CHAPTER SIX

Intendant of Moulins and Metz

In 1765 what were the problems of a new intendant? It has been recently argued that after 1750 royal power began to weaken. Contrary to Tocqueville's thesis of increasing centralization of power, the intendants became the victims of governmental policy in two respects—their freedom of action was increasingly circumscribed, and support from Paris was less sustained. Here too, the Seven Years' War marks a subtle turning point. The controller-general, Bertin, after an abortive effort to pursue Machault's policy to tax the privileged, was disgraced in 1763. He was followed by François de L'Averdy, previous member of the Parlement of Paris, and thought to be partial to its views on financial matters. He seemed inclined to reduce the powers of the intendants, and his edicts on municipal reform of 1764-65 can be seen in this light. In retrospect, royal experiments in local initiative only increased the obstacles to "reform from above," the main instruments of which were the royal intendants.¹

But if the central direction of the royal administration seemed to flag, the actual apparatus expanded as if by laws of its own. Whether or not under the influence of a particular "school" of physiocrats or economists, the government turned its attention increasingly toward communication, productivity, education, public health, and the plight of the poor. A new vocabulary invaded the intendants' reports—"state of the harvest," artificial meadows, inoculation, midwives, and ateliers de charité. In the mid-1760s Bertin launched his project of clearings as Turgot, then intendant of Limoges, began his campaign to end the corvée. The debate over the grain trade dominated the decade. No wonder the ministries sprouted new branches, the petits ministères such as Bridges and Roads, Water and Forests, Mines, Agriculture, and Manufactures. An enormous expansion of administrative correspondence took place, as Bertin (1762), L'Averdy (1764), and Terray (1772) each launched national
statistical surveys to determine the precise resources, human and material,\(^2\) of the kingdom. Thus, at the same moment the royal intendants found themselves challenged by local estates and parlements, the duties of the post expanded into the entire area of public welfare. It was no longer enough to be the guardian of law and order in the provinces; an intendant was expected to be an active public improver.

Jean-Samuel Depont's new assignment must have been disappointing. However long the seventeen years in Paris may have seemed, the thirteen in Moulins were equally interminable. Baron de Frénilly may have remembered that in his youth an intendancy was the finest post a man could desire, but even so dedicated an intendant as Turgot considered his first assignment at Limoges a "misfortune," pulling him away from the "philosophic life" in Paris he loved so much.\(^3\) Jean-Samuel was no philosophe—his father's fears on this account were much exaggerated—but the two days' coach ride from the comfortable Marais quarter across the Beauce and along the upper Loire to Nevers and finally to Moulins brought him to a remote rural world that made La Rochelle and Aunis seem "advanced" and prosperous by comparison.\(^4\)

Even by the standards of the time, Moulins was a backward généralité. A pays de petite culture, it consisted of 1,178 parishes and 49 villes, though only Moulins, the capital, with some twelve thousand inhabitants could properly be called a "town," followed by Nevers, Montluçon, and the spas at Bourbon-Archambault and, more recently, Vichy, frequented in summer by the court nobility. The intendancy was coterminous with the old province of Bourbonnais, a region of gravelly soil useful for road-building but not much else. Like Auvergne to the south and Limousin to the southwest, the Bourbonnais produced more rye and buckwheat (blé noir) than high quality wheat (froment) for the market, and in any case plots were too small and yields too low to produce a grain surplus of any importance.\(^5\) In fact, chronic food shortage was the problem, and the early 1770s would be particularly hard on a peasantry who understandably had a reputation for lethargy which sometimes passed for douceur.\(^6\) There were only two main royal roads, in constant need of repair, one from Clermont to the south and the other from Lyon to the southeast, which met at Moulins to form a single route north to Paris. The road from Clermont became a seasonal highway for bands of "vagabonds" out of the Massif Central. The Auvergnat peddlers and "disguised beggars," known for their heavy drinking and aggressiveness, presented a special problem for any local administrator. Many of these misérables never got beyond the hôpital at Moulins on their way to Paris, swelling the intendant's list of mendicants, vagrants, and gens sans aveu.\(^7\) There were few alternative occupations to subsistence farming; a few wood merchants floated logs down the Allier, Nièvre, and beyond; there was the usual range of semirural
crafts, but almost no mines, forges, or textile mills, not even an exportable wine or brandy.\(^8\) Probably the most lucrative trade was in smuggled salt, for the *gabelle* (salt tax) in the Bourbonnais was considerably less than in neighboring Auvergne.\(^9\) Otherwise, the toll houses at Vichy, Gannat, and Montluçon did their best to discourage any exports of merchandise from Auvergne,\(^10\) so that the Bourbonnais had little transit trade either. There was ample opportunity for Intendant Depont to be a “public improver” in the Bourbonnais.

If this *généralité* did not carry the prestige or amenities of those of Brittany, Bordeaux, or Dijon, much less Paris, it had some institutional advantages for a new intendant. There was no parlement, no provincial estates, no military governor. There was not even a cathedral chapter or a university. There was only a presidial court and a *bureau des finances*; in this respect it resembled La Rochelle. It was a *pays d’élection* where the central administration had the fewest institutional challenges to its directives. Moreover, even the poverty of the province had some advantages. The resident nobility was reasonably docile; there were no powerful mercantile interests and not too many lawyers. This may have been one of the reasons why Moulins was designed as a beginner’s post. Between 1636 and 1790, there were forty-two intendants, or about one every four years who “passed through” the *généralité*.\(^11\) If Depont’s thirteen years (1765–78) suggest that he was not among the most favored intendants, one must not forget that Turgot spent an equal time (1761–74) in Limoges, not the economic or cultural center of the realm either. Moreover, it required a decade of continuous administration to have some lasting impact on the local area.\(^12\)

The town of Moulins was a sleepy provincial capital. It was still “a poor, ill-built town” when Arthur Young passed through in 1789; on that occasion the English traveler made one of his usual comments on French “provincial culture.” “This capital of Bourbonnais, on the great post-road to Italy, has not an inn equal to the little village of Chavanne ... as to a newspaper, I might as well demand an elephant.”\(^13\) Instead of a parlementary square as at Rennes or a palace for the estates as at Dijon, or even a cathedral as at Autun, Moulins had a *caserne*, a military barracks. The very architecture suggests *ennui*, and one is not surprised to read how bored Madame des Escherolles was as a girl, when her father was garrisoned at Moulins, spending her days in interminable *visites* among the local notables.\(^14\)

The official residence of the intendant was the Hôtel d’Ansac on the rue Sainte-Claire. It was in such poor condition that Depont tried to find a new building. The limitations of the public budget, however, forced him to settle for minor renovations, extending a wall here and adding a room there, but apparently with little permanent success.\(^15\) Jean-Samuel kept
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his hôtel in the Marais; indeed much of his correspondence with the controller-general is posted from Paris. His long sojourns in Paris were one aspect of his style of administration.

