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Greg King. *The Mad King: The Life and Times of Ludwig II of Bavaria.* Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing Group, 1996. xi + 335 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55972-362-6.

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Within the past three years, Greg King has published elegant biographies of Empress Alexandra of Russia (1994) and Prince Philip Youssoupov, leader of the conspiracy to murder Rasputin (1995). King's most recent work, a study of the "Swan King," Ludwig II of Bavaria (1845-1886), outshines both.

The conventional wisdom about Ludwig II is that he was hopelessly insane, an assumption borne out in the 1970s in an article speculating that syphilis, contracted through homosexual activity, explained Ludwig's increasingly bizarre behavior throughout his adulthood. Obsessed for several years with the music of the composer Richard Wagner, as well as with numerous extravagant architectural projects in the Bavarian countryside, Ludwig spent less and less of his time ruling Bavaria, a responsibility that had never held much appeal for him. The king's inattention to political affairs, his mercurial temperament, and not least the relentless attacks of the Munich press upon him, his court, and Wagner's antics contributed eventually to a palace coup in June of 1886 which saw the installation of the king's uncle Luitpold as regent for Ludwig's incurably and undeniably mad brother, Otto. Kept under guard in a lakeside castle near Munich, Ludwig mysteriously drowned on one rainy evening, along with the doctor who, without the benefit of an examination, had certified him insane.

The continuing mystique surrounding the life and death of the Swan King is amply supported in the stream of factual and fanciful literature that still appears. Most of the work on the ill-fated monarch revels in his myriad personal idiosyncrasies and in the lavish palaces that he constructed but rarely enjoyed. Speculations about his death–accident, suicide, or murder–moreover, detract from more worthwhile analyses of his life, and neglect the extent to which Ludwig's own failings led to his removal from power. King seeks to preserve the mystique of Ludwig II while cutting through the mystery that envelops him. In this biography, Ludwig emerges as a man who was less deranged than lonely, eccentric, and self-absorbed. A demanding, abusive father, a distant mother, and a physically rigorous yet completely impractical education combined to create a youth rich in imagination but completely lacking in the qualities that were indispensable to effective political leadership or to enduring personal relationships. When this insecure and ill-prepared prince suddenly inherited the Bavarian throne at the age of eighteen, the resulting disaster was inevitable. Ludwig was no match for his own ministers, let alone for more adept statesmen, particularly Otto von Bismarck, who maneuvered Ludwig into offering the imperial German crown to the reluctant Kaiser-to-be, King William of Prussia.

This captivating biography of Ludwig II compares favorably to King's earlier works. His affection for Ludwig is evident; his insistence that the monarch was more sinned against than sinning makes this detailed examination of his life a compelling read. The story of the tender affection between Ludwig and his cousin, Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary, depicted as the only genuine friendship in the lives of these two lonely souls, leads the reader to wonder if "Sissi" will be the next subject of King's attention. Ludwig's doomed engagement with Elisabeth's younger sister Sophie, the stormy relationship with his idol Richard Wagner (depicted as a mendacious and completely unsavory character), and a string of initially passionate encounters with young men are all treated with an eye to how previous chroniclers of the king's life misinterpreted them. The blunders of Ludwig's statesmanship in domestic policy before and during Bismarck's wars of unification are treated with almost as much care. At the same time, King's assertion that Ludwig's bizarre personal behavior was not symptomatic of much deeper mental illness is not convincing. None of this, however, diminishes the value of this biography of one of the most colorful characters in German history.

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