



Christopher Clark. *Kaiser Wilhelm II.* Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000. xvi + 271pp.p Notes + bibliography and index. \$13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-24559-4.



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This study of the last German Kaiser is the most recent volume in the Profiles in Power series, now numbering some thirty-odd studies of monarchs and statesmen ranging chronologically from Catherine de Medici to Mikhail Gorbachev. It is an intelligent and valuable contribution to the series and to the historiography of Wilhelm II. The author's comments are perceptive, his judgment measured, and his text remarkably free of errors of fact. There is, however, a rather unsettling opening sentence which mistakenly declares that at Wilhelm's birth in January 1859 his paternal grandfather was "still" occupying the Prussian throne, when in fact he did not ascend to that distinction until early in 1861. Similarly, on the final page Wilhelm is declared dead a day before his unlamented end in fact came. These are minor, if not trivial, blemishes, and the reader can venture into Clark's account with confidence that this is an accurate and informed study of a very strange and unfortunate man.

As a contribution to the study of power, Clark is rightly interested in determining the extent and nature of the Kaiser's authority over his statesmen, generals and admirals, an important but elusive question. Wilhelm's personality does not receive so much attention, although the author provides enlightening commentary on the subject. He remarks, quite correctly, that Wilhelm II's boundless enthusiasm for all things martial un-

happily failed to embrace the primary ingredient of military behavior: self-discipline and subordination to superiors. In the case of a monarch, whom of course no one outranks, this was a question of deferring to people of greater wisdom or experience, something of which Wilhelm II was psychologically incapable. The general line of argument which Clark advances is that the Kaiser's influence was far more slender than it seemed to be, for his authority was undermined by imperial Germany's constitutional system, which murkily confused the prerogatives of crown and government; by the successful manipulation of the Kaiser by wily courtiers; and by the growing strength of the voices of public opinion trumpeted by party politicians, parliamentary deputies and the lords of the press. He tends to minimize the power which Wilhelm retained and which he exercised in making appointments, in adjudicating quarrels between his military and civil servants, and, in the Great War, between rival factions within the army. In diplomacy, Clark argues that the Prusso-imperial sovereign was never a decisive force and that his antic behavior made little contribution to the gradual encirclement of the Fatherland, but I wonder if he would have been inclined to alter this judgment had he reflected more closely on the poisonous reputation Wilhelm's careless behavior ensured for himself in Britain. Clark contrasts with warrant the unfortunately maladroit public utterances of the last Kaiser to the sphinx-like tac-

iturnity of Franz Joseph in Vienna. A better and even more odious comparison would be measuring Wilhelm II by the standard of his uncle, King Edward VII, who was a very positive instrument in advancing British diplomacy in many European capitals and whose faultless grace and sure-footed discretion were often contrasted favorably with the boorish and offensive behavior of his German nephew.

In his preface Clark declares that this is a work of “synthesis and interpretation,” and that it is. He raises questions about what earlier biographers, myself included, have argued, challenging for example whether 1897 or 1900 represented decisive increases in the royal prerogative, and whether after 1912 the Kaiser endorsed the notion of war, one that would soon begin. The author often finds that there is some truth in what his predeces-

sors have asserted, but that some aspects of the Kaiser’s portrait have been overdrawn, settling down in the end to combining rival positions into a new synthesis. The book consequently may be read with profit to learn what the present state of the literature on Willhelm II is, with pointers as to where it might profitably go in the future. This is a very useful study of a very deplorable man. It would be an excellent place for anyone interested in the last Kaiser to begin an investigation of this last, and worst, of the German emperors, a man who may not have been decisive in bringing his great empire to ruin but one who surely made hardly a single positive contribution to the destiny of his people i Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

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