A Companion to Eighteenth Century Europe

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Companions and handbooks to various periods or problems of history are currently all the rage. This one is the 37th in its own publisher’s series, which ranges from the whole sweep of a continent’s or a nation’s history (such as Latin America, or Japan) to much more restricted periods or problems of current scholarly interest. The formula is to contract a distinguished editor or editors, who in turn invite a range of other authors known for their expertise in aspects of the period or place, to contribute short essays on what they consider its main features, along with detailed bibliographies to guide readers towards further exploration. If such volumes lack the co-ordinating thread of a textbook by a single hand, they have the advantage of presenting reliable knowledge and interpretation in more areas of a subject than any author could hope to cover adequately alone. In this one, Peter H. Wilson has brought together 29 collaborators. Although some of them are what one might call the usual suspects, most are relatively young, and the editor has used his own German contacts to recruit a refreshing number of contributors from east of the Rhine. All too often surveys of 18th-century Europe are dominated by France and authors with French interests, but this one resolutely avoids that trap. Volumes written in the British historical tradition often also used to exclude Great Britain; and although the editor makes the exculpatory plea that British matters are covered in much more detail in another volume in the series specifically devoted to the island kingdoms, there is actually no shortage of British material throughout; and the British state strikingly shares a chapter, as it shared a monarch for most of the 18th century, with Hanover.

The chapters are grouped into five thematic parts. The first, ‘People, Production, and Consumption’ would once have been called something like ‘Economy and Society.’ It begins with an interesting and original survey of the weather and the environment by Dennis Wheeler. Wheeler is not a historian but a geographer. This is reflected in a somewhat dry and scientific style, but the material is first-rate and takes in phenomena
too often completely ignored, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. This initial momentum is unfortunately not sustained by the second chapter, on gender, by Deborah Simonton. Suffused by the scholasticism which has come increasingly to characterise this topic, it is aridly historiographical and demonstrates the rapidly diminishing returns of fashionable overkill. In this section, by contrast, there is a serene and totally authoritative chapter on nobilities by Hamish Scott, vitiated perhaps only by ambiguity about whether or not the British gentry were part of one. But, by the deliberate and explicit decision of the editor, there is nothing specifically on the bourgeoisie. The once all-conquering heroes of the century now simply play a walk-on part in Marc Schalenberg’s wider survey of towns and their inhabitants, or, disguised as the eminently English-sounding ‘middling sort’, in a number of other sections and chapters. They are clearly essential to the spectacular expansion of consumerism which is bracketed in Beverly Lemire’s essay with manufacture and markets, but nowhere do they assert themselves in the ways that were once considered their natural and world-historical role, and the most important social development of the whole century.

Together with Markus Cerman on rural economy and society, and the general editor’s own interesting essay on poverty (all laden with unfamiliar and stimulating German examples), this chapter is the only homage to mainstream economic history, once so hegemonic. The hegemony these days is cultural, and six chapters constitute the second part under this rubric. Another excellent start comes from Michael Schaich, with a lucid analysis of what Habermas said about the public sphere, and how subsequent research has modified and sometimes even disproved the assertions of a prophet more cited than read. Suffused with critical good sense, unlike many other contributions this one offers an argument as well as a survey. It finds a sober complement in Beat Komin’s thoughts on popular culture and sociability, particularly the latter. Joachim Whaley on religion is polished, confident and approachable. He is duly sceptical about a number of current pieties – but to claim that Jansenism ‘promoted essentially Tridentine values’ (p. 183) is surely to misunderstand it profoundly. The great missed opportunity in this section is Mark Berry on the arts. Admittedly the task in the space available is almost impossible, but Berry concentrates far too much on music, and even there he is more allusive than informative. And, Werther apart, he offers nothing about one of this century’s greatest inventions, the novel. We look in vain, here or elsewhere, for Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, Lesage or Laclos. Nor does any poet make an appearance, apart from Voltaire or Goethe wearing other hats. The painting of this most accomplished century is represented by fleeting mentions of Boucher and Canaletto, with only Tiepolo and David receiving more.

