



Hero or Tyrant?
Henry III, King of France, 1574-89,
Robert J. Knecht
(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014).

Review by: Estelle Paranque

Hero or Tyrant? Henry III, King of France, 1574-89. By Robert J. Knecht. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014. xiii + 356 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4724-2930-8. £75.

As Robert Knecht rightly explains in his preface, King Henry III of France is a relatively unknown figure to the British audience. For this reason, the author chose to write a biography of the last Valois king of France, bringing together French historiography relating to Henry III, as well as important and informative primary sources to highlight key events of his reign. The originality of this biography is that rather than commencing with Henry's birth, the book opens with a brief history of the reigns of Henry's grandfather, Francis I of France, and of his father, Henry II of France, enabling the reader to better comprehend the political and religious situation in France prior to the reign of Henry III. Another interesting perspective is that the biography, whilst being largely chronological, occasionally deviates from a chronological approach in order to examine a specific theme, such as 'The King's Peace' (p. 145) and 'A Tiresome Brother' (p. 163). Knecht is also concerned with drawing as complete a portrait of the Valois king as possible. To this end, he provides details of trivial accounts of the court, as well as devoting a chapter to Henry III as a person rather than as a ruler ('Henry III, the Man' (p. 119)). This choice echoes the works of French historians, such as Jacqueline Boucher, who focuses on the man behind the king, thereby aiding the reader to a better understanding of the king's personality, as well as revealing the motivations behind some of his actions.

The book consists of sixteen chapters with a preface and a conclusion. As well as discussing important French secondary sources, Knecht utilises a wealth of fascinating French primary sources, such as royal letters, diplomatic reports, and the infamous 'Registre-Journal' of Pierre de L'Estoile. Knecht's translations of selected passages from these primary sources are beneficial for both academics and students who may otherwise be unable to access them. The secondary sources on which the author has based his book are similarly varied and extremely well documented. Not only does he refer to the most important French historians who are recognised as specialists on the reign of Henry III, such as Denis Crouzet, Nicolas Le Roux, Jacqueline Boucher or Xavier Le Person, he also links their works with those of British historians who have contributed to the field, such as Mark Greengrass and Keith Cameron. These Anglo-French references allow the reader to be aware of the interest Henry has created in both countries and in both historiographical traditions.

Each chapter offers a detailed account of the political events that took place during Henry III's reign. Three chapters are particularly striking for their fascinating anecdotes and accounts. The first of these is the chapter en-

titled 'Catholic Hero' (p. 39), which narrates the little-known proposed marriage between Henry and Elizabeth I of England. Utilising sources ranging from the English State Papers to the Letters of Henry III, Knecht brings to life these negotiations and the reasons for their subsequent failure (pp. 44-5). Furthermore, in this chapter, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre is vividly and meticulously described (pp. 48-53). Through an examination of these two important political events that shaped early modern Europe, Knecht manages to portray Henry as a determined and zealous young French prince who, through his actions, earned the reputation of a 'Catholic Hero' — at least for a period of time. Another absorbing chapter is 'The Archmignons' (p. 205). Knecht shrewdly chooses to explain the concept of Henry's 'mignons', presenting as examples the lives of two such 'mignons', the Duke of Epernon and the Duke of Joyeuse, both of whom not only played important political roles, but who were both also very close to the king on a personal level. This chapter, which is largely based on Nicolas Le Roux's *La faveur du roi*, endeavours to explain the concept of Henry's favourites to English speaking readers, and also reveals the intensity of their friendship. In the final intriguing chapter of this work, 'The Catholic League' (p. 225), Knecht describes the political events that ultimately led to the creation of the Catholic League and its profound impact on Henry III's royalty and authority. The pressure that the French king had to face at this time is particularly well explained and vibrantly depicted (pp. 235-40). Henry's struggle to maintain authority over his subjects and his lack of available solutions during the years of upheavals and civil war are recounted extremely well, enabling the reader to see the 'bigger picture' during this turbulent time in Henry III's reign.

Robert Knecht's biography is exceptionally well-written as well as an engaging and fascinating read. In concluding his work with the legacy of the Valois king as well as making comparisons between Henry's style of monarchy with that of his heir, Henry IV, Knecht is able to re-evaluate Henry III's reputation as a bad king and a tyrant, to offer a more complex and complete portrayal of the Valois king. The life and reign of Henry III of France cannot be fully understood without recourse to all the details, accounts and nuances provided by this biography.

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