adolf and Ragnhild Hatton on Charles XII, there has remained an unsatisfying gap, save for a few articles which have raised more questions than they have answered. Indeed Upton himself has been whetting scholarly appetites with articles and seminar papers for many years, and now his book triumphantly fills the void. He apologizes that this is not the definitive history that he had hoped to write, although his suggestion that it is in the first instance a survey for non-Swedish students, while consonant with his habitual modesty, misrepresents the richness of scholarship and interpretation which infuses every chapter.

At the heart of his story is a paradox – for historians, for Swedes, and for Charles XI himself. This was undoubtedly absolute monarchy, by God's representative to whom unquestioning religious and secular obedience was due, and yet it was benevolent rule which respected Swedish laws and traditions, was devoted to giving justice to all, felt bound to consult the council and the *riksdag*, and provided a pious example for all Lutheran Swedes to emulate. News of royal displeasure could cause alarm, but usually the king sought consensus, through negotiation and discussion, and achieved it.

In the early years of the reign Charles seems a shadowy figure, but Upton slowly builds a mosaic of fragments into a coherent image. The king intended to be formally in control of every aspect of government but, as with many monarchs of the period, he left the details of complex matters such as the finances to others. Yet he made frequent personal interventions, urging greater haste, because he was impatient to balance the budget. Eventually he achieved a surplus, a rare experience for a seventeenth-century ruler. He was always insistent that his policies should be implemented, not resisted, but was merciful to anyone who had suffered personal hardship as a result. Even in foreign policy, that cherished prerogative of kings, he relied heavily on his advisers, although here too his final decisions were not to be challenged. In his plans for internal and external government, as he briefly confided to his *Almanack*, it was God's purposes and his own sinfulness which preoccupied him. As the trustee of divine power, his duty to sustain his peoples was an ever present thought. For his subjects, therefore, it was the piety of the king that was their best safeguard against tyranny.

Upton enlarges upon these general principles in a series of chapters on specific aspects of the reign. The subtleties of foreign policy, the one area of government where there were rival factions, pro-French and pro-imperial, are well explained. It is revealed that

Charles was primarily concerned with the immediate areas of Swedish self-interest, together with his dynastic claims and his divine mission, whereas his advisers tried to involve him in wider European alliances and diplomacy. Also the strategic arguments for a French alliance could not counter the personal antipathy felt by Charles for the arrogant and patronizing Louis XIV. For the Swedish monarch, the overriding priority was to keep his kingdom out of wars, and he succeeded in doing so.

Equally skilful are the chapters on the complexities of internal policies, especially the resumption or *reduktion* of crown lands, the new ways of financing a defensive army by the *indelningsverk* system, and the reform of the church. Progress was sometimes slow, because of confused records, overworked bureaucrats, and legal challenges by the privileged members of the secular and clerical elites, but most of the projected reforms had been implemented by the end of the reign. Only the attempt to codify and modernize the land law would require a further thirty-seven years of diligent work under subsequent monarchs. Upton steers a deft course through the extensive archival evidence on all these topics, but for all his clarity there are times when the reader too requires a clear head.

Although relations between Charles and most of his subjects were so harmonious, and much consensus was achieved on the direction of policy, many groups were not eager to play the decisive role in approving any change lest unforeseen circumstances intervene, making their decision seem unwise. Charles often sought the opinions of the *riksdag* and the council before declaring his intentions. This might be a means to delay an awkward international commitment, to gauge support for possibly contentious internal reforms, or to curb the ambitions of his close advisers. Frequently, the shrewd leaders of the peasant estate and sometimes those of the clergy declared that they had no competence in such sophisticated matters, and offered no opinion. On a difficult issue, the council might propose that the *riksdag* was the appropriate body to advise the king, only to find that the estates returned the dubious compliment and insisted that it was a conciliar responsibility. Alternatively, they might all agree that it was for Charles to decide. On other occasions, of course, all these groups stood on their dignity and positively denied the right of rivals to deliberate on their behalf.

Upton therefore presents a vivid picture of Sweden under this strange phenomenon, an 'absolute monarch' who was immensely popular. Even the great nobles, who had forfeited their crown lands and had lost control of the council, could only grumble, because they had no alternative system to propose to the contented population. By the death of Charles in 1697, the Swedes had experienced nearly two decades of benevolent rule and freedom from war. The decisions of the *riksdag* to endorse or initiate the extension of royal authority, at the expense of the high nobility, had been triumphantly vindicated.

The critic, journalist, and novelist, Fabian Gastellier, has chosen an even more elusive subject for a first venture into historical biography. Although the author claims that Jacqueline Arnauld, Mère Angélique of Port-Royal, has long needed a biographer, her life has been well documented by many historians of Jansenism, who have used her letters and the eulogy compiled by a sister nun. The doubt about this latest work is whether it is a biography of an exceptional woman or another history of Jansenism, supplemented by excursions into other aspects of French history.

It is the extent of these historical digressions which is problematic. Obviously the reader who is unfamiliar with the period needs to know the sequence of events which increased the hostility of the crown towards the pious and harmless nuns of Port-Royal. Yet Angélique, preoccupied with reforming her convent and with her personal struggle

against sinfulness, was unaware of many aspects of the outside world which are recounted at length here. It is difficult to see the relevance of extended discussions of prices and social life in Paris, the early history of the Cistercians, the character of the assassin of Henri IV, the history of French Protestantism, the family of the abbé de Saint-Cyran, the foreign and domestic policies of Louis XIII, and many other topics, including an excessively detailed narrative of the Frondes. A further drawback is that the interpretations and generalizations on these matters are frequently very old-fashioned, long rejected by most French and anglophone historians. There are many statements, such as the assertion that the judicial nobles did not immortalize themselves in portraits, thus distinguishing themselves from the military and landed nobility, which are simply inaccurate.

