

GUSTAV III OF SWEDEN

THE FORGOTTEN DESPOT OF THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

A.D. Harvey recalls the career of the Swedish king whose assassination inspired a famous opera.

GUSTAV III OF Sweden (1746–92) is one of the least studied of the later eighteenth-century rulers known as the Enlightened Despots. He was not a great general like Frederick II of Prussia or a great empire-builder like Catherine II of Russia, nor did he labour tirelessly to rationalise the administration of a conglomeration of disparate principalities like Joseph II of Austria.

In many ways, while the other Enlightened Despots were trying to push the clock forward, Gustav III was struggling to force its hands back. In the seventeenth century, under a succession of outstandingly able soldier kings, Sweden had been a great power but after the death in 1718 of Karl XII, the last and most monomaniacal of the line, the country had become a by-word for weak government, corruption and impotence. Gustav III set himself the task of making Sweden great again. He was assassinated in March 1792 – the third Swedish monarch in 160 years to die of gunshot wounds – with his life's work still less than half completed.

Under Karl XII's successors, his central-German brother-in-law Fredrik I and his north-German second-cousin-once-removed Adolf Fredrik (Prince Bishop of Lubeck before the Swedish *Riksdag* chose him to be Fredrik's heir) the country passed through the so-called Age of Liberty. Political power was entirely in the hands of the *Riksdag*, or parliament, which consisted of four houses: nobles, clergy, burgesses and peasants. Swedish constitutionalism is



Gustav III in 1792, painted by Niclas Lafrensen. Though physically unprepossessing, he was a captivating figure who began a dramatic transformation of his country.

often compared to the parliamentary system in eighteenth-century Britain. In practice it was very different. Adolf Fredrik, Gustav III's father, was described by one English contemporary as having 'the title of king, with hardly the privileges of a subject'. Unlike his British counterpart George II, he had no power to summon or dissolve his parliament. He could appoint ministers from a list of three candidates presented by the *Riksdag* but he could not dismiss them. There were some progressive features in the Swedish system, for example, qualified women were en-

titled to vote in elections to the two lower houses, but the heads of the noble families, both titled and untitled, who sat in person and almost outnumbered the elected deputies from the other three houses, provided half the members of the *Riksdag*'s Secret Committee, and it was the latter that was the real locus of power. The peasants were not even represented on the Secret Committee, which kept all matters relating to finance and foreign affairs from the ordinary members of the *Riksdag*. The *Råd* (Senate or Council), which acted as the executive arm of the Secret Committee, also consisted chiefly of men of noble birth.

A parliamentary façade behind which a hereditary aristocracy monopolised power might equally describe

the government of both Britain and Sweden in the mid-eighteenth century: but in Britain the aristocracy owed its dominance to the influence of property, and for the most part opposed itself to increases of public expenditure, while in Sweden the nobility were generally impoverished and depended on public expenditure for their income: more than half of them were military officers or higher civil servants. The corruption of British elections in the eighteenth century is notorious: but elections in Sweden's Age of Liberty were no less corrupt. The difference was that in Britain the money for bribery came from the pockets of Britain's rich, whereas in Sweden it was provided by foreign governments.

Riksdag politics were dominated by two parties, the 'Hats' (after the

tricorne hats of the army officers, for it had originally been the young man's aggressive foreign policy party) and the 'Caps' (after the nightcaps supposedly worn by superannuated elder statesmen). In practice the 'Hats' were the pro-French and the 'Caps' the pro-Russian party, though their pro-Frenchness or pro-Russianness had little to do with abstract principles or Swedish interests.

In April 1771 the British minister in Stockholm – Sweden was not important enough to rate a fully-fledged ambassador – reported:

The last diet [Riksdag] cost England above Forty Thousand Pounds, which was not a Third of the whole Expense

sneered, 'If there were Swedes in Sweden they would soon agree to bury their differences; but foreign corruption has so perverted the national spirit that harmony was impossible'.