Part III brings us closest to a traditional textbook. Under the heading ‘State and Society’ are nine essays covering the main states or regional groups of states. They tell us how they were structured, and broadly what happened of importance at the political level within each of them. This approach allows more prominence than is normal in textbooks for areas often treated summarily as marginal, such as the Italian states or those of Scandinavia. And, in another impressive contribution from the editor, that shadowy entity the Empire is restored to its due importance alongside constituent parts like Austria and Prussia. Most of these pieces concentrate on internal developments and conflicts. External dimensions receive separate treatment in the four chapters of the fourth group, ‘International Connections’. After a succinct synopsis of the major diplomatic relations and developments, including an interesting excursus on the culture of diplomacy, by Andrew C. Thompson, three thematic pieces add an even wider context. Molly Greene, under the heading of ‘Islam and Europe’ thoughtfully reminds us of the Turkish presence and the emergence of the problems that became the eastern question. Philippe R. Girard then outlines the course of European worldwide expansion into overseas territories, including the export of rivalries between states and the rise and fall of colonial slavery. He is incisive in summarising all the scholarly ambiguities that study of the latter has recently engendered, and ends with warnings against drawing unhistorical consequences for the use of contemporary political and racial polemics. Finally Jan Glete provides a more detached view, in ‘Europe and the Sea’ of the rhythms of and constraints on the instruments of overseas expansion, fleets both mercantile and military. Ranging over all states with maritime power and ambitions as well as the usual examples of Britain and France, he argues that, although the preceding and subsequent centuries offered more drama and breakthroughs, the steady build-ups and accumulations of the 18th were in their way just as momentous.
Five chapters make up the final part, ‘Politics and the State’. Courts, the stage on which most great decisions were made, and the dynasticism which drove so many fateful ones leading to conflict between states, are surveyed by Clarissa Campbell-Orr. A careful definition of terms and a very wide range of reference make this a succinctly rewarding comparative analysis of the context of high politics. Ronald G. Asch is also careful to define his terms in looking at absolutism and royal government. He accepts the newer consensus that absolutism, once seen as one of the defining characteristics of the 17th and 18th centuries, was largely a self-serving myth originating with rulers who were neither as strong nor as confident in their power and authority as they liked to appear. Their power rested on the co-operation of carefully nurtured elites, and attempts to assert the plenitude of their theoretical authority usually resulted in challenges from those on whom they most relied to maintain the stability of the state. Yet the costs of international competition pushed them inexorably towards such clashes, and paved the way for the breakdown on the French state and the near-collapse of several others in the second half of the century. The main reason for these crippling burdens is analysed in a sparkling essay on warfare between 1688 and 1812 by Ciro Paoletti. Unlike all of his fellow contributors, Paoletti is not an academic, and perhaps this lends his essay a freshness and vigour not always apparent in the worthy lecturer-like plod through historiography which marks not a few of the other pieces. Stimulating and sceptical of orthodoxies throughout, he reminds readers that military science as we know it was unknown before the age of Napoleon, and that 18th-century warfare was far from the elaborate and relatively bloodless ritual it often retrospectively seemed to Clausewitz and his successors. He makes a compelling case for a 'long' 18th century on the battlefield, and it is rather surprising that other essayists in the volume do not engage more in their own fields with this idea, so regularly invoked over the past generation, that neither 1700 nor 1800 have much intrinsic significance in defining what made the 18th century distinctive. Few of the contributors, in fact, look much beyond 1789, and the volume concludes with revolution rather than its imperial sequel. David M. Luebke sets the scene with a survey of Participatory Politics, demonstrating how in many parts of Europe the governed had never been entirely excluded from the processes of government, even if their interventions occurred outside institutional frameworks and took forms which alarmed the social and political authorities. He shows conclusively that the expansion of news networks in the public sphere encouraged the popular sense that rulers could be held to account. He has no time for the never very convincing idea that monarchy became ‘desacralised’ in the popular mind, but he shows how ordinary people had growing expectations of what governments ought to do for them. In a final essay on the French and European Revolutions Alan Forrest confronts what has sometimes been called the suicide of the 18th century. Interweaving his account throughout with a vast and fractious historiography, he expertly pulls together threads from all over Europe and North America to demonstrate the universal scale of this crisis. Yet even he, acknowledged expert though he is on Napoleon, stops short of suggesting that the Empire is best seen as an 18th- rather than a 19th-century episode.

There is no concluding editorial overview, and the introduction is relatively short. Here Professor Wilson does briefly discuss the question of a long or short century, and whether in fact the very middle of the century, the 1750s, marks a more coherent turning point than half a century either side. But he offers no clear lead of his own, and has evidently left his team of contributors to set their own parameters. The tone of the whole team is in fact commendably undogmatic. Nobody who knows the 18th century will fail to learn something new from this companion. The bibliographies are extensive and up-to-date, there are eight pages of clear maps, and a handful of scattered half-tones to add visual stimulus. It is not perhaps a companion for beginners, but students who have digested the outlines of the period, or topics that fall within it, will find their understanding deepened almost wherever they open it.

The editor is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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