

matter or do they not? To say that we all have beliefs of some sort anyway, is to sit on the fence, both of poetry and of ethics. Mr. MacNeice understands the nature of poetry so well, that one wishes that he had gone one better and faced this important issue. Perhaps, however, it only exists for poets at the moment when their poetry solves it—precisely at that point at which neither poetry nor system is in need of defending. One cause at least Mr. MacNeice defends well—that of scholarly criticism in the field of living poetry.

K. J. RAINE

Frederick the Great, by Pierre Gaxotte, translated by R. A. Bell (G. Bell & Sons, 15s.).

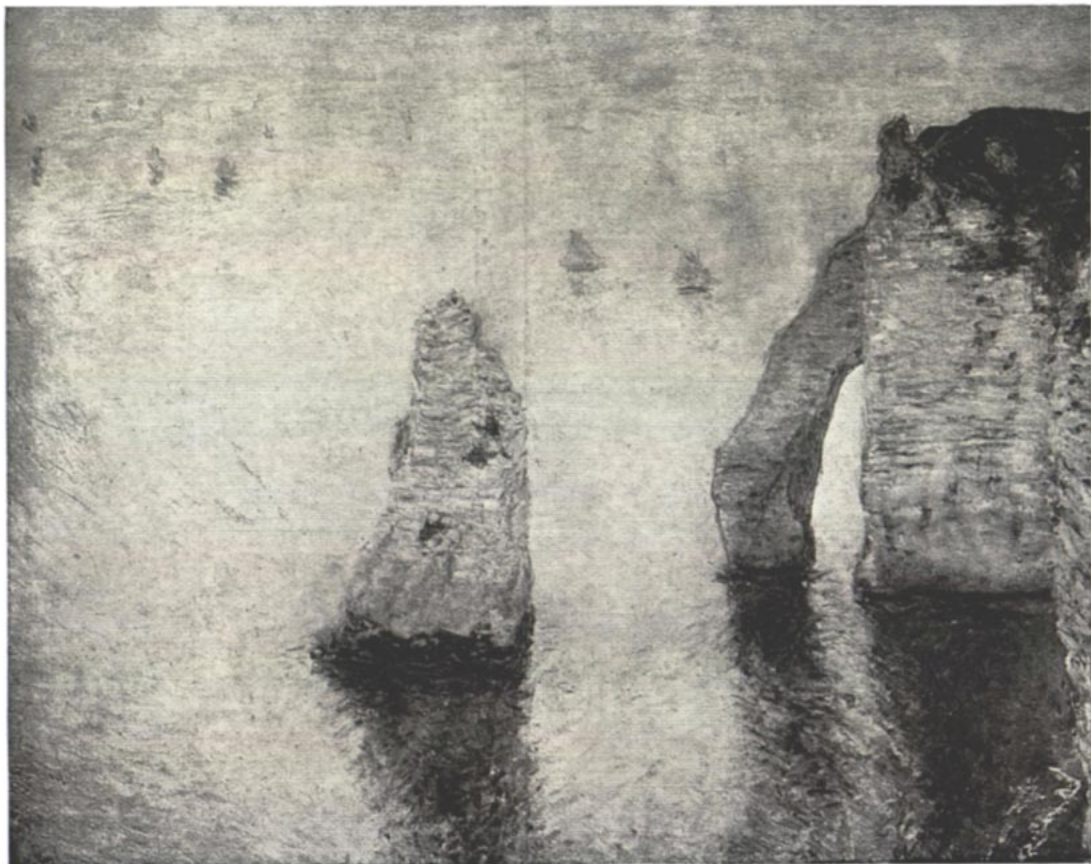
How remote they sometimes seem, those Enlightened Despots of the eighteenth century: disciples of the Physiocrats, patrons of the Encyclopædists, the German epigoni of Louis XIV, basking in an artificial afterglow of the splendours of Versailles! And yet their modernity is sometimes grimly apparent. They rejected the restraints of tradition and the sanctity of treaties; they despised their subjects and made their yoke effective; and they partitioned Poland. In the end, the very success of their Realpolitik was their undoing. The disorderly Machiavellianism of the 1780's was too hectic to last; and in the avalanche which followed, Europe, losing its kings, was forced to rediscover some common standards of international behaviour.

Of this dichotomy Frederick the Great is a fascinating example, in which the characteristics of the age were heightened by a personal case-history. In consequence, he is a hazardous subject for a biographer. That Mr. Gaxotte should avoid the cruder misrepresentations of the panegyrists and the scandalographers is, of course, to be expected; but there are other hazards, less blatant than these. How easy, and how tempting, but how fatal, for a writer in 1941 (like Mr. Gaxotte) to dwell upon the contemporary relevancies, which are so obvious; how natural, and how pardonable, but also how fatal, for an erudite scholar (like Mr. Gaxotte) to lose his reader's way in the barren intricacies of eighteenth century diplomacy. Mr. Gaxotte has, however, avoided both pitfalls. He has left modern inferences to the reader, and dead politics out of the book; and he has described, with skill, the history of a warped personality and a successful reign.

