



THE BORGIAS

By Ivan Cloulas

Pub Date: April 10th, 1989

ISBN: 531-15101-8

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Renaissance scholar and French National Archives Conservator-in-Chief Cloulas makes his American debut with this chronicle of two centuries in the life of the infamous Borgias. A dynasty in an age of dynasties that included the Medici, the Sforzas, and the Estes, the Borgias' influence extended through two centuries (1377-1572), their name synonymous with luxury, incest, political intrigue, and murder. To set the record straight, Cloulas, a Borgia apologist, has scaled "a mountain of documents" in order to fashion a revisionist reconstruction of a family legend that's told with all the coloristic and textual opulence of a master fresco. The cast of characters includes Cesare Borgia (nicknamed Valentino, he was reputed the handsomest man in Italy--as well as the most ruthless; he almost certainly murdered his brother, and probably slept with his sister--an enigmatic man who was at once the enlightened patron of Leonardo da Vinci and Machiavelli's model Prince) and Lucrezia Borgia (shamelessly pimped, in effect, from the age of 13 on by her family, as was the custom, into successive marriages of alliance to successive client-princes, "The Belle of Ferrara" would in later life become a leading patroness of the Italian Renaissance). But this Renaissance Dynasty is not all lavish sets, costumes, and amorous intrigue. For the backdrop of the melodrama within the palace walls includes the invention of movable type, the union of Ferdinand and Isabella, demands for Church reform (in a time when the clergy not only tolerated but ardently supported prostitution) by the proto-Protestant reformer Savonarola, the Fall of Byzantium, and the rise of Renaissance humanism. Although not the tome to choose for scholarly insights into, say, the role of the Medici in the rise of Western capital, Cloulas' work does vividly illuminate the very rich hours of that historic time.