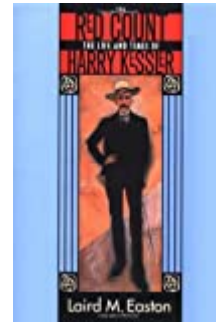


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Laird McLeod Easton.** *The Red Count: The Life and Times of Harry Kessler.* Weimar and Now Series. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002. xv + 497 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-23035-4.



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## Nietzschean Aesthete and Idealistic Pacifist

Harry Graf Kessler was an extraordinary figure about whom Laird McLeod Easton has written a superb book. An exemplary representative of the new financial aristocracy that emerged at the height of the Wilhelmine Empire, Kessler achieved renown as a patron and promoter of modern art, artists, and theater, and as an author, publisher, museum director, officer in the imperial army, diplomat, ambassador, politician, and pacifist. “An active and passionate participant” (p. 4) in public life from the 1890s to the 1930s, Kessler’s circles of friendship and influence spread across the elite of Germany, France, and England—forty thousand individuals are mentioned in his diaries. He was, as Easton makes clear, a significant presence in the pivotal events marking these years, and, more remarkably, a meticulous chronicler of that world in fifteen-thousand diary pages that he wrote over fifty-seven years. Making this treasure-trove of observation and reflection the core of his study, Easton has skillfully distilled a historical narrative that quite seamlessly integrates extensive contextual material with Kessler’s experiences and activities. The resulting book provides the reader with a fresh insider’s view of the human processes shaping crucial, well-known events in Germany’s difficult history.

Quotations from Kessler’s diary observations appear

often in studies of Weimar Germany, particularly his entries recounting the chaotic revolutionary days in Berlin. The diaries from 1918 to 1937 were published in Germany in 1961, followed by an English edition in 1971. His pre-war diaries, discovered in 1983, are in the archives at Marbach and a three volume collection of his writings was published in 1988.[1] Several important collections of his correspondence with friends—the patron of art and director of the Krupp armaments firm Eberhard von Bodenhausen, the playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and the theater designer Edward Gordon Craig—have also been published. The appearance of two books in 1995 in Germany as well as articles in this country and in Germany underscores the increasing attention that Kessler, as a figure bridging the world of art and the worlds of politics, diplomacy, and war, is receiving.[2] Drawing upon the complete diaries and with extensive work in the archives of the Foreign Office in Bonn and the cultural archives in Brussels, Marbach, Weimar, and Harvard, Easton’s book is, therefore, a valuable and timely addition to this largely German-language scholarship.

Easton’s approach to his subject is befittingly chronological; its scope, however, reaches far beyond a biography. Given Kessler’s wide-ranging activities—cultural, political, social, and geographical—and his detailed diary accounts, Easton’s narrative can genuinely claim to be

a study not only of his life, but also of his times. Beginning with Kessler's privileged childhood in the heady years of the modernization of western Europe where financial elites maintained a high level of international cosmopolitanism, Easton presents a study that flawlessly intertwines Kessler's experiences with discussions of the major historical events that led to the total destruction of that world under National Socialism.

Coming from a wealthy family with close connections to the imperial court in Berlin, Kessler was born in Paris in 1868 as son of a German banker and an Anglo-Irish mother, died in exile from Germany, and was buried in Pere Lachaise in 1937. His family home in France and his education in England and in Germany provided the cultural and social parameters across which, as Easton carefully recounts, he was in constant restless movement, accompanied by a sense of being an outsider, an ambivalence accentuated by his homosexuality. Although he studied for a career in the foreign service, his aesthetic interests led to a life-long preoccupation with and patronage of the arts. Influenced by his reading of Nietzsche, he was involved in the mid-nineties with developing the short-lived elitist modern art journal *Pan*. Easton characterized Kessler's work here as paradigmatic of efforts throughout his life to create "a web" of circles from which the creative and rejuvenating impulses" (p. 66) would serve to transform society. Easton's further analysis of Kessler's less known articles and books as well as his world travels in this pre-war period provides valuable insight into Kessler's subsequent aesthetic and political endeavors.

His most ambitious, and ultimately doomed, aesthetic undertaking was centered on creating a cultural revival of the arts in Weimar, in part to honor the memory of Nietzsche. This multifaceted episode (1902-1906) included, among other things, Kessler's appointment as director of the ducal art museum and van de Velde as director of the art school, exhibitions of contemporary German, French, and English artists, the sculptures of Rodin and Maillol, the meticulous designing of his own home in Weimar as an aesthetic retreat, as well as plans for contemporary theater productions and, later, for a memorial temple for Nietzsche. The portrait that Easton paints of Kessler's enthusiastic whirl-wind activity and of the mounting opposition, which also involved William II, becomes a sensitive reading of the larger struggle over modern art that took place in Germany in the decades before the war. Even as he focused on Weimar, Kessler was an active player in the political controversy on the national level: first in his leadership in forming the new league of seces-

sionist artists (Deutsche Kuenstlerbund) in 1903 and then a year later helping organize the debate in the Reichstag attacking the government's handling of the art exhibition for the St. Louis Exposition.

