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The Birth of Absolutism: A History of France, 1598-1661 (European Studies Series)

Yves-Marie Bercé

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The Birth of Absolutism: A History of France, 1598-1661 (European Studies Series) Yves-Marie Bercé Yves-Marie Bercé's *The Birth of Absolutism* offers a refreshingly original approach to the history of France between the Edict of Nantes and the personal rule of Louis XIV, a period dominated by the names of two cardinals, Richelieu and Mazarin. Berce brings to the task not only familiarity with the sources and with the French historiography, but also a thorough acquaintance with the large body of English and American research upon seventeenth-century France. This has enabled him to escape the diminishing perspective of an older French school, the 'grand history told from Paris' which subordinated the course of events to an account of the inevitable triumph of the 'Royal state'. Bercé's vision of French history is not of a 'one-way ticket to the future'. The French Crown is beset by aristocratic faction only too ready to avail itself of royal minorities, religious dissent or provincial grievances in the pursuit of its own ambitions. Richelieu is not only the brilliant strategist with a mission to undermine Habsburg hegemony in Europe, he is also a political gambler, staking the very stability of the kingdom on an interventionist foreign policy which was sometimes saved from utter disaster only by the fortunes of battle. Mazarin is not only the mentor of Louis XIV, but a deft operator with an uncanny ability to come back from the political dead. Bercé's own researches into provincial history are put to good effect in showing how the fiscal and military demands of war created social and economic strains which provoked regular peasant risings and culminated in the more organised and threatening opposition of the Fronde. The story of early seventeenth-century France is thus one which might have turned out very differently. It is still, in the end, a story of the rise of absolutism: but it is a highly resistible, and often fiercely resisted rise.

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