

and importance of the intendency in France. During the century and a half preceding the Revolution the main administrative division of France was the *généralité*, a unit usually but not necessarily coextensive with the province. At the head of this division was placed a royal official, the Intendant of Justice, Police, and Finance, armed with very extensive administrative powers, distinguished by his loyalty to the interests of the king, and in a sense reflecting the absolutism of the monarchy. Within his *généralité* the intendant was bound by no hard and fast statutes or regulations, and he owed no obedience to any local authorities: he was appointed by, removable by, and responsible to the king alone. When he took office his powers were given him in the form of a royal commission; and these powers might be widened or narrowed from time to time by special instructions from the crown. Usually, however, both the commission and the instructions were couched in very general terms; and, reliance being placed upon the judgment and fidelity of the official, he was left to carry out their spirit as local conditions might seem to dictate.¹ To an outsider the intendant's powers might well appear portentous, as they did to the observant Scotchman, John Law, who remarked to D'Argenson, "Let me tell you that this kingdom of France is governed by its thirty intendants . . . on whom, so far as the provinces are concerned, welfare and want, prosperity and adversity, absolutely depend."

But how, one may ask, came this centralization of local administration into the intendant's hands? By a somewhat curious but very persistent error the origin and early development of the intendant's office has been commonly attributed to Richelieu.² Such an attribution was once not without reason; for even by some of his contemporaries the great cardinal was regarded as sponsor for the system of provincial intendancies, and the idea that he created and developed the office would fit very nicely with his well-known

¹ Charles Godard, *Les Pouvoirs des Intendants sous Louis XIV.* (Paris, 1901), ch. 11.

² The error may be found even in the most recent publications. "Ces fonctionnaires firent leur apparition durant la première moitié du XVII^e siècle. Ce fut Richelieu qui les créa" (Thomas Chapais, *Jean Talon, Intendant de la Nouvelle-France*, Quebec, 1904, p. 18). "An even more effective instrument of royal control was afterwards created in the form of the intendants. Dating in their beginning from the middle of the sixteenth century, reintroduced by Henry IV. in his reconstruction of France after the religious wars, these officials were settled upon by Richelieu in the period between 1624 and 1641 as the principal agents and representatives of royal power" (E. P. Cheyney, *European Background of American History*, New York, 1904, p. 117).