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The longest reigning monarch in European history, Louis XIV (1638 – 1715) ruled France from 1643 until his death. His reign encompassed a period of immense transformation and tumult, not only in France but also across Europe, and Louis’s pre-eminence amongst Europe’s monarchs proved to be a catalyst for a great deal of this change. Seen as the apotheosis of monarchical ‘absolutism’, whether real or symbolic, his power and desire to aggrandise France had a profound impact on European geopolitics, culture and society. Inheriting a kingdom that had spent decades riven by internal religious and political hostilities as well as external competition with the Dutch and the Habsburgs of Spain and Austria, Louis led France to ascendancy in Europe. This had begun to wane by the time of his death. His ambitions curtailed by a European alliance of Protestant and Catholic monarchs fearful of his supremacy. If one were to simply consider the impact of the wars France engaged in once Louis XIV decided to rule without a grand minister following the death of Cardinal Mazarin (1660), his impact upon European history would have been notable. Yet there is so much more to be covered over the long reign of an energetic king who pursued gloire for himself and France, that it makes the task of any biographer a difficult one if they are to do justice to the sheer scope of his life.

This is what Philip Mansel’s King of the World endeavours to attempt, and largely manages to successfully achieve with great aplomb. Mansel confesses to benefitting from a surge of recent
interest in Louis XIV, in part due to the tercentenary of his death in 2015. The publication of numerous works in English and French on the monarch plus access to a range of other sources are utilised by Mansel, as he paints a very detailed picture of the king’s life. Roving over the diverse aspects of Louis XIV’s character, relationships, amours, children, wars, policies, aims and court, stretching back to the kingship of his father – or before if you include his brief 1000 year overview of French monarchy in the Introduction – to the aftermath of his death and legacy. There is much here for the reader to appreciate, and the level of detail marshalled to explain the interactions in the Louis XIV’s life is impressive. Mansel is especially good when outlining the behaviour of the court and the nobility as demonstrated by chapter 13 (‘Inside Versailles’) which vividly captures the workings of Versailles. *King of the World* increases its focus from chapter 15 (‘The Global King’) as Mansel begins to explore the wider contextual impact of Louis’s France, particularly in discussing the damage instigated by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) and persecution of the Huguenots (protestants), and the complicated relationship with his Stuart cousins.

One feels as a reader, however, that more could be made of the geopolitical context within the biography. While Mansel references the importance of events and ideas, sometimes these can appear to be throwaway paragraphs within the wider expanse and focus of the book. Mansel could perhaps explicate the nature and extent of Louis XIV’s famed ‘absolute’ kingship and why other neighbouring countries were so fearful of his grandiose ambitions. More could also be included on the economic aspects of European competition as well as the internal criticisms made, and future plans formed, by French thinkers and aristocrats relating to the internal problems caused by the king’s wars and policies. Moreover, the key issue of the book is that despite the title’s claim that Louis was ‘King of the World’ and part of a ‘global’ early modern world (p. 2), there is little engagement with the realities of what this meant beyond discussing France’s links with Siam, the Ottomans and other European states. Louis is therefore situated in a lightly sketched European and global context that could have been delineated with greater depth to reveal the broader interactions and issues that concerned France.
These points do not detract from the enjoyment of reading *King of the World*, or consideration of the skill and dynamism Mansel has applied to provide a commendable biography of such an illustrious ruler. His critique of Louis XIV is also a worthy addition to the contributions of many scholars who have commented on the king’s rule and legacy. Mansel charts his transition from a younger man who was kind, civil and courteous to a forty year-old dominated by ‘narcissism, tactlessness’ and a ‘failure to see consequences’ (pp. 276-77). These traits lead Mansel to a rather damning verdict of the monarch and a legacy ruined by his ‘lack of judgment’ and numerous ‘mistakes’, markedly after the death in 1683 of his able adviser and Minister of Finances, Colbert (pp. 444-45). Mansel’s work asseverates how many decisions taken during this long reign proved to have long-term consequences into the eighteenth century, ultimately leading to the downfall of the French monarchy he sought to glorify.

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