



The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815

Timothy C.W. Blanning , David Cannadine (Editor)

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The Pursuit of Glory brings to life one of the most extraordinary periods in European history from the battered, introvert continent after the Thirty Years War to the dynamic one that experienced the French Revolution and the wars of Napoleon. Tim Blanning depicts the lives of ordinary people and the dominant personalities of the age (Louis XIV, Frederick the Great, Napoleon), and explores an era of almost unprecedented change, growth and cultural, political and technological ferment that shaped the societies and economies of entire countries.

The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815 Details

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From Reader Review *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815* for online ebook

Philipp says

Absolutely amazing - and part of a longer series I didn't know existed before, now I have to read all of those, thank you very much, I'll just stop pretending to be an adult for 7 months, and then go back to pretending, I guess

So here we have 1648 - 1815 (maybe I should have started from the beginning?), an era which connects several of the major events of European history - the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, etc. The wonderful thing here is that the book isn't a straightforward history with tedious listings of events for each year; instead, we get a series of connected essays tracing the development of a certain theme, like transport, or agriculture, or from a culture of feeling to a culture of reason and back, etc. This doesn't always work perfectly, sometimes I got confused when a new subchapter "resets" the time to 1648, but it's a great boon to readability (the two parts on agriculture and transport were surprisingly the most mindblowing ones, to me at least).

The author goes to great pains to make sure to show you that there's always at least two perspectives - the Enlightenment wasn't just that everybody went to bed and *blam!* woke up as snarky French critics of the church, since the same time saw a large growth in monasteries and churches. The transitions of kings-as-states to sovereign nation states saw a decline in power for the pope, yet religious feelings were more popular than ever. Was the industrial revolution driven by invention, or by a drastic change in consumers' demands? Can you even answer these questions? To quote: "As this book has tried to show, neither of these narratives is valid in isolation. There is no obligation to accept one or the other in its entirety: a selection can be mixed and matched according to individual taste."

There's so much here, it's just *dense* with interesting and well-prepared information, here's an interesting observation which in my opinion fits the current atmosphere of a "post-truth" public sphere which focuses more on feelings than on facts, quoting Schiller:

Enlightenment by means of concepts could not influence the character of mankind, for most humans are moved to take action by their feelings. So the seeds of rational perception will wither where they fall unless the soil has been prepared by the emotions and imagination: 'The way to the head must be opened through the heart.' And that was the task of aesthetic education, to pave the way for the transition from 'rule by mere forces to rule by laws'.

I feel that this is important - in the last 20,30,40 years we as "Western society" have shifted our view of what constitutes a "citizen" not as a participating member of society, but as an excellently-trained employee. "The seeds of rational perception" have stopped withering since they don't even get a chance to touch the ground. "Aesthetic education" is dead, but I'm not sure whether this is the only way to go about it...

Gumble's Yard says

Outstanding history of the period and part of an attempt by Penguin to produce a new definite set of European history books.

The book has four sections.

The first on Life and Death (Communications, People, Trade and Agriculture) is a brilliant social/economic history.

The second on Power has one chapter on the relationships between rulers and noble elites (like many of the other sections contrasting and comparing France, England, emerging Prussia, Russia, Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire) and a second extremely informative one on the emerging concepts of state, people and nation (culminating in the unity of all three in the French Revolution).

The third is perhaps the least interesting with a section on religion (where the author's anti-religious biases are clear), one on hunting, the weakest on palaces/gardens and the most disappointing on the clash between the cultures of feeling and reason which despite being one of the author's main themes for the period is more of a very brief art/philosophy history.

The final section is a political/military history of the period – pithy and if anything (and unusually for a non-fiction book) too brief at times given the whirlwind of alliances, rising and falling of great powers, frequent wars and even more frantic diplomatic negotiations.

Tomáš Zemko says

Absolutely brilliant work.

Never read better piece of 17th and 18th century history of Europe.

History writing at its best.

Highly recommended.

Simon Wood says

EUROPE 1648-1815

Tim Blanning may not be personally in pursuit of glory, but judging by the back page blurb he has achieved a good deal of it. The man at the Sunday Telegraph read it with his "jaw permanently dropped in admiration" - at the Sunday Times it was "let the nations rejoice . . . a truly glorious book" - "Sparkling" intoned the Guardian. Appetite whetted with all this praise I plunged into the book. Alas, between the hype and reality there is a gulf.

