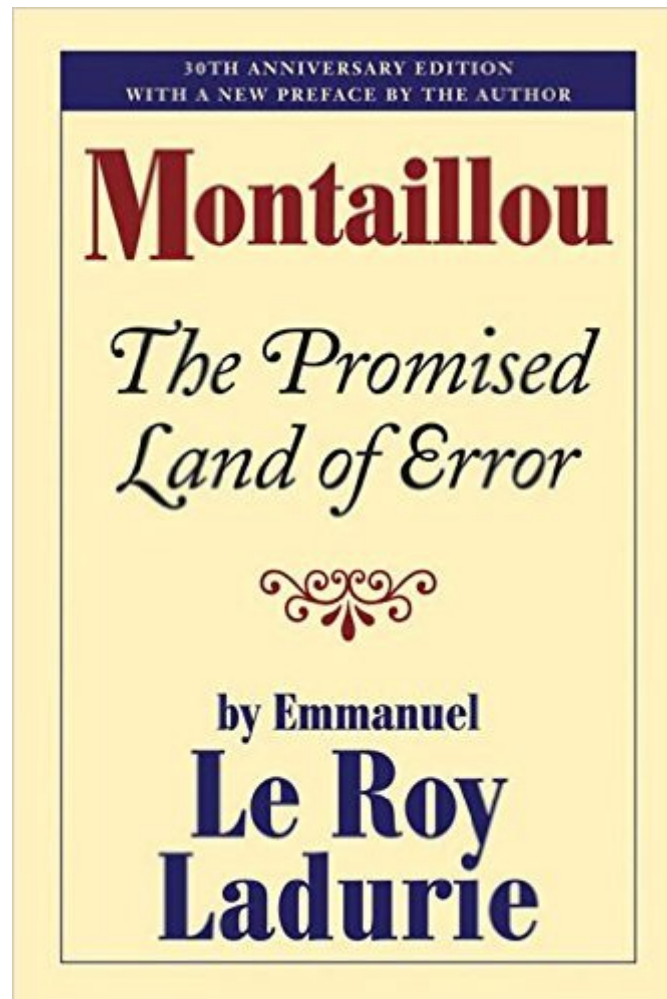


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Montaillou: The Promised Land Of Error



Synopsis

"Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie has had a success which few historians experience and which is usually reserved for the winner of the Prix Goncourt...Montaillou, which is the reconstruction of the social life of a medieval village, has been acclaimed by the experts as a masterpiece of ethnographic history and by the public as a sensational revelation of the thoughts, feelings, and activities of the ordinary people of the past." — Times Literary Supplement. With a new introduction by author Le Roy Ladurie, this special edition offers a fascinating history of a fourteenth-century village, Montaillou, in the mountainous region of southern France, almost destroyed by internal feuds and religious heterodoxy. Ladurie's portrait is based on a detailed register of Jacques Fournier, Bishop of Pamiers and future Pope Benedict XII, who conducted rigorous inquisition into heresy within his diocese. Fournier was a consummate inquisitor, an acute psychologist who was able to elicit from the accused the innermost secrets of their thoughts and actions. He was pitiless in the pursuit of error, and meticulous in recording that pursuit. LeRoy Ladurie analyzes the behavior, demography, social mentality, and cosmology of the community of peasants and shepherds, and vividly evokes the daily life of the village and mountain pastures. His portrait of Montaillou is dominated by the personal histories of two men: the curé Pierre Clergue, a brutal and powerful man who placed his enemies in the hands of the inquisitor; and the shepherd Pierre Maury, a friend of the Albigensian perfecti and a fatalist who returned from Spain to disappear in the inquisitor's prison in his own country. Montaillou, which has received even more praise than LeRoy Ladurie's earlier work, provides a portrait of a fascinating place with a dark, intriguing history.

