

The ‘*Essai sur la Monarchie autrichienne*’: Origins and Transmission

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The document that we are publishing here, entitled *Essai sur la Monarchie autrichienne en son état actuel. 1790*, provides a uniquely authoritative and comprehensive account of the vast complex of lands which the Emperor Joseph II had ruled, following the death of his mother, Empress Maria Theresa, in 1780, until his own death in February 1790 at the age of only 48. He had no surviving children and so was automatically succeeded as ruler of the Austrian Monarchy by his younger brother, who ruled it as Leopold II until he died in March 1792. Leopold had already been for twenty-five years Grand Duke of Tuscany in Italy, and for ten years heir-presumptive to his eldest brother, Emperor Joseph II, as ruler of the Austrian Monarchy. Leopold’s unchallenged heir in this capacity was his eldest son, archduke Francis, who had been living and working mainly in Vienna for some years by way of preparation for this role.

Two more premature deaths among the Austrian Habsburg family – all in the same month of February 1790 – had contributed to a sense of dynastic crisis that no doubt helps to explain the compilation of the *Essai sur la Monarchie Autrichienne 1790*. Two days before Joseph II himself died, the wife of Archduke Francis, Elisabeth of Württemberg, died in childbirth, and her baby died too. It now became a matter of urgency to find a new bride for the Archduke, in the hope that she would provide him with a direct heir to himself as ruler of the Austrian Monarchy. The princess swiftly chosen for this role was the elder daughter of the king and queen of Naples, and hence a grand-daughter of Empress Maria Theresa. She too was named Maria Theresa (1775-1807). She was only fifteen. It is evident that the queen of Naples, a daughter of empress Maria Theresa and much abler than her husband the king, played the major role in these arrangements, with the aid of a special Neapolitan envoy to Vienna, the marquis Gallo.

In order to understand the story it is necessary to grasp that “the Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation” was elected by numerous princes of the

Empire, and had to be male, while the succession to “the Austrian Monarchy” was hereditary and could pass to a female. Hence, from 1740 to 1780, while Maria Theresa was ruler of the Austrian Monarchy in her own right, three Emperors in succession were elected: the first one had not been a Habsburg, but the second was her husband Francis Stephen, who reigned from 1745 to 1765, and the third was her son Joseph II from 1765 to 1790, who after her death had reunited the two roles of Emperor and ruler of the Monarchy from 1780 to 1790.

Since, by very early in the year 1791, Joseph’s brother Leopold was in full charge of the Austrian Monarchy and had also been elected and crowned Holy Roman Emperor, and archduke Francis had re-married and his new wife was pregnant, it was and is easy to forget how precarious the situation of the Monarchy and Empire had seemed to be at the time of Joseph II’s death, less than a year earlier, and for some months thereafter. Then Austria was on the verge of war with Prussia, and the future of the Empire and of its relationship with the Monarchy seemed in real doubt. This crisis evidently contributed to the compilation of the remarkable document entitled *Essai sur la Monarchie autrichienne 1790*, clearly intended to inform archduke Francis’s new Italian bride about the Austrian Monarchy of which her husband was now destined to be the ruler. The completed *Essai* ran to more than 500 large manuscript pages and offered an unrivalled and generally convincing account of the structure and workings of the Monarchy, superior to any known earlier account and of great potential value to historians. There is no other document from this period which describes these matters with equal authority or on anything like the same scale.

However, rulers had not commonly thought it necessary to provide elaborate instructions for young princesses destined to marry future monarchs, while Francis himself had already been involved in government business in Vienna for some years. The information provided for this young princess was massive, but it does not appear that after her marriage she ever aspired to influence policy. Her chief concern, apart from the regular production of heirs and heiresses, was for music, of which she became a notable patron.

In these circumstances, it seems at first sight extraordinary that this remarkable *Essai* has survived and yet also remained hitherto virtually unknown. It has never been published, even in part. But there is one obvious reason why it has been ignored. It was commissioned at a time of crisis, when the election of an Emperor was imminent and seemed likely to be hotly contested: most importantly, Prussia and the Austrian Monarchy were approaching war, as had been the case so often during the previous fifty years. But in fact a most remarkable shift in international relations occurred in the summer of 1790: peace was made between these two Powers, with the aid of British mediation, by the Convention of Reichenbach late in July. Prussia now agreed to support the candidature of Leopold as Emperor. A major factor in this diplomatic

volte-face was that Prussia's long-standing ally, France, was disabled by her Revolution.

Although the whole process of electing and crowning Leopold in all the lands of the Monarchy took many months, there was no further serious controversy about it, and the two copies of the extensive *Essai* that had been so carefully prepared were left to languish in archives. The next – and, as it turned out, the last – imperial election took place after Leopold's early death in 1792, this time an uncontroversial elevation of his eldest son, Francis, to succeed his father. The Holy Roman Empire was abolished soon afterwards, in 1804, and Francis now became, instead of the Holy Roman Emperor, the Austrian Emperor.

The subsequent history of the two surviving copies of the *Essai* needs to be recounted briefly here for the sake of completeness, and also because it is both remarkable and almost unknown to historians in general. In 1790, as has been already explained, the man in charge of the marriage negotiations on behalf of the Neapolitan royal family was a special ambassador to Vienna, Marzio Mastrilli, Marquis of Gallo, sent by the Neapolitan chief minister, who happened to be a Catholic exile from Protestant England, Baron John Francis Edward Acton (1736-1811). Gallo evidently master-minded the *Essai sur la Monarchie autrichienne 1790*. Though Gallo was in charge of the process, it is clear that he consulted some others, especially prince Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg (1711-1794), still after more than forty years the chief minister of the Austrian Monarchy.

After Catholic Emancipation in Britain (in 1829), the then Baron John Acton became in 1895 Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge. Much of the family's immense collection of his papers, including the *Essai*, was eventually acquired by Cambridge University Library through a combination of gift, purchase and public subscription.

The only other known copy of the *Essai* has found its way in mysterious circumstances in the Library of the Center for Austrian Studies of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis (U.S.A.). It seems plausible that this is the copy that was at one time in the "Nachlass" of the Empress, Francis's wife, in Vienna but disappeared from it, apparently, during the Second World War. This copy, which I have seen, though I was not allowed to Xerox more than a small fraction of it, appeared to be identical to the copy now in Cambridge. While the unlikely locations of both copies may explain the fact that historians have hitherto virtually ignored them, it is nonetheless remarkable that such elaborate and significant records should have remained so little known for so long.

