In the United States, as in the United Kingdom, university history, public media, commercial biography, and historical fiction are converging in new and exciting ways. The question is whether they can converge to tell new stories in new forms that open up debate, or whether the old stories, genres, and certainties are still the best as far as the public and the media who serve them are concerned. Despite isolated exceptions such as ‘Martin Guerre’, many of the new historical stories of the last forty years have been developed in exclusively academic and specialized terms. This may have put the booming market for history off and driven it back to the old chestnuts. Alan Yentob’s mid-Atlantic series on Leonardo, marketed by PBS in America as Leonardo’s dream machine and shown recently on Channel 4 Television in the United Kingdom, would tend to support this view.

Theodore Rabb’s book is part of an enterprising media project harnessed to an old story about the struggle for liberty. It started life as a general reader’s companion to the six-part PBS television series The Renaissance, broadcast early in 1993 in America, but never in the United Kingdom. The series discussed distinct social types – ‘the Prince’, ‘the Warrior’, ‘the Dissenter’, ‘the Merchant’, ‘the Artist’, and ‘the Scientist’ – as a way of exploring the origins of the modern west. It used what might be described as the classic style of television history. A magisterial narrator – in this case the besuited British actor Ian Richardson – deploys a series of location shots, filmed artworks, readings by actors, historical re-creations, expert comments, in order to tell his story. Rabb himself features as the most prominent inset academic. Modern journalists and politicians – including the British politicians Geoffrey Howe and Tony Benn (in the first episode) – keep us constantly in touch with the contemporary political parallels that underlie the whole enterprise. Simon Schama’s innovative use of visual strategies in the BBC’s A history of Britain, makes this style of television history look rather outdated. It uses media resources in conventionally illustrative ways to teach topical lessons about the past.

There followed in the same year an eighteen-part telecourse, based on the series, accompanied by a text book (Theodore K. Rabb and Sherrin Marshall, Origins of the modern west: essays and sources in Renaissance and early modern European history (1993)) designed for instructors who wanted to integrate the films into their teaching. In addition to the historical chapters and the chronological overview, the book includes illustrations, maps, and primary documents. The telecourse has been integrated into various American college courses, and was also used in a series of regional workshops, sponsored by the Medici Foundation with the support of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education of the US Department of Education, on the uses of television and film in the teaching of history. The status of Renaissance lives as a companion to a television series may explain, though it does not excuse, the omission of references of any kind to primary sources (there is not even a bibliography to facilitate further inquiry). More excusable for the same reason
is the omission of discussion of the methodological problems involved in basing historical biographies on primary sources that deliberately shape lives for instructive or other purposes.

Such a discussion would have been difficult because Professor Rabb is self-consciously doing the same thing. He is shaping lives for instructive purposes. The fifteen lives offered as a portrait of the ‘Renaissance’ age between the mid-fourteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries encompass a wide range of experiences and locations. It is not all about Florence and Padua-Venice, though both feature in the lives of Petrarch, Titian, Galileo, and others. We also visit Bohemia and Prague (Jan Hus and Wallenstein), Nuremberg (Albrecht Dürer), Basel (Thomas Platter), Bordeaux and the Franco-Spanish borderlands (Montaigne), Devon (Walter Ralegh), and Essex (Ralph Josselin). We range from the more familiar intellectual feats of Petrarch and Galileo to the military experience of the greatest quartermaster in history (Wallenstein), the practicalities of early modern trade in precious gems and metals (Gluckel of Hameln), the struggles of the bacchant or wandering German scholar, and the shooters or young boys who served him as foragers and beggars (Thomas Platter).

Whether dealing with Galileo or with Ralph Josselin, Rabb always tells the story not just of an individual but of a family and its struggles. Women are deliberately given a major role, not only in featured biographies (Teresa of Avila, Catherine de’ Medici, Artemisia Gentileschi, Glückel of Hameln), but as wives and daughters in the lives of the featured men. Five of the lives stand on their own, ten in pairs. All have rubrics which identify them as, for example, the life of a student (Thomas Platter) intended to illustrate the enthusiasm for change, or the paired lives of a believer and a dissenter (Teresa of Avila and Michel deMontaigne, Ralph Josselin and John Milton) intended to illustrate the response, in the case of the first pair, to change and, in the case of the second, to revolution. These rubrics prove something of a straitjacket and opportunities are missed. Teresa and Montaigne is a very intriguing pairing, but the contrast between believing and dissenting does not capture the intrigue. Teresa struggled during her lifetime to have her holy ecstasies accepted by the authorities, while Montaigne had much to say about the meaning and status of ecstasy for laymen and laywomen leading ordinary moral lives. Nothing is made of this.

Rabb’s original and interesting choice of genre raises a more general question. Can collections of potted biographies still have a role in the making of our historical imaginations? Individual political biographies of illustrious figures remain a staple historiographical genre, despite the trend in twentieth-century academic history towards the study of almost anything but the lives of individuals. Social history has recovered the non-illustrious lives of marginalized or persecuted figures such as the wife of Martin Guerre, Bertrande de Rols, and the Friulian miller Menocchio. But the art of telling stories about the past on a larger scale by means of a series of biographies – except in the case of successive kings and queens – is lost. There are isolated exceptions, especially in popular and television history. When faced with the daunting task of recounting the story of the twentieth century in a one-hour television programme, Simon Schama narrated the lives of George Orwell and Winston Churchill in parallel. In so doing, he distantly echoed a major body of historiographical literature that thrived through the medieval and early modern periods until at least the later seventeenth century.

I refer to the corpus of collections of the lives of illustrious men and, more occasionally, women, that stretched from Vespasiano da Bisticci’s Lives to John Aubrey’s Brief lives. Major
early modern libraries held shelfloads of these collections grouped around editions of classical precedents such as Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of the philosophers* and Plutarch’s *Parallel lives*. It was above all Plutarch who had created a distinct role for serial, comparative biography in the making of the historical imagination. His potted biographies had a larger political and ethical design. *Parallel lives* was the principal document in the high Roman empire’s reinvention of classical Greece as an empire, like itself, centred on a single city-state (Athens). In Plutarch’s hands Athenian and other Greek men of action became a box of mirrors reflecting the vices and virtues of the individuals who had shaped the Roman past (Robert Lamberton, *Plutarch* (2001), ch. 2). The ethics and rhetoric of exemplarity took precedence over the provision of complete chronicles of rulers, deeds, and battles.

There is a close connection between this body of classical and early modern literature and the origins of modern European Renaissance historiography. When Jakob Burckhardt identified the Renaissance with the self-discovery of the modern western individual, his inspiration came from primary sources such as Vespasiano and Vasari’s collections of *Lives*. There he found biographies of Renaissance patrons and artists as ‘universal men’, biographies modelled on Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, and others. In *Renaissance lives*, Theodore Rabb’s intention is to refresh the biographical connection and inspiration behind Burckhardtian historiography, to offer a Renaissance that captures the imagination of the modern American public. He uses an adapted and modernized Plutarchan scheme that combines the illustrious lives of high political and philosophical biography with the non-illustrious lives of ‘history from below’.

