Early Modern Great Britain and Europe
Début de la Grande Bretagne et de l’Europe Modernes


A welcome addition to the growing corpus of books on the history of information in early modern Europe, _A World of Paper_ by the late John Rule and his former student Ben Trotter elegantly expands our understanding of diplomacy during the reign of the Sun King. The authors ask new questions of documents in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and draw on a vast amount of scholarship on bureaucracy. Rule and Trotter use the methods of scholars like Eric Ash, James Cortada, Jacob Soll, and Cornelia Vismann to bring the study of information within the purview of diplomacy.

Questioning just what is “modern” about bureaucracy with the help of contingency theory, the authors analyze Jean-Baptiste Colbert de Torcy’s foreign affairs department during the latter part of Louis XIV’s reign to show both that this ministry was highly specialized and organized by 1715 and that this system is not so different from bureaucracies of our time. The idea of strict barriers between patrimonial and bureaucratic systems already questioned by many scholars (esp. Peter Burke) is shown to be even more problematic in this close study of one of Louis XIV’s major ministries. Moving away from Weber’s idea of bureaucracy as a machine, the authors emphasize complex human activity and changeable, but sometimes routinized task-based work, as the driving forces in Torcy’s department. Throughout the work the authors embrace contingency theory, which posits that organizational effectiveness reaches its pinnacle when structures are specialized to match the needs and size of the organization. They adopt this theory as a means of introducing flexibility in bureaucracy studies so as to avoid using evidence about the period between 1661 and 1715 as “an index of modernity” (p. 30).

The book is a long one, and almost half of the printed pages are dedicated to comprehensive notes. The text could have been split into multiple monographs (a biography of Torcy, a prosopography of the commis, and a study of the foreign ministry’s portfolio) yet as a whole it is a testament to the life work of Rule. It is premised on the idea that administrative history should not judge the past by a Weberian “idealized rationality” but rather focus on the “actual workings of power” (p. 32). For Rule (1929–2013), the book is the culmination of decades of work, but it is also a publication that reflects Trotter’s contributions and research (pp. xiv-xv). Rule and Trotter
carefully map out the history of the foreign office under Louis XIV as a
bureaucracy in motion, one that depended on unique, skilled individuals
as much as it was shaped by the institutional, social, and economic struc-
tures of the regime.

The title of the book refers to the great waves of paperwork that
streamed into and out of the foreign secretary’s chambers at Versailles, or
later in Paris at Torcy’s private residence. Discussion of the ministry’s
materiality and its inner workings animate this book even more so than
the professional biographies of the clerks or ambassadors working under
Torcy or his father Croissy. The “things” of ministers, clerks, and diplomats
— their mail, horses, pens, gifts, and residences — open up a new appreci-
cation for just how an ancien régime ministry functioned from day to day.
Things move, and so Rule and Trotter describe the movements inherent in
diplomacy, explaining the importance of equerries and the relais de poste,
not to mention the complications of a mobile court. In the vein of Jacob
Soll’s book on Torcy’s uncle, the authors paint a more precise picture of
operations as they took place within the corridors of Versailles. This focus
on the places where diplomatic decisions were made and registers were
filled out brings the typical discussion of diplomatic documents into the
rooms of the past.

Chapter one introduces the major actors and issues at stake in the book.
Rule and Trotter emphasize Louis’ active role in the craft of kingship and
the need for historians to study the activities of royal officers and ministers
thus far neglected. After setting the stage for their analysis of Torcy as an
innovative secretary of state and for diplomacy as a bureaucratic activity,
they introduce the concept of a small group of royal officials “steering”
while non-centralized actors perform the “rowing” to implement policy
(p. 35). Chapters two and three focus on the person of Torcy (1665–1746)
and the context in which he was able to develop his own strategies for
managing French diplomacy and the foreign office. Nephew and godson
of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Torcy eventually succeeded his father, Charles
Colbert de Croissy, as foreign secretary. Apprenticed to his father, well-
traveled and acquainted with diplomatic networks, and mentored by his
father-in-law Pomponne, Torcy’s rise owed much to family networks in
an age where no formal training for diplomats existed. Chapters four
through seven tackle the inner life of Torcy’s department, including the
devoted “pen and paper pushers” who managed its affairs. The authors
challenge the issue of defining bureaucracy by the existence of formal
bureaus, and describe the task-based work and informal groupings that
best suited the department. Further, clerks were more than “cogs in a
mechanism.” They were the socially mobile, well-connected men who
“project[ed] the department’s power” (p. 281). Chapters eight through
eleven analyze the work of Torcy, his clerks, and the broad swath of
ambassadors, spies, propaganda writers, police, and informants who generated the “world of paper” in the department. Crucially, Torcy developed a system of preserving information in archives and registers that allowed him to delegate routine tasks to his clerks. Torcy, stricken by “info-lust” like his uncle and father, exercised such control over diplomatic information that others in the king’s council felt he had too much power in the formulation of foreign policy.

*A World of Paper* belongs to a new kind of political history that contextualizes leaders in their institutional contexts. If Torcy was the “information master” of foreign affairs, his clerks, “brain trust,” and countless contacts were the men who kept the flow of information moving. Combining the study of Torcy himself with his department is an approach opening up new avenues of inquiry for diplomacy scholars.

While the book has the heft of a long thesis, for teaching purposes, chapters could fairly easily be assigned in small sets. Even with two authors, it has a unified tone and clear style. From a historiographical perspective, it is intriguing as a work that brings together research questions of two generations — the post-war historian whose career began with a traditional “great man” topic and a younger scholar with a more technological approach. Together, John Rule and Ben Trotter have written a book that humanizes the world of administration behind the blazing figure of the king. They bring into the light the monarch’s delegation of responsibility as well as Torcy’s reliance on clerks.

Katherine McDonough, *Stanford University*


This book is a fine collection of essays addressing an under-explored topic, namely the relation between Hume the philosopher and Hume the historian. Mark G. Spencer notes in the introduction that apart from scattered remarks on history in Hume’s philosophical treatises and essays, and general comments on the development of the English constitution in his *History of England*, the philosophical content in Hume’s historical writings and the historical content of his philosophy are not fully apparent. And while Hume’s *History of England* was widely read in his day, his historical work tended to be neglected thereafter relative to his philosophical texts. Although some of the claims made by the authors in this volume may be