

REVIEW ARTICLES

FINANCE, RELIGION, AND THE FRENCH STATE

L'argent du roi: les finances sous François Ier. By Philippe Hamon. Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière, Ministère de l'Economie, 1994. Pp. xliii + 609. ISBN 2-11-087648-4. 249F.

The king's army: warfare, soldiers, and society during the wars of religion in France, 1562–1576. By James B. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi + 349. ISBN 0-521-55003-3. £45.00.

One king, one faith: the parlement of Paris and the religious reformations of the sixteenth century. By Nancy Lyman Roelker. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996. Pp. xiii + 543. ISBN 0-520-08626-0. £50.00.

A city in conflict: Troyes during the French wars of religion. By Penny Roberts. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996. Pp. xi + 228. ISBN 0-7190-4694-7. £40.00.

The birth of absolutism: a history of France, 1598–1661. By Yves-Marie Bercé, translated by Richard Rex. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1996. Pp. viii + 262. ISBN 0-333-62757-1. £15.50.

The French sixteenth century has always posed serious difficulties for historians. It was a time of rapid change and, in its later decades, of massive disorder, so that there are many large and complex issues to unravel. The need for close analysis as an antidote to over-hasty generalizations is obvious, yet on many issues the archives are frustratingly scanty or even non-existent. A group of recent books tackles these problems with considerable ingenuity and a fair degree of success, even if some of the gaps in the evidence inevitably defy the authors' best efforts. Philippe Hamon's excellent thesis, devoted to the central theme of the royal finances, has to contend with the virtual absence of all central records, the result of a series of disasters running from a major fire in 1737 to the events of the Paris Commune in 1871. This immediately compels anyone working on the topic to a hugely time-consuming search for indirect evidence; Hamon has performed this task with great skill, and one can even believe that his book gains originality and thoughtfulness as a result. The downside – in no way the author's fault – is that he has ended up restricting himself to the reign of Francis I, when as he himself recognizes it would have been immensely valuable to take the story down to at least 1559. There is certainly an implication here that in the financial sphere as in others Henry II's reign saw crucial shifts in the nature and scale of the crown's operations, building on foundations laid down under his father, and leading ultimately to disaster.

Given the generally accepted image of Francis as a proto-absolutist ruler who spent lavishly on war, display, and buildings, it is rather surprising to find how relatively modest overall levels of expenditure were. Admittedly the court was absorbing almost a third of peacetime revenues, drawing on taxes originally conceded for the defence of

the realm, but it could be argued that a good deal of this was really political expenditure which brought indirect benefits in the form of political stability. Warfare was inevitably the dominating factor, and could only be sustained by borrowing; the flow of funds was always inadequate, so that secondary fronts had to be starved of resources to keep one main army more or less supplied. One corollary was that while the French held the duchy of Milan they imperilled their own position by extorting large sums to support their garrisons; another was that most military reverses (although not the ultimate disaster at Pavia) resulted from inability to pay the troops. In fact it seems that Francis lacked the technical means to bankrupt the country, as he might well have done with a freer hand; his government was unable to raise taxes significantly in the absence of reliable agents and knowledge, while later structures for borrowing large sums from the privileged through a network of financiers were hardly visible even in embryo. The use of special tribunals to recover illicit gains from financiers was a predictable disappointment when the group concerned was neither very large nor very rich. Although the sale of offices pointed another way forward, here too immediate returns were rather modest, and levies on both the clergy and the towns could not be pushed too high without alienating those powerful corporate bodies. Untapped resources probably did exist on a large scale, since the enormous ransom required to secure the release of the king's sons was raised remarkably quickly. The ultimate impression left by Hamon's fine study is that the monarchy was in the throes of a prolonged, painful evolution towards higher levels of taxation and borrowing, slowly developing a range of expedients it had not yet learned to exploit with the epic ruthlessness of later times.