Like all intendants, Depont had a very small paid staff. Consequently, he had to depend on a few key men for routine work and was obliged to work with other institutions and even independent entrepreneurs for larger projects such as road-building. His subdelegate-general at Moulins, Faulconnier, handled much of the correspondence; the engineer of the Ponts et Chaussées, Desvaux, and his assistants were indispensable for the execution of public works; the local receiver-general had to be willing to transfer tax funds to him on convenient terms; and local suppliers of army provisions or entrepreneurs of spinning mills often contributed raw materials or talent necessary to the operation of the public workhouses. Perhaps contracting to entrepreneurs was more convenient than economical, for Depont was criticized later in his career by the new provincial assembly at Metz for not obtaining the best price for army supplies. There was no hint of graft, but rather the suggestion that Depont preferred the easiest way, which was to procure private services.

Depont was chronically late in sending his reports to Paris. Albert, intendant of commerce, and commis (chief clerk) of the controller-general, reprimanded Jean-Samuel on more than one occasion. In the spring of 1772 he wrote: “The controller-general [Terray] asked you in a letter of 9 November, 1771 to send your plans for the public works [travaux de charité] before the end of December. They have not arrived yet and I am afraid the poor will suffer from this delay. I will not conceal from you the fact that you are the only one of all the intendants who have similar projects to execute in their généralités who has not yet taken care of this.”

The intendant always had an excuse. On this occasion he blamed the slow payment schedule of the receiver-general and the weather. “Yes, I should have sent my état in December. But this does not mean that I would have received my money any sooner, since the receiver-general was to pay it in six installments, beginning March 10. One installment would not have been enough to begin my twenty-five ateliers. Besides, work begun when it is still cold would not be very solid anyway.”

Depont did better with his “paper work” in 1774 and 1775, only to be reprimanded again for tardiness in 1776. This time it was the fault of the engineers. “The difficulty in assembling all the expense accounts as well as the diverse reports of the engineers and the assistant engineers of my department has made me late. I hope that in the future the charity accounts will arrive at the date specified by the minister.” When Depont moved on to Metz in 1778, his replacement at Moulins, M. Reverseaux, referred to the “unfinished business” (tâches arriérées) from 1777 and 1778, especially the roads in progress. He then turned to the accounts in
his letter to Paris. "I take the liberty to reply that the previous accounts will be difficult to straighten out."22

It appears that Jean-Samuel was much more effective dealing with administrative problems by face-to-face relationships. Everything points to his charm and affability. He surely knew what he was about when he went to see the intendant of finance, d'Ormesson, personally about more money for public works. "I would have made my complaint earlier, Monsieur, but since I was coming [to Paris] anyway, I thought it preferable to treat the matter orally."23

While Intendant de Pont could hardly be called a meticulous administrator, which was infuriating no doubt for "undersecretaries" like d'Ormesson24 who were painstaking in these matters, he knew his prerogatives and would brook no jurisdictional incursions. With the local Bureau des Finances he was firm and on occasion peremptory. Jean-Samuel may have been the son and brother of trésoriers de France, but first and foremost he was "the king's man." He may well have read the latest mémoire by Moreau de Beaumont, councilor of state, on the tax powers of the intendants. The key lines were: "the intendant is to preside at and have principal voice in the meetings of the Bureau of Finances which receives the royal orders for the levy of the taille."25 Whether or not he had read Moreau's mémoire, Depont treated the trésoriers as his subordinates. His letters had the unmistakable tone of authority. "In addition, Messieurs, I had assumed the second brevet [letters patent] containing the taxes for the military for 1768 had been deposited at your office immediately after reaching my departments, but since I see that it has not been delivered, I am giving my Bureaux the necessary orders to assure its delivery."26 In fact, his failure to supply the trésoriers at Moulins with the requisite tax information from Paris may not have been accidental. The previous year, Depont had bypassed the trésoriers completely in the task of assessing royal taxes. The Bureau had protested and the controller-general was obliged to intervene. But instead of chastising Depont, he defended his actions against the trésoriers.27 Perhaps L'Averdy was not the thoroughgoing traitor to royal centralization his critics have made of him.28

Jean-Samuel did not stop at treating the trésoriers as subordinate tax officials; he even tried to tax them. In 1773 he extended the capitation to the trésoriers. Again, they protested to Paris and received a word of caution from one of their colleagues, M. de Villantroys: "... the supplement to the capitation tax was imposed by M. l'Intendant who has included you, Messieurs, in the category of 'privileged.' Until now that rubric has not been used in this way in any other généralité. You must appeal to M. l'Intendant, but with considerable circumspection and without losing sight of the authority of the intendants. Their work is always well regarded
by the Council [of State] and they can never do wrong."29 Apparently, Depont enforced the new vingtième taxes of 1772 as well. His tax roll reads: "tax to be levied on all property ... owned by nobles, ecclesiastics, officiers exempt and privileged [i.e., the trésoriers], bourgeois and inhabitants taillables et non-taillables."30

But surely the most humiliating blow to the Bureau was the matter of recruitment into their "company." Depont was very officious when called upon to arbitrate in a dispute: "The Guardian of the Seals orders me to inform you that you can do nothing better than to admit Sieur de Fontenay into your ranks. Your refusal is all the more baseless since he is educated, is of proper birth [il est d'une naissance], and enjoys a fortune respectable enough [assez honnête] to hold his office with honor. Therefore, Messieurs, I am assuming that his admission [to your ranks] will encounter no [further] difficulty from you."31 Talent, Birth, and Fortune should be rewarded, by administrative fiat if necessary.

