

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stella Fletcher. *The Longman Companion to Renaissance Europe, 1390-1530*. Harlow, England: Longman, 2000. xiii + 347 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-29882-8; \$95.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-29881-1.

Reviewed by Brian W. Ogilvie (Department of History, University of Massachusetts Amherst)

Published on H-W-Civ (March, 2000)



A Brief Guide to a Traditional Renaissance

Teachers in Renaissance studies who want a compact handbook of basic historical and cultural data for their courses should consider Stella Fletcher's *Longman Companion to the European Renaissance*. For courses focusing on the traditional topics of politics and high culture, Fletcher's handbook will be useful. Others will have to look to other reference works to meet their needs.

The handbook is divided into twenty-five sections, including the bibliography. The first seven are, roughly speaking, political: after a chronology of public events, the author provides an overview of Renaissance popes, the Holy Roman Empire, heads of states and dynasties, genealogical tables for the Sforza and the Habsburgs, courts, and republican governments. Three brief sections address social and economic history: urban life, population, and commerce. One short section covers warfare; another, rather longer, the church. Renaissance learning receives six sections: a glossary of literary terms, education, letters and lives of humanists and vernacular writers, a list of libraries, a brief account of printing, and a section on science. Four more sections address the fine arts: music and musicians, chronologies of the visual arts, a glossary of the visual arts, and plans and designs. One section provides a chronology of European exploration and expansion, and just before the bibliography the author includes two maps of Europe and five city plans. A twenty-six page selected bibliography and a twenty-seven page index round out the volume.

The Renaissance that emerges from this collection is traditional. Fletcher emphasizes events and personalities, not social structures and institutions; correspondingly, her principle formats are the chronology and the biographical sketch. Fletcher justifies this traditional focus on pragmatic grounds: she chose topics based on "the ease with which they suit the format of a work of reference," so there are many "obvious lacunae" in the book (p. xi). This explanation is not entirely convincing; brief definitions or narratives are suited to many topics, such as social history, which are omitted. The real strengths and weaknesses of this *Companion* reflect not the difficulties of format but the author's interests.

The primary strength of the book lies in its numerous chronologies. Fletcher has carefully identified important political and cultural events, providing a level of detail that should be adequate for undergraduate courses without deviating into the trivial. With their pan-European focus (including, in some cases, Muscovy and the Ottomans), the chronologies will help students relate narratives that are usually treated discretely, such as political developments in Italy and Northern Europe before the Italian Wars. Teachers or students looking for a chronology more detailed than those in most textbooks or brief handbooks like the *Anchor Atlas of World History* will find these useful.

The biographical sketches will interest many readers as well, particularly those needing very brief accounts of

political or cultural leaders. The entries on Renaissance popes, for example, indicate the pontiff's education, experience before election, political role, nepotistic activities, and cultural patronage. For literary figures, Fletcher lists education, offices, works, and other scholarly significance. Such entries provide the basic facts necessary for understanding the public lives of their subjects, but their personalities rarely shine through: we learn that the composer Bartolomeo Tromboncino murdered his wife and lover and then was pardoned (p. 207), but this is an exception.

The bibliography is a third strong point. It is carefully selected and organized, and includes important recent studies as well as classics. The sections on urban life, commerce, and the economy are rich, in contrast to the reference entries on those topics. With few exceptions, the areas in which the bibliography contains few recent entries are generally those where few English-speaking historians are currently active.

These strengths, however, are offset by several weaknesses in the range and detail of the information provided. In some cases, the author provides no more than the facts that would be found in any textbook. Other areas are omitted entirely. Finally, some details seem more appropriate to a specialized text than a reference handbook, and it is hard to see why they were included.

For example, the two pages on population are brief and relatively unhelpful. A short introduction notes some of the problems involved in estimating populations but provides no hint of how historical demographers address those problems. It also observes that the proportion of urban to rural population varied widely but gives little detail. The rest of the section comprises two tables, one of the total European population in 1450 and 1500 and the other of the largest cities in Europe ca. 1500 and their populations. The first table is taken from two different sources, with no discussion of how comparable the figures for 1450 and 1500 are; in a handbook aimed at students, this is a serious omission. Furthermore, the section on population does not address the age structure of the population, marriage patterns, birth and death rates, and other topics that historical demographers have been investigating and debating for over half a century. A map of population densities, even rough estimates, would have greatly assisted students in understanding the social structure of Renaissance Europe.

If population is treated too briefly, other areas are completely omitted. Money and commerce receive attention, but primary production, trades, and manufacturing

are missing. The omission of agriculture and mining is perhaps understandable, since they are not part of traditional Renaissance history courses, and Fletcher does mention the discovery of alum in Tolfa and Volterra (pp. 22, 26). But it is surprising that textile manufacture, one of the chief industries of Renaissance Europe, goes almost unmentioned. Given the book's political focus, it is also surprising that it contains no discussion of the organization of justice and finance. In my experience, these are two areas that often confuse students; they are also critical for understanding how Renaissance monarchs extended their authority to form territorial states.

Finally, a few sections provide a strange selection of detail, more appropriate for a lecture than a reference book. The section of "selected Christian writers" includes only four names (pp. 146-147). The author notes that these writers "should not be regarded in isolation from Christian scholars such as Erasmus, who are featured elsewhere," but that advice is not very helpful for the beginning student, who would have little idea of which other Christian scholars are meant. A few other sections also seem to presume the same familiarity with the rest of the book. It's also not clear what principle guided the section on plans and designs, which presents an elevation and floor plan of the Palazzo Medici, floor plans of Bramante's design for St. Peter's and of Charles V's palace in Granada, a schematic showing where statues were located on Orsanmichele, and a plan indicating which scenes were depicted on the ceiling and walls of the Sistine Chapel. The last two diagrams seem particularly odd because there are no photographs of either the statues or the frescoes.

A handful of factual errors should be corrected in later editions. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (published in 1496) was not the primary impetus to the European witch craze (p. 32), which peaked roughly a century later. Duke John the Fearless of Burgundy was assassinated, a fact noted in the chronology (p. 9) but not in the biographical sketch of Burgundian dukes (p. 69). Ludovico "il Moro" Sforza was Galeazzo Maria's brother, not his son (p. 79; the correct relation is indicated further down the page). Machiavelli should be included in the list of important republican writers (p. 104). In *Gargantua*, Rabelais satirized scholastic education, not humanist education (p. 174). Erasmus did not edit all the Church Fathers, as the biographical sketch of him implies (p. 180). "Hypnerotomachia" means "battle of love in a dream," not "erotic dream" (p. 194). Adriaan Willaert's name is misspelled, and students unfamiliar with this composer will not recognize the error (p. 207 and the index).

In the end, the usefulness of this *Companion* will depend on the kind of course it is chosen to accompany. For courses on the Renaissance that focus on politics and high culture, it would make a useful counterpart to lectures and narrative texts. Teachers who emphasize institutions (except for the Church) and social history will need to look elsewhere for a reference book, though they should consider sending their students to the bibliography. Beginning graduate students in Renaissance history could also profitably consult the bibliography. Advanced graduate students and professionals should save their money for more detailed reference works.

As a coda, it is hard to understand why Longman

charges so much for this book. Even those teachers inclined to use the *Companion* will have a hard time justifying the \$31 price tag (for the paperback edition!) to their students. The book has no expensive color plates and few figures. For a book that is designed to complement textbooks, not replace them, the price seems too steep, and it will undoubtedly deter some teachers from assigning the book in their courses.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-w-civ>

Citation: Brian W. Ogilvie. Review of Fletcher, Stella, *The Longman Companion to Renaissance Europe, 1390-1530*. H-W-Civ, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3887>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.