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Review of *The Search for the Man in the Iron Mask: A Historical Detective Story* by Paul Sonnino

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Paul Sonnino, *The Search for the Man in the Iron Mask: A Historical Detective Story*. Lanham, Md. and London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. xvi + 252pp. Maps, table, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4422-5363-6; \$34.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-4422-5364-3.

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In *The Search for the Man in the Iron Mask*, Paul Sonnino applies his consummate knowledge of the diplomatic and administrative records of the seventeenth-century French monarchy to a mystery dating from 1669: the identity of a prisoner held by the royal government in the utmost secrecy.

The very secrecy of the prisoner's confinement gave rise to a number of myths that have enjoyed remarkable longevity through works of fiction, popular history, and film. Certainly, the existence of a prisoner confined under extraordinary conditions was no myth. Sonnino establishes that a prisoner was held from 1669 until his death in 1703 in conditions of greatest secrecy under the personal charge of Saint-Mars, successively the director of the royal prisons at the fortress of Pinerolo, the Island of Sainte-Marguerite in the Mediterranean, and finally the Bastille in Paris. Moreover, the king and his ministers concerned themselves with every detail of that confinement. Clearly, then, this was no common criminal, but the author does question the existence of the iron mask itself. While the mask was part of the first story about the prisoner to come to the public's attention in a handwritten newsletter of 1687, a later account spoke of a velvet mask, and Sonnino concludes that the prisoner seemed, at least at times, to have worn no mask at all, as when the authorities transferred him from Pinerolo to the island of Sainte-Marguerite in 1687.

But the murkiest aspect of the mystery involves the identity of the prisoner, and Sonnino identifies at least nineteen different theories addressing the question that were in circulation by the late nineteenth century. Thus, various authors alleged the man in the mask to have been the disgraced superintendant of royal finances, Nicolas Fouquet, one of a number of troublesome French and foreign aristocrats, and, most bizarrely, the son of Oliver Cromwell. Some of the most enduring myths of the identity of the man in the mask, however, linked him to the royal family, and Alexandre Dumas, the chief propagator of the most well known version of the royal family myth, identified the prisoner as the twin brother of Louis XIV. Sonnino's careful research allows him definitively to dispose of such unfounded assumptions about the prisoner's identity, and to build his hypothesis that the condemned man was one Eustache Dauger, whose chief offense seemed to have been that he knew too much about the financial affairs of the avaricious chief minister, Cardinal Jules Mazarin. Thus, it is to the career of the cardinal-minister that Sonnino turns to understand the offense of Dauger.

During his tenure in office (1642 to 1661), the corrupt Mazarin ruthlessly amassed great personal wealth, numerous sinecures and *seignuries*, and even the crown jewels of England, which Queen Henriette Marie carried with her when she sought refuge in France during the Civil War. But Mazarin did not build these vast holdings singlehandedly. Assisting him was a considerable number of men bound to him by patronage. First in this group was Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Mazarin's chief financial

adviser, who relentlessly pursued his eventually successful effort to destroy politically his rival Nicolas Fouquet. Colbert, too, had his minions, enlisting the help of a now largely forgotten group of men, chief among whom was Antoine-Hercule Picon. Sonnino finds that Picon knew Mazarin's affairs almost as well as Colbert himself and that he frequently provided cover for some of the cardinal's more unseemly financial dealings. For his part, Picon, like most important Old Regime officials, employed the assistance of a number of valets, and it was to the most trusted of those men, Eustace Dauge, that Picon entrusted some of the most sensitive details of Mazarin's peculations. Indeed, Sonnino suggests that Picon had employed Dauge in work of increasing importance since about 1643 and that the valet was well known to both Mazarin and Colbert. Dauge was, in short, a key link in the circle of men ultimately dependent on Mazarin's good will and patronage.

By 1661, Mazarin's fortune was at its peak, but problems were beginning to overtake the cardinal. England's restored monarch, Charles II, would soon begin to seek restoration of the paintings, tapestries, and jewels that his mother, Queen Henriette Marie, had pawned in Europe and over which Mazarin had gained control. Most importantly, Mazarin's failing health mandated that the cardinal begin arrangements for the eventual disposition of his wealth. Those arrangements required the collaboration of all of the cardinal's circle and constituted perhaps the most outrageous financial skullduggery of his tenure at the center of French politics.