"The Pursuit of Glory" starts off reasonably well. Part one covers what might be labelled the Socio-Economic sphere, though without enough discussion of the economic side of it for my taste. The section that contemplates whether an industrial revolution happened in Britain or not, never seemed to get its teeth into

the subject, and I felt that Blannings judgement was pre-ordained; he doesn't seem a great fan of revolutions, whether they're Industrial, English (1640's and 50's) or French (1790's).

The second part "Power" is a tolerable discussion of "Rulers and their Elites" and "Reform and Revolution" especially if you are up to coping with a regular bombardment of names from the various Royals and their noble (or otherwise) flunkies. This brings us to the third part, "Religion and Culture" and I presume this is where the claim that the book is "provocative" is rooted. I certainly felt seriously provoked while reading a thirty-page chapter on hunting including statistics of the kills of various notables of the era. The book ends with a hundred and fifty pages of warfare.

One thing that I found surprising is that Blanning only incidentally mentions Europes over-seas Empires. Why on earth have thirty-pages on hunting (followed by forty-pages on elite architecture) and not deal with the Imperial issue in anything like a systematic manner? Given that this is a crucial factor in the period's history at the European and Global level, this has to be marked down as a serious omission. Another source of irritation was the register Blanning writes in: essentially conservative, complacent and well pleased with itself.

"The Pursuit of Power" is a book that left me underwhelmed and without any feeling that I had gained any great knowledge or insight into the age. Not the nicest of feelings after slogging through 677 pages in search of an understanding of European history during an important era. Not one that I'd recommend.

Geevee says

Mr Blanning has written an excellent political, social and military history of the period which saw great change and challenge for rulers and their citizens.

As other reviewers have said it is not necessarily an "easy" read as the detail of the author's work is substantial and the period and scope wide. However, Mr Blanning does the general reader such as myself a good service as he recognises that statistic after statistic is both a challenge and not that interesting, and so frequently provides an example of facts and figures that are easy to assimilate and that he outlines as being representative of the detail.

There are four parts to the book: Life and Death; Power; Religion and Culture and War and Peace. I found the first and last the most readable. Life and Death was so very well written in terms of telling a story of how people lived and died. In a serious history book telling a story can be at times prove difficult but Mr Blanning does it so well.

One piece of information I found revealing in Mr Blanning's conclusion was the following *"Relative to population, seven times fewer men died in battle in the nineteenth century than in the eighteenth"*. When one considers the wars of the 19th century, short though they were, such as Waterloo, Crimean War, Franco-Prussian, Wars of Italian independence to name a few this was surprising to me.

My copy was a 2008 penguin paperback and the 5 maps and 30 illustrations were of a good quality, as one would expect from this publisher.

In summary this book is a challenging but highly rewarding read of a period in Europe's history that saw people change their countries, states and continent in the most dynamic and far-reaching ways.

Josh says

Tim Blanning has offered an excellent general popular history of 18th century Europe that contains some original ideas. The 3 stars here refers to the poor state of the book itself rather than the scope of Blanning's scholarship which is commendable, crossing through many schools and eras of historiography. While Blanning's jaunty writing style and irony may tickle some readers, his book badly needs a proofread: the chapters and sections often had little to do with the subject and he frequently repeats points or entire quotations. Most importantly, the book needs some form of basic citations at least; despite its being a popular history, Blanning's frequent evocation of this scholar or the next demands the source's formal recording.

Liviu says

while it is fairly long and being split into subject parts which sometimes bog down into detail so lacking narrative momentum, this book is superb as a guide to understanding the crucial 1648-1815 period when our modern world came into being - there are tons of examples of where things stood in 1648 (from communications, to trade, to science...) and where in 1815 and how the gulf between such was arguably higher than between 1648 and the classical era of the Greeks and Romans

lots and lots of anecdotes enliven the narrative (there are newspapers excerpts, including some very funny marriage announcements from the 17th and 18th centuries, diaries, pamphlets, political works by famed kings like the Sun King or Frederick the Great etc) and while the political and scientific parts are fairly sketchy (these being the parts I've read a lot about), as mentioned I consider this just a guide to the era

lots of tidbits to put our modern era and its fears into perspective too (as a reasonable estimate, France lost some 15% of its population in the famines of the early 1690's - basically two consecutive poor harvests and two rough winters - the plague killed large fractions of the people wherever it popped up, small pox devastated everyone, commoners and nobility the same, while also as the period progresses, famines started being less prevalent - though still an issue up to the French Revolution, but much less devastating, plague essentially disappeared and smallpox was contained by vaccination, though the initial procedure was much riskier than the safe Jenner one discovered later...)

