

## Book Reviews

Eleanor Herman. *Sex with Kings: Five Hundred Years of Adultery, Power, Rivalry and Revenge*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005. Pp. 320. Paper \$12.00.

*Sex with Kings* by Eleanor Herman examines the lives of royal mistresses in the history of Western Europe over the past five hundred years. Although sex and the subject of sexual relations with royalty is the prevalent theme of the book, Herman also delves into the lives of the mistresses themselves.

With a degree in journalism, Herman has written for countless publications, as well as appeared on radio and television programs speaking about “all things royal.” Despite her lack of academic credentials her work does have historical merit. *Sex with Kings* is extensively researched draws on a wealth of reputable sources, including letters to and from members of royal courts, memoirs of the mistresses and members of the royal family as well as printed news reports, where available.

Herman emphasizes that these mistresses were not just everyday whores brought to the palace for a few nights but rather women who were officially titled with what Herman refers to as *maitresse-en-titre*, translated as “royal mistress.” The women were lavished with royal gifts, presented at court, and often times preferred by courtiers over the queen. Over the course of their life as royal mistresses, these women earned estates, servants, and had titles bestowed upon them and their family. A very influential mistress could even sign legal documents that would be regarded as law.

Herman begins by examining the role of royal mistresses, what they did, what was expected of them and what made them so desirable. Her book is topical and she emphasizes the many other roles that royal mistresses played as wives, mothers of illegitimate children, and usurpers of the queen.

While Herman writes with wit and humor the title of the book is slightly misleading. The book does not portray the sex lives of royalty but the lives of those having the sex. She examines the different roles of these women in their context as mistresses of royalty and the sexual aspect becomes a backdrop. Throughout the

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book, she shows how similar the mistresses were to each other, spanning not only centuries but also an entire continent.

Herman's book is a must read for anyone who enjoys European history, women's studies or the history of royalty. One should not assume that this book is merely a fun read, although it is enjoyable for those with or without a background in history. Herman herself has devoted her life to writing about the feminine side of history trying to portray the many ways women are alike throughout history.

—Amy Luu

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Edward J. Larson. *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign*. New York: Free Press, 2007. Pp. 352. Cloth \$27.00.

Some would ask why write another book exploring the tumultuous election of 1800. With many believing that the topic has been over-analyzed to the minutest detail by a host of historians, what added insight can Pulitzer Prize winner Edward J. Larson provide to the topic? Those interested in the upcoming election will find that this book analyzes the historical parallels with many contemporary political issues such as the Imperial Presidency, conflicts within the structure and selection of the Electoral College, and the determination of the President in the House of Representatives. Those parallels provide the impetus and distinction for this work in contrast to many previous discussions of the election of 1800.

In an incredibly readable three hundred plus-page work, Larson outlines the conflicts between the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans as they entered the first real fight between the newly developing political parties in this country's history. He reviews the antics of the characters and the deliberations within the states for the selection of Presidential electors. He pays close attention to setting up the conflict between the Federalists, many of whom sought to transform the Presidency into a British style monarchy, against the Republicans, who sought a more representative democracy. Larson's discussion of the Naturalization, Alien, and Sedition Acts provides interesting parallels to the Patriot Act.

Larson documents the dramatic nature of the electoral events through detailed recounts of struggles within each state by the various means of selecting the electors. The drama is intertwined with politicking, maneuvering, and good old horse trading. Larson holds a Ph.D. in History, but as a professor of Law at Pepperdine University he approaches the subject from a legal perspective. At the same time, his background in science and religion is apparent in his analysis of the conflicts between Adams's Christian understanding of the republic and Jefferson's deist beliefs.

Starting at Independence Day, Larson recounts the events leading to the contested election of 1800 and the tied vote in the House of Representatives. Larson explores the emerging conflict between Adams and Jefferson, who shared the offices of President and Vice-President within the only split party occupancy of the two offices in the history of the republic. The thirty-eight ballots cast by Congress to break the tie, the maneuvering within state delegations, and the eventual outcome inspired constitutional changes in order to avoid future conflicts. Larson reiterates these points, providing analysis and contemporary parallels regarding presidential style and constitutional balance between the three branches of American government.

Readers searching for relevant historical precedents to understand contemporary political events will find Larson's work rich and rewarding.

—Howard Gaass

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Nancy Shoemaker. *A Strange Likeness; Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. 232. Paper \$19.95.

Although the common perception, reinforced by scholars and popular histories, dwells upon the conflicts between Indians and Europeans, Nancy Shoemaker, a professor at the University of Connecticut specializing in American Indian History, argues that Indians and Europeans shared similar social constructs. In *A Strange Likeness; Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America*, she examines the similarities between Indians and Europeans to ascertain how these cultures constructed new identities

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that highlighted their differences instead of their commonalities in the eighteenth century. A foundation of shared concepts and practices such as categorization, sense of direction, and the concept of nation, not only enabled Indians and Europeans to communicate initially, but also ultimately led to the expression of their differences. Shoemaker examines how similarities turned into tension-filled differences from the Atlantic seaboard to the Great Lakes between 1700 and the 1760s.

Shoemaker examines six concepts and analytical categories—land, kings, writing, alliances, gender, and race—that eventually led to new identities for both Indians and Europeans. The methodology employed throughout the book explains the Indian and European perspectives and then introduces the conflicts, which ultimately led to the construction of new identities focused upon the differences. This approach produces a significant departure to the relationship between the two cultures: an eastward facing Indian perspective challenges the Eurocentric viewpoint that most readers have come to expect. The necessity of creating a new identity in order to survive affected both cultures equally; previously, only Indian cultures were depicted as changing to adapt to European culture.