The failure to increase revenues to match royal ambitions played a crucial part in the nemesis which overtook France after 1559. James Wood's splendid study of the royal army goes far to explain just how this happened, and marks a major advance in our understanding of this deeply confused period. This is a book packed with detail, based on extensive primary research, whose separate sections are brilliantly combined to advance a general argument. In its broad outlines this may not seem particularly original, since historians have often suggested that the crown was unable to assert its authority because it repeatedly ran out of funds to pay its army. Such assertions are easily made, however, and in themselves are little more than facile rationalizations. Wood explains in compelling fashion the multiple difficulties which confronted the crown and its military commanders, while giving a dramatic picture of the realities of late sixteenth-century warfare. He combines analytical chapters with gripping accounts of key campaigns, sieges, and battles, all achieved with remarkable economy and clarity. The devastating reciprocal effect of the wars on royal finances, and of financial collapse on the armies, becomes all too clear. By 1574, a year of uneasy peace, the king could only expect a net revenue of 4.5 million *livres* with which to meet expenditure of 20 million, when spending on the army had already been cut back to the bare bone. To maintain a large field army theoretically cost over 1 million *livres* a month; since nothing like this could ever be found, the troops had to live off the country, with all the predictable results.

There is far more in Wood's book than can possibly be explored here, so it is only possible to give a selection of major points. The qualities and limitations of specific bodies of troops emerge as key factors; armies were made up of distinct groups of specialists, who were simply not interchangeable. Infantrymen could not be expected to dig trenches, for example, when that was the task of pioneers, effectively forced labourers who were compelled to wear a kind of uniform in a vain effort to prevent

desertion. Pitched battles were usually decided by heavy cavalry, but since the royal *gendarmerie* was largely recruited from the nobility it was a scarce resource which had to be carefully husbanded. The Protestants were strong in cavalry both because so many nobles had converted, and through their practice of hiring German *reiters*; these inflicted such heavy casualties on their opponents at Dreux in 1562 that much of the effect of the royal victory was lost. After that the royal commanders were desperately anxious to conserve the *gendarmerie*, being aware that a heavy defeat might cripple their army decisively. Such troops were of little use at sieges, however, and a number of examples demonstrate just how difficult it was to capture well-defended towns. Only heavy guns were much use against modern defences, and here the crown had a major advantage on paper; this was largely negated in practice by the huge logistic difficulties in moving siege trains about the country, illustrated here by some startling figures for the number of horses, carts, and men required. Once a significant proportion of his subjects had decided to resist him to the death if necessary, the king of France found that he simply lacked the means to coerce them. It may well have been relevant that as the duke of Anjou, the future Henry III commanded armies in 1567–70, then at the disastrous siege of La Rochelle in 1573, where he saw at first hand the true scale of the problems. If he was an ineffectual king, this may have been as much from realism as from any faults of character, because Wood's account suggests that by 1574 the royal army had disintegrated, with the financial disaster leaving no real hope of reconstituting it for years to come.

The collapse of the French royal state was only possible in such a fashion because religious divisions became so bitter as to change the whole nature of political life. Aspects of this conflict were central to the historical interests of the late Nancy Roelker, a fine scholar with a relatively modest list of publications. Her large posthumous book started out as an ambitious enterprise to place the political and religious attitudes of the Paris *parlementaires* in their historical context. As her editor Barbara Diefendorf recognizes, she had to abandon much of the planned archival research, and the final product is a slightly lopsided one. The book opens with some excellent analytical chapters, mixing a prosopographical approach with alert discussions of wider themes. Although there are no major surprises here, there is much to admire in Roelker's thoughtful treatment of some tricky subjects, such as the multi-stranded constitutionalism of the *parlementaires*. She also wrote sensitively about their cultural milieu, familial strategies, and educational background. Most of this is primarily a work of synthesis, pulling together a great deal of recent scholarship, including numerous unpublished theses. Not all nettles are grasped quite as firmly as one would have wished; for example, Sarah Hanley's controversial arguments about the *lit de justice* are set against those of her critics, without the author's own judgement ever becoming clear. This is part of a broader failing, because despite a good deal of evidence scattered through the text there is no really focused discussion of the various techniques by which the crown sought to manage the *parlement*, nor of relations between *grands* and groups within the court.