overall, excellent and highly, highly recommended

Baykal says

This is a serious book with insightful analysis. Its main strength is its thematic approach (except the last part). Considering the time span and all the countries Blanning looks at, this approach is a good way to draw comparisons (based on the themes the writer picks for consecutive periods, such as communications, palaces and manufacturing etc.) between different countries. The author mainly relies on these comparisons for his bigger arguments. The narrative is also full of interesting details and anecdotes (such as the severe persecution of gays in eighteenth century Dutch Republic or Frederick the Great's views on Christianity). Nevertheless, this book is more enjoyable for people with some background on the history of some of the major European countries. The level of detail and the constant switching of locales might be confusing for

the casual reader of European history.

Lauren Albert says

It is hard to do justice to the breadth and depth of this book. Blanning keeps it all under his control and never loses the thread of narrative. Covering what he sees as the five revolutions of the period (French, American, industrial, scientific and romantic), he weaves them all together into a fascinating whole.

Gonzalo Fernández-Victorio says

The book deals with a period in European History from mid Seventeenth Century to the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

It is impressive because it deals with almost every aspect including society, religion, politics, and war.

But I don't like it because it's a mere enunciation of facts and quotes, grouped by topics, and often with what I perceive clear author's biases and judgements. But there is no organisation or main schema that links the different topics. Wars look independent of society, society appears independent of economy and so on and so forth.

You don't get any kind of global picture until the conclusion. There, in the last three pages, you can find anything beyond the enumeration of facts in the previous 670.

Milton Soong says

I took me 4 years to finish, but it's worth it. What hardcore history should be: creative, thought provoking, tells old stories in a new light, and not without a bit of humor. The slow pace of my reading is based on that fact that it is a dense book and requires you to take time to absorb the information. Eagerly waiting for the next volume in the series (and hopefully I make it through a little faster this time...)

Antonio Nunez says

This is not the first volume to be published in the Penguin History of Europe. That honor belongs to William Jordan's "Europe in the High Middle Ages", a book not as praiseworthy as Mr. Blanning's, which reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic have regarded as one of the top history books of 2007.

"The Pursuit of Glory" is a very ambitious book. It covers, in a single volume, a period that took up 4 volumes in Will and Ariel Durant's Story of Civilization. It begins during the minority of Louis XIV, and ends with Napoleon en route to Saint Helena. In between these two, Blanning tells the stories of the trial and execution of Charles I and of James II's dereliction of duties, of pathetic Charles II and his poisoned inheritance, of Charles XII's madness and Peter the Great's folly, of Elizabeth Farnese's ambition, of Louis XV's lack of foresight, of Maria Theresa's efforts to survive and thrive next to fearsome neighbours, such as Frederick the Great, of Joseph II's pigheadedness and Katherine the Great's acquisitiveness, of Louis XVI

and Marie Antoinette, of Brissot and the Girondins, of the Abbe de Sieyes and Napoleon, of Talleyrand, Pitt and Metternich. All the usual suspects turn up, but this is not dynastic history as usual.

Blanning tells us why road locations were not chosen in the same way in Britain, Spain or France, and what that meant for those countries' future development. He shows us that hunting was a very important activity, central indeed to the kingly role, and highlights the popularity of cock fighting in Britain all the way to Queen Victoria's reign. He compares Mozart's with Beethoven's funeral and uses it to give evidence of the artist's role from the classical to the romantic period. He derides the popular perception of the XVIII century as an age of irreligion, and instead argues that it was an age of faith, with several important revivals still to come, although he acknowledges the decline in the papacy's role since the renaissance. Perhaps the only XVIII century pope worthy of remembrance was Clement XIV, because he suppressed the Jesuit order under pressure from the Bourbon kings of France and Spain. Not the papacy's greatest hour.

