

## The Reasons for Two-and-a-Half-Century-Late Biographies of Louis XIII and Cardinal de Richelieu: A Review

Takao ABE

What is the point of writing a biography of a prominent early seventeenth-century French king and his minister as late as the last quarter of this century? One knows that historical events result from several forces, including impersonal factors, and not from one individual's decision. While numerous works have been written on impersonal aspects of France, there are nearly as many works on individual French monarchs and their associates.

When one focusses on the early seventeenth century, one can find biographies of Louis XIII or Cardinal de Richelieu. The earliest descriptions include Jean Héroard (1551-1628) and Tallemant des Reaux,<sup>1</sup> both of whom were contemporaries of Louis XIII. Since the mid-twentieth century, attempts have been made to discuss Louis and Richelieu in connexion with the growing absolutism of France.<sup>2</sup> Also, A. D. Lublinskaya's Marxist interpretation of Louis' rule was introduced into the English historiography in 1968.<sup>3</sup> During these last dozen years, those two prominent Frenchmen became more popular biographical topics and were discussed, for example, by Roland Mousnier<sup>4</sup>, Richard Bonney,<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Knecht, J. H. Elliott, Elizabeth W. Marvick and A. Lloyd Moote.

Although the latest biographers' narrative methods may be different from those of Louis' contemporaries, that may not be the only justifi-

cation for the latest historians who have chosen to write new biographies. Elliott, Marvick, Knecht and Moote — the last four among the above — provide either revisionist or distinctive perspectives on Louis XIII and Cardinal de Richelieu. It will be worthwhile to consider why they have dealt with the French king and his minister as well as how valuable or problematic their analyses are.

Louis XIII (1601-43) and Cardinal de Richelieu, or Armand-Jean du Plessis (1585-1642), lived in the early seventeenth century. While still a boy, Louis succeeded his father Henri IV in 1610. Louis' majority was proclaimed after the regency of Queen Marie de Medici ended in October 1613. His reign lasted until his death in 1643. Richelieu (1585-1642) was the Bishop of Luçon from 1608 onwards. In 1616, he became Secretary of State in the court though he was dismissed in the following year. It was in 1622 that Richelieu became a cardinal. Two years later Richelieu entered the council of state and soon served Louis XIII as his chief minister.

In Robert J. Knecht's work, one finds the conventional emphasis on Cardinal de Richelieu's central rôle in the French politics. Knecht's *Richelieu*<sup>6</sup> is a biography of the cardinal as chief minister. He concentrates on Richelieu's ministerial career; including 'his

rise to power, the opposition he encountered, his aims and policies both at home and abroad, his interest in the navy and oversea trade, his methods of government' and finally his 'patronage of learning and the arts' (p. ix). In Knecht's assessment of Richelieu, the cardinal was 'intelligent, resourceful, single-minded, energetic, cultivated and devout' but also 'insatiably ambitious, proud, ruthless, grasping, vindictive and at times heartless' (218). For instance, Knecht describes Richelieu's paradoxical religious policy: at home, he deprived Protestant Huguenots of their military and political privileges, but abroad he supported Protestant powers to fight against the Catholic empire of Habsburg (218). It was to Richelieu that the author attributes the growth of royal power. The cardinal is considered to have been a founder of royal absolutism in the sense that he replaced existing local civil and judicial officials with *intendants* who were regular agents of the central government (219). Knecht writes that the French monarchy became stronger and more widely respected during the cardinal's ministry of 1624-42 (220).

This emphasis on Richelieu's political rôle is shared by J. H. Elliott. He compares this French minister with a contemporary Spanish minister in the context of European politics. In his *Richelieu and Olivares*,<sup>7</sup> Elliott's two targets, Richelieu and Gaspar de Guzmán Olivares (1587-45) were principal ministers of France and Spain.<sup>8</sup> These two figures were in the political arena during the long rivalry between strong French and declining Spain. Richelieu died in 1642 being still in power while Olivares resigned his offices in 1643. Elliott illustrates the similarities between those two ministers in terms of their personality and policies. Both Richelieu and Olivares were cautious and ambitious, and they shared an inclination for grandiose designs (13-31).