The officiers of Moulins should never forget that Depont was "Intendant of Justice, Police, and Finances." Backed by the royal council, he consolidated his control over municipal finances. In a series of arrêts (judgments) by the Council of State between 1765 and 1772, both the Chambre des Comptes at Paris and the Bureau des Finances at Moulins were prevented from sharing power to audit the accounts of the communities in the généralité. Not one new octroi (toll) could be levied at the town gates and not one sou spent from the proceeds of a communal wood without the intendant's approval. In 1769, for example, Depont's authorization was required before Nevers could build a bridge, a town hall, and barracks.32 Some intendants, Etigny at Auch for instance, were not very successful in establishing an exclusive control (tutelle) over the finances of the local communities, but Depont was not one of them. Bourbonnais, like Bourgogne, witnessed no weakening of royal power over the villages and towns in the last half of the century.33

Unlike the tireless Turgot at Limoges, Depont demonstrated only a perfunctory interest in the promotion of agriculture and manufactures. Nor did he advance any general theories of economic growth based on physiocratic principles. If one judges by existing administrative correspondence, horses and silk production were the extent of Jean-Samuel's enthusiasm for "growth." He made a tour of the royal stud farms in the province and assured Bertin, now in charge of procurement for the royal cavalry, that he would identify the best horses. He also had twelve thousand mulberry trees planted and solicited a government bounty of three thousand livres to encourage two small silk establishments at Moulins. One of the entrepreneurs was Edme Joseph Jacquesson de L'Herbut, tax agent for the vingtièmes as well as chief steward for the Prince de Condé. He had laid out a series of projects before Depont, including a plan to
manufacture chairs, screens, and cotton cloth. But Depont’s main preoccupation was the employment of beggars and foundlings. The minister in Paris concurred: “I agree with your own strong conviction that the bounty be used to reward those female spinners who spin the finest thread.”

With regard to the grain trade, Depont was not a promoter of “free trade.” When it came to finding the necessary food for a chronically undersupplied province, the “free market” held no great attractions. Depont was too close to the rigidities of the market and shared none of Turgot’s grim determination to press a principle like free trade to the bitter end. For example, in October 1775, as grain prices happily began to fall, Depont was concerned that the price of bread drop at the same rate. To his subordinates at Moulins he wrote: “As soon, Messieurs, as the fall in the price of grains begins to be perceptible, the people must receive the same reduction in the price of bread. ... If the bakers’ guild [jurande] becomes an obstacle to this, please inform me.”

Depont had no inhibitions about selling government grain at a loss when hard times required it. In 1771, a very bad year, he wrote:

I have made the greatest effort to alleviate the conditions of the people and to relieve the destitute in particular. I have obtained grain from the neighboring provinces at considerable expense. ... I have had to use considerable sums for these purchases, on which there is bound to be a loss. I have also spent money on alms which I have distributed by the municipal officials in the towns and by the curés in the countryside. The suffering [mal], however, continues. This généralité has been reduced to a terrible state and deserves all the help it can get.

Depont felt that it was incumbent upon him to distribute a very scarce commodity as equitably as possible. Bread was too precious to be left to the free market. Here, as elsewhere, Jean-Samuel was a thoroughgoing pragmatist, and aware of the limits of economic theory.

In 1775, after he had become controller-general, Turgot proposed that the corvée be commuted and road construction paid for by special taxes. He consulted all the intendants on the matter. Depont replied enthusiastically that he had already persuaded the village communities to “repurchase” their obligations for labor services on the royal roads. He even insisted that in the assessment of the new road tax, “no one be exempt,” specifying the Church, the Privileged, the Princes of the Blood, the Royal Domain—all property owners, “in proportion to their landed revenue.” Depont appeared as a more committed “fiscal egalitarian” than the other intendants who replied to Turgot’s circular letter. Most of the intendants simply proposed a supplement to the vingtième, thus avoiding any new attempt to tax the “privileged” by means of a reassessment of revenues—the dreaded new cadastre.
Two years later, the progress made in road-building in the province earned Depont high praise from the controller-general. "I must praise your administration for the thoroughness with which you have executed the directives of the Council concerning the construction of the *grandes routes* without *corvées* in 1776. The minister is equally satisfied with the construction accomplished in 1774 and 1775 to facilitate communication on the secondary roads." Depont was also careful to compensate the proprietors dispossessed by the new royal roads from a special tax imposed for this purpose.

The most original aspect of the government's policy of public works in the 1770s was the new use of the *ateliers de charité* for poor relief. The idea of State-financed enterprises to put the poor to work was not new in 1770, but Turgot's experiments with them in Limoges encouraged the central administration to extend the projects throughout the kingdom. The *atelier* scheme was intended to reach beyond the chronic beggar and vagabond to offer a supplementary income to the seasonally unemployed, especially to women and children whose ordinary day-wages were so pitifully low. The *ateliers* were not intended to be permanent, nor were they to replace other more traditional forms of Church and private charity, but it is easy to understand how they quickly exhausted the public funds allotted to them. The bad harvest years of 1769-72 placed an especially heavy burden on the *ateliers*.

Jean-Samuel Depont had special reasons to welcome any new effort to help the poor; in addition to his own *misérables*, he had to deal with those Auvergnats who flooded north in the dead season. In mid-December of 1770, a "bad year," he wrote to d'Ormesson, undersecretary in charge of public welfare: "Here we are, Monsieur, in the hardest days of winter. Public works have been halted almost everywhere and the first frost will end them for good. There is not a moment to lose in preparing the relief measures the minister intends for the people." He asked permission to use all the funds granted to his généralité from the *taille* for direct charity (*aumônes*) to the poor and destitute. He had spent the grant of the previous year in this way and said it had saved "many lives" even though the formal instructions from Paris had earmarked sixty thousand livres for tax reduction and the remaining twenty-five thousand for public works (*travaux de charité*). Depont explained that, although the proprietors and tenant farmers (*fermiers*) would not receive the tax relief His Majesty had intended, direct charity would help them as well since they would not have to feed the poor. Jean-Samuel never seemed to take the "letter" of the regulations too seriously. But d'Ormesson in Paris did. "However honorable your motives in deviating from the rules prescribed by His Majesty, I cannot approve of the fact that you have taken it upon yourself not to conform to them. Regretfully, I must tell you that I will be very un-
happy if such a thing were to happen again. I am convinced, however, that I shall not have another occasion to reproach you in this way. I shall forget this episode in order to cooperate with you for the good of the généralité."  

Rebuked by his superior, Depont pleaded that at least the allotment for public works be increased to forty thousand livres, an absolute minimum in his opinion. He did not favor direct tax rebates to the landowners who did not necessarily use these sums to feed their sharecroppers and farmhands, much less to make charitable contributions to the bureaux de charité. On the contrary, observed Depont, in hard times the landowners, large and small, were apt to dismiss their bordiers and valets."  

"As for the ateliers, as long as that is what you insist on, it is impossible to do the slightest bit of good with less than 40,000. As for the rest of the grant (45,000) it will be used according to your orders. But I must tell you that this is the first time I have been criticized in the six years I have administered this province. The infinite gratitude of a mass of unfortunates [malheureux] whom I have helped by deviating a little from the rules would console me if I did not wish, above everything else, to merit your approval."  