In this book Blanning concentrates on the great powers. That meant France, Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia, since Spain, the Dutch Republic, Poland and Sweden went into a steep decline around the middle of the XVII century. France was a superpower until the end of the XVII century. Then Austria prevailed, before ceding its position to Prussia. On the margins, both Britain and Russia only got stronger, until in 1815 they were able to define the future of Europe. Seen from this perspective, the Napoleonic era is just a grandiose coda to a faded greatness that would never return.

Remarkable to this reader was that "Blitzkrieg" (lightning war) was an invention of Frederick the Great. He understood that a small, (relatively) poor country with a first rate army could hope to prevail against bigger, richer neighbors only through short wars with maximum impact. This meant sharp, painful thrusts instead of long campaigns of attrition. It worked for him: he gambled recklessly and always won. Sometimes it was luck, but over a long reign it was really brilliance. Frederick wanted Prussia to be accepted as a great power. He achieved that. For Frederick, "glory" was a practical concern: survival in the middle of strong, bellicose neighbors, for a small contry lacking natural borders.

For the French leaders from Louis XIV to Napoleon "glory" meant acknowledgment of France as supreme in any and all matters: military, economical, political, philosophic, artistic, literary, religious, etc. It didn't work. Demography and economics were against it. France invaded countries (like the Netherlands in the 1690s) without a clear purpose other than showing it was powerful enough to do so. It spent its wealth promoting revolution in remote regions (in North America in the 1770s and 1780s) while it was unable to pay its debts and its political system crumbled. Eventually it was reduced to fighting alongside satraps against everyone else (under Napoleon), until it was well and truly beaten. It continued to be an important country (indeed, it remains so to this day) but it ceased to be a great power in 1815. The pursuit of glory, which means simply the need to be acknowledged as greater than others and thus entitled to impose one's views and preferences, sapped its strenght and demoted it to subaltern status. The same thing happened to Spain or to Sweden.

While drawing parallels between the France of 1648-1815 and today's USA is surely beyond the scope of this book, it is a mark of its excellence that it gives elements that could feed such a debate without ever allowing current concerns to intrude into analysis of past events.

An interesting conclusion was that Napoleon's aggression, which nearly resulted in the unification of Europe under his aegis and the end of dynastic politics, so terrified contemporary leaders that they agreed to establish a legal and moral framework that would make such aggression impossible in the future. The framework held out for roughly a century before it unraveled in the trenches of 1914-1918. Wilson tried to revive it with the League of Nations, but to no avail, and it broke down even more spectacularly in 1939-1945. Then it was reinstated (suitably amended) and it has done fairly well for over 60 years. The lesson

would be that such frameworks are fragile, that powerful countries often try to bypass them, and that the result can be total war. It also means that we forget our lessons, and that sometimes they need to be retaught so they are not entirely forgotten.

This is a great book. Extremely well written, prodigiously learned, always interesting and endlessly intriguing. I'd say it would be too short even at twice the number of pages.

Wilson Hines says

First of all, please understand this book is not for the casual reader. I've read this book for the third time and I'm now just reviewing it. If it means anything to you, I really don't do much of re-watching movies and I certainly don't do much of re-reading of books, as they are so time consuming.

Understand this book is special, for more than one reason. 1) This book is a survey first and foremost of the European people. I would say that well over half of this book is devoted to learning what the ordinary man, woman, and child went through on a daily basis to keep from going hungry and thirsty. 2) This book is a survey of European history from 1648 at the end of the 30 Years War(s) to the end of the Treaty of the Congress of Vienna at the end of the second and final exile of Emperor Napoleon I. The chosen time frame is crucial to understand why this planet has shaped up the way it has in the past 98 years (since WWI).

If you want to know how life was in 1648 you will find that until 1800 the average human never travelled more than three miles from their point of coming into this world. Traveling a mere 20 miles would have cost two or three years in wages and would have taken two or three days with the likely hood of peril enroute. You will learn how waterways were flat out quicker, but they really didn't bridge the gap, pardon the pun. You will learn how women had their place, religion was strict for the first 100 years of this time, and you'll learn how trade and manufacturing evolved with capitalistic ideals.

