

# The Good Book Guide

**NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN** by Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaild. Palgrave Foundations, 2003. xxiii + 349 pp. Index. £47.50 hbk, £16.99 pbk.

The authors aim to provide 'a comprehensive and up-to-date introduction to nineteenth-century Britain' (though they mean Britain from 1776 to 1914). They have entered a competitive field, but their book has many advantages over its rivals. They include a chronology of events, a list of prime ministers, profiles of key individuals, boxed information, summary and discussion points, in short the standard features of modern textbooks. But, in this volume, these are never obtrusive. The emphasis is squarely on decent-sized sections of continuous, well-written prose, and the reader's eye is not directed endlessly back and forth between the main text and marginal information.

The other refreshing feature is the book's wonderful scope, from industrial growth to growing religious doubt, from the music hall to local government, from emigration to chartism and cosmopolitanism, from coastal trade to the Boys' Brigade. The technique of Black and MacRaild is to begin with the basics (for instance, in the section on 'Victorian Values' they define what the Victorians meant by 'sex' and 'making love'), to provide a judicious selection of information (about divorce, prostitution, etc), and to end with common-sense conclusions (about Victorian morality) which stress the importance of context and comparison. What's more, the book teaches us about the past, in all its drama and diversity, rather than about that dull substitute, historiography.

There are occasional blemishes. A misquotation from Tennyson on page 266 jumped out at me (the addition of an extra word making poetry sound remarkably unpoetic). But the main problem is simply that the scope of this book is far wider than any examination syllabus; and, as a result, those many sections which are relevant probably don't contain enough depth for today's students. But for those who want a real understanding of a pivotal period in our history, this book is an ideal starting point.

Robert Pearce

**AUSTRIA, PRUSSIA AND GERMANY 1806-1871** by John Breuilly. Longman - Seminar Studies series, 2002. xvii + 202 pp. Index. £12.99 pbk.

This book in the Seminar Studies series takes a long view of German Unification. The author argues there was nothing inevitable about the way Unification



*Bismarck, the mastermind of Prussian power* unfolded over the nineteenth century, or that Prussia would come out 'on top'. Indeed, he argues that at some stages it looked as though Austria would lead unification, although industrialisation and modernisation did tend to favour Prussia. The final paragraph quotes Bismarck 'You can ride a wave, but not make it', suggesting that while we might think of Bismarck as the father of German Unification perhaps he was just a shrewd politician who took advantage of the prevailing conditions.

The book starts by putting events into context - the impact of the Napoleonic Wars on German states, and explores the pressures for modernisation and unity that grew out of that. To my mind, the best section is Part Three: Analysis and Assessment that compares Austria with Prussia; comparative history at its best! There is a superb chronology, set of maps and bibliography that help make the whole more accessible, and the document section is cleverly chosen to support the key arguments of the text.

This is a very detailed text. It will be used first and foremost as a teachers' book, an excellent way to update on current historiography of the period - and perhaps by more able students at A2 level. The language level is appropriate for students, and presentation is not at all intimidating, it is just the depth that some will find intimidating! Arguments are clearly made, and comparisons abound. I heartily recommend this text to anyone teaching nineteenth century Germany.

Alf Wilkinson

**QUEEN VICTORIA** by Walter Arnstein. Palgrave Macmillan 2003. xii + 254 pp. Index. £14.99 pbk.

Essentially, this is a traditional narrative with a conventional sweep across the Queen's reign, including an index, bibliography, chapter notes and 200 pages of text. The Queen is explored through historiographical analysis,

including Strachey's subtle skewering. She outran 18 Presidents and 10 Prime Ministers and died in 1901 'the grandmother of Europe'. There are treats and judgements: she was tutored into moral values but also knowledge of the real world, its tunnels and factories and navies. Her early Whig sympathies soon followed Peelite directions, and her emotions were easily aroused by Dickens. We learn of the powers of the monarchy but also of the Queen's use of childbirth chloroform (against advice) and the origin of the royal 'We'. Here are the ACLL, the Chartists, Albert as the eager university reformer; and also Gladstone and Disraeli and Salisbury. But few assumptions go unchallenged and so we learn that during the Crimean War the Queen was entirely taken up with military affairs; and that during her marital bereavement she paid close attention to politics. It was Gladstone, it is argued, who rescued her from a disillusioned public. And, in the end, she became an adjective as well as an era.

The text does not address examination needs but this is not its task. Read and enjoy!

Richard Miller

**TROTSKY** by Ian D. Thatcher, Routledge - Historical Biographies series, 2003. xii + 240 pp. Index £9.99 pbk.

This book achieves its aim of providing a dispassionate, clear and accessible introduction to Trotsky's life and thought within a broad context and in the light of recent research. It will be invaluable for teachers. A-Level students will find the sections on 1917-24 the most useful. The discussion of Brest-Litovsk, Trotsky's role in the Civil War and his relations with his leading colleagues is most illuminating. Thatcher shows convincingly that Trotsky had been defeated before Lenin's death - he was 'truly routed' at the 13th Party Congress late in 1923. By this time there had been a 'complete breakdown in political and personal relations between Trotsky and the vast majority of the Politburo and Central Committee'. There is a helpful discussion of Trotsky's economic theories and Soviet economic performance in the 1920s and 1930s, and Thatcher questions whether a Soviet economy managed by Trotsky could have provided industrial expansion and improved living standards. Other strengths of the book are the chronology at the beginning, divided into personal, political and general, and the introduction which focuses on the main developments in Trotsky studies. More than one copy of this book is a must for the library.

Chris Corin