Rabb’s explicit parallels are between contemporaries or near contemporaries such as Teresa and Montaigne. But like Plutarch, he also has in mind parallels between Renaissance and more recent forgers of the modern west. His book is a document in the high American empire’s reinvention of the European Renaissance as a box of mirrors reflecting the vices and virtues of its own pioneers. His Renaissance men and women are individuals who struggle in one sense or another against traditional authorities. They are like the religious and political dissenters who struggled to found the revolutionary American republic of the late eighteenth century and the Czech republic of the twentieth, and the social dissenters who in various western countries fought for the freedoms of women, of conscience, of scientific inquiry, of trade, of speech. The book ends by finding an anticipation of American revolutionary ardour in Milton, champion of free speech, and, in Milton’s Satan, the individual finding his own way (p. 254).

*Renaissance lives* may appeal both in the United States and in the United Kingdom to the general reader or the first-year undergraduate looking for a vivid snapshot of early modern European social and intellectual history. To the academic historian in the United Kingdom, however, it will be interesting primarily as a document of the twentieth-century American re-imagining of the European Renaissance, which has been both more stimulating and more partial than the British. The perception that ‘Renaissance man’ is the source and inspiration of modern American civilization has a surprisingly enduring place in American popular culture. In *Star trek: Voyager*, Captain Janeway’s holographic refuge is the studio of Leonardo da Vinci in Renaissance Florence. She even spends one whole episode in his company comparing philosophical notes (‘Concerning flight’). From this point of view, Theodore Rabb is doing the American public a service by presenting an original selection of lives that broadens and deepens the set of potential relations between the American present and the Renaissance past, even if he does anachronistically impose the sense of a common frontier struggle to forge the modern west. The imposition will be
most deeply felt by British readers when Prof. Rabb claims the English Revolution as the final great act of the drama of the Renaissance (p. 229). They, perhaps more than their American counterparts, will enjoy the rich variety of experiences and locations on offer in ways that go against the grain of the ‘general education’ course on the origins of modernity that is anticipated in this book, just as Plutarch’s *Parallel lives* are appreciated despite the passages in which the Greek historian anticipates their use in the schools of late antiquity.

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In the small hours of 22 August 1642 Sir John Lucas left his house just outside the walls of Colchester in readiness to join the king who that day would raise his standard at Nottingham to begin the civil war. But he was spotted, the alarm raised, and before long a crowd of thousands had assembled to thwart his flight. They assaulted Sir John and his family, marching his wife and daughter away under armed guard and publicly humiliating his mother. The house was ransacked and plundered, the family vault in the church desecrated. Moreover, this incident provided the spark which ignited a blaze of further attacks on the gentry and nobility of Essex and neighbouring Suffolk in the late summer of that momentous year.

The violation of the Lucases, and the ensuing wave of ‘Stour valley’ riots, provide some of the most spectacular examples of spontaneous violence and popular protest during the English Revolution. They were much reported at the time, both in private memoirs and printed journalism; they were to feature prominently in the reflections of contemporaries on their turbulent times, such as Clarendon’s great *History of the rebellion*; and their place in the modern historiography of this period was assured when S. R. Gardiner included them in the opening chapter of his still fundamental *History of the great Civil War*. Most recently, scholars have tended to regard these outbreaks, aimed at the social elite and unrivalled in their sustained destructiveness, as perhaps the supreme example of plebeian radicalism and class hostility in early modern England.

As John Walter points out, however, in this deeply researched and powerfully argued analysis of the ‘Colchester plunderers’, general histories of the 1640s have accepted far too readily the original narrative accounts of these events which have been repeated uncritically down the generations and continue to inform our perception of them. Only when these sources are exposed to detailed scrutiny, and the actions of those who took up arms much more thoroughly explored and explained through a close reading of all the available evidence, can conclusions about the real motivation and meaning behind them be drawn. In doing this Walter succeeds triumphantly. He provides an intensive micro-history of the episode, setting it both within its immediate local and regional circumstances and the specific context of events and issues in the preceding decades. The result is not only a much more sophisticated and nuanced interpretation of these particular incidents, but
also a major contribution to our understanding of popular political culture in ‘pre-
industrial’ society.

The events around Colchester in the summer of 1642 were fashioned in the minds of
countemporaries, as of later generations, by two principal sources: a letter from the mayor
of the town to the speaker of the House of Commons which provided copy for subsequent
newsbook accounts, and the relation penned by Bruno Ryves for that organ of the king’s
party, *Mercurius Rusticus*. Both of these are highly partial, the mayor as a custodian of local
order whose report was subject to journalistic distortion, and Ryves as a royalist clergyman
who was writing for a propagandist publication. Both depicted the rioters either as a
furious rabble, inspired by malice and bent on pillage, or as zealous ‘schismatics’, fanatical
in their desire to assault papists and ‘malignants’. But Walter takes us beyond these
superficial and polemical transcripts, so typical of most of our sources for collective action
in this period, and seeks instead to identify some of the faces on the ‘many headed mon-
ster’, to understand the dynamics of that most complex and polyphonic of sociological
phenomena, the crowd.

To this end, successive chapters peal away layers of context surrounding the inci-
dents, and emersion in a vast range of local records enables Walter to probe ever more
deeply into their economic, social, religious, and political background. He explores
the relations between the Lucas family and the town of Colchester over several gener-
ations, reveals the factional politics within the Corporation and the issues which div-
ided it, and in so doing explains some of the animosities which lay behind the events
of 1642. But these unprecedented outbreaks of popular violence cannot be explained in
merely local terms. Walter’s handling of the high politics and religious history of the
Personal Rule is equally assured as he demonstrates the ways in which the policies of
Charles I divided a region. He shows that Essex and Suffolk were by no means as
solidly Parliamentarian as was once believed since the king used the assizes and the
pulpits to publish proclamations and declarations which inspired the fear of popular
disorder in an incipient royalist gentry. Equally, the main urban centres of the region
were not the uncontested godly commonwealths often assumed but sites of long-
standing religious conflict which was to take on new dimensions during the Laudian
backlash of the 1630s. The policies which it sponsored were instrumental in raising old
anxieties about the threat of popery which were goaded both by the presence of some
powerful Catholic families in Essex and the incitements of those puritan preachers
so active across the region in this decade. All of this helps to explain the tensions which
exploded in August 1642 and why Arminians and papists were so ruthlessly singled out
by the crowd.

Finally, Walter develops the economic background to these episodes. The cloth in-
dustry provided direct employment for some 3,000 men and their families in seventeenth-
century Colchester and the livelihood of many of its neighbouring villages and townships
along the Essex–Suffolk border. The depression in the trade during the 1620s and 1630s
provides an important backdrop to these outbreaks of violence, finally triggered when
economic crisis was precipitated by political crisis in the early 1640s. The complex layers
of differentiation and the variegated relations to the means of production within the
ranks of cloth workers make it difficult to regard them as a monolithic ‘class’ with a
single identity or consciousness, but the explosions of 1642 were themselves instrumental
in helping to foster a collective sense as they came together around common causes. Even
then, however, their targets were not so much the gentry as a class, but rather their
representatives who as ‘delinquents’ or papists were perceived to be enemies of the people.