Gustav's new kingdom was then the second largest in Europe after Russia. It comprised present-day Finland as well as Sweden, and a toe-hold in Germany in northern Pomerania. In Finland the land-owning and commercial classes were Swedish in language and origin. In Pomerania on the other hand the people were German-speaking and increasingly inclined to identify themselves with the other Germans to the south. The population of Gustav's vast realm was thinly spread,

June 1771 – the first time in more than a century that a Swedish King had addressed a Riksdag in Swedish – he borrowed from George III's celebrated, 'Born and educated in this country I glory in the name of Briton' speech of ten years earlier:

Born and bred among you I ... hold it the highest privilege to be born a Swede, the greatest honour to be the first citizen of a free people.

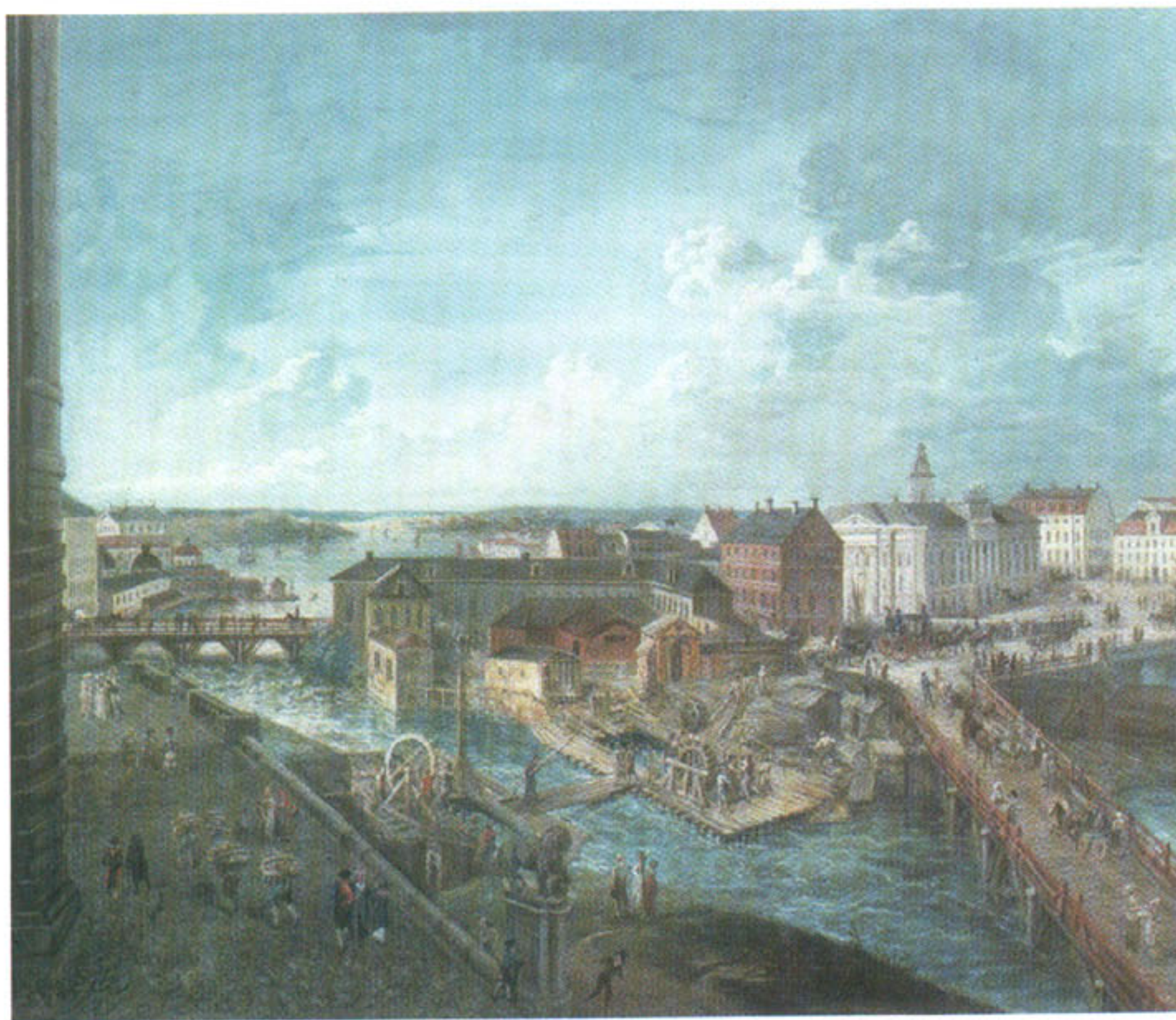
Gustav soon found that the leaders of the Riksdag had no interest in his good intentions, and on August 19th, 1772, he gathered about him a few hundred loyal officers and arrested the Råd; the members of the Secret Committee fled. Later that day, as he paraded through the streets of Stockholm at the head of his jubilant supporters, crowds of ordinary townsfolk gathered to cheer the King; in demonstrations of fervent loyalty that had been seen nowhere in Europe for more than a century, women threw themselves at his feet and lifted their babies so that he might kiss them. Next day the shamefaced deputies of the Riksdag were forced to walk between lines of troops with fixed bayonets to assemble in a Parliament Hall surrounded by field guns, each with an artillerist standing behind it with a lighted taper. It was a classic coup d'état: the first in Europe since Cromwell's suppression of the Rump Parliament in 1653.