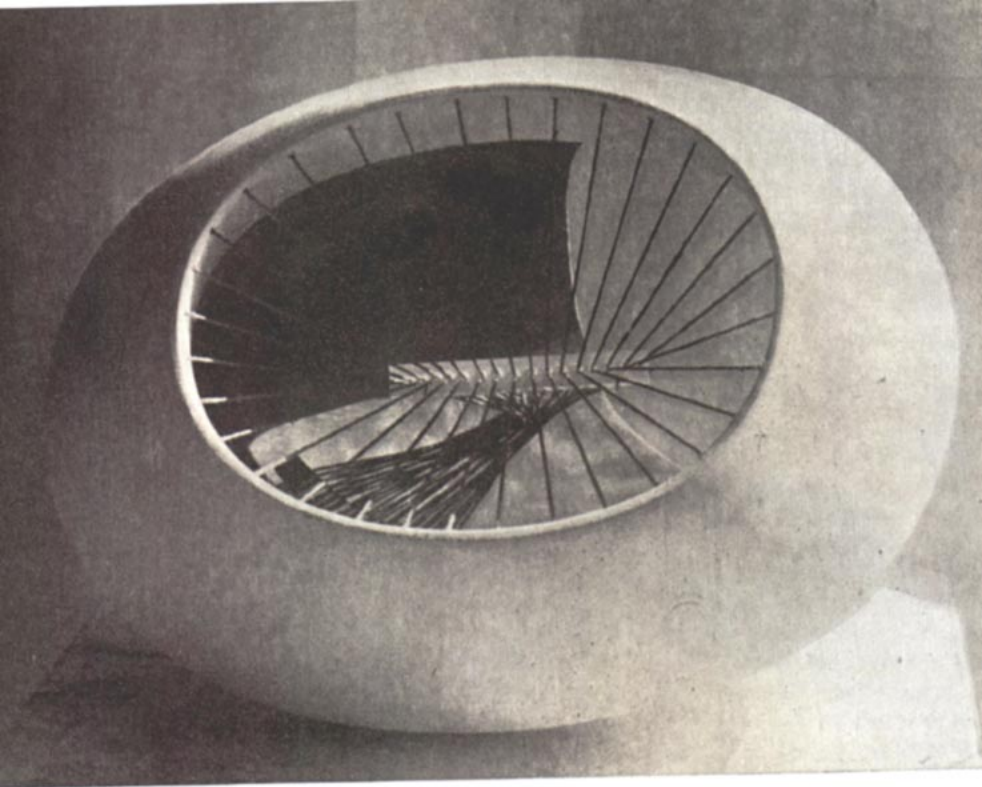
The character of Frederick is interesting, but not attractive. The fastidious, dilettante Prince, brutally treated by an unsympathetic father, survived his humiliations only by developing a callous duplicity and assuming a serious mission; and when his father's death set him free, he ascended the throne of Prussia a cynical egotist, a frustrated intellectual, and a ruthless and efficient despot.

These interwoven, and often conflicting characteristics are illustrated throughout Mr. Gaxotte's book. The author is more concerned with the personality than the historical significance of his subject; and most readers will be glad to find the strategy of Frederick's wars treated in less detail than the life at Rheinsberg and Sans Souci. We are shown impartially the philosopher discussing with Voltaire the engaging topic of Plato's androgynes; the soldier sneering at his own collection of literati; and the restless administrator whose demands of his subordinates caused an English envoy to observe, 'I would rather be a monkey in Borneo than a minister in Prussia'. But perhaps the most fascinating aspect of that complex character is what psychologists term the ambivalence of Frederick's attitude towards the intellectuals, whom he first courted with fashionable adulation, and then treated as Court-fools. His relations with Voltaire are famous; but the others fared no better; and the vanity of philosophers and the vanity of German princes being about equal, the results were nearly always disastrous. Frederick's mind seems really never to have developed beyond the adolescent stage at which it suffered its great crisis—his intellectual judgments remained always immature; but although he devoted his riper faculties to a historic task, which he superimposed upon his early inclinations, the suppressed intellectual hankerings would still return to torment him with the memory of those miserable years. Frederick indulged these mutilated instincts; but for their mutilation he took his revenge on the less unfortunate philosophers of Sans Souci.

Of course there were other reasons too for the alliance between Frederick and the philosophers. While Louis XIV reigned at the luminous centre of civilization, those who, in the next generation, claimed to carry on the traditions of Versailles, were conscious of their cultural isolation. They were exiles in barbarian lands beyond the Rhine; and the friendship of Voltaire, of D'Alembert, and of Diderot was necessary to Frederick and Catherine if they were to



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respect themselves, and despise and reform their subjects. Besides, the Encyclopædists were first-rate propagandists. There is a modern ring in Voltaire's eulogy of Frederick's new order after the Peace of Breslau. Even the Partition of Poland was represented as a victory of liberty of conscience over 'christed superstition'—for, as Mr. Gaxotte asks, 'who could take up the cause of such pious Catholics as the Poles in the century of the Encyclopædia?' It does us no harm to be reminded that the Enlightenment was not on the side of Self-Determination.

H. R. TREVOR-ROPER

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