



Peasant Fires: The Drummer of Niklashausen

By Richard Wunderli

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"... lively and intellectually stimulating..." ?Speculum

"Wunderli... has lucidly reconstructed a controversial conflict in 15th-century south-central Germany.... this engaging narrative takes off from Hans Behem?the peasant who claimed to see the Virgin and gained followers until crushed by the established church?to explore larger forces at work in Germany on the eve of the Reformation... Wunderli also attempts to sort out the violent conflict that ensued and Hans's subsequent trial. His scrupulousness and sensitivity make for a small but valuable book." ?Publishers Weekly

"Fascinating and well written, this is highly recommended for academic and larger public libraries."?Library Journal

"Richard Wunderli... deftly tells the story in Peasant Fires, finding in it a foreshadowing of peasant uprisings in the 16th century."?New York Times Book Review

"... a stimulating read... an engaging synthesis."?Central European History

In 1476, an illiterate German street musician had a vision of the Virgin Mary and began to preach a radical social message that attracted thousands of followers?and antagonized the church. The drummer was burned at the stake. This swiftly moving narrative of his rise and fall paints a vivid portrait of 15th-century German society as it raises important questions about the craft of history.

"A gem of a book.... It has a plot, good guys and bad buys, it opens up a 'strange' world, and it is exceptionally well written." ?Thomas W. Robisheaux

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Wunderli (*London Church Courts and Society on the Eve of Reformation*) has lucidly reconstructed a controversial conflict in 15th-century south-central Germany. Aimed at the general reader, this engaging narrative takes off from Hans Behem--the peasant who claimed to see the Virgin and gained followers until crushed by the established church--to explore larger forces at work in Germany on the eve of the Reformation. For peasants, the world of spirits and saints was more powerful than nature; only there could they imagine a different social order. The hardships of nature in 1476 provided impetus for the peasants, temporarily emboldened by pre-Lenten Carnival, to be ripe for a visionary shepherd like Hans. But Hans's call for the leveling of society prompted the wrath of Bishop Rudolph, who, according to Wunderli, was a reformer in his own right. Building on sketchy records and elements from other contemporary sermons, the author invents a sermon for Hans, showing how he might have appealed to peasant fantasies of egalitarianism. Wunderli also attempts to sort out the violent conflict that ensued and Hans's subsequent trial. His scrupulousness and sensitivity make for a small but valuable book.

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From Library Journal

Wunderli (history, Univ. of Colorado) recounts the tragic story of Hans Behem, a peasant shepherd of the German village of Niklashausen, in 1476. Behem, following instructions received in a vision of the Virgin Mary, devoted himself to God and preached to the folk, his sermons becoming more radical as the crowds grew. It is also the larger story of the bitter divisions between peasants and the elite clergy, as reflected in the line "O God in Heaven, on You we call/ Help us seize our priests and kill them all." The oppressed peasants could only find "justice" in the fantasy world of Carnival, the period before Lent. At such times, society was turned on its ear: The Fool reigned, Mass was mocked, and all were reduced to a common level. But what if the attitudes of Carnival lasted beyond their appointed time? The answer to that question lies in the story of Hans Behem. Fascinating and well written, this is highly recommended for academic and larger public libraries.

-*Robert A. Curtis, Taylor Memorial P.L., Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio*

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From the Back Cover

This book is written for the people who are not professional historians in order to introduce them to late medieval Germany, to German scholarship, and to a process of thinking about history.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Ann Clark:

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