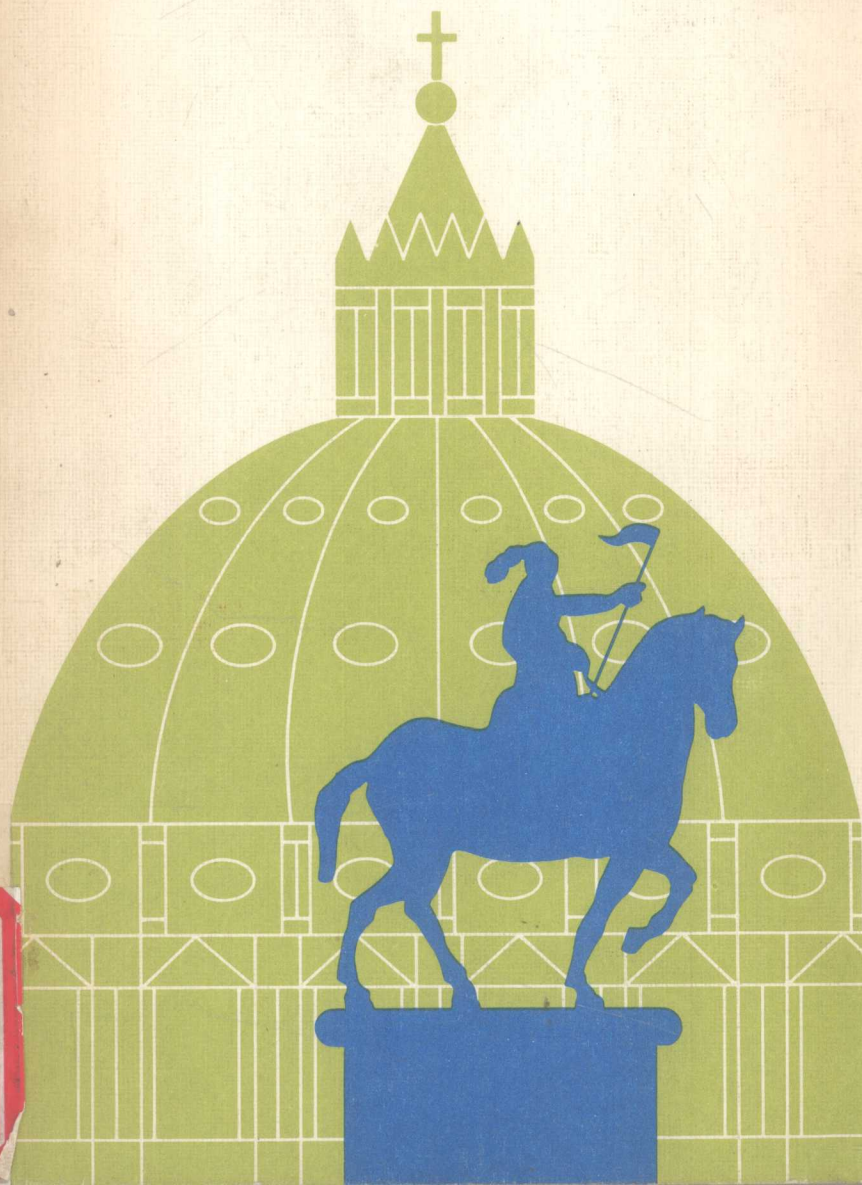


The Renaissance

Wallace K. Ferguson



BERKSHIRE
STUDIES IN
HISTORY



THE RENAISSANCE

文艺复兴

BY

WALLACE K. FERGUSON

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO



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Giuliano de' Medici, panel by Botticelli. (*National Gallery of Art*)

PREFACE

The college teacher of general European history is always confronted with the task of finding adequate reading for his classes which is neither too specialized and technical nor too elementary. For many topics, including several of the greatest importance, no such material is at the moment available. Moreover, in too many instances, good reading which undeniably does exist is in the form of a chapter in a larger work and is therefore too expensive for adoption as required reading under normal conditions.

