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The diaries and journals of the French chronicler Pierre L’Estoile have long been a staple of histories of the French Wars of Religion. All have treated L’Estoile as an objective source. Tom Hamilton is the first historian to examine L’Estoile as a historical agent and as an “individual negotiating and commemorating the controversies of his time” (p. 204). Hamilton blends elements of biography and microhistory into a critical analysis of how L’Estoile acquired, engaged, and selected the materials that shaped his works. The result is a more critical understanding of L’Estoile’s role in fashioning our understanding of the religious wars. It also provides a fascinating portrait of his private life, his social world, his role as a collector of curiosities, and his own personal experiences of living through the era of the French religious wars.

Hamilton first examines L’Estoile’s material world, his household and his possessions. L’Estoile lived in a three-story house in one of the wealthiest districts in Paris, but it was modest in comparison with other royal secretaries who lived in larger buildings. Hamilton analyzes the inventory of L’Estoile’s estate, made in 1611 after his death, and compares it with those of thirty-five other royal officeholders between 1574 and 1609. In contrast to other royal officers who possessed devotional paintings of the Virgin Mary or saints, L’Estoile favored Old Testament themes (“The History of Lot”) or “vanitas paintings” (“The Tree of Life”) that stressed the ephemeral nature of life and the vanity of earthly pleasures. From this Hamilton infers that L’Estoile rejected the “superstitious’ piety of many of his colleagues” and embraced a position that “conforms more closely with Protestant norms” (p. 31). The inventory made of his and his second wife’s clothing, for instance, also revealed striking differences. Both owned “the barest of wardrobes,” and L’Estoile’s clothing was well-worn and “threadbare” in comparison with other officeholders (p. 33). It reveals a man who “displayed a disregard for worldly appearances that contrasted with the wonders of his collection” (p. 37). Located in his second-floor study and cabinet, this collection of portraits, medals, books, and manuscripts set him apart from his peers, and helped to shape his diaries and other writings.

Hamilton then explores the social world of L’Estoile as secrétaire du roi and audiencier in the Palais de Justice in Paris. Although his father and grandfather had occupied more prestigious positions in royal bureaucracy, L’Estoile never attained high office, which Hamilton attributes either to “acquiring his office at the age of nineteen” or “to the outbreak of the civil wars” which “cut short L’Estoile’s university education” (p. 53).
In his capacity as an *audiencier*, “L’Estoile oversaw the roll of offices of *secrétaires du roi* and managed their wages” (p. 57). He also “announced the letters to be presented to the *maître des requêtes* [master of requests] who either refused them or declared them acceptable to be admitted to the seal” (p. 59). When he was not engaged as an *audiencier*, his responsibility as a *secrétaire du roi* consisted of him signing “letters requiring only the small seal (*petit sceau*), typically private closed letters (*lettres clos*) concerning decisions in particular cases and not the open letters patent (*lettres patentes*) conveying royal decisions and requiring the great seal (*grand sceau*).” Most of the documents that L’Estoile signed probably “involved civil requests of ennoblement or legitimization, letters granting remission in criminal judgements, and printers’ privileges” (p. 60). The signing of “letters of privilege” involved L’Estoile in the licensing of books and solidified his connections with many leading opponents of the Catholic League. For instance, in 1593, L’Estoile signed the privilege for Abel L’Angelier to publish Guillaume du Vair’s *De l’Eloquence françois* (1594). Du Vair was a prominent *politique* and a leading member of the Parlement of Paris.

Much of the information on L’Estoile’s early life (chapter 3) comes from the so-called family book that he kept, and maintained, after inheriting it from his father, Louis. L’Estoile’s father died when Pierre was only twelve years old. Before his death, he put his son under the care of Mathieu Béroalde, a Hebraic scholar with Protestant inclinations. Béroalde was instructed to raise L’Estoile in the Catholic faith but to avoid “the abuses and superstitions of that church” (p. 71). From his mother, Marguerite de Montholon, Pierre was also exposed to Protestant influences. While he remained a lifelong Catholic, he befriended many Protestants. Moreover, in his earliest foray into writing, which was a miscellany on the early Wars of Religion, he adopted a neutral tone, presenting the attitudes and opinions of both sides, while supporting the Crown’s efforts at mediation.

His commentary on the Colloquy of Poissy indicates that he believed in the real presence in the Eucharist and opposed the Protestant interpretation. What appears to characterize L’Estoile’s religious outlook is a fervent belief in God’s providence, a theme that runs throughout his writings and figures in his understanding of historical events, like the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. It was evident in the way that he coped with personal tragedies in his life, such as the death of his first wife, Anne de Baillon, in 1580, who died four days after giving birth to a daughter. In 1582, he married his second wife, “the eighteen-year old Colombe de Marteau,” the daughter of an “avocat du roi at Château-Thierry” (p. 118). Her brother Claude, who was also an accomplished poet, “was a frequent source of news and intellectual stimulation for L’Estoile” (p. 119).

