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H-France Review Vol. 5 (June 2005), No. 62

Françoise Hildesheimer, *Richelieu*. Paris: Flammarion, 2004. 590 pp. Images, notes, chronology, appendices, maps, bibliography, and index. €26 (pb). ISBN 2-08210290-4.

Review by Joseph Bergin, University of Manchester.

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This book belongs to a series being published currently in France entitled “great biographies”, by which is meant biographies of the great men—and occasionally great women—of French history. Of the twelve (only!) biographies of Richelieu published between 1660 and 2002 which Françoise Hildesheimer has selected for entry into the bibliography of her book, only two can be said to have been written by historians who also had done extensive research in the period covered by the Cardinal’s career, and such a proportion would fall sharply if the full corpus of biographies were compiled. One of the two biographers she lists, the hugely influential Gabriel Hanotaux, wrote a monumental study to Richelieu’s political genius which he did not live to finish himself; the second, Roland Mousnier, shaped an entire generation of *dix-septiémistes* from the early 1950s, and wrote the preface to Hildesheimer’s own first foray into Richelieu studies, published in 1985.[1] It is fair to say that the vast majority of Richelieu biographies have contributed virtually nothing to a better understanding of their subject, except insofar as they were able to take advantage of research done in related fields and without an explicitly biographical focus.

Hildesheimer, a *chartiste* like Hanotaux, stands apart from other contemporary biographers of Richelieu in that during the past twenty years she has undertaken extensive research on Richelieu’s own writings, and has been producing scholarly editions of ‘canonical’ texts, such as his *Political Testament*, but also of his religious writings.[2] Despite their aridity and problematic authorial status, Hildesheimer believes that historians have been misguided in neglecting these works and refusing to take them seriously as an expression of Richelieu’s thinking. By preferring to look for the “real” Richelieu in his explicitly political writings and correspondence during the years in which he was a minister of Louis XIII, historians perpetuate an inadequate and partial (in both sense of the word) view of Richelieu. In an impressive series of books, essays, and papers (not all of which are listed in her extensive bibliography), she has used these works in order to get as close as possible to the mindset of Richelieu via a close study of his language, with a focus on key concepts like “reason”, “reason of state”, “pardon”, “punishment”, and so on. She clearly considers exposing readers to Richelieu’s own prose as an essential step towards understanding not just *what* he wished to say, but also *how* he said it. To hear and recover his voice, rather than to wrap him up in abstractions such as “absolutism” or “reason of state”—an expression he rarely used, and always negatively—has been central to her approach. It is eminently suited for a biography which is essentially constructed around an intellectual history of its central figure. Nobody knows how to draw on the *Political Testament* to the same effect as Hildesheimer in order to illuminate Richelieu’s experience or thinking about the multifarious questions raised by the exercise of power.

At the same time, Hildesheimer draws extensively on the best work of other scholars in recent decades in both French and English, and to a lesser degree in German. Some of the emphases in her account of Richelieu’s career will seem particularly French to a non-French reader, but this is by a long way the least Franco-centric biography of those currently available in France. Moreover, this book also has a series of very useful appendices which, far from being mere additions for the scholarly, ought really to be read by everyone with an interest in Richelieu as a political figure. The reason is quite simple: Richelieu himself was convinced of the need to produce his own account of the major events and decisions in which he was involved as minister of Louis XIII. His badly misnamed *Mémoires* were really

intended as the basis of a *History of the reign of Louis XIII* which was never written. While French scholars tried, without ultimate success, to resolve issues of authorship and attribution of Richelieu's writings, the latter continued to trap the unwary into conflating the biography of Richelieu and the history of France. Writing a biography that is *not* a general history of France between 1624 and 1642 remains a highly problematic exercise.

It is the "early" years of Richelieu's career which are the most susceptible to straightforward biographical treatment. But given that he already made his way on stage as bishop of Luçon in 1606, aged only nineteen, the concept of "early" can be hard to determine precisely, and it might well be pushed on further, into the mid-1610s, which saw the tentative beginnings of the political career which defines him as an historical actor. Hildesheimer's account, covering part one of her book, is fully in accord with recent research in showing how slow and halting Richelieu's early political career was, how dependent he was on patrons and wider circles of friends and family, how frequent and nearly fatal some of his mistakes were, and so on. But she is also at pains to trace to his family background and these early years some enduring features of the Cardinal's character and career--the ideal of service to the monarchy held by many of the "second-rank" nobility to which he belonged; the desire to advance one's family and one's name; the importance of women in shaping his personality which, for all its female features, was ill at ease in dealing with women with a mind and will of their own, especially in politics; his unswerving belief in the power of words and the irresistible power of reason, which meant that the pen would always be more indispensable to him than the sword; and a enduring commitment to the regeneration and reform of the French church derived from his early episcopal activities. These themes recur at regular intervals throughout the book, and give it its basic structure and coherence.

