

REVIEWS

Nancy Mitford. *Madame de Pompadour*. New York: New York Review Books, 2001. Pp. xix, 292. Paper, \$12.95; ISBN 0-940322-65-X.

Madame de Pompadour by Nancy Mitford is as much a cultural icon as a work of history. Mitford, a British aristocrat born in 1904, was known for writing historical biographies as well as several novels, such as *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) and *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960). This particular text is a reprint of the 1953 original with an introduction by Amanda Foreman, author of the recent *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*. Foreman attempted to resuscitate Mitford's reputation by emphasizing her love of learning, her vulnerability, and the popular success of her books. Denied an education by their father, Mitford and her sisters gathered whatever information they could from the family library. Her first foray into literature was the essay "The English Aristocracy," which gave a witty and critical overview of the ways and speech of the aristocracy. Her station seemed to have dominated her writing, as she gravitated toward descriptions, either fictional or historical, of upper-class life.

The difficulty with Mitford as historian is that she was not one. This small fact should not interfere with the reader's enjoyment of her work, but to call her works historical in the traditional sense would be mistaken. Mitford herself strove for a wide audience that could see the aristocracy as she did, with all their glories and failings; thus her works were mainly anecdotal. The writing is witty at times, and certainly appropriate for a general audience, but historians should not accept the work as a scholarly endeavor. There is no documentation of sources in the text, although she does provide a bibliography (albeit with publishers and places of publication omitted). The lack of footnoting, however, is not the main problem with the text. Her treatment of the material is questionable from a scholarly point of view. She made generalizations and assumptions about her topics that a professor would not accept from a freshman survey student, such as: "The French loved their kings as the English never have, with an unreasoning love which was later to turn to an unreasoning hatred." Perhaps most troubling is the casual way in which she treated her subjects, such as in this example that deals with Louis XV:

He was tall and handsome, he had a most caressing look, a curious husky voice which nobody ever forgot who had once heard it, and a sexy moodiness of manner irresistible to women; the haughty air, which came in reality from shyness, in no way detracted from his charm.

Her language is perfect for an historical novel, but less acceptable for the serious student of history. Mitford clearly felt drawn to *Madame de Pompadour*, which caused her to gloss over her negative points to recreate a more perfect mistress for the king.

That having been said, this text would make for a wonderful summer read; it would be more dangerous, however, in the classroom.

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Margaret C. Jacob. *The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents.* Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. Pp. xiii, 237. Cloth, \$45.00; ISBN 0-312-23701-4. Paper, \$10.00; ISBN 0-312-17997-9.

Roy Porter. *The Enlightenment.* New York: Palgrave, 2001. Second edition. Pp. x, 90. Paper, \$12.95; ISBN 0-333-94505-0.

Thomas Munck. *The Enlightenment: A Comparative Social History 1721-1794.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 249. Cloth, \$65.00; ISBN 0-340-66326-X. Paper, \$25.95; ISBN 0-340-66325-1.

"Dare to reason!" wrote Immanuel Kant in 1784, echoing the words of the ancient Roman poet Horace. "Have the courage to use your own mind! That is the motto of enlightenment." As historians have noted, that is truly the motto of the Enlightenment itself. The three works under review remind us that we are heirs of the Enlightenment in both its positive and less salutary aspects. They also demonstrate how complex it has become to attempt analysis of this seminal movement. All three reflect the current trend to focus less on the great writers of the period and more on secondary figures, the transmitters of ideas however diluted or transformed, and on the intended audiences for what are today often almost forgotten publications. The result is as many questions as resolutions. Even though none of these three books represent theoretical breakthroughs, they do provide useful overviews of the current state of Enlightenment scholarship.

Margaret Jacob has been for more than two decades a distinguished and sometimes controversial authority on the attributes and diffusion of the Enlightenment. Her book, an introduction valuable for more advanced students, is highly readable and far-ranging. She begins with a summary of her view, explicated in her earlier works, of the Enlightenment's radical nature. This radicalism originated as a Protestant protest against Catholic intolerance and absolutism as reflected in the regimes of James II of England and Louis XIV of France; it rapidly expanded into a crusade against a variety of social abuses. Such was the result of the general application of images drawn from science: God envisioned as a benevolent, constitutional monarch and nature understood as a machine governed by universal, general laws intelligible to all men. By the mid-eighteenth century free-thinkers had advanced to touting such outrageous concepts as philosophic materialism and political republicanism. Jacob traces how the desire for liberation ultimately extended to women and slaves. Students