

Caroline Bitsch, *Vie et carrière d'Henri II de Bourbon, prince de Condé (1588–1646). Exemple de comportement et d'idées politiques au début du XVII^e siècle, Paris (Honoré Champion) 2008, 544 p. (Bibliothèque d'histoire moderne et contemporaine, 27), ISBN 978-2-7453-1620-2, EUR 95,00.*

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It is perhaps inevitable that scholars of the French court and the French nobility will ask why another book is needed on the Condé family so soon after the magisterial and incredibly detailed work by Katia Béguin in 1999. In fact, this new work by Caroline Bitsch is a fine complement to the earlier work by Béguin, focusing as it does primarily on the period before 1630, the period in which the foundations of the Condé dynasty were set and secured, and a fundamental shift occurred in the way in which the grand nobles related to the Crown. This is Dr. Bitsch's strongest argument, supported by a wealth of contemporary material, both within the text and as lengthy appendices. It is a question of how – and notably why – the first prince of the blood changed his position from rebel and provocateur to chief supporter of the new »absolutist« model of the Bourbon monarchy, as ally of its chief architect, the Cardinal de Richelieu.

The political and mental shift of Henri II de Bourbon, prince de Condé, after the Chalais conspiracy of 1626, marks a departure from the traditional role of the princes of the blood as semi-independent warlords, with provincial powerbases and devoted noble followings, which were so destructive to the development of the French state throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This shift to loyal supporter was not immediately emulated by most of the greatest of the French *grands* – notably the Guise, the Vendôme or the La Tour d'Auvergne in the 1630s; or indeed by Condé's own son in the 1650s – but set the standard for Crown-*grandee* relations that became the bedrock of Louis Quatorzian politics, and would continue for the remainder of the *ancien régime*. It is therefore imperative to understand this shift from its origins.

The second major point for discussion put forward by this book is that of Henri II as founder of the Condé fortune, and as an early exemplar of the nobleman as a »modern« »homme d'affaire and gestionnaire« (p. 10). But this section of the book is rather briefer, and appropriately refers the reader to Béguin's book, where this theme is covered in great detail.

Bitsch first debates whether or not to write a straightforward biography (p. 10–12), and therefore sets out to examine the life of this generally overlooked prince in two parts, one chronological, and one thematic (religion, finance, intellectual pursuits, politics, and *clientèles*). While in theory this seems a good strategy, the book suffers from repetition in the second section, where Condé's political career is traced for a second time in giving context to some of the thematic material. It also seems a bit out of balance, having such a heavy focus on the first phase of Condé's life, in particular his rebellions against Henri IV and the Regent Marie de Médicis, then skimming quite quickly through his later

career. This is especially jarring when the author considers two aspects of Condé's later political life that hugely impact on his family as a whole: his decision to marry his son to a niece of Richelieu – a shocking *mésalliance* for a prince of royal blood (and one still fairly close to the royal succession in 1641) – and his emergence as Chef du Conseil for the Regent from 1643. Bitsch underplays both of these transformative events, a deeper analysis of which would have supported her notion of a fundamental change in Crown-noble relations during the rule of Richelieu and his successor Mazarin. Towards the end of the book, Bitsch reveals that Condé's great success in part can be seen in his takeover as »heir« of the vast Richelieu clientage (p. 385), but does not then attempt to use this as a motive for why Condé would have accepted such an unequal match for his son (and it could be argued that Conti and Vendôme had precisely the same strategy when accepting marital alliances with Mazarin in the following decade). Nor is it clear that Condé was able to predict the huge windfall of the Richelieu fortune and clientage as justification for his son's marriage, since in 1641 the Maillé heir (the new princess' brother), was still a young man, poised for marriage and reproduction.

The most valuable portion of this book, therefore, is in the analysis of Condé's rebellious phases, 1609–1610, and 1613–1616, and subsequent alienation from the Court, 1619–1627. Bitsch makes extensive use of published memoirs and letters of Condé and his contemporaries, many serving as justifications for his actions against the Crown. These are quoted at length, but are often *too* long, distracting from the course of the narrative or argument (for example, an account by Cardinal Bentivoglio of the attempted capture of Condé's wife from Brussels in 1610, covering three pages, p. 73–75), and they are only infrequently supported by references to other recent scholarly works. Every letter, every memoir, is quoted in full, rather than selected and analysed in detail. But what is revealed, and of great use to researchers due to such thoroughness, is the sheer amount of self-justification and speculation by Condé and his contemporaries about the nature of rebellion, and the role of the great nobles in the running of the state. In the end the analysis comes back to arguments put forth by Arlette Jouanna, and the great change in French society that is no longer fooled by the great nobles joining rebellions »for the public good« (p. 197). Once this change is realised, the *grande*s turn instead to unmasked agendas of personal gain: Condé's policies change from rebellion to cooperation with this new »monarchy of finance«, to gain provincial governments, military commissions, royal pensions, and a seat on the Council, for himself and for his son. All this with an eye towards the revenues to be accumulated from each of these royal gratifications. In this vein, one of the most useful sections in this study is the extensively detailed and analysed chapter on Condé as governor of Burgundy (p. 282–336).

In return, the monarchy gained a supporter/servant of the highest rank, one who could be presented as an extension of the Crown itself: because of his princely rank, Condé could command troops and govern major provinces without offending the honour of other high ranking military elites and regional *grande*s (p. 275). The princes of the blood now had a more defined role to play in the running of a more centralised monarchy and were richly rewarded. This pattern can then be seen repeated in the reign of Louis XIV for the *princes étrangers* – the same idea put forward in my own recent monograph on the Lorraine-Guise – and the rest of the high court nobility. Caroline Bitsch has provided historians

with a useful detailed analysis of noble revolt in the early decades of the seventeenth century, but also puts forward a motive for the crucial shift in grandee mentality from independent political players to loyal supporters of the centralised Bourbon state.