The resulting picture is one in which national politics and confessional conflicts intersected with local issues and economic grievances in constructing a complicated web of motives and incitements in the summer of 1642. Ultimately, Walter argues, anti-popery and popular Parliamentarianism were more important explanatory factors behind these events than simply the class-hostility usually assumed by historians.

This is a book which will be required reading for all students of the English Revolution and its causes. But for its analysis of class in early modern society, one of the finest now available, and for its deep contextualization of an episode of mass direct action, it also deserves to engage a much wider audience.

**ADAM FOX**


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The Putney debates of 1647 were urgent negotiations between the highest and lowest ranks of the victorious parliamentarian army – plus some civilian radicals – on topics extending far beyond professional army grievances to the role the army should play in the settlement of the kingdom, and the principles on which that settlement should be based. This book, the outcome of a conference held in 1997 to mark the 350th anniversary of the debates, looks back on them as a historical artefact and is keen to position itself at the specific point in history from which we view both the debates and their historiography. It also attempts to represent the state of historical thinking on the debates, and here the collection shows up some disappointing blind spots in current scholarship.

The central section of the book focuses on the debates ‘and their contexts’. Those contexts had already been comprehensively examined in books by Ian Gentles (*The New Model Army* (Oxford, 1992)) and Austin Woolrych (*Soldiers and statesmen* (Oxford, 1987)), and work by John Morrill and Mark Kishlansky (the latter is present in this volume in spirit if not in person). We now need to use those contexts to read the debates themselves, but judging by these essays the historiography has been disabling as much as enabling. Gentles and Woolrych here offer narratives which do not differ substantially from their earlier work, while Barbara Taft’s account of Ireton illuminates his character more than the way in which his thinking was developed and articulated. Morrill and Philip Baker’s essay on the *Case of the Armie* is squarely in the revisionist mould: Putney is an army affair hijacked by outsiders, and Sexby is transformed from a key Leveller mediator in the army into an exemplar of the autonomy of army agitation. Their new reading of the evidence makes Sexby the author of the *Case* – here contrasted strongly with the *Agreement* – and places both old and new agents well outside the Leveller sphere of influence – a provocative reading, but one which ultimately creates as many problems of interpretation as it solves.

Revisionist work has made us very aware of the importance of army identity, but has been slower to develop the account of army ideologies which we need if we are to make sense of the debates as the army’s discussions with itself. Kishlansky’s article on ‘Ideology
and politics in the parliamentary armies’ (in Morrill, ed., *Reactions to the English civil war* (London, 1982)) was important in this respect, but too often once the Levellers are banished from centre-stage at Putney, the political content of the debates goes with them. Barbara Donagan asks questions precisely about the relationship of the army to the political authorities in a situation where the parliament had assumed de facto sovereignty through its monopoly of armed force. Her essay loses impetus, but provides much useful information, when she moves on to outline two particularly problematic areas of overlap between military and civilian norms: indemnity and the granting of surrender terms; it is a shame she does not do more to reflect these insights on military/civilian status back on to the debates. Michael Mendle’s essay on ‘identity and indemnity’ is an extremely rich and stimulating contribution, which gives the phenomenon of Leveller–royalist linkages the serious attention it deserves and treats the complex issues of identity and language in the ‘great debate’ at Putney with considerable perceptiveness. There are numerous issues here which would repay further work.

The first and third sections of the book situate the debates, and our reading of them, in broader contexts. The creation and transmission of the text we have are treated in Frances Henderson’s fascinating piece on the shorthand versions behind William Clarke’s longhand manuscript of the debates, and in Lesley Le Claire’s outline of the adventures of the manuscript. William Lamont’s enjoyable essay is designed to expose the way in which Woodhouse’s packaging of the Putney debates under the title *Puritanism and liberty* has distorted our reading of them.

The Levellers, elusive at Putney, reappear later in the collection in a broader historical perspective. Tim Harris argues that the energies of the 1640s Leveller movement did not evaporate in the later seventeenth century, but were rightly perceived by Tories to be present in the ‘Lilburneisme’ of parts of the Whig movement: it was the political levelling associated with Lilburne’s appeals for mass support, rather than the specific Leveller platform, which survived. Blair Worden, in contrast, contends that an unteleologically minded historian will find little of the Levellers in the next two and a half centuries. Faced with the task of proving a negative he shows that the Levellers were read (about) and invoked far less often than other civil war figures by later radicals; we should take seriously the suggestion that the word ‘leveller’ may often carry no specific reference to our ‘Levellers’.

Patricia Crawford’s essay on ‘the poorest she’ so conspicuously absent from the debates is a missed opportunity to reflect on the implications of Leveller or army-radical language and argument for women. On my reading, Mendle’s interpretation of her essay as showing that a ‘dynamic of inclusion’ meant that Leveller ideas ‘could not entirely be kept away from women’ (p. 13) is a generous misinterpretation of a far rasher and less nuanced account.

It is sad that an entire volume on the Putney debates should have so little room for analysis of the vocabulary and dynamics of the debates in terms of political thought. There is much more work to be done here. The debates are more than a script written for the actors by simple circumstance, and all we now know about their context should enable us to read their content in genuinely illuminating new ways. The extraordinary fact that what was said at Putney was sayable at all, on all sides of the debate, should surely still stir us to look for the intellectual, cultural, and ideological forces at work there. J. G. A. Pocock’s tactfully exasperated coda to the volume may point in some of the right directions.
Habsburg Imperial power and its public representation form the closely related subjects of two recent publications in the General History series of the Institute for European History in Mainz. Maria Goloubeva’s study of Leopold I’s public image investigates authorized eulogies and pictorial representations of the emperor’s moral and military virtues. The latter, it has to be said, were never much on display either before or after 1683, and his spiritual upbringing made him in this respect an unlikely match for his dashing Bourbon rival. Rather, the young emperor’s composed and somewhat subdued expression in van Merlen’s engraving of 1658 seems to reflect the fact that he had only fairly recently and as a result of his elder brother’s death in 1654 been made to exchange the prospect of an ancillary dynastic role as clerical prince for the leading position in the Monarchy and Empire. The author of the present study of Leopoldine propaganda not implausibly opts for a thematic approach which deals in turn with the different facets of the emperor’s official persona. A chronological account, on the other hand, would have shown the extent to which Leopold’s reputation was determined by his (in)ability to preserve the Empire’s and Monarchy’s territorial integrity against French and Turkish aggression. Leopold’s ruthless Counter-Reformation policy in Hungary after 1671 made his affinity for the Society of Jesus and the presence of clerical councillors at court natural targets for Protestant denunciations of his ‘Jesuitical’ religious policies. His carefully cultured public piety hence was of ambivalent propagandistic value.