Both attempted to create societies which would be more obedient, deferential, domestically peaceful, and victorious in war (166). In Elliott's opinion, although their lives appear to have ended differently, Richelieu's seeming triumph was more like Olivares' defeat (165). Elliott states, 'If Richelieu achieved his triumph by a hair's breadth, the margin by which Olivares was defeated was correspondingly close' (165).

However less masterful Richelieu might have been, Elliott's comparative portrayal of the cardinal demonstrates the important rôle of personality and personal commitments in royal policy making. In Elliott's work, Richelieu was still a great politician who attempted to impose Roman Catholic conformity and spent much energy on domestic and foreign policies. In the author's comparison of France with Spain, Richelieu is portrayed as the creator of French domestic and external policies.

Yet, was the French policy under Richelieu really his own creation? Such a question is posed by Elizabeth Wirth Marvick. Marvick's *The Young Richelieu*<sup>9</sup> seeks the seeds of Richelieu's pursuit of French economic independence and royal absolutism. Marvick's psychological — 'psychoanalytical' in her words — approach is applied to his early life. Her analysis is based on a double premise that he became an innovative political leader in the royal court, and that his economic and political 'entrepreneurship' had an origin in his childhood experience. Taking that presupposition for granted, she describes his parents' origins and his life until his promotion to Secretary of State in 1616. Regrettably, since her discussion ends without mentioning the cardinal's golden age from 1624 to 1642, the reader may wonder about the connexion between his early experience and his later strong leadership. Nevertheless,

the book is a well-written account of Richelieu's life before his cardinalate. One still wonders, however, whether Richelieu or his master King Louis XIII was really the predominant political figure of early-seventeenth-century France.

Marvick applies her psychological analysis also to Louis XIII in her *Louis XIII: The Making of a King*.<sup>10</sup> Although she herself denies that her biography is a 'psychohistory', it is still a detailed account of the interaction between the inner and outer worlds of Louis XIII from his birth to his youth (xiv). Based on the diary of Jean Héroard — court physician, scholar and political advisor — she describes little Louis' ingestion, digestion and excretion. By providing accounts of his relationship with his parents, sister, brother, and nurse, as well as with royal servants, she also analyses their influence on the growth of Louis XIII's personality. Compared with her biography of Richelieu, her work on Louis XIII is a vivid account of the king's childhood because of her access to Héroard's observations of the court. As with her study of Richelieu, her methodology in this work seems to be based on triple presumptions that Louis' childhood experiences had influence on the formation of his personality, that his personality was reflected in his rule, and finally that the adult king — not his ministers — played a predominant part in royal government.<sup>11</sup> This last assumption especially is never proven in her work. As well, her story of Louis ends suddenly at the age of sixteen.

Although Marvick's approach in both books is methodologically interesting and refreshing, one needs to consider the logical approach and theme of her works. In the first place, she seems to confuse *explanatory* approaches with *confirmative* ones; or in other words, hypotheses-seeking with hypotheses-testing. Her premise connecting childhood experience

with policy-making is groundless because she does not provide the reader with enough data or case studies that has led to her hypothetical presumption. She applies such a groundless hypothesis to her *confirmative* case studies of Richelieu and Louis XIII. Furthermore, her books are not simply confirmative case studies of psychological analysis which verify that many aspects of a young life have influence on one's future deeds. She does not attempt to prove her hypothetical premise about the influence of one's childhood experience on one's personality; instead, she simply assumes that it was influential. She does not even touch on the great deeds of the mature Louis or Richelieu. One may wonder, for example, whether or not Louis' first sixteen years really determined the destiny of his entire life. With no conclusion in either of her biographies, she does not seem to analyse the later deeds of politicians or rulers. In order to put an emphasis on Louis' childhood and youth as a vital determinant of his later rule, for instance, one should not only elucidate his early experiences but also refer to his later actions and establish their relationship. If she really intends to connect Richelieu's and Louis' later actions with their childhood, there may be published, in the near future, some sequels to her biographies. At the moment, her works deserve credit just for their detailed descriptions of two important public figures' early years.

An attempt to analyse the intimate relationship between Louis' personality and his reign can be found in A. Lloyd Moote's *Louis XIII, the Just*.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Marvick's work, Moote's biography deals with the entire forty-three years of Louis' life. In a chronological style, Moote discusses firstly the making of the young Louis' personality, secondly the adolescent king's attempt at his personal rule, thirdly the adult monarch's policy-making in

partnership with his minister Richelieu, and finally the ruler's 'political, cultural and personal legacy' during the last years of his life (p. 3). In Moote's view, Louis grew up to be a decisive and tenacious king who acted in his own right (291-7). Moote's positive view of Louis challenges the belief in the dominant political rôle of the cardinal.

