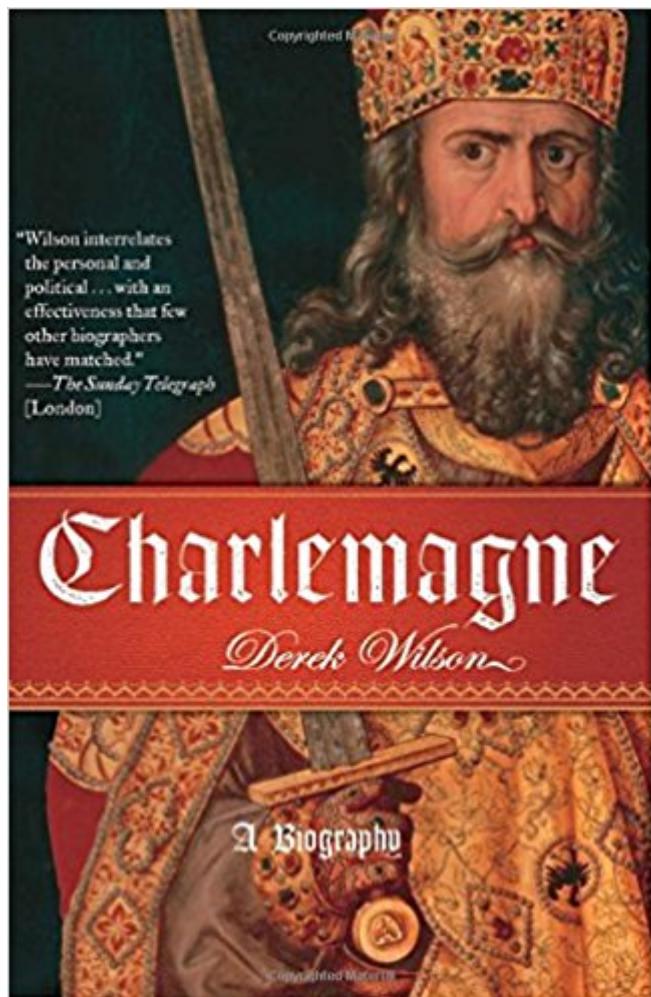


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Charlemagne: A Biography



Synopsis

An incisive and absorbing biography of the legendary emperor who bridged ancient and modern Europe and singlehandedly altered the course of Western history. Charlemagne was an extraordinary figure: an ingenious military strategist, a wise but ruthless leader, a cunning politician, and a devout believer who ensured the survival of Christianity in the West. He also believed himself above the rules of the church, siring bastards across Europe and coldly ordering the execution of 4,500 prisoners. Derek Wilson shows how this complicated, fascinating man married the military might of his army to the spiritual force of the Church in Rome, thereby forging Western Christendom. This is a remarkable portrait of Charlemagne and of the intricate political, religious, and cultural world he dominated.

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Customer Reviews

Christian warrior, scholar prince, pilgrim saint and emperor, Charlemagne (742–814) has influenced modern rulers from Napoleon to Charles de Gaulle. As acclaimed British historian Wilson (Tudor Tapestry: Men, Women, and Society in Reformation England) points out in this fast-paced biography, the Frankish king who was named emperor by the pope brought civilization and peace to Europe in the Early Middle Ages. An acquisitive king intent on expanding Francia's borders and connecting politics and religion, Charles the Great, according to Wilson, is responsible for the shape of Europe as we know it today. Wilson deftly chronicles Charlemagne's military exploits, political intrigues and religious devotion. In addition to his military leadership, the emperor initiated a revival of humane learning (the Carolingian Renaissance) and the establishment of a clerical hierarchy that

could preach, administer the sacraments properly and oversee matters of the empire. Although, as Wilson points out, Charlemagne's sometimes megalomaniacal personality drove his armies to the brink of disaster, he fostered a unity and a culture in his empire that have lasted to modern times. Maps. (On sale June 6) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Adult/High School
A fascinating introduction to the ruler and his world. Several features help readers navigate this complicated era. A genealogy of the Carolingian dynasty helps keep track of Charlemagne's large family. A time line from his birth (742) to the division of his empire (843) lists significant events in Francia, the Byzantine Empire, Western Christendom, and the Islamic world. Nine maps trace the changes in the borders of the empires and the routes of invaders, and 16 pages of color pictures show how legends about Charlemagne captured the attention of artists and craftsmen through the ages. Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, Wilson's account reads like an adventure story. The author comments on the reliability of his sources even as he faithfully quotes them. Charlemagne's intellectual pursuits, his ideas about faith, and his visions for his empires are also covered. Wilson shows how Charlemagne's image changed after his death and over the centuries. Sometimes, he was revered as the world's greatest warrior; at other times, as a saint or a philosopher king. Each age re-created him in a new light, and Wilson demonstrates how the empire he built led to the development of the European identity.
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Wilson achieves two goals with this book, first it is a biography of Charlemagne and second it is a study of the movement of political power from the Mediterranean region to Western Europe. Charlemagne inherited vast lands from his father Pepin the Short and from his brother who unfortunately died at age 20 and his lands were immediately absorbed into the lands of Charlemagne. But as Wilson makes clear, the concept of Western Europe as a political entity was forged during his reign. This came about due to multiple factors. One was the influence of Celtic missionaries throughout Gaul and Franconia that immigrated from England and Ireland and practiced an energetic almost evangelical approach to Christianity that was in contrast to the slower moving bureaucratic Christianity that had evolved in Rome. These missionaries and the churches, convents, and monasteries they build were the foundation of schools, infrastructure, and a sense of