In these same years, Kessler, with his close ties in England, began the first of many future, often futile initiatives at covert diplomatic mediation between Germany and England. Once war broke out, Kessler, as a high ranking army officer, led troops both in the invasion of Belgium and then on the eastern front. Using Kessler's detailed diary entries as well as judicious use of current scholarship on the war, Easton presents a intimate account of the brutality of the Polish and Carpathian campaigns, viewed through the lens of a privileged officer. Transferred to command his regiment at Verdun in March 1916, Kessler, stopping briefly in Berlin, entered into the divergent worlds of the high-ranking imperial policy makers and of the incipient opposition to the war. Faced by the bitter fighting at Verdun between soldiers from the three countries that he considered to be his "homelands" (p. 248), Kessler broke down and was sent back to Berlin. Here, as elsewhere, Easton's even-handed treatment of Kessler means that he does not hesitate to raise critical questions about Kessler's motives and interpretations of events.

Kessler's diplomatic endeavors intensified during and after the war, involving an astonishing range of actors in both countries. Easton follows him through the intricate details of his secret diplomatic negotiations in a search for peace late in the war, his brief service as ambassador to Poland in 1919 negotiating the safe return of the army from Ukraine, his involvement in the tangled negotiations over the Versailles treaty and German reparations during the 1920s, and his dedicated pacifist campaign in Europe and America supporting the League of Nations. Witnessing at close hand the civil war fought in the streets of Berlin in the winter of 1918-19, Kessler's diary records his dismay over the failure of the socialists, his condemnation of the violence of the Freikorps, and his growing support for the left revolutionaries, particularly the young idealists whose projects he underwrote financially.

Considering this startling transformation into "the Red Count," Easton presents a careful, convincing argument that Kessler's turn to pacifism and democratic socialism constituted "a remarkable continuity between the goals he pursued as art critic, patron, and museum director before the war and those he pursued as a diplomat and pacifist after" (p. 306). That continuity, he argues, was

based on the Nietzschean foundation of Kessler's struggle to reconcile "the agonistic relation between *Macht* and *Geist*" (p. 410) in German culture that was expressed before the war in his search for an aesthetic state and sustained afterwards in his pursuit of an idealized socialist state. As a witness to the disintegration of the cosmopolitan world of privilege and international connections, Kessler demonstrated surprising resilience in confronting new political realities. In his concluding remarks, however, Easton points to the frequent futility of his efforts, the unfinished projects, "the vast nimbus of potentiality" (p. 409) that constituted the shadow side of his significant and manifold achievements.

Throughout the twenties, Kessler continued his restless activity and constant travels. Financially supporting causes and continuing his patronage of many artists, he left a lasting legacy in the magnificent editions of classical literary masterpieces published by his Cranach Press, in his biography of Walther Rathenau, and in his own diaries and memoir that bear witness to the death of one world and the troubled beginnings of another.

Laird Easton's book is a richly nuanced evocation of the overlapping multiple realms in which Kessler moved. With its masterful combination of detail and overarching structure, of personal and political, of narrative and analysis, this book should be on scholars' bookshelves as well as on their class reading lists.

#### Notes

[1]. Harry Graf Kessler, *Tagebuecher, 1918-1937* (Frankfurt a.M., 1961; 1982); *Aus den Tagebuechern 1918-1937* (Munich, 1965; a shortened paperback version); *In the Twenties: The Diaries of Harry Kessler*, trans. Charles Kessler (New York, 1971; reissued in 2002 as *Berlin in Lights*); *Gesammelte Schriften*, vols. 1-3, ed. Gerhard Schuster (Frankfurt a.M., 1988).

[2]. Eberhard von Bodenhausen and Harry Graf Kessler, *Briefwechsel, 1894-1918*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Simon (Marbach am Neckar, 1978); Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Harry Graf Kessler, *Briefwechsel, 1898-1929*, ed. Hilde Burger (Frankfurt a.M., 1968); *The Correspondence of Edward Gordon Craig and Count Harry Kessler, 1903-1937*, ed. I. M. Newman (London, 1995); Peter Grupp, *Harry Graf Kessler, 1868-1937: Eine Biographie* (Munich, 1995); Burkhard Stenzel, *Harry Graf Kessler: Eine Leben zwischen Kultur und Politik* (Weimar, 1995); and Laird Easton, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Third Weimar': Harry Graf Kessler and the Aesthetic State in Wilhelmian Germany, 1902-1906," *Central European History* 29, no. 4 (1997), pp. 495-532.

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