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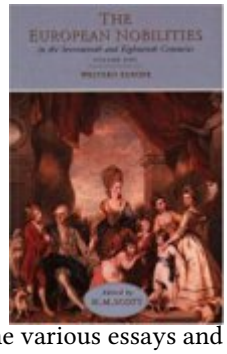
H. M. Scott, ed. *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.* London and New York: Longman, 1995. x + 330 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-08066-9; $55.05 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-08072-0.



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Historical interpretations of the European nobility in the early modern period have been conditioned by the view of the nobility as a "feudal" class in crisis and decline, a decline that has often been read back into the pre-modern period. The "success story" of the middle and lower classes in the modern period has led to a wealth of historical research about the composition and historical development of these groups, while research on the nobility has often been an attempt to chronicle and explain the downfall of the noble estate. *The European Nobilities* is a successful effort to reevaluate historical conclusions about social and political change as it affected the nobility across Europe, as well as an attempt to measure the current state of research on European nobility. It has the added advantage of exploring noble societies not commonly discussed in readily available English language texts.

The first volume on Western Europe includes chapters on the British nobility by John Cannon, the Dutch nobility by J.L. Price, the Italian nobilities by Claudio Donati, and two chapters on France by Roger Mettam and Julian Swann. Of interest to scholars of early modern Spanish Habsburg history is a lengthy chapter in the first volume on the nobility in Spain by I.A.A. Thompson. For the majority of subscribers to HABSBURG, the second volume on Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe will be somewhat more relevant to their interests. Besides chapters on the Swedish, Danish, Prussian, and Russian nobilities by, respectively, A.F. Upton, Knud Jesperson, Edgar Melton, and Isabel de Madariaga, the volume includes excellent essays on the Bohemian and Austrian nobilities by James Van Horn Melton, the Hungarian nobility by Peter Schimert, and the nobility of Poland-Lithuania by Robert I. Frost.

The main theme which unites the various essays and geographical areas is the question of the continuity of noble power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Embedded in the issue of the continued predominance of the nobility are numerous historical questions which remain heavily debated by scholars of both Eastern and Western Europe. To what degree did noble experience in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries entail a crisis of noble status and power vis-a-vis the state, and how did the nobility survive it? What did it mean to be noble in these societies, particularly as the traditional bases of noble support were eroded? What were the elements of noble privilege, and to what extent was the nobility able to adapt to new state structures, particularly the bureaucracy, and new economic constraints and concerns? In addition, what was the relationship of the nobility to other groups, such as the recently ennobled, the newly-rich bourgeois, or the peasant? Prior work on the nobility has often focused on a nobility that seems fatally squeezed from both above and below. The essays in these volumes explore the way nobles, as a group or individually, were able to negotiate this pressure successfully. In the final analysis, noble power, whatever the appearance of change and decreasing influence, for the most part outlasted any serious attempts to curtail its political and social vitality.

As H. M. Scott and Christopher Storrs make clear in their introduction, the essays contained in the collection confirm that "the most appropriate descriptions of the elites' fortunes during these two centuries are not 'crisis' and 'decline', but 'consolidation' and transformation' " (I, p. 9). The inclusion of essays from such a wide geographical and political spread allows one to see not only comparative differences, but more importantly the similari-

ties of noble experience that cut across these boundaries. Too often, historical work on Central and Eastern Europe is artificially and hermetically sealed from the comparative perspective of Western Europe. *The European Nobilities* fills this gap. Whatever the stresses and strains faced by the nobility in different regions, they remained nearly everywhere firmly entrenched in the eighteenth century, and to a large extent more powerful and influential than before.

The essays in general support the view that whatever the differences among noble societies, the predominant characteristic across the European continent was a strong, unified, yet hierarchically stratified nobility which reasserted its power after the seventeenth century and remained virtually unchallenged until the end of the eighteenth. While the essays in this collection explore the meaning of nobility, they also investigate the economic, political, and social foundations of noble power, and in this respect are an excellent source for scholars and students concerned with the history of the nobility in Europe.

In nearly all of the societies covered in the Scott volumes, noble wealth and power, even in the worst of times, were derived from the land. The essays show that even where bureaucracy and the incursions of central government appeared to be undercutting the traditional power bases of landed, local elites, these elites were able to maintain their ascendent position. Bureaucratic institutions like the intendancy in France were co-opted, and the newly ennobled were to different degrees and speeds accepted and absorbed into the nobility. In most of Europe, monarchs upheld the belief that the nobility embodied the best elements of society and were thus the most appropriate and natural source of political and social leadership. This, together with the reality of politics at the local level, allowed the continuation of noble power on the land and proved that the power of the nobility was inherently stable.

Noble privilege, defined legally and formally, disappeared in the nineteenth century in many Western European societies and was replaced by status based on ostentation, wealth, and merit. In Eastern and Central Europe, where the nobility remained most vibrant and met with few legal challenges, noble power was gradually eroded only by the triple challenge of modernization and industrial change, large professionalized bureaucracies, and egalitarian political philosophy. The final blow did not come until World War I.

Despite the similarities among the many societies discussed in *The European Nobilities*, the editor and authors make clear that there were important differences in the structure of noble power and the quality of noble life, particularly between the societies of the East and the West. Land tenure, the laws of inheritance, and the formal rules and customs of ennoblement all reinforced the divergence of noble experience in any given society. Noble landed power in the East was in large measure the result of direct cultivation of demesne land by means of unfree rural labor. Scott to some degree smoothes over this difference by suggesting that this system of unfree labor was not as universal, uniform, or even inefficient as has been supposed. However, there is little doubt that this economic system concentrated in the East was a central plank of noble power and contributed significantly to its resilience. It is in fact in the East that the general conclusions of this two volume work are most convincingly borne out. The continuity of noble influence rested not simply on adaptability, but on the solid foundations of traditional noble power and wealth established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In describing the limits of research on the nobility, Scott himself admits to the omissions in the collection. In the interest of exploring the questions of the foundation and continuity of noble power, other elements of noble life are left relatively unexplored in the essays, particularly the cultural milieu of the nobility, patronage, and the contours of the nobility's relationship with religious institutions. Other gaps are a result of the limitations on available sources rather than any intent of the authors. The obvious concentration in most essays on the upper nobility or aristocracy is a necessary result of the number of sources available for this group, its visibility and position, and the relative dearth of comparable collections for the lower nobility. Both volumes include a useful annotated bibliographical guide to further reading. The footnotes included in the text vary considerably by essay, but tend to be limited to direct textual references.

The European Nobilities is an excellent comparative exploration of the European nobility over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and fills a lacuna in the current research on the nobility. With detailed, scholarly essays it does a great service in bringing out the broad characteristics of the nobility across the continent, and will certainly be of interest and use to readers of both Habsburg and Western history.

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