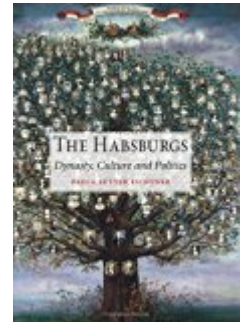


Paula Sutter Fichtner. *The Habsburgs: Dynasty, Culture and Politics*. Chicago: Reaktion Books, 2014. 288 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78023-274-4.



Reviewed by Nicholas T. Parsons

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Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan (University of Nottingham)

Although it may seem a little ungenerous, the first question a reviewer of such a work as the above must ask is “Do we need another book on the Habsburgs?” We have, after all, Dorothy Gies McGuigan’s *The Habsburgs* (1966), Andrew Wheatcroft’s *The Habsburgs: Embodying Empire* (1995), and Adam Wandruszka’s *The House of Habsburg* (1964). We also have numerous fine biographies of individual Habsburg rulers in German and in English, most notably Stephen Beller’s excellently concise analysis of Francis Joseph (*Francis Joseph* [1996]). Also an intriguing light was cast on some of the lesser-known members of the dynasty a few years ago when the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna staged some well-documented shows on the great Habsburgs of the Counter-Reformation. Yet another entrant in a comparatively crowded field might well feel the same anxiety as Zsa Zsa Gabor’s prospective fifth husband, who allegedly remarked ruefully “I know what to do; but do I know how to make it interesting?”

Happily in this case such an anxiety may rapidly be put to rest since Paula Sutter Fichtner tells a good story well and elegantly. Even if there appears to be nothing startlingly new in her treatment and conclusions, the book succeeds in being a great deal more than a recital of clichés in Habsburg historiography. It benefits from adroit use of the research of the last two decades or so, much of which has appeared in academic papers and journals rather than books. It steers a middle course between heroizing the dynasty and the tiresome Marxist tendency to treat it as just another exploitative force in history that got its just deserts in 1918. Indeed one of the most useful insights offered by Fichtner is the peculiar nature of what she rightly calls the Habsburg *imperium*, in contradistinction to other imperial traditions from the Romans to the British. The Romans offered a *pax romana* based on ongoing military conquest and technical superiority. The British Empire grew mostly from an original commercial interest with colonial administration and ideology bolted on afterward. While all imperialists sub-

merge rank self-interest in the notion of a civilizing mission, the longevity of Habsburg rule suggests that its claim to be (for example) the defender of Christian peoples against both heresy and Islamic Ottoman aggression was shared to some degree, and differently according to location, by many of the dynasty's subjects over time. As Fichtner dryly observes, many of the periods of instability and threats to its hegemony were actually caused by disputes within the ruling house as much as by outside factors.

In approaching a subject as vast and sprawling as the 645 years of Habsburg rule, certain choices have to be made. Does one write what is effectively a series of biographies with some historical background tacked on? Or does one write a history of the lands ruled by the Habsburgs? Does one treat the Habsburg phenomenon as just that, or does one treat it as one aspect of broader historical developments? I think it is fair to say that Fichtner chooses the first option in both cases, perhaps mindful of A. J. P. Taylor's famous observation that in most countries "dynasties are episodes in the history of the people; in the Habsburg Empire, people are a complication in the history of the dynasty." [1] Moreover, her treatment is decidedly Austro-centric—one can imagine how different the book would read if, for example, it had been written by a Czech or Hungarian.

While this viewpoint gives the text a certain coherence, Fichtner feels obliged to explain the almost total absence of any detailed treatment of the Spanish Habsburg line. Perhaps more worrying is the tendency to give the non-Austrian Central European lands of the Habsburg patrimony little more than walk-on parts in the narrative, although admittedly this is consistent with the approach she has chosen. Beyond the two seismic events of the Battle of the White Mountain in 1621 and the Hungarian War of Independence in 1848, Bohemia and Hungary feature intermittently and with little analysis of what Habsburg rule actually meant to their native populations. Indeed the

Hungarian War of Independence, which, after all, even dethroned the dynasty in that country for a while, is given a single paragraph on page 183. At least the amusing observation of historian István Deák is quoted, pointing out that, since Ferdinand was both king of Hungary and Austrian emperor, during the initial stages of the war before Habsburg dethronement, he was technically at war with himself. The earlier Magyar rebellion (1705-11) led by Ferenc Rákóczi, which lasted six years and reached into Austria with *kuruc* incursions, is dismissed in a sentence—indeed the name Rákóczi itself only occurs in a reference to *Rákóczi March* composed over a century later and reused by Hector Berlioz (p. 226). I happen to be interested in Hungary, but I fear a similar objection could be made in respect to Bohemia or indeed the later Italian possessions (surely the great "*Pietro Leopoldo Giuseppe Antonio Gioacchino Pio Gottardo*" deserves more detailed attention than he gets for his pioneering and reforming governance of Tuscany [p. 153]? This was a major achievement of the Habsburg dynasty, and his rule in the empire was only for two years, while he ruled Tuscany for twenty-five.)

