

A Habsburg Hausfrau

Empress Maria Theresa: The Earlier Years, 1717-1757, by Robert Pick (Harper & Row. 335 pp. \$8.95), reveals the Habsburg monarch as an earlier Victoria who narrowly missed greatness. Geoffrey Brunn is the author of "The Enlightened Despots."

By GEOFFREY BRUNN

MARIA THERESA of Austria should have been one of the brightest stars in the eighteenth-century galaxy of royalty. Instead, she appears at best a conscientious amateur competing with professionals. The century that opened with Louis XIV still on the throne of France, and closed with the advent of Napoleon, was a century in which subjects admired grandeur, wit, and virtuosity in their rulers. Prussia had its Frederick the Great, Russia its Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. Sweden was dazzled by the meteoric career of Charles XII and by the theatricalities of Gustavus III, who was, as Carlyle observed, "a shining sort of man."

The Habsburg dynasty produced no shining monarchs in that demanding age. The inept Charles VI, the virtuous Maria Theresa, the frustrated Joseph II lacked the eccentricity, the histrionic flair, that fosters the growth of legends. Yet Maria Theresa's resolute heroism throughout her forty-year reign should have assured her a more prominent niche in the hall of fame than historians commonly allot her. One might say of her, as Lord Bryce said of her unlucky son Joseph, that few rulers have more narrowly missed greatness. She failed to make the front rank in the parade of royalty for the same reason that a pious and indefatigable housewife fails to make the headlines. She was too respectable to be interesting, too normal to be newsworthy.

Sixty years have passed since a scholarly biography of Maria Theresa appeared in English, and Robert Pick's detailed and well-documented study should find a prompt and sustained welcome. His preparation for the undertaking has been auspicious and possibly unique. Though born and educated in Vienna, he is now a United States citizen who has come to know the tastes and responses of the American reading public through years of writing and editing in this country. The result is a happy blend of unostentatious erudition, critical ob-

jectivity, and a lively, readable prose style.

Eighteenth-century Vienna was not Versailles. The wealth of witty anecdotes, letters, and memoirs that French courtiers and intellectuals left behind are a historian's delight. No equivalent literary heritage piled up in Vienna, where children spent more time mastering a musical instrument than a polished prose. Mr. Pick has gleaned most of his data from official memoranda, diplomatic dispatches, and Maria Theresa's prolific and pedestrian correspondence. It is a tribute to his own literary skill that he identifies the innumerable characters with deft phrases and keeps the narrative moving despite the dull domestic tempo of Habsburg court life.

His task must have demanded pa-

tience and perseverance. For the truth he unfolds to the reader is that Maria Theresa, like Victoria a century later, swiftly outgrew her girlish charm and became a stubborn, prudish, maternal despot, jealous of her power. She reduced her amiable consort, Francis of Lorraine, to idleness and nullity. She refused to share power with her eldest son, Joseph, who became hagridden, drafting reform plans he was powerless to put into effect while his mother lived. Humorlessly moral herself, she set up a much-ridiculed "vice squad" in a vain effort to keep her subjects equally so.

As a biographer Mr. Pick remains scrupulously fair, neither overpraising Maria Theresa's courage and common sense nor ridiculing her limitations and prejudices. Yet one suspects that secretly he becomes a little weary of her as he proceeds. He ends his volume somewhat abruptly at her fortieth year, and he does not promise a sequel on the last twenty-three years of her long reign. One must hope, nonetheless, that he will write one, for this biography has so many merits it should not lack that of completeness.

From Royalty to Religion

Christina of Sweden, by Sven Stolpe, translated from the abbreviated German version by Sir Alec Randall and Ruth Mary Bethell (Macmillan. 360 pp. \$6.95), concentrates on the psychological and ideological aspects of a complex, controversial monarch. Alrik Gustafson, chairman of the Department of Scandinavian at the University of Minnesota, is the author of "A History of Swedish Literature."

By ALRIK GUSTAFSON

BOOKS about Queen Christina are legion. Many of them are merely gossipy if not sensational; others, less offensive, have been deliberately tossed off for popular consumption; still others are serious attempts to come to grips with the many problems posed by the enigmatic character of Gustav Adolf's famous daughter. Unpredictable, highly intelligent, at the age of twenty-eight she abandoned a throne, became one of history's most celebrated Catholic converts, and spent the last thirty-five years of her life on the Continent involved in political intrigues and quarreling with popes, cardinals, and kings, while sporadically searching for a religious way



—Bettmann Archive.

