



Lamar Cecil. *Wilhelm II. Volume 2: Emperor and Exile, 1900-1941: Volume 2: Emperor and Exile, 1900-1941.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. 503 pp.p. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2283-8.



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Wilhelm II was certainly a man made for history. He was outspoken, opinionated, and bombastic. He was also vacillatory, egotistical, and self-confident to the point of arrogance. These are excellent qualities for a fascinating personality, but they were ill-suited for the man who was to be the last Kaiser of Germany. Wilhelm was so convinced of his innate wisdom and genius that he repeatedly ignored the well-meant— and frequently more reliable— suggestions of his advisors, tending instead to agree with the opinions of whoever he had last heard. He preferred the company of military men to politicians, despite the dual civil-military nature of his position as both Kaiser and Supreme War Lord. “These traits ensured that Wilhelm II would be a disaster as a monarch, leading his hapless subjects to a tragic end” (p. 1).

This is the unyielding judgement of Lamar Cecil, in the concluding book to his two-volume biography of Wilhelm. The approach taken by Cecil in this second volume is a welcome one. It is possible for someone unfamiliar with Wilhelm’s life to read this book and understand its subject without having to refer back to the first volume. Cecil chose to break his biography at 1900, a convenient point for two reasons. First, it marked the appointment of Bernhard von Buelow as Chancellor, certainly a turning point in German diplomacy, with the introduction of *Weltpolitik*, and its consequently disastrous effects on

Anglo- German relations. Second, 1900 was the halfway point in Wilhelm’s life; he turned forty-one that year and was destined to live another forty-one years.

Consequently, Cecil’s decision to use the first three chapters as a chance to paint a portrait of Wilhelm at mid-life is a useful exercise for those scholars interested only in post-1900 events. In these chapters the author deals with Wilhelm’s personality, his relationships with those people to whom he was closest, and his personal philosophies. Once finished, any reader emerges prepared to tackle the chronological narrative that follows from the fourth chapter onward. Yet scholars should not see this work as a text of German history. Cecil states as much in his preface, where he notes he limits the scope of the book to the interests of Wilhelm. “This is the biography of a man whose vision was woefully constricted and is not the history of the broadly productive nation over which he so maladroitly ruled” (p. ix).

Although Cecil is generally critical of Wilhelm, he does make one significant departure from that theme in his handling of the *Daily Telegraph* Affair. Here, he defends the Kaiser, portraying him as the victim of Buelow’s negligence and subsequent attempts at damage control. “Buelow’s failure lay in the fact that he *had* read the [interview text] and recognized its potential for harming both relations with Britain and the Kaiser’s rep-

utation but had then done nothing effective to ensure that the unfortunate text was altered before being sent forward for publication” (p. 136).

Cecil does not end his account of the last Kaiser’s life with the abdication in November 1918, but takes us through Wilhelm’s pathetic final years in exile at Doorn, “the kingdom of damp.” The Hohenzollern flirtation with Nazism is well-documented, but Cecil makes it clear that, despite Wilhelm’s rabid fulminations against Jews, he had clearly broken with Hitler and the Nazis by November 1932. This break had little to do with disagreement over Nazi policy, but was primarily because Wilhelm had concluded that Hitler would never consent to the restoration of the monarchy (pp. 339-40).

There are several minor errors in the text. Cecil seems unclear as to the intentions of the Schlieffen Plan, describing it as a “pincers movement” designed to take Paris from both east and west simultaneously (p. 213). In fact, the original Schlieffen Plan called for the German right flank to sweep round the north of the capital and encircle it. It was only during the execution of the plan that First and Second Armies were forced to begin their southward turns before passing north of Paris. The southern armies in Alsace-Lorraine were, again according to the original plan, to remain on the defensive, in order to lure the French away from the decisive theatre in the north. The decision to pursue a vigorous counter-offensive was one made in the heat of battle. In addition, it does not seem correct to say that of the 1,198 victims on HMS Lusitania

in 1915, “many...[were] U.S. citizens,” when only 128 were Americans (p. 222). Finally, the Battle of Jutland is mis-identified as the Battle of Dogger Bank not once, but three times (p. 347).

In the final analysis, Cecil does not spare Wilhelm any guilt or blame in the ruin that was his life. Although Cecil believes that the Kaiser could have been capable of so much, it was because he could not take advice or criticism that Cecil brands Wilhelm a failure “as a son, as a husband, as a father, as a friend, as a commander, as a statesman, and as an emperor” (p. 356). The evidence that Cecil has amassed from correspondence, memoirs, and archival minutes supports the harsh conclusion that Wilhelm, in the words of the Duke of Wellington speaking on George IV, was a sovereign “who lived and died without having been able to assert so much as a single claim on the gratitude of posterity” (ibid.).

This book is certainly worthy of use by scholars of Imperial Germany and of European diplomacy before and during the Great War, and deserves to be looked at more closely by those interested in the forces that opposed the Weimar Republic. Cecil’s biography will certainly be compared to John C.G. Roehl’s efforts when they become available, but for now this is the best-available English treatment of the waning years of the last Kaiser.

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