Shoemaker relies on the transcripts of councils between Indians and Europeans as an invaluable source. Although Europeans wrote these transcripts, they are imbued with Indian voices and perspectives. Some historians challenge the validity of these European records, claiming that they do not include Indian voices. Shoemaker spurns these critics by pointing out that tribal variations are discernible and even Indian contempt for Europeans is often clear. In other words, conversations between Indians and Europeans—what they said to one another—reveal deeply held ideas about each culture and the new ideas that emerged as a result of cross-cultural dialogues.

*A Strange Likeness* represents a fine work of imaginative history; it successfully constructs a new picture of Indians and the necessity to redefine their culture as the Europeans became more powerful in America. The book offers a vivid depiction of events that occurred when two different cultures came into contact and the changes that took place within both groups. The examination of language's inability to be transcribed accurately between cultures and the difference of cultural meaning and values provides an insightful universal cause for the tension between different cultures.

While her book was not envisioned as a definitive masterpiece, Shoemaker provokes discussion, leading other scholars to further investigate the sources employed and the relationship between the New World and the Old World.

—David Payne

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Timothy Tackett. *When the King Took Flight*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003. Pp. 288. Cloth \$24.95.

For anyone who has ever wondered about how the French Revolution, which started out with the high ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality, descended into the Reign of Terror, University of California, Irvine Professor Timothy Tackett offers a new perspective. According to Tackett, the Revolution's downward trajectory was set in motion by Louis XVI's attempt to flee from France in June of 1791. By this time the country had achieved relative stability and was well on the road to becoming a constitutional monarchy. However, the king's attempted flight called into question whether the new government could have a monarch who was opposed to these ideals.

In eight largely chronological chapters the author closely examines the circumstances surrounding these events. He includes an extensive discussion about the nature of the monarchy, the role of public opinion in shaping the image of the king, as well as Louis XVI's personal traits such as his well-known inability to stick to a decision. Tackett also analyzes the major factions that made up the National Assembly and how the king's flight first caused fissures and then chasms between them. He details how the mistrust created by the king's perfidy led to a fear of external foes and eventually to alarm about internal enemies. In the end radicals ousted the moderate faction and unleashed widespread paranoia where anyone could become a suspect. These radicals went on to create the legal apparatus to deal with real and imagined enemies.

Historians of the French Revolution frequently slight the influence of the citizens of the provinces. Tackett, however, highlights their importance in two places. First, he shows how the revolutionary government created a new sense of national identity

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among the provincials. A heightened awareness of events outside their local concerns led to the capture of the king in Varennes. Second, the king's flight created increased mistrust of "suspicious" persons within the provinces and aided the rise of the Terror in the countryside.

Tackett, who has written other books about eighteenth-century France, draws on memoirs, letters, and journals of some of the most famous participants such as Marie Antoinette, Lafayette, and Madame Roland, as well as contemporary revolutionary newspapers. In contrast to an approach pioneered by Francois Furet, the author returns to doing archival work, consulting the National Archives as well as those of a number of departments, a new administrative unit created by the revolutionary government. Highly engaging and readable, *When the King Took Flight* illustrates how the seemingly minor event of stopping a coach on the way to the French border had major repercussions for the future trajectory of French history.

—John C. Chen

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Susan Whitfield. *Life Along the Silk Road*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Pp. 253. Paper \$18.95.

Susan Whitfield's *Life Along the Silk Road* is based on a collection of primary sources found in a cave near Dunhuang, China. The cave stored manuscripts for almost three hundred years from the Chinese, Tibetan, Mongol, and Turkish governments who controlled the city at different times in the first millennium. Loan records, prayers, legal documents, medical prescriptions, and letters from soldiers far from their homes help Whitfield to understand the political, social, religious and economic history of the people and governments involved in the Silk Road trade. Whitfield is the director of the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library at London. She used illustrations found in the cave to compose the life stories of the ten fictional characters in her book.

The Silk Road trade was an exchange between Central Asian wares such as wool, horses, and sheep for Chinese goods like the desirable silk which only the Chinese could manufacture. The land route extended over thousands of miles from Chang'an, China,

passing the important cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khotan and Bactria to Mediterranean economic centers. The transcripts uncovered in Dunhuang provide a better understanding of the area generally believed to be uncivilized. Whitfield argues that Central Asia was not a land of nomads or a society that lacked civilization. In fact she tells the life stories of ten people who lived along the Silk Road to illustrate that different societies coexisted with one another in the most profitable trade of the first millennium. Whitfield explores the religious diversity of the area, where Taoism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, and Confucianism thrived, to illustrate the government's religious tolerance. One of the most important themes is that Dunhuang was a civilized place with a multicultural society in which people from different cultures and religions lived together and intermarried.

Whitfield presents a chronological narrative that begins with the biography of a Samarkand merchant in 750 and ends with the life story of Bong Boode in 965, before the Silk Road trade shifted to sea routes. The stories describe military battles that pitted the Chinese against Tibetans, political alliances between the Chinese and the Turks, the simple life of female entertainers, and traveling Buddhist monks.

Whitfield's contribution to historiography can be found in the new historical information about people living along the Silk Road. The book should be read by anybody interested in Central Asia in the second half of the first millennium. Her work illuminates the power struggle among the governments, people's religious beliefs, and the social environment of the people involved in the trade. Overall, the book provides a different perspective about an area thought to be uncivilized and demonstrates that power struggles and conquest were followed by a period of peace and coexistence.

— *Erick Lazo*