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**Sophie de Laverny**, *Les Domestiques commensaux du roi de France au XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002. 557 pp. Tables, maps, notes, and bibliography. 42.00 € (pb). ISBN 2-8050-225-9.

Review by Sharon Kettering, Professor Emerita, Montgomery College in Maryland.

The king's household was the center of the royal court, traditionally defined as "the place where the king lives" (p. 387). The king's household was surrounded by the separate households of other royal family members, crowds of noble courtiers, and even larger crowds of *roturier* hangers-on, including merchants, tradesmen, artisans, workmen, domestic servants, visitors, tourists, and so forth. The commensals were domestic servants who lived, ate, and worked together in the great households of the royal court because room-and-board was part of their compensation. Sophie de Laverny has studied the commensals of the king's household.

The size of the king's household steadily increased during the seventeenth century, peaking at nearly 5,000 members during the latter decades of the century, despite periodic efforts to slash their numbers. Because of its size and the length of his reign, Louis XIV's household is the focal point of this study, but earlier reigns and other royal households are also examined. Laverny has studied 4,500 of the king's domestic servants, 4,000 of whom came from Paris while the remaining 500 hailed from the Languedocian cities of Montpellier, Sète, and Agde. They lived at court for only part of the year, usually for six months, and the remainder of the year somewhere else, so there was a steady stream of commensals going and coming to court.

Laverny has chosen a distant southern province to investigate this traffic. She notes that while the commensals came from all over France, most of them came from cities, and 60 percent were Parisians or came from the regions immediately around Paris. The number of non-noble *roturiers* among the commensals steadily increased throughout the century from 42 percent in 1611 to nearly 80 percent by 1653. The remaining commensals were nobles, either the great nobles, who held the high offices in the king's household, or members of the provincial *noblesse seconde*, who held military offices in the royal guard, gendarmes, and light horse companies, and served as various types of royal pages. Only 5 percent of the French nobility attended court regularly, and a sizeable number of them were members of the royal households. Only 3 percent of the 4,500 commensals were women, and most of them served in the households of female members of the royal family. These households differed from those of their husbands and brothers in being smaller, having 25 percent female membership, fewer military positions, and more clerics, artisans, secretaries, and readers.

Laverny illuminates a world largely unknown to historians. In reconstructing the lives of the non-noble domestic servants of the king's household, she has used the royal household lists in the O Series of the Archives Nationales, the *minutier central*, parish registers in Languedoc, memoirs of commensals, and an extensive printed and secondary literature. As her introduction states, she was inspired to tackle this project by the work of François Bluche.<sup>[1]</sup> As a result, she has written a social study investigating the

family origins, marriage alliances, fortunes, careers, and lifestyles of the commensals, their social ranking and social mobility, and their cultural ideals and values.

Laverny has divided her study into three parts. Part One describes the institution of commensal service, including types of offices and their functions. Honorary offices, of which there was a significant minority, were titular and did not require service. They were an important form of patronage for the great nobles who held the high-ranking household offices and had large clienteles of their own within the royal households. Part One describes how household places were acquired and disposed of and the nature of commensal privileges. They were exempt from numerous royal and local taxes, including the *taille* and the *franc-fief*, and from troop billeting and troop support. They also enjoyed various judicial privileges, such as veteran letters permitting them to enjoy their privileges until their death, although they no longer held office. In general, household offices did not enoble. They were venal but not hereditary; that is, they could not be bequeathed to heirs, and their holders did not pay the royal taxes of the *paulette* or the *marc d'or*.

Part Two describes the social characteristics of the commensals. The typical commensal was a middle-aged male *roturier* who was married, professionally competent, and had no career goals beyond the office he held. Royal domestic servants usually married within their own social group during their thirties or forties in age. Household service allowed them to make advantageous marriages, which is why they married so late. Laverny has used the Parisian social stratification scheme of Roland Mousnier to describe the commensals.<sup>[2]</sup> She finds Mousnier's scheme of nine social levels useful in categorizing the commensals and finds that they had the same characteristics as members of these strata in the larger society. Fortunes varied from level to level, and each level had a range of fortunes. Most commensals were worth considerably less than the upper range of 50,000 livres; few were worth more. They did not get rich through domestic service. Their wages were low, and their daily maintenance was modest.

