

Preface

Historians are often nagged by the suspicion that they could have spent more time studying their subject. The French scholar Prosper Boissonnade noted with no irony that he had studied Jean-Baptiste Colbert for thirty-six years “without overlooking any source of information.” He expressed fears that his work was “superficial” and that he had not had enough time to research. Indeed, it would be possible to spend decades analyzing all of Colbert’s correspondence, for he wrote it for hours on end, with the help of teams of secretaries, research assistants, and agents. Yet it is hard to assess whether spending a lifetime on a project or finishing it within a few years is the best approach. Both have their merits. Having spent only six years studying Colbert, I share Boissonnade’s concerns. Although I read through thousands of pages of printed and manuscript sources, I cannot make the claim of having the ambition or the capacity to make a total, four-decade study. I thus gratefully followed the footsteps of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars such as Pierre Clément, Léopold Delisle, Georges Depping, René Memain, Boissonnade, and others who believed that studying seventeenth-century government was important enough to dedicate their lives to it. They used research teams to catalog, organize, and reprint the massive archives of early modern government. Their work has guided my trek through the giant and sometimes uncharted archival forest of Colbert’s paperwork.

To handle and interpret such a massive set of sources, I have also relied on the aid of my colleagues. While some works of scholarship are written in seclusion, this has been, from the beginning, a collaborative effort. I am privileged to say that this book is the product of their work and learning as much as mine. I first discussed the project with Ted Rabb, over lunch at Palmer House at Princeton. It was here that we worked out the initial concept of the book. Ted has since read countless versions of the text and aided me with his remarkable ability to see the big historical picture and to explain it in the clearest terms possible. His is a rare and disappearing art to which I can only aspire. Anthony Grafton has never wavered in his friendship and generosity. He offered to this project his unparalleled scope of knowledge, mixed with his careful scientific spirit of analysis. His influence has shaped this book as well as my own belief in the primary importance of the culture and tradition of research. Ann Blair also worked with me from the beginning, helping to hone and tighten various versions, and offering her rich erudition and advice. Peter Burke's work inspired this book, and I am grateful for the time he spent with me discussing it. He has never stopped being my thesis advisor. Roger Chartier has been a constant source of inspiration and support, for which I am ever grateful. Margaret Jacob has given unwavering support and the power of her learning to the project. Her emails from all corners of Europe at all hours kept me going through the hard days of writing and revising. Christian Jouhaud, Richard Kagan, Peter Miller, Barbara Shapiro, Justin Stagl, and Peter Stallybrass read early drafts, gave useful advice, spent much time discussing the project and writing letters recommending it, for which I am very grateful. Enzo Baldini has been a great help, discussing and circulating news of the project in his wide network in the republic of letters. From beginning to end, Keith Baker and Dan Edelstein have helped and inspired me to develop the central ideas of the book, and have managed to do so with wine present at all times. Randolph Head and Orest Ranum worked very patiently with me to pull together the final draft. Jean Boutier, Pierre Burger, Marc Fumaroli, Antoine Lilti, Paul Nelles, Diogo Ramada-Curto, Emma Rothschild, and J. B. Shank generously read drafts of the book and offered priceless commentary.

I am particularly grateful to Richard Dunn and the American Philological Society, who first showed interest in this project and gave it funding. Their generous Franklin Grant got the book off the ground. A fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities allowed me to spend a year working on the book. Without this funding, I would

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not have been able to do the project. I am also grateful for the support of my colleagues at Rutgers Camden and New Brunswick, as well as at the European University Institute in Florence. Many thanks go to Benjamin Bryant for his skilled editing of the bibliography, and for his loyal friendship. Thanks to my parents and in-laws for babysitting. Thanks to my father as always for helping to support my research and helping me to purchase the necessary computers. Special thanks go to Chris Hebert and the team at the University of Michigan Press. They supported this book from its earliest beginnings and have patiently and skillfully worked with me toward a final project.

It goes without saying that without the aid of librarians, this book would never have been done. Special thanks to the *conservateurs* of Salle des Manuscrits of the Bibliothèque Nationale; the Archives Nationales; the Archives du Quai d'Orsay; the Bibliothèque Mazarine; the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal; Rutgers University Library, and in particular the Paul Robeson Library in Camden; the Firestone Library at Princeton; Cambridge University Library; the Archivio di Stato di Torino; and the Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze. Thanks also to the journals *French Historical Studies* and *Archival Science*. Finally, I would like to thank John Pollack and the librarians of the Annenberg Rare Books Room of the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library. John has made their reading room my base laboratory, helping to find documents, offering useful analysis, and tracking down and copying texts and images. They make the access to information easy and collaborative, providing ideal research conditions.

