

H-France Review Vol. 10 (October 2010), No. 158

Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009. ix + 328 pp. Notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index. \$ 65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978 0 472 11690 4

Review by P. C. Reynard, The University of Western Ontario.

“*Since Colbert*” is perhaps the most frequently used chronological marker of modern French history. This reference to an admittedly hyper-active minister reflects the range, importance, and lasting influence of his more than two decades in power, but also the need for historians to anchor their comments within a broadly shared understanding. What Jean-Baptiste Colbert did for late seventeenth-century France is not only known, but also thought to be known. His ministry has naturally been praised and blamed. Most importantly, it has been revisited often. Our assessment of this *contrôleur général des finances* has been regularly revised to meet changing expectations. Jacob Soll’s *Information Master* adds an appropriately contemporary layer to the composite yet still remarkably impressive foundation of the monument that is the age of Louis XIV. Characteristically, this tight volume, part of a series on the “Cultures of Knowledge in the Early Modern World”, does not subvert but rather enriches our comprehension of the first and most productive decades of this brilliant if costly reign. Through this deliberately narrow window on a big world—the shape and power of the early-modern state, we understand better Colbert’s ambitions and methods as well as the limits of his achievements.

Not surprisingly, this investigation is anchored in the sea of documents of all kinds accumulated by Colbert and those who worked most often very directly under his rule. Books, precious or simply rare, administrative correspondence, frank or more predictably tedious, memoranda and scientific treatises, accounts, summaries, quick notes and reminders—this minister gathered, produced, and used a forest of paper. Enough has reached us, and enough has been probed by historians to make it clear that the information amassed in these files was central to Colbert’s plans and deeds—successful or not. Indeed, the importance of Colbert’s library to his administration and power was fully articulated almost two decades ago.[1] Jacob Soll’s first crucial contribution is to link this mountain of references to well-defined traditions of inquiries and scholarship. Colbert’s drive to place information at the core of his plans for power was solidly rooted in precedents. We meet here one of the better known dividends of the historical work done around the tricentenary of his death. Colbert’s genius was not that of a radical innovator but rather his ability to thoroughly deploy and implement what others had pioneered or explored in less favourable contexts.[2]

The Church, naturally, had long been aware of the importance of records, a focus that Italian civic culture took to a new level, drawing on humanist ideals as well as dynamic and expanding banking and commercial practices. The Renaissance certainly forged links between the antiquarian scholar and princes, and several early modern states gathered information on a large-scale, Philip II of Spain having perhaps pushed the practice to one of its limits. The French monarchy itself would take a very active role

in building the work of antiquarians--in part around the crucial demands of Gallicanism. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Colbert's own training, much enhanced through his service to Mazarin, convinced him that the gathering and shaping of data reaching the ultimate decision-maker was central to power.

Over the following chapters, Soll surveys several stages in the building by this driven minister of a large-scale intelligence or information system (these two expressions being explicitly chosen as the best label for Colbert's intentions and practices, although the last chapter makes it clear that the word "system" may be less than deserved; note 10, p. 3), starting with what was perhaps Colbert's unique luck--the fact that the young king was not only willing but even keen to invest himself in the minutiae of his craft, all the way to arduous fiscal accounts. Over more than two decades, Colbert's many hats allowed him to continually enrich the collections at his disposal, drawing on the skills of talented minds who were willing to put their loyalty to the monarch and his minister ahead of their scholarship. Indeed, this was a tightly controlled operation, built on a universal vision of knowledge but fully focussed on the service of royal power. This was also a very rounded programme. Colbert and his young master meant to not only know as much as their immense means allowed them to, but also to foster the creation of new knowledge, and shape what the public learned as much as possible. This goal was naturally impossibly ambitious, but Colbert's incessant efforts left no doubt to those willing to hear--a new type of monarch was on the throne. And when it functioned well, this information system delivered. The research and preparation that led to the Edict of Régle reasserting royal power over the French church is chosen to illustrate such a conjunction of scholarly work, political manoeuvres, and royal will. [3] Before that, a short study of Colbert's efforts to train his son, the marquis de Seignelay, proves to be an astute way to compensate for the absence of deliberate statements from the father on his understanding of the mechanisms of power.

Short chapters and a straightforward prose deliver a smooth account of some of the less known dimensions of Colbert's rule. This clearly structured volume is marred by only a handful of editing failures (expenses rather than deficits ought to match revenues, for instance, p. 50), as well perhaps as the recourse to overly up-to-date expressions that risk irritating more than they inform, such as "Information War Room", "information arms race"--in fact, references to today's massively present yet ungainly by nature 'search engine' may be misleading (pp. 2, 7, 147, 155, 163, and others). Readers will, however, quickly forget such minor transgressions over a last chapter that brings all strands together through a fast-paced examination of the failure of this information system after the death of Jean-Baptiste Colbert and the implications of this breakdown. Here, Soll returns to the larger issues raised by these ambitious schemes to elevate Bourbon power. Two central preoccupations run through the book--the relation between Colbert's endeavours and the rise of the modern state, and the inevitable tension between the state's need for control, even secrecy, and the openness required to foster knowledge that is just as indispensable to power.

