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Colin Jones, *Versailles*. New York: Basic Books, 2018. vi+224 pp. Illustrations, appendices, further reading, notes, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781541673380.

Review by Chandra Mukerji, University of California, San Diego.

There is a huge cache of books on Versailles addressed to casual readers, but *Versailles* by Colin Jones stands out. It not only tells conventional stories about the development of the chateau under Louis XIV (expected in books on Versailles), but also addresses questions raised during the Sun King's reign and later periods about how to maintain the site. The author claims to be telling a fairy tale about the great chateau and gardens—an ugly duckling valley turns into a glorious swan of French culture. It is a charming conceit that suits the general interest reader that is the audience for this book. Colin Jones is clearly enamored by Versailles, but he is not just an adoring fan. He is clearly taken by the fact that this symbol of the monarchy was maintained through the Revolution and has become a world heritage site. He shows how Versailles has been able exercise power over people with its sheer material presence, and he is interested how this charismatic material power has prolonged the life of Versailles and its gardens. The author asserts that he is following the material turn in history by looking at the landscape and architecture of Versailles as a product of material practices. But he also implies that the imperfections of the location and the problematic nature of its political importance over time somehow add to its significance.

At crucial moments, new advocates for Versailles proposed ways to put it to use. Louis XIV wanted Versailles as his seat of court even though it was not convenient or conventional to reside in a country house. Versailles affected people, and even if Colin Jones does not know why, he draws the reader's attention to this power, its material sources, and its historical effects.

Colin Jones begins his story of Versailles with an unwanted valley that was too swampy to be much use for farming, too stinky to live in permanently, and not beautiful enough to be desired for its charm. Because of its faults, the land was available to consolidate into a large estate that Louis XIII acquired for hunting. It was woodsy, undeveloped, and seemingly remote, but not so far from Paris. Versailles was not prime property, but this is precisely what made it a good place to escape. Louis XIV loved the hunting lodge in part because only men would go there, and it had a rustic character. Its swamps and forests gave Versailles special appeal. But the same qualities that drew the king to Versailles also raised the question later of how to make Versailles more suitable for a royal use without destroying its remote, woodland feel.

Louis XIV's visit to Vaux-le-Vicomte seemed to provide the answer. He was invited to a *fête* at this just-completed rural estate by the minister of the treasury, Nicolas Fouquet. The chateau was small but charming, dominating the landscape around it in a fortress setting, and it was surrounded by a great garden that seemed to extend to infinity. The chateau was elegantly French in style, and while it was distinctively rural, the design was perfectly *à la mode*. Louis le Vau, master of the French baroque, was the architect. Charles le Brun, a painter with a taste for Italian art that would become director of the academy of painting and sculpture, was the interior decorator. André le Nôtre was the garden designer who brilliantly integrated military architecture with garden art to establish a distinctively French style of gardening. Fouquet invited the king to his *fête* presumably to gain admiration for his taste, but the visit had an unwanted effect. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, then director of the king's household, recognized immediately the high cost of the beauty and sumptuousness of Fouquet's estate and suggested to the king that it was a product of graft. Fouquet was put in jail; Colbert became minister of the treasury; and the artisans who built and decorated Vaux-le-Vicomte were taken to Versailles.

Colin Jones tells a rather conventional great man story of Versailles under Louis XIV, as the Sun King employed Le Vau, Le Brun, and Le Nôtre to turn his father's hunting estate into a glorious country chateau and dream world of classical revival. A truly material history would have indicated how much Le Vau relied upon François d'Orbay not only to make architectural drawings but also to design many elements of buildings attributed to Le Vau. And while it is true that Le Brun was head of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture and controlled art education in a heavy-handed manner in France, he was also dependent on the artisans of the Gobelins to execute his tapestry designs, and he relied on sculptors like François Girardon and Jean-Baptiste Tuby to work with marble and bronze to bring his ideas to life. Similarly, André Le Nôtre relied on both hydraulics experts to realize ingenious fountains and horticulturalists to fill the flowering parterres near the palace with each season. A true material history of Versailles ought to include such figures, too, but they are lost behind the conventional set of great men. Even Colbert who was in charge of the cultural program at Versailles has little presence in the material story Colin Jones tells.

We learn that Colbert was not in favor of developing Versailles, thinking that a country house was unsuitable for a French monarch. He wanted the king to make his residence the Louvre Palace in Paris, the traditional center of the French court. Thinking that the king might be swayed by aesthetics alone, he asked Le Vau and Le Brun to make additions to the Louvre to lure the king back to Paris. They made parts of Louvre, such as the Apollo gallery, magnificent. But the king simply wanted to live in Versailles. If the hunting lodge was in a swampy, smelly valley, the Louvre was in a city famous for its stinking mud. And the king preferred the country.

