
Biographers of a long and complex life like that of Vincent Pitts’s subject, Henri IV, king of France and Navarre (1553-1610), have many choices to make. A prominent public life brings its subject into contact with numberless other persons of potential interest to readers: family members, friends, allies, rivals, favourites, ministers, generals, and churchmen. It would be impossible to bring each of these subsidiary characters fully to life in a volume of manageable size. The author must assert a workable balance between detail and broad themes, between a vivid sense of place, time, and social milieu sketched in selected moments, while maintaining a narrative rhythm that makes sense of the subject’s lengthy career. Pitts succeeds admirably in his newest book, *Henri IV of France: His Reign and Age*, the first scholarly English-language biography in twenty-five years of Henri de Bourbon, who was both Henri III of Navarre and Henri IV of France.

Pitts makes generally shrewd decisions about where and when to let his pen linger. Detailed portraits emerge of Henri’s formidable mother, Jeanne d’Albret, of his beguiling early mistress Corisande (Diane d’Andoins, comtesse de Guiche), and of the king’s cousin Prince Henri II de Bourbon-Condé. Pitts might have drawn a more explicit parallel between the way the unpredictable behaviour of this youthful cousin troubled the king’s late years and Henri IV’s own early life as a Prince of the Blood with status and future forming a constant question mark in the affairs of France. Other relatives, associates, and rivals, many of them well-documented elsewhere, are wisely given adequate but shorter shrift in this volume, and accounted for in their interactions with the subject while standing in half-silhouette as personalities: Henri’s first wife Marguerite de Valois, his irresolute father Antoine de Bourbon, the regent Catherine.
de Medici. There are enough character portraits to lend liveliness to the book without slowing the main narrative or deflecting attention from the life of Henri IV.

The general outlines of Henri’s life and reign are familiar. His Valois cousins, Francis II, Charles IX, and Henri III having failed to produce legitimate male heirs, the dynastic order of succession gave Henri a strong claim to the French throne. But the claim was clouded by his adherence to the Protestant faith. Protracted political and military manoeuvres were necessary before Henri IV achieved secure possession of his French heritage, a dramatic story to which Pitts does full justice. Some less well-known incidents also attract this biographer’s interest, such as the conspiracy of Henri’s spurned mistress Henriette d’Entragues, who late in the reign tried to parlay a written promise of marriage she had never relinquished into a dynastic claim for their illegitimate son Gaston-Henri.

Turning his attention to the period after Henri secured the throne, Pitts explains the complicated French system of taxation and fees as part of his depiction of Henri’s success at restoring a measure of stability to the kingdom after decades of civil unrest. But some readers may find that these economic matters have been introduced too late in the book, or that they have been too briefly addressed. A more circumstantial account of the capabilities and contributions of senior members of the civil service of both Navarre and France might also have balanced the attention paid to military leaders and the aristocratic members of Henri’s entourage. Pitts does draw appropriately on the writings of Maximilien de Bethune, duc de Sully, who served in some measure as Henri IV’s minister of finance. Other material might also have been usefully mined for clues as to the mechanisms that facilitated Henri’s career, notably the memoirs of other government officials represented in the bibliography, and—for material on the finances of the Albret family, which provided Henri’s maternal
Pitts is at his best with politics—domestic, international, or interpersonal. Already the biographer of Anne-Marie-Louise d’Orléans (La Grande Mademoiselle), one of the great figures of the Fronde, the seventeenth-century insurrection of the nobility, he was well prepared to tackle another figure from an era when France was fragmented by faction. The book provides clear guidance through the shifting alliances and military ebb and flow of the Wars of Religion that dominated the French landscape in the second half of the sixteenth century. The struggle for power between Henri’s adherents and the rival Guise family during the regency of Catherine de Medici is a complex tale. Henri de Bourbon was obliged simultaneously to maintain the upper hand among the fractious leaders of his own party, both before and after the outbreak of open civil war. Pitts guides the reader through the frequent changes of fortune in the shifting political alliances of the time, and renders intelligible even Henri’s eventual lenient treatment of the treacherous Henri de la Tour d’Auvergne, duc de Bouillon.

In their younger days as leaders of the Huguenot party Bouillon had been an important military ally to Henri, but became a critic of the uneasy entente between Protestant and Catholic France typified by the Edict of Nantes in 1598. Bouillon participated in conspiracies after Henri came to the French throne, and ultimately precipitated armed conflict between France and German Protestant states on the French frontier. Pitts points to strategic advantages that accrued to France from wresting the fortress of Sedan from Bouillon (1606), and

---

to relief at having extinguished the last serious opposition to his royal authority as explanations for Henri’s clemency to the defeated rebel magnate.

The central ambiguity of Henri’s biography has always been, and remains, the question of whether his 1593 conversion from the reformed religion to Catholicism was or was not sincere. No single account of this change will satisfy all readers. Pitts presents his own reasoning cogently and persuasively, arguing that, while political considerations were very much in play, the king’s religious views may never have been at the theologically extreme end of the Huguenot side on most of the points at issue. Pitts draws usefully on subsequent evidence, such as Henri’s impatience with his sister Catherine’s intransigence—she married the Catholic duke of Lorraine, but never left the Protestant church—to argue that he acted in accordance with conscience at least as much as convenience.

The book is structurally framed, first by allusion to, and then by a detailed account of, the assassination of Henri IV by François Ravaillac, a religious fanatic infuriated by what he saw as the king’s too pragmatic approach to religious toleration. Based on a comprehensive survey of available seventeenth century sources, the event is vividly told, sending Pitts’s reader away with a strongly favourable impression of the thoroughness of the research that informs the book.

As in many admirable histories, past and present, some of the best scholarship of this book is in the endnotes, where Pitts volunteers careful documentation, and sometimes assessment, of his sources. One need not agree with the interpretation Pitts assigns to every resource examined, but the volume of reading he has done and the tempered judgment exercised in weighing his sources compel respect. Johns Hopkins Press is to be commended for supporting the level of scholarly documentation provided in this book—a hundred
pages of endnotes, and a thirty-page bibliography—that will be of use to anyone studying the era.

Christopher H. Walker
Penn State University Libraries