Nobody was more closely associated with the Prussian enlightenment than Friedrich Nicolai. Although he was no philosopher, and had never even attended university, his activism in promoting a German republic of letters placed him at its very center. On more than one occasion, author Pamela Selwyn proudly recites Gordon Craig's remark that, "when German intellectuals [...] talked of living in a Frederician age, they were sometimes referring not to the monarch in Sans Souci, but to his namesake, the Berlin bookseller Friedrich Nicolai" (p. xi). This is not a conventional biography, or even an intellectual history that recounts the many layers of intercourse between its subject and the great Aufklärer of his very long lifetime. There is nothing here about his activities in the Society of Friends of the Enlightenment or in the unnamed masonic lodge to which he belonged. Instead, the author endeavors to "rediscover" Nicolai (p. 373) by examining the more mundane world of publishing and book selling that made him such a prominent and powerful player. Although she tells us a bit about Nicolai as author, we learn a great deal--perhaps more than we need or want to know--about the entrepreneurial Alltag of Berlin's preeminent Buchhändler and publisher of 1,100 volumes, including 199 numbers of the vaunted Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek (ADB).

Selwyn's choice may place her book in the "optional reading" category for those who would prefer to learn more about the Aufklärung or about Nicolai himself as Aufklärer. But she has certainly done her job well in a first book that is both well-written and well-grounded in manuscript collections drawn from all over German-speaking Europe. This reviewer was disappointed at the omission of some secondary sources, most notably the work of James Van Horn Melton, whose The Rise of the Public Sphere in Enlightenment Europe would have provided a broader context for her analysis of Nicolai's world. Nonetheless, the author knows her subject, at least from the moment he took over the family business in 1758, at the age of twenty-five. Nicolai was definitely a "hands-on" manager, whose dedication and hard work generated frequent trips to book fairs, extensive correspondence, and a steady income for his publishing business, which flour-
ished in the immediate aftermath of the Seven Years' War before attaining its peak during the 1770s and early 1780s. Although Nicolai's books at least trickled into every corner of Christian Europe, his greatest market and influence remained in Protestant Germany, while also extending into Catholic Germany and along the southern Baltic littoral all the way to St. Petersburg. Yet when Frederick II died in 1786, Nicolai had barely reached the halfway point of his own career. Although he had planned to retire at some point, a combination of his son's suicide (1799) and an enduring sense of responsibility obliged him to sustain the business until his death in 1810 at the age of seventy-seven. By then Nicolai had made his mark on two discrete generations—even though he only belonged to the first one.

In reflecting on a public life that consumed more than a half-century, Selwyn observes that Nicolai began as an *enfant terrible* and ended as a curmudgeon (p. 42). This may be true of a man who first attracted attention as a twenty-one-year-old author who rashly assailed the stuf
diness and stilted prose of Germany's literary establishment and who left it as a recalcitrant adversary of the new aesthetics and philosophy of the Revolutionary Age. But it was Nicolai's commitment to the Enlightenment mainstream that consumed everything in between. He not only promoted the republic of letters, but its accessibility to the broadest possible public audience. Hence his preference for basic, economically priced books written in clear prose.

Not surprisingly, he was an energetic advocate of free enterprise and, especially, freedom of the press. Perhaps the most illuminating part of this study demonstrates that Nicolai's nearly clean record with Prussia's censors went beyond mere deference to a pervasive awareness of the need to preclude the banning of his books and, above all, the *ADB*. He routinely cautioned contributors in what appears to have been a generally successful attempt to preempt troubles with censors, who were usually reasonable and liberal-minded. That changed, however, with the new Censorship Edict that Frederick William II's Minister of Justice, Johann Christoph Woellner, issued in 1788. Selwyn places the law and subsequent *Allgemeines Preussisches Landrecht* (1794) along a continuum during which censorship initially targeted books but eventually held authors and publishers responsible for what was written in them. Nicolai was sufficiently alarmed by the edict that he contemplated relocating his business in Braunschweig and actually sold the *ADB* in 1791 to a Kiel publisher. Remarkably, Nicolai's public persona and residual interest in the *ADB* inspired the king's censors to continue harassing him until the *ADB* was formally banned three years later.

Another salient of Nicolai's public agenda was a commitment to equality that extended beyond the missionary zeal with which he promoted the broadest possible reading public. His enduring friendship with Moses Mendelssohn and publication of Christian von Dohm's *Ueber die burgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* manifested a strong interest in the proper treatment of German Jewry. He was markedly less empathetic with Germany's Catholics whom he denigrated and devalued for their ignorance and intolerance. And he was especially strident in his criticism of Austria, primarily because it epitomized the worst excesses of the Counter-Reformation and state censorship, but doubtless because it was the sworn enemy of his native Prussia. Indeed, the parameters of Nicolai's commitment to the Enlightenment closely corresponded with those of the Berlin ruling elite to which he belonged.

Despite his modest contributions as an author and his liberal political correctness, Nicolai owed his power and prominence as an *Aufklarer* to his publishing activities. And in this, Selwyn judges him to have been more of a "midwife" than "manufacturer" of ideas, much of it disseminated by the *ADB* and an earlier literary review, the *Briefe, die neuester Literatur betreffend*. One of his great-
est concerns was protecting the income generated by these and other publications from the piracy that flourished throughout the German-speaking world. Much of the problem stemmed from the dearth of imperial officials capable of enforcing the Holy Roman Empire’s laws against piracy, especially since most of the Holy Roman Empire’s Reichsstaende protected local publishers whose own pirated editions reduced the export of money abroad. As a result of such purely mercantilistic calculations, each government generally enforced copyright laws in favor of its own publishers, while shamelessly promoting piracy against the publishers of foreign countries or even neighboring imperial principalities. And, once again, great power politics ensured that Austria would be the most accommodating in sheltering pirate operations against Nicolai’s fleet of publications. Not surprisingly, Nicolai, like many other publishers, never gave up the fight against piracy, even though it consumed time, resources and energy, usually to no effect.

But neither piracy nor censorship were the biggest threat to Nicolai’s preeminence, especially since other publishers confronted the same hazards. Rather it was the intensifying challenge posed by an ever-expanding number of competing publications that appealed to the changing tastes of a new generation. Although his business seems to have remained profitable to the end, he could not ignore the trend. In 1800 he repurchased the ADB in order to rescue it from oblivion, but was finally compelled to let it go five years later due to his increasing blindness and inability to recruit a buyer worthy of the challenges it faced. The waxing demands and waning rewards of book publishing coincided with the trials of defending the mainstream Enlightenment values that he had first embraced at mid-century. His sometimes strident criticism of everything from Sturm und Drang to Kantian philosophy to nationalism assured that the next generation of great minds would disparage his own, leaving a mixed view of the man and his legacy. But Nicolai does not appear to have minded. He had made his mark and was content to let it stand without alteration.

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