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John Hardman, *The Life of Louis XVI*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016. xi + 499 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0300220421.

Review by Michael P. Fitzsimmons, Auburn University Montgomery.

Beginning with a 1985 biography by Évelyne Lever, the past three decades have witnessed a significant revival of interest in Louis XVI. In 1993, coinciding with the bicentennial of his execution, John Hardman published *Louis XVI*. Additional studies followed from Munro Price, Jean-Christian Petitfils, Joël Felix, Barry Shapiro, and Ambrogio Caiani.[1] Prompted by the ensuing scholarship, including the publication of Louis's correspondence with his foreign minister Vergennes, which he co-edited with Price, and by the authentication by Price and Peter Campbell of sources that he had earlier treated with caution, Hardman set out to rework his original biography. It is generous of Hardman to credit the stimulating effect that the authentication and additional scholarship had on him, but it is also clear that his new study of Louis is informed by his own later work on court politics, closely related to the subject of his Oxford dissertation, and especially the Assembly of Notables.[2]

Perhaps the insights Hardman gained from his subsequent research led him to understand and explore the Revolution in greater depth, but whatever the reason, *The Life of Louis XVI* corrects a noticeable idiosyncrasy in *Louis XVI*: its elision of the period between October, 1789, and June, 1791. The year 1790, particularly from February through July, saw Louis's popularity reach extraordinary heights but also saw the enactment of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy that would become the catalyst for Louis's disillusionment with the Revolution, which Hardman did treat in his 1993 study. *The Life of Louis XVI* affirms nearly all of the judgments put forth in *Louis XVI* but they are more deeply grounded in research and more fully elucidated. This is fortunate because Hardman has acute observations to offer about the period to which he previously gave only cursory treatment. To be sure, as before, he openly seeks to rehabilitate perceptions and interpretations of a monarch he views as misunderstood, but his judgments are consistently evidence-based.

Louis grew up in the shadow of his favored older brother, who died of tuberculosis in 1761, leaving his parents grief-stricken and Louis aware of their preference for his deceased brother. He received his education from tutors who emphasized the need for reserve or restraint and during his adolescence his confessor enjoined him never to enable people to read his mind. Along with his innate shyness, this upbringing produced in him an evasiveness that many found frustrating and that during the Revolution was perceived as duplicity. Hardman alludes several times to an observation by Louis's brother Provence that pinning down where Louis stood was like trying to hold oiled billiard balls together and states that the combined effect of these qualities was to produce a "special kind of silence" (26). Louis came to the throne at the age of nineteen and Hardman notes that many of his advisers before the Revolution were old men, which he suggests could account for Louis's difficult relations with Revolutionary politicians, many of whom were his age or younger. At his accession the Maupeou *parlement* had replaced the former *parlement* of Paris, and initially it seemed that Maupeou's position was secure. But the influence of public opinion, to which Louis was sensitive, and arguments by Maurepas,

led Louis to dismiss Maupeou (the public stoned his carriage as it left Compiègne).^[3] Terray was dismissed the same day, to be replaced by Turgot. Maupeou's successor, Miromesnil, had been a member of the *parlement* of Rouen for fourteen years, and Louis decided to recall the old *parlements*, a decision he would regret. Turgot would fall in 1776, but the deeper problem, according to Hardman, was that Louis did not trust his ministers--subsequent ministers fared little better, and Hardman observes that those who wrote of their experience professed hurt. One who was often hurt and frequently felt insecure was Vergennes, but he and Louis were able to achieve the greatest foreign policy accomplishment of the reign, which was intervention in the War of American Independence. Hardman speculates that Louis may have been conflicted about assistance given to the Americans, not only because he was an Anglophile who liked George III but especially because he was troubled by the moral quandary of a monarch aiding the rebellious subjects of a fellow monarch. Hardman believes it possible that the French intervention may have adversely affected Louis's morale.

