

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.