Gustav was an unimpressive figure physically, weedy and foppish, and slightly lame since birth, but when he addressed the members of the Riksdag he made them flinch with his phrases of masterful contempt:

Freedom, the noblest of human rights, transformed into an unbearable aristocratic despotism in the hands of a ruling faction ... working only to create a majority for their own party, so as to shelter themselves from the lawless effrontery of their opponents... If there be anyone here present who can deny the truth of what I state, let him stand up.

No one stood up.

The new constitution that Gustav now promulgated, in place of that of 1720-72, brought Sweden more into line with contemporary Britain. The Riksdag still had a veto on new legis-



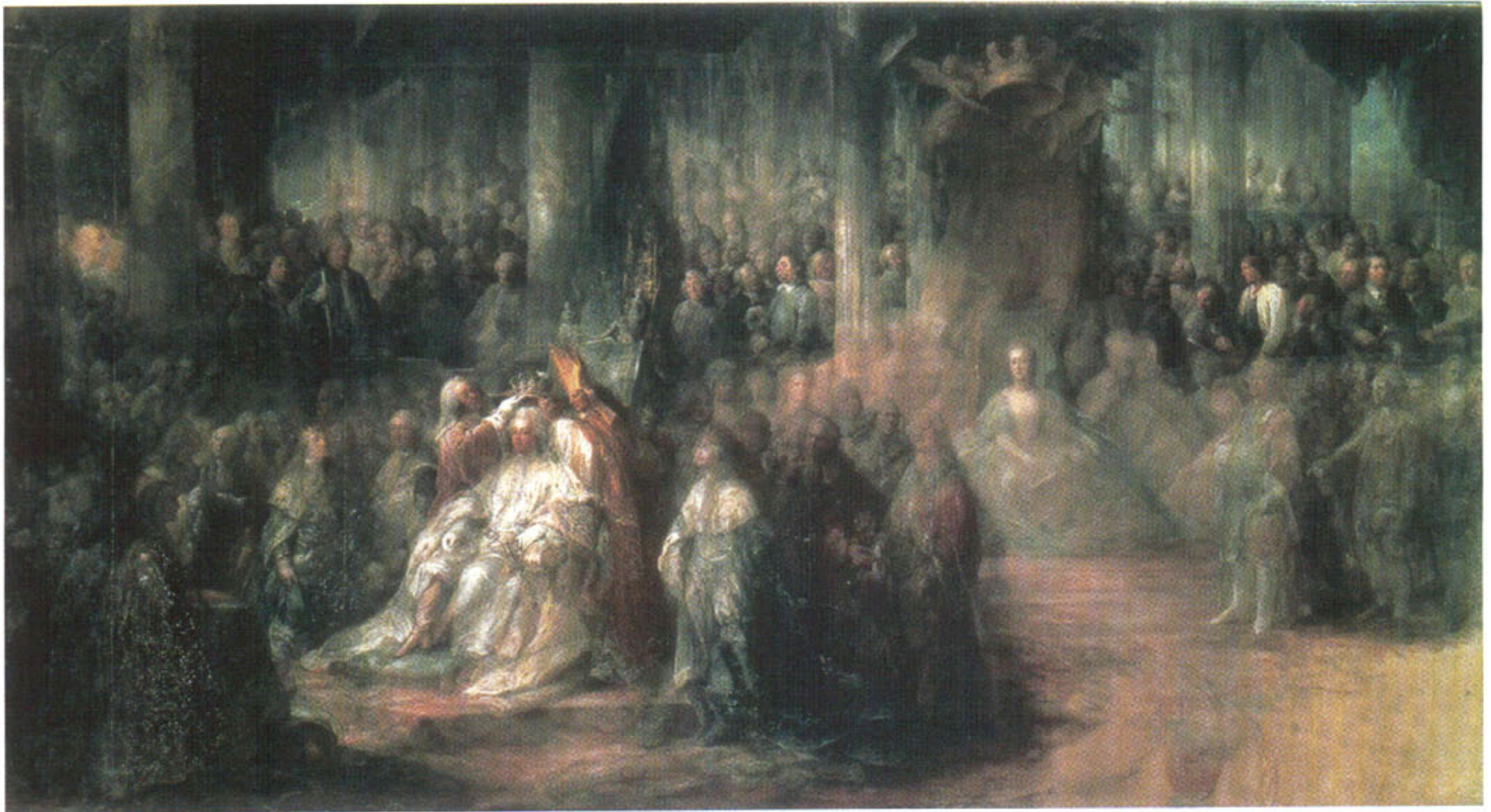
made on our Side. The [Russians] spent above twice as much, without reckoning what the Kings of Prussia and Denmark sent hither. France spent likewise about Four Millions and a half of French Livres: so that I do not think that the whole sum employed here, on that Occasion, by all three Courts, can be subscribed at less than Three Hundred and Seventy Thousand Pounds Sterling.

When, shortly after his father's death in February 1771, Gustav III met his uncle Frederick II of Prussia (Frederick the Great), the latter

Building works in the Swedish capital: the view from the Royal Palace painted by Elias Martin in the later 18th century.

totalling fewer than three million, mainly in the south. What is now Norrbotten, the northernmost Swedish province, with an area two-and-a-half times that of Switzerland, then had fewer than 20,000 inhabitants.

