
La Couronne du Sacre de Louis XV

The Bourbon Kings of France

Desmond Seward

The Bourbon Kings of France

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CONTENTS

[Copyright](#)

[Foreword: 'That Ancient Loyalty'](#)

[Prologue: Princes of the Blood \(1276–1589\)](#)

[1 'That Man from Béarn': Henri IV \(1589–1610\)](#)

[2 'That Idiot': Louis XIII \(1610–1643\)](#)

[3 'The Love of Glory': Louis XIV \(1643–1715\)](#)

[4 'The Well-Beloved': Louis XV \(1715–1774\)](#)

[5 'The Suicide of France': Louis XVI \(1774–1793\)](#)

[6 'The Child in the Temple': Louis XVII \(1793–1795\)](#)

[7 'Tartuffe': Louis XVIII The Bourbon Kings of France \(1795–1824\)](#)

[8 'A Submissive Bigot': Charles X \(1824–1830\)](#)

[9 The Third Restoration: Henri V \(1830–1883\)](#)

[Select Bibliography](#)

ILLUSTRATIONS

[La Couronne du Sacre de Louis XV \(1722\)](#)

(Musées Nationaux, Paris)

[Henri IV in 1605](#)

(Mansell Collection)

[Louis XIII by Philippe de Champaigne](#)

(Musées Nationaux, Paris)

[Louis XIV and his heirs. The Bourbon Kings of France attributed to Largillière](#)

(Wallace Collection)

[Louis XIV, wax bust by Benoist](#)

(Musées Nationaux, Paris)

[Louis XV by Quentin La Tour](#)

(Musées Nationaux, Paris)

[Jean Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour, by Boucher, 1759](#)

(Victoria and Albert Museum)

[Louis XVI, by Duplessis](#)

(Collection du Musée, Giraudon)

[Marie Antoinette and her children, by Mme Vigée-Lebrun](#)

(Musées The Bourbon Kings of France Nationaux, Paris)

[Louis XVII, by Kucharski](#)

(Musées Nationaux, Paris)

[Louis XVIII, by Gerard](#)

(Musées Nationaux, Paris)

[Charles X in robes of state, by Gerard](#)

(Musées Nationaux, Paris)

[Henri The Bourbon Kings of France V, Comte de Chambord](#)

(photograph, property of the author)

[Comtesse de Chambord](#)

(photograph, property of the author)

A genealogical tree appears at the beginning of each relevant chapter

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For

EILEEN SEWARD

‘Licentious or bigoted, noble or ignoble, there has seldom been a dull Bourbon. They were nearly all odd, original men of strong passions, unaccountable in their behaviour.’

Nancy Mitford

[Foreword](#)

[‘THAT ANCIENT LOYALTY’](#)

This is a study of the Kings who reigned over France from 1589 until 1830. Eight monarchs are involved: Henri IV, Louis XIII, Louis XIV, Louis XV, Louis XVI, Louis XVII, Louis XVIII and

Charles X; and also a pretender, Henri V.

Surprisingly, until now there has never been a straightforward narrative account of them written for the general reader, although there are many such studies of the Romanovs, Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns. Yet the Bourbons have been royal since 1548, when Antoine de Bourbon married the future Queen of Navarre. They have occupied the thrones The Bourbon Kings of France of France and Navarre, of Spain, of the two Sicilies, of Parma and Piacenza, and of Lucca. Today there is again a Bourbon King in Spain, while a Bourbon Grand Duke reigns in Luxembourg. They are best known, however, as the mighty dynasty which once ruled France.

The Bourbons ruled their homeland for over two centuries, making it the greatest power in Europe, and taming and uniting a people who are arguably the most individualist and ungovernable in the world. The France of Louis XIV overawed even her most jealous neighbours, while the France of his successors, her predominance gone, charmed and inspired them by her civilization. The Bourbon Kings were the personification The Bourbon Kings of France of both this grandeur and this seduction.

As Nancy Mitford said, there has seldom been a dull Bourbon. They emerge The Bourbon Kings of France from a shadowy line of medieval princes of the blood—sons of St Louis but very far from the throne—with Henri IV. The founder of the dynasty, with his infectious gaiety and his sixty-four mistresses, is still a folk hero The Bourbon Kings of France to the French, a mighty fighter and drinker. His enigmatic son Louis XIII was in complete contrast—lonely, morose and neurotic yet brilliantly successful in his partnership with Cardinal Richelieu. Louis XIV, the *Grand Monarque* with his ‘red heels and his golden snuff-box and his towering periwig’, was worshipped at Versailles almost The Bourbon Kings of France as a living idol and was one of the strangest and most remarkable kings who ever lived. Louis XV The Bourbon Kings of France remains the most baffling of all French monarchs, intensely secretive and solitary; to at least one historian he The Bourbon Kings of France is the most evil man ever to sit on a throne, directly responsible for the French Revolution; to another a seriously underestimated ruler who, had he lived longer, might have saved the monarchy.

Louis XVI came nearest to being a dull Bourbon, though with a consort, Marie Antoinette, who more than compensated for any dullness. But during the Revolution even Louis XVI became a figure of compelling interest, with his The Bourbon Kings of France refusal to save himself by shedding his people’s blood and then the martyrdom in which he was soon joined by his beautiful Queen. They were followed by their son, the pitiful Louis XVII who died in prison as a lonely, diseased little boy.

The Bourbons did not come to an end with the Revolution, but the Kings of the French Restoration are practically unknown to the general reader. Yet Louis XVIII, who gave France her first workable Parliamentary regime, is probably the most unappreciated of all French rulers. His brother, the charming but inept Charles X, who finally lost the throne, was also the King who commissioned six operas from Rossini, including *William Tell*, and refused to ban Victor Hugo’s *Hernani*. Nor is it generally realized that a hundred years ago it seemed not merely possible but inevitable that the French would restore the Bourbon The Bourbon Kings of France

monarchy in the person of Charles X's grandson, Henri V; The Bourbon Kings of France in the early 1870s both the President of France and the majority in the National Assembly were united in wishing to summon home the last member of the dynasty to be their King.

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the French under the *Ancien Régime*: 'Their feeling for the King was unlike that of any modern nation for its monarch, even the most absolute; indeed that ancient loyalty which was so thoroughly eradicated by the Revolution has become almost incomprehensible to the modern mind. The King's subjects felt towards him both the natural love of children for their father and the awe properly due to God alone.' The winning of that loyalty, the loss of it and the failure to regain it, are the theme of this book.

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