Richelieu's eighteen-year ministerial career from 1624 to 1642 occupies the three remaining parts of the book. It is the early years of trial and error, down to late 1630, which are probably the most difficult to get right, since Richelieu's political position was at its most uncertain. Hildesheimer's eight chapters in the second section, which is entitled "Metamorphosis", provide a sure-footed analysis of the problems facing the crown both at home and abroad, but also tracks the shifting sands of political feuding that no minister like Richelieu could ignore. As is well known, the Cardinal, unsure of royal support and dependent on the patronage of the increasingly miffed Marie de Medici, only just managed to survive the most sustained attempt to get rid of him in 1630. Hildesheimer's interpretation of the significance of this much-discussed crisis constitutes one of the most important and perhaps contentious chapters in this book. First of all, it was Richelieu's uncharacteristic silence--which Hildesheimer styles, in an allusion to the Jansenists of later generations, a "silence respectueux"--that saved him when faced with his patron's bitterest recriminations on 10 November 1630. Moreover, the disgracing of Marie de Medici that ensued locked Louis XIII and Richelieu together as partners in political crime--the first was guilty of matricide, the second of "patricide"--but in such a way that they were unable to come to terms with what they had done. For Richelieu, Hildesheimer argues, the avenue of escape from the psychological tension this brought with it was to seek to subordinate political action--even that of his royal master--to an abstraction which became increasingly prominent thereafter in his writing, namely the state. And such a shift of objective and language came more easily to an inveterate reasoner and theologian like Richelieu, possibly because he was already accustomed to thinking in terms of a more familiar entity, the church. If the real springs of his resort to "statist" political language lay in such a psycho-political impasse, then it is easier to understand why so few contemporaries were ready to embrace his idea of the state, as became abundantly clear after his death.

Of course, as Hildesheimer's remaining chapters demonstrate, none of this actually changed Richelieu's political style and political position one iota. He continued to employ whatever methods seemed necessary for political survival, and he never had many scruples about blackening the reputation of his political opponents. To the end, his greatest fear was assassination of the kind that befell his first political mentor, Concini, a fear that was compounded by the fact that Concini had been executed on the

orders of Louis XIII himself! What had happened once could happen again. Successive chapters in section three, *l'empire de la raison*, show Richelieu accumulating the various types of power and wealth which were characteristic of him at the height of his power. The decisiveness of the crisis of 1630 was limited in the sense that it did *not* lead to a fundamental transformation in the relations between king and principal minister. One of Hildesheimer's most intriguing chapters, in section three, argues that Richelieu is best seen as "un homme d'influence" and not an "homme de pouvoir", since political power in the French monarchy remained firmly and directly in the hands of the ontologically superior but stammering Louis XIII, who was the polar opposite of Richelieu, minister of the spoken and written word. In real life, relations between them remained as tense and testy as this contrast would lead one to expect, and Hildesheimer gives the distinct impression that, contrary to what one might expect, the onset of war with the Habsburgs actually made them worse, as the warrior-monarch found himself increasingly frustrated not just with the poor organization of the war effort, but also with Richelieu's determination to direct both the war and the diplomacy. King-management, with all its inevitable *éclats*, continued to be a fundamental problem for Richelieu, as his experiences with successive royal favourites from the mid-1630s onwards showed. The last years of the king-minister regime were execrable, with only France's limited military successes enabling Richelieu to withstand the conspiracies which royal disgruntlement encouraged. The relief reportedly experienced by Louis XIII on the Cardinal's death makes perfect sense in this context: while he would not actually ditch Richelieu, he had simply grown tired of the abilities and characteristics that had once attracted him so much.

This review touches on only a limited number of the issues raised in this significant study. It is entirely in keeping with Hildesheimer's attempt to write something more than a biography driven by political narrative that two of her last chapters, "le grand dessein" and "la mort d'un Chrétien", return to Richelieu's enduring efforts to sustain the coherence of his thinking about God and human reason, political action, and confessional unity and its implications at a key point in European history, to mention only a few. If the intense strain which gradually undermined his already fragile constitution obviously derived mainly from his role as principal minister, it may also be guessed that the intellectual problems he faced in holding together the coherence of his ideas also contributed to that strain. For these reasons, the Richelieu on display in Hildesheimer's book remains an exceptional figure, but her account draws its strength from acknowledging that this is a challenge rather than an answer to the historian-biographer's curiosity. Her command of the material is faultless, and her analysis is infused with the welcome realism of the professional archivist. A few of her thematic chapters may skip in a less than seamless manner from one topic to another, which is almost inevitable given the variety of Richelieu's activities and interests, but her determination to allow Richelieu's own voice to be heard throughout the book makes this a very welcome study. It is to be hoped that in France itself, it will serve to make the many myth-perpetuating pot-boilers, both old and new, redundant.

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## NOTES

[1] Gabriel Hanotaux and Duc de la Force, *Histoire du cardinal de Richelieu*, 7 vols (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1893-1947); Roland Mousnier, *L'Homme rouge, ou la vie du cardinal de Richelieu* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992); Françoise Hildesheimer, *Richelieu, une certaine idée de l'état* (Paris: Publisud, 1985).

[2] Armand-Jean du Plessis, cardinal de Richelieu, *Testament Politique*, edited by Françoise Hildesheimer (Paris: Société de l'Histoire de France, 1995); idem, *Traité de la perfection du chrétien*, edited by Françoise Hildesheimer and Stéphane-Marie Morgain (Paris: Champion, 2002). A second volume of Richelieu's religious writings is in preparation.

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