The War of American Independence had a catastrophic effect on royal finances, but Louis, wishing to set a new moral tone, ruled out bankruptcy. Louis appointed Necker as director-general of finances five months after Turgot's dismissal and Necker became popular with the public because he did not raise taxes during wartime, instead financing it with unsecured loans that created an unsustainable burden of debt. When criticism began to mount Necker published the *Compte rendu*, a fraudulent document that sold well at the time, enabling a critical loan to be fully secured, but also, Hardman notes, increasing the power of public opinion. The deteriorating fiscal situation precipitated by the War of American Independence demanded action. The Diamond Necklace Affair had poisoned relations with the *parlement* of Paris, as Hardman ably demonstrates, and the Crown could not rely on it to register the reform program devised by Calonne, especially the land tax to be paid by all landowners without exception. Hardman observes that Calonne's proposals represented "a rejection of the spirit and mechanism of the ancien régime" (235), but Calonne, of whom Louis was fond, confidently expected the Assembly to endorse his measures and conclude within fifteen days. Instead, of course, it failed, and Louis dismissed Calonne while it was in session. Hardman, characterizing the Assembly of Notables as a watershed event, notes that Louis, demoralized by its failure and his need to dismiss Calonne, began to demonstrate an indifference toward affairs consistent with depression and that he may have remained in this state long afterward.

In a novel but credible judgment, Hardman contends that the *parlement* of Paris called for the convening of the Estates-General out of spite. Louis's calling of the Assembly of Notables led members of the *parlement* to doubt that its political role would continue. If the king could summon the Notables, the *parlement* could raise the stakes and ask for the Estates-General, which Louis had not wanted. Hardman presents the edict of July 5, 1788 soliciting advice on the Estates-General as an effort to prevent the nobility from dominating the body that it had compelled the monarch to call. Ultimately, however, its convening led to what Hardman calls "the central tragedy of the reign" (304), which was the misunderstanding between the monarch and the Third Estate during the Estates-General. With Louis and Necker reinforcing each other's indecisiveness, the Third Estate, believing the monarch to be an ally, soon came to see him instead as duplicitous. Its reaction produced the collapse of royal authority as it moved ahead without him in drafting a constitution. The royal session of June 23, when Louis appeared to side with the nobility, reinforced the sense of betrayal.

Hardman denies that the movement of troops around Paris during July represented an effort by Louis to dissolve the Assembly, arguing instead that they were deployed to preserve order because the number of grain riots had risen during Louis's reign. The uprising provoked by the dismissal of ministers led to the destruction of royal power, as Louis recognized when he agreed to go to Paris on July 17, telling Marie-Antoinette, who did not want him to go, that he had to give himself up. After his observations on the August decrees were ignored, Louis chafed at being excluded from any significant role in shaping the constitution. In accordance with the qualities of reserve and restraint with which he had been inculcated, however, he said nothing, but he especially wished to be able to initiate legislation. What

Hardman terms Louis's "passive acceptance" (352) of the Revolution continued until the end of 1790, at which time his disillusionment with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the deterioration of the political situation led him to consider flight.

As the constitution neared completion during 1791 he had to act. Whereas Timothy Tackett believes that Louis wanted to reverse the Revolution nearly in its entirety, Hardman contends that the monarch's goals were more modest and that he sought to renegotiate articles of the constitution rather than repudiate the Revolution altogether.[4] While conceding its petulant tone, Hardman takes seriously the manifesto that Louis left behind and asserts that it offered the outline for a constitutional monarchy with a strong executive. The National Assembly, of course, would not accept that structure and although Hardman notes the sense of betrayal and mistrust engendered by Louis's flight, he does not seem to recognize fully the damage it did. He argues that the king's flight did not so much weaken the monarchy as polarize opinion concerning it, but that is a distinction without a difference—it was precisely the polarization of opinion that weakened the monarchy. Saving the monarchy was a significant accomplishment of the National Assembly but it led to the expenditure of nearly all of its political capital, of which the Constitution of 1791, presumably unrevised had the flight not occurred, might otherwise have been a beneficiary.

Louis had to accept the constitution as a condition to remain on the throne, which he did, recognizing that the alternative was civil war. Apparently accepting more passively than he should Marie-Antoinette's opinion that the constitution was not monarchical, Hardman judges it defective. To be sure, it was not a perfect document, but to affirm her belief sharply discounts the power that the suspensive veto conferred on the monarch. A veto enabled Louis to delay legislation for a minimum of four years and potentially six, so even if he could not initiate legislation the monarch could still exert a large degree of control. At the same time that he pronounces the constitution defective, Hardman acknowledges that the conduct of everyone involved in its implementation utterly lacked good faith, which makes any appraisal of it difficult. The new Legislative Assembly distrusted Louis and quickly sent him antagonistic legislation on émigrés and refractory clergy, which Louis vetoed, thereby ensuring that these issues could not be definitively resolved until late 1797 at the earliest. Likewise, suspicion of the monarch was a motivation for many deputies in advocating war and also played a major role in Louis's overthrow on August 10.