In fact, Depont had not been the only intendant to "deviate from the rules" that year. Turgot at Limoges apologized for the "considerable deficit," largely due to relief measures, but pleaded that the public service rendered "might merit some approval."  

By 1771, Depont's reports on the ateliers began to arrive in Paris. One has an impression of large quantities of earth and gravel being moved about in baskets, stone replacing wood as canal linings, drainage improved, even garbage hauled away from the churchyards. Each of seventeen projects of that year contains an estimate of work days required and the daily cost at 12 sous per man, 10 per woman, and 8 per child. Depont estimated the total cost for 1771 at 40,220 livres, "which would employ 1,941 men for two months." Given a provincial population of about 500,000, such relief was clearly inadequate.  

Aside from enlisting the help of the engineers from the Ponts et Chaussées and procuring the minimum of tools and baskets, the main problem was obtaining the money from Paris. Even when the sum was authorized, payment via the local receiver-general of taxes was not immediately forthcoming. One of them wrote to the minister as if the collected taxes were not really public funds. "... it is clear that the intendants think they can draw on the receivers-general without any advance planning as if this service were easily performed and as if they had these sums readily at hand, which is very unfair. No doubt that in hard times like these, everyone is prepared to sacrifice his own interest, but such requests must be limited to what is possible and not considered an obligation." The letter would be inexplicable if we did not know that as a
financier, the receiver-general “placed” the public funds in short-term loans (six months) and could not raise the capital on very short notice. Jean-Samuel was well aware of these operations—his father-in-law profited from them—but as intendant he did not hesitate to press the receivers for payment.52

This was a particularly bad year. The word “desperate” appears three times in Depont’s letters in early 1771 to d’Ormesson.53 By November the bands of poor from the south had inflated the numbers on the roads so that they constituted a menace to security. A petition from the canton of Bourbon asked Depont “to prohibit ‘squatting’ and building huts along the main road by people who are in extreme misery and who frighten regular travelers.”54 It was a nationwide phenomenon. Throughout the 1770s and 1780s, writes Olwen Hufton, there was a “rising tide of vagrant bands” intimidating the countryside.55

The royal government never intended that the ateliers be paid entirely from public funds. Since the roads benefited the larger landowners who would use them, the government argued, plausibly, that these people should contribute to their construction. Initially, Depont had some difficulty getting private individuals to pay anything, and the controller-general’s office had still another occasion to criticize him. “I notice with distress the indifference of the clergy and of the seigneurs of the parishes of your généralité. The comparisons I have made between a number of other généralités and yours lead me to believe that the importance of His Majesty’s charity has not been sufficiently understood. More zeal in seconding his beneficent views should be demonstrated and I urge you to renew your efforts with those persons in a position to contribute to this relief work.”56 The polite use of the passive form could not disguise the reprimand.

Although Depont was able to enlist the help of a few gentilshomes and bourgeois aisés at Montluçon to form a “Bureau of Alms,”57 his superiors complained again the following spring. “It appears that your efforts to make the rich proprietors contribute [to the ateliers] have been no more successful than last year. At least I presume that you have done everything possible to stimulate their zeal. Your généralité is the only one where there is so much indifference.”58

By 1773, however, Depont began to report participation by local notables. On a brand new form Depont began to list these contributors—sums of 300 to 600 livres from a dozen resident gentilshommes-campagnards and a few churchmen.59 At the end of the year, Depont handed in his accounts for 1773 and projects for 1774—apparently on time—and received a compliment. His superior was “edified by the zeal of the seigneurs and rich proprietors” which Depont had done so much to stimulate.60
Jean-Samuel had suffered from invidious comparison with other intendants regarding his late reports and his lack of zeal in prodding private contributions to charity. He also had complaints from the local nobility. In a letter sent directly to d’Ormesson in Paris, one Comtesse de Saint-Georges began by describing the misery on her estate in the remote Haute Marche, claiming that “people by the hundreds” came to her gate every night. “The intendant of Limousin [Turgot] does things for the cantons. M. Depont, our intendant, sends only the modest sum of two thousand livres into the small towns of this province. Only the poor of the towns are admitted to these ateliers; the poor of the countryside groan and starve to death. Yet they are the ones who keep us alive by their hard work. . . . If we do not help them, the land will not be tilled this year. The seigneurs are doing what they can for their vassals, but since the harvest was ruined, they do not have anything either.”

Albert, d’Ormesson’s commis, forwarded this letter to Depont with the subtle recommendation: “I notice that you place almost all your ateliers in the towns, but I presume that the poor inhabitants of the countryside are admitted there as well. Otherwise, the intentions of his Majesty would not be fulfilled.” Again, Depont was not following the rules to the letter, but in this instance the ministry seemed more tolerant. With only about forty thousand livres to spend, Depont had to pick his locations carefully. Although he did establish some of his twenty-five ateliers in the least accessible districts such as Combrailles, he concentrated most of them on the main highway north and south of Moulins in the eastern half of the province. This was the route by which the dreaded Auvergnats would arrive after the harvest season. The intendant of Auvergne at Clermont had also concentrated his ateliers in the towns, claiming that his seventy-five thousand livres were simply not enough to do anything for the countryside.

In the eyes of the central administration Jean-Samuel’s performance as intendant of Moulins was not altogether exemplary. True, he had consolidated the fiscal powers of his office at the expense of such local rivals as the Bureau of Finances, and increased his tutelle over the villages. His road building was praised, at least by 1777. But his handling of poor relief not only failed to conform to bureaucratic routine in the submission of reports, but also deviated from policy directives. Depont first favored direct charity instead of the ateliers, then spent the entire annual welfare budget on the ateliers instead of earmarking a large part for tax relief, then failed to enlist any private contributions, and finally failed to move the ateliers about the countryside. Perhaps it was this kind of “independence” that kept him thirteen years at Moulins.

It would be futile to argue that Jean-Samuel was a model intendant. There was an element of carelessness in his behavior that did not make for bonne administration, at least as a d’Ormesson or a Turgot understood it.
When the minister praised "zeal," he usually meant "exactitude" in following the directives of the office of the controller-general. Jean-Samuel Depont was not made this way. Having spent the first forty years of his life resisting the admonitions of his father, the prescriptions of his church, the mores of his provincial origins, why should he slavishly follow the orders of a d'Ormesson or even a Turgot? Moreover, there was more to it than "carelessness" or "independence." Depont had his own ideas about how to treat the poor, and these ideas differed from the official position adopted by Turgot, controller-general, 1774–76.