Even before his father's death and his own succession to the throne Gustav had been involved in efforts to end faction and assert royal influence. Addressing his first Riksdag in



The coronation of Gustav in Stockholm, painted by Carl Gustav Pilo.

lation and new taxes proposed by the government and (as was not the case in Britain) still had to be consulted before the country could embark on an offensive war. The main difference between the British and Swedish systems was that, whereas in Britain the monarch's executive power was in practice delegated to ministers more industrious, more proficient and, for the most part, more intellectually gifted than their royal master, in Sweden it was Gustav III himself who was indisputably in day to day charge.

No other of the Enlightened Despots was more fond than Gustav of the time-wasting rituals of court life, the levées, formal audiences and ceremonial entries and exits. He also devoted a great deal of time to card-playing and conversation, sometimes occupying his hands while he chatted by embroidering bodices for the ladies of his court; but his particular hobby was the theatre. He not only produced and acted in plays, he even wrote them. Yet he was also the moving spirit in everything his government did. Even the reform and stabilisation of the currency, a complex technical matter carried through by

Johan Liljencrantz, secretary of state for trade and finance, depended on Gustav's active support in face of opposition from the Råd and the Bank of Sweden, and in other departments he made a habit of going behind the backs of his ministers and dealing directly (and often in secret) with middle-rank subordinates.

