

James B. Collins — *Classes, Estates, and Order in Early Modern Brittany*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xv, 313.

James B. Collins, the author of an impressive earlier study entitled *The Fiscal Limits of Absolutism* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988) and a number of challenging articles (most notably, "Geographic and Social Mobility in Early-Modern France", *Journal of Social History*, vol. 24, 1991), has addressed a problem in early modern French history considerably broader than his title suggests. Although he focuses on Brittany in discussing the processes by which the elites of France participated in and benefited from the increasing intervention of royal government and its growing fiscal demands, his conclusions offer a useful corrective to the still powerful myth of royal absolutism as antithetical to and destructive of aristocratic power and prestige.

As a region in which provincial estates survived as tax-granting bodies, Brittany provides a useful case study of local cooperation with royal demands. The estates were dominated by the local aristocracy and most of the tax revenues they authorized were disbursed in the province itself; indeed more than one-quarter was often awarded in pensions and gratuities to the nobles. Henry IV allowed the Breton nobles to decide what kinds of taxes they preferred (and as landholders they usually opted for indirect levies on sales and transport) "so long as he received extra revenues" (p. 141). The burden of taxation was placed disproportionately on the towns, leaving peasant tenants' incomes relatively untouched. This enabled landlords to maximize their revenues. One of the consequences of this policy was the dramatic decline of the Breton economy from the early seventeenth century; the increased exactions of Crown, landlords, and churchmen made it impossible for both the better-off peasants and the urban mercantile and manufacturing community to save, and investment in trade and production diminished.

Collins's presentation of the social and professional groups which constituted the Breton body politic is less clear and less fully integrated than it might be; he tends to repeat himself and at times compresses his evidence in ways that make it virtually indigestible (cf. p. 77). Nonetheless, he does give his reader a sense of both the connections and tensions between the various groups. On the other hand, his analytical discussion of the economic structures and relationships in the region is both straightforward and sophisticated.

That the nobles allied with the Crown to increase their own wealth and power even as they cooperated in the expansion of the power of the central government can hardly be doubted. Increasing numbers of nobles attended the estates in the seventeenth century; its sessions lasted longer, and the feasting and public display of power by the greater noble families seem to have increased as well. Participation was seen as an important noble responsibility and, given the clear opportunity for self-aggrandizement which cooperation with royal demands provided, this is hardly surprising.

The revolt of 1675 is discussed as a kind of litmus test of the ideas developed earlier in the book, and one has to agree with Collins's assessment; here, however, is the one place where a fuller presentation of evidence, even a series of narratives of the risings in the various regions and towns, would help most readers to feel

more sure of the strength of his arguments. One wonders, for example, about the fact that the ransacking of houses in Rennes appears to have been led, at least initially, by “students of the Jesuit *collège*”. Collins does argue that some members of the elites of Brittany saw revolt as serving their interests, but the nature of the relationships between them and the rebels they encouraged might profitably have been presented and examined at greater length.

One would like to be able to recommend this book to undergraduates interested in the increase in monarchical authority and the effects of royal absolutism on the provincial nobility. Unfortunately several factors make this improbable if not impossible. Although there is a glossary at the beginning of the book, far too many terms unlikely to be familiar to non-specialists are omitted (such as *amortissements*, *arrière-ban*, *écuyer*, *étapes*, royal *greffes*, *impôts*, *octrois*, and *rentes* for loans). Some of these are defined or explained when they first appear in the text, but this is not always the case, and the contexts in which they are used often leave the meaning hazy. A novice will have to resort regularly to the index to find earlier references and explanations of such terms. In addition, much of Collins’s thesis is advanced by the presentation of carefully organized and detailed evidence. While commendable, this will tend to overwhelm the non-specialist, particularly since Collins does not summarize or recapitulate his arguments at the beginning or end of each chapter.

These reservations do not diminish the value of this sensitive and intelligent study as an explication of the process by which royal authority was extended in France, or as a portrait of a regional society in the years extending from the Wars of Religion into the reign of Louis XIV. They merely indicate the limits of its usefulness to beginning students of early modern France. These, presumably, will be able to approach most of the arguments developed here by looking at the author’s more recent general work, *The State in Early Modern France*, also published by Cambridge University Press.

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Raymond A. Mentzer, Jr. — *Blood and Belief: Family Survival and Confessional Identity among the Provincial Huguenot Nobility*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1994. Pp. viii, 272.

In the tradition of Jack Goody, Raymond Mentzer has produced a well-crafted study of a French family, the Lacgers, and their evolution over a period of two and a half centuries. From the 1530s to the French Revolution, the family succeeded in entering the ranks of the minor nobility, converted to Protestantism, and lived through the trauma of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. While this could have been just a run-of-the-mill descriptive study of a minor French noble family, Mentzer has elevated his analysis of the Lacgers’ evolution to that of a model treatment through excellent use of structuralist and comparative methods.