In 1880 Nietzsche observed that Goethe had been not just a good and great man, but an entire culture. The author of Faust, of exquisite lyric poetry, and of a bewildering variety of other plays, novels, and poetry as well as treatises on botany and color theory, Goethe also excelled as an administrator in the cabinet of Carl August, Duke of Saxe-Weimar. Now, Nicholas Boyle has written the definitive biography of this extraordinary figure—indeed, The Poet and the Age is the first full-length, original English-language biography of Goethe in sixty years.

In this elegant and enjoyable first volume—the first of two projected books—Boyle captures the passions and poetry of the young Goethe, leading us up to the moment when the French Revolution shook the foundations of all of Europe. Boyle contends that, although Goethe was certainly as much a part of German social and political life as he was its cultural nucleus, there was no single Age of Goethe. Instead, Goethes life spanned a great divide in European history: half was spent under a monarchy, and half under a middle-class bureaucracy. The first forty years of Goethes creative life, rendered by Boyle in captivating detail, saw the early conception of Faust, and Goethes rise to literary fame on the heels of his bestselling sentimental novel The Sorrows of Young Werther, a book which captured the European imagination like no other before it. Werther became a fashion in a strikingly contemporary sense: impassioned readers imitated the clothing, the sentiments, and even the tragic suicide of the novels young hero. Napoleon claimed to have read Goethes book seven times, and years later Mary Shelley cited it as the first book read by the monster she created in Frankenstein. Boyle provides not only close and provocative readings of Goethes literary works, but also a vivid portrayal of a convulsive age of revolution, including insights into Weimar court life, and accounts of other master thinkers like Lessing and Schiller.

Part social history, part literary criticism, this is biography on a grand scale—as sweeping and magnificent as the life it portrays. Boyles work is accessible to anyone, and does not assume a prior knowledge of German
history or literature, but it is also rigorous and original—a major work of scholarship.

My Personal Review:
There are two points of interest here, one being the life of Goethe, the second being the job that Boyle has done in presenting it. As to Boyle's work, I would be hard pressed to reconstruct the details of my own life with anything approaching the thoroughness provided here by Boyle. This is virtually a day to day account from birth to age 40, multidimensionally presented as Boyle meticulously places Goethe in the total context of his environment and provides us with the background to judge the development of the young Goethe as both artist and man. The faults of this biography, some of them existing by sheer volume and weight of content, are many and obvious. But, the imperfections are also in my view irrelevant to the tremendous accomplishment of the work as a whole. First, be informed that Boyle is a first rate intellect who is almost as able as his subject to a clarity of expression and penetrating insight that one finds only in the best minds. Boyle is possessed of the intellectual talent to provide a synthesis of man, history, environment, religious and philosophical ideas as well as standard universal human values and emotions, which makes this biography unique in its all encompassing presentation of its subject. It is apparent from the beginning that Boyle is attempting to provide to the reader the development in all phases as Goethe passes through age 40, which is when this book ends. Secondly, Boyle provides thorough scholarship and obvious effort. It seems that Boyle has read every published word written by Goethe and much that has been written about him, and in addition to the mere reading has studied and logically glued together and digested the life in all its dimensions. While many biographies purport the same, the extent taken here appears to me to be unmatched. The results of this highly energetic undertaking is basically to subsume whatever imperfections exist in the work to give us what undoubtedly is the best biography of Goethe, and, I suspect, also the best biography, period. This review would be incomplete without a word about my reaction to Goethe himself, for this is an author who sparks an unusual amount of attention on the other side of the Atlantic, and after reading of the first 40 years of his life I would say the stage had been set by then as to how Goethe would subsequently be called the German Shakespeare. One of the first to write a biography of Goethe in English was George Henry Lewes, better known as the husband of George Eliot of Middlomarch and Silas Marner fame. And, I must add, after reading Boyle's work that this is an entertaining and fascinating life backgrounded by a spectacular but little understood German culture of the time, as we witness Goethe, the determined agnostic attempt to find a meaning for his life without religion. How this is done in the first 40 years provides for the reader a rewarding, entertaining experience, and also much food for thought.
Goethe: The Poet and the Age: Volume I: The Poetry of Desire (1749-1790) (Goethe, the Poet of the Age) by Nicholas Boyle - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!