Thanks also go to Blaise Aguera y Arcas, Richard Bonney, Gianfranco Borelli, Harald Braun, Arndt Brendecke, Paul Cohen, Robert Darnton, Robert Descimon, Francesco Di Donato, Vitorio Dini, Paul Dover, Marcus Friedrich, Susanna Friedrich, Tim Harris, Lynn Hunt, Matt Jones, Ben Kafka, Marie-Pierre Lafitte, Donald Kelley, Kirstie McClure, Martin Mulrow, Geoffrey Parker, John Pocock, Aysha Polnitz, Laurence Pope, Sophus Reinert, Antonella Romano, Rob Schneider, Phil Scranton, Will Slauter, Paul Sonnino, Erik Thomson, Filippo di Vivo, Wolfgang Weber, Richard Yeo, and Cornel Zwierlein.

I would like to make special mention of those who provided intellectual, moral, and culinary support over the years, essential to the writing of this book. As they know, I see research and intellectual activity as inextricably intertwined with *la gourmandise*. Thanks to Manu Barrault and Anne Rohart for making their spare couch my base for research, Vespa riding and late-night eating in Paris. Françoise Choay generously

housed me in Paris on many occasions, thus making possible my research. Thanks to Alessandro Arienzo for his interest in my work, discussions, intellectual and soul empowering powwows and feasts in Naples, singing with Borelli and passing long evenings at the Enoteca near Gesù Nuovo. Bill Connell has been a sturdy rock of support and a true friend in research, conferencing, and dinners at home and across the world. John McCormick seems to show up at key moments offering advice, support, and an inspiring confidence in the link between very good wine and intellectual activity.

Roger O'Keefe has been a constant source of wisdom on my own work, international law, and the biological origins of Vaudeville. He appeared miraculously both in Amsterdam for a memorable feast of wonderful flat, round Dutch barrier oysters, and in Florence for a Christmas notable for the six hours spent in the emergency room of the children's hospital, as well as for a memorable *tortelli in brodo* and pork stewed with fennel in Poppi. Thanks to Carrie Weber for all the friendship, late-night emails, pep talks, inspiration, and the brilliant, hard work on the manuscript, without which I could not have finished it; and to Tom Stegeman for unwavering moral support, discussions about the merits of accounting, marathon feasts in New York, Paris, and Philadelphia, and a truly inspiring pancetta- and Sangiovese-fueled, and possibly cardiac-threatening, culinary odyssey through Tuscany that ended in the valley of Rignana, with a fireworks of Tuscan eggs, fresh truffles, and olive oil washed down with Chianti Classico. Maurie Samuels was always there, at all hours, to discuss the project and keep the boat of scholarship afloat. He is a true comrade in arms. I must thank Colin Hamilton for frankly critiquing and discussing my work, as he has done since we were in high school, which now seems to be a century ago, as well as for an inspiring voyage through Italy highlighted by a boat ride in Venice *jusqu'au but de la nuit*, and a grand *pranzo* at the Diana in Bologna. Thanks to Richard Serjeantson for therapeutic brainstorming and feasting expeditions in Paris at the Grand Véfour, and at the Zygomates under the care of Patrick Frey; as well as in Burgundy, the Perigord, and lastly Piemonte, where, buoyed by a wave of Barolo from 1981, we reached for the gourmet sky.

A special thanks and farewell goes to Alexander Lippincott for fueling this project when it ran out spiritual of steam, on the wintry Thursday evenings in Philadelphia, with bottles of Bordeaux and slabs of restorative steak from North Dakota. Colbert liked Rhine valley white wines; but this book was fed with red, most notably from Lippincott's

once endless streams, which ran upward from Château de La Huste, to Léoville-Las Cases, Mouton Rothschild, Palmer, Vieux Château Certan, Cos d'Estournel, Château Pavie, Cheval Blanc, Margaux, and onward to Petrus. His cellars, once a liquid library, are now dry and those days are over. This book stands in memory to Eat Club in Philadelphia.

Most of all, this book owes an enormous debt to Ellen Wayland-Smith. She supported its research and writing; discussed it over and over again to the point of humoring me; read and reread it; and lived through the pressure of its constant deadlines and related travel engagements, all during the very active early youth of our marvelous daughters Sophia and Lydia. During the last days, we finished the book together in Florence, in the house of the Bartoli family on the via Fra Paolo Sarpi, correcting drafts, roasting truffled pork with bread crust and sage, and taking care of the children between trips up the hill to Fiesole to the villa Schifanoia, walks to the Biblioteca Nazionale, lunch at Il Giova, jaunts on the byways of Chianti and through the clouds of the Val d'Aoste, and Sundays spent together at the mercato Saint'Ambrogio, and at the court of the Ramada-Curtos at the Teatro del Sale. They have been happy days for which I am grateful. *Rien sans la belle Hélène.*

Studying dusty archives can be both lonely and tedious. Yet if they happen to be situated in the lands of the former Roman Empire, and if they give up their treasures, there is nothing more satisfying than leafing through parchment, reading lost texts, solving old mysteries, and then walking home to dinner through ancient streets, with the smell of cool old stone, hungry from the knowledge gained from a hard day's work. The world changes, but from what I can tell, this pleasure has remained a constant.