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Michel Pastoureau, *The Bear: History of a Fallen King*. Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 343 pp. Plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 (cl). ISBN. 978-0-674-04782-21.

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Michel Pastoureau's book was first published by Seuil in 2007 as *L'ours: histoire d'un roi déchu* and translated by George Holoch in 2011. Pastoureau is extremely well-known for his prolific work on medieval European visual culture and iconology, in particular on heraldry, animals and colour. His interest in the cultural role of the bear—"the great wild beast of the forest"—stretches back to earlier work, where the transition from pre-Christian to Christian world views was accompanied by the abandonment of traditional animal symbols of power. The bear and wolf were gradually replaced by the lion and eagle. Focusing on the bear, Pastoureau develops this thesis and makes the focus of the book very clear from the onset as the struggle of the medieval Church against the bear and ursine cults, with an emphasis on periods of transition from pre-Christian to Christian societies.

Whilst much has been written on the wolf and werewolves, Pastoureau's work is, to date, effectively unique in adopting such an inter-disciplinary, diachronic perspective. The book is sub-divided into three main sections, followed by a short conclusion and almost a hundred pages of notes, references and indices. The diachronic perspective is very broad, for Pastoureau is moved to begin with the earliest known human-bear relations, with a discussion of select French Palaeolithic sites. After considering representations of bears in cave art, the "ritual" deposit of bear remains in the Chauvet cave and the bear deposit at Le Regourdou, the discussion leaps forward six millennia to the Magdalenian bear sculpture from Montespan. The tone is chatty, even verging at times on flippant and concludes with a suggestion of a connection between prehistoric and historically documented bear cults, asking the question "Why have prehistorians shown so little interest in these cults, which have been solidly documented in historic eras? Why have they never really looked toward the European Middle Ages?" (p. 26). This is somewhat reminiscent of Carlo Ginzburg's work on the *Benandanti*, which includes an explicit suggestion of the continuity of pre-Christian practices into the seventeenth century, albeit not one explored in much detail.[1]

Both Ginzburg's and Pastoureau's work have been incredibly influential (and controversial), defining new approaches to history in the latter decades of the twentieth century. However, these links stretching off into the distant past are not explored in any spatial or temporal depth, partly because there is little or no engagement with material culture as the written record becomes increasingly sparse and fragmentary. As a result these loose and problematic connections continue to draw widespread criticism, especially in the light of studies arguing for multiple discontinuities and reinventions of practices in the past.[2] Pastoureau returns to his notion of the *longue durée* of ursine veneration throughout the book, for example: "The problem remains for the historian to determine the links that may have existed between possible Palaeolithic bear cults and the cults of antiquity and the High Middle Ages" (p. 37), although he acknowledges the vast gaps in time between these loosely defined chronological episodes. The term "feudal period" is used throughout the book without reference to a specific time range, although when discussing particular case studies precise dating is provided.

This eclectic use of chronology characterises much of the first section, where the narrative leaps from the Greek goddess Artemis to King Arthur and subsequently from Tacitus to the First Crusade and finally to Old Norse literature. The terms “Celtic” and “German” are widely applied, collapsing the regional nuances that differentiate responses to the bear across Europe during the first millennium AD. When moving onto descriptions of the bear itself, perhaps something that would have been more appropriate at an earlier stage, there is virtually no incorporation of the zooarchaeological data concerning the size and morphology of the European *Ursus* species, although it is extensive for both prehistoric and early historic Europe. On the other hand, Pastoureau underlines the importance of separating modern and medieval taxonomies, and his discussion of stories of human procreation with bears exemplifies this approach. This perceived proximity to the bear—its closeness to humans—is seen as the main cause for the Church’s hostility towards the species.

This leads on to the second section which is concerned with the development of the negative role of the bear from the Carolingian period to the later twelfth century. Here, the defining role of the Church in driving responses to the bear is particularly highlighted. Pastoureau suggests the Church was terrified of bears because of their resemblance to men and argues how the Church’s war against the bear sought to eliminate the physical presence of the animal in the north-western European landscape. He attributes the mass hunting of bears in north Germany and Scandinavia to parallel trends in evangelisation and deforestation, returning to the significance of pre-Christian bear cults. This is an interesting hypothesis which seeks to understand the ecology associated with the process of religious conversion in northern Europe, however relatively little data is provided to substantiate Pastoureau’s claims of a religious war against bears. The concept of a monolithic Church directing a consistent inter-regional response to a single species is problematic in and of itself, particularly when drawing on a suite of disparate commentators.