The French hegemony will become apparent and you'll understand that the French Revolution wasn't contained within the borders of France; it erupted into a European War that last 23 years. That during that time 5,000,000 people would die because of war, which was as much as had died in the four years of WWI.

You will understand, as best as you will ever understand without a serious regimen of study, how Germany became what was by 1914.

Once you get to the three-quarters side of the book, you will understand why the author chose the name of the book as *The Pursuit of Glory*, because mainly Louis XIV had the idea that conquest was his Glory and he deserved Europe. After him, his heirs knew no different and the "French Revolution," which was started as a outcry from the common folk, simply did what just happened in Egypt and placed an even more conservative and more harsh regime in it's place which killed more, with the guillotine, than any regime before or after it.

My detraction with this book is simple. The only reason I won't give this author and this book five stars and only four is because this book is difficult to read and sometimes you put it down after reading a paragraph, because you have to absorb it. What is the solution? I don't know that there is a solution. The subject matter isn't JFK's Camelot and prose really doesn't lend itself to the subjects at hand. I've seen him change subject mid-paragraph and I think I have seen it mid-sentence.

I recommend this book to anyone wanting to understand Europe and why we are where we are today. I

literally listen to the news and read the news paper differently today because of this book!

Christian says

A comprehensive primer on eighteenth century social developments. If you're really keen on the development of roads and the waning power of the Catholic Church, just to name two, you'll love it! I, alas, did not.

Andrew says

The Pursuit of Glory, Europe 1648-1815 by Timothy C.W. Blanning is a text on European history during the so called "Glorious Revolution," which saw the rise of various political thoughts and theories, such as liberalism and republicanism, and the overall improvement of infrastructure, healthcare and human rights, albeit very slowly.

This text starts off and is organised in an innovative way. The first chapter is on transportation infrastructure, including roads, canals and the like. The following chapters each cover individual aspects, which Blanning charts by nation and over time. Instead of organising the text into time periods, the author goes into detail about the infrastructure, economy, people and social status of minorities to name a few. Hunting even has an entire chapter to cover it. I really enjoyed this aspect of the text. Each section was refreshing in the sense that it covered something interesting in great detail, but such detail might have been lost in a cut and dry chronological history text.

The text itself covers a fascinating time in history. We see the rise of Prussia and Russia, the dominance of Britain and France, and the floundering of Spain in this era. We see the Napoleonic conquests of Europe, and the religious schisms of Europe. The economy of nations begins to centre on taxation, manufacturing and trade in a more modern sense. Banking becomes a key player in the Dutch economy. Interesting as well are the social changes, where homosexuality is still illegal but widely practiced in Paris, or women begin to write about their oppression. Infrastructure is improved, stoking land and water trade across Europe. Everywhere there are popular revolts which depose Kings, install Emperors, or are brutally suppressed. Traditional Monarchists square off against republicans and Imperialists over multitudes of issues. This is indeed a fascinating time in European history.

A small complaint I have with the book is its overall lack of a source list. Blanning uses parenthesis to denote who wrote certain quotes, but does not necessarily source them. This has to be the most inexplicable crater of a source list I have ever seen, and I'm knocking a full star off of the rating just because of it. A text like this would benefit greatly from a source list that can push the reader into new and exciting territory, especially due to its innovative organisation and the way it covers smaller topics in depth. I was a bit disappointed in this text's sourcing technique.

Otherwise, this is an excellent and refreshing read on European history. It covers topics that are often neglected in history books in great depth, and has loads of interesting tidbits for the reader to learn or consider. For example, many readers may marvel at how difficult overland travel was in the past. Rain would often make travel impossible, and keep travelers stranded for weeks or months when it should only take a few days to reach a destination. The source list is a quite an issue in this text, but a reader who does not mind a lack of sources may be fine with it. All in all, a solid recommendation for a great and innovative history

text.

Emily says

The Pursuit of Glory is not just the best book I've read in a while; it's also, due to its extraordinary length, the *only* book I've read in a while. I was inspired to pick it up by this almost excessively glowing NYT review, which turns out to be a very accurate description of it--so I'll try to mention some other aspects.

