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Madame de Pompadour: Sex Culture and Power

Margaret Crosland
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“Intelligence” surely deserves a place in this book’s subtitle: it was the quality that enabled Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, universally known as Madame de Pompadour, to become mistress and friend of Louis XV; a sensitive patron of the arts; and survivor of formidable intrigues against her at Versailles.

Crosland has not written a major new biography. She acknowledges her debts to the significantly more comprehensive de Pompadour biographies written by Champardon (1867), Danielle Gallet (1985), Evelyne Lever (2000), and others. Nor has Crosland penned a popular or romanticized portrait of her fascinating subject. She provides a concise, insightful, and continuously interesting account of how the very attractive young bourgeoise Jeanne-Antoinette was packaged through a well-planned education, an appropriate marriage, and a skillful social launch to become the king’s mistress—thereby fulfilling a fortune-teller’s pronouncement.

Once formally presented (almost as a sacrificial victim on an altar) to the amiable, phlegmatic Louis XV and installed as maÃ®tresse en titre, Jeanne-Antoinette made it her mission to rescue him from Versailles’ deadly Catholic domesticity imposed by Maria Leczinska, his queen, that left him bored and restless. Crosland skillfully tracks de Pompadour’s many activities. She arranged construction of an elegant fourteen-seat theater in which she herself acted and sang and where Molière’s Tartuffe and original plays by Voltaire were premièred. In art she was an active patron of Boucher, Van Loo, and de la Tour; in literature, of Diderot and Voltaire, whom she fascinated as she did Casanova.

Crosland explores de Pompadour’s refined taste in decorating her several residences (her passion) and in ensuring construction of the splendid Ã□cole Militaire at St. Cyr and the great Sèvres porcelain enterprise. Throughout she emphasizes de Pompadour’s greatest skills: retaining Louis’ affection after his passion had cooled and holding her own against jealous enemies at court. Hostility toward her reached a peak in the mid-1760s, with France wracked by the Seven Years War. She died in 1764, aged forty-three.

Over the centuries de Pompadour has received a mixed press. Undeniably she brought brilliant performance and new dimensions to the historic role of mistress. Certainly she was extravagant; certainly, despite lack of sexual ardor and her unhelpful married name of Poisson, she was no cold fish. Warm, vibrant and remarkably energetic, she lit up two decades of life at Versailles and a whole circuit of aristocratic chÃ¢teaux. She left a permanent imprint on her times.

Crosland provides a fine account of a brilliantly effective and truly engaging woman while giving due weight to others in the often distinguished and always ambitious society in which de Pompadour moved. Twenty-four illustrations, eight specialized appendixes, and a bibliography add to this rewarding book.
PETER SKINNER (December 16, 2000)

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