More serious than the above omissions is the failure, in a book about "the Habsburgs" as a ruling and civilizing dynasty, to leaven the trudge through the main line of Habsburg governance with accounts of the lesser (but important) figures, many of whom show the family at its best. I am thinking of figures like the modernizing and bourgeois-oriented Archduke Johann (1782-1859) in Styria and particularly Maria, the granddaughter of Maximilian I who was married to the Jagiellon king of Hungary, Lajos II. After the latter was killed in the disastrous battle of Mohács against the Turks in 1526, this remarkable woman briefly served as regent of Hungary. Her good sense, gift for diplomacy, and resilience encouraged Emperor Charles V to make her governor of the Netherlands, which she was between 1531 and 1555. During that time, she navigated a dangerous situation with skill and firmness, having also some

understanding of, and sympathy for, Protestantism. She also mediated between her squabbling relatives with some success. Given that, apart from Maria Theresia, the Habsburg line is virtually bereft of female rulers, it does seem strange that a book written in the twenty-first century (and indeed after the exhibition on Maria's career a few years back in the Buda History Museum) does not even find space for her in the index.

Some such material would also round out the answer to the question that is implicit in looking at the Habsburgs, namely, "what is the secret of the dynasty's survival over more than six hundred years?" Fichtner of course covers the standard answers to this, such as the brilliant (and amazingly lucky) string of opportunistic marriages—*Bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube!* (Let others wage war. You, lucky Austria, shall marry), as King Matthias Corvinus (more likely one of his humanist retinue) is supposed to have said. Of course such good luck and the legitimate inheritance of titles had frequently to be backed up by force, and some Habsburgs, notably Maximilian I, spent almost an entire reign fighting wars to enforce or defend a claim. A second standard explanation is the alliance "between throne and altar" which enabled the Habsburgs to rally Christendom to their side from time to time in a manner that eclipsed (albeit temporarily) more parochial struggles. The rise of Protestantism threatened this severely, but the dynasty rebounded with the Counter-Reformation that re-energized the belief in a civilizing mission and conveniently replaced the fading Ottoman *Feindbild* (bogeyman/enemy image) with a Protestant one (the necessarily negative correlative of a Habsburg civilizing mission were *Feindbilder* in the form of Jews, Turks, marauding Magyars, and Protestants).

Fichtner supplies a further explanation, which is really the core of her book, and indeed new in the extent of its documentation: the Habs-

burgs, as she portrays them, were the greatest self-propagandists of all time. She begins with the ingratiating portrayal of Rudolf I, whose image of frugality, piety, and modesty was vigorously polished from the thirteenth century onward. The legend of him giving up his horse to a priest who needed to cross a fast-running stream to reach a dying man and administer the last rites became a leitmotif, recurring in texts and sentimental images right up to nineteenth-century historicism. Numerous long-forgotten examples of verbal and visual propaganda on the dynasty's behalf are cited throughout the text, the image being adjusted according to the exigencies of the age. *Privilegia* (privileges) were forged, titles invented, legends circulated, and opportunities seldom missed for appropriate pomp, display, and iconographic idolization of the ruler. One of the most active in this department was the enigmatic Friedrich III, who not only outlived his rivals but also survived their scorn and ridicule. His motto AEIOU, for the decipherment of which some three hundred solutions have been proposed in Greek, Latin, and German, is generally thought to signify something like *Austria est imperare orbi universo* (It is fated that Austria will rule the world). Considering that Friedrich was besieged more than once in his own capitals and even had to be rescued by a Czech Protestant (George of Podiebrad) at one point, the satirical interpretation offered by a Styrian pastor and quoted by Fichtner must often have seemed equally applicable (Aller erst ist Osterreich verlorren [First of all, Austria is lost]). Yet his reign, vividly handled by the author, is a turning point in Habsburg fortunes: by its end, the intrafamilial equivalent of England's Wars of the Roses was effectively settled; the occupation of Vienna by the great rival to the dynasty, Matthias Corvinus, had ended with his death; and marriage diplomacy had culminated in the major coup of winning the hand of the daughter of the massively rich Duke of Burgundy for Friedrich's son Maximilian. The Habsburg propaganda mill went into overdrive.