Gustav was unusual among heredi-

tary monarchs in that the one area in which he showed indisputable mastery was language. His play-writing should not be compared with Frederick the Great's flute-playing, or his fourth-rate French verse: Gustav was the finest dramatist writing in Swedish prior to Strindberg a century later; his masterpiece, *Siri Brahe*, was translated into French, German and Italian, not while he was a topical figure, but some years after his death. He was an outstanding public speaker. Whereas Napoleon, in his coup d'état of 19e Brumaire 1799 broke down and began mumbling in front of the popular assembly he was trying to overawe, Gustav III easily faced down his opponents in the Riksdag. Yet somehow he never quite managed to inspire respect. This was partly the result of his obsessive deviousness and under-handedness. The British minister at Stockholm reported,

His confidants are never entirely so, but He has a singular Art in dividing the trust he reposes in each, & His whole life is a continual

Gustav's fellow Enlightened Despots, the Emperor Joseph II (r. 1765-90) and his brother Leopold of Tuscany, who became Leopold II (r. 1790-92).



Scene of Intrigue and Suspicion.

He showed little gratitude for loyalty. He became bored with Liljencrantz's complaints about government overspending and sidelined him. When his troops complained of the breakdown of supply arrangements in 1788 he made a scapegoat of Johan Christian Toll, the ablest of his military administrators and the most faithful of his supporters since August 1772. Yet mostly his associates turned on him before he turned on them. Baron Jacob Magnus Sprengporten, who had secured Finland for the King in the 1772 coup, unable to stifle his jealousy of Gustav's faultless performance in Stockholm, resigned in 1774, and till his death in 1786 relieved his frustration by writing letters to Gustav rebuking him for his 'weakness for minions and vulgar partiality for favourites'. After Gustav fell out with his physician, Nils Dalberg, the latter began circulating strange stories about his sex life. When after eight years, Gustav finally managed to consummate his marriage and make his wife pregnant, his mother announced that someone else must have been the father.

Gustav III may well have held a record among monarchs prior to the



Stockholm's cathedral and royal palace built in the early 18th century.

nineteenth century for the number of other crowned heads he met. What Louis XV and Louis XVI of France or Ferdinand IV of Naples thought of him is uncertain, though none of these Bourbons were exactly noted for their insight into character. Pope Pius VI pretended to be delighted with Gustav (the first Protestant monarch ever to meet a pope) and made him a Knight of the

The New Year's Eve party given by Gustav in 1779, painted by Pehr Hilleström. Gustav adored the rituals of court life.

Golden Spur. The other Enlightened Despots, Frederick the Great, Catherine the Great and Joseph II, agreed in thinking Gustav charming in a wearying sort of way, and faintly ridiculous. Leopold II, Joseph II's brother and successor, perhaps the ablest politician among the Enlightened Despots – he was still only Grand Duke of Tuscany when Gustav met him, and the latter mistook him for a household servant – thought the Swedish king was a positive menace with his incessant scheming and readiness to interfere in other governments' affairs.

In part the disdain of Gustav's royal *confrères* stemmed from the weakness of Sweden's international position. Between 1772 and 1788 Gustav received a total of 38.2



million *livres* (about £1.6m) in subsidies from the French court, and in October 1791 succeeded in arranging a subsidy treaty with Russia: other monarchs were not unjustified in seeing him as a pensioner rather than a power in his own right. The other Enlightened Despots knew, too, that despite his coup Gustav was still not really master in his own house. The middle years of his reign were something of a golden age (and have seen increasingly in those terms by succeeding generations). Incompetent judges were purged and the administration of justice was tightened up; freedom of worship was granted to Roman Catholics and to Jews; the Caribbean island of Saint Barthélemy was acquired from France; a Royal Opera House was established in 1782 and a Swedish Academy in 1786; the navy was strengthened. In 1786 however a new Riksdag rejected all but one of Gustav's legislative proposals; and encouraged by the Russian minister in Stockholm, discontented nobles continued to plot against the throne.

Gustav III seems to have been impressed by the advice of Carl Gustaf Nordin, an influential cleric, that 'all radical improvements in national character take place during the severest wars'. Russia, having annexed the Crimea, had embarked on a titanic struggle with the Ottoman Empire which was absorbing stupendous quantities of manpower and treasure. At the beginning of 1788 he began making plans to attack Russia from the rear.