The Berkshire Studies in European History have been planned to meet this situation. The topics selected for treatment are those on which there is no easily accessible reading of appropriate length adequate for the needs of a course in general European history. The authors, all experienced teachers, are in nearly every instance actively engaged in the class room and intimately acquainted with its problems. They will avoid a merely elementary presentation of facts, giving instead an interpretive discussion suited to the more mature point of view of college students.

No pretense is made, of course, that these *Studies* are contributions to historical literature in the scholarly sense. Each author, nevertheless, is sufficiently a specialist in the period of which he writes to be familiar with the sources and to have used the latest scholarly contributions to his subject. In order that those who desire to read further on any topic may have some guid-

ance short bibliographies of works in western European languages are given, with particular attention to books of recent date.

Each *Study* is designed as a week's reading. The division into three approximately equal chapters, many of them self-contained and each suitable for one day's assignment, should make the series as a whole easily adaptable to the present needs of college classes. The editors have attempted at every point to maintain and emphasize this fundamental flexibility.

Maps and diagrams will occasionally be furnished with the text when specially needed but a good historical atlas, such as that of Shepherd, is presupposed throughout.

R. A. N.

L. B. P.

S. R. P.

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CHAPTER I

THE BACKGROUND OF THE RENAISSANCE

THE PROBLEM OF THE RENAISSANCE

THE word "Renaissance"¹ has long carried overtones of glamor, such as have been associated with no other period in European history. To the average reader it evokes a brilliantly colored picture of an age when all life was a work of art, an age of versatile supermen, of cultured princes and condottieri, of classical scholars, and divinely gifted painters and sculptors, "the age of the discovery of the world and of man." The component elements of this picture have been selected from the age itself, but the picture as a whole is the legacy left by the creative genius of Jakob Burckhardt. For more than a generation, however, scholarly critics have been attacking Burckhardt's conception of the Renaissance from the most varied points of view, so that, though it remains a commonly recognized historical period, there is no longer any

¹ The use of the term "Renaissance" to denote a period in European history, without the limitation of specific reference to art or letters, was made popular by Michelet's *Histoire de France*, Vol. VII, 1855. It was then taken over into German and given a much wider acceptance through the influence of Burckhardt's *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*, 1860. Since then the French word has been used by English and most other European historians. The term has frequently been criticized, but as yet there is no other commonly accepted name for one of the most significant periods in the evolution of European civilization.

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general agreement as to its character, its causes, or even its geographical and chronological limits. It has become, in fact, the most intractable problem child of historiography.

The study of the Renaissance here presented is intended as an essay in interpretation rather than a narrative of events. The civilization of any age presents a bewildering confusion of varied and often conflicting characteristics. It is one of the most important duties of the historian to select and arrange these characteristics so that they form part of a reasonably intelligible picture, for, until that task has been performed, history remains a meaningless chaos, without form and void. The historian will, of course, endeavor above all things to make his presentation of the period conform as closely as possible to reality. Yet, in the end, it must appear as seen through his eyes, from his point of view, and interpreted through the medium of his understanding. And, since history is in this sense created by the historian, and he, in turn, is the product of his age and environment, history varies from generation to generation and must be constantly reinterpreted. That does not mean that history written in the past is not of great value. It is, indeed, indispensable to the student, for each portrayal of an age illuminates it from a different angle and calls attention to essential factors which might easily be overlooked in the disorganized confusion of the original sources. It may be well, therefore, to begin our study by noting briefly the various points of view from which the Renaissance has been presented in the past.

The idea that there was a great revival or rebirth of literature and the arts, after a thousand years of cultural sterility, in the fourteenth and fifteenth cen-

