

Tim Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), xxiv + 648 pp., ISBN: 9781846141829, £30

Frederick II of Prussia – dubbed ‘the Great’ – has acquired such a symbolic significance in German history that it is almost impossible to exhume the life and deeds of the eighteenth-century monarch from under the layers of subsequent interpretation and myth-making. The Prussian king has rarely been discussed in the media without reference either to Hitler’s veneration of his military ferocity or (less frequently) to his Enlightenment credentials. Indeed, an earlier reviewer (in *The Economist*) complained about Tim Blanning’s reluctance to trace Frederick’s afterlife all the way to Hitler in this new biography. Academic historians should, however, be grateful to Blanning precisely for avoiding this well-worn cliché. A better understanding of Frederick the Great can surely be achieved by situating him more firmly within his contemporary intellectual, cultural, and socio-political contexts.

This task is performed by Blanning with great panache. As the author of many books on eighteenth-century military, political, and cultural history – and not least as an expert on the history of music – Blanning is particularly well suited to the task of presenting us with a Frederick for the twenty-first century (rather than for previous generations of German nationalists or British Romantics such as Thomas Carlyle, the author of a six-volume biography of Frederick). No eighteenth-century ruler was better aware of the significance of culture to political power and of the latter to the former, a topic that stood at the centre of Blanning’s book *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture* (2002). As Blanning demonstrates in this new biography, Frederick not only used culture instrumentally for political purposes; he was also an active cultural agent in his own right. Like his subject, Blanning lavishes much attention and detail on architecture, painting, porcelain design and manufacture, sartorial fashion, and gardening. A particularly welcome and thorough examination is dedicated to Frederick’s musical works, performances, and management of the official repertoire in Berlin and Potsdam (pp. 138-160). In all these domains, Blanning expertly brings to the fore Frederick’s cultural ‘conservatism shot through with pessimism’ (345). The only aspect of Frederick’s cultural agency that could have received more attention is his philosophical oeuvre, which was much more than a tool of self-fashioning in the public sphere. Despite some references to Frederick’s engagement with Pierre Bayle, Machiavelli, or Marcus Aurelius (pp. 47-48, 118-122, 329-331), more could have been said on the writings of the only eighteenth-century monarch who not only corresponded with major authors but also composed numerous essays, reviews, and poems on philosophical themes. Questionable as their stylistic merits may be, a further contextualisation of Frederick’s works against the background of contemporary debates would have enhanced Blanning’s point that “his approach to culture was not that of the passive patron of representational art, but that of the active creator” (p. 351).

The core of Frederick’s military and political feats (and failures) is presented in the central part of the book (pp. 183-316), while the first part describes the ‘making’ and ‘breaking’ of Frederick (mainly by his quasi-sadistic father) and ends with thematic sub-sections on cultural and social issues. These are also the focus of the entire third part of the book (pp. 319-463). Blanning provides succinct and telling accounts of Frederick’s renowned (and lesser known) military campaigns, from his early conquest of Silesia to the Seven Years War and the War of the Bavarian Succession. Yet most of the book is dedicated to other aspects of Frederick’s life and

times – and recurrent emphasis is placed on Frederick’s sexuality. Blanning criticises the reluctance of previous biographers (especially Johannes Kunisch) to deal with this issue head-on; he shows how frequently they relied on retrospective accounts which were meant to counter the weight of evidence testifying to Frederick’s strongly homoerotic cultural preferences and friendships. This is a much-welcome focus, for it is difficult to read too much into Frederick’s very close relationships with some of his confidants, his frequent praise of homosocial culture, and his overall misogyny. Blanning convincingly argues that Frederick’s homosexuality “was not something peripheral, to be passed over in furtive silence or explained away. It was central to his assertion of his own personality after twenty-eight years of oppression and repression.” (p. 71) He also observes that conclusive, unequivocal evidence of homosexual activities – required by past scholars – will probably never be found (p. 61), and that the historian has to do with cumulative circumstantial evidence that points strongly in that direction. Yet at times Blanning’s laudable wish to make Frederick’s homosexuality a central tenet of his interpretation turns into a zero-sum game, for example when he seeks to undermine claims about affectionate relationships Frederick may have had with women (Countess Orzelska and Eléonore-Louise von Wreech, pp. 34-35 and 53-54). While observing that modern categories of gender and sexuality should be applied very carefully to early modern subjects, Blanning seems to insist on a clear-cut picture. Even if Frederick had had an intimate relationship with a woman, it would have hardly undermined Blanning’s main point about his general homosexual preferences. It might be helpful to regard Frederick’s sexuality as a spectrum of potential choices and behaviours rather than an either/or question.

It is also unclear whether Blanning would like to argue that – beyond the iconography of Frederick’s palaces and the homoerotic references in his works – there was a necessary link between the king’s sexuality and his overall aesthetic taste. On the one hand, Blanning argues that the ambience of Frederick’s personal court can be “best expressed by the English word ‘camp’” (p. 447). Elsewhere, however, the conservative nature of Frederick’s artistic preferences is emphasised; Blanning himself makes the point that “what seems ‘camp’ to twenty-first-century eyes could appear impeccably virile to mid-eighteenth-century patrons” (p. 176).

These points notwithstanding, Blanning has produced an authoritative and enjoyable account of Frederick the Great and his Brandenburg-Prussia. It reassesses many previous *idées reçues* – for example, the traditional view of the Prussian army as “a mobile prison” (Christopher Duffy), an efficient war machine denuding its soldiers of any capacity for independent initiative (pp. 269-272). Blanning’s achievement owes much to his impressive command of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship, whose insights are deftly integrated with the most recent research – particularly the flurry of publications in German on the occasion of Frederick’s tercentenary in 2012.

Profoundly researched, this biography is enjoyably readable and wears its considerable scholarship lightly. One can only hope that Blanning’s important achievement will serve to nuance and reassess some of the tenacious public images of Frederick the Great.

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