The selling prices of their offices increased steadily, however, and thus their investments in office holding. They also enjoyed indirect financial benefits, including tips, cash gifts, and opportunities to make money through financial speculation, investments, and loans. The commensals were upwardly mobile, and Laverny describes their household service as a social "springboard," rather than a "cul-de-sac," because of the opportunities available to them at the royal court. In particular, those on the lower levels moved upward through family and clientele connections, the king's friendship, the friendship of other royal family members, and their own military exploits, political ties, and professional reputations. The holders of military and secretarial household offices were more likely to be ennobled.

Part Three describes the inner emotional life of the commensals, juxtaposing their ideals and values against the stresses and strains of domestic service and the unpleasant realities of life at the royal court. It was impossible to separate household and court life. Laverny notes that the court was not only a place, but also a way of life distinctly different from urban and provincial life. Life at court included the political pomp and circumstance and the ceremonialism surrounding the king, a display of magnificence and luxury, a constant round of pleasures and entertainments, codified behavior, and a lack of privacy. Laverny relies upon the memoirs of about a dozen commensals, in particular the memoirs of Marie Du Bois, Pierre de La Porte, Françoise Bertaut de Motteville, and Nicolas Goulas. All agreed that the ideal commensal and courtier was a *honnête homme*, civilized, courteous, charming, and generous. The reality was darker. Household and court life was full of factions and intrigues, ambition and self-interest, flattery and frivolity, deceit and malice. For this reason, great emphasis was placed upon the solidarities of life described by Yves Durand.<sup>[3]</sup> Horizontal solidarities included common values, friendship, and commensal camaraderie. Vertical solidarities included kinship and family ties, the patron-client relationship, and the master-servant bond. Sophie de Laverny has joined a notable group, including Jacqueline Boucher, Jean-François Solnon, Katia Béguin, and Nicolas Le Roux, in attempting to throw light upon this lost world of great households at the royal court.<sup>[4]</sup> Hopefully, more of these studies will follow because they are needed. Much less is known about French royal courts than other European

courts. By illuminating the social identity of domestic servants in the king's household during the seventeenth century, Laverny has made a significant contribution to scholarship.

These individuals have never been studied before, and they belonged to a social group about whom historians have known almost nothing until now. Laverny's research into the lives of 4,500 individuals has changed that and made available a considerable amount of information. She has been especially successful at elucidating a complex subject and making massive amounts of research material easy to understand. She has carefully explained and defined every term. There are sixty-two charts and tables clarifying major issues in the text. She has liberally used headings, sub-headings, and boldface type to highlight main points, and there are conclusions every few pages that summarize the argument. As a result, her book is clear, lucid, and easy to follow, which is no small achievement given its length.

There are some weaknesses, however. In doing this type of social analysis, Laverny has trodden a path blazed by others, namely François Bluche, Roland Mousnier, and Yves Durand in work published years ago. Their ideas may appear old-fashioned to some historians. I wish that Laverny had added more of her own ideas to a body of concepts around for a long time and used by a generation of historians. Nonetheless, she has brought together a wide range of sources in a comprehensive study that is an excellent introduction to the subject, and she has confirmed what has previously been suggested but not always known, such as the information about female members of royal households.

Laverny has used analysis by categories, an approach characteristic of Roland Mousnier's work but not always widely accepted. Categorization can be overdone and may not be the most original approach. I also wish that Laverny had developed more of her own modes of analysis. Finally, there is no index to the book, and with the exception of seven genealogical charts, there is no list of the names of these 4,500 individuals. A reader can not easily look up individuals, families, or household offices, making the book less useful for research on other subjects. These weaknesses do not seriously detract from the book's importance, however, and overall, it has far more strengths than weaknesses. It is a significant achievement and should become a standard source on royal households and the royal court.

## NOTES

[1] François Bluche, *Les magistrats du Parlement de Paris au XVIIIe siècle (1715-1771)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1960).

[2] Roland Mousnier, *Recherches sur la stratification sociale à Paris aux XVII et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: A Pedone, 1976).

[3] Yves Durand, *Les solidarités dans les sociétés humaines* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1987).

[4] Jacqueline Boucher, *Sociétés et mentalités autour de Henri III*, 4 vols., (Lille: Atelier reproduction des thèses, Université de Lille III, 1981); idem, *La cour de Henri III* (Rennes: Ouest France, 1986); Jean-François Solnon, *La cour de France* (Paris: Fayard, 1987); Katia Béguin, *Les princes de Condé* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 1999); and Nicolas Le Roux, *La faveur du Roi* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2001).

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