Turgot had written that "the bureaux of charity must never lose sight of the fact that public aid for real poverty must never serve as an encouragement to idleness." Except for the sick and the aged, Turgot opposed direct aid to the poor, and emphasized employment of the able-bodied in public works. He also preferred that poor families be paid in food, "since wages were too often dissipated in the cabarets." As intendant at Limoges, for example, Turgot paid poor persons who worked in the ateliers 3 sous and 1.5 pounds of bread daily. Depont, on the other hand, never referred to the laziness (fainéantise) or drunkenness of the poor. He paid them in coin—12 sous per day for men, 10 for women. He gave up direct charity, one recalls, only under administrative pressure. When the central office wanted his reports to measure in actual paving stone the work accomplished, he replied that "the accomplishment cannot be measured in toises [cubic feet]."

But most important, Depont did not regard the ateliers as crisis or temporary relief, but potentially, it seems, as a permanent source of ancillary income for a part of the population that would always be misérable. In one of his letters to d'Ormesson, after mentioning the new roads and the grain they could now handle, he wrote:

The ateliers have another, even greater advantage. They have permitted a portion of the people to live during the hardest months of the year. It is that portion which can never be well enough off and whom we call locataires or journaliers in the countryside and the children of winegrowers, jardiniers, and other types in the towns. This is a charity which does not degrade one's spirits and makes for respectable citizens. If the ministry wishes to continue this successful project, there is every reason to believe that in the next ten years the whole province will be transformed.

Unrealistic though the statement may have been, it was a tribute to Jean-Samuel's more generous inclinations—inclinations that were not widely shared by his colleagues in Paris or his forebears in La Rochelle.

In December, 1774, Jean-Samuel was made maitre des requêtes honoraire, giving him "rank, presence, voice, and opinion" in the Parliament of Paris. He must have reflected as he read the lines of the royal
brevet: "Desiring to recompense the services that he has rendered Us for more than twenty-four consecutive years ... and the example of his ancestors who have distinguished themselves in important posts conferred on them by Our Predecessors. ..." Among the distinguished ancestors was his grandfather, "president of the Chamber of Commerce at La Rochelle."70 His father, Paul-François, had died the previous June. Jean-Samuel himself was approaching fifty. Was this the end of a long climb from commercial and provincial horizons to honorable status as intendant of one of the more mediocre généralités of the kingdom?

Although he lived at Moulins only part of the year, he made efforts to improve his provincial surroundings. His colleague and friend, Jacques Flesselles, the previous intendant, had built a bridge across the Allier71 and also contributed money to the restoration of the old Jesuit collège. One of Depont's first gestures on behalf of his "capital" was a gift of 1,200 livres for an iron gate for the collège with the appropriate inscription: Collegium Restauratum.72 During his thirteen years, Depont's urban improvements ranged from such relatively minor embellishments as repairing the clocktower and building public fountains to constructing new streets and sewage canals. The filthy sludge from the town's tanneries that flowed down an open stream into the Allier River was channeled through a covered aqueduct. The intendant also built new boulevards,73 provided street lamps, and was the first to mark the street names on plaques and number the houses. He also planted linden trees along the boulevards. The quays along the river were enlarged to house a depot for wine and foodstuffs and another for lumber. He drained the marshes which encircled the town's prisons. Much of this work was done over the protests of the Bureau of Finances, which objected to the cost. In addition, the large quantities of wood used for construction made Moulins susceptible to fire, one of which ravaged the entire town in 1755, while another burned down the faubourg Chaveau in 1778.74

From what we know about Jean-Samuel's father-in-law—intendant des menus plaisirs du Roy—and his social life in Paris, we can assume that he must have been particularly adept at organizing the town fêtes, especially on the occasion of the passage through Moulins by members of the court noblesse—Conti, Bourbon-Lamballe, the Italian brides of the king's brothers, Provence and Artois—on their way to take the waters at Bourbon or Vichy. Paul-François may have taken a dim view of Intendant Le Peletier's celebrations at La Rochelle, but as royal intendant Jean-Samuel organized and enjoyed concerts, illuminations, and fireworks. He was equally proficient at arranging ceremonies for the "great events" of the reign—public prayers on the death of the Dauphin (1766), Maria Leszinska (1768), and Louis XV (1774), as well as the more festive celebration of the coronation of Louis XVI. An unexpected ceremonial occasion was
created by the death of the archbishop of Cambrai, Monseigneur de Choiseul-Stainville, who died suddenly while visiting Depont at the intendance in 1774. It was characteristic of the intendant’s relations with the Bureau of Finances that they should quarrel over the quality of the musicians at the concerts and complain of the cost of the local Academy of Music of which Depont was president. In 1777 the Bureau criticized certain “abuses” recently introduced into the concerts, such as dancing.75 Moulins would never be Paris.

In 1778 Jean-Samuel was named intendant of Metz, a much more important post. A few weeks before his departure from Moulins, the municipality decided to establish a monument at the entrance to the new “covered market” in Depont’s honor. The deliberation of the town council included these lines: “... to perpetuate the memory of the beneficence and the generosity that have marked the administration of M. Depont and to express the recognition that our fellow citizens will always have for all the useful and important projects that he has accomplished in this city, for its embellishment as well as for the purity and salubrity of its air.”76 Due allowance made for the ceremonial imperatives of the occasion, the municipality had reason to be thankful to Jean-Samuel. In the province at large, Depont had his critics—the Bureau of Finances and certain proprietors like Comtesse de Saint-Georges—but perhaps his solicitude for the poor, restrained by slender budgetary allowances from Paris, deserved the greatest praise.

In 1790 Metz had thirty-six thousand people, a number almost equal to Strasbourg or Toulouse, three times the size of Moulins, and twice the size of La Rochelle. It possessed three thousand houses and sixty-one churches and chapels, a high per capita ratio of housing and religious “capacity,” and a reputation for good sanitary conditions and a relatively low rate of disease. The city had a parlement, a cathedral and an archbishop, a military governor and a large garrison, in addition to its bureau des finances and tax receivers. Although Parisian visitors like Voltaire might have found its fortresslike atmosphere a bit austere, Metz was a real metropolis on the main road from Paris to Strasbourg on the Rhine. Nor was Metz an isolated urban center; the towns of Nancy, Toul, Verdun, Pont-à-Mousson, Lunéville were nearby and distinctly more cosmopolitan than Montluçon or Gannat in remote Bourbonnais. The town hall was an impressive new stone building, as was the parlement, and the intendant’s residence was a spacious eighteenth-century town house with inner court and large windows. Although the old court of the dukes of Lorraine was at Nancy, Metz boasted a cultural life with its academy of science, collèges, patois literature, theater, and Masonic lodges.