While Moote does not deny the active rôle of Richelieu for Louis' reign, the king, in Moote's portrayal, never hides behind Richelieu. Moote affirms that Louis presided over more political decisions than any other French ruler (296). Richelieu is described as an important partner of the king in making and executing royal political programmes (1554-74). Moote insists that, although Richelieu fully supported Louis with his genius, the cardinal would have been unable to rule France without his king's approval (296). In the author's view, it was Louis XIII, not Richelieu, who had the ultimate power and capability for political decisions.

Another feature of Moote's biography is his description of the king's involvement in the complicated human relationships within the court. As the head of the royal government, Louis was not able to escape household and family conflicts. In his childhood, his father Henri IV was assassinated (39-42). Also, he broke with his mother, Queen Marie de Medici, and exiled her to Blois (100-01). He had to face conspiracy of his wife Anne of Austria (193-4). Moreover, he had to deal with many courtiers as their king, and not just as one of them as did Richelieu.

This study has reviewed five late-twentieth-century biographies of Cardinal de Richelieu and Louis XIII. Why do historians still write biographies of Louis XIII and Richelieu? There are three possible answers to the question. Firstly, it may be convenient to write

a biography, for it already has the whole setting for a life story, from birth to death. Although biographers do not necessarily have to follow that setting, they do not have to create the entire structure of biography from A to Z. Secondly, Richelieu's or Louis XIII's name itself may have appeal to popular audience. Before the content of a biography is examined, the main character's name will draw attention of readers.

There is, however, another — and the most important — key to the answer to that question: the French royal government in the seventeenth century. The French court in the early seventeenth century was still halfway from mediaeval household government to a government bureaucracy. Whether capable or not, the king had all the potential power. This power included almost everything, such as symbolic power, administrative power, legal power, military command, spiritual power and probably personal charisma. In order to exercise such power, however, the monarch had to understand and use the complex network of personal relationships for his own objectives. Thus, the 'government', in the sense of the royal court, depended on the king's intelligence and ability to deal with others. Moreover, the degree of successful administration depended, in the end, on the king's or his minister's personality.

From this perspective, the biographies of Louis or Richelieu have another importance — biographical significance — for the study of France. Elliott analyses the rôle of Richelieu from an international standpoint. Knecht draws the entire picture of Richelieu as royal minister. Marvick and Moote focus on the making of personality. These biographies are by themselves pieces of biographical significance. And yet, one should not simply choose to write a biography of historical figures of the above reasons, since such an

enterprise involves problems.

There are problems in writing a biography. In the first place, the obvious point of biographies is that there is always a main character throughout the story. As a natural consequence, focussing on a main character restricts the biographer's viewpoint. The biographies of Louis XIII see incidents and actions from the king's standpoint, while those of Richelieu do the same thing from the perspective of the cardinal. The writers are limited by their subjects. In Louis' biographies, on the one hand, Richelieu's involvement in the politics gets neglected. In the accounts of Richelieu, on the other hand, the cardinal's decisions and actions come to the forefront. And yet, both the biographies of Louis XIII and those of Richelieu are, after all, the story of the French royal court during the early seventeenth century.

In the second place, no matter whether Louis or Richelieu is the main character, one should question the legitimacy of attributing political actions to one individual's personal will. The seventeenth-century French royal household was governed not only by a monarch personally but also by the sense of obligation and the desire for patronage from the dynasty. As well, the French royal court consisted of a complex network of human relationships which ultimately converged on the king. Although childhood and youthful experience may have had some influence on the king's or the chief minister's policy makings, Louis did not escape the fact that he was the legal head of royal government. Thus, other aspects like those have to be considered in order to analyse French court politics.

In the third place, only when both the individuals and the entire court are taken into consideration, can one write a story of the entire royal court. It may be still possible to

discuss Louis from the standpoint of the whole royal government, because he was the king. Richelieu, however, was still just the king's chief minister no matter how much of a genius and how influential he may have been. Since Richelieu did not belong to royal kinship groups, his attitude towards the domestic royal government, as an outsider, was not identical with the royal family's view. Thus, his biography would not necessarily disclose an aspect of the royal court, which was the setting for making royal policies.

