

In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World it Made (Central Asian Studies)

Norman F. Cantor



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IN THE WAKE OF THE PLAGUE is a social history, not just of collapse but of rebirth. It is a fascinating investigation into how the Plague rocked the sociological, commercial, cultural and religious foundations of medieval civilisation. Arguably the greatest biomedical disaster in history - the Black Death wiped out 40% of the European population - the results are not confined to figures of mass fatality. They are diverse and long standing, extending to the present day: with the population depleted, the peasants could claim land for themselves, creating Europe's first class of independent farmers, hastening the modern capitalist era; the Catholic Church, powerless in the face of such disaster, watched as the faith healers became influential; efforts to block windows and doors against supposed airborne germs with woven tapestries generated a whole textile industry. Cantor presents an eclectic mix of individuals directly affected by the plague, some are well known today - Robin Hood, Richard the Lionheart, Edward the Black Prince - others have been forgotten by history books but have valuable stories to tell. Underlying this vivid recreation of a grave chapter of history is an interrogation of the medical facts. How closely linked are the Plague and the infamous 1918 flu epidemic? Is it something closer to today's medical phobia, Mad Cow disease? Cantor undermines the confidence we have in our world, doused in disinfectant and dosed with antibiotics, challenging us: can we be sure the Black Death is extinct - or is it just dormant?

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