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This pocketbook in the highly respected Kohlhammer series designed for a general public offers a useful, if rather selective, summary of Charlemagne’s reign. The book claims to be comprehensive, and the chapter titles offer ostensible support for this claim in their logical sequence and range of topics addressed. The treatment thereof, however, is inevitably too brief to offer more than a bare summary of the essentials. First of all there is a conventional survey of the sources. Hartmann reinstates the traditional favouring of Einhard’s Vita Karoli over all other narratives. He offers some sharp words concerning the debate on the dating of Einhard’s Vita. Hartmann favours Tischler’s later date of 827 and 828 against my arguments for 814–817, though he omits to mention Krüger’s powerful arguments for c.823. There is an account of the more biographical aspects of Charlemagne’s reign, insofar as these can be reconstructed, namely: Charlemagne’s origins, birth and youth, the brief period of rule with his brother Carloman, his marriages and family, way of life, death and burial.

The effect of these chapters is it reinforce how difficult it is to write a biography of this ruler in any conventional sense. There follows a summary of Charlemagne’s career as ‘conqueror’, and Charlemagne’s government of his realm. As one would expect from Wilfried Hartmann’s substantial contributions to scholarship on Frankish councils, the most valuable section is on the law. Here, however, he maintains a somewhat old-fashioned distinction between ‘secular’ and ‘ecclesiastical’ law in relation to the capitularies and conciliar material (which leads him, incidentally to misunderstand my own comments about Charlemagne’s legislation in my book of 2008), rather than considering the case for examining them as complementary and interdependent aspects of the legislative activity of the reign and their implications for the Carolingian polity as a whole. There is a brief, seven-page, section on economic life with pertinent comments in particular on food supply, building activity, and coin production, though without reference to recent archaeological research on rural settlement and urban development. Despite the allusions to various categories of source material in the introduction there is no room afforded many aspects of the reign that might have been elucidated in the light of the information they provide, not least that of the charters. The chapter on Charlemagne and the church considers inner piety, conversion, ecclesiastical organisation, monasticism and relations with the papacy and church law. Hartmann’s acceptance of Fried’s recent arguments concerning the production of the Constitutum Constantini may not persuade all his readers. Hartmann’s pragmatism on the question of Charlemagne’s literate skills, on the other hand, as well as the king’s encouragement of learning is to the point and the wealth of relevant material on Carolingian learning is
succinctly summarised and rounded out with a series of brief observations on whether this amounts to a »Carolingian renaissance«, and suggests »Carolingian educational reform« might be a preferable label.

In general no-one would quarrel with Hartmann’s final summing up on the importance of Charlemagne in the realm of administration, ecclesiastical and educational politics, and the beginnings of the western European imperial tradition, nor with his highlighting of the remarkable influence exerted subsequently by Charlemagne’s achievement in so many regions of Europe. After all, it echoes some of the conclusions and arguments of the most recent studies of Charlemagne, notably those by Matthias Becher, Roger Collins, Max Kerner, Dieter Hägermann, myself, and the collective volume edited by Joanna Story, even if all of us differ in emphasis, method, and interpretation of points of detail. The laconically dismissive remarks on too many of these earlier studies throughout Hartmann’s text and especially the endnotes sometimes misrepresent those with whom he disagrees. The effect is to make some sections of his book merely a series of counter assertions which the unwary reader may accept as the only possible interpretation. All in all, however, the book is a neat and compact interpretative essay. It needs to be read alongside the other studies already available.