The religious crisis, which lies at the heart of the book, very appropriately drew the best from the author. Her account of the evolving opinions within the *parlement* down to the 1560s is both subtle and convincing, with its explanations for why virtually no councillors became Protestants, yet the court was generally dominated by moderate Catholic reformers. For the latter the answer to heresy was to remove the abuses within the church which provoked it, not to burn deviants on a large scale. Their position was

made far more difficult by the decisions of the Council of Trent, and in the later decades of the century they were often primarily concerned to defend the Gallican tradition against pressure from the papacy and the Catholic zealots of the League. Roelker's claim that over time the range of opinion among the *parlementaires* narrowed towards a moderate conservatism, with a relatively small body of extremist Catholics as the dissenting group, is highly plausible. Unfortunately the working out of the situation in the final decades of the century rather eludes her, as her account becomes more of a narrative, with the *parlement* itself pushed towards the fringes. The traumatic events after 1588, with the murder of *premier président* Barnabé Brisson and the emergence of rival courts in Paris and Tours, are so underplayed here that we learn nothing new. These final chapters convey a rather poignant feeling of the author's own struggle against time, but their relative weakness should be set against the much more fully realized achievement of what precedes them.

However much weak kings, fiscal collapse, and factional struggles all contributed to the descent into civil war, it was religious division which fractured the French polity almost beyond repair. In her meticulous study of Troyes during the wars Penny Roberts shows how one of the most important second-rank cities in the country slid into violence, faction, and massacres. In broad terms, Troyes shared the experience of many comparable urban centres in northern and eastern France, with the Protestants gaining numerous converts down to 1562, then being harried virtually out of existence by successive waves of persecution. Ultimately the Catholics too were divided by the appearance of the League, whose adherents had control of the city from 1588 until its surrender in 1594, during which time they expelled many leading moderates and confiscated their property. Roberts tells the grim story in a dispassionate style which somehow heightens the effect, showing a judicious scepticism towards the more partisan claims on both sides. She is also well aware of the more general issues a local history of this type should address. As so often happens, a close-up view of the evidence proves tiresomely resistant to most efforts at fitting it into wider patterns. As other historians have already found, religious divisions seem to cut right across most other boundaries, social, economic, or even familial. Some regular links remain baffling; as Roberts asks, why should goldsmiths and painters, who worked extensively for the church, have been so ready to go over to the reformed faith, while butchers, whose trade was presumably affected by religious requirements for abstinence, emerged as zealous Catholics?

On the evidence presented here (and much comparable material from elsewhere) it remains astonishing that the French Protestant movement achieved such extensive penetration, and that it survived as well as it did. The initial failure to seize control of Troyes in 1562 was certainly fatal to the local church, yet one can only agree with Roberts that the numerous tactical errors which were certainly made did not really affect the outcome. Although the Protestants were numerous, visible and aggressive enough to arouse a violent reaction, their numbers were still far too small for them to have retained control of a large and overwhelmingly Catholic city. In the face of executions, murders, and exile, the survival of a significant group for another decade at least was something of a triumph, powerful evidence for the deep commitment of the core membership. The author is rightly anxious to put religion back at the heart of the crisis, to which end she makes effective use of the account left by the leading Protestant layman, Nicolas Pithou; while the case is decisively made in general, there remains something mysterious here, on which the documents are silent. The success of the League raises some similar difficulties, because Troyes does not seem to have

participated in the mass processions and similar demonstrations of heightened religious feelings which were so common in the region during the 1580s; the ideas of Denis Crouzet, for which Roberts obviously feels much sympathy, cannot therefore be applied directly. The League appears primarily as a factional movement among the ruling classes, although the author plausibly suggests that as with the earlier persecutions, then the final return to obedience, popular feelings may have played a vital role. So if this most welcome study explains a great deal about Troyes, it also leaves the reader (very properly) conscious of just how hard it remains to achieve a full understanding of the tragic conflicts of later sixteenth-century France.

