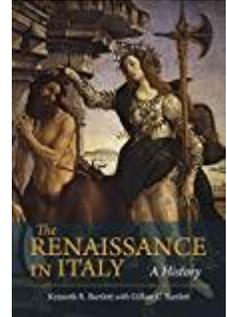




Kenneth R. Bartlett, Gillian C. Bartlett. *The Renaissance in Italy: A History.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2019. 416 pp. \$78.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62466-819-7.



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This book aims at creating an accessible synthesis of the Italian Renaissance for nonspecialists. It argues that the Renaissance began with Petrarch and was defined by a new sense of individualism, secularism, and a focus on the dignity of man. From Petrarch, the Renaissance flowered in the republican environment of fifteenth-century Florence, with Leonardo Bruni a critical figure. From Florence, the book examines key political and cultural developments across the Italian peninsula. Its final section focuses on Rome, where the narrative reaches the end of the Renaissance after Counter-Reformation popes began rejecting the heritage of classical antiquity. This book includes a good range of rulers, artists, and authors. However, scholars may find that the book's interpretations and assumptions contrast with many of the conclusions within recent scholarship.

The book marks another entry in Kenneth Bartlett's prolific production of accessible syntheses on Renaissance Italy. For example, Bartlett has authored lectures for The Great Courses series

popular in public libraries. He has authored a common textbook, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance* (2013), and a sourcebook of the period, *The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance* (2011). Recently he has written a short synthetic work focused on the Medici and Savonarola in Florence for Hackett Publishing. Bartlett joins forces with Gillian C. Bartlett for this new synthesis, *The Renaissance in Italy*, also published by Hackett. The book developed out of the experiences of the authors leading tours and delivering lectures for nonspecialists.

The book argues for an Italian Renaissance that began with Petrarch and ended with the Counter-Reformation in Rome. It opens by claiming that the Renaissance was defined by Petrarch's interest in classical studies, his newfound individualism, and his increasing interest in the affairs of this world in addition to those of the next. From Petrarch, Coluccio Salutati served as a transitional figure to bring the Renaissance to Florence. Bartlett claims that the Renaissance became embedded in the republicanism and liberty of

Florence with Leonardo Bruni as its leader. Humanism became the foundation for other cultural developments, with humanism defined as an anti-scholastic ideology focused on the dignity of man. Florentine liberty, Bruni, and then Cosimo de' Medici defeated both the tyrant Giangaleazzo Visconti in Milan and would-be oppressors in Florence from the Albizzi faction. Out of their victories emerged a new Renaissance culture indebted to Florentine republicanism. Cosimo was a popular ruler, generous, and a defender of the Florentine republic. Lorenzo is presented as enjoying near universal acclaim and as a promotor of Renaissance culture. After Lorenzo's death, his son Piero proved ineffectual and succumbed to a popular uprising, with Savonarola coming to power as a backlash against the increasingly esoteric Renaissance culture and a tool of the enemies of the Medici. A final chapter on Machiavelli concludes the book's treatment of Florence.

From republican Florence, humanism spread to other Italian centers in northern and north-western Italy. In chapters on Milan, Mantua, Ferrara, and Urbino readers are introduced to well and lesser-known rulers, artists, and authors. The political narrative is clear, even as at times the successive chapter sections on individual rulers and cultural producers read more like stand-alone pieces than part of a broader narrative. The treatment of rulers in these chapters differs from the consistent praise of members of the Medici family. The chapters often relate a bewildering array of vices and crimes committed by members of the Visconti, the Sforza, the Este, and the Gonzaga families. Despite their negative traits, the book also presents some of the key pieces of culture and cultural producers working for each family. The treatment of Federico da Montefeltro in Urbino is somewhat different. Federico mostly escapes an association with numerous crimes. Rather, Federico is presented as a metaphor for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. While alive, Federico was the light of the Renaissance. After his death, discussions about theories rather than actions be-

came dominant, even as the Italian peninsula was plundered. The book argues that these theoretical discussions captured in *The Courtier* (1528) serve as a metaphor for an Italy that is powerless in the face of northern invaders.

The book then turns to other areas of Italy. Venice did not embrace Renaissance culture until after the Battle of Agnadello in 1509. The book claims that the Renaissance barely entered the Kingdom of Naples or Sicily, with the notable exception of the court of Alfonso the Magnanimous. As in other courts, the Angevin and Aragonese monarchs usually were intent on little but power for themselves. The final section of the book turns to Rome and the papacy. Here, each chronological chapter features subsections on individual popes. Throughout the sections, popes and cardinals tend to be evaluated based upon their patronage of Renaissance culture. Although many popes were sinful or zealots, the Medici popes are treated as an exception to broader trends. Finally, the Counter-Reformation popes began rejecting pagan culture and created the Roman Inquisition as well as the Index of Prohibited Books. The last Renaissance pope, Sixtus V, completely rejected the papacy as an heir to pagan Rome, which the book argues had been an idea begun by Petrarch and that, once it ended, signaled that the Renaissance was over. The book concludes with a short section arguing for the continued significance of the Italian Renaissance as foundational and continually influential on many aspects of the early modern and even present world.

As a work of popular history, the book introduces some of the best-known and even lesser-known rulers and cultural producers in Italy between 1300 and 1600. The production of the book lends itself to pleasure reading. It is full of color images, often of less common subjects and always with an extensive, but accessible, description of the object shown and its broader significance. The book also has a broader geographical range than many other popular syntheses. Cer-

tainly, the book begins with Florence and argues for Florentine centrality in the Renaissance, but it also devotes ample space to Ferrara, Mantua, Urbino, Milan, and other places. The book succeeds at laying out a lot of basic information for nonspecialists in a way that will, I think, provoke a desire in many readers to learn more about many different topics. Finally, the book tries to answer the always difficult question of why the Renaissance still matters today.

However, the book's embrace, at times, of older claims and assumptions detracts from these notable qualities. Many studies have challenged the idea that the Renaissance was a period defined by individualism. The book presents humanism as an elite ideology focused on republicanism and the dignity of man, but few specialized studies still make those claims. In addition, the contrasting treatment of rulers in the book is puzzling. Members of the Medici family consistently receive praise in the book's pages, while the book reports the worst possible rumors about rulers in other places. The treatment of Naples contrasts with recent scholarship by historians and literary scholars both in and outside of Naples. Venice is also claimed to have only embraced Renaissance culture during the sixteenth century, but that argument, too, disregards a rich body of scholarship on fifteenth-century culture and humanism in Venice and the Veneto. The book makes references to religion and religious themes even as it presents the essence of the Renaissance as secular. Recent scholarship argues for the significance and dynamism of scholasticism in the period, rather than the older view that it was something stale, retrograde, and out of fashion. Other work by scholars is absent—studies that decenter the Renaissance; that show the varieties of Renaissance culture; that challenge the idea that Florence birthed the Renaissance; and that show that Florentine culture was not always the example against which all others should be compared.

In summary, this book's anecdotes and accessibility will make a possibly fun read for nonspecialists. Its inclusion of places sometimes absent from popular books is also a positive. But the content of the book, unfortunately, repeats many questionable assumptions and claims that specialists have, in some cases, been trying to dispel for three generations or more. Certainly, popular texts have to appeal to readers with a coherent and accessible narrative that does not assume a great deal of background information. A popular book, I think, also must acknowledge and work through many common stereotypes that readers may have about the past, using recent studies to present an accessible synthesis of the current state of the field. It is an extremely difficult balancing act. Unfortunately, *The Renaissance in Italy: A History* pushes the balance too far to one side, and consequently readers may find many popular stereotypes confirmed rather than challenged.

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