The new theater had nightly performances with a repertoire that in-
cluded Molière’s comedies, Voltaire’s tragedies, Marivaux’s Le Jeu de l’Amour and Beaumarchais’s Le Barbier de Séville. Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme and L’Avaré were special favorites of the Messins and may have elicited a wry smile from the new intendant who surely attended the theater. The royal academy held weekly meetings and sponsored essay contests on serious subjects of public importance, ranging from agriculture to civil equality. The subject of the competition for 1787 was: “Est-il des moyens de rendre les juifs plus utiles et plus heureux?” With a Jewish population of two thousand, the issue was a pressing one at Metz. Among the essays submitted to the secretary of the academy was one by an obscure curé from a village in Lorraine, an abbé Grégoire. His “Mémoire sur les Juifs” won the concours, an indication of the liberal tendencies of the local academy, especially its leaders Roederer and Le Payen.

The généralité of Trois-Évêchés was one of two carved out of newly annexed Lorraine (1766). If the loyalty of its 350,000 inhabitants was less assured than the passive obedience of those of Moulins, they had a reputation for greater discipline and hard work. Although there were still active Jewish and Protestant communities, the Catholic Reformation had made its mark, not only on church architecture, but especially on education. The region was one of the most literate in the kingdom. By the end of the century, it was also in the process of economic growth. In addition to exports of farm produce, salt, wine, and brandy, Lorraine began to industrialize. With forest covering more than one-quarter of the surface of the généralité, there was abundant fuel for new iron forges, glassworks, and paper mills. Metz was clearly a step up from Moulins.

It is not surprising that even the intendant’s stationery assumed new dignity. Capped by a simple classic decoration, the printed name “Jean de Pont” now headed each official letter, followed by his full title, functions, and dignities:

Chevalier, Seigneur de Manderoux, Forges, Pindelouat, and other places, Councilor of the King in His Council, Honorary Councilor of the Parlement of Paris, Maîtres des Requêtes in His Hôtel, INTENDANT of Justice, Police, and Finance in the Department of Metz, Frontier of Champagne, Luxembourg and the Saar.

The “Samuel” had been dropped; the prefix of the surname was detached and his principal seigneury was added. Thus, “Jean-Samuel Depont” became “Jean de Pont de Manderoux.” As intendant of a “frontier province,” he now reported to the minister of war, the Comte de Saint-Germain. After 1779, his regular residence was given in the Almanach Royal as 11, rue des Filles Saint-Thomas. It is not surprising, therefore, that the phrase “in the absence of M. l’Intendant” appears more than once in the administrative correspondence from Metz to Paris.

But though Metz was a more prosperous, urban post, it presented De-
pont with institutional competition. The Parlement of Metz had been reinstalled in October 1775, with the support of the archbishop, the governor, and even Depont's predecessor, Calonne. It was apparently a popular local institution, especially after its four years of suppression under the "Maupeou Reforms." Consequently, much local administration, especially with regard to the grain trade, the local guilds, and religious questions had to be shared with the parlement. In 1787 the provincial assemblies were created, and assumed extensive local power over tax assessment and public works. Although the intendant presided at the sessions of the assembly at Metz, his policy-making power was substantially reduced. It appears that Depont adapted to this new situation. His respect for the parlement is indicated by the fact that he placed his son in the "company" in 1784 when the young man was seventeen years old. The Parlement of Metz was a testing ground for young magistrates and known for its many newcomers launching their careers in the high administration. As for the new provincial assembly, Depont apparently met Mgr. de Fontanges, the bishop of Nancy, who presided over the assembly there. Depont's daughter was to marry a Fontanges in 1788.

In other ways, Depont's style of administration had not changed. He still overspent his budget and delayed filing his reports with the intendant of finance at Paris. Depont's predecessor, Calonne, showed a small surplus on the budget for provincial stud farms. But soon after Jean-Samuel's arrival, the deficits began to accumulate. Although his états were as neat and complete as Calonne's, Depont was full of new proposals "for the complete overhaul of this establishment" with "the small means at my disposal." He complained about the small salaries of the "service employees" but stressed that "by economizing" he hoped to improve the "race" of horses with several new "mares of distinguished breeding." He also mentioned in a postscript that he was looking for an Arab horse for the minister.

In a mémoire to the war office in 1780, Depont stressed the progress already made and the need to sustain it with more funds. "Last year I made a complete tour of my généralité with a cavalry officer who knows his horses and we were astonished at the progress made. The horses at Longwy, Etaing, Verdun, Carignan, and Saarlouis sell at 10 to 15 louis [240 to 360 livres]. M. Calonne received 5,000 livres over his regular budget. . . . We need 8 to 10,000 to replace the stud horses. M. le Prince de Montbarey [minister of war] might look at what they are spending in Lorraine and Alsace. . . . We are infinitely more advanced [than they] in this matter."

Depont revealed a certain expertise on the subject of pasturage, an issue that had implications for French agriculture as a whole. He mentioned that he had reviewed Calonne's correspondence on the horse farms and
personally visited those parts of the généralité watered by the Moselle River. He condemned local communal practices of pasturage (vaine pâture and parcours) which "degraded" the meadows. He supported the right to enclose the land and encouraged the planting of artificial meadows. But aside from endorsing legislation such as Bertin's edict of 1768 "permitting enclosure," he did not make any proposals for spreading modern agricultural techniques by means of model farms, for example. As Arthur Young had so often said, the royal administration knew about artificial meadows, but was unable to persuade either gentry or peasants to plant them.91

Depont was always generous with his staff, including bonuses in his budget for his subdelegates and other employees. But after the establishment of the provincial assembly at Metz in 1787, the annual budget of the généralité was audited by a committee of that body of thirty-two notables.92 In July 1788, the committee claimed that Depont's budget of 52,650 livres could be reduced to 45,147 livres. "Circumstances do not permit this extra expense," they informed the controller-general in Paris. Depont had asked not only for bonuses for the subdelegates and the veterinarians treating the cattle plague, but also for "relief to those whose homes were burned down and other individuals stricken with misfortune."93 The committee of the provincial assembly wanted to use the entire sum for the travel and personal expenses of the deputies during the sessions.94

On another occasion the finance committee objected to Depont's buying wood for the army from a single supplier. "Such a contract," read the minutes, "provides the entrepreneur with an opportunity to create a monopoly of the wood supply ... giving him control of the price. ... It is calculated from the average price of wood in the capital of the province, which is always well above prices in the local areas. Here the entrepreneur finds subcontractors on whom he makes a very large profit, and they in turn make theirs." The assembly advised the intendant to deal directly with local wood merchants in the future. Depont had accumulated a debt to the wood entrepreneur of almost 140,000 livres in three years.95 There is no direct evidence that Depont was profiting personally from army-supply contracts, though arrangements such as this gave him an excellent opportunity to do so. On the other hand, convenience always counted for something with Jean-Samuel; competitive bidding required close "on-the-spot" supervision.

