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## EDITOR'S PICK

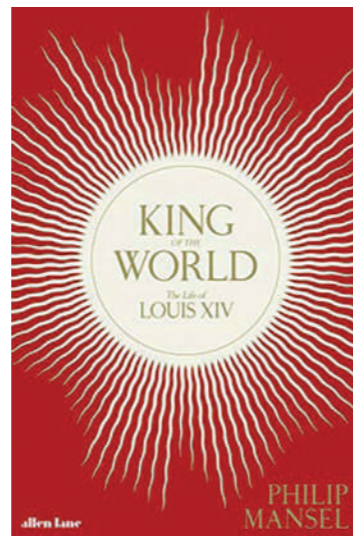
# King of the World: The Life of Louis XIV

by Philip Mansel | Allen Lane | £30

Smedmore House on the Dorset coast, a symmetrically fronted manor house of three central bays flanked by two large bows, was built by Sir William Clavell, an early industrialist (he was burning shale oil, much to the annoyance of local residents, centuries before the invention of fracking) in around 1620. Another member of the family, Edward Clavell, substantially remodelled in 1700 and his grandson added large parts in 1760. (If the name seems familiar, it may be because a later descendant built the Clavell Tower, perched on a clifftop at the very edge of the estate and now the Landmark Trust's most popular property.)

In the entire time that it took Smedmore to be built, rebuilt and enlarged, a period spanning more than a hundred and forty years, France had just three kings – Louis XIII, XIV and XV. That each reign began with a period of regency while the king was still a minor may have played a role in the long-term strains that eventually came to a head with the guillotine a generation later. That the coronation of Louis XIV, aged 16, comes only at page 65 of a 458-page book is a working illustration of how important the years of his minority (which had ended three years before that, in 1651, but still eight years into his reign) were in setting the scene for his later rule.

Philip Mansel is a direct descendent of the man who bought the manor at Smedmore in the late fourteenth century, and his home is a Historic Houses member, open for Invitation to View tours and available for short lets as a whole. He is also a noted historian, with a specialism in France and the French court in particular. The way in which that focus has shaped his biography of the longest-reigning monarch in French history (indeed, world history, until and unless Queen Elizabeth II lives another four years), is best illustrated by a quotation from one of his subjects, Madame de Motteville, a *première femme de chambre* of Anne of Austria, Louis's mother. "Great movements in the world which destroy or establish empires" were in reality due to the "secret intrigues of a few people", often over unimportant matters,' he notes the courtier as saying in her memoirs.



The book then, is more a sweeping history of France through the prism of the king and his relations with the key figures of his court than it is simply the life of one man; though how separable those things are in the case of the Louis, the 'Sun King', is moot in any case. Charles de Gaulle, who his constitutional reforms of 1958 created what is sometimes referred to as a republican monarchy or monarchical republic, said of his predecessor, 'he laid the bases of modern France, won the respect of the rest of the world, a strong internal structure, grandeur.' It's the evolution of a state, and even more the idea of that state, that the book traces, as much as the unfolding of an individual's character.

Louis's story takes in more than French history, though. His reach was global, from the Great Lakes to Siam (modern-day Thailand); his contemporary influence almost as great a factor in English and Dutch politics as it was in French; his lasting legacy on taste – architecture in particular – evident everywhere from Versailles itself (along with the 'hexagon' shape of France, arguably his most lasting creation) to its little imitators at Hampton Court, Chatsworth and even Washington, DC. In the end, though, perhaps his record-breaking reign was longer than his ambition could safely accommodate; reach became overreach as wars of expansion became costly conflicts with continental coalitions formed out of common interest in resisting Louis's dynastic aspirations. France's twentieth-century answer to *Le Roi de Soleil* did not let these problems lessen his admiration; responding to a friend's criticism that, by the end, Louis's methods had created a void around himself, de Gaulle replied, 'His succession was Louis XV's problem, not his.' Truly, Louis's arm was long.

Look out for Philip Mansel's piece in the autumn issue of *Historic House*, tracing connections between Louis XIV and British country houses.