Christendom which Charlemagne supported as a unifying ideological basis for a common culture in Western Europe and the basis for his power structure. Charlemagne did establish headquarters in Aachen but he moved around constantly throughout his empire. This allowed him first hand contact with the representatives of his government and the nobility of his vast lands. It allowed him to also be constant guard against invasion and to create a moving target for his enemies. He asked personal allegiance from the nobility across the empire and tried to balance local laws with broader laws applied from region to region. He also was able to use his military power to bring Saxony with its wild warriors into his domain as well as Lombardy, the region of Northern Italy dominated by Germanic Lombards and a constant threat to the Pope. Of course expanding the boundaries of an empire does not do away with threat since the new borders will bump against new potential enemies. The Vikings of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway were one threat, the Islamic Spanish were another, and the wild warrior Magyars from Hungary were a third that Charlemagne was required to encounter. Wilson tells us that the development of Christendom and a sense of European identity emerged during the reign of Charlemagne and strengthened his power base. The first sections of the book are biography and the final sections are commentary on historic trends initiated during the reign of Charlemagne but which can be traced to Louis XIV, Napoleon, and the Hapsburgs of Spain and Austria. Like all powerful rulers, it is rare that sons and grandsons have the same fortitude and will power and this is certainly also the case with Charlemagne. I did find fascinating the loose and fluid mating and bonding during this period. However in a time of little personal property to inherit and the high rates of infant mortality, it is understandable that both concurrent and consecutive sexual partnerships develop. For example, for the Frankish kings, the mistress who bears a son who survives infancy is eligible for marriage. Wilson also is relatively clear about tribal regions that are now incorporated into nation states. Thus Francia eventually includes Provence, Burgundy, Lombardy, Saxony, and Brittany. Franconia and the Rhineland are the power centers rather than Paris. Whereas Charlemagne was a protector of the Papacy, he determined religious offices within his realm. Wilson also keeps us abreast of the unstable Eastern Roman Empire ruled by Irene including the struggles around spiritualist who use images to seek truth against iconoclasts. This is a thoughtful biography, placing the life and reign of Charlemagne in a larger framework of emerging and evolving identity and common culture in Western Europe.

The book was received early within the posted ship time and the book's physical quality was very good. The book is very interesting and is an easy read.

This book is part biography and part assessment of the continuing impact of Charlemagne on the idea of Europe. The author's central premise is that prior to Charlemagne, there was no larger identity that the people who inhabited the post-Roman world hewed to. They saw themselves as competing and distinct tribes and peoples who warred with the tribes and peoples around them. Charlemagne's impact on civilization was to take the remnants of the Merovingian Kingdom and through military conquest, apt administration, shrewd politics and most importantly through identification of his empire with the Church and Christ's teachings, mold the people who today roughly inhabit France, Germany, the former Austria-Hungarian areas and Italy into believing they were part of something larger than their tribe or kingdom, that they were part of this area and idea known as Europe. This was first seen as Christendom, or a polity theoretically united behind the Pope (most often through the strongest leader who could dragoon the Pope into legitimizing him) and the princes and kings who inhabited his ecclesiastical realm. Though they might war and compete (and they did and have right down to the 1940's), they were still a distinct people whose religion, culture, habits and way of looking at the world set them apart from others on the periphery or continents away. The biographical part of the book is brief, but well written. It is written in essay style. Short on battles and specifics and long on the author's ruminations of what events meant in the development of Charlemagne's empire (the proto-Europe), the author does a good job of building his case with regard of how Charlemagne was uniquely able to weld disparate peoples into being members of Christendom and its successor, Europe. Charlemagne combined faith (rather absolute faith in his Church and its rightful place in the hearts and minds of his subjects), force of personality, canny and ruthless politics, appreciation of the arts and learning, a talent for administration and a willingness to work hard at it, and importantly, an understanding of what he needed to do to be seen by his subjects (high and low) as a protector-king who would be among them, serve their interests (at least as far as any tyrant would in keeping disgruntlement below the threshold which produces revolt) and produce a better living experience under his auspices than could be had outside of his embrace. That Charlemagne's Frankish Empire did not long survive him (his sons and grandsons understandably did not combine all of the success factors brought together in Charlemagne) does not diminish the great impact of Charlemagne in any way in the author's argument (I happen to agree). Although Charlemagne's Frankish Empire of the late 700's and early 800's didn't last a century, its impact - most particularly in creating this larger idea of Europe and in creating an ideal of kingship and a rally point to which future would-be Charlemagne's would continually turn - reaches all the way to today. The second half of the author's book is an analysis of this impact on Europe and its successor rulers. He spends a great deal of time on the Capet's of

France and the Otto's and Frederick Barbarossa of the German area. They drew their lessons and legitimacy from Charlemagne even though often warring with each other. The author points to Louis XIV and the grandeur of his empire as well as Napoleon and his Continental System as reverberations of Charles the Great (as Charlemagne is translated) that echoed through the Twentieth Century and even the making of the European Economic Community. His central thesis is that even though the territories that became France, Germany, the Low Countries, Italy and the Austrian Hungarian Empire often invaded and killed each other, both in Europe and the world-over, they were still Europeans and represented an association of cultural norms and thinking that has not been matched in other continental sized agglomerations of peoples. It is an interesting argument and the author reasons it well. While he does stretch Charlemagne's impact a bit much in these last centuries I believe, it is true that Charlemagne can be rightly called the progenitor of Europe and a touchstone to which Europeans still sometimes look - even if only symbolically of late - to legitimize and organize themselves.

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