Letters were sent by the permanent committee of the new provincial assembly directly to the controller-general in Paris, most of them necessarily relating to the work of the intendant. It must have irritated Depont to have this new body corresponding with Paris, though outwardly at least he maintained a discreet and even patronizing attitude. Referring
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to one of the assembly’s reports forwarded to him by the controller-
general, he commented: “I notice nothing in this report that does not con-
form to the principles of moderation and equity, which they would be well
advised not to ignore.” Jean-Samuel had mastered the innocuous for-
mulas of public administration. In addition, he knew that the Calonne ex-
periment in provincial assemblies was a new, and perhaps temporary one,
which should not be allowed to degenerate into “tumult,” a common fear
of the central administration. How appropriate that the intendant of Metz
should stress “moderation.”96

In a “frontier province” it was normal that much of an intendant’s
energies be devoted to raising cavalry horses and gathering army supplies
for a large garrison.97 But there were other problems as well. Despite the
relative dynamism of the province, it had its poor and destitute. Although
there is no information on the ateliers de charité at Metz, there is some
regarding the dépôt de mendicité. Here Depont’s lack of “exactitude” and
his budgetary deficits suggested a genuine sympathy for the misérables,
as it had at Moulins.

Poor relief throughout the kingdom was reorganized by the L’Averdy
commission in 1764. The commission proposed the establishment of two
or three poorhouses (dépôts de mendicité) in each généralité in which all
“beggars” would be confined. It also attempted to draw distinctions be-
tween “beggars” and “vagabonds,” between the permanently destitute
and the seasonally unemployed, and between the able-bodied and the
sick, insane, orphaned, or aged. Unlike the hôpitaux and other private
charitable organizations, the new dépôts were placed under the intendant
as agent of the State. It marked a major advance for exclusively public
welfare in France. Unfortunately, the State had few funds and the need
was enormous. Consequently the treatment of the poor became increas-
ingly subject to budgetary considerations, and the various efforts at
classification and selection were intended to weed out the “less deserving”
and put the able-bodied of the inmates to work, converting parts of the
dépôts into shops or mills.98 The “work ethic” also conditioned the at-
titudes of administrators. The controller-general and intendants des
finances like Turgot or d’Ormesson cautioned the intendants about open-
ing the dépôts to everyone who claimed to be destitute. Fraud and laziness
would not be condoned or encouraged. Nor would public begging.

Like so many of his colleagues, Jean-Samuel was severely hampered by
lack of funds. The dépôt de mendicité at Metz when he arrived was pitifully
dererequipped for the task at hand. It consisted of twenty rooms
(one infirmerie), a chapel with one room for the almoner, eighty-eight
camp cots, a few wooden tables, and six chamberpots. Each room had
about ten beds, each with one blanket, placed against the walls with a
table in the middle. The straw mattresses, bedding, and clothing, in-
cluding 32 coats, 32 culottes, 145 skirts, 32 pairs of socks, and 32 sabots, were all characterized as "très mauvaises" and "usés" in 1776. In fact, there was talk of closing the dépôt in 1776, but Calonne argued for its continued use, especially in order to keep diseased prostitutes away from the garrison "until they are cured." He suggested that the dépôt be renamed a "renfermerie," as indeed he might, since every inmate was threatened by venereal disease.

No wonder that the central government was concerned about the types of people placed in the dépôts of the kingdom. In 1780 it was disclosed that the Bertrand family, Bourgeois de Metz, was using the dépôt to discipline a wayward son, in the same manner that Vincennes was used to keep the younger Mirabeau out of trouble. The lettre de cachet was addressed to the intendant asking him "to give orders that Pierre Bertrand, their son, age thirty-five, at present in detention in the dépôt de mendicité of this city, be kept there until he has given proof of good conduct." The parents offered to pay 120 livres for room and board, which no doubt tempted the administration to comply.

The dépôt was also used to imprison authentic criminals. In 1779 the intendant of Châlons reported that his mounted police (maréchaussée) had arrested "a very suspicious beggar without a passport," "scar on his right temple," age twenty-two, now in prison in Reims. He asked Depont if this individual had escaped from the dépôt at Metz. Ten years later there were two criminals in the dépôt sent by the intendant of Nancy on the excuse that they were born in Metz. The ministry hoped to have the expenses for these men paid by their parents, a budgetary optimism that Depont could not share. As criminals, he said, they are outside of "society"; their parents do not have to support them. In addition, they have been "whipped and branded" for their theft, and are therefore not in condition to work. Yet "the presence of these criminals makes a very bad impression on the morale of the other inmates." At least Jean-Samuel was capable of grasping the human situation beyond the bureaucratic formulas.

The winter and spring of 1789 were as horrendous at Metz as everywhere else in France. The Moselle River froze and all the grain mills stopped, depriving the region of badly needed flour. Thanks to the bishop, the Benedictines, the town notables, and even the army, the city's poor did not starve; there were no food riots that spring. But budgetary restrictions were worse than ever. Depont asked for raises in salary for the personnel at the dépôt only to have the intendant des finances at Paris ask him to lower salaries and reduce the staff. The physician, the apothecary, and the second guard (porte-clef) would have to go; the remaining surgeon was compensated for his extra work load with a raise in salary—to four hundred livres, about twice the wage of a day laborer.
In April 1789 Depont submitted a report on the dépôt. Far from having placed everyone in the prescribed classifications and removed those whose presence was unauthorized, Depont drew a picture of a dépôt that resembles the Soho society of Bertolt Brecht. There were criminals, beggars, prostitutes, pregnant women, children of all ages, and the insane. Depont argued that they should be kept on even if their terms had expired. In the spring of 1789, it was better to be in a somber dépôt than on the road. His report touched each of the cases—the orphans kept “by pity” (commiseration), the sick retained as “kinds of servants” since they were not well enough to support themselves, the pregnant women or those who had just given birth to be cared for so they could nurse the babies properly, the prostitutes infected with venereal disease retained until cured, and so on. He promised to remove those (male or female) who had “unnatural sentiments,” but in general he was reluctant to “release” anyone. He was particularly eloquent in his defense of the insane: “If it is absolutely necessary I will expel these unfortunate human beings, deprived of their reason, incapable of sustaining themselves—a few cannot even speak—but the mounted police will bring them back immediately after they have left.”

