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The sultan Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn—known to the West as “Saladin”—is famous even in the present day as the Muslim ruler who recaptured Jerusalem from the crusaders. In *Saladin*, prolific historian and travel writer John Man presents a complete biographical account of Saladin’s life, while also building his narrative around the Crusades. He charts Saladin’s rise to power specifically as the path that brought him to Jerusalem, whose capture he chronicles in the central chapters of the book, though Saladin died only six years later. For this reason, *Saladin* can also be characterized as a contribution to the popular history of the Crusades. After covering the Third Crusade and Saladin’s death, Man ends the book with a chapter on leadership and another on the legacy of Saladin throughout the intervening centuries. The latter is perhaps Man’s most important contribution, although this chapter would have benefited by including some of the excellent research and analysis that has already been done in this area. While Man offers problematic conclusions for the current political scene (described below), this volume nevertheless succeeds in presenting a vivid picture of medieval life in the Middle East that will appeal to a popular audience.

Man is at his best when recreating the cultural and political landscape for his audience. For instance, the book opens, not with a description of Saladin, but with a picture of his “hometown,” Baalbek, Lebanon, as it would have been nine hundred years ago. Man’s depiction of the sights, sounds, and even smells of Baalbek evokes the city in striking and visceral terms. Throughout the book, Man continues to provide colorful descriptions of the world in which Saladin lived. His storytelling is supplemented by liberal quotations from contemporary Arabic sources, which are a wonderful addition to English-language popular histories of the Crusades.

Unfortunately, Man’s treatment of these sources is inconsistent. Although he occasionally questions the credibility of specific claims, he more often accepts assertions or stories without considering context or motive. Moreover, although Man’s world-building is rich, his character-building often lacks nuance. Man’s biographical sketch of Saladin at times slips into hagiography, portraying him as a hero. Saladin’s positive actions are often judged the result of innate personality traits while his more negative behaviors are portrayed as circumstantial. In addition, Man characterizes Saladin as a man of unprecedented foresight. For example, he suggests that Saladin held an implacable “certainty that one day his [Muslim] rivals would be his allies in the true battle still to come, the jihad against the Franks” (p. 83). The outcome of this characterization is that
Man privileges Saladin’s role in reuniting the Islamic world and recapturing Jerusalem, to the extent that all other historical factors appear irrelevant or secondary.

*Saladin* is Man’s first foray into the Middle East, which perhaps explains his imprecise and occasionally misleading language about the Islamic world. For instance, Man uses the term “Islam” throughout the book to describe not only the religion but also the entire Islamicate world (*dār al-Islām*). Man writes, for example, that “Islam, despite all its diversity and violence, was united by religion and culture” (p. 2; see also pp. 6, 55, 63, and 126 for further examples). In a popular history aimed at English-speakers, it is understandable that Man might refrain from using Arabic spellings for names or the Muslim calendar for dates. Yet greater care could have been taken to avoid the type of choice described above.

Finally, and most importantly, the connections Man draws between the early crusading era and the modern world are troubling and problematic. His argument, essentially, is that now, as during the Middle Ages, the Muslim world is divided by a sectarian schism while simultaneously facing a “challenge from without” (then, the Crusaders; now, Israel and the United States) and seeking a simple solution: jihad. Man references these ideas throughout the book, such as when he casually compares the Assassins to “suicide bombers,” notes that the crusader Reynald developed an “implacable Islamophobia,” or argues that Muslims were looking for a leader to “drive the Franks into the Sea” (pp. 10, 106, and 19, respectively).

The roles of sectarian divides, colonialism, and violence in the history of the Crusades, as in the current state of affairs in the Middle East, are complex and reflect historically situated circumstances. Rather than comparing these situations in a meaningful way, Man reductively describes similarities in their most basic form to create significance for a medieval story. More troubling, perhaps, is his one-size-fits-all characterization of the conflict and of the players involved. Man defines the goals of both medieval and modern Muslims as singular and uniform: unity and jihad. Whether purposefully or to create relevance for his story, Man’s loose connections and simplifications devalue a potentially compelling narrative that offers an inviting look at the world in which Saladin lived.
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