The first chapter of Goloubeva’s study outlines the Austrian Habsburgs’ tradition of dynastic representation since the time of Emperor Maximilian I. A cult of ancestry which stressed the dynasty’s unbroken lineage blended with the family’s famed piety to form an ideological prop for its claim to quasi-hereditary Imperial succession. Goloubeva draws on a wide range of sources, such as the libretti and stage directions of Viennese court opera, pamphlets, historiographical works, published accounts of pageants, and other public celebrations of dynastic and wider political importance, to demonstrate how the attributes given greatest prominence in Leopold’s public image were conveyed to the court and a wider audience in the Monarchy and Empire. In the wake of the military triumphs, propagandistic emphasis shifted from Leopold’s piety, virtue, and constancy in adversity to his military valour, though exerted, so to speak, by Polish-Imperial proxy. Pictorial representations, most notably prints and portraits of the emperor, are likewise taken into account. Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach’s contribution, on the other hand, is given short shrift because of its alleged unprogrammatic nature. His first draft design for Schönbrunn is referred to, but no attempt is made to explore the propagandistic potential of the elaborate iconography of the triumphal arches for Joseph I’s Viennese entry in 1690, which were likewise designed by him. Neither is he mentioned as sculptor of the Viennese plague column (discussed on pp. 196–7) which came to epitomize the brand of baroque piety that was consciously nurtured at and diffused by Leopold’s court. On closer inspection,
the court’s policy of commissioning artists would hence seem less random than Goloubeva suggests. Moreover, the case of Fischer von Erlach, who returned to Vienna in 1686 after the Turkish threat had subsided, is illustrative of the constraints to which art patronage and court culture in the capital were subjected by war and the plague until the mid-1680s.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the contributors and prospective recipients of Leopoldine propaganda at the court and in the Empire. The intricacies of etiquette and social ranking which regulated life at court are demonstrated from the prescriptions of court protocol. Beyond this inner circle, the Jesuit colleges, the universities, and municipal corporations are shown to have played an important part in sustaining the emperor’s and dynasty’s public image. The town magistrates of Augsburg, for example, commissioned a sumptuous engraving by Matthias Kusel to commemorate the celebrations for Joseph I’s Imperial designation at the Electoral Diet at Augsburg in 1690. Chapters 4 and 5 examine Imperial art patronage and the public staging of dynastic events like the emperor’s weddings, while chapters 6, 7, and 8 investigate the military rhetoric and imagery developed in connection with the Turkish and French campaigns and the suppression of conspiracy and insurrection in Hungary. Chapters 9 and 10 look at representations of the emperor as paragon of Christian virtue and defender of the Catholic faith. The final chapter (pp. 213–33) resumes the author’s discussion of potential audiences and inquires into the reception of Leopoldine propaganda (ch. 2). Negative responses are hinted at, but since contemporary critical opinion is not the subject of analysis it remains unclear how far Leopoldine propaganda was in fact designed to counter public criticism, of which there was plenty before 1683–7. The fact that just a single panegyric text was produced by the Jesuit college in Tynau in the period 1664 to 1695 (p. 54) is revealing; moreover, it serves as a reminder of the political and military pressures to which the agents of Leopoldine propaganda were subject in this most exposed province of the Monarchy. The ways in which Habsburg–Bourbon relations affected official representations of the emperor’s persona likewise remain underexplored: there is an excellent but tantalizingly brief characterization of the uses of contrast and inversion as the characteristic stylistic devices of anti-Ludovician Imperial propaganda (pp. 153–4). On the other hand, no attempt is made to assess the influence of the proponents of a Francophile policy at court, such as Johann Weikhart von Auersperg (until 1669) and his successor, Franz von Lisola’s adversary Václav Eusebius von Lobkovic (until 1672/4): both held the position of majordomo (Obersthofmeister), whose key importance in supervising the activities of the court and regulating the emperor’s public appearances is justly emphasized by the author. Goloubeva’s conclusions stress that Leopold’s image was highly formalized but by no means static (p. 230). It could, however, be argued that the overriding aim of dynastic preservation made potential exchangeability of candidates imperative, as Leopold’s case would illustrate, which militated against the development of a highly individualized public persona. His reign amply illustrates the potential for clashes of interest resulting from the emperor’s multiple roles as head of the Empire and ruler of the disparate and expanding lands of the Monarchy.

The ambivalence of Habsburg–Imperial relations is further documented by the findings of an Austro-German conference held in Mainz in 1997. The fifteen papers assembled in this volume investigate different levels of exchange between the Empire (represented by the Estates and the Imperial Diet and Court), the emperor, and the Estates of the Austrian lands of the Monarchy. Günther Burkert-Dottolo’s paper outlines the composition, agenda, and directives regulating the activities of the Austrian Estates’
embassies at the Imperial Diet mainly in the first half of the sixteenth century. He explicitly rejects inclusive concepts of the Empire as formulated, among others, by the author of the last contribution to this volume, Georg Schmidt, who insists on the political and constitutional unity of the Empire before and after 1648. By contrast, Burkert-Dottolo stresses the de facto (and, one might add, in important respects de jure) autonomy of the hereditary lands, the most tangible expression of which was the administrative and governmental apparatus created by Maximilian and Ferdinand I. The financial exigencies of the Turkish Wars and the need to petition for substantial subsidies from the Imperial Diet provided the Protestant Austrian Estates with a legitimate reason for making contact with their co-religionists among the Imperial princes, e.g. at the Regensburg diet in 1556. Ferdinand eyed these delegations with suspicion and tried to keep them under close control, though straightforward prohibition was no option in the circumstances.

The second paper by Christina Lutter is concerned with an earlier period and different aspect of Habsburg Imperial rule, i.e. Maximilian I’s foreign policy and the general political, economic, and social state of the Empire as seen through the eyes of the Venetian diplomat Vincenzo Querini. Lutter demonstrates how the rhetorical conventions and protocol of diplomatic exchange helped patch up relations after clashes and resume communication in 1508 before the formation of the League of Cambrai caused a complete breakdown in December that year. Christopher Laferl’s study of the Spanish at Ferdinand I’s and Maximilian II’s court in Vienna shows that the number and importance of Spanish clerics and courtiers increased over the two reigns, starting with a group of about twenty to thirty Spaniards among Ferdinand’s entourage and rising threefold in number under his son. They were employed in such trusted positions as envoys, secretaries, and court physicians, and exerted considerable influence on Viennese court society. However, few of them were promoted to high government offices, perhaps in a conscious effort to minimize conflict with the provincial Estates.

The Spanish connection is further explored in Friedrich Edelmayer’s analysis of Philipp II’s network in the Empire. Edelmayer demonstrates how Philipp II used promises of support in religious matters and tangible financial help to build up a clientele among the Catholic princes, giving financial support to such high-ranking dignitaries as the ecclesiastical electors of Cologne, Mainz and Trier. More intriguing even in his temporary success in roping in the more approachable members of the Protestant party such as the elector of Brandenburg Joachim II (though this link dated back to an agreement with Charles V), Hans von Küstrin, Duke Adolf of Holstein, and Count Otto von Schaumburg (pp. 67–71).