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Customer Reviews

Having read many of the reviews of 'Montaillou' at .com, I feel compelled to put fingers to keyboard in defence of this marvellous book. I have read both the original French version AND this most recent translation, and feel that the flavour, color, atmosphere and historical accuracy lose NOTHING in translation. As to the footnotes, etc - 'Montaillou' is, first and foremost, an ACADEMIC book. It is not a 'light read', and if Le Roy Ladurie is sometimes a little pedantic with his footnotes and cross-references, it is because he is an academic whose chief aim is to adhere as closely as possible to the historical data he is working with. I think that potential readers might be a little 'put off' by some of the criticisms of the reviewers, yet if they approach 'Montaillou' with the knowledge that it IS an academic work and not a 'novel', then they won't be disappointed. In saying this, 'Montaillou' would work WONDERFULLY as a novel - all the elements are already in place for a beautifully rich and romantic tale of the Middle Ages - but until 'Montaillou - The Novel' is written, we must content ourselves with this sound, insightful and ultimately fulfilling ACADEMIC book.

Every once in a while, some terrible act results in good. For example, the same Spanish bishop -- Diego de Landa -- who burned the irreplaceable writings of the Mayans wrote a book which was critical in subsequent scholars' understanding of Mayan culture. So also the inquisition established in southwest France in the early years of the 14th century to root out the last vestiges of the Cathar heresy resulted, ultimately, in this little treasure of a book. The Albigensian Crusade had dealt a death-blow to Catharism, but rural pockets of the heresy persisted. The ambitious bishop of Pamiers, Jacques Fournier, brought in all the residents of one village for questioning. Consisting mostly of shepherds and peasants, Montaillou was a hotbed of Catharism, including the parish priest! Everyone was questioned in detail about their religious practices, households, relationships, work, and travel. Their testimony was taken down verbatim by a clerk; and, after the trial, the records lay untouched in the library of the Vatican until Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote this book. This is not the usual study of wealthy, educated, and influential Medieval people. Here we have the voice of Everyman. In addition to a great deal of detail about the practices of the Cathar "goodmen," with their sacraments of heretition, the "consolamentum," and the awful "endura," we see how average people formed households, managed to eke out a living, what they talked about, how they got along with their neighbors, how faithful they were to their wives -- in effect, everything. Because Le Roy Ladurie is a scholarly historian, there are hundreds of footnotes pointing to records of this particular inquisitorial proceeding. They do not manage, however, to cover up the voices of the people of Montaillou, as they tried to explain to their inquisitors the details of their

everyday lives. It took me a little while to realize the uniqueness of this book as I read it. Then it came clear to me that these were the voices of the little people who are almost never heard in history.

This is one of THE most important books for anyone interested in the varieties of the human mind. Thanks to the compulsive thoroughness of an early 14th century inquisitor (a bishop who became pope), lengthy quotes from the people that he was interrogating came to be preserved in the Vatican library. The accused are heretics, stubborn country folk supporting "the resistance", as it were, that handful of Cathar holy men hiding in the woods following the Church's campaign savage against the flourishing southern French civilization around the town of Albi in the first quarter of the 13th century. In spite of the slashing and burning that had laid waste to the land of the Cathars in the previous century, the folks of Montaignou were stubborn in holding to their beliefs, and here it gets interesting. What on earth were these people like, what issues could possibly matter enough to medieval farmers for them to put their lives on the line over subtle theological distinctions, like whether the Trinity was indivisible? LeRoy Ladurie thankfully quotes extensively from the sources, and a picture emerges of a Christian religion influenced by contact with the Eastern Gnostics, leaning towards a belief in reincarnation and the virtues of vegetarian asceticism. The Catholic Church was seen as a nasty political beast at odds with a true faith, and the villagers turn out to have been surprisingly sophisticated, reading books, for instance, at a time when only hand-copied manuscripts existed. It is apparent that many popular religious movements preceded the protestant schism. In their literal testimony we glimpse the villagers' daily lives, their sense of time and reality, their relations with neighbors (like the Moors of northern Spain), as well as a social organization that was more communal (and less class-divided) than our unconsciously marxist-influenced history books would have it. The lady of the manor is seen regularly spending time gossiping in the kitchens of the farmers, the shepherds tend each others' flocks on cash contract, and when it's safe, religion is vigorously debated by the fire. It's not a dark oppressed feudal world. The romantic entanglements of the village priest alone are enough to liven the place up. If we had such documents for other times and places, in which people's thinking was as thoroughly documented, we might better appreciate our origins. This book is a gold mine.

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