



Cardinal Richelieu believed in the “divine right of kings.” He thought that *his* king—Louis XIII—had the right to rule with absolute power and authority.

Throughout the ages, Richelieu has been viewed as an evil person who—for example—made life really miserable for French Protestants (known as Huguenots) and for everyone else (including poor people) who paid the huge taxes he imposed. It’s fair to ask, though, if that’s all there was to the man.

Centuries later, it isn’t surprising that people disagree in their assessment of this Cardinal-plus-Satesman. Certainly:

- He valued power, including for himself.
- He loved commissioning personal portraits (as many politicians did and still do).
- He loved France, of that there can be little doubt.
- He valued his role as a political—not just a Church—operative.
- He believed that the state was above everything (and that religion—even his religion—existed to serve the state’s purpose).
- He tried to tame the French nobility by reducing their status—and ruining their fortresses—in favor of strengthening the King’s power.

In his political autobiography, Richelieu makes clear why he didn’t care if people disdained him and his policies:

*Harshness towards individuals who flout the laws and commands of the state is for the public good; no greater crime against the public interest is possible than to show leniency to those who violate it.*

In other words ... if brutality was needed to enforce the law, so be it.

And ... brutality was certainly part of Richelieu’s *modus operandi*, if he thought those means would justify his ends. As he also once wrote:

*If you give me six lines written by the most honest man, I will find something in them to hang him.*

Such an observation is hard to square with Richelieu’s belief that applying reason to an argument is paramount:

*Reason must be the universal rule and guide; all things must be done according to reason without allowing oneself to be swayed by emotion.*

What was Armand-Jean du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu—who lived between September 9, 1585 and December 4, 1642—like as a person? Jonathan Wright, in an article penned for the *Catholic Herald*, makes some key observations and draws a few conclusions:

*Richelieu was of his time and he did his best. He was not a monster, but nor was he quite the political genius he pretended to be. He was a survivor. Balanced appraisals lack glamour, of course.*

*He'll still be compared to Stalin, even by serious historians, and he'll still be depicted on television as an evil schemer. The former is absurd but the latter is eminently forgivable: if you are adapting books about musketeers then you are stuck with the original text, and this can be jolly good fun.*

*At least, in his homeland [of France], Richelieu enjoyed something of a rehabilitation during the 20th century: he was championed as one of the creators of modern France and was even deemed worthy of being put on bank notes. This case for the defense was over-egged too, and the simple truth is that Richelieu was neither as fabulous nor as despicable as you might think. He is still, however, one of the most enthralling historical figures you are ever likely to encounter.*

*If people light celebratory bonfires when you die and if you are still on the telly almost 400 years later then you must have done something interesting. (See Wright, "Sorry BBC, Cardinal Richelieu was not a beard-stroking evil genius," published in the *Catholic Herald* on January 24, 2014.)*

Indeed! And ... if *that's* the case, it's also likely that people will disagree about the impact of *your* life's work (and how you accomplished it all).

## Credits:

Simon Vouet created this portrait of Armand-Jean du Plessis, Cardinal de Richelieu, in 1634. Image online, courtesy the [Museum Syndicate](#) website.

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