Albrecht Luttenberger reveals how failure to gain the emperor’s support for comprehensive fiscal, military, and administrative reforms based on the principle of confessional parity led Rudolf II’s able Imperial treasurer (Reichspfennigmeister), the Protestant Zacharias Geikofler, into treasonable correspondence with the emperor’s ambitious brother Matthias, whom Geikofler’s charges of neglect supplied with welcome ideological support for his move to force Rudolf’s abdication. A brief chapter by Alfred Kohler considers the problem of continuity and discontinuity in Imperial policy (pp. 101–117) and emphasizes the need for further research to adequately assess Ferdinand II’s place in the development of early modern Kaisertum.

The origins and in parts strongly ‘Bodinian’ intellectual complexion of Imperial legal state theory of Reichspublizistik as conceived by Dominicus Arumaeus, Johannes Limnaeus,
and Theodor Reinking are expounded in Rudolf Hoke’s thoughtful article. This is followed by three papers dealing with the Imperial Diet and Court (Reichskammergericht) as the Empire’s core institutions. Helmut Neuhaus bases his assessment of the emperor’s position vis-à-vis the Imperial Estates on a broad survey of the proceedings of the Diets from the reign of Ferdinand I to Leopold I. The Turkish threat formed the predominant and common concern of the Diets held from 1576 to 1613, acting as a coercive power on both sides, while the Estates are shown to have enjoyed a wider scope of action at the executive assemblies (Reichsdeputationstage). However, the rise to pre-eminence of the Electors’ Council at these meetings after the mid-sixteenth century cancelled out the political gains that might have been reaped from this extension.

Johannes Burkhardt’s analysis of the volume and nature of the Imperial Diets’ business after 1663 (pp. 151–83) demonstrates that this institution was in fact more efficient than contemporary critics and subsequent historiography would admit. Bernhard Diestelkamp focuses on the legal and ideological implications of the frequent clashes between the Emperor and the Imperial Estates over the conflicting authorities of the Imperial Court and the Viennese Aulic Court (Reichshofrat), while Winfried Schulze points out the future constitutional relevance of the principles of confessional parity and amicable settlement as contained in Unionist constitutional thought. Matthias Schnettger’s instructive survey of episcopal elections from c. 1555 to 1664/5 shows how they became a battleground of Habsburg–Wittelsbach competition, with both dynasties striving for the exclusion of rival influences and elimination of jurisdictional enclaves in their territories. The Wittelsbachs are shown to have, on balance, scored more successes, though occasionally the local nobility would steal a march on them, like the von Galens who became entrenched in Münster. Bernhard Sutter characterizes the political position and manoeuvrings of the Imperial knights as loyal supporters of the Habsburgs or neutral, politically, and socially self-contained third party. The penultimate paper by Manfred Rudersdorf discusses, among other examples, the Saxon electors’ policy to demonstrate the impact of Lutheran precepts of patriarchalism on the territorial prince’s domestic and Imperial policy. The concluding paper by Georg Schmidt argues that the Empire before and after 1648 was a viable, coherent constitutional entity embodying a ‘system of complementary statehood’, a hypothesis which Schmidt has developed more fully in several recent publications and which is presently discussed controversially by German early modernists.

The papers collected in this volume reflect the major trends of research on the subject in Austria and Germany, and are in many cases related to current debates and ongoing research projects in both countries. They may hence be consulted with profit by the specialist as much as the reader with a more general interest in the history of the Empire.

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In his introduction to this excellent collection of essays, Donald Winch writes that ‘instead of “peculiarity” we have plumped for “political economy” as our linking theme’, since
for much of the period with which we are concerned political economy described the favoured mode of analyzing, debating, or justifying the significance of British policies, institutions, and ideas’ (p. 2). True enough. Still, it is the peculiarities of British historical experience between 1688 and 1914 that stand out in this volume, and provide the most convenient means of coming to grips with its rich contents. Its sixteen contributors cover a very broad range of material, and were evidently given no brief to develop a unifying argument. One can, however, relate a good deal of what they have to say to three broad themes that each in its own way emphasize the notion of British peculiarity: the shifting European verdicts on Britain’s ostensibly ‘peculiar’ social and political development; the peculiarities of British fiscal and administrative practice in the mid-nineteenth century, which powerfully legitimated state authority; and finally, the peculiarities of British and especially English welfare arrangements, which perhaps contributed more to the relative stability of Victorian society than is usually realized.

Identifying British peculiarities has always been a popular pastime on the Continent, and the essays here on ‘the view from abroad’ present us with fresh variations on some familiar themes. Emma Rothschild shows that European observers in the Georgian era habitually chalked up Britain’s unparalleled commercial success to the peculiarly expansive freedoms that Britons enjoyed. In contrast, Gareth Stedman Jones stresses that from Waterloo through 1848, a great many French and German observers could agree that the British state was ‘governed by a selfish, ignorant, socially backward, and financially irresponsible aristocracy’ (p. 86) that was driving the country into moral and financial bankruptcy. This critique virtually disappeared by the 1860s, both abroad and at home. As James Thompson notes, high Victorian Britain had more than its share of admirers on the Continent, even in Bismarckian Germany, where liberal political economists lauded and envied the relative peace and stability of British industrial relations.

Britain’s relative social peace after 1850 provides the subtext for this volume’s lengthy section on ‘fiscal and monetary regimes’. Among other things, social peace was predicated on the broad acquiescence in a Victorian state still dominated by a narrow elite but which, in stark contrast with the ostensibly rapacious and nepotistic ‘fiscal-military’ state of the late Georgian era, was now widely seen to be a disinterested arbiter of sectional interests and an honest steward of tax money. The advent of ‘cheap government’ in the wake of the almost ruinously expensive wars with France was central to the legitimation of the Victorian state. Julian Hoppit is right to point out that post-Waterloo retrenchment was not as extensive as it has lately been made out to be (not least by me), and he and Patrick O’Brien both have good reason to stress that such spending reductions as were achieved owed less to the cheeseparing of post-war governments than they did to a Pax Britannica that stemmed from the military exhaustion of Britain’s European rivals. Still, as Martin Daunton and G. C. Peden stress elsewhere in this volume, Britain was unique in its ability to preserve ‘cheap government’ in the long run. Total expenditure by central and local authorities declined as a percentage of GNP between 1830 and 1870 and remained fairly stable thereafter, right up to 1914. While the cost of imperial defence was immense, the relative affluence of British taxpayers made it comparatively affordable. If ‘cheap government’ was an earnest of the putative disinterestedness of the Victorian state, so too was Free Trade. While Anthony Howe’s and Frank Trentmann’s essays indicate that protectionism was a long time dying, they also stress that Britain was peculiarly loath to return to it even well beyond the point at which it would have made good economic sense.
to do so, because Free Trade was widely and persistently seen as the bulwark that protected humble consumers from rapacious interests.