Christina — quarrels with popes, cardinals, and kings.

of life not too divergent from the discipline of the Church.

Sven Stolpe's biography is in its way worthy of its royal subject. Like Christina, the author became a convert to the Roman Church, and like Christina periodically he has been a controversial figure on the Swedish cultural and religious scene. Energetic, arrogant, and distinctly egocentric from the beginning of his career when, in the years around

1930, he vigorously championed a variety of "modernistic" literary developments, he has maintained not a little of this aggressive stance despite his growing preoccupation with religious matters as reflected particularly in a spate of studies on modern Swedish and French religious personalities of literary and philosophical leanings. Inevitably his interests turned to Christina, and after extensive investigations in the mass of primary sources abroad and in Sweden Stolpe came up in 1959 with a doctoral dissertation on her *Maxims*, the substance of which was folded into the much more inclusive biographical work *Christina of Sweden*, a somewhat abridged version of the two-volume Swedish original which appeared in 1960 and '61.

The present English translation is uneven in quality, based as it is on a heavy German translation and because even the Swedish original is not infrequently sloppy and imprecise in its formulations. The author's "Preface to the English Translation" is in bad taste in its exaggerated claims, claims which denigrate almost all previous works on the subject and which stress by contrast the unique contribution he is providing in the present book.

While the tone thus established at the outset irritates the reader, and puts him sharply on guard, it is clear that Stolpe has in the main provided a new approach

to Christina, one that cannot in the future be disregarded. No earlier scholar has so indefatigably examined in detail the whole range of primary sources nor immersed himself so totally in Christina's complex world. New vistas in this world have been opened up—in some cases with impressive results, in others with rather shaky documentation and/or questionable interpretation of the sources used.

Two instances may suffice to illustrate. Concerned with the psychological and ideational aspects of the Queen rather than the political role she played in seventeenth-century Europe, Stolpe attempts to establish the formula "From Stoicism to Mysticism" as the over-all intellectual and religious pattern of her development. The formula as applied to the complex temperament of the Queen is too pat. And the manner in which Stolpe documents his case is highly suspect. The basic source used in these contexts is the Queen's *Maxims*, which have never been subjected to the kind of textual investigation that dates with some assurance each of the maxims. Ignoring this fact, Stolpe simply assumes that those which reflect a Stoic mood are of early provenance while those which reflect mystical strains come later. The procedure is clearly suspect.

When, however, he examines the Queen's latter-day flirtations with late seventeenth-century religious quietism

he is on more solid ground. Here he uses documents that are both numerous and dated, or at least datable, particularly those which have to do with the Queen's contacts with Miguel Molinos, at the time the most representative figure in the quietism of the day, a crude, popular kind of mysticism that was allowed to exist within the Roman Church until its often outspoken opposition to the absolute authority of the Church, its sacraments and other formalistic practices, led to a formal Church action against Molinos, the proceedings of which Christina followed with intense concern. Among the documents that came into the hands of Church officials in charge of the court action were some 200 letters from the Queen to Molinos.

Two questions arise: How far had Christina gone in her identification with the quietists? And in what respect or respects were the quietists related to the great earlier Catholic mystics? Stolpe answers the first of these questions satisfactorily and in detail. He does not consider the second question, which is a pity, particularly in Christina's case, because it would raise other pertinent questions: Precisely what kind of a mystic, if any, was the Queen in her last years? And why? Was she at the end really seriously interested in the world of the mystics? Or was her interest merely that of a lively mind always prepared to examine a new, to her fascinating, world of ideas? Answers to these questions would reveal the human aspect of Christina's last years as distinguished from her preoccupation with mystical traditions and practices as such.



An Unjustifiable Violation: The title of Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death* (Putnam, \$3.95) is, of course, ironic, though the words were spoken honestly by a nurse assuring the author that her mother had sunk into a coma before the end. Translated from the French by Patrick O'Brian, here is the starkly factual account of the weeks of suffering that preceded the "merciful release" that Simone and her sister had desired yet dreaded.

Madame de Beauvoir, seventy-seven, arthritic but active, lived alone in a Paris apartment. One day she fell and cracked a thigh. The prognosis was good: the bone would knit correctly in six weeks, and meanwhile bedsores or pneumonia brought on by immobility would be prevented by the excellent care the nursing home was equipped to provide. However, other troubles were detected—a slight intestinal obstruction, easily removed, said the doctors cheerfully, for the patient's heart was strong enough to permit an operation. So the cancer was cut out, and for more than a month the heart and lungs held on while



"He doesn't want me to tell anybody, but he's in the top half of his class."