Gustav thought he could count on the fact that north-west Russia was virtually stripped of troops but the officers of the army he gathered at Helsinki for a descent on St Petersburg complained bitterly of the illegality of a war started without the consent of the Riksdag. The common soldiers made trouble about the lack of provisions and poor quarters, and when the army crossed the Rus-

Count Hans Axel von Fersen (1755-1810), Gustav's emissary who assisted Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in their attempt to flee to Varennes in 1791.



sian border at the end of July 1788, they mutinied. Some officers, hoping for an independent Finland, opened negotiations with Catherine the Great. Gustav found himself far from his capital, stuck with an army that would not obey him. He was rescued by the Danish government declaring war on him. Hurrying back to Sweden, Gustav rode to

Gothenburg, 250 miles cross country in forty-eight hours – the last sixty miles quite alone and on borrowed farm horses, in blinding hailstorms – to rally the defences of the city against the invading Danes. Under pressure from Britain and Prussia, the Danes pulled back. The war with Russia settled down to a series of battles, victory going to one side then to the other, among the woods and lakes of the Russo-Finnish border north-west of Lake Ladoga. A battle between the Russian and Swedish fleets off Öland on July 26th, 1789, was inconclusive because one of the Swedish squadrons, as a result of a conspiracy among the captains, failed to come into action. The fol-

A musical party during Gustav's reign, by Per Hillestrom.



lowing year Gustav, having taken personal command of the fleet, managed to get trapped by a superior Russian force at the mouth of Vyborg harbour. The two fleets confronted each other for nearly a month. The senior Swedish officers rejected all the courses of action proposed by Gustav and his latest discovery, William Sidney Smith, a British naval captain who had turned up without the permission of his own government; they even, according to Smith, talked of 'proposing terms of Capitulation independent of the King'. Gustav finally gave direct orders for a break-out but lost six ships of the line. Less than a week later, on July 9th, 1790, the Russian coastal flotilla was virtually destroyed in an action with Gustav's oared vessels at Svenskund. Catherine, still preoccupied with the war with Turkey, was glad to patch up a compromise peace, remarking, 'We've pulled one paw out of the mud. When we pull the other one out, then we'll sing Hallelujah'.

About the only benefit Gustav derived from the war was that it gave him a pretext for a final showdown with the Riksdag. While the Stockholm crowds stood outside cheering him, Gustav confronted the chamber of nobles with a new constitution, and when they howled it down he coolly ordered the secretary of the chamber to record their vote as *yes*: a piece of blatant illegality combined with intimidation that anticipates the tactics of twentieth-century dictators. In fact, apart from giving the King the power to make war without the Riksdag's consent, the new constitution marked little advance on that of 1772 – the Riksdag still had the final say in taxation and legislation.

Eleven weeks after Gustav rammed his new constitution down

the throats of the nobles, the Estates General met at Versailles and by the time of the peace settlement with Russia the French *ancien régime* was well on the way to dissolution. Gustav had always regarded the French royal court as a model of what a royal court should be. He also of course believed in keeping parliamentary assemblies in their place. He had regretted France's alliance with American colonists during the War of Independence, writing,

I cannot allow that it is right to support rebels against their Lawful King, such an example will find too many imitations in an age when it is the fashion to overthrow every bulwark of authority.

Despite the fact that Sweden was virtually bankrupt in the aftermath of the Russian war he now offered to land 16,000 Swedish and 8,000 Russian troops at Ostend, in Austrian territory, and to march on Paris to overthrow the Constituent Assembly, with the support of an Austrian army advancing from the Rhine. In June 1791 he went to Aachen and was greeted there as a saviour by the French royalist exiles. While he was



A Swedish peasant interior by Hilleström.

there Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette made their bid to escape from Paris, their so-called Flight to Varennes: most of the arrangements for this attempt were made by Axel Fersen, Gustav's personal emissary. Marie Antoinette's brother Leopold, who had succeeded Joseph II as Holy Roman Emperor and ruler of Austria the year before, was enraged by Gustav's interference: there were some too, including Gustav's uncle Henry of Prussia, who believed that his schemes for an armed intervention in France were merely a cover for a secret plan to seize Norway from the

Gustav with his army in Russia in 1789.