The reply of the secretary, La Millière, was somewhat less sympathetic. He gave grudging approval to the extension of “terms of detention,” warning Depont to follow the règlements in the future. He agreed that “the debauched girls” with maladie vénérienne should not be released and that the women have their babies in the dépôt. However, he advised that the babies be put out to wet-nurses in the countryside and kept there permanently. It was less costly and “children raised in the countryside will acquire a taste for hard work and develop healthy and robust constitutions.” Like many Parisians, La Millière apparently believed the myth of the healthy countryside.

Three months later the number of beggars and vagabonds had increased everywhere and Depont no doubt found his small staff inadequate. In July 1789, he abandoned direct administration of the dépôt and contracted with an entrepreneur to employ the able-bodied in the manufacture of linen and woolen cloth. Monsieur Maubougard agreed “to employ without interruption all the able-bodied inmates (renfermés valides) of both sexes confined in the dépôt de mendicité in the city of Metz.” He supplied the raw wool and flax as well as the tools—spindles, spinning wheels, brakes, nails—and promised to pay so much for a prescribed measurement of spun cloth. The proceeds would be distributed each week in the following proportions: to the inmates (33 percent), to the manager (régisseur) (25 percent), and to the entrepreneur (42 percent). The poorhouse had become a workhouse, an atelier.

But there could not have been a worse year for cloth sales. Added to the
"change of administration" as it was called by more sanguine contemporaries, the conditions of 1789 assured a business failure. Instead of solving the problem of chronic deficits, the debts for supplies of food accumulated rapidly. A year later, as the secretary in Paris tried to sort out the accounts, Depont urged him to grant the manager an indemnity for his losses. There was no money for "indemnities" in the spring of 1790. The best Depont could do was to provide a new kettle for the soup kitchen.111

At sixty-five years of age, Jean-Samuel resigned his post of intendant with dignity, carrying on certain administrative tasks after his official termination in January 1790, until the new administration was in place in June.112 In March 1790, he responded to a national appeal for a census of the poor from the new committee of the National Assembly on mendicity with more than his usual dispatch. "This will not be easy to do right away. The mounted police, for example, has been arresting vagabonds and vagrants but has not kept records on the parish beggars. I will have to contact each of the parish curés. It is difficult enough to account for the resident beggars. Each week the poor of one parish move all over the neighboring parishes. ... I shall send you a report in one month at the latest."113

In January 1790, the municipality made Jean-Samuel honorary citizen of Metz. The Moniteur in Paris carried this notice:

The Municipal Committee [of Metz] wishing to give M. de Pont, intendant of the province, a sincere testimony to his administration, which has always been active, mild, and enlightened, charitable in bad times, always wise and moderate in the most difficult circumstances, and wishing also to preserve our relations with this magistrate who will always be cherished by this city, ... and even if, because of a new order of things, M. de Pont must relinquish his duties and leave us, we have unanimously decreed to award him HONORARY CITIZENSHIP of the City of Metz.114

One should not make too much of such deliberations. There is no evidence that peasants left their plows or artisans their benches to "salute" their intendant of the past twelve years. The early years of the Revolution were replete with such rhetorical flourishes of national solidarity, usually climaxing with an enormous patriotic banquet at the townhall. A better testimony to Depont's success as an administrator was in a letter of the new city government, regarding the dépôt de mendicité. It said they knew that "this service had been well run under the previous administration."115

One is tempted to defend Jean-Samuel Depont, not as an exemplary, meticulous administrator, but as a humane one. One could make a case
for his “independence” permitting a certain generosity to staff, colleagues, and associates as well as to the mass of malheureux of Moulins and Metz. Yet on balance, Zoltan Harsany’s evaluation of the intendant of Metz seems more accurate. “Well-liked at Metz, [Depont] was satisfied with informing the government about the economic activities of the region and expediting tax collection, [but] his name cannot be associated with any reform or social innovation, and he seemed satisfied not to have attracted any public hostility”¹¹⁶ (italics mine). Surely he was a likable person, but his amiability was apparently earned negatively, by avoiding controversial projects, by leaving major reforms to others. He was no innovator, no Turgot, which is not to say he was indifferent to his administrés or incompetent in the performance of routine duties. Perhaps the historian is not obliged to explain why the run-of-the-mill administrator is what he is. The exceptional calls for explanation.

It seems obvious, however, that somewhere in the 1770s Jean-Samuel’s career lost its momentum. He spent his forties, his best years, in Moulins, which, if not the “Siberia” of the kingdom, was something very close to it. Why did he not move on sooner? Did his patrons in Paris, so carefully cultivated and assiduously nurtured, desert him? Had he placed too much stock in his undeniable talent for sociability and personal relations and not enough in professional application? The Old Regime, as Jean-Samuel’s father had recognized, was not built exclusively on birth, patronage, and social savoir-faire; in administration, constant application and zeal counted too. The social imperatives of Parisian society had exacted their toll.

How did Depont compare with other intendants of his age and background? If we compare him to his four colleagues in the “class of 1760–65”—Flesselles, Le Peletier de Morfontaine, Taboureau des Réaux, or Perrin de Cypierre—they too remained for long periods in one post, but their généralités were more prestigious—Lyon, Soissons, Valenciennes, and Orléans.¹¹⁷ The other four “new Parisians” were sent to Grenoble, Bordeaux, Alençon, and Orléans, also a cut above Moulins, though perhaps not above Metz. Superficially, Depont’s career most closely paralleled those of Chazerat at Riom (1771–90), Depré de Saint-Maur at Bourges (1764–76), and La Bourdonnaye de Blossac at Poitiers (1751–84).¹¹⁸ But such sketchy career profiles tell us little, except to suggest that “new blood” does not guarantee top performance. The price of social adaptation may, in some subtle way, be paid for in professional drive.

The explanation in Depont’s case may be simple. The capital may have crippled him for further adaptation. He was obviously very much tied to Paris from the start of his career. He kept his residence in the capital and in 1773 even bought a larger hôtel in the Marais quarter. He conducted
much of his administration from Paris, visiting d'Ormesson and other ministers in their hôtels, but at the cost of inspection tours of his généralité.\textsuperscript{119} His residence at Moulins seems like an outpost, one that he was never able to repair fully and where certainly his wife rarely stayed. Even his priorities in administering public works might be seen as a reflection of a myopic urbanity. Depont planted linden trees and named the streets near his townhouse in Moulins; he did not place the ateliers de charité in the rural cantons. His tight Parisian world opened on a rural horizon that seemed less familiar and more distasteful to him the closer he came to it. Like his father, notable of La Rochelle, Jean-Samuel in turn became a prisoner of his own milieu—Paris.