

Frederick the Wise: Seen and Unseen Lives of Martin Luther's Protector.

Sam Wellman.

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The Reformation casts a long shadow over the history of the German-speaking lands in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and all too often political events in the Holy Roman Empire are treated as little more than context for understanding the religious changes of the age. Sam Wellman's biography of Frederick III of Saxony takes a step toward redressing this imbalance by introducing us to a man who was not just Luther's protector, but also a key player in the imperial politics of the age. The book chronicles Frederick's life as elector from 1486 to his death in 1525. Nonetheless, the last eight years of Frederick's life receive special emphasis, when the "Luther affair" became an important issue in Saxon and imperial politics.

Probably the most obvious and important observation to make about this book is that it is not intended for an academic audience. Wellman is also the author of numerous biographies for young adults, many of which focus on heroes of the faith. To his credit, he avoids an obviously hagiographic treatment of his subject. However, there is no doubting the deep respect he has for the Saxon elector. Rejecting characterizations of Frederick as a sly and secretive usurper of imperial and ecclesiastical authority or as an indecisive and vacillating lightweight in the politics of the age, Wellman instead portrays him as a Christian prince who was pragmatic, but also principled and honest. In many ways the book embodies the virtues and vices of a popular biography. It is an easy and at times compelling read, and Wellman is careful to provide valuable background information for the nonspecialist reader on a variety of topics. But sometimes he indulges in speculation about the motives and thoughts of characters in this drama that go well beyond the available evidence, and while his chronological approach provides a clear progression of events, it also tends to avoid important questions of interpretation.

Wellman's stated purpose is to bring to English speakers the fruit of scholarship in German on Frederick. In this he relies heavily on Ingetraut Ludolph's 1984 biography of Frederick. This is hardly a bad choice, but otherwise his bibliography is spotty. Thomas Brady's *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400–1650* (2009) fails to

appear and its absence is felt in the portrayal of political institutions of the Holy Roman Empire as largely moribund and its politics as essentially futile.

In the end, Frederick's relationship with Luther is of paramount importance for Wellman. He argues convincingly that Frederick was personally committed to Luther and his teachings, but for reasons of state kept the Reformer at arm's length (one is reminded here of the interactions between Joseph Fiennes and Peter Ustinov in the 2003 film *Luther*). That being said, Wellman's characterization of Luther and the Reformation also needs updating. All too often Luther is the Reformation. For example, Luther receives credit for all of the pre-Reformation reforms at the University of Wittenberg. Elsewhere, events of the Reformation not directly connected to Luther rely on seriously dated interpretations — e.g., Thomas Müntzer appears as the undisputed leader of the Peasants' War in Saxony and Thuringia. Sometimes this leads to missed opportunities, as when Wellman fails to explore the relationship between Frederick, the Wittenberg city council, and the Reformers under the leadership of Karlstadt during Luther's stay at the Wartburg.

Clearly, Sam Wellman has set out to provide us with a well-rounded picture of an important and complex political figure at the center of the early Reformation. For that he is to be commended. However, this is first and foremost a popular biography and its value for academic audiences is limited. Scholars of early modern Europe will find little new material here. It might serve as a useful textbook to introduce undergraduates to the Reformation's political context, but its failure to address central debates about reform in the empire and Church limit its usefulness in even that capacity.

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