This is a history of the last century in the life of a great noble family. As such, it necessarily discusses only the final stage in a much longer history, one that had its beginning in the chancellery of the Burgundian dukes in the early fifteenth century and reached a peak of political importance during the Wars of Religion a hundred years later.

It would be most revealing to follow more closely the rise of the Saulx-Tavanes in these years, for it would tell us much about the so-called grands, their levers of power, their values and skills as councillors, captains, and seigneurs. It would help us to clarify the gradual transition of the French aristocracy from local provincial independence to Royal Court dependence and, hopefully, to capture the ambiguities and ambivalences of a ruling class in the process of domestication. Unfortunately, this cannot be done. The sources are not sufficient for more than a sketch of these earlier centuries. Adequate documentary materials become available only when the family gravitated to Paris at the turn of the eighteenth century. Moreover, hindsight makes it almost impossible to ignore the coming of the Revolution and the eclipse of the old Court. The entire narrative, as well as the analytical questions emerging from it, are necessarily influenced by our own awareness of the impending crisis, not to say doom. I have tried to avoid the worst blemishes that mark history written à la Cassandra. On the other hand, it would be a mistake not to investigate the reasons for the decline of a great noble house.

Why study one noble family? What can the social historian learn from a single case? Abandoning all claims to the typicality of the family in any statistical sense does not mean retreating to antiquitarianism and the quaintness of the particular. The actions and attitudes of more than four generations of noble courtiers such as the Saulx-Tavanes can tell us a great deal about the society in which they lived, about that society's working assumptions and its formal structure. The study of a family can
thus become one of the most effective ways of establishing a continuous relation with a manageable group of individuals. This group does not need to be limited to the members of the family proper; it can include individuals with whom the family had most regular contacts—other nobles and “notables,” officials at various levels of the royal administration, creditors, estate agents, tenants, and even a certain number of ordinary country people. If the sources do not permit a rigorous psychological analysis of this “extended family,” they do furnish individual portraits with specific characteristics that would be difficult to attain in a more general study of a social group. Such distinct contours can provide some insight into the attitudes and values, not only of a grand seigneur but also of a whole cross-section of eighteenth-century society, both urban and rural, representing various tiers of the social hierarchy. A number of specific questions must be asked about these two worlds of Versailles and Burgundy.

First, how did an old military family promote its fortune at court? This question involves family discipline, marriage policy, and debt management, as well as the more obvious maneuvers for pensions and favors in the daily performance of court functions. Second, there is the question of how the Saulx-Tavanes managed their estates from Paris. The relationship of court nobles to landed society is perhaps the most important part of this book. The most crucial issues here are the role of the noble landlord in agricultural improvement and the effects—psychological as well as economic—of his managerial methods on the local rural community. Third, it is important to know how the family spent its money. The budgetary priorities of the Saulx-Tavanes tell us much about the style of life of a noble family at Paris and about its changing relations to creditors. And fourth, what form did the Revolution take and what were its effects on the family’s estate in Burgundy? Looking at this circumscribed area, one can debate who “won” and who “lost” the Revolution in the provinces. For the Saulx-Tavanes, as for many other emigré nobles, survival was a matter of preserving not only life and revenues, but also name, rank, and esteem. How did they meet the challenge of a new century?

This study, then, treats a number of general questions about French society in the century between the reign of Louis XIV and the Restoration, as reflected in the fate of a single family and a single rural estate. If it does not claim “statistical typicality,” it makes a case for “plausible
typicality." I remain convinced that the Saulx-Tavanes did not act very differently from other court nobles. The pressures and norms that guided or limited their actions were those of their milieu. Understanding this in sufficient depth, one does not need excessive determinism to conclude that there must have been other Saulx-Tavanes.

Finally, this book is not only a "study"; it is also a story. I hope that, despite digressions on various special problems in the social and economic history of France in this period, the central theme remains intact and visible. My purpose has been to blend narrative and analysis. The reader will be the judge of whether this goal has been achieved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the Social Science Research Council and Dartmouth College for providing me with both the resources and the time to pursue research in Dijon, France, in 1964. The archiviste-adjointe of the departmental archives, Mlle Françoise Vignier, was especially helpful during my stay in Dijon. I also want to express appreciation to the librarians of Baker Library, Dartmouth College, for their generous assistance over several summers. Finally, I wish to thank James C. Davis, Elborg H. Forster, Frederic C. Lane, R. Burr Litchfield, Marc Raeff, Orest Ranum, David Spring, Lawrence Stone, Perry Viles, Sasha Weitman, and Martin Wolfe for their helpful criticism while this study was in preparation. All documents included in this book have been translated by Elborg H. Forster. A special acknowledgment is due to Linda Vlasak of The Johns Hopkins Press for numerous improvements in the manuscript.

ABBREVIATIONS

A. D. for Archives Départementales, Côte d'Or; series letter and bundle number to follow (e.g., A. D., E-1748).

Other departmental archives will be cited as A. D., followed by the name of the department and the bundle number.