In captivity Louis's reign was over and he became a pawn for whichever political faction could impose its will on the Convention. Four months after his overthrow, beginning December 11, 1792, the Convention placed him on trial, which culminated with four motions recorded with rare roll-call votes. The most critical of them, calling for immediate execution, narrowly passed. The monarch was to be notified "within the day" and executed within twenty-four hours of the notification. He was told at 2:00 p.m. on January 20 and executed the next morning, January 21, 1793. For all of his evident sympathy for Louis, Hardman's conclusion is curt but accurate: "Louis left a will but no political legacy" (447).

Even the long format afforded by H-France for reviews is insufficient to plumb the depth and nuances of Hardman's book, which will be of interest to anyone engaged with any period of Louis's reign. In a work of such scope disagreements will arise, and historians of the Revolution in particular may find his treatment of the critical period from October 1789 to June 1791 less sure than that of the years preceding it. In imagining Louis's possible thoughts after the humiliation of July 1789, Hardman suggests that the Third Estate wanted to destroy the social privileges of the nobility, but this is surely a mistaken belief. It certainly wished to end the fiscal and political privileges of the nobility through more equal taxation and vote by head in the Estates-General, but it was careful not to infringe upon social distinctions. Seeking to undercut vote by order, it threw off the designation "Third Estate," which seemed to validate it, and renamed itself "the commons," which preserved social distinctions while rejecting vote by order. Moreover, after its consolidation during late June, the National Assembly continued to sit by order until the meeting of August 4, during which it repudiated privilege altogether.

It would undoubtedly come as a surprise to many deputies of the National Assembly to read that “it would have been difficult for French clergy to have been more conciliatory towards the Revolution” (364), particularly with respect to the French episcopate. Indeed, as Rodney Dean has recently demonstrated, the reverse might be a more accurate characterization.^[5] It is also difficult to understand the statement that France continued to be governed by the Constitution of 1791 until 1795 (433), which Hardman makes in the context of its provisions for removing Louis from the throne. The Constitution of 1791 was negated the day Louis was overthrown and the Constitution of 1793, suspended as it was, nevertheless superseded that of 1791. As Hardman also notes, the trial of Louis was political, so the reasons specified by the Constitution of 1791 for which he could be removed were meaningless.

Finally, it is clear that this book was written under the influence of the 2008 financial crisis and the political stalemate that has characterized much of the presidency of Barack Obama. It would have been better to omit contemporary asides, which offer little analytical added value and divert the focus of the book. None of these reservations, however, detract from Hardman’s considerable achievement. Insightful, engaging and well written, *The Life of Louis XVI* will remain an indispensable source for scholars of the Old Regime and the Revolution for years to come.

NOTES

[1] Évelyne Lever, *Louis XVI* (Paris: Fayard, 1985); John Hardman, *Louis XVI* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); Munro Price, *The Road from Versailles: Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, and the Fall of the French Monarchy* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002); Jean-Christian Petitfils, *Louis XVI* (Paris: Perrin, 2005); Joël Felix, *Louis XVI et Marie-Antoinette: Un couple en politique* (Paris: Payot, 2006); Barry Shapiro, *Traumatic Politics: The Deputies and the King in the Early French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009); Ambrogio Caiani, *Louis XVI and the French Revolution, 1789-1792* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[2] John Hardman, *French Politics, 1774-1789: From the Accession of Louis XVI to the Bastille* (London: Longman, 1995); John Hardman, *Overture to Revolution: The 1787 Assembly of Notables and the Crisis of France’s Old Regime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[3] Maupeou refused to resign his position, however, so his successors had to use the title Keeper of the Seals rather than Chancellor.

[4] Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 54-55.

[5] Rodney Dean, *L’Assemblée constituante et la réforme ecclésiastique* (Paris and London : Rodney Dean, 2014), 738-739.

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