Arguing that a now common focus on the public sphere has, over the past decades, often sketched a dynamic intellectual and political life only in opposition to royal absolutism, the author calls for a more balanced perspective on a 'symbiotic and competitive relationship' (p. 12). Thanks to Colbert, Louis XIV's state grew more powerful while at the same time playing a key role in developing the public sphere and thus civil society (p. 164). But this was a fragile exchange--one that Colbert never sought to balance. Likely, he believed that he could master both dimensions or, more simply, he daily worked all levers of powers to the best of his abilities. While he would have agreed that power, then as now, needs to be fully informed and centrally positioned within the intellectual sphere of its age, he may not have concluded, like this book, that a "curious and open government seems preferable to the mysteries of the secret sphere" (p. 167). With regard to the now classic path toward the modern state sketched by Max Weber, linking

rationalisation, secularisation, and the rise of bureaucracy, Colbert's endeavours remind us, forcefully enough, that the quest for control of information was not subordinated to modernisation and rationalisation. His power remained firmly rooted in pre-modern traditions. This was true of his use of patronage so thoroughly exposed over the past decades, as well as his determined construction of an intelligence machine—all in the service of his monarch: the “mastery of paperwork” was a key tool of power “[f]rom the Middle Ages onward” (p. 14).

However, and most importantly, this book reminds us that there lay also the failure of Colbert: the “information system” that he had built had not been institutionalised. As a telling few pages focussed on Colbert's lack of interest in information emanating from New France suggest, it had not even been systematised: where Colbert's curiosity ended, his ‘system’, and his policies, failed (pp. 117-119). It may be possible to argue that in many colonial matters, contingencies and other priorities curtailed the minister's power as much as his shallow knowledge of the region, but the point is nonetheless well taken. Perhaps even more conclusive is Soll's subsequent determination that Colbert's massive information management machine died with him, lacking the bureaucratisation that will, later, allow the modern state to survive rulers and even regimes. “*L'Etat c'est moi*” was quite literal and in stark opposition to the Weberian ideal of the impersonal centralised state.” (p. 154). Once again, the extraordinary powers Colbert had gathered in the hands of his king, and that this effective tandem wielded often judiciously or at least decisively, must be seen as fully grounded in the context of the post-Fronde era.

Historians of early-modern and modern France may regret that this study fails to explore more finely the political forces through which Colbert manoeuvred throughout his decades at the core of the French monarchy. We discover the roles played by several key figures around the “*Information Master*”, but these are people directly connected to the enterprise at stake here. Like many volumes on this exceptional minister, this work understates the contribution of the political currents of the age, simply by putting aside dimensions of Colbert's power others than those related to his mastery of intelligence. This is understandable, because of the focus of this work and because other studies have plowed that ground fruitfully over many decades. Indeed, Soll is careful to quickly sketch out, for instance, the importance and extent of the re-energised network of *intendants* upon whom Colbert leaned upon so decisively. Still, this study risks painting a one-dimensional portrait of a man committed to using every means at his disposal to secure the power of his king. Readers will recall that this work complements rather than supplants earlier studies.

By contrast, those familiar with the last reigns of the Old Regime will appreciate the consideration given, in the concluding chapter, to the monarchy's inability (or simply failure to seriously try) to recreate an information machine as performing as that constructed by Colbert later in the eighteenth century, when it needed it most to fight a resurgent opposition or, even more fundamentally, to build public support—if only to bolster its credit. These are sweeping arguments, but they are sound and productive in the questions they raise. Just like Colbert did not single-handedly built the most powerful state in late seventeenth century Europe, this book comes to life when added to other investigations of a mightily diligent minister and those who often very consciously followed him at the helm of the ponderous Bourbon ship.

NOTES

[1] See Stewart Saunders, “Public Administration and the Library of Jean-Baptiste Colbert”, *Libraries and Culture*, 26, 2 (1991): 283-300.

[2] See for instance *Un Nouveau Colbert : actes du colloque pour le tricentenaire de la mort de Colbert*, ed. by Roland Mousnier (Paris: Éditions Sedes, 1985). Over the past decades, many articles have examined particular aspects of Colbert's work, such as William Doyle, "Colbert et les offices", *Histoire, Économie et Société* 19 (2000): 469-480, or Marc Boulanger, "Justice et absolutisme: la grande ordonnance criminelle d'aôut 1670", *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine* 47 (2000): 7-36. Among recent books on Colbert, in reverse chronological order: Daniel Dessert, *Le royaume de monsieur Colbert, 1661-1683* (Paris: Perrin, 2007); Michel Vergé-Franceschi, *Colbert: la politique du bon sens* (Paris: Payot, 2003); Daniel Dessert, *Colbert, ou, Le serpent venimeux* (Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 2000); Jean Villain, *La fortune de Colbert* (Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 1994); Jean-Louis Bourgeon, *Les Colbert avant Colbert; destin d'une famille marchande* (Paris: PUF, 1973).

[3] More directly, see Jacob Soll, "Colbert's Archives, Secret Histories, and the Affair of the *Régale* (1663-1682)", *French Historical Studies* 31 (2008): 3-28.

P. C. Reynard
The University of Western Ontario
preynard@uwo.ca

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172