

## *To H-ll with the Kaiser*

### **The Kaiser: Warlord of the Second Reich,**

by Alan Palmer, *New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978. 276 pp. \$14.95.*

IN THE CURRENT *Book of Lists* Germany's Kaiser William II ranks third among the "Ten Worst Well-Known Human Beings in History," below Attila and Adolf Hitler but above Idi Amin, Heinrich Himmler, and Joseph Stalin. So persisting has been the British-created World War I propaganda image that the villain label seems to be pinned forever on the shallow, mercurial, bombastic, but the essentially decent and well-meaning last Kaiser. From my own childhood memory I recall the diabolic Kaiser Bill, in 1918 the ogre of our third grade in Boston's Martha Baker School, along with his son the Clown Prince, the most loathsome figure of our time. Only the residual Victorian proprieties caused Miss Sykes, our teacher, to forbid our wearing celluloid pins inscribed *To H-ll with the Kaiser*. His title itself has become eponymous: "Kaiser" means the arch-villain William II.

Yet when this grandson of Queen Victoria was born, his birth was celebrated in England as if he were an English prince. After he came of age his grandmother made him the youngest foreign Knight of the Garter, Admiral of the Fleet—the first foreign sovereign to be so created—colonel of a British regiment. Indeed, Victoria died in his arms. When he passed through London after her funeral many of the buildings flew German flags beside the Union Jack. Nine years later Conan Doyle, seeing him in Edward VII's funeral procession, wrote that he looked "so noble that England has lost something of her old kindness if she does not take him back into her heart today." As late as July 1911, on a visit to England, the Kaiser was cheered in the streets, and when he went to the theater he was given a standing ovation. Yet five years later he had become the most hated man in the British Empire. So he has remained to the general public, however historians might revise opinions about him.

Mr. Alan Palmer's relatively short biography

of William II, more concerned with his politics than his private life, is the most enlightening study of the unenlightened Kaiser that has yet appeared. As Palmer explains at length, only fitfully did the real world break through the world of William's fantasy. He liked to think of himself as the supreme warlord, but it was only a kind of play. His father had been a field commander in the war against Austria, his uncle had entered Paris in 1814 on the heels of Napoleon, he himself liked to appear at masquerades as Frederick the Great. One of his permanent regrets was that he was never made a colonel of a Scottish regiment so that he might wear a kilt. For a quarter of a century he strutted a stage part, designed uniforms, travelled endlessly, led cavalry charges on maneuvers that would have led to annihilation in actual warfare, spouted improvised remarks on world affairs that outraged opinion in London, in Paris, and in his own foreign office. After one of his gaffes his mother complained to her mother, Queen Victoria: "I wish I could put a padlock on his mouth. I tremble for him—with all his rashness and obstinacy . . . he is a big baby." For all his passing moments of hatred, he loved England. Yet if he had not insisted with Admiral von Tirpitz and the Navy League in building up a fleet to rival the British, his deepest wish for an Anglo-German alliance might have been possible. The European War might have been avoided. As Palmer explains, "he was childishly vain over world policy, resenting any development which did not confirm his prejudices and convictions." He loved the posturing while avoiding actuality until it overwhelmed him in the war he had predicted would be over in a few months.

The Kaiser lacked discretion, judgment, application. Probably he would have been well-suited for the rôle of Lohengrin in a provincial opera house. Instead fate brought him at the age of thirty to rule the expansive parvenu Second Empire. Had William, Palmer writes,

. . . left day-to-day politics to the chancellor and his ministers while amusing himself with ships, uniforms and parades, then Germany might have worked out a practical

and smooth system of government. But the Kaiser still thought as an autocrat. He saw nothing inconsistent in suddenly intervening on a grand scale after weeks of remote control, ruling spasmodically by telegram . . . . The Kaiser's intervention in foreign affairs—after snap reactions to the whim of a moment—could destroy in a few hours the diplomacy of several weeks.

The war, which in his heart he never wanted and which made him a villain to the outside world, made him a cipher within Germany. By the Battle of the Marne he was no more than a spectator of events beyond his control, helpless as he watched his dynasty founder, then after the war a powerless exile for almost a quarter of a century. Palmer is particularly informative about those last years, William's reaction to and relations with National Socialism, a movement he despised while yet admiring in spite of himself the national resurgence that it conjured up. After the fall of France he could not refrain from sending Hitler a congratulatory telegram. He died two weeks before Hitler's invasion of Russia.

I fail to find in this or any earlier biography an explanation of the mysterious George Sylvester Viereck, German-born propagandist in the United States for Germany in both World Wars. Viereck was close to the Kaiser, acting as his literary agent between the wars. Was he, as has been rumored, William's illegitimate son, and if so by whom? The Kaiser was a highly moral family man, in contrast to his eldest son who, after a wastrel's life, died some time following World War II in the arms of a chambermaid. Yet the Crown Prince in writing to Viereck always addressed him as "cousin."

One major event that Palmer all but skips over is Chancellor Brüning's scheme to restore the monarchy in 1931 as a means of stemming the Nazi tide, with Hindenburg as regent for the Kaiser's grandson, Louis Ferdinand. Such a regency was something the Social Democrats, the trade unions, and the Catholic Center would have agreed to, but they could not accept the long-discredited ex-Kaiser. The scheme might have worked. But the Kaiser refused to consider any Hohenzol-

lern restoration except his own. Bruening was rebuffed, the moment passed—possibly the last free moment for Germany.

It is seldom given to a man to destroy his country twice, yet that was the achievement of the well-meaning last Kaiser. His astute and able father, the unfortunate Kaiser Frederick William, would never have succumbed to the jingoistic naval rivalry with England, and he would certainly have avoided going to war in 1914. William blundered into that and the doom of his dynasty. In 1931 as an old man he might have saved his country from a far greater evil by renouncing his rights to his lost throne. Without this renunciation, Hindenburg, the creaky senile monarchist, would not accept the regency for Louis Ferdinand, the only tolerable Hohenzollern. And instead of King Log Germany received King Stork.

Reviewed by FRANCIS RUSSELL