Even if the peace settlements of 1598 hardly transformed the situation overnight, they plainly constituted a crucial turning-point in French history. Whether this was truly the birth of absolutism proclaimed by the title of Yves-Marie Bercé's textbook, first published in French in 1992, could of course be questioned. The author is too subtle and experienced a historian to attach very much importance to claims of this kind, and this is generally an alert summary, making effective use of recent scholarship. Bercé, who is rightly anxious to bring provincial France into the picture, writes particularly well about the impact of royal policies on urban and rural communities, also about social structures, theories, and changes. Broadly speaking he contrasts a period of relative peace and prosperity down to the 1620s with one of plague, rising taxation, revolt, and war after 1630. The strong body of English-language work on governmental structures is shrewdly mined to explain how the crown sought to enforce its will, while Bercé's own expertise on popular revolts is evident in his treatment of the opposition. In a number of passages there are interesting suggestions that the polity might have evolved along very different lines, since there were many voices calling for a more representative and limited monarchy, preferably with regular meetings of the Estates General. These are quite justifiable reminders that historians are usually too ready to assume things were bound to turn out as they did; one might still argue that there were numerous structural reasons why such an outcome was very unlikely. Not least because of the effects of the sale of office, a phenomenon whose modalities and implications could perhaps have done with rather more attention than they get here.

Any book of this kind is bound to provoke some disagreement and minor disappointments. The treatment of the royal finances and the economy is a little sketchy in places, as is that of the Catholic reform movement, despite some good individual points on the latter. A number of political judgements might be queried, such as the relatively favourable assessment of the abilities of Marie de Medici. The complexities and ambiguities of Richelieu's position during the crucial early years of his ministry are rather underplayed, with some of his statements being interpreted too literally, so that the nature of the differences which developed with the *dévo*t faction is somewhat obscured. While some oversimplification is bound to creep into accounts of foreign policy, the idea that France and England were in perfect accord in 1624 is plainly false, the analysis of the situation in Lorraine omits some crucial factors, and the outbreak of full-scale war in 1635 is not fully explained. In general it is on such topics that Bercé most often appears to be writing a little from the outside, although there are still plenty of shrewd or thought-provoking observations, while his account of the Fronde combines clarity with a welcome emphasis on non-Parisian aspects of the situation. This last is a major virtue of the book as a whole, which clearly sets out to be a history of France and not just the central government; it should prove a deservedly popular text on a period to whose significance and drama Bercé gives full value.

As a group these books cover the period between 1515 and 1661, two years when able and virile young kings took over the reins of power in what appeared very favourable circumstances. Over the intervening century and a half both the kings and their subjects had been through some very disagreeable experiences, which had shaken the state to its foundations, while also revealing its ultimate resilience. Hardly any of the innumerable grandees and corporations found defying or evading their monarch actually denied his authority, still less challenged the integrity of a state which might have been thought highly vulnerable to fragmentation. What one does note time and again in detailed investigations is how many members of the privileged orders, whether in Paris or the provinces, saw their interests and their identity as bound up with the fortunes of the crown. In the first half of the sixteenth century it was still possible for the Valois kings to rule with a relatively light hand, on the basis of the rather primitive fiscal arrangements described by Hamon. Initially the downside was in foreign affairs, as the rising tide of bullion from the New World allowed their Habsburg rivals to raise the stakes; the crucial problem, however, was the wave of Protestant conversions, which fatally destabilized France. In the longer run the crown would find a radical solution of a kind, levying much higher taxes and establishing a monopoly of violence. It would also seek to impose a degree of ideological control which would have startled and probably horrified the humanist intellectuals of the sixteenth century. These later choices are only fully explicable in terms of the problems and the bitter experiences which all these authors, in their different ways, are concerned to explicate.

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