
NEW TITLES

History

MONTAILLOU: The Promised Land of Error
 by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie
 Braziller, 1978
 403 pp. \$20
 L of C 77-6124
 ISBN 0-8076-0875-0

A DISTANT MIRROR: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century
 by Barbara W. Tuchman
 Knopf, 1978
 704 pp. \$15.95
 L of C 78-5985
 ISBN 0-394-40026-7

In 1308, Church officials arrested the entire population (200 souls) of Montailou, a remote Pyrenees town. A decade later, Jacques Fournier, Bishop of Famiers (and the future Pope Benedict XII), again visited the Inquisition on the still heretical village. Fournier was a tenacious interrogator, avid for detail. From the bishop's records, historian Ladurie has woven a wry, moving account of 14th-century rural life. It became a surprise best seller in France in 1976. Via the stories of individual villagers, we learn of sorcery and illness, of greed and envy, of family squabbles, and of the brutal libido of Pierre Clergue, the parish priest. (There are still Clergues in Montailou.) We are told that the population "carried around a whole fauna of fleas and lice." Delousing one's companion was a sign of affection, and the common word for thumb was *tue-poux*, or "lice-killer".

They should have paid more attention to the fleas. Plague decimated Europe in 1348-50. Pulitzer-prizewinning historian Barbara Tuchman (*The Guns of August; Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-1945*) reports that the flea-borne disease killed one-third of the population between India and Iceland. (In Montailou, the figure was one-half.) It was a "violent, bewildered, suffering, and disintegrating age," Tuchman writes of the 14th century, "a time, as many thought, of Satan triumphant." The Hundred Years War had split France and England; schism within the Church had placed rival Popes in Rome and Avignon. Roving brigands swarmed upon the land. Tuchman pegs her tale to the life of Enguerrand de Coucy VII, the last of a great French ducal dynasty. His mother succumbed to plague; he himself survived to fall in battle against the infidels 50 years later during the disastrous Sixth Crusade.