In the fourth place, one may well wonder if the lives of the king and his royal minister explain the government policies and events in France. Through the works on Richelieu especially, one can see the political trends and cultural atmosphere in France and other countries. A biography is basically an account of one specific individual and his/her social circle. However prominent or influential he/she may have been, the story of his/her life cannot fully embody all the experience of the whole nation. One will also need to review the national conditions of life of other social groups in seventeenth-century France.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, the fundamental problem lies in the historical significance of biography. One should consider what biographical significance means to history. Biographical significance is one thing, but historical significance is another. No matter what one prominent person did in the past, historical significance is based on several forces, including impersonal factors, and not simply from one individual's action.

This paper has already referred to the framework of the French royal household government as the third reason for writing a biography. It has also logically extracted biographical significance from historical significance. But conversely, one cannot reach his-

torical significance from biographical significance. The logical inconsistency of such an attempt is obvious. Let us suppose that there is a these which says, 'A (e.g. French politics) is important. Thus B (e.g. household government) is vital. Therefore, C (e.g. king's (personality) has importance'. One may be able to prove Statement C by starting with Statement A, but cannot verify A by conversely proving C, B and A in order unless A, B and C, are all 'necessary and sufficient' conditions. One cannot verify a sufficient condition (A) by confirming a necessary condition (C). The five works discussed in this review seem to have biographical significance. Yet none of them logically proves its historical significance. Instead, they either illogically impose on the reader their paradoxes or simply confuse historical significance with biographical significance. The biographers may be merely satisfied with biographical significance of their work. So long as one is aware of the limit of biographical analysis and use it properly, however, biography could still enhance the scope of historical study.

<sup>1</sup>Héroard was a contemporary court physician for Henri IV. In the nineteenth century, Héroard's diary was edited as *Journal de l'enfante et de la première jeunesse de Louis XIII* (ed. Eudore Soulié & Edouard de Barthélemy, 2 vols., Paris, 1868). Also, Tallemant's biographical work of both Louis XIII and Louis XIV was published by L. J. Monmerique. See Monmerique, *Les historiettes de Tallemant des Reaux* (Paris: Paulin, 1800-1881).

<sup>2</sup>Victor Lucien Tapié [1900-1974], *France in the Age of Louis XIII and Richelieu* (trans. D. McN. Lockie, London & New York: Macmillan, 1974); C. V. Wedgewood [1910-], *Richelieu and the French Monarchy* (new rev. ed., New York: Collier, 1962); William F.

Church (ed.), *The Impact of Absolutism in France: National Experience under Richelieu, Mazarin, and Louis XIV* (New York: Wiley, 1969); & William F. Church, *Richelieu and Reason of State* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972)

<sup>3</sup>Aleksandra Dmitrievna Lublinskaya, *French Absolutism: The Crucial Phase, 1620-1629* (London Cambridge UP, 1968)

<sup>4</sup>Mousnier, *L'homme rouge, ou La vie du cardinal de Richelieu, 1585-1642* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1992)

<sup>5</sup>Bonney, *Society and Government in France under Richelieu and Mazarin, 1624-61* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988)

<sup>6</sup>Robert J. Knecht, *Richelieu* (London & New York: Longman, 1990, pp. ix, 259)

<sup>7</sup>J. H. Elliott, *Richelieu and Olivares* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984, pp. viii, 189)

<sup>8</sup>Olivares served the Spanish King Felipe IV.

<sup>9</sup>Elizabeth Wirth Marvick, *The Young Richelieu: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Leadership* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1983, pp. x, 276)

<sup>10</sup>Marvick, *Louis XIII: The Making of a King* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1986, pp. xx, 278)

<sup>11</sup>For example, Marvick asserts that, in 1617, the sixteen-year-old Louis played an important rôle from behind in the assassination of Concino Concini, the major courtier of Marie de Medici (1986, 175-200).

<sup>12</sup>A. Lloyd Moote, *Louis XIII, the Just* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989, pp. xiv, 401)

<sup>13</sup>E.g. Emmanuel le Roy Ladrie, *Les paysans de Languedoc* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1966); and Sharon Kettering, *Judicial Politics and Urban Revolt in Seventeenth-Century France: The Parlement of Aix, 1629-1659* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978)