

Catherine the Great

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James Cracraft

Another biography of Catherine the Great? Simon Dixon locates his new book somewhere between *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* by Isabel de Madariaga (1), which he terms ‘the most important (and appropriately weighty) study of Catherine’s reign in any language,’ and John T. Alexander’s *Catherine the Great: Life and Legend* (2), ‘the first modern scholarly biography, particularly interesting on medical matters and also strong on social history’ (p. 391). Implying that neither work is truly comprehensive—‘clearly an impossible goal’—his own effort seeks ‘to recover a sense of place, situating Catherine in the context of the Court society in which she grew up in Germany and lived most of her long life in Russia’ (p. 2). In so doing he brings to bear the fruits of a substantial recent historiography devoted to court life in early modern Europe and Russia viewed as a crucial component of governance in an age of monarchical absolutism, with works by T. C. W. Blanning and Richard S. Wortman accorded particular authority.(3) True to his word, Professor Dixon’s book is much less an account of Catherine’s private life (see Alexander) or a political history of her reign (see de Madariaga) than it is a minutely detailed chronicle of Russian court life of the period 1744 (Catherine’s arrival in St. Petersburg from her native Germany) to 1796 (her death) as gleaned from its verbal but also, to some extent, its visual remains (the book includes 23 contemporary illustrations along with six maps).

As all historians know, recovering context in a way that is at once faithful to the documents and intelligible to our contemporaries is the essence of our craft. In this central task Dixon largely succeeds, at times brilliantly. The kaleidoscope of coronations and royal weddings that he deftly presents, of extravagant court entertainments and solemn church rites, of gargantuan meals and gorgeous dress parties, the rapidly shifting scenes peopled by a wondrous array of dignified grandees and sleazy parvenus, cunning diplomats and sycophantic scholars, secret lovers and duteous servants, is little short of stunning – to the point, at times, of

surfeit. And at the center of it all sits comely, *zafitig* Catherine (Dixon is ever discreet, indeed politically correct, in describing her), now deeply, not to say passionately engaged in the proceedings, now coolly, even wittily observant (her own memoirs and letters are Dixon's most important source), now adroitly exploiting a tense situation for her own frequently noble – or nobly selfish – ends. The overall impression – and an element of subjective impressionism is unavoidable here – is one of barely contained bedlam, with all or some of the several hundred people involved – 'the Court' – reeling from crisis to crisis, from bedazzlement to horror, from joyful celebration to ignominious, if well-compensated, defeat. Catherine ruled by conciliation, persuasion, blandishment, bribery, deception, spectacle, and pure charm; rarely were courtiers who incurred her disfavour subjected to the threat let alone the application of harsh punishment. She also liked to claim, as Dixon duly reports, that hers was an orderly as well as an enlightened court. But 'discipline' was instantly the watchword of the day when her son and successor Tsar Paul assumed the throne (p. 316).

At the same time, larger underlying developments – the fate of serfdom in Russia, the development of industry, the promotion of trade and public education, the peopling of empty lands – are conscientiously noted and major events of the period – the Pugachev rebellion, the conquest of Crimea and partitions of Poland, the rise of Prussia or the advent of the French Revolution, the bloody wars and complex diplomacy – are at least alluded to in the rush to the next item on the Imperial Russian court calendar. Catherine's legislative achievements, of which she was extremely, perhaps inordinately, proud, are recorded with measured deference if not always clearly explained, whether in their short-term application or longer term significance. Chapter ten, for example, is entitled 'The Search for Emotional Stability 1776–1784,' suggesting that the assortment of such developments, events, and achievements occurring over these eight vital years that the chapter in due course mentions was historically less important than the contemporaneous flow of Catherine's love life. Nor is the chapter's conclusion – 'For all Catherine's emotional turbulence, the direction of her government had remained firm' (p. 269) – entirely reassuring. When all's said and done, however, one puts down Dixon's book in grateful realization that he has given us a literate, compassionate, immensely colourful but plausible representation of an important chunk of the Russo-European past.

Notwithstanding her long and largely successful reign, Catherine suffered a relative dearth of serious historical study until quite recently, as Professor Dixon's epilogue somewhat inadvertently shows. Sexism, populism, Marxism, and plain old prurience all played their part in either denying her historical importance or grossly distorting her record. So did envy. In fact, Dixon concludes his panoptic chronicle by suggesting, a little unexpectedly, that her 'gentle methods' and 'tolerant and trusting' manner rarely inspired her successors 'not least because it has served as a subtle form of ammunition for their critics for most of the two centuries since her death' (p. 335). Be that as it may, Dixon's bibliographical essay ('Further Reading') as well as numerous chapter notes make it clear that in the last 20 years or so much serious work has been accomplished in both Russian and English (also German). This solid literature is frequently cited by Dixon rather than engaged: there is little historiographical discussion in his book, little critical evaluation of his sources and of the controversies that study of her reign has given rise to among historians—historians rather than royal contemporaries and successors, contemporary friends and foes, contemporary and later publicists, the commentators Dixon mostly pays heed to, particularly in his epilogue.

The lack of an obvious historiographical dimension in turn raises the question of the book's intended readership. The hundreds of chapter notes (filling nearly 50 pages), invocation of an academic totem like Jürgen Habermas (not in the index but see p. 345 n. 43), and glancing reference to numerous figures and events only fellow historians could be expected to recognize, suggest that the latter are his target. And yes, specialists in early modern Russian and European history will certainly find material here of considerable interest, thanks to the diligence of Dixon's research even in quite tangential sources – e.g. Mozart's collected letters (pp. 234, 254) – and determination to work in all his findings. On the other hand, the abundance of anecdote and sensational detail, the strong preference for narrative over analysis, the pleasantly fluent, often humorous style, the barely repressed delight in drollery, scandal, and the bizarre, indicate a more general, commercially rewarding audience. Can one write history that is both? That is at once instructive and entertaining? Academically sound yet readily readable? Serious, but fun? A good deal of history aspiring to

be both has indeed recently appeared, especially, it seems, in Britain, whence its most successful practitioners have tended to migrate to the United States (e.g. Simon Schama, Niall Ferguson), there to occupy prestigious academic chairs while surfacing regularly in the public media and generating ever more lavishly published books. Such historians are to be distinguished from the ‘telly dons’ of yesteryear, who were dons first, dutifully practicing their craft in quiet seclusion, and occasional television talking heads only second. The Schamusons of today are agented megastars, their work as historians inseparable from their work in the media.

It’s doubtful that Professor Dixon would wish to put himself in that league (it seems safe to predict he’ll stay in London). His is much closer to the hard monographic work on which all good history, academic or popular, is built. He entirely eschews the massive interpretive claims of the Schamusons and their grand historical verdicts – characteristics of their work that make it eminently teachable, to be sure. Indeed Dixon’s colleagues might wish that his book spoke more often directly to their professional concerns. But we must not ask for the moon. His book is a richly rewarding depiction, impeccably produced, of the Age of Catherine the Great in all its questionable glory. The notion that history can be at once instructive and entertaining is here handsomely vindicated.

Notes

1. Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (London, 1981).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John T. Alexander, *Catherine the Great: Life and Legend* (Oxford, 1989).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. T. C. W. Blanning, *The Power of Culture and the Culture of Power* (Oxford, 2002) and Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (Princeton, NJ, 1995).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author thanks Professor Cracraft for his generous review and does not wish to respond further.

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