

History

THE BLACK DEATH AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WEST.

By David Herlihy. Edited by Samuel K. Cohn, Jr. 128 pp. Harvard Univ. Press. \$27 hardcover, \$12 paper

As a teacher, the Brown University historian David Herlihy was a model medievalist, an unassuming man adept at unraveling technical details of demography and society, and equally able to provoke students with the big questions. His last and posthumous work (he died in 1991), though brief, is a splendid memorial.

We are approaching the 650th anniversary



of Europe's worst natural disaster, the bubonic plague of 1348. The cataclysmic "Black Death"—a term coined in the 16th century and popularized in the 19th—reduced the continent's population by as much as two-thirds, leaving behind an indelible record in contemporary chronicles, art, and (in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*) literature. With the discovery of the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* a century ago, the biological roots of the epidemic became clear. The social factors behind the plague, however, remain controversial.

Herlihy addresses today's most widely accepted social explanations for the epidemic, the Malthusian and the Marxist. Did the Black Death result from overpopulation, declining living standards, and malnutrition, as the former theory suggests? The author thinks not, because European population had been high for decades without a major epidemic and because the population con-

tinued to fall for decades after the plague. Malnutrition may even have afforded some protection against disease; bacteria, like their human hosts, need nutrients to survive. Was the true cause, as the Marxist explanation holds, heightened exploitation of the peasantry by lords who, when the real value of their rents declined, turned to war and pillage? No, because nonfeudal regions such as Tuscany suffered similarly. Herlihy argues that the Europe of 1348 was stagnant but not in crisis. Its population density, though high with respect to available technology and resources, was sustainable when the plague struck. Whatever other social and economic

patterns may have promoted the plague, the author discounts deprivation as a cause.

While the mass death was not a consequence of social decline, Herlihy contends, it did prove to be a terrible but effective catalyst for social renewal. It broke demographic, economic, and technological deadlocks by depleting the work force and raising labor costs. Landlords had to offer tenants forms of capital such as

oxen and seed. Artisans had to extend guild apprenticeships beyond the family circle. Craftsman-entrepreneurs such as Johannes Gutenberg found ways to substitute technology for manpower. With soldiers and sailors as with scribes, the labor shortage stimulated innovation: introduction of firearms and larger ships.

Disease changed European culture, too. In higher education, the plague dealt a terrible blow to Oxford, whose student population declined from 30,000 to 6,000; in all, five of Europe's 30 universities had to close. Yet pious bequests and the need for new clergy led to new colleges at Oxford and Cambridge as well as innovative new universities in Prague and Florence. In science, the obviously contagious nature of the plague challenged Galenic medicine to modify a model of disease that recognized only imbalances of humors. The plague also left its mark on religion. The search for divine pro-

tection led to a new vigor in devotion to the saints (and to newly popular saints—in Florence, parents began to name their sons Sebastian, Bartholomew, and Christopher), which sharpened the already growing controversy over their role in Christianity. In some respects, then, mass mortality and depopulation may be healthy for technology, learning, faith, and other living forces: a cheerful reflection for the new millennium.

—Edward Tenner

DIVIDED MEMORY:

The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys.

By Jeffrey Herf. Harvard Univ. Press.

560 pp. \$29.95

Herf, a historian at Ohio University, reveals how the leaders of both post-World War II Germanys manipulated memory of the Holocaust for political ends. Rather than following the path of *Vergangenheitsbewng* (coming to terms with the past) paved in the early postwar years by, for example, the West German Social Democrat Kurt Schumacher and the East German Communist Paul Merker, the two nations construed history through the distorting lens of ideology.

During the 1950s, West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer allowed millions of Nazi-era civil servants and judges to reassume their former positions. Adenauer believed that integrating the former Nazi supporters could help stabilize and nurture the new democracy. The nation paid a heavy price for his decision: a series of scandals about the Nazi records of these officials, which in turn fueled widespread political disaffection, especially among young people. With time, political freedom and open debate led to criticism of the Adenauer years, criticism that included efforts to comprehend the Nazi past.

In the East, Communist Party leader Walter Ulbricht shamelessly followed Stalin's anti-Semitic policies, purging "Cosmopolitanism" in 1952-53 to establish communist martyrdom at the core of anti-fascist memory. To justify the communist dictatorship, Ulbricht interpreted the murder of millions of Jews as nothing more than confirmation of Nazi brutality. Herf, who gained access to the archives of the Central Committee of the SED (East Germany's communist party) and those of the Ministry of State Security (the Stasi),

is particularly incisive here. Although anti-Nazism became part of the East German collective memory, the "Jewish question" remained largely unfronted for years. Still, the seeds were planted. In one of its first declarations in 1990, East Germany's democratically elected parliament—which governed for the six months prior to reunification—expressed remorse for the crimes of the Nazi past *and* for the policies of the communist regime toward Jewish people.

—Burkhard Koch

HOMESTEADING.

By Percy Wollaston. Lyons & Burford.

131 pp. \$20

Jonathan Raban's lyrical 1996 book *Bad Land* recounts the settlement of eastern Montana early in this century. A heretofore unpublished memoir by a settler, *Homesteading* was one of Raban's primary sources. Wollaston was six years old in 1910 when his family left a rented farm in South Dakota to take title to a 320-acre homestead near Ismay, Montana. They built a house, planted crops, and survived the winter—"I don't think there is anything that can make cold seem more penetrating or dismal than that creak of wagon tires in cold snow." After a few years, though, Ismay fell into a slump. The livery barn closed, the lumber yard burned, and a tornado leveled the town hall, "leaving the piano sitting forlornly in its place with the sheet music still on the rack." Wollaston moved west in 1924, planning on college but ending up a firefighter; his parents abandoned the farm two years later.

Bad Land portrays the homesteaders as tragic figures—bamboozled by railroad tycoons who needed more residents in order to make new rail lines profitable, gulled by a balmy theory that rainfall increases as population grows, exploited by shiftless bankers and too-easy credit. *Homesteading*, by contrast, depicts plucky survivors. "The next meal might be potatoes and water gray but you didn't hear anything about hardship unless somebody burned out or broke a leg," Wollaston writes. He tells of a drifter who came across a Norwegian farmer's homestead. The farmer was away, so, as was customary, the visitor fixed himself a meal. After dinner he sat down, had a smoke, then took the shotgun down from the farmer's wall and blew his head off. Raban, in his foreword to *Homesteading*,