



Nicholls, Sophie. Political Thought in the French Wars of Religion

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Nicholls, Sophie.

Political Thought in the French Wars of Religion.

Ideas in Context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv, 269. ISBN 978-1-108-84078-1 (hardcover) £75.

Sophie Nicholls's first book is partly a result of her PhD completed at St. Anne's College, Oxford. Her purpose in writing this book is twofold: repositioning the political thought of the League at the heart of the French Wars of Religion, and studying how Early Modern ideas were framed according to classical ones. She uses French, Latin, or English sources coming from three different repertoires: little known or neglected League texts, works published before the League, and texts produced by competitors or opponents of the League. Nicholls also relies on an extensive knowledge of the historiography of the League and on very recent works. Only a few fundamental French works are lacking (Le Roux about the *mignons*, Crouzet about the Old Testament, Maillet-Rao about the seventeenth-century *dévots*).

Nicholls's analysis takes place in eight chapters. The first one materializes ideas, stating what kind of texts the League published and formulating hypotheses about its social or cultural role. Chapter 2 nuances the traditional opposition between Leaguers and *politiques* and shows that both share a conception of power based on common good, justice, and custom. Dedicated to the laws of succession, chapter 3 shows how Leaguers defined the people by its *sanior pars* and attributed specific roles to the Parliament and the States Generals. Chapter 4 studies the resurgence of medieval debates on the power of the church, and chapter 5 studies the controversies about the power of the pope in France. Chapter 6 shows how Leaguers instrumentalized scholasticism to define tyranny and legitimize tyrannicide. Chapter 7 seeks to clarify the relationship between political philosopher Jean Bodin and the League and to specify more precisely the concepts of sovereignty, obedience, and resistance. Finally, chapter 8 examines how the Leaguers defined *patria* by loyalty to the church and analyzes the links of the League with Spain and English exiles.

The results of Nicholls's research are numerous and very stimulating. First, it is a richly documented contribution to the recent and still fragile rehabilitation of the League. Considering it collectively, Nicholls reveals all the complexity of the League's thought, both in its influences (medieval and modern, French and European), in its dissemination (variety of arguments,

networks of authors), and in the quantity, diversity, and technicality of the subjects addressed (laws of succession, *patrie*, popular sovereignty, *police*, etc.). Challenging the relevance of radicalism as a concept applying to the League, this book reveals how elements long considered as opposed are visibly linked in the texts: the confrontation between Leaguers and *politiques* or medieval *regimen* and modern *reason of state* is opportunely weakened by a very fine rereading of what scholars consider indisputable facts. This innovative interpretation shapes a brand-new framework by bringing complexity through a perfectly clear demonstration. As a result, Nicholls's work is both an extremely necessary historiographical rehabilitation and a very stimulating scholarly reconstruction. One might be surprised that a book in which the League occupies such a central place does not mention it in its title, which gives the slightly distorted impression of a general work, whereas the major interest of Nicholls's book lies precisely in the fact that it considers in a coherent way the thought of a well-defined group.

Indeed, this book defines "political thought" as a mosaic of a large number of influences whose richness deserves to be explored. Guided by the work of Annabel Brett, her supervisor, Nicholls identifies scholasticism as the most important of these influences: she demonstrates very convincingly how medieval controversies were revived in the sixteenth century on multiple issues. On the other hand, she remains more implicit as to the interpretation of these results, which she sometimes describes as a "fresh synthesis" (15) of old elements, sometimes as a simple "stretching" (211) of medieval material to a modern context. This book not only reintegrates sixteenth-century political thought into a medieval tradition but also uses the League as a starting point for a rereading of the many intellectual debates of its time. Contextualizing its thought into a wider debate helps both to define the specificities of the League and to measure its influence, even on a European scale or during the seventeenth century. However, the links between the ideas and their authors could have been better clarified by exploiting data on their political positioning in order to embody the ideas in greater depth. Pierre de L'Estoile should especially have been critically identified and quoted from the recent edition of his *Registre-journal* (Geneva: Droz, since 1992) rather than from the Brunet edition (1875–1906).

One of the major strengths of Nicholls's book is placing the sources at its heart. A precise selection of extracts adds great robustness to the demonstration and makes it possible, through precise and long-term work, to approach in

a concrete way a vast and complex debate. The demonstration is articulated according to ideas and, inside each chapter, to sources echoing each other. This fine work of reconstructing the debate shows on which points the different actors were opposed and how they argued against each other. Moreover, this horizontal reconstruction is associated with a vertical one—the archaeology of ideas already discussed. This thought-provoking combination allows us to dive into the heart of the political life of the moment. As a result, Nicholls goes far beyond the level of analysis of a text or group of texts and, rising to that of an entire context, shows how the League's thought functions as a system.

This book considers political thought in a way that is both fully embodied (paying attention to argumentation and the ways in which the different parties confront each other) and original (thanks to a selection of little-known texts and a specific way of questioning them), offering us a look into the heart of the debate that ran through sixteenth-century France. Focusing on a well-defined subject (the political thought of the League) at the heart of a long and rich history (from medieval scholasticism to the seventeenth-century *dévots*), it proves to be extremely stimulating for anyone studying the cultural history of the French Wars of Religion.

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