What Colin Jones describes brilliantly are material transformations of places that create monuments like Versailles and the charisma that a site like Versailles could acquire through its form. In each step of the history, Jones describes both the material problems that gave rise to transformations and the consequences of rebuilding for the place. So, the swampy valley too stinky for most people where the king wanted to spend his time was a material problem to solve. The gardens were the solution. They had the hydraulics systems to drain the swamps to fill the basins of fountains, where sculpture could be bathed in glittering sprays of water. And the hunting lodge that Louis XIV loved but was too *dépassé* for a royal chateau was wrapped in an envelope of new rooms by a long garden, including the Hall of Mirrors. If the estate was too remote for ministries located in Paris, then buildings had to be constructed for the ministries

along the courtyard of the chateau. Only when his relatives started dying at Versailles did Louis XIV question his choice of site, all but abandoning it for Marly. Nonetheless after his death, his heirs took residence at Versailles, claiming his heritage but now finding the estate too expensive to maintain.

The materialism of his analysis might be limited, but Colin Jones' desire to write a history of a place, Versailles, rather than a king, Louis XIV, saved *Versailles* from being another banal account of palace intrigues and imperial ambitions. Versailles, under the pen of Colin Jones, becomes something much more interesting. With detailed descriptions of changes at Versailles, the author conjures up for the reader successive moments in the life of the chateau and gardens, using beautiful descriptive prose. His Versailles has its own story to tell, and it exercises its own power over people.

Colin Jones conveys rather than explains Versailles' charisma. The fountains and water supply in the gardens capture the theatrical nature of the Sun King's power. They not only make the petit parc magical—full of glittering forest rooms gushing with water—but show how water features draw attention to Versailles as a stage for the theater of power. They exemplify the dramatic appeal of the place that never seems to fade.

Colin Jones shows that Versailles survived because people cared for it. They cared for it in the sense that they valued it, and in the sense that they maintained rather than abandoned it. The site was still stunning in its audacity and creativity—visible in the gardens, painted onto the ceilings, and embodied in Marie Antoinette's hameau or miniature farm. People took care of it even in the Revolution when this monument to sovereign power should have been an object of hatred. Instead, they tore down Marly. They used the gardens for agriculture, but the chateau was not destroyed. It became a repository of France's political and cultural heritage—a place to sign treaties and hold court, but it did not become a permanent seat of government.

Colin Jones is clearly charmed by the Versailles of Louis XIV in spite of its excesses, but to his credit, the author does not end his fairy tale of Versailles with the triumph of Louis XIV. He shows how the royal residence started to be abandoned even by the old king before his death for the new buildings at Marly. Versailles endured, but power drained from the site under his successors, through the Revolution, and through the Napoleonic era. The inheritance from Louis XIV declined in political value, first, reduced to a family asset, then as an object of revolutionary fury, further as a problematic site of government, and finally as a shell of memory. But still it endures.

Throughout its long decline, the question of what to do with Versailles was raised repeatedly. During the Revolution, the issue is whether it should be destroyed or preserved. And if it is preserved, what purpose could it serve? With its future uncertain, advocates for Versailles sought out new uses for the chateau and gardens that would save them. Absent a good answer to that question, the chateau started to deteriorate, bits of the ceiling now falling on visitors. The garden descended into disarray, too, as the garden was not maintained and land was put to other purposes. Even Napoleon was not interested in it.

Under Louis-Philippe, the chateau was saved from falling down by being converted into a museum of French history. This decommissioned Versailles from its political role as a center of government but entailed gutting part of the chateau to create rooms for the historical paintings.

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At the end of the nineteenth century, the chateau was saved again—this time as a monument to French glory by Pierre de Nolhac, arguing for the historical significance of Versailles and its gardens as art. He called on French donors to protect their heritage, and they did. In the twentieth century, the site was redefined as an international treasure, becoming a museum and study center supported by international as well as French donors. It is only in the twentieth century, Colin Jones argues, that the great center of Louis XIV's court was finally embraced as truly worthy, first as a monument to France and then as a world treasure. The ambivalences that surrounded the stinky valley, the monument to absolutism, and the arrogance of the monarchy finally dissipated.

Great men made and maintained Versailles through the long history told by Colin Jones, but the chateau and gardens outlived them all. Human weakness, trees, swamps, fountains, fog, wind and bad weather all threatened Versailles repeatedly, but people were roused to save it. This perhaps justifies calling this essay a fairy tale. The story has a happy ending, and Colin Jones tells it so concisely. But *Versailles* is only deceptively simple. Colin Jones's history of the valley and chateau of Versailles demonstrates convincingly the material power of places to command our attention even in periods of their decline. *Versailles* also demonstrates how physical spaces can participate in relations of power by harboring aesthetic forces that endure.

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