turies originated with the Italian writers of the Renaissance themselves. Finding the feudal and ecclesiastical literature and Gothic art of the Middle Ages uncongenial to their taste, they turned for inspiration to the civilization of Roman and Greek antiquity, and as their reverence for classical culture grew, it strengthened their contempt for the unclassical forms of medieval art and letters. Thus, from the beginning, the double conception of medieval darkness and subsequent cultural rebirth was colored by the acceptance of classical standards. Thanks to the predominance of the classics in European education, this attitude continued to exert a powerful influence on the interpretation of cultural history for centuries, the "revival of antiquity" being generally accepted as the essential mark of differentiation between the culture of the Renaissance and that of the Middle Ages, as well as the most valid justification of the former's claim to superiority. The prejudice of the classicists was also reënforced and provided with a broader intellectual basis by the Rationalists of the eighteenth century. In his penetrating *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756), Voltaire presented the Middle Ages as a dark era of priestly tyranny, in contrast to which the age of the "renaissance des lettres" shone with the bright light of liberated reason. It was in much this spirit that Hallam and Michelet later characterized the Renaissance, and echoes of their thought still ring through more recent histories. But if the classical and rationalist interpretations exercised a wide and lasting influence, they were not left unopposed. A reaction began with the Romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The romantic writers turned a more sympathetic eye on the Middle Ages.

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They discovered the vigor of early Germanic culture, the grandeur of Gothic art, and the sentimental appeal of medieval piety and chivalry. On the other hand, they were shocked by the cold rationalism and pagan immorality they saw in the Renaissance, and regarded it with a sort of fascinated horror.

It was with this background of classical, rationalist and romantic traditions, qualified by Hegelian philosophy and his own esthetic revolt against the utilitarian standards of the mid-nineteenth century, that Burckhardt constructed his masterly synthesis of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). Here the Italian Renaissance appeared for the first time as a distinct epoch in cultural history, with every aspect of its civilization fitted into place as part of a unified concept. It was now no mere revival of letters or art, but a general awakening or rebirth of human intellect and personality, the beginning of the modern world. In estimating the origins of this phenomenon, Burckhardt made a brilliant analysis of the influence of the Italian cities and of Italy's unique social and political organization; but he found the essential motive forces in the revival of antiquity and "its union with the genius of the Italian people." He insisted throughout on the rational and esthetic attitude of the Italians of that age, which made every part of their life a work of conscious art. For the rest, his picture of the Renaissance leaves a vivid impression of rampant individualism, creative energy and moral chaos, with the supernatural sanctions and Christian traditions of the Middle Ages giving way to something more like the ancient pre-Christian ways of thought.

The rounded completeness of Burckhardt's synthesis made an irresistible impression. Renaissance his-

toriography during the following generation was devoted almost exclusively to amplifying and illustrating his interpretation, often enough without the qualifications which the master himself had been careful to make. And the Renaissance in the northern countries was interpreted, in the light of his conception of the Italian Renaissance, as resulting directly from the migration of Italian culture and classicism across the Alps.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, a reaction set in, somewhat reminiscent of the Romantic reaction of a century earlier. In 1885, Henry Thode¹ called attention to the influence of the Franciscan religious revival on the art of the early Renaissance, and less than a decade later Paul Sabatier's life of St. Francis aroused an enthusiastic interest in the early Franciscans. From this arose a new interpretation of the Renaissance, which found the origins of its creative spirit and individualism in the religious mysticism of the later Middle Ages. This was the first serious challenge to Burckhardt's emphasis on the rational and classical elements in Renaissance civilization. Other interpretations soon followed, minimizing the importance of both the "Italian genius" and the revival of antiquity. Patriotic scholars from the North began to insist on the spontaneous development of their own national cultures without dependence on Italy. A group of German historians, in particular, claimed all that was creative in the Renaissance as the natural outgrowth of the Germanic culture of the Middle Ages.

Meanwhile, increasingly intensive research in medi-

¹ See his *Franz von Assisi und die Anfänge der Kunst der Renaissance in Italien*, 1885.

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eval history tended to modify still further the Burckhardtian conception of the strong contrast between medieval and Renaissance civilization. Closer examination of the Middle Ages led to the discovery of the "Renaissance of the Twelfth Century" and to the realization that many of the characteristics of the Renaissance were already in existence in the preceding period. Conversely, Huizinga and others called attention to the continuation of much that was medieval through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. From this double approach has grown a healthy emphasis on the continuity of development from the one period to the other, though it has left the chronological limits of the Renaissance vague in the extreme and has destroyed much of the integrity that Burckhardt gave it. Finally, there has been of late a growing tendency to stress the importance of economic and social changes, and to find in them a clue to the other changes in the culture of the age.

