



*King of the World:
The Life of Louis XIV*

Philip Mansel

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King of the World: The Life of Louis XIV. By Philip Mansel. London: Allen Lane, 2019. ISBN 978-1-846-14599-5. xxxvi + 604 pp. £30.

It seems difficult in 2019 to still innovate on Louis XIV. Existing biographies are solid and his life is well documented, television documentaries are legion as are films devoted to the life of the monarch. The tercentenary of the Sun King's death in 2015 was the occasion for a new scholarly leap, enriching an already crowded field. Philip Mansel's work is innovative, however, by drawing on global history. It is the challenge and success of this biography to have been able to place the reign and politics of Louis XIV in an international perspective.

The book offers a fine introduction, followed by twenty-four chapters, and concludes with a list of sources, classified by place of conservation, an expansive bibliography, and an index. Mansel's work includes a large number of maps and genealogical tables, which are extremely useful. It also includes fifty-five pictures.

The introduction presents Louis XIV as a European and even global head of state. The author briefly paints the major issues at stake in his policy of territorial expansion and reviews recent academic contributions on specific points, including finances, the King's house, health, armies, and court officials. The introduction also outlines the history of French royalty and its monarchs from the fifth to the seventeenth century. A long line of kings and events define the nature of French royal power. This entry into the life of Louis XIV through his ancestors is of real interest, highlighting the effects of continuity and novelty of his reign. It is also an added value for the general public.

The first part (chapters 1 to 5) relates the birth and childhood of the king in Paris, whose city is the subject of a historical description. Chapter 2 sheds a valuable and rather rare light in the biographies of Louis XIV on the role of the different cities-in-the-city of Paris in Louis XIV's politics. Indeed, Mansel never misses an opportunity to recall or teach his reader the great historical, anthropological, and cultural data of the era, making his text accessible to both the researcher and the neophyte. A brief history of the end of the reign of Louis XIII, accompanied by Richelieu, unfolds. A few shortcuts are perhaps to be regretted. For instance, Gaston d'Orléans is painted unilaterally as a traitor and weak, which recent historians have been able to nuance.

Starting from the centre of France, Paris (Chapter 2), Mansel seems to construct his work as a decentration: he extends his angle to France as a whole (Chapter 3), then to China (Chapter 15), encompassing Versailles (Chapter 13), the heart of monarchical politics, and the very body of the King (Chapter 14).

The Fronde, Mazarin, and the queens are the subject of Chapters 3 to 5: those chapters support converging issues and make it possible to represent the dynamics of power in the King's entourage, either at his side or against him. Mansel is always careful to forge links between the French court and foreign courts. The networks of Mazarin or Spanish Queens of France outside the kingdom's borders are analysed with precision. The movements of the court during the Fronde and Mazarin's exile are not perceived as blind spots.

Chapter 6, which deals with the well-known fall of Fouquet, opens the period of Louis XIV's personal reign. The following chapters describe his rise, first in domestic politics and then in the politics of conquest. Mansel regularly gave voice to the foreign visitors or ambassadors to the French court. Thus, one can read the judgements of such and such a British royalist on the French monarchical system, the reports of Venetian ambassadors returning to the Republic, and so on. Mansel brings rare elements to the studies on Louis XIV: little is usually said about the investments of members of the royal family in international trading companies. The role of foreign personalities is abundantly emphasized, such as Colbert's intermediaries outside the borders, who participated with him in the establishment of commercial treaties.

Of course, several chapters evoke Versailles (Chapters 8, 13, 23, 24). The domestic cultural policy of Louis XIV, and the myth that is built up around the great architectural project of Louis XIV to the point of turning the king himself into a myth, is discussed, but Mansel's study reveals a resolute king with global ambitions. The reception of Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini in France, for example, is discussed at length.

After three chapters devoted to the conquests of Louis XIV, from Flanders to the Netherlands, then to the Rhine States, Mansel builds a triptych that takes a closer look at the personality of the Sun King, as monarch and as individual.

Chapter 15 is devoted to the court's fascination with distant continents: America and Asia. The author questions the reception of exoticism at court and the imperialist and colonial policies of Louis XIV, both from the point of view of cultural and diplomatic relations. Chapter 16 evokes Louis XIV's ambiguous relationship with Protestantism. The German states, mostly Protestant, are a major object to establish French power east of its borders. Therefore, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes enabled Europe to unite against France. From there, the following chapters report on the tense relations between France and its neighbours: first England, then more widely Europe, and finally, the resolution of conflicts through French triumph, especially in Spain with the accession to the throne of Philip V.

The last chapters are marked by the fall: France is ruined by war and the King is surrounded by mortal enemies, especially in England. The

successive deaths of his closest heirs leave his succession uncertain. Finally, the death of Louis XIV is the subject of Chapter 23, which gives an eloquent vision of the death ceremonial of the sovereign. Chapter 24 summarizes this work and serves as a conclusion: after drawing up a synthesis, Mansel takes stock of Louis XIV's fortune after Louis XIV and measures his legacy in the centuries that followed.

In general, this work is a solid biography that provides a completely new and interesting look at a subject that has been studied extensively. The bias of world history echoes many current contributions by historians and meets the concern to move away from a history that would be only national. Mansel's work is remarkable for the precision of his sources and the richness of his precious notes: one appreciates the variety of testimonies—be it ambassadors, songs, memorialists, epistlers, or registers.

The present monograph, although treating an already rich field, certainly offers new perspectives for experts and provides newcomers with a wonderful and accessible introduction to Louis XIV Studies. The author avoids many of the pitfalls he could have fallen in, which is why this biography is a welcome addition to our field; it is without clichés, nor does it emphasise his private life, in spite of a title that reads “The Life of Louis XIV.” It is indeed a life of Louis XIV, but mostly, it is the life of a ruler and a statesman.

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