Finally, Jose Harris’s illuminating essay suggests that even the peculiarities of the New Poor Law, which were damned by so many contemporaries and still are by many historians, probably played more of a stabilizing than a disruptive role by the 1860s or so. The post-1834 system of poor relief was ‘peculiar’ not only because it was tax-based and centralized, but because it was highly impersonal: in stark contrast with Continental practice, English Poor Law officers had little power to mete out differential treatment to the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, particularly in the management of outdoor relief. This dearth of moral policing meant the English system was actually less intrusive than its counterparts in Europe, and its relative neutrality made it more broadly tolerable to the poor than private philanthropic alternatives that invariably attached ‘moral’ strings to the benefits they provided.

The narrow compass of a book review prevents me from doing proper justice to the richness and complexity of this collection, and I must apologize to those whose worthy contributions I have no space to explore. Suffice it to say that the uniformly high quality of these essays testifies to the vibrant state of contemporary scholarship on institutions and political economy in modern Britain.

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The Royal Navy was a central national institution in the eighteenth century, and an essential element in the national self-image, which has long called for a sophisticated analysis in terms of cultural history. This is the first book to meet the challenge, ranging widely over late eighteenth-century Britain in search of the self-image of seamen and sea officers, and the view of the Navy and of naval men held by outsiders. These it analyses in a series of different contexts: politics, commerce, religion, medicine, and the female sphere, concluding with a brief look at the reputation of the post-war Navy. The evidence is drawn from extensive reading in contemporary books, pamphlets, and periodicals (notably the Gentleman’s Magazine), together with prints and material objects from ceramics to swords produced for consumers of varied taste and pocket. Many of these are illustrated in the eighteen colour plates and eight monochrome figures. The general effect is of a wealth of information from which even expert readers will learn much, but the breadth of the subject and the range of evidence employed in a shortish book inevitably mean that it is spread fairly thinly. The author often throws out significant ideas, but passes swiftly on without giving them any deep analysis. Her approach may be more satisfying to cultural historians than to other readers, for it tends to address the image more than the reality. This reviewer, at least, would have welcomed more explicit discussion of the gap between them; of how far, and why, fact shaded into fiction. Margarette Lincoln is well aware that the writings and engravings she uses promoted particular interests and points of view,
but she does not always give a clear enough sense of what was happening in the real world to allow the reader to judge what the representations mean. She often provides political pamphlets with only the lightest sketch of the background politics (though in exchange we do have the Keppel-Palliser courts martial of 1779 explained three times). In discussing the extensive controversy over Admiral Byng and the loss of Minorca, for instance, she does not make it very clear to the unwary reader that the Newcastle ministry fell in November 1756; the admiral was prosecuted by his enemies, but shot by his friends. Again, it is naive to say that ‘all parties sincerely celebrated’ Rodney’s victory at the battle of the Saintes in 1782. In fact the new Rockingham ministry hurried to dismiss an admiral it loathed before the news of his success could be confirmed, then panicked and tried too late to recall the order when it realized how complete and popular his triumph was, and finished up offering palpably insincere congratulations through gritted teeth. Only Lord North’s ministry, now in opposition, celebrated the discomfiture of Frenchmen and Whigs with unfeigned delight. Contemporaries were well aware of all this, and so must the reader be to understand the contemporary images. In another political case the author is seriously misleading. She reproduces a colour print of May 1815 entitled ‘Things as they have been. Things as they now are’, with an officer bisected, half in uniform and half in civilian clothes, with the comment that this represents ‘the post-war service in straitened circumstances’. But the war was not over in May 1815, and this officer is not an archetype; he is plainly identified as Captain Lord Cochrane, lately dismissed the service, expelled from the House of Commons, and imprisoned after a conviction for fraud. To understand this print by ‘R. Bothsides’, with his interestingly ambiguous attitude, we need an explanation of this celebrated affair.

Something similar might be said about religion. No doubt Margarette Lincoln herself knows that evangelists are not necessarily members of the Church of England but Evangelicals certainly are; that the early Methodists were not quite Nonconformists; and that Quakers, though undoubtedly dissenters, were hardly typical of Dissent as a whole. Unfortunately readers who do not know all this may easily go astray, for the terms are used in a vague and inconsistent fashion, though it is essential to locate people’s religious views precisely in order to understand what they were trying to say, and to whom. Similar pitfalls attend the reader of the post-war literature about the Navy. The author rightly notes the prevailing sentimental and trivializing tendency, but is less alert to the moralizing thrust of Evangelical writings concerned to present the Navy as depraved and in need of salvation. Likewise it is dangerous to take post-war comments about naval discipline at face value, when radical politicians had adopted naval and military discipline as a convenient symbol of a range of contemporary political and social targets, and issued numerous polemics lightly disguised as naval memoirs.

Much of this, it may fairly be said, amounts to a criticism of the book for not being longer. The author has opened up an important but largely unexplored subject with a preliminary survey which covers much ground at some speed. Inevitably there is more to be done to fill in the picture, and it is easy for a specialist critic to spot points of weakness. Nevertheless this is a very worthwhile book, handsomely produced and illustrated, based on a great volume of evidence, visual and material as well as literary, which will be welcomed by social, cultural, and naval historians of the period.

Design and the decorative arts, published to mark the opening of the excellent new British galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum, contains contributions from many of the historians and decorative arts specialists involved. It is a large book in every way, covering no less than 400 years of design history, consisting of almost 500 pages, containing over 1,000 beautifully reproduced illustrations, and aiming to place design goods in a wide range of contexts. Whilst the text is divided chronologically into the Tudor and Stuart, Georgian, and Victorian periods, each section has a broad introduction to key historical developments and is organized according to the same four themes, taken from the galleries. The first chapter on each period is entitled ‘Style’ and surveys all relevant ‘isms’, discussing key aesthetic developments. The second, ‘Who led taste?’, describes those who contributed to new trends, whether patrons, artists, critics, or institutions, as well as the circulation of new ideas through various means such as prints and the pattern book. ‘Fashionable living’ aims to set objects in both behavioural contexts and physical settings, considering issues such as the increasing emphasis of privacy and comfort in the home and the changing demands of hospitality. The final (and consistently the best) chapter in each section analyses ‘What was new?’, outlining product innovation, the development of new materials, and technical advances.

The breadth of the period considered is both daunting and laudable, providing big contexts and allowing the formulation of big questions and answers. The key arguments are fascinating. The book recounts the decline of the monopoly of court patronage and the increasing availability of design goods to the middle and even to the lower classes, discussing the pride, concerns, and dilemmas that such dissemination raised. It looks at the changing status of the artist, in terms of social position, his/her relationship with patrons, and advances in business practice. It discusses the vital role of the empire, both through imports and import substitutes, as well as pointing out the mêlée of international influences that created ‘British’ styles. The range of objects included is equally vast. The first discussion of ‘What was new?’ closes with the silver teapot and the three-deck warship; the last culminates in the sewing machine and the locomotive.