Danes.

On March 1st, 1792, Leopold died – poisoned, it is said, by an aphrodisiac of his own concoction – but Gustav was destined never to learn that there was no longer any challenge to his self-appointed role as leader of the monarchist opposition to the French Revolution. On March 16th, 1792, shortly before news of Leopold's death reached Stockholm, Gustav attended a masqued ball at the Opera House. He had been there about half an

hour when a disgruntled nobleman named Jakob Johan Anckarström produced from under his domino a cavalry pistol loaded with two balls, some nails and fourteen assorted scraps of lead and iron, thrust the muzzle against Gustav's back, and pulled the trigger.

Gustav staggered but did not fall: which so surprised Anckarström that he dropped a second pistol and a knife with which he had equipped himself. Nevertheless the hole blown in Gustav's back was large enough for a surgeon to insert his hand up to his wrist. The King lingered in agony for not quite a fortnight while throughout the city noblemen hid from the furious populace. Though able to give instructions for the security of the realm almost till the end,





Greifswald in Pomerania, a town in northern Germany acquired by Sweden during the Thirty Years' War. Gustav imposed a new constitution on its university. Painting by Caspar David Friedrich.

Gustav showed little interest in the conspiracy. Told that Anckarström had confessed and that accomplices were suspected, he responded,

I don't want to know the names ... It is only their political plan I should like to know about, some time or other. I am curious to see whether there was anything sensible in it.

There wasn't of course. Gustav III was only forty-six when he died. That was at least eight years older than the most brilliant of his predecessors on the Swedish throne, Gustav II Adolf, Karl X and Karl XII – and if he had lived a normal span he would still have been king at the time of Waterloo. One can only speculate what difference this might have made to events.

From the perspective of later developments, the Enlightened Despotism of the eighteenth century seems like a last-ditch attempt to match the personal rule of hereditary princes to the needs of the modern state. In fact the Enlightened Despots were one aspect of a more

general movement. Countries where the hereditary lottery had failed to throw up rulers of the calibre of Frederick the Great or Joseph II had to make do with Unenlightened Despots who employed enlightened first ministers – Tanucci in Naples, Struensee in Denmark, Turgot and Calonne in France, and the Earl of Shelburne in Britain – though being easier to get rid of than kings, these ministers were mostly levered out of

Anckarström, the nobleman who shot Gustav at a masked ball in March 1792. His deed inspired the libretto by Eugene Scribe which was modified by Verdi for his opera *Un Ballo in Maschera*.



office in a short time. The energies liberated by the accelerating pace of modernisation in France in the era of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars showed what a population mobilised under a powerful central government could achieve.

Gustav III was cut off in his prime. The economic weakness of his country, the inveterate opposition of the social class that elsewhere might have been a king's chief support, and the increasing influence of the revolutionary ferment in France may have meant that, even if he had lived, he would not have been able to go as far as he dreamed: he is one of the great might-have-beens of history. He is also the eighteenth-century ruler who most strikingly anticipates the more disquieting features of twentieth-century politics.

FOR FURTHER READING

There is no recent standard biography of Gustav III either in English or Swedish: but see R. Nisbet Bain, *Gustavus III: and his Contemporaries 1746-1792* (London, 2 vols 1894); Beth Hennings, *Gustav III: en biografi* (Stockholm, 1957); Claude Nordmann, *Gustave III: un démocrate couronné* (Lille, 1986), and also Michael Roberts, *The Age of Liberty: Sweden 1719-1772* (Cambridge, 1986).

A.D. Harvey's books include *Collision of Empires: Britain in Three World Wars 1793-1945* and *Sex in Georgian England: Attitudes and Prejudices from the 1720s to the 1820s*, both available in Phoenix paperback.