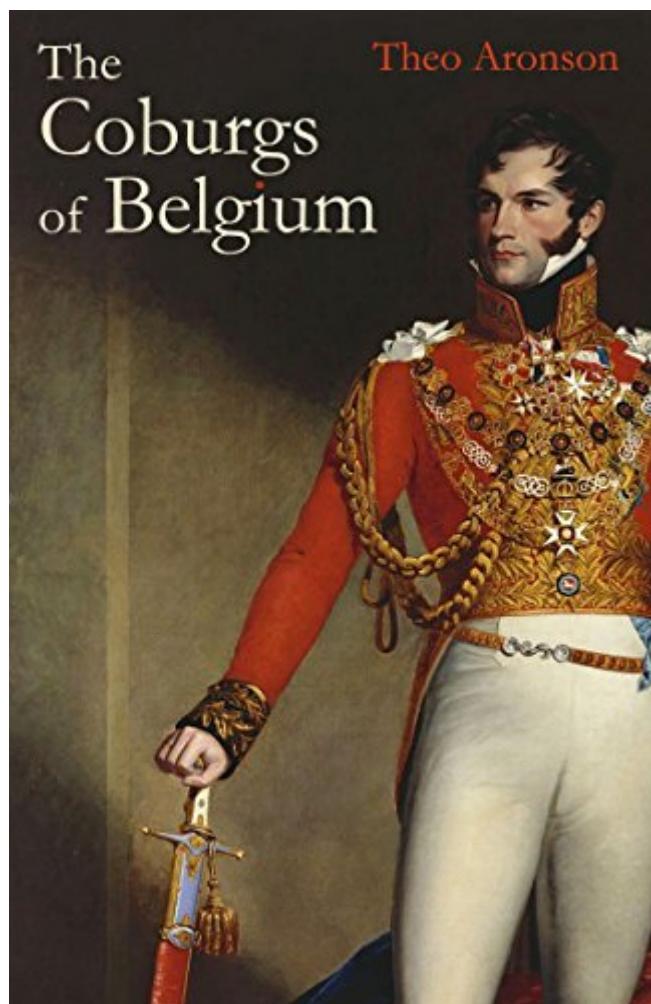


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The Coburgs Of Belgium



Synopsis

The Coburgs, remarked Bismarck, were 'the stud farm of Europe'; if unkindly phrased, there was nevertheless some truth in the jibe. Within three generations of the foundation of the Belgian Royal House in 1831, Coburgs had tarried into almost every royal family in Europe. Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the throne of Belgium is that it ever came into being: created after the successful rebellion against the Dutch, handed to an imported German prince, it was hoped, without much enthusiasm, that it would weld together a new nation of disparate and quarrelsome elements. It has survived to the present, in an era which has seen older and seemingly more secure dynasties vanish. The first Coburg of Belgium, Leopold I, as that 'Dear Uncle' to whom Queen Victoria was so abjectly devoted in the early years of her reign. Cheated by the death of his first wife, Charlotte, Princess of Wales, daughter of George IV and Queen Caroline, from becoming Prince Consort to the Queen of England, the resilient Leopold of Saxe-Coburg not only became the constitutional monarch of Belgium but married the daughter of the King of France. With this the Coburgs were well launched on a climb from their petty German principality to position of enormous world power. Leopold I's son, Leopold II, vastly enriched the family fortunes by his avaricious plunder of the Congo and scandalised Europe with his sexual promiscuity. In fact, not until the reign of 'Albert of the Belgians' (1909-34) and his beloved Queen Elisabeth, did the royal Coburgs prove themselves a very endearing family.

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Customer Reviews

I really enjoyed this book but I was a little disappointed to discover that it was written in 1968. I wanted to know what happens next, if King Baudouin does have children or not, and who becomes the next King. I had to look on the internet for this. But Theo Aronson is a good writer, and the book reads fast. I was a little annoyed by the French, though. He consistently uses French phrases and sentences without translating and it takes away from the flow. It's why I give it four stars instead of five. Also, it would have been better if some pictures were included. Having read two books already on King Leopold I, I found that I preferred the latter half of the book which focuses on his son Leopold II and his successors. Yet, this is a concise history, so even here Aronson gives only a brief survey and doesn't delve too deeply into the story. I would have liked to read a little more about what was going on in the Congo. But as an overview of Belgian royal history, I found it very good and I would recommend if you are just beginning this subject. I love books on European royalty and this one doesn't disappoint.

Although published in 2015, the book only takes the Coburgs of Belgium from Leopold I (1830-1865) to Leopold III (1934-51) and doesn't include the last three kings (Baldwin, Albert II and Philip I) from 1951 to present. It also has no index. For a history book dealing with dozens of events and characters over nearly 120 years, the lack of an index makes the book useless for continuing study. History books are not like novels -- to be read from cover to cover and put on a shelf. Historical studies are primarily useful as a resource to be read and revisited for further research and study. I will avoid any Theo Aronson books offered for sale in the future.

The writer, Theo Aronson, is described as a "royal biographer with an easy touch" in articles in the British Telegraph and on Wikipedia. He applies this easy touch to the Belgian Royal family beginning with the first Leopold and ending with the then reigning King Baudouin in 1968. This book is not to be taken as an in-depth discussion of the failings and winsome ways of individuals falling broadly into the category of "The Coburgs of Belgium". Indeed, Aronson states in the Author's Note that this book "is the story of the Coburgs of Belgium in their more defiant attitudes. ...The focus,

throughout, is on the dynasty, ... allowing the monarchs to be seen in their more embattled moments." The book is filled with quotes and reminiscences of folks, BUT there is no index or footnotes or sometimes no attribution at all, only a lengthy bibliography at the end. The book is very easy to read, thanks to the chatty tone of the writer. "Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg owed almost everything to his looks." Few "young men [were] as handsome as he. With "the studied abandon of the period, Prince Leopold had the looks to draw the eye." Too bad, there are no illustrations in the book! Anyway, this prince becomes the first Belgian monarch and we see him in his finer moments navigating a small, powerless country between major European forces. He is not only a politician, he is a vain man with extraordinary wigs and love interests. Then we proceed to his son, who is shown as a miserly, dishonest family tyrant with more love interests. Do not forget the various sons and daughters - all given their due such as Empress Carlota of Mexico (born as Princesse Charlotte). On it goes through the World Wars, the Congo controversy (before there was an independent Congo), serious crises, morganatic marriages and abdication until we are in the reign of Baudouin. He is happily married to Paola and the succession is assured.

Aside from the British branch of Saxe-Coburg, the Belgian branch managed to weather out the revolutionary storm of the old days and managed to stay in the throne while the other reigning house of Europe has since been deposed. This is a well written story about the head of the dynasty, and some members of it. I've read about the atrocities in Congo during the reign of Leopold II, it was cruel and inhumane to local population. Aside from his ambitions, his wanting for glory and hoarding his riches, Leopold II wasn't a good father to his daughters. Out of all the monarch that reigned in Belgium, to me he stood out the most and it was his story that prompted me to pick up this book. That and I appreciated the World War I and II reads as well.

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