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[Review of] *Life in a Time of Pestilence: The Great Castilian Plague of 1596–1601*. By Ruth MacKay. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xiv+276. $39.99 (cloth); $32.00 (Adobe eBook Reader).

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This book, about a plague epidemic that swept through Castile during the last years of the sixteenth century, came out in 2019. Although Ruth MacKay could not have foreseen the parallels between Castile in the 1590s and the United States today, now they come immediately to mind when reading this thoughtful book. The poor suffered more than the rich, guards trying to enforce quarantine orders encountered hostility and rudeness, politicians denied the plague's existence ("people are dying there [Burgos] but it's not peste" [84]), people tried to litigate special exemptions from the rules, officials tried to balance the needs of the economy versus public health, and elites set themselves outside of the rules they enforced on others. Perhaps the most glaring similarity was the ineffectiveness of the government, at both central and local levels, in stopping the spread of disease.

MacKay has spent her career exploring the relationship between the peoples of Iberia and their rulers, and this book fits well into that trajectory. There is an overwhelming sense of orders being issued, laws passed, directions given, but very little actually accomplished. There was not enough money, not enough personnel to oversee the implementation of emergency measures, and not enough good information reaching decision makers to help them guide the response. Yet the people continued to look to their governors and king, petitioning and pleading while continuing to obey and paying taxes, which was perhaps the government's greatest accomplishment.

Life in a Time of Pestilence focuses not on the extraordinary—the crisis—but rather on the quotidian muddling through that she claims, persuasively, characterized the experience of the epidemic, plus the way that privilege gravitated toward the powerful just as it did in healthy years. Focusing on the everyday and what did not change—"to find the ordinary amidst the extraordinary" (1)—sets this book apart from other historical treatments of epidemics, and the innovative point of view seems justified. After all, the plague trickled and oozed its way back and forth through the kingdom over a period of six years.

MacKay has done some impressive archival digging, finding innumerable records of local or royal government bodies addressing problems and disputes. This might skew the findings of *Life in a Time of Pestilence* toward an emphasis on dysfunction since there were few reasons for government organs to record instances of communities coming together, of the clergy heroically staying to serve sick parishioners, of the rich helping the poor, or of the king spontaneously and proactively addressing local problems.

The book's structure is less thesis-driven than simply an attempt to depict the feel of the plague years. MacKay organizes the book around seven "sites." These are scenes, really, vignettes that gather together patterns that she's found among all the ways that plague rearranged normal life. "Palace" shows the new royal favorite, the soon-to-be Duke of Lerma trying to keep Philip III safe from pestilence, at the same time trying to ascertain what was happening in the disease-struck north of the country. Meanwhile the machinery of government clicked into gear, with royal offices adjudicating between local disputes and problems

that arose from mass death and the streams of refugees in plague-struck places. Meanwhile the government strained to keep the taxes coming in and to build ships and fund the armies.

The second site, "Road," found refugees, news of the plague, and officials trying to find out what was going on all coursing along Castile's network of roads. Localities and people tried to stave off infection, and shrines in the countryside became safe places to drop off food, shoes, and money for stricken areas. "Wall," the third site, found people negotiating to get inside healthy towns. Lying, pleading, sneaking, and building private gates through town walls all occurred as people tried to enter and leave towns, healthy or sick. How could travelers prove that they came from still-healthy areas? How could town councils find men to patrol the walls, or to pay the ones who they coerced into standing guard? There were no hard rules and everything was negotiable.

The fourth site, "Market," portrays empty stalls and hunger thanks to the closed walls and unsafe roads. Many observers thought that famine killed more than plague, or set victims up for disease to finish the job. Fairs closed down, or they still went on with extra precautions. Everyone lied about being healthy in order to keep trading, so who to trust? Burgos and Bilbao continued to do business with each other simply because they had to, playing their "deadly game of deceit and false hope" (140).

"Street" is the fifth site, and it was empty as social interaction ceased. The wealthy left town, and most of the clergy did too. Quarantine shut people in, burials were irregular, and religious processions ceased, partly thanks to the lack of clergy and partly to avoid contagion. Jumping ahead to the last site, "Sickbed" reviews the fight against death. Towns built hospitals, not so much to cure the ill but to ensure that they would not die alone, without last rites. Towns paid for physicians, surgeons, and clergy to help the dying, and the rich tried to dodge the responsibility of paying their share.

The sixth site, "Town Hall," is perhaps the most interesting because it provides MacKay an opportunity for exploring community and memory. Town council minutes, she argues, provided Castilians one of the ways of doing what they did best, which was to do the same thing over and over again. Gather together and petition the same saints as the last plague. Gather together in open town meetings to discuss the common good and allocate money. Gather together and consult the laws, petition the king, set prices, and send out town criers to announce new regulations. Again she reinforces the notion that life in Castile was not set on its end by the epidemic so much as it simply circled back to traditional, reflexive, normal behavior. The end result is an intriguing indirect investigation of a crisis, one where MacKay explores everything but the plague itself, instead focusing on the choices that people and communities made during the crisis.

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