

BOOK REVIEWS

The Alps: An Environmental History. By Jon Mathieu. Translated by Rose Hadshar.
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“Tout d’abord les montagnes” (“Mountains come first”). With these words, Fernand Braudel began his landmark history of the Mediterranean world. In many ways, the trail that Braudel began blazing in the mid-twentieth century pointed the way for works like that of Jon Mathieu. By focusing on geography’s influence on the past and introducing concepts such as geologic time to historians’ vocabulary, Braudel helped clear the way for a historiography alive to the possibility that matters such as topography deserved scholarly attention. Braudel and the *Annales* school were important intellectual forerunners of today’s environmental history. More specifically, though, Braudel also devoted space in his analysis to the Alps. In contrast to the mountains of the Mediterranean, Braudel argued that the Alps showed signs of “civilization” not present in other ranges. He claimed that in terms of resources, population, and infrastructure—among other things—the Alps were “*une montagne exceptionnelle*.” This question of the Alps’ special status among mountain ranges stands as one of Mathieu’s key organizing principles. His conclusions in this concise and engaging history will be of interest beyond the environmental history community. The Alps are indeed exceptional in many ways, and their specialness owes much to the peculiarity of their surroundings. This history of the Alps is implicitly and often explicitly an alternative history of Central Europe.

Mathieu is the foremost historian of the Alps, with over forty years’ experience and multiple monographs on the subject. The author also was instrumental in founding the International Association for Alpine History in 1995. The association continues to produce an annual journal whose pages supply much of the secondary research that Mathieu draws upon to complement his own work.

The Alps is an English translation of a German book published in 2015. In addition to a few updates to the main text, Mathieu wrote a new preface for this volume. The title (or subtitle, more precisely) has been changed to demarcate the book as an environmental history. This is true in the broad sense that the book takes a natural region as its focus. But the themes addressed here go well beyond the environmental to include political, economic, social, and cultural history. Over the course of nine chapters and a conclusion, Mathieu presents a history of the Alps from the first arrival of humans fifty thousand years ago until the present.

The first two chapters consider the Alps’ place in European history more broadly and survey the mountains’ place in modern scholarly inquiry. Mathieu introduces the idea that the mountains, once viewed as a barrier within Europe, have increasingly been understood as an area of transit. In fact, from the earliest times, the more accessible valleys and passes have carried significant traffic. Time and again, readers are reminded that widespread views of these mountains as peripheral require qualification. We also see that the Alps have long

filled a central role in the study of both the natural and the human world. Since the time of Humboldt, the mountains have appeared to naturalists and anthropologists alike as a “natural laboratory” (22) well-suited to empirical observation.

The following chapters trace Alpine history from the mountains’ initial peopling through the early modern period. Like other areas in Central Europe, the earliest inhabitants of the mountains were hunters and gatherers. Gradually, agriculture and animal husbandry made headway. As Rome incorporated the region into its empire, it also began to build the first roads over important passes. The major turning point in Alpine history, however, came in the later medieval period, when the mountains experienced a population surge. At this point, the Alps ceased to resemble other uplands worldwide. Urbanization brought the amenities of cities to parts of the Alps. Feeding greater numbers of people led to an expansion of agriculture and the creation of a thoroughly cultural landscape.

Though cities were growing in the Alps, they were not growing as quickly as in the plains below. Large swaths of the mountains remained unknown territory. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with elite European perceptions of these mysterious mountains from afar. Through the eighteenth century, legends of dragons and witches’ sabbaths in the high valleys persisted. With Rousseau and others came the vision of the mountains as the textbook example of sublime nature, which in many ways persists to this day.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, modernization arrived in the Alps in the form of the railroad. As the region became more accessible to more people, tourism to the mountains was no longer restricted to the wealthy. The masses came to behold nature or to prove themselves through sport in Europe’s “playground.” Mathieu illustrates an Alpine space torn between different conceptions of the modern: monarchy and republic, democracy and dictatorship, “progress” and environmental degradation. The Alps even belonged to the avant-garde in certain respects. Abundant waterpower and the luxurious tastes of upper-class tourists mixed to ensure that electric lights brightened the night here earlier than elsewhere.

The final chapters analyze two major developments since 1950: the rise of European integration—and the corresponding strengthening of regionalism within the Alps—and the emergence of environmental consciousness.

In contrast to previous attempts at writing Alpine histories, this volume stands out for its longer scope and for its effort to present an interdisciplinary look at a transnational landscape. The choice of subtitle is somewhat misleading. Readers should not expect a narrative of human-caused environmental change and its ecological consequences. While cattle, sheep, wolves, and even lynxes and brown bears appear in the text, this is a firmly human history.

The Alps serves as a great introduction to the multifaceted history of an iconic landscape. In arguing for the exceptionality of the Alps, it also holds up a mirror to the Alps’ surroundings and the peculiar history that has unfolded there over the last few centuries.

MARC LANDRY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS
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