

**Michael Rohrschneider, Der Große Kurfürst Friedrich Wilhelm von Brandenburg (1620–1688). Studien zu einem frühneuzeitlichen Mehrfachherrscher, Berlin (Duncker & Humblot) 2019, 230 S. (Historische Forschungen, 119), ISBN 978-3-428-15343-5, EUR 59,90.**

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For the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Great Elector of Brandenburg, Friedrich Wilhelm (16 February, 1620), Michael Rohrschneider has provided a fitting birthday present: a collection of some of his finest articles on the Hohenzollern ruler's government over his composite dominions. The assembled chapters and articles, which the author – with one exception - published between 1997 and 2008, are dedicated to the memory of Ernst Opgenoorth, whose *magnum opus*, a biography of the Elector, had stubbornly bucked the trend against »grand biographies« during the 1970s. The collection also pays homage to others masters and historiographical traditions, from Bernhard Erdmannsdörfer's demand to pay greater attention to the ruler's advisers, to John Elliott and his invitation to understand early modern European states as »composite monarchies«. Rohrschneider's guiding light remains, however, Opgenoorth's critique of the Borussian historiographical tradition and its notorious enthusiasm for Prussia's »destiny« as engineer of German unification.

In the article on the Elector's Pomeranian policies after 1648, the only piece which had not been published before, Rohrschneider again follows Opgenoorth's revisionist attack on Johann Gustav Droysen's oeuvre and deconstructs older historical assessments. He compares and contrasts various perspectives on Friedrich Wilhelm's efforts to gain Swedish Pomerania and the Elector's – allegedly – overarching ambitions to »free German land« from Swedish occupation at the price of an alliance with France. While his censure of Droysen might amount to preaching to the converted, Rohrschneider locates Hohenzollern foreign policy firmly within the current historiographical orthodoxy which recognises the Elector's allegiance to the Empire, characterising him as a pragmatic conciliator of the local political cultures in the provinces of his composite polity.

All other contributions to this volume are well known through previous publication in edited collections or mainstream scholarly journals, above all the »Forschungen zur Brandenburgischen und Preußischen Geschichte«. Considering the unbroken interest, across Europe and not least in the English-speaking academic world, in the history of the Holy Roman Empire and composite states, this collection provides easy access to a significant body of



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work on early modern Germany which for many scholars might otherwise have remained out of reach. Presented with the book title, however, one could easily be misled to expect a biography. At the same time, the title falls short of reflecting the multitude of themes, chronological periods and rulers that the volume contains.

While the book always turns its attention back to Friedrich Wilhelm, it also includes various perspectives on Brandenburg-Prussia's foreign policy, the Elector's political co-operators, ministers and governors, such as Johann Moritz of Nassau-Siegen, Johann Georg II of Anhalt-Dessau, and Otto von Schwerin. Those looking for primary sources will be delighted to find two annotated memoranda on Brandenburg-Prussian policies towards France, Sweden, the Emperor and the Netherlands. There is also space for an analysis of the Hohenzollerns' political testaments, ceremonial representation and visualisation of dynastic rulership, as well as a comparison with another composite monarchy – Spain.

The volume is not intended as, and could not be, a biography of Friedrich Wilhelm. The author makes no claim to that effect. Most articles comment extensively on other historians' research on Brandenburg-Prussia in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century and provide an excellent summary of German perspectives on the subject. Even the new piece, on the Elector's Pomeranian policies, does not rely on archive-based analysis but focuses on the historiographical reception of Friedrich Wilhelm's conduct. The earliest historian whose verdict labelled the Elector as first »state-builder« and unifier of Prussia was nobody else but Friedrich II who praised his ancestor's achievements in his »Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la maison de Brandebourg«.

As Andreas Pečar has since shown in greater detail<sup>1</sup>, it is there that effectively communicated myth-making started. Friedrich II's manipulation of the history of his dynasty painted the Elector as an autocratic »German hero«, as his own and best first minister, military leader and as the king's most likely predecessor, yet unable to match Friedrich as self-styled »roi-philosophe«. It is little wonder, then, that the historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were keen to reconcile this image easily with their own of Prussia's »German destiny«.

The book concludes with a useful bibliographical list of the chapters' original publication data. Readers will be extremely grateful for a final index of names. Researchers of early modern Prussia can indeed look to this publication with great benefit, in lieu of a more complete new biography.



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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Pečar, Die Masken des Königs. Friedrich II. von Preußen als Schriftsteller, Frankfurt/M., New York 2016.