Yet luck and resilience played as great a part in all this as sheer diplomatic or military skill, particularly resilience. Fichtner writes that Friedrich's official motto on election as German king (he was also the last to be crowned Holy Roman emperor in Rome) was *rerum irrecuperabili-um summa felicitas est oblivio* (Lucky those who forget what can't be changed). She might usefully have added that this remarkable sentiment resurfaces four centuries later in the beloved Johann Strauss's operetta "Die Fledermaus" as "*Glücklich ist / Wer vergisst / Was doch nicht zu ändern ist.*" Thus did the enduring struggle of the rulers to survive and prosper get transmuted into the folksy idiom of operetta and an unconscious identification of people with dynasty become semi-institutionalized. As time went on, the image softened from pompous splendor to homely empathy—in a brilliant phrase, Fichtner describes Maria Theresia as "mother-in-chief" of her peoples, which conjures a wonderful *mélange* consisting of Mutti Merkel and a combatant Margaret Thatcher (p. 130). The homely image, again vigorously promoted by what we would nowadays call spin doctors, continued through the Biedermeier period, notwithstanding (or perhaps because of) Klemens von Metternich's police state. By the late Franz Joseph era, Vienna at least was populated by emperor look-alikes in that prolific netherworld of the capital's doormen and minor functionaries. The emperor was indeed becoming a mediator between increasingly irreconcilable political and ethnic factions, the focus of ironic affection, at least from his Austrian subjects, the glue holding the edifice together rather than the turbine driving it forward. The great Viennese cabarettist Karl Farkas has a sketch that seems to typify this slightly bemused citizen loyalty: he imagines himself dying and going to heaven, where he meets the old emperor. "How did the War turn out?" asks the latter. "Not well, your Majesty," replies Farkas. "That I didn't want," says Franz Joseph dolefully. "Me neither!" says Farkas.

It is customary in reviews to nitpick about factual errors, but happily there seem to be very few in Fichtner's carefully researched text. I noticed the following minor errors. Maria Theresia did not marry Duke Charles of Lorraine in 1736 but Franz Stefan (Franz I as Holy Roman emperor) (p. 10). Presumably the confusion is with his grandfather, Duke Charles Leopold V, who jointly led the armies that liberated Vienna in 1683. Dürnkru, where Rudolf of Habsburg defeated Otokar II of Bohemia, is situated not "around Krems" but to the northeast on the Marchfeld by the March River, which today forms the border with Slovakia (p. 27). Emperor Sigismund died in 1437, not 1438 (p. 44). The catastrophic Battle of Mohács in southern Hungary, where the Ottomans wiped out a combined Hungarian and Polish army, took place on August 29, 1526 (not August 25, 1525) (p. 80). On page 235, we are told that Theophil Hansen designed London clubs. These buildings are indeed great examples of classicism and historicism generally, but I think the members of the famous London clubs of Atheneum, Reform, Travellers, etc., are rather proud of them as being among the finest work of leading British architects of the day, such as Robert Smirke, John Wilson Croker, Benjamin Wyatt, and Charles Barry. The Hungarian millennial celebrations took place in Budapest in 1896, not 1897 (p. 237). Franklin Delano Roosevelt can hardly have thought of the Habsburg monarchy as being a "*Prisoner* of peoples," although it is a nice idea (p. 288).

These are trivial blemishes in a nicely written and useful book, which I imagine will be suitable for undergraduate courses. It is weakest on turn-of-the-century Vienna, a topic well covered elsewhere however. Fichtner writes that "just why late nineteenth century Vienna became an epicenter of aesthetic radicalism remains a debate in progress"; she avoids the issue rather than addresses it. There is a mismatch between the picture of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, propagandized by Prussia as a worm-eaten old battleship

and by Marxists as a *prison* of nations, and its astonishing cultural achievements in art, urban planning, the building of infrastructure, and so forth. Even politically, the monarchy, or at least Austria under the Habsburgs, hardly seems to be the reactionary backwater that propagandists are fond of describing. After all, Austria got universal male suffrage in 1907, while citizens of the United Kingdom had to wait for that privilege until 1918. In the latter year, all females got the right to vote in Austria, but only those aged over thirty in the United Kingdom, which had to wait a further ten years for full adult suffrage. The Habsburgs may have talked their book with some tendentiousness, as Fichtner shows, but we would do well to remember that those determined to talk them down have their own agenda.

All in all this is a book that provides a clear narrative of the Austrian line of the Habsburgs incorporating a lot of the most recent research. Undergraduates and general readers, at least those with some basic familiarity with the relevant historical background, should find it a useful complement to the existing literature.

Note

[1]. A. J. P Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809-1918* (London: Penguin), 12.

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