

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

French & Francophone Studies Faculty Works

French & Francophone Studies

---

8-1-2016

### Review Of "Dictionnaire Richelieu" Edited By F. Hildesheimer And D. Harai

Jean-Vincent Blanchard

*Swarthmore College*, jblanch1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-french>



Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Jean-Vincent Blanchard. (2016). "Review Of "Dictionnaire Richelieu" Edited By F. Hildesheimer And D. Harai". *H-France Review*. Volume 16, Issue 153.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-french/67>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in French & Francophone Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

H-France Review Vol. 16 (August 2016), No. 153

Françoise Hildesheimer and Dénes Harai, eds., *Dictionnaire Richelieu*. Dictionnaires & Références vol. 33. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2015. 402 pp. Figures and chronology. €70.00 (hb). ISBN 978-2-7453-2866-3.

Review by Jean-Vincent Blanchard, Swarthmore College.

Scholars and students of early modern France and Europe can only welcome news of the publication of a *Dictionnaire Richelieu*, centering on the cardinal-statesman whose actions arguably shaped both France and Europe as we know them today. While there are some excellent reference works on the French seventeenth century, such as François Bluche's *Dictionnaire du Grand Siècle*, no dictionary specifically takes Cardinal Richelieu as its subject.[1] This new book's 120 entries, spread over 360 pages, include some written by a remarkable cast of specialists, from long-established authorities such as Arlette Jouanna, Orest Ranum, and Joseph Bergin, to voices such as Hélène Duccini and Benoist Pierre (authors, respectively, of the smart "Concini" and "Le Clerc du Tremblay" entries). Françoise Hildesheimer, the author of excellent works on the cardinal, editor of his crucial *Testament Politique*, and Conservateur général du Patrimoine at the Archives Nationales, headed the project.[2] Yet even with these highly favorable circumstances, this *Dictionnaire Richelieu* does not quite live up to its promise.

As the foreword announces, this is a volume that centers very much on Richelieu's own life, rather than "La France de Louis XIII." About 20 percent of the entries relate directly to Richelieu, traits of his person, his family and close dependents, and his household. 30 percent concern government, political and judicial institutions, and officers as these topics relate to the statesman. Almost a third of the entries describe political theory, religion, the arts, also in relation with the character; this includes, as well, reputation and historiography in a historical perspective. Setting aside entries on the royal family members and a smattering of narrowly defined historical events, this leaves less space devoted to the foreign affairs for which Richelieu became most famous: 12.5 percent.

This is a volume, then, that will hardly satisfy researchers who want to learn about Richelieu in a European context, about the man who entered the political stage just before the onset of the Thirty Years War and launched the Franco-Spanish War, both conflicts whose conclusion he would not live long enough to see, although he very much played a key role in them. Take note, as well, that information on foreign events or persons is subsumed under headings defined by countries. This perspective—given the absence of an index or referencing system—makes it hard for the reader to locate information: to hear about the Valtellina, the Alpine conduit hotly contested since Henri IV, one must refer to the entry "Italie" (François Boulétreau) even though the Grey Leagues (allied with the Old Swiss Confederacy) controlled the territory. One can guess that this choice was made by default, since there is no entry dedicated to Switzerland. The approach erases characters who do not conform to such a proto-nationalist perspective, in particular those *condottieri*-style military leaders that European potentates hired to wage their wars, such as Spinola. The taciturn Wallenstein, whose military talents and tragic faith so perturbed Richelieu, is nowhere to be found, but that is for another reason:

surprisingly, there is a very long piece on “Transylvanie” (Dénes Harai, one of the two co-editors) but no entry on “Saint-Empire romain germanique.”

