

William H. McNeill is professor of history, emeritus, at the University of Chicago.

Trying to Learn from History

A Book Review by William H. McNeill

This book sums up recent historical research on the migration of peoples which took place in Europe, when the Roman empire broke up in the West, and survived a bit precariously in the East, despite waves of barbarian invasion. The author, a professor of medieval history at the University of Caen, divided his book into two parts. First comes a rather bald narrative of three successive waves of Germanic invasion, starting with the Visigoths in 374 A.D. and ending with the Lombard invasion of Italy between 363 and 572. Then follows a chapter on Britain where Picts and Scots rivalled Germanic barbarians as extinguishers of Roman culture. Each invading group is dealt with separately, and what is known and what remains uncertain in each instance is precisely and carefully set forth. A concluding chapter then attempts to account for the shift of linguistic frontiers that had occurred by about 600 A.D., and assesses the mingling of Roman and barbarian heritages that emerged within each of the barbarian kingdoms of Western Europe.

These five chapters constitute "Part I: The Facts," and as generations of students will attest, a collection of facts like this — even when carefully stated and meticulously assembled — is not very interesting. Far livelier is "Part 2: Unsolved Problems and Subjects for Further Research." Nearly all the really interesting questions remain to be answered, and Musset describes recent scholarly efforts to do so without committing himself on disputed points. The book is in fact aimed at beginning graduate students of medieval history, and points them toward issues that might profitably be studied more closely.

But for readers of this journal, Musset's pages are likely to be disappointing. So much remains uncertain! What impelled the invaders to cross the Roman frontiers? How and why were they able to overcome Roman armies? Why did the mingling of peoples across all of the western Roman empire provoke a (relatively modest) shift of language frontiers along the Rhine and Danube, and in Britain, but not elsewhere? What was the nature of the invading hosts — how brought together, how organized, armed, supplied and provided with transport? How important was religion in defining ethnic identity as against language or other indicators? What attracted barbarians to Roman ways of life? What counter attraction did the Germanic tradition exert among Romans? All remains unknown

or a matter of guesswork.

Musset sums things up as follows: "The history of the invasions ... is like Penelope's task: theories are woven out of such information as we have, only to be unravelled when fresh evidence comes to light... This ... is singularly instructive. It teaches us that Europe has constantly benefitted from all her experiences, even though under duress at times, to create innovating syntheses. The willingness to absorb, while modifying, to draw renewed vigor from the ruins, is a recurring motif throughout our account. It is the distinguishing feature of civilization..."(p. 238).

This concluding remark strikes me as a bit too cheerful. The clash between Romans and Germans that Musset deals with in this book shows that even when interaction across a cultural boundary remains intense, so that both parties borrow freely from one another, a peaceable and prosperous upshot cannot be guaranteed. Instead, the Germanic

invasions were accompanied by economic decay, widespread depopulation, and a general disruption of secular urban culture. We have come to expect economic and other forms of growth, but such growth is quite unusual. And perhaps the history of western Europe 400-600 A.D., when everything went the other way, ought to give us pause. If so, this little book may serve as a convenient place to learn about what actually happened, so far as that is knowable. ■

THE GERMANIC INVASIONS: THE
MAKING OF EUROPE AD 400-600
By Lucien Musset
New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993
287+xiii pages