It's an entry in a new Cambridge series that intends to tell the story of European history from the classical period until, more or less, now--in eight volumes. So I suppose you could say that Blanding got off lightly only having to cover 1648-1815, less than two hundred years, in his book. What makes this book ultimately so satisfying is that in seven hundred pages, it explores not just the social *and* political history of the period, but also ties them together through the history of the developing public sphere, and shows how those innovations--coffee houses, postal systems, scientific societies, etc.--make this period a hinge in European history.

The book is organized in an interesting way: the first section talks about developments in everyday life; the second discusses new ideas at court, in the church, and in politics; and the third is a more traditional overview of the politics and wars of the period. Several sections stand out as particularly interesting. Blanding discusses different conceptions of time and of place (time as cyclical versus forward-moving, and greater ease in travel). One chapter talks about hunting as a primary activity at court--a topic that I've never read about, even though it was very different from the kind of British fox-hunting a modern reader might envision. (One practice, deemed suitable for ladies, was known as fox-tossing: tossing a small animal up in the air from an outstretched blanket repeatedly until it died.) Another chapter analyzes the arts in the broad terms of "the culture of reason" versus "the culture of feeling." While I value the book chiefly as a cogent synthesis of the period, it contains quite a few new facts as well. And somehow Blanding can take even information that's very familiar and make it feel newly significant.

I enjoyed the author's view towards the period: he's capable of simultaneously acknowledging the importance of the shoulders we're standing on, and having a bit of a laugh at the strangeness of history (especially the gross inbreeding of the Habsburgs, which is a sort of recurring punchline). It would be impossible to find a truly representative paragraph in a book of this length, but here's a bit that shows how evocative Blanding can be, in one paragraph, of a place you wouldn't necessarily expect to see covered here:

Sicily was also special in that it boasted a Parliament, one of only three in eighteenth-century Italy [...]. As representative assemblies go, however, both its ambition and achievements were limited. As its three chambers were dominated by the privileged orders who had the most to lose from change, it acted as a brake on what was already a somnolent polity. Victor Amadeus II referred to it contemptuously as 'an ice-cream Parliament,' as the deputies spent most of their time consuming refreshments. With a majority of votes controlled by a handful of intermarried clans, the proceedings were a formality. One carriage was usually sufficient to transport all the deputies who bothered to turn up and just two or three sessions were sufficient to complete the business. At least Victor Amadeus II spent a year getting to know his new acquisition. Charles III was just a week on the island before returning to Naples, leaving behind a status of himself which, for reasons of economy, was made from the melted-down statue of his predecessor.

I also liked how, in the third and most turgid section, which deals with the political and military machinations of the period in a relatively traditional way, Blanding is willing to admit when something isn't

worth the effort:

Even the most gifted narrator would find it difficult to construct an account of the 1720s both coherent and interesting, or indeed either of those things. Only intense concentration and repeated reference to the chronology can reveal which abortive congress was which, which short-lived league brought which powers together, who was allied to whom, who was double-crossing whom, or whatever.

Overall, the book brought the period exhilaratingly to life and I look forward to returning to it, perhaps in ten years or so.

mali says

I'm a little torn about my rating on this book. The first half is definitely 5 stars. But as with Frederick the Great, which I read earlier this year, it gets bogged down in minor details and loses the narrative thrust after a while. I found myself skimming over large portions of the last few chapters and only finished it out of sheer stubbornness. If you're into military or architectural history your experience may be different, but again, it's not so much the topics as the presentation. I do recommend at least starting it and enjoying the first several chapters, then seeing how it goes for you. But beware that your mind could be numbed at a certain point. Overall it's amazingly well researched and has a great argument and narrative - for the first 40-50%! It was frustrating to not have the rest live up to that section.

Charles says

The title says it will discuss the 'five revolutions that made modern Europe' but I'll be damned if I actually know what the five revolutions are. Literally on the final page he mentions the French and American revolutions and then discusses the agricultural, industrial, and commercial revolutions. So I guess that's it?

But apart from the general conceptual confusion, this is a rich and compelling portrait of a complicated period. The massive changes that took place over the period are brought wonderfully to life--as are the arguments that perhaps these changes were never quite as monumental as we now choose to regard them.

Blanning occasionally suffers from the historian's defect of layering endless detail without context, expecting the reader to simply understand why X is important (and to possess the detailed background knowledge necessary to understand why it's important that Y and Z made a deal in the process). But given the scope of issues covered, there's less of this than might be expected.