Pastoureau’s point of departure is the eastward expansion of the Carolingian empire. Charlemagne is certainly known for his attempts at ecological management, not only in the case of the bear but also with the establishment of the *Louveterie*—a corps of professional wolf hunters. The evidence for systematic hunting in Carolingian France and its eastern frontiers is in fact relatively limited, and statements concerning the dwindling numbers of bears from the Ardennes to the Pyrenees are not supported by biogeographical studies, although it is clear bear hunting was practiced by individual aristocrats in many regions of Western Europe. Pastoureau does cite the work of Corinne Beck, without drawing attention to the problematic and uneven distribution of zooarchaeological data at Carolingian sites.^[3] Moreover, where the written sources are more complete, Pastoureau provides some interesting vignettes of bear hunting, particularly in the third section where the illustrious counts of Foix are mentioned, but does not situate bear hunting and consumption within broader, regional aristocratic cultures. A brief discussion of the importance of the stag (i.e., red deer) is only found much later. The section concludes with a consideration of the replacement of the bear with the lion as a popular symbol of personal, predominantly elite identity.

Pastoureau’s earlier work on heraldry has clearly demonstrated the widespread occurrence of the lion (and eagle) in later medieval European armorials, whilst the use of bears as emblems in parts of Germany and Switzerland is not framed in the form of direct continuity, but rather as the discreet persistence of meanings and the re-contextualisation of symbols within the heraldic vocabulary of Christian society. On the other hand, sweeping statements such as “Slavic and Baltic bears were similarly victims of the inroads of Christianity” (p. 90) are not qualified. It is certainly clear from the archaeology of Late Iron Age/Early Medieval Baltic Europe that the bear played an important role in pre-Christian culture, but this awaits more detailed, synthetic study particularly in terms of the impact of colonisation, the expansion of commerce and Christianisation.

The third and final section focuses on the debasement of the meaning of the bear from the late medieval period (i.e., the thirteenth century) into the modern day. It begins with a detailed discussion of the bear in the *Roman de Renart* cycle. Again, the Church is held responsible for associating the bear with vices in the thirteenth century (p. 178). However, there are regular hints of regional diversity. Pastoureau draws on the well-documented lives of Pierre de Béarn and Gaston Phébus, suggesting the bear's prestige in the Pyrenees was not undermined in the same way as in the north (p. 186), but does not explore this further. Frustratingly, the emblematic use of the bear in German-speaking regions is not included within a discussion of regional variation which disrupts any clear north-south divide. The physical disappearance or rather, the reduction of the populations of bears, in the late Middle Age is linked with the consignment of the species into fictional narratives. The final chapter is concerned with the post-medieval role of the bear, included within a somewhat eclectic discussion of witchcraft, proverbs and the city of Bern. The epilogue leaps ahead to the early years of the twentieth century to the contentious story of the stuffed toy bear—the teddy bear. The final comment of the book is quite abrupt and concerns the inseparable relationship between humans and bears.

Overall, Pastoureau's work is reminiscent of diachronic histories attempting to situate an interesting cultural phenomenon within the full span of human history. It is reminiscent in some ways of Adam Douglas' *The Beast Within*, which outlines the patchy cultural history of the werewolf phenomenon. [4] Such approaches are invariably eclectic, partly due to the nature of the evidence—significantly far more sources for the bear are invoked from the twelfth century—combined with the ambitious task of writing a cultural history of any species within a broad European context. Understandably, Pastoureau's consistent interest throughout the book is the emblematic role of the bear. However, from a methodological perspective, *The Bear* contrasts with his earlier work on heraldic armorials, which were characterised by a more careful, nuanced and systematic approach.

Of course, despite questions posed throughout the book and the enduring theme of