The main subject of chapter 4 concerns L’Estoile’s famous diary, which he titled “*Registre journal* by a curious observer, concerning several memorable things, published freely in French during the reign of Henri III, king of France and Poland” (p. 101). Hamilton argues that it was composed after the king’s death, “relying on previous drafts that are now lost.” He bases this on an analysis of L’Estoile’s handwriting style, which is identical to the style of other writings that appear after 1589. Hamilton explains the rather complex system of cross-referencing, particularly the way in which L’Estoile employed such devices as “stars, crosses, or letters” to connect disparate passages and make additional annotations. Modern editions of the diary have brought these additional passages back into line with the initial marked entry. Two manuscript copies survive. Hamilton refers to the first as the “autograph copy (A)” and the second as “the scribal copy (B)” (p. 102). L’Estoile crossed out many sections in the autograph copy that are absent in the scribal version. L’Estoile employed a classical style similar to Tacitus, which was to view the religious wars as a sign of “how moral decline once again led to a world being torn apart by court intrigue and civil
war” (p. 105). L'Estoile also copied many printed libels, and other licentious works, that circulated in Paris, thereby preserving them, even while condemning many of them as obscene. Many of these libels were directed against the so-called mignons, or favorites of Henry III, but some also attacked the king himself, which L'Estoile was quick to condemn.

In examining the period 1589-98 (chapter 5), Hamilton focuses mainly on L'Estoile’s hostility to the Catholic League. In his writings, L'Estoile shed his usual air of neutrality and adopted a harsh anti-league bias. He saw the assassination of the Duke of Guise “as divine judgement” and even composed a libel of his own that attacked Pope Sixtus IV’s bull excommunicating Henry of Navarre (p. 107). In 1589 agents of the league briefly arrested him, and in 1591, the Sixteen, the radical council of leaguers, who represented the sixteen quarters of Paris, allegedly put him on a “hit list” of opponents to be eliminated. But despite his anti-league writings and support for Henry IV, L'Estoile chose to remain in Paris, and continued to perform some of his duties in the royal chancery, under the aegis of the Duke of Mayenne. His decision to stay may have been to protect his wealth and property from confiscation. During the royalist siege of Paris in 1590, L'Estoile's wife and son fled to Corbeil, which was under the control of Henry IV. It proved to be a bad decision because a Spanish army not only broke the siege of Paris but also recaptured Corbeil. L'Estoile was then compelled to ransom his own family with the help of Colombe’s uncle, the Sieur de Villeroy. This connection to Villeroy, who until the assassination of Henry III had been a prominent opponent of the league, but then switched sides due to Henry IV’s failure to convert to Catholicism, is unfortunately not pursued any further.

Hamilton also mentions L'Estoile’s opposition to the attempted coup d'état of the Sixteen in 1591, his anger over his eldest son's decision to join the league army, and his reaction to Henry IV's triumphal entry into Paris in 1594, but he focuses chiefly on L'Estoile's scrapbook history of the league, titled *Les Belles figures et drolleries de La Ligue* (2016). Hamilton believes the title was chosen to refer dismissively to the cheap ephemeral print literature of the league that circulated on the streets of Paris in the form of placards, ballads, and libels. L'Estoile collected this material to denounce “the League through the evidence of its own publications, appropriating pieces that supported his argument” (p. 142). He pasted them in a scrapbook, and even defaced some of them by writing annotations and margin comments that mocked their original meaning and drew attention to “their ephemerality and illegitimacy” (p. 149). In the process, he preserved many league publications that would have otherwise been destroyed by royal censors. L'Estoile also wanted to impart the view that the league was “an utter monstrosity” and an aberration from normal civic life (p. 165). To reinforce this further, he included prints of bizarre monsters and prodigies “discovered across Europe” at the end of his scrapbook (p. 164).

In the last decade of his life, 1598-1611 (chapter 6), L'Estoile followed very closely many of the theological and papal controversies of the period. Hamilton characterizes L'Estoile as essentially a Gallican Catholic. This is most evident in L'Estoile's frosty meeting in 1610, with the theologian Pierre de Bérulle, his second cousin, who attempted to convince him “that the Church cannot err” (p. 181). L'Estoile was also interested in bridging the Protestant-Catholic divide, and visited the English ambassador in Paris, where he even participated in an Anglican service. Yet L'Estoile spent most of his time collecting books and managing his growing library. He employed several amanuenses, many of them Protestants. He possessed one of the largest private libraries with 822 books and an additional 834 bound into 103 packets. Hamilton did an inventory of his collection and established the following breakdown: theolo-
gy (36 percent), history (27 percent), and the humanities (20 percent) in contrast with medicine and natural philosophy (12 percent) and law (5 percent) (p. 167). They were composed mainly in Latin (68 percent), French (19 percent), Greek (10 percent), and Italian (2 percent) (p. 168). He also compares L'Estoile's library with those of two other prominent collectors: Jacques De Thou and Claude Dupuy. They owned a greater proportion of books in Latin and Italian while L'Estoile's library had a greater number of French-language books in history and theology.

In his conclusion, Hamilton explains what happened to L'Estoile's library after his death and how his various writings came into print. Pierre Dupuy, for instance, was the first to publish an edition of L'Estoile's diary for the reign of Henri III in 1621 (*Journal des choses mémorables advenies durant tout le règne de Henry III roy de France et de Pologne*), but he took a great deal of liberty with the original work, altering the diary, cutting out some of the narrative, and adding additional material of his own. The most recent editions have removed these additions and stay true to the original manuscript.[1] Hamilton also reiterates his main point that L'Estoile was an active agent in the construction and commemoration of the religious wars in France. Discerning L'Estoile's political and religious views, as well as his biases, therefore, will provide historians with a more critical context for using his diaries and other writings. Hamilton also hopes that his study will prompt other scholars to take a similar approach with “other diarists and collectors, both in the early modern period and beyond” (p. 205).

Note
