Interest in Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642), the chief minister of King Louis XIII, never seems to fade, whether among anglophone scholars of French history, or among the French themselves. An enduring icon of France’s glory and grandeur, Richelieu has often been imagined as having succeeded in carrying out a comprehensive plan to subordinate all of France to the king and his ministers, and to subordinate all of Europe to French interests. David Parrott’s new book on military history goes a long way toward showing both the prevalence and persistence of decentralization in Richelieu’s France, and the apparent absence of any overall strategy to change things very much.

Parrott does an excellent job of demonstrating the pragmatic and reactive nature of Richelieu’s military policies. France lagged behind new developments in armaments and battle strategies pursued by other states in Europe. Contrary to much of received interpretation, this study also shows that the Cardinal did not carry out—at least not in the military sphere—a master plan that achieved centralization of power and subordination of unruly elites, such as the great noble families. Those families did what they had done for centuries: they used military service, and especially the holding of military offices, to bolster their own prestige and power; only secondarily, if that, did they seek to serve (or in fact serve) royal interests. Parrott’s Richelieu achieved whatever (small) success he had in the Thirty Years War, not by overturning the traditional aristocratic military ethos in favor of royal authoritarianism, but by a pragmatic cultivation of that ethos. While the notion of a more domesticated, court nobility may be valid for the later seventeenth century and beyond, Parrott suggests that it does not apply to the reign of Louis XIII.

War in Richelieu’s France was financed in part by army officers who not only bought their offices from the state, but also paid...
out of their own resources at least a portion of the living and other expenses of their regiments. Military command was certainly not a suitable occupation for anyone looking for a lucrative career; while socially useful for those looking to maintain or gain the status of noblesse d’ épée, it could be economically ruinous. Parrot shows how Richelieu relied heavily on these traditions of aristocratic generosity (a kind of noblesse oblige mentality and practice) to make up for grossly insufficient tax revenues. But even with such generosity, France continued to field an underfunded army.

While officers and would-be officers might be plentiful, numbers of soldiers were chronically inadequate during Cardinal Richelieu’s ministry. Parrot shows how statistics were often inflated to mask this problem. John Lynn’s work, Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army 1610–1715 (Cambridge University Press, 1997), examined how, in the personal reign of Louis XIV (1661–1715), the size of the French army expanded rapidly, and how the army was brought under greater centralized, royal control. Parrott’s work suggests that such developments were not anticipated or foreshadowed in the age of Richelieu. Devoting an entire chapter to the size of the French army, Parrott argues that one must distinguish clearly between the exaggerated figures promoted by Richelieu’s government and the reality that existed in the field. Claims of totals between 125,000 and 150,000 soldiers—claims designed to impress and intimidate France’s enemies—coexisted with actual figures closer to 70,000 to 80,000 men.

As for control of the army, Parrot finds that jurisdiction was frequently contested, and that “multiple hierarchies” (366-367) prevented clear lines of authority from functioning. The king and his ministers, provincial governors, princes and other nobles, and military officers all sought to direct matters. There was no neat pyramid of authority, and not much rational planning. The presence of the king himself at certain battles (e.g., Arras 1640), while bolstering production of heroic images of Louis XIII as a warrior king, actually compromised centralized royal control of the war effort, an effort that included several fronts and a vast, complex geography.
This book includes a useful glossary of terms, and a number of helpful maps. It also offers a detailed index and a thorough bibliography, and thus may function as a kind of reference work as well as one to be read cover to cover.

The book's length may well discourage some potential readers, even as some lacunae disappoint others. Though the origins of this study were an Oxford doctoral dissertation, completed in 1985, the book sometimes reads more like a University of Paris doctorat d'état: much too long, unedited, long on quantity where quality would do better. Annoyingly verbose at times, Parrott's book also passes too lightly over some significant topics. Several interesting questions, such as the effects of the plague on the military, receive only brief mention. In general, there is very little social history in this tome. Parrott's approach to the past privileges institutional, political, administrative history; one learns too little about the average soldier in Richelieu's armies. Key issues such as food, battle injuries, epidemic disease, hospitals and medical care are viewed as administrative problems, and are never explored from the point of view of the soldier. Frequent disciplinary lapses, such as desertion, and the tendency of encamped armies to pillage and loot among local populations, Parrot treats only as challenges for officers and ministers to face (or, more likely, ignore). Again, the perspectives and experiences of actual soldiers and other ordinary people remain distant and out of focus for Parrott, just as they may have been for Richelieu and his administration.

Yet this is an important book, and it ought not to be ignored by scholars of seventeenth-century France. Parrott shows convincingly that the notion that “Richelieu had laid the foundations for a strategy that was about to bear fruit in the 1640s must be questioned” (162). If a centralized France prospered in the years after Richelieu’s death, Parrott implies that the Cardinal Minister of Louis XIII merits little credit for it. If France ultimately emerged from the Thirty Years War in a powerful position, it must have been due to factors other than a brilliant Richelieu at the helm, for there was no overall direction of the French army in the era of his ministry, but rather various “levels of administrative confusion
In the light of this study, images of Cardinal Richelieu as the clever mastermind behind the triumph of French royal absolutism, at home and abroad, in peace and in war, may seem more part of the history of French government propaganda than as anything else.


What connects the study of witchcraft trials to a book on the English navy? What links a history of the English civil wars with a study of the Society for the Preservation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK)? The answer, according to Michael Braddick, is the early modern state.

Braddick argues that the state is at the heart of every history of early modern England, be it social, military, political, or religious. This fact is obscured by the increasing specialization of the discipline and by the often narrow approach of historians and their graduate students. For example, it might seem as if Keith Wrightson (*Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling 1525-1700* with D. Levine) and Conrad Russell (*The Causes of the English Civil War*) are writing about completely different subjects. However, on closer inspection, it appears that both are concerned with the nature and use of political power. Braddick believes that “bringing the state back in” will offer some new answers to old questions. It will also provide “a fruitful way of thinking across boundaries set by our professional specialisations” (8).

To this end, the author marshals an impressive array of works on social, political, military, and religious history. His footnotes alone are worth the price of the book. He describes a variety of historiographical controversies, both past and present, and shows how often disparate narratives can be used to tell the larger story of the development of the English state.