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An Environmental History of Medieval Europe by Richard C. Hoffman

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Of Nature and Culture in the Middle Ages

An Environmental History of Medieval

Europe by RICHARD C. HOFFMANN

Cambridge Medieval Textbooks, 2014

\$29.99

Reviewed by GENEVIÈVE PIGEON

Interdisciplinary studies can prove to be tricky and many scholars will shy away from the idea. Richard C. Hoffmann obviously doesn't share this concern and proves just how fertile and fascinating such an approach can be. In *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe*, the Professor Emeritus and Senior Scholar in the Department of History at York University combines his knowledge of Medieval history and environmental history to think about nature and culture as being involved in an interactive and reciprocal relationship mediated by human material life: "Over time culture and nature co-adapt; they engage in co-evolution" (10). This interactive model, which Hoffmann explains in clear and accessible language designed to interest both undergraduate students and seasoned scholars looking for new perspectives, poses and answers "relational questions about the interplay of humans and their environment" (10).

Hoffmann's background in environmental history allows him to choose a few vocabulary items which prove to be essential to the understanding of his thesis, and lets readers get familiar with terms such as *colonization* or *biomass*, making a convincing case for a more dynamic collaboration between medievalists and scientists. Although we do not pretend to grasp all the nuances of the colonized ecosystem, we have to agree with Hoffmann about the importance of local

history, as ecosystems (or socio-natural sites) evolve according to specific natural or cultural factors. Always extremely careful in avoiding the risk of falling into the "reductionist trap of environmental determinism" (11), Hoffmann surveys ten centuries of European environmental history, bringing the natural world into the story as an agent and object of history. In doing so, he deals with structures and people of power (kings, emperors, bishops, church, merchants, communities, etc.) and shows how agriculture, mining, and hunting, for example, have shaped Europe's landscapes and relations to what is considered to be natural, even today.

While medievalists have been reading and learning about wheat consumption and its influence on the economy and agriculture of Europe for a long time, pathogens, as natural agents, are more seldom studied, usually briefly mentioned as sources of chaos and imbalance. In *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe*, we are reminded of just how autonomous the natural sphere can be, capable of altering human-environmental relations. In this regard, Hoffmann asserts that "all the prerogatives which medieval culture assigned to certain individuals, groups or institutions remained subject to powerful forces from the natural sphere" (278). In other words, nature conditions culture, even if nature can never be thought of outside of culture. This tension inspires the author to be extremely cautious in his understanding of the past, relying on scientific data as well as on texts, drawings and maps to better study the relation between nature and culture.

Of course, many other scholars have contributed to the field before Hoffmann and the author gives credit where credit is due; March Bloch and Georges Duby are

mentioned, and the still extremely popular thesis of Lynn White Jr. (on the influence of Christianity on the ecological crisis) and Garret Hardin (on the presumably inevitable overexploitation of common resources by self-governed groups) are discussed at length. Always cautious, Hoffmann reexamines these last two authors' statements to come to the conclusion that they do not fit the reality of what can be observed today. Of course, and the author is clearly aware of this, more advanced readers and scholars will, at times, feel like his examples and anecdotes could benefit from more details and, more importantly, sources. The absence of footnotes, while it does contribute to a comfortable and almost page-turning rhythm, prevents the reader from looking further into areas he or she is more interested in. Countries, cities, mountains, lakes, people and events are included in a convincing narrative, supported by graphics, reproductions and aerial photos; it can, however, be frustrating to jump from one area to the next, without really knowing why the author chose these examples instead of all the other ones he left aside.

The list of suggested titles for further reading could help broaden the discussion, although Hoffmann acknowledges the predominance of English authors and texts. Sadly, important scholars such as Michel Pastoureau (whose work on bears and pigs in the Middle Ages is remarkable) or Michel Zinz (on poetry and nature in the Middle Ages) are missing. We

understand, of course, the author's intention and can't completely disagree with it, but can't help but wonder if the interdisciplinary approach shouldn't or couldn't benefit from an international and plurilingual approach. Can one really exist without the other?

Despite these few remarks, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* is a fascinating book, one that will cause the reader to pause and think about the names of rivers and mountains, about the origins of the food we eat and the image of the so-called rustic and disorganized medieval peasants and workers. What emerges from this book is the portrait of a civilization controlled by a few, whose power forced all the ones under it to adapt and to make the best of difficult situations. As Hoffmann puts it, "programmes and actions always served the interests of people with power more than they did others or the environment itself" (194). Things haven't changed that much, or so it seems.

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