It is this last tendency that suggests what seems to be the most satisfactory interpretation of the Renaissance. None of the other interpretations mentioned above furnish an adequate explanation of the fundamental changes in European civilization which occurred at the end of the Middle Ages, nor do they provide a sufficiently inclusive characterization of Renaissance culture. Too often, cultural historians have considered only the literary, artistic, philosophical or religious manifestations of the Renaissance, treating each as though it had an independent existence; while the political and economic historians have usually been content to leave these to the specialist. An adequate synthesis must include not only the intellectual and esthetic elements of Renaissance civiliza-

tion but also the economic, social and political, and the former can best be understood by approaching them from a study of changing economic conditions in their interrelation with social and political institutions.

It is, of course, impossible to find in economic conditions a directly traceable cause or a sufficient explanation of all the intellectual and artistic, or even the social and political phenomena of any age. There are too many other factors that must be taken into consideration, such as the creative contribution of individual men of genius and the qualifying effect of religious, philosophical, literary and artistic traditions inherited from the past. Moreover, there is a constant interplay among the various elements of a changing civilization, so that the development of economic life may itself be influenced by intellectual preconceptions and by established political and social institutions. Nevertheless, economic conditions, the way men make a living, form the necessary basis of civilization. They determine in large part the character and interests of the social classes and set a limit to the variety of cultural forms possible at any given time. Together with the political and social organization of the age, they form the environment in which writers, artists, preachers, and thinkers live, and they exercise an inescapable influence upon their ideas and attitudes. And when there is a fundamental change in this necessary basis of civilization, it is only reasonable to expect roughly corresponding changes in the political, social and cultural superstructure, though the latter may be delayed and modified by the force of tradition and custom.

Such a change took place in Western Europe at the end of the early Middle Ages with the revival of com-

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merce and the growth of towns in the midst of what had been an almost purely agrarian economy. These dynamic forces gradually altered the foundations of medieval society, though for more than two centuries the feudal and ecclesiastical classes retained their dominant position, set the tone of European culture, and maintained the traditional framework of political and social life. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, however, the economic change had begun to effect a radical alteration in both the political and social structure of the Western countries. But even then, the aftermath of corresponding intellectual change was beginning only in Italy. It did not appear in the North till a century or more later. As a period in the history of European civilization, the distinguishing characteristic of the Renaissance is to be found in this transformation of culture, the result of the change from a natural economy to one based on money, from a rural society to one in which the influential classes dwelt in cities and drew their wealth directly or indirectly from trade. The Renaissance grew out of the Middle Ages and was a period of gradual transition. But its most typical culture was that of the cities and their people. From this point of view, it may be said that the Renaissance began when the new urban and secular elements in European culture began to weigh down the balance against the feudal and ecclesiastical elements which had dominated the civilization of the Middle Ages.

THE CONSERVATIVE ELEMENTS IN MEDIEVAL
CIVILIZATION: FEUDALISM

The life of the High Middle Ages, both temporal and spiritual, was set in the mould provided by the two universal institutions of Western Christendom: feudalism and the church. Save in the towns, the forms of political, social and economic activity followed the pattern of the former, while the ideas which inspired or rationalized all aspects of life were shaped by the latter. These two institutions were inextricably interwoven. Feudal society was bound by unquestioning faith to the divinely ordained church. On the other hand, the church held vast accumulations of land, which bound it by political and economic ties to the feudal system. Both feudalism and the church reached their highest point of development in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, yet neither was the product of that vigorous age. When Western Christendom awoke to new activity with the revival of commerce in the eleventh century, both the feudal system and the church had already acquired their major characteristics, though they were still capable of further growth. The church, indeed, displayed an enormous cultural vitality during the next two centuries, and made great progress in its task of civilizing the western world. But its organization and its social doctrines, like those of feudalism, were already hardening into conservatism. The clergy, like the feudal nobility, had gained their dominating position and their characteristic attitudes in an earlier and simpler society. Both tended to oppose any social change that might imperil their position or the ideals for which they stood.