Design and the decorative arts is also broad in its intended audience and its format is essentially that of the ‘coffee table book’, inviting ‘dipping’ through the double page features and picture captions which stand apart from the main text. However, it is clearly valuable to the academic historian and sheds light on a wide number of historiographical debates, although its contributions are largely implicit. Most notable is John Styles’s apposite emphasis on the industrial revolution as a gradual process and the fact that most enterprise remained on the small scale, even after the advent of the steam engine and spinning machine. There are other significant insights on the consistently paradoxical nature of Britain’s relationship with France, an uneasy blend of disdain, admiration, and rivalry. The book also proposes a long-term narrative that allows a further move away from the notion of a dramatic eighteenth-century consumer revolution.

The four themes that structure the book show a breadth of analysis that draws on the imperatives of both new art history and cultural history to explore interdisciplinary
connections. The authors neither simply reduce design goods to their formal qualities nor succumb to new art history’s temptation to emphasize the social aspects of art at the expense of the aesthetic. However, the final effect of the divisions is conversely to strengthen rather than to merge disciplinary boundaries. Despite the fact that each chapter refers the reader to material considered in other sections, the organization of the book means that the patrons who influenced taste are set apart from consideration of their houses and lifestyles and new aesthetic trends are divorced from new materials. Also, the text as a whole tends to begin with context and to use objects as illustrative. It is most satisfying in those passages in which one object or style is introduced and then used as a basis for wider discussion. For example, Styles shows how the importing of mahogany in the eighteenth century was prompted by practical and stylistic advantages as well as by imperial economics.

The desire to write a history of design that moves beyond the traditional limits of stylistic consideration is hampered by the fact that the overarching criterion for the selection of objects is that they are ‘the best of their kind in aesthetic terms’ (p. vii). Thus, despite the book’s emphasis on the expansion of the consuming public, we are only given infrequent glimpses into the purchasing habits of the lower classes. Equally, in certain sections, the model of emulation is used diffusely but not rigorously. This is despite considerable recent debate over its value and utility, to which Styles himself has previously and significantly contributed. However, a book of this scope would be hard pressed to cover every issue and, overall, the authors’ achievement is impressive. The cornucopia of material on offer, combined with the sheer expertise of the historians, art historians, and, in particular, the curators who have contributed to the project, make this an invaluable reference book on which scholars will draw for years to come.

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These two recent volumes in the outstanding Italian diplomatic documents series that began publication fifty years ago, are lulls before storms. The first covers the final months of the long political career of Agostino Depretis, the ‘spinner of Stradella’, who had dominated Italian politics for more than a decade, stitching together a succession of fragile ‘transformist’ coalitions using the arts of compromise and bribery. He had never had much time for foreign policy. ‘Whenever I see bad weather approaching’, he once famously said, ‘I put up my umbrella and wait for the rain to pass.’ But he could not avoid foreign affairs altogether during the last year of his life. First, there were the negotiations for the renewal of the Triple Alliance to sort out. Second, and more dramatically, he had to contend with the disaster of Dogali, when 500 Italian troops were massacred by a warlord in Ethiopia. Dogali provoked a storm of indignation throughout Italy and brought to power the man who was to succeed Depretis as prime minister, Francesco Crispi. As both prime minister and foreign minister from August 1887 to January 1891 Crispi was to pursue
a turbulent foreign policy that on more than one occasion brought Europe to the brink of a major war.

The second volume sees the return of Crispi as prime minister at the end of 1893 following the lack-lustre and latterly scandal-ridden administrations of Antonio di Rudini and Giovanni Giolitti. Domestic affairs dominated the agenda. The country faced bankruptcy as a result of a slump in the economy and a catastrophic implosion of the banking sector: a package of stringent financial measures had to be pushed through in the course of 1894 that pulled Italy back from the precipice. Even more urgent was the crisis of the so-called Fasci, a socialist-led movement in Sicily that began to spiral out of control during the late autumn of 1893 and threatened – or so it seemed to many – to engulf the country in revolution. Crispi declared a state of emergency in January 1894, and dispatched 40,000 troops to the island. Foreign affairs in the mean time simmered in the background, with Africa the main theatre of activity. It was only from the summer of 1895 that they pushed centre stage, as the Eastern crisis resurfaced, and all-out war against the Ethiopian emperor, Menelik – a war that was to culminate in the disastrous defeat of Adua in March 1896 – loomed closer.

Italy had joined the Triple Alliance for five years in a fit of near panic in 1882 on terms that were widely seen as unfavourable. It fell to Depretis’s plain-speaking and energetic foreign minister from 1885, Count di Robilant, to try and renegotiate a better deal. Di Robilant accepted fully the rationale for the alliance, but was not very enthusiastic about Italy’s partners. Above all he disliked Bismarck (‘the pro tempore master of the world’, he called him), whose condescension towards Italy rankled. Di Robilant told the Italian ambassador in Vienna, Costantino Nigra, in July 1886 (doc. 4) that Italy must not repeat the ‘error’ of 1882 and go cap in hand to Austria and Germany. ‘Our alliance with the two Empires could have been much more beneficial to us if we had known how to make ourselves wanted rather than show that we were burning with desire to be in their company … I will not hesitate … to make it clear that I do not see an alliance as a necessary condition of our relations with the two powers.’

Costantino Nigra was a figure of immense stature within Italian diplomatic circles, not least because of his standing at court, and his views, voiced in letters of equanimity and silky intelligence, did much to smooth the way towards a successful renegotiation of the alliance. He told di Robilant early in August (doc. 31) that he could quite understand why the alliance had not proved popular in Italy, given that it had produced almost no tangible benefits, aside from a couple of toe-holds on the Red Sea; and Italy should certainly not sell its support cheaply to Germany and Austria. But what if Germany and Austria were to respond to di Robilant’s coolness with a similar coolness on their own part, and the alliance were to lapse? He doubted whether Italy would be no worse off. ‘Starting from zero, it is possible to be friends without being allies. But once an alliance has ended, it is difficult to remain friends as before … Something will be different … And that is precisely the danger we face here.’

Italy, however, found itself in an increasingly strong position in the autumn of 1886. The crisis in Bulgaria, brought about by the abdication of Alexander of Battenberg, threatened to precipitate the Eastern question; and in France General Boulanger was stirring up inflammatory talk of revanche and war. In this atmosphere of mounting tension and insecurity Germany and Austria needed Italy. Di Robilant, Nigra, and the Italian ambassador in Berlin, Count de Launay, capitalized, and managed to get an important new clause inserted into the alliance that guaranteed Italy against any further extension
of French power in North Africa, whether in Tripolitania or in Morocco. Italy wanted at all costs to avoid a repeat of the 1881 fiasco over Tunisia. This new clause also covered any attempt by France to upgrade its position in Tunisia from one of occupation to sovereignty – something Francesco Crispi was to exploit shamelessly in the summer of 1890 when he alleged (without any firm evidence) that France had secretly negotiated the outright annexation of Tunis. He suggested to London that Italy should occupy Tripolitania immediately as compensation.