I wouldn't recommend this as an *introduction* to the period, but if you already have some familiarity, it does a great job of tying the pieces together.

Justin Evans says

I'm sure it's incredibly difficult to write a book about European History covering a hundred and fifty years which is at all academically respectable; Mr Blanning has certainly done it. But the balancing of

respectability with accessibility has come at great cost. First, what is surely the most bizarre decision every taken in the history of publishing, this book has no end-notes. So where an author might want to write "the condition of roads in Europe was very bad in 1648, but by the nineteenth century things were very much improved," and then throw a few statistics in the end-note, Blanning compiles thirty pages of anecdotes and figures- about *ROADS* for the love of god. Important, yes. Interesting, no. Second, the book's perspective is bottom up in a slightly too literal sense. That chapter on roads is the first one; you'll read virtually nothing about the 'high' realms of culture and politics until the final chapters. I understand why you might want to do that theoretically, and I agree with those theories, but reading it is water torture. Third, on the evidence of this book Blanning is a militant atheist. Whatever, many academics are, but it skews his analysis and the content of this book. You may well be interested in the gardens and hunting habits of aristos during this period, but to give as many pages to *each* of those activities as you do to the entire edifice of *both* the Catholic and Protestant churches in this time period is flat out wrong.

These three points, combined with the crazy hype surrounding this book, makes me give it two stars. He writes well, but thanks to the no-notes business it's not very readable. Maybe the second edition can be 350 pages of text plus 200 pages of notes; maybe the narrative element will be a bit stronger. That'd be a five star book, because his judgments are very persuasive and fairly independent of prevailing fashions (e.g., really, the industrial revolution happened and was kinda important.)

Xander says

An excellent book in this series, better than most of the ones I have read so far. Blanning chooses to explain the period involved by zooming in on different aspects of the lives of people, the cultural developments of the period and most important of all: the military campaigns of the different powers involved. This creates a broad, interesting story; at some moments Blanning diverts from the main road, but always in an interesting way and with appealing examples.

Blanning starts the book by offering a wide view on economy, agriculture and communication (among other things) and explains the developments in the more important regions (Prussia, Great Britain, France) but he chooses to contrast this with developments in lesser know regions (Dutch Republic, Italy, Russia). Towards the end of the book, Blanning loses this wide scope and mainly focuses on just three of the main powers (Great Britain, France, Austria). This was a slight disappointment: I found the information on lesser known regions one of the strengths of the first half of the book.

On the other hand, Blanning succesfully works his way through a very difficult job: describing the major events and developments throughout 17th and 18th century Europe, without losing himself in summations of facts (something that kills some of the earlier books in the series). He tells the main story and chooses to illustrate the topics with just some appealing examples; he also clearly states on which historical interpretations the scientific debate isn't settled (yet). This gives the book a scholarly feel.

After reading this book, one gets a very clear impression of the period 1648-1815 - the key players and the main events. One also learns (Blanning's main message) that there's no clear one-way approach to history: describing 17th and 18th century Europe demands a pessimistic as well as an optimistic approach. It's almost some sort of scientific Hegelianism. There were no revolutions (agrarian, industrial, cultural), just sped up evolutions; there was no single Enlightenment, just different, local movements to attack superstition and base policy on reason; there was no religious eradication, one could even say there was a religious rejuvenation.

One of the key insights I gained, is that the French Revolution started off as a liberation movement, but quickly turned into a killing frenzy (The Terror) and this politicization of liberalism led to the vulnerability of exploitation by ambitious individuals (Napoleon). One man's hunt for glory led to 23 years of war with more casualties than the First World War. The roots for this problem lay in the royal power politics of post-Renaissance Europe - and would sadly continue up to 1945. (Interestingly, communism has the exact same history as Enlightenment-liberalism: the corruption of sympathetic ideals into power struggle and terror, leading to deaths of millions).

Another key insight is that plain liberalism (i.e. let the people decide for themselves) doesn't work. Without governments enforcing the end of with trials of the end of war crimes/genocides, we wouldn't be where we are today. (And not really the topic of the time covered, but anyway: without governments enforcing laws on companies, workers would still be exploited - in big parts of the world they still are). This book made me (as a liberal) appreciate the power of politics more than before.