When Gastellier moves closer to the world of Port-Royal, it is again the people around Angélique, rather than the abbess herself, who dominate many pages. Her relations with her family affected her deeply at times, especially her quarrels with her father, but that is no reason to give such detailed accounts of so many Arnauld family members, only some of whose activities impinged upon Angélique. Again the biographical focus is lost. Nevertheless, there are passages where she is given centre stage, and her story, albeit familiar, is well told. Although the enthusiasm of the younger nun who chronicled the life of the abbess must be questioned, Angélique emerges, not for the first time, as an extraordinary person, her considerable achievements set in the context of her tortured inner self.

This wilful child, who wanted to enter the religious life but only as an abbess, was granted her wish at the age of eight when she was appointed co-adjutor, succeeding to the abbatial title two years later. Soon she would be the great reformer of her abbey, detaching it from Cîteaux and carefully filling it with nuns who brought no wealth with them. Yet her overwhelming desire was to be a simple nun, which she achieved for a time, until the wishes of her community compelled her to resume the burden of office. The role that she would least have chosen was forced upon her in her last years, when she had to sustain her nuns as royal displeasure closed around them, and their religious mission was disrupted by the political issues from which she had always isolated herself and her community. Despite her inner torment and her devotion to duty, she never forgot her Christian obligation to help others. She was always ready to counsel her nuns, even if the advice was often that they should be more rigorous in their devotions. Yet she also remembered those outside the abbey, personally making enormous quantities of soup for poor villagers in times of famine. So, although this book cannot be said to break new ground, it does provide a vivid portrait of Angélique in the context of the Jansenist movement, for readers who are unfamiliar with her remarkable personality.

In sharp contrast to the success of Upton and Gastellier in bringing two elusive figures to life, Mariage takes a man of great reputation, André Le Nôtre, and, by exploring the world in which he lived, reduces him to insignificance. The series editor, John Dixon Hunt, warns in his introduction that this book underplays the achievements of the celebrated garden designer, but this caveat hardly prepares the reader for the argument which follows. It begins by diminishing the innovative talents of all seventeenth-century French gardeners, stressing their debt to the period of the Renaissance. There were undoubted advances during the reign of Louis XIII, but the credit should go chiefly to two men, François Mansart and Jacques Boyceau de la Baraudière. It was their inventiveness which their pupil, André, was to copy, gaining a reputation which should rightfully have been theirs. Even the renowned gardens by Le Nôtre for Nicolas Fouquet at Vaux-le-Vicomte incorporated no original features which had not

previously been developed by his two masters. Generations of art historians have therefore simply been wrong.

For Versailles, André contributed the overall ‘conception’ but was not responsible for the realization or the details. Those were assigned to a number of contract gardeners, under the close supervision of the minister, Colbert, whom Mariage describes as ‘the project’s executive architect’. It is extraordinary, therefore, not only that so many historians have believed Le Nôtre to have been a creative mind of genius, but that the pope, Innocent XI Odescalchi, learning that the gardener was in Rome to visit Bernini in 1678, invited him to an extended audience, so great was the international reputation which he already enjoyed.

There are a number of instances in the book where it is possible to explain, though not to condone, the unusual conclusions reached by Mariage. Having already alerted his readers to the fact that many of the classical gardens attributed to Le Nôtre may be the work of others, he then confines his investigations to Paris, the Ile-de-France and in particular to the Essonne. He explains that this is partly for ‘professional convenience’, not wanting to stray too far from his office at Versailles, but it is unfortunate that he disdains to study some important examples in more distant provinces. Even so, his selection of gardens is rather strange. Why, for example, devote much time to Courances, where subsequent drastic alterations prevent the reader from seeing any visual evidence to support his argument? It would have been fairer to Le Nôtre to study a greater variety of his schemes, for instance the château of Castries in Languedoc, where he had to adapt his ideas to suit a Mediterranean climate. There his imagination and resourcefulness might have been glimpsed.

There are nevertheless some positive aspects to this book, even if they do not enhance the reputation of André. Mariage explains the development of garden design, the allées, canals, grottoes, broderies, and parterres, demonstrating the adaptability of the designers when they were presented with different natural landscapes. He rightly points out that there was no single way of solving these problems, and that classical gardens therefore exhibited a great variety in layout and planting. Yet, when he sometimes compares plans, stressing similarities and influences, these claims are not always easily apparent from the plates in the book, and even less so from visits to the gardens in question.

The worst passages in the text relate to the wider historical context, where wild generalizations abound. The end of feudalism, the influence of fortifications on garden design, the dawn of a state dynamic, and the replacement of private developments by national projects are all misconceptions which could not have been sustained if Mariage had looked beyond the Paris region. He also asserts that all the major seventeenth-century planning schemes were of gardens, which clearly ignores extravagant projects like the new city centre for Lyon. Nor is he correct in describing Vaux-le-Vicomte as the last great building scheme of the financiers. Fouquet was, of course, a senior royal minister, not a mere financier, and Vaux was not the final example of such ministerial ostentation. Colbert had yet to create the full splendour of Sceaux, and Louvois had only just acquired the lands which he was to transform so magnificently at Meudon. Interestingly, all three ministers, blissfully unaware of the opinions held by Mariage, chose André Le Nôtre as the man who would realize their dreams.

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