
NEW TITLES

History

**RUSSIA IN THE AGE OF
CATHERINE THE GREAT**
by Isabel de Madariaga
Yale, 1981
698 pp. \$40

Catherine the Great (1729–96), pictured by many historians as a cruel, tyrannical woman of monstrous appetites, receives far more sympathetic treatment here. De Madariaga, a University of London historian, argues that the Empress, enthroned by a 1762 military coup, brought her subjects reasonable government and greater personal freedom. In the spirit of the *Nakaz* (Instructions) of 1767, her distillation of Enlightenment texts, she promoted the concepts of British law (which the Russian judiciary never fully digested), broadened the franchise for municipal elections, and established a number of social services. The Empress still believed that some must rule and some obey. While loosening the bondage of the serf to the landlord, she felt that it was logical to restrict Ukrainian peasants' freedom of movement: Russia's food output, after all, depended on a stable peasant population in the wheat-growing Ukraine. Abroad, Catherine's victories were significant; she took Poland and the Crimea—and gained access to the Black Sea. Her shrewdness and fair-mindedness degenerated into impatience and intolerance in old age, but her profound love of Russia remained.

GRANT: A Biography
by William S. McFeely
Norton, 1981
592 pp. \$19.95

Recognizing early on that Ulysses lacked business sense, Jesse Grant got his son into West Point, because, McFeely explains, "he did not know what else to do with him." McFeely, a historian at Mount Holyoke College, develops the unflattering thesis that the course of Grant's varied career was shaped less by great brilliance or understanding than by fortune, which often smiled on him. When Captain Grant retired after the Mexican War (1846–48), he struggled to make a go of farming. The Union's disintegration was his salvation. In war, Grant's instincts worked; he became Lincoln's first winning general and

the hero of Appomattox. In 1868, the nation awarded its hero the Presidency, a position for which Grant was sadly ill-suited. The graft and inefficiency of his administration became legend, and Grant's weak efforts to bring ex-slaves into the American mainstream revealed a flaw in character, a reluctance to take unpopular action. Elected by the common man, Grant was manipulated into backing economic policies (such as tight money) that made the Republican Party the bastion of established wealth. But his White House record was partly redeemed, in McFeeley's opinion, by his frank *Memoirs*, completed just a week before his death and regarded by historians as the best recollections ever penned by a U.S. President. Self-knowledge is of value—even when it comes too late.

**THE BUILDING
OF RENAISSANCE
FLORENCE:**

**An Economic and
Social History**
by Richard A. Goldthwaite
Johns Hopkins, 1981
459 pp. \$27.50



From *The Building
of Renaissance Florence*.

Prosperous and powerful, Florence of the early 15th century emerged supreme among the Tuscan city-states. A booming textile industry (wool and silk) and trade network extending from northern Europe to the Levant brought fortunes to many of its manufacturers, bankers, and merchants. With so many "agents of demand," writes Goldthwaite, a Johns Hopkins historian, a great local market for the decorative arts developed. The affluent citizen channeled his surplus wealth not only into bronzes and frescoes but also into monuments and palaces, believing, along with the Florentine engineer Alberti that "we erect great structures that our posterity may suppose us to have been great persons." Scrutinizing all aspects of the Florentine building industry—from patron to stonecutter—Goldthwaite shows how widely this great construction effort distributed the city's wealth, albeit slowly and unevenly. Workmen's wages tripled between the 14th and 16th centuries (though much of this increase was absorbed by rising food prices). Most prosperous artisans attained middle-class status, and architects, once considered simple craftsmen, now took their places, alongside Donatello and Botticelli, as artists.