In February and March 1661 the dying cardinal agonized over how to bequeath the ill-gotten gains that constituted the great bulk of his personal fortune, and Sonnino identifies the drafting of several texts of his will for that purpose as Mazarin's life drew to a close. Certainly, the cardinal recognized that his vast accumulated wealth would generate undesirable publicity if it were inventoried as required by the customary law of Paris. His first solution to the problem of his final bequest involved leaving all of his property to Louis XIV on the assumption that no one would dare demand an inventory from the monarch. But he soon realized that the sudden royal possession of such a vast fortune might compromise the crown, and he amended the original arrangements. Thus, only a week before his death, Mazarin revised the testament to include specific bequests to members of his family and a number of charitable donations, the most notable of which was the gift of his considerable library and an endowment for the establishment of the Collège des Quatre-Nations for young aristocrats. Additionally, Mazarin left many of his jewels, including those of the queen of England, to Louis XIV, although these last arrangements did not dispose of the totality of the cardinal's real holdings. Significantly, the will stipulated that there should be no inventory of his estate, while it entrusted all of the cardinal's papers and accounts to the sole, and unsupervised, possession of Colbert. But after the cardinal drew his last breath and expired on March 9, 1661, Colbert and his creatures, including Antoine-Hercule Picon, undertook patently illegal postmortem modifications of the will to protect themselves from legal liability and to secure Mazarin's property for the crown.

Mazarin's estate was hardly handled in conformity with the legal procedures usual in the Paris region. Although the king finally did require an inventory of the assets, officials did not apply the required seals to Mazarin's properties until over three weeks after his death, allowing plenty of time for Colbert, Picon, and their confederates to modify account books and to pillage the vast sums of cash and quantities of jewels left by the late cardinal. When the inventory was completed, it was obvious that valuables worth a significant amount were not included in the final enumeration of Mazarin's property. Clearly, much of value had been removed from the cardinal's palace and apartments for the benefit of the king, and Sonnino reasonably concludes that Picon's trusted assistant, Eustache Dauge, must have been actively involved in the actual removal of Mazarin's possessions from his residences. Such actions, of course, could never be made public, since accountability for them ultimately rested with the monarch himself.

At the death of Mazarin, Louis XIV announced his intent to assume personal administration of his realm without the assistance of a chief minister, but the late cardinal's creatures politically survived the

cardinal's death with enhanced power, both in royal government and over the considerable bequests of Mazarin to his family members. These men, including Colbert, Hugues de Lionne, Michel Le Tellier, and their clients like Picon and his valet Dauge, also were the king's accomplices in the cover-up of the royal acquisition of the cardinal's vast wealth, and in the years following Mazarin's death, they took part in dealing with those who threatened to reveal their actions. They disposed of the chief threats early, and in 1661, the crown consigned Nicolas Fouquet, who certainly knew too much, to arrest, trial, and eventual life imprisonment. Others followed, including Michel Barbès who alleged that Mazarin had skimmed money from tax farmers, but the fall of Dauge occurred only in 1669.

In 1669, Louis XIV was planning the Dutch War, a conflict whose roots Sonnino has explored carefully in another study.^[1] In his present work, he draws on that earlier research to advance a convincing hypothesis to explain Dauge's fate. He notes that Louis XIV's preparation for the Dutch War of 1672-74 involved drawing Charles II of England into an alliance against the Dutch, and that the French monarch was prepared to act quickly to silence any voice that might imperil those negotiations. Nothing, of course, could have been a greater threat to the king's diplomacy than reopening the matter of the jewels and art works of the English royal family that Mazarin had acquired and that had come into the possession of Louis XIV. Thus, Sonnino suggests, incautious remarks by Dauge, perhaps under the influence of drink, would have been noticed in the highest reaches of government. As Picon's valet, Dauge knew about all the financial and legal irregularities that had occurred at the time of Mazarin's death, and he quite probably had been involved in spiriting cash, jewels, and art works from Mazarin's residences before the tardy inventory of their contents. Sonnino suggests that Dauge was confined for life to keep him quiet. The mysterious prisoner was not a member of the royal family or some powerful aristocrat, but one of the faceless valets who heretofore did much of the legwork of seventeenth-century French officials.

This is a fascinating book of great erudition that is written with considerable wit, and it will be of much interest to specialists in early modern French history. Indeed, Sonnino offers a model of careful historical research incorporating all of the major Parisian archives and libraries, a host of French departmental and municipal archives, and manuscript repositories in eight countries outside of France. Sonnino's search for the man in the iron mask may prove to be the definitive statement on the identity of that mysterious prisoner.

NOTE

[1] Paul Sonnino, *Louis XIV and the Origins of the Dutch War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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