Italy’s relations with Britain were to become fraught while Crispi was prime minister: Crispi deliberately stoked up tensions with France and risked dragging Britain into a war along with Germany and Austria. But in the autumn and winter of 1886–7, with the situation in the East growing more unpredictable, and with Britain looking for support against France in Egypt, Lord Salisbury was happy to move closer to Italy. Bismarck egged him on, and di Robilant used the opportunity to secure an additional guarantee of Italy’s position in the Mediterranean. The result was an exchange of notes on 12 February that pledged the two to co-operate in preserving the status quo in both the Mediterranean and the East. Di Robilant would have liked something more formal, but Salisbury did not want to have his hands tied (‘Parliament would never forgive [me]’, he told the Italian ambassador in London on 5 February, with warranted scepticism (doc. 479), ‘if Italy sought to recover Nice and Savoy, or if a less prudent minister than General di Robilant were to provoke an unnecessary war’).

In the meantime, events in Africa had brought about a governmental crisis. On 26 January the disaster of Dogali took place. The news of the massacre in Ethiopia of 500 Italian soldiers (whose alleged iron discipline and heroism in the face of the enemy quickly became a cause for national celebration and fuelled the public’s calls for revenge) was greeted in parliament ‘in a virile manner’, according to di Robilant (doc. 468). But di Robilant himself was forced to step down. His eye had been firmly on Europe, not Africa, and he had disregarded the clear warning signs that tension was building up on the shores of the Red Sea. Depretis took over in April as foreign minister, but the key player in the new administration was the man who was to dominate Italian politics for the next nine years, Francesco Crispi. Crispi received the interior ministry, but his real interest was foreign affairs: before he entered Depretis’s final government he insisted on knowing the precise terms of the renewed Triple Alliance.

There were no major new initiatives in foreign policy in the spring and early summer of 1887, and the final third of the first of the volumes under consideration ranges diffusely over issues such as the negotiations for the handing over of Italian prisoners in Ethiopia, British proposals to include Austria in the agreement of 12 February, the Bulgarian crisis, the possible accession of Spain to the Triple Alliance, the Anglo-Turkish convention in Egypt, and the ill-starred attempt of Padre Tosti in June and July to bring about a conciliation between the Vatican and the Italian state. This latter episode is still rather murky, and it is a pity that there are only four documents dealing with it here. But this is indicative of a major problem with Italian foreign policy: some of the most sensitive issues were dealt with by the king, or by ministers using secret channels, and accordingly left little or no trace in the state archives.

The first volume ends with the death of Depretis on 29 July 1887 and Crispi’s accession to the premiership. The second begins with Crispi’s return to government in December 1893 after nearly three years in opposition. As in 1887 he was carried to power on the back of a wave of salvationist expectation in a time of crisis: there was turmoil in Sicily; the
public finances were in disarray; and a banking scandal was threatening to discredit the entire political class (and possibly engulf the monarchy too). However, in contrast to 1887, Crispi did not combine the offices of foreign minister and prime minister – in part because that would have been provocative after the events of 1888–90, but also because he was going to have his work cut out on the domestic front. The hard-drinking anglophile, Baron Blanc, became foreign minister instead.

In suppressing the rising of the Sicilian Fasci in the early months of 1894, Crispi claimed in parliament to have evidence of French involvement. His main source for this would seem to have been a private letter from a friend, Davide Levi, of 4 January (doc. 27). This asserted that ‘French boulangists, patriots and radicals’ had ‘for some time’ been preparing the insurrection in Sicily ‘in collaboration with the Vatican’. However, there is nothing to indicate that Crispi took such an idea very seriously. Apart from anything else he was keen, given Italy’s state of prostration, not to antagonize the French unduly (in marked contrast to his policy of persistent and calculated provocation in 1887–90). The main purpose of the allegations of foreign involvement (he added Russia in due course, for good measure) was domestic: to rally public opinion and justify his introduction of an emergency ‘state of siege’ in Sicily. A ‘state of siege’ technically required the presence, or proximity, of an ‘enemy’ on Italian soil.

A large proportion of the documents published in this volume relate to Africa. The foreign minister, Baron Blanc was desperate to secure closer ties with Britain, and dreamed in 1894 of joint action in the upper Nile against the Dervishes. But in this, as in so many of his overtures to Britain, he was rebuffed: London had no desire at this time to commit itself to Italy (whose ambitions it distrusted), or indeed to the Triple Alliance. One important consequence was that Italy was to be left dangerously isolated in Africa. In the early months of 1894 the Italian government put out feelers towards the Ethiopian emperor Menelik, apparently looking to see if it could rebuild the good relations that had paid dividends in 1889–90. But Menelik was by now deeply suspicious of Italy, and was in no mood to be wooed. He was also in a strong position, with France and Russia willing to offer him help. Moreover, when in the summer of 1894 the rebel warlords of the Tigre (whom Italy had been inciting in recent years) made their peace with Menelik, Ethiopia was politically and militarily united for the first time in many years. Italy was now facing a formidable African state.

The weakness of Italy’s position in Ethiopia was for a while masked by the capture of Kassala in the summer of 1894. But this episode exposed another serious problem with Italy’s operations in Africa, namely the absence of a clear command structure. Blanc, Crispi, the minister of war, and the chief of general staff, not to mention the king, had somewhat differing views on Africa, and were willing to let them be known. This left the commander on the ground, General Baratieri, at times uncertain as to what the official line was. The fact that in Rome telegrams were not shown to those who had a right to see them, and important information was withheld, added to the growing atmosphere of confusion and mistrust – as the minister of war’s indignant exchanges with Blanc in July 1894 (docs. 439, 442, 443), asking why he had not been consulted earlier about the attack on Kassala (which he was opposed to), reveal.

During the second half of 1894 the situation in Africa grew steadily more tense. Egged on by Blanc and Crispi, General Baratieri negotiated with the warlords of the Tigre, and even agreed to supply them with weapons, believing that they were still supporting Italy against the emperor. Only at the end of the year did the reality of the situation – that they were
now loyal to Menelik and were stringing Baratieri along – become clear. To make matters worse, reports were coming in that the French were supplying Menelik with weapons and were willing to assist him in a campaign against Italy. Blanc implored the British for help; but again and again, as the reports here of Blanc’s conversations with the ambassador in Rome show, the British claimed they did not want to fall foul of the French, and offered no more than polite and comforting words.

The second volume concludes in March 1895, a year before the calamity of Adua. General Baratieri had achieved a striking military success in January at Senafe and was being exhorted by Crispi to press on and occupy the whole of the central Ethiopian plateau. But Crispi’s judgement was in danger of becoming clouded. He was facing a barrage of accusations of corruption back home, and was under huge political pressure. In December, in the teeth of increasingly intemperate opposition from the far left, he angrily prorogued parliament. More and more he was looking to a major victory in Africa for his political salvation. But Britain was still not prepared to help, and France was blatantly assisting Menelik. Moreover, there were signs that Baratieri was not up to a major campaign. The prognosis for Italy was already looking poor.

UNIVERSITY OF READING

CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN