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The Life of Louis XVI

John Hardman

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Review by: Aurore Chery

The Life of Louis XVI. By John Hardman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-300-22042-1. 512 pp. £25.00.

The Life of Louis XVI is John Hardman's third volume on the subject, following his 1993 book, *Louis XVI*, and his 2000 book, *Louis XVI: The Silent King*. The book's title, however, is rather deceiving. Instead of recounting the life of Louis XVI, Hardman details the history of Louis' successive governments. This book is, nevertheless, an important piece of political history that brings to light sources often undervalued by historians—such as the *Mémoires* of the Comte d'Angiviller—and poses some important questions. Hardman also presents a good analysis of the policies developed by Louis' ministers, and pays close attention to their relationships with other members of government. His emphatic rejection of “the conventional stereotype of the stupid, lazy and impassive king” (442) is curious, as few scholars continue to espouse this opinion.

Yet, as a biography, the book would have benefited from a thorough cultural and intellectual contextualization. This contextualization would have offered a clearer understanding of the king, and framed his actions as representative of his time. More serious and regrettable is Hardman's treatment of the female protagonists, who are all clearly depreciated when they are mentioned at all. For instance, the king's sisters-in-law are reduced to only one gratuitous judgment on their appearance—“The ugly daughters of Emmanuel, king of Sardinia” (41)—and the second daughter of the king is not even given her proper name (273).

The main issue of the book lies in Hardman's tendency to rely on dubious sources from the nineteenth century, often carelessly quoted from Jean- Christian Petitfils' book *Louis XVI* (2005). The events after the Revolution shed a very different light on Louis' reign, and do not offer an appropriate way to understand the thinking of eighteenth century France. For example, readers are induced to think that Louis XVI had a particular fascination for Charles I of England, making Louis' end appear as a kind of *fait-de-complet*. Hardman also perpetuates the old image of a French court strictly divided into a *dévots* and a *philosophes* clan. As Bernard Hours, among others, has demonstrated, there were no unbending cliques; but rather, moving configurations depending on the diverse interests of a courtier at a specific moment. The royal family, especially the later Louis XVI, took great care not to appear rigid, and could be seen championing apparently opposite interests. The author does realize that Jacob- Nicolas Moreau, for instance, is not “a typical member of the *parti dévot*” (15), but he fails to notice that the concept of a “typical member” does not exist at all.

Likewise, Hardman is puzzled by the proposal of Stanislas Leszczynski—the deposed King of Poland—as tutor for the future Louis XVI (11). In doing so, he reveals his lack of understanding of the princely culture of popularity in the second half of the eighteenth century. Despite no longer having a crown, Stanislas knew how to appear as a beloved prince, and to present the failures of his life as a success story. The dauphin could not overlook the tough times that were coming for the French monarchy, and the choice of Stanislas for the education of his own son shows how much he prized an aptitude for public relations. Consequently, by ignoring Stanislas’ appeal, Hardman perpetuates the inaccurate image of the Duc de La Vauguyon, who eventually became the king’s tutor, as a narrow-minded and presumptuous courtier.

Nevertheless, as was highlighted in the beginning of this review, the real quality of this book resides in the analysis of Louis’ ministers, and the policies they developed. The ministers clearly appear to be interesting characters for the author—far more so than the king. This interest means less well-known figures, such as Miromesnil, receive closer attention. Hardman depicts Armand Thomas Hue de Miromesnil as the embodiment of opposition within the conseil. Miromesnil would encourage a contradictory debate to arise that would ensure the king thought he was making his decisions with the full knowledge of the cause. Without any surprise, giving the inclination of the author for the Maupeou reform, Hardman regards Miromesnil as “the most disastrous appointment Louis ever made” because “he was the biggest single obstacle to reform” (91, 92). Regarding Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, who is already well studied, Hardman constructively brings up the question of the social context in which he evolved. Coming from a family of recent nobility, he was also married to a Turkish commoner. These were two impediments at court, but served as two recommendations for the king, who preferred a minister with no affiliation to the powerful great families of his court (102). The most appealing development of the book, however, concerns the Baron de Breteuil. Hardman makes it clear that Breteuil considered himself a minister to the queen, rather than of the king (204). In doing so, Hardman revives Girault de Coursac’s theory of the Queen’s secret policy during the Revolution, which would have opposed the views of the king, and the book asks the question with equanimity at last (335, 384). Hardman demonstrates the limited confidence Louis XVI placed in Breteuil, even if he clumsily explains the relationship between Marie-Antoinette and the king. For example, readers would be perplexed to see the queen presented as a woman unable to understand the complexity of politics in one page, while two pages later, Hardman states that “Louis was increasingly relying [on her] as the crisis deepened” (259, 261).

This incongruity is apparently solved by resorting to the theory of the king's depression from 1787: a hypothesis that has become somewhat commonplace since Hardman's first publication on Louis XVI, but it is still not convincing. To conclude, readers can expect to find in this book a well-documented analysis—though openly conservative—on the government of Louis XVI, but the king himself retains his secrets, and remains a mystery still to be solved.

AURORE CHERY

University of Lyon