Then again, the foreword discloses some interesting aims, the reconciliation of the biographical perspective on the historical actor Richelieu with other methods: “L’approche traditionnelle du ‘grand homme’ a pu être ainsi complétée et confortée, voire renouvelée (?) par les apports divers de la ‘nouvelle’ histoire” (p. 7). The question and quotation marks used here warn the reader not to expect much on that front, first and foremost because the scope of these methods of this “nouvelle histoire” remains, throughout the book, hard to discern. The “nouvelle histoire” at work here is cast in opposition to biography, and yet it does not examine collective representations, nor does it show interest in the demography, material life, or anthropology of Louis XIII’s subjects. Dénes Harai’s “Espace public,” which raised hopes of a piece on how territory, urban landscape, and political power emerged together in early modern France, turns out to be an inventory of places bearing the cardinal’s name. On the subject of the lived experience of Louis’ subjects, the entries “Révolte populaire” (Yves-Marie Bercé) and “Épidémies” (Françoise Hildesheimer) will have to suffice alongside with “Finances” (Alice Motte) and “Fiscalité” (Françoise Bayard) because, according to the editors, “la personnalité même de Richelieu impose de laisser dans l’ombre les aspects concrets de la vie des sujets du roi bien abstraitement considérés par le Cardinal comme nécessaire source de financement de son projet politique” (p. 8). But it is the same Hildesheimer who, in her luminous biography of the cardinal, highlighted how much his ambitious political and military endeavors relied on France’s population numbers, a wealth that Spain could never match.[3] The editor’s “nouvelle histoire,” then, turns out to be narrowly defined in terms of quantitative considerations and the echoes of popular *émotions*, in short, to strict matters of governance as Richelieu the man himself encountered them.

There is still, however, through such “volontariste” optics (p. 7), rich opportunity to create a complete dictionary on Richelieu. Alas, the book’s problems here only deepen. Consider that the book is much more a collection of small essays organized in alphabetical order than a dictionary. Since the entries range from the narrowest (Orest Ranum on “Antoine Bertier,” the editor of an essential biography of the cardinal and, nevertheless, a minor character) to the widest (“Guerre de Trente-Ans” by Claude Michaud), some omissions were unavoidable. The foreword, again, tries to justify this situation, and it does so with puzzling considerations, asserting, “là où la biographie se déploie au fil de la chronologie, le dictionnaire découpe, sélectionne,” as if putting together a narrative did not involve selection and arrangement of information (p. 7); it then alludes to publishing constraints, “le moment vient inéluctablement où il faut lier la gerbe imparfaite des notices et la livrer à l’impression.” A pretty metaphor and a *faute avouée* can hardly render the book’s shortcomings *à moitié pardonnés*, especially when the good work of many specialists, when it does not teeter next to gaping voids, stand uncomfortably next to some uneven or underwhelming contributions.

The book covers aspects of Richelieu’s personal life and circle most effectively. The entry on “Fortune et succession,” written by Joseph Bergin, is precise and highly informative. Concerning Richelieu’s collaborators, “Clientèles” (Michel Cassan) and “Léon Bouthillier” (Madeleine Haehl) do a fine job as well, and the entry on the notary Pierre Parque (Claire Béchu) brings much-needed light on a heretofore lesser-known character. Aspects of psychohistory, which Marvick pioneered with two biographies on both the cardinal and Louis XIII,[4] are absent, although the article “Femmes” (Françoise Hildesheimer) opens some interesting religious and political perspectives on the cardinal’s relationship with women. It is a puzzle, after that, to understand why “Lopez” (Françoise Hildesheimer) was deemed worthy of an entry and not the faithful secretary Le Masle.

While the two articles “Sorbonne” (François Boulétreau) and “Sorbonne (collège et chapelle)” (Alexandre Gady) tackle Richelieu’s early position as a *proviseur* there and then the architecture of the Collège, a less than keen interest for Richelieu the man of the church might begin to explain the many oversights of the dictionary. The cardinal was an ordained priest and one of the highest-ranking prelates

in the Catholic Church of his time; obviously, religion informed all aspects of his thinking and activities, including governance. Entries on government, institutions, and officers form another satisfying group. Christophe Blanquie, in particular, wrote four nice and synthetically conceived pieces, including “Gouverneurs” and “Intendants.” That said, as far the application of justice related to Richelieu the churchman, there is nothing on special courts and secret police, nor on the concepts of obedience and punishment, which is surprising, given how Hildesheimer herself had insisted on the crucial nature of these subjects for the churchman in her previous work.[5] More disappointment awaits anyone who seeks information squarely on religion, and that in spite of well-crafted pieces on the “Le Clerc du Tremblay” (Benoist Pierre), “Église de France” (Claude Michaud), and “Gallicanisme” (Jotham Parsons). Theology, Preaching, Controversy, Heresy, Council of Trent, and Spirituality are not the subject of specific entries. Not to exhaust the patience of the reader with an enumeration of other exclusions in the areas of the political thought, the arts, literature, rhetoric, and Richelieu’s legacy, let’s simply state that the above provide an idea of their number.

