

The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System. By Jacob Soll. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. 304 pp. \$65.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-472-11690-4.

In this analysis of Jean-Baptiste Colbert's efforts to collect, organize, digest, and control information, Jacob Soll gracefully blends narrative detail, historical context, and thematic scope. After defining several ambitious goals, Soll fulfills them in a succinct text of less than two hundred pages, and the eleven figures in the main text follow the same principle of strategic economy. For those left thirsting for more, the concluding hundred pages of footnotes and bibliography

are a treasure trove of insight and resources. Soll's scholarship can be seen as a complement to Jean Boutier's edited volume of 2008, which focused on Colbert's head librarian, Étienne Baluze, and which also broached the interplay between information and power (Étienne Baluze, 1630–1718, PULIM). The seventeenth century rendered by Soll is greatly enriched by his portrayal of information management as practiced by this key figure in the administration of Louis XIV. The author also points to tension, still with us today, between selective access to state information and the interests of the public sphere.

Louis XIV, the Sun King, enhanced the prerogatives of the French monarchy at the expense of the Parlement and the nobility, and Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–83) was a key figure in advancing the absolutist agenda in the first half of Louis' lengthy reign. Colbert, who "spent his entire youth training to manage large fortunes," proved his worth to the young king's political guardian and France's de facto king, Cardinal Mazarin, by improving the methods used in the accounting of Mazarin's fortune (37). Colbert, whose professional background was financial and mercantile, soon became indispensable to Mazarin, who at his death recommended him to Louis as someone who could be trusted.

Colbert became invaluable to Louis for his ability to collect, produce, manage, and police information. Soll shows us how this administrator and accountant, "with the resources of a nation-state at his disposal . . . amassed enormous libraries and state, diplomatic, industrial, colonial, and naval archives; hired researchers and archival teams; founded scientific academies and journals; ran a publishing house; and managed an international network of scholars" (7). Colbert harnessed different strands of information traditions—humanist, diplomatic, ecclesiastic, legal, financial, and military—and put them to a totalizing effect. He "actively trained information managers who would find, copy, catalog, and bring him documentation as he needed it for his day-to-day affairs" (120). These agents gathered information and accumulated reports in cross-referenced registers. From the world of banking Colbert introduced accounting procedures and the system of double entry and even made pocket-sized financial digests (embellished with gold) for Louis XIV to carry and reference.

Colbert was a bibliophile, but with a difference. His personal collection "consciously integrated a traditional humanist library and practical state and industrial administrative archive on a large scale" (2). Soll makes an interesting contrast between Gabriel Naudé, Mazarin's erudite humanist–scholarly librarian, with Colbert, whose avidity to learn had different motivations and was harnessed to different ends. Before his death Colbert's private collection of books and documents was almost as large as that of the Royal Library, which, by no accident, had been relocated within a block of Colbert's residence, available for ready consultation by his agents.

Colbert placed a premium on documents for establishing claims of all kinds, and it is telling that when he orchestrated the surprise arrest of Nicolas Fouquet (Louis' early superintendent of finances), he took strict measures to ensure that all of Fouquet's papers were seized and delivered directly to him. This exemplifies the side of Colbert Soll shows quite well: he was interested not only in gathering and organizing information but also in controlling its uses. Though Colbert founded scientific academies, he shifted scholarship to the service of the absolutist state. He did not allow equal access to the documents in either his private library or the Royal Library and organized "an up-to-date information and propaganda

machine” (144). He created a Council of Police charged with exerting greater control over the Paris book trade, a strategy that dramatically reduced the number of Paris printshops and effectively restricted the Paris trade.

Soll carefully describes Colbert’s system, then gives instances of the system in action. He shows Colbert and his agents marshaling documents and reports to assert claims in favor of the monarchy. The final chapter, a brief coda, describes the rapid dismemberment of the system in the wake of Colbert’s death.

The *Information Master* is fascinating on many counts. Soll effectively ties Colbert’s efforts to preceding traditions of information gathering and organization but also shows links to future endeavors. Colbert’s brother, employed as part of Colbert’s network of agents, created the first “systematic archive of diplomatic documents” (156). The German polymath Gottfried Leibniz, when appointed head librarian in Wolfenbüttel, visited Colbert’s head librarian, Étienne Baluze, to learn his methods of filing, cataloging, and document retrieval. Soll also sees in Colbert a foreshadowing of the eighteenth-century *encyclopédistes*—not for their philosophical views, of course, but for their attentiveness to precision in quotidian production and in the least detail of the shoproom floor.

Brett B. Bodemer, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo