

Yet if Betjeman is sometimes an old fogey, he is an old fogey with taste. He does not want the past tout court but the best of what remains, and not just for itself but for the variety of human life to which it bears witness. *Who Took Away...* protests against the boundary revision and renaming of English counties in 1979 as an attempt to abolish history. The intimate link between land and people is a recurring preoccupation, and there is always an aesthetic aspect to Betjeman's antiquarianism.

Gardner sensibly does not claim to have discovered neglected masterpieces. He explains that the composition of the *Collected Poems* was a hit-and-miss affair, owing to Betjeman's self-doubting overreliance on other people's judgement and the chaotic state of his papers. His introduction and notes provide ample context, although he misses a few things – including an intentional comic misquotation from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* in *Clifton 1940* and a parody of Othello in the prologue for the 70th anniversary of the Dublin Gaiety Theatre. Two appendices give drafts of a version Betjeman made of a poem by Fernando Pessoa which was set to music by Bliss, and a send-up of Nikolaus Pevsner in heavily Teutonic English.

The future editor(s) of a new, more substantial *Collected Betjeman* will owe a great debt to this volume.

The Sun King shines

HAMISH ROBINSON

*King of the World:
The Life of Louis XIV*

By Philip Mansel

Allen Lane £30

Philip Mansel begins his superb biography of Louis XIV, *King of the World*, with a 12-page introduction, in which he whisks the reader through 'A Thousand Years of France' from the reign of Clovis to the death of Henri IV.

This feat of coherent compression is a foretaste of the virtues that the book as a whole brings to the study of certainly the longest and perhaps the most copiously documented reign in European history.

From birth to death, even more than monarchs before and after, Louis lived his life in public. He was, and understood himself to be, a spectacle. As other kings at other courts, he was attended at his rising and at his going to bed, while he was dressed and undressed, washed and shaved. Some courtiers even had the privilege – the brevet d'affaires – of attending him on his commode.

However, visitors to Versailles were



'I said we need to update our Equality and Diversity profile, you deaf old bat'

astonished by the scale and the manner of the attendance – above all by the lack of ceremony. Contrary to what one might have thought, although he thrived on routine, Louis disliked ceremony. Had he been a contemporary politician, his watchword might have been 'accessibility'.

While court etiquette was strictly enforced (duchesses alone had the right to sit on a stool in the presence of the queen) and new etiquette introduced (only those in favour were permitted to wear shoes with a red heel), traditional court hierarchy was bypassed.

This was not merely a matter of his visibility, but connected to the way in which Louis went about the business of ruling. In his minority, his reign had been threatened by an aristocratic rebellion, the Fronde, and he had learnt at a young age the usefulness of ministers untrammelled by aristocratic affinities, who were faithful servants, rather than sharers of power.

From Cardinal Mazarin, the minister who had overseen his early years and to whom he was closely attached, Louis learnt to handle all aspects of government. When Nicolas Fouquet, a protégé of Mazarin, sought to step into the Cardinal's shoes with alluring displays of wealth and influence, Louis was spooked and had him imprisoned. With this coup d'état, Louis established his personal rule, free of both aristocratic interference and over-mighty servants.

Thereafter, there were ministers – above all Colbert and Louvois – but none who aspired to the heights of Mazarin, or of Louis XIII's minister Richelieu. Likewise, princes of the blood, particularly the Prince of Condé, the senior frondeur, were kept out of executive roles in government. The lack of ceremony and the crush at Versailles can be seen as a function of this singularity. As 'Roi Soleil', Louis needed to be eminently visible. As a working

king, he also needed to be surrounded by all the apparatus of government.

This bald sketch of Louis's modus operandi hardly does justice to Mansel's wonderfully detailed and fluent narrative – or to its enormous scope. Huge amounts of information have been digested. As a court historian, Mansel is alive to every nuance of rank and relation and a master of the mechanics of life at Versailles and the other royal palaces. This mastery naturally extends to dynastic relations and to the diplomatic history of Louis's reign.

This is shown, to take one example, in his running account of the close ties between the French and English royal families. Two generations of Stuart cousins lived at Louis's court in exile as kings next to kings. When the young Louis danced the role of Apollo in the Ballet Royal de la Nuit in 1653, his first outing as the 'Sun King', James, Duke of York, who was in exile with his brother Charles II and who was to return as the exiled James II, danced next to him in the role of Honour. When Louis attended the first horse race outside Paris in 1683, the winner was ridden by the Duke of Monmouth, two years before his execution on Tower Hill.

The portrait of Louis that emerges from this titanic effort is compelling: a man of large appetites, capable of intense affection and loyalty, vengeful, gracious, vain, hard-working, hardened in the exercise of his own will, susceptible to flattery, conceited in his isolation, capricious, unforgiving and stubborn – a combination, as Saint-Simon asserted, 'that one admires and that one flees'.

It seems hard to believe, as we see the last vestiges of an inherited understanding of courtly manners disappearing from the world, that this biography will ever, in English at least, be surpassed.

Crikey, Fyodor!

FRANCES WELCH

Mud and Stars: Travels in Russia with Pushkin and Other Geniuses of the Golden Age

By Sara Wheeler

Jonathan Cape £20

The title of Sara Wheeler's new book is taken from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*: 'We sit in the mud, my friend, and reach for the stars.'

In her introduction, Wheeler announces that it is she who is in the mud, following an – unspecified – personal crisis, and the stars she reaches for are the Russian writers of the