

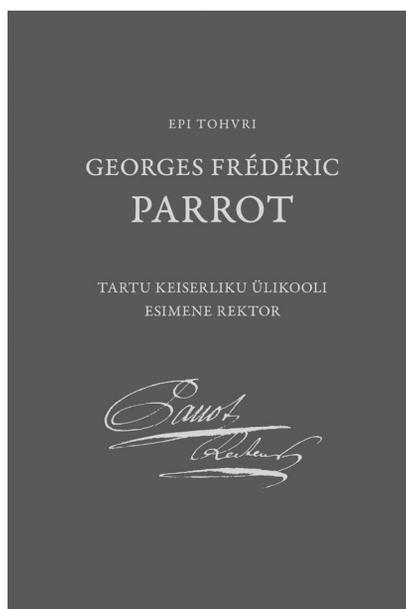
BOOK REVIEW

Tohvri, Epi. *Georges Frédéric Parrot: Tartu Keiserliku Ülikooli esimene rektor* [Georges Frédéric Parrot: the First Rector of the Imperial University of Tartu], Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2019, ISBN 9789949031436, 1072pp.

Epi Tohvri's monograph on Georges Frédéric Parrot, the first rector of the University of Tartu, fills a veritable void in the academic literature. Most likely, though, its international impact will have to wait until there will be a translation into some other, more popular language than Estonian.

To a large extent, Parrot's scant academic coverage is, paradoxically, due to his influence. That French-born, German-made, Russian-flourished scientist and educator is still mostly known as the rector who re-established the Livonian university after a century-long hiatus, while his influence in the educational policies of Tsarist Russia has remained a once well-known secret. The attempts to summarize Parrot's close relationships to two rulers of the Russian Empire, Alexander I and Nicholas I, were largely silenced by their political sensitivity up to World War I, after which the currents of scholarship shifted elsewhere, documents were scattered, and Russian imperial archives still did not become exactly easily accessible for a long time. That is why it has only become possible nowadays to gather all the data from the collections in Russia, Estonia, Latvia, and France, as Epi Tohvri has done through her meticulous work.

Indeed, the sheer amount of effort made here is staggering, as a monograph of a thousand pages should not be taken, written, or dropped lightly. But the true



achievement, naturally, lies not in its form but content. These days, a chance to read a book that is written in a clear, enjoyable, bright intellectual style yet does not yield in its scientific seriousness and strong grasp of the material, is far from quotidian. In her devotion to the subject, the author has taken to close reading of both the written legacy of Parrot, as well as his character, often displaying some rather intimate knowledge. Yet this also enables her to have deep insights into his modes, mores, and moods which, displayed on his cultural and intellectual background, shed light on a reader's way towards understanding both the man and his age. Indeed, Epi Tohvri does not fear becoming somewhat subjective, clarifying and stressing the importance of Parrot's ideas in his time as well as ours, trying to pass her own comprehension along to us.

After all, the very principles of the Enlightenment—the deep belief that education is always a fundamentally positive thing, the great equalizer that brings social justice to all, and that science is the objective foundation upon which humanity must rely in its effort to build a better future—have rarely been as much disputed as now. Thus, if we want to understand the position we are in, we have to realize the relevance and, indeed, urgent actuality of the Enlightenment for our own political and ontological issues. And what better way might lead us to that understanding than approaching the mind of someone who, sometimes at high cost to his own career and personal life, tried to embody that mindset in his own person?

The monograph consists of five parts: Georges Frédéric Parrot's family and youth, Alexander I and Parrot, Parrot and education, Nicholas I and Parrot, and Parrot as a scientist. Despite the theme-based structure, the book is largely following the curve of Parrot's life. We can see that, rather similarly to the earlier Parrot-scholarship, about one third of the book cover his relationships with the Russian tsars. In turn, about three-fifths of this part discuss Alexander I with whom Parrot had a much closer, if somewhat turbulent relationship, and two-fifths analyze Parrot's relations with Nicholas I. Another third of the book focuses on Parrot's role in the university which, indeed, became the center of his *Umwelt*, although he only was the rector in Dorpat in 1802–1803, 1805–1806, and 1812–1803. Yet, as we are shown, his engagement with higher education was much wider than his repeating rectorship and professorship in 1802–1826, mostly due to his lasting relationships with the tsars. Thus, the last third of the book is dedicated to Parrot's familial and educational background, and his work as a scientist, which undoubtedly would have made him notable on its own but has largely remained in the shadow of Parrot the educator.

Epi Tohvri starts by reconstructing the moral and intellectual climate of Montbéliard (Mömpelgard), a town on the borderlands of France, Germany, and Switzerland, that had a strong identity of its own. The author's own background as a historian of architecture becomes evident here, as we are presented a significant amount of Parrot's architectural surroundings, while authors coming from different areas might have probably focused on the peculiarities of local nature, food or music—and who can say all these do not leave their impression on young people's minds? Tohvri shows not only the Montbéliardian influence that developed our hero's mindset—and we can certainly say that in the author's eyes, the subject truly is a hero—but also the strategies he used to turn his background into an advantage. Georges Frédéric Parrot's early career was probably less than overwhelming, including some years of wandering as a young widower with two children, but his arrival to Livonia definitely involved his contacts with other Mömpelgarders, including his family, and we are shown there was no shortage of his countrymen in Russia, partly due to the origin of Alexander I's mother Maria Fyodorovna (formerly Sophia Dorothea) coming from the same town. And we reach the narrative peak in the analysis of Parrot's welcoming speech, given as a rector to Alexander I in May 1802, that laid the grounds for their later friendship, using their shared codes and keywords. It is a revealing moment, laying open the character of the subject for the reader, to be recognized as a man who, while not exactly a master of intrigues, can recognize and use his opportunities, joining subtlety with straightforwardness and knowledgeability like an *homme honnête* should.

While all the close interpretations of the crucial moments given by the author might not convince every reader, what we can see in the monograph is a certain, consistent understanding of the reasons and methods by which Parrot gained his influence on the Russian society, concerning not only the development of higher education, which is nowadays mostly recognized, but also in other fields, including the social policies concerning the reforms of serfdom, starting in the Baltic provinces in 1816–1819 and continuing long after. His ideas and writings are compared and contrasted with those of the other great influencers of Russian education that time, starting from Alexander's private tutor Frédéric-César de La Harpe, continuing through Joseph de Maistre, Mikhail Magnitsky, Vasily Zhukovsky, and ending with Parrot's adversary, the 16-year Minister of Education Sergey Uvarov.

Indeed, this book can be read as a short encyclopedia of education and science in northern continental Europe, particularly Russia, and its cross-cultural

relationships. In many cases, the particulars acquire a much wider significance, due to the author's use of encyclopedic knowledge with a *sprezzatura* of her own. Be it the case of Parrot's study of galvanic elements, left unpublished in Netherlands for political reasons in 1802, his presentation on secular interpretation of Bible, received with less than adorative reaction in his increasingly pietist surroundings, or even his rather well known letter to Nicholas I from 1843, in which he stood up for the concept of universities' autonomy, criticizing Uvarov's educational reform based on Russian nationalism—which, according to Epi Tohvri, became the basis of reinterpretation of Georges Frédéric Parrot in the Baltic German historical literature, where formerly heavily criticized Parrot was turned into a German at the end of the 19th century.

The question of Georges Frédéric Parrot's nationality and mentality is a recurrent theme in the book. As many issues which might be considered nonsensical by a bystander, it has been a topic of heated discussion during the last century, particularly in Estonia, with Teutophiles having the upper hand but being followed closely by Gallophiles (and some stranger creatures long behind, like theorists of Parrot's Scottish origin). Epi Tohvri belongs to the Gallophile camp, clear and proud. She brings many convincing arguments for seeing Parrot as essentially French, beginning with the fact that he only acquired decent German in the university and even later was not too sure about his correctness in German writing. He usually preferred French to German throughout his life, applying it with much elegance and *esprit*. Yet we can also read his letter to Nicholas I, stressing his own Germanic nature, supposedly similar to the tsar's. Of course, we can interpret this as an expression made for the sake of an argument against Slavonification of higher education—but *explaining away* a piece of evidence is always a slippery slope. Writing his own name, Parrot used both German and French orthography, according to its linguistic context. In the end, it seems, that while after Tohvri's analysis the Parrotian Gallophiles are left much stronger than before, both interpretations still remain standing and sensible.

The most consistent criticism of this volume has involved the inclusion of too many of Parrot's letters. Indeed, a large part of them have been published herein for the first time. A comprehensive edition of Parrot's epistolary legacy would be of great value for the history of science and education in Russia, but also more widely, as his contacts ran all across Europe and it is very likely that even Epi Tohvri has not had a chance to gather everything scattered in the archives. Still, it must be said that all the material has been used quite appropriately and fluently in the course of the great narrative, placing each excerpt in its context

and adding valuable comments that let the texts be understood better than they would be on their own. We can but hope there will be such a collection of letters one day, but considering the value hierarchy of the genres of scientific literature in the eyes of the ‘powers that be’, putting even a monograph much lower than a row of separate papers, that hope might run pretty thin. Thus, we definitely have reason to be thankful for what we have got.

It would also be a mistake to leave unrecognized the ample use of visual material— photographs of letters and documents, portraits, buildings, publications, etc. Many of the illustrations have been provided specifically for the book, like the photo documenting Parrot’s grave on the Lutheran Smolensk cemetery in St. Petersburg. The integral use of illustrative material further amplifies the value of the monograph.

All in all, it can be said that *Georges Frédéric Parrot* by Epi Tohvri is a veritable contribution to the study of late Enlightenment, useful for researchers in a wide variety of fields. It is of considerable value both as a work of science on its own as well as a collection of historical documents. The book is packed with new interpretations and ideas, allowing us insights into one man’s mind and the mentality of his age, while also lending itself as a rather enjoyable read, written in the same bright intellectual style for which many contemporaries praised highly Georges Frédéric Parrot. Any translations into less obscure languages like English, French, German, Russian, Polish, or Latin would be highly recommended.

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