

BOOKS: WORD of MOUTH

High Court judge Michael Kirby was the first chair of the Australian Law Reform Commission and, among other things, has been a director of the CSIRO, UN Special Representative in Cambodia, and president of the International Commission of Jurists. These are his recommendations to fellow readers

An Uncommon Woman: The Empress Frederick

Hannah Pakula (Phoenix Press, \$24.95)

This is the biography of the oldest daughter of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, Her Royal Highness Princess Victoria Adelaide Mary Louisa who became, very briefly, Empress of Germany in 1888 and the mother of the last king of Germany, Wilhelm II (the infamous "Kaiser Bill" of World War I). It's also the story of Prince Albert's vision for his daughter's role in a liberalised Germany, says Michael, his "wise and important" role in the development of British constitutional monarchy and how Germany "missed out."



Princess Victoria

Albert's dream was unrealised. Princess Vicky was exiled to an "aggressively patriarchal and semi-feudal society which contradicted every facet of her English upbringing," says Stanley Weintraub in The Times Literary Supplement. Her husband's accession to the throne was interminably delayed as William I doddered on to the age of 90 and the unprincipled chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, accrued more and more power. "This long and detailed life becomes, simultaneously, a biography of Bismarck and a glimpse into the unified monarchical Germany that was Prince Albert's dream and, even before his early death in 1861, his daughter's nightmare," writes Weintraub. Pakula's "splendid biography, ostensibly that of Queen Victoria's ill-fated eldest daughter, is an obituary for the aborted promise of Wilhelmine Germany."

by a series of chances mixed with luck, full of idealism about building a better Germany and more humane world. It is fascinating to read of the sudden turnabout of the German people, many of whom had been so cruel to Jews during the Nazi Reich. Klemperer was elected to the Parliament of the DDR and was honoured by the government of East Germany. But he became increasingly disillusioned by the nepotism and untrammelled police powers. He could see parallels with the Nazi era and this depressed him profoundly. At the end of the book, after his wife dies, he remarries and has a period of happiness but then, with his life, his diary finishes. What an era he lived through. His book teaches us that even a highly civilised country can embrace fanatical cruelty. It is a warning to us all."

Why Societies Need Dissent

Cass R Sunstein (Harvard University Press, \$52)

This is a book about the "importance of discordant voices" in politics, business and on the bench, says Michael. Cass Sunstein, professor of law and political science at the University of Chicago, argues that group decision-making is shaped by two factors: we save effort by basing our opinions on what others think and we desire their good opinion of us. These two human traits stifle dissent which, in a group situation, becomes information not considered by the group. So decisions are based on incomplete information - and such decisions are likely to be incorrect. "Why do corporations with contentious boards do better than those with harmonious relationships? Why do investors' clubs with a strong social underpinning do less well in the market than less socially oriented groups?" asks David England in The Law and Politics Book Review. "The answer is the availability of dissent in the more contentious groups." Sunstein's thesis has "high relevance for the legal/political situation," says England, and he is "meticulous in noting that dissent is not always helpful, but can itself have negative effects on social well-being."

A page from Victor Klemperer's diary



The Lesser Evil: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer 1945-59

Translated by Martin Chalmers (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, \$69.95)

It became caught up in the life of Victor Klemperer from the earlier wartime diaries, which were "unputdownable," says Michael. "He emerged from the Holocaust

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