The foreword of the *Dictionnaire* claims that the book’s “personnalisation” lent itself fruitfully to a wide variety of scholarship and writing styles, but this reviewer found in this instance more evidence of half-hearted editorial command. Articles that succeed, such as “Gaston d’Orléans” (Pierre Gatulle), “Marie de Médicis” (Jean-François Dubost), and “Sully” (Laurent Avezou), are the ones that seamlessly weave a general biographical outlook with indication of what was at stake for the cardinal in these people’s actions. Contrast that with an essential article for the book, “Louis XIII” (Jacqueline Martin-Bagnaudez), which turns out to be a pedestrian summary of the king’s life, too short on information on the fascinating tensions between king and minister—one more reason to lament the absence of an article on “Favoris.” Entries on various foreign countries differ too, although here it’s more a question of style than quality: “Angleterre” (Stéphane Jettot) takes an interesting historiographical point of view, “Espagne” (Alain Hugon) and “Lorraine” (Marie-Catherine Vignal-Souleyreau) adopt a first-rate synthetic approach, while “Franche-Comté” (François Pernot) remains largely narrative. The different scope of entries is also evident within the particular category of historical characters. Wisely, Olivier Poncet limited his account of Mazarin’s existence to what matters directly to the topic of this *Dictionnaire*, a choice that would have made the text on Anne d’Autriche (Barbara Gaehtgens) much more effective. Then there are some curious deficiencies. The article “Réforme du Royaume” (Françoise Hildesheimer) narrates the succession of initiatives that sought to streamline France’s government and institutions but neglects to state specifically what these reforms actually were. For all of her expertise, was Françoise Hildesheimer the best author to write on “Économie,” especially when you contrast that entry with Françoise Bayard’s own take on “Fiscalité,” a model of how a reference work should provide both succinct information and reliable data? Harking back to the editors’ stated method, and setting aside the modest attention to a vaguely defined “nouvelle histoire,” it appears that the Richelieu of the dictionary is the lone actor who operated at the highest reach of French monarchical government, less as the real human being, and even much less as the cardinal-diplomat and military leader that he also was, all that against an ill-defined background of intrigues and artistic interests.

While surely there are some gems to be found in the volume’s entries, in the midst of many other good ones, some notable for the synthesis they propose, others for their novel scholarship, the volume struggles to achieve what can reasonably be expected from a dictionary on Richelieu. It’s not the least of the work’s oddities that its principle shortcomings are highlighted in the foreword, in what sounds much more like an apology than a *captatio benevolentiae*.

At its core, this *Dictionnaire Richelieu* displays an unfortunate lack of editorial control. References at the end of each entry are another place to look, since these are regularly rife with typos. The five images included at the end, including an unreadable map of the siege of La Rochelle, add little, except for a portrait of the intriguing Zaga-Christ, the subject of an instructive piece that is marred by a sensational style. The editors acknowledge that their dictionary to some degree is the “impitoyable reflet” of the

current field of history (p. 7). Elaborating on what is meant by this observation would be more generous to the broader field of French historiography, which earns no laurels in such a context.

This *Dictionnaire*, in the end, does not really seem to know its own goals. Given its omissions, it cannot function as a research instrument. The editors express the wish that its readers will enjoy serendipitous discoveries as they go from one entry to another, following the cross-references. That would work if those cross-references had been rigorously created and controlled—noting, for example, that the entry “Effiat” (Alice Motte) omits to mention that Cinq-Mars, the infamous conspirator, was Effiat’s own son. The *Dictionnaire* neither can be some sort of a writerly “*dictionnaire amoureux*” because in such projects unity of writing makes up for the diversity of interest. Maybe, with serious trimming and an index, the book could have succeeded in the English academic tradition of the “Companion to.” That would have done justice to the many great contributions to this *Dictionnaire*, contributions that amply justify a trip to the library and some attentive, albeit selective, reading.

#### NOTES

[1] François Bluche, ed., *Dictionnaire du Grand Siècle 1589-1715* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

[2] Françoise Hildesheimer, *Richelieu* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011) and *Relectures de Richelieu* (Paris: Publisud, 2000).

[3] *Richelieu*, p. 432.

[4] Elizabeth W. Marvick, *The Young Richelieu* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) and *Louis XIII* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1986).

[5] *Richelieu*, pp. 324, 351.

Jean-Vincent Blanchard  
Swarthmore College  
[jblanch1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:jblanch1@swarthmore.edu)

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172