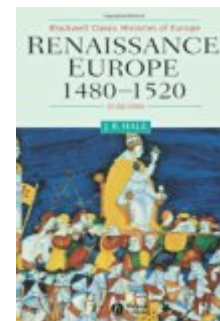


J. R. Hale. *Renaissance Europe 1480-1520*. Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000. xiv + 280 pp. \$62.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-631-21625-4.



Reviewed by Rhiman A. Rotz

Published on H-W-Civ (January, 2001)

Life in the Renaissance, Not Revised

The late J. R. Hale's *Renaissance Europe* is indeed a "classic history," so it is good to have it back in print. Though written thirty years ago, as part of the Fontana History of Europe series (published in the U.S. by Harper and Row), its brilliant evocation of the "quality of life" at the peak of the Renaissance era, for many different types and groups of people at several different social and economic levels, has in many ways not been surpassed. In particular, while Hale defends the concept of a Renaissance period held together by a cultural movement which transformed European ideas and style, a significant step on the way to the modern world, his extensive knowledge of the evidence and careful, balanced treatment of it still provides an excellent corrective to those textbooks, particularly Western Civilization textbooks, which "over-modernize" the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Hale avoids facile generalizations like "the birth of the modern world," and if in the end he might agree that something new and important was happening in the Renaissance period, he also

constantly reminds us just how small and fragile that infant was. That said, however, it is difficult to discover exactly what might justify calling this version a "second edition" instead of merely a re-print. Michael Mallett has added a six-page preface and appended five and a half pages to the bibliography, but the text stands virtually untouched.

Indeed, the title for this work, always a bit misleading, has if anything become even more so. The reader who picks up this volume expecting a standard narrative history of the four decades between 1480 and 1520 will almost certainly be not only disappointed but bewildered. The original edition carried a subtitle, *the Individual and Society*, which at least provided a clue that this work is not a reference on who did what, when. But, in fairness, probably no title could really prepare the reader for the richness of detail, the countless examples of real events as experienced by real people, which Hale has assembled from his extensive knowledge of the sources. For example, political history here is no recitation of monarchs and their battles.

Instead, Hale compares the institutions, as they developed during this time span, of five different types of regime: one republic (Florence), one monarchy which avoided succession problems (France), one dual monarchy (Spain), one monarchy that suffered through a disputed succession that led to civil war and a new ruling family (England), and, finally, the Holy Roman Empire. The volume also contains some of the most sensitive and carefully drawn writing on economic and social stratification in these centuries that has ever been done—for example, on how most people identified far more strongly with their occupational group than with any lower or bourgeois "class," let alone a "third estate" (pp. 126-127); on the countless specific variations in peasant land tenure and service requirements that make it difficult to speak of a "peasantry," shaped not only by the different kinds of land but also by humans working together to use it over the centuries (pp. 149-150); on how the Church provided, in some respects, its own separate and distinct status system, so that top-level clerics were "stepping sideways from the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie" into an "adjacent niche" (p. 168).

Arguably, the best use a Western Civilization teacher can make of this work is to mine it frequently for the specific illustrations and anecdotes which support or, particularly for this subject, qualify our points. The textbook I use, Brummett et al., *Civilization Past and Present* (9th edition 2000), like most, makes some sweeping generalizations about the Renaissance period: for example, that during it, thanks to the "system of economic individualism known as capitalism," plus overseas expansion, "Europe rapidly became the economic center of the world" (pp. 352-353). Anyone who fears, as I do, that such assertions will leave today's students with the impression that there was little difference between Renaissance commerce and today's globalized economy, can dip into Hale to point out that c. 1500, by the fastest means available, it still took ten and a half days to send a message from Brussels to Rome (p.

20), and merchants merely moving goods on the Seine from Paris to Rouen would pay tolls on them fifteen times (p. 102).

Hale also knows that "[t]he age of the all-around man was also the age in which the hilts, the blades and the sheath of swords were made by different guilds, [and] when a saddle was the work of three separate crafts" (p. 109). The Brummett text tells my students that Renaissance thinkers with "new secular interests and values" developed "a culture that depended on individualism, on skepticism, and ultimately on science" (p. 356).

Hale, in contrast, speaks too of "a civilisation where not only devotion but the whole cast of secular life was permeated by Christian observance" (p. 163); where sermons drew huge crowds and works with religious subject matter constituted roughly half the books printed (pp. 176-178). While emphasizing the significance of humanism as a new state of mind, Hale also notes that "in spite of its relevance, the driving force behind the study of antiquity was still primarily scholarly and literary. Humanism makes no sense unless we see at its core a purely intellectual excitement," the fundamental "scholarly enthusiasms" of going back to the sources (pp. 214, 221). As to individualism, Hale bluntly says "[t]his was not an age in which the individual had grown away from the need to be linked to others" (p. 71); for example, religious confraternities multiplied (p. 87), and kinship ties may have been stronger than ever (pp. 71, 89). In any case, so little attention was paid to documenting the individual life that even King Louis XII of France did not know his birthday, and so could not establish his age with a margin of error of less than two years or so (p. 5). Hale tells us, too, that the concept "scientist" was still unknown; arguably the best examples of applied science and calculation came from astrologers and magicians (pp. 236, 241). While the West's fascination with precision measurement may indeed have begun with artists of the Renais-

sance, Hale reminds us that at the same time many clocks still lacked a minute hand (p. 2); even literate men often could not multiply, divide, or do fractions other than halves, and though Arabic numerals were known, a stubborn continued reliance on Roman ones meant that in calculations, errors probably outweighed correct answers (pp. 111-112).

This closeness to the sources, to life as it was actually lived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, gives the work, as Mallett points out in his preface, "a certain timelessness" (p. ix). In the case of this "second edition," that aspect is fortunate, because even though the word "revised," or one of its derivatives, appears seven times in that new preface, in fact Hale's original text has scarcely been altered. The type has been completely reset, which provided an opportunity to correct typographic errors (though the chance was not always taken: for example, "*textural* discovery" for textual, p. 210, and "the wide variety of source materials *than* humanists thought pertinent," for that, p. 229, are both mistakes repeated from the earlier edition). However, one wonders whether a historian was really at the wheel at all times during this project. For example, the original edition mentioned the *Junkers* of Prussia, in Italics of course, so that the word began with a lovely traditional Italic "J" with a scrolled top line and a crossbar in the middle. In the second edition, the group has become the *Funkers* of Prussia (p. 152).

There are a few improvements. In the original, chapter subdivisions were marked off in the body of the text only by Roman numerals, even though they had names too, which appeared at the top, in the header, of odd-numbered pages. This edition has brought those subdivision names down into the text as well, appearing as subheadings. The population estimates for Germany and France have been lowered to better reflect current thinking (pp. 19, 244). The maps are bigger. Nevertheless, if your institution's library already has the 1971 edition, it would be very difficult to

justify purchasing this one. Bringing the work back into print, though, at least provides an opportunity for a new generation of historians, or anyone else who missed this "classic" the first time around, to become acquainted with a history that, as Mallett says (p. ix), gives us "a sense of what it was like to live and think and talk in the Renaissance."

Copyright (c) 2001 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: Rhiman A. Rotz. Review of Hale, J. R. *Renaissance Europe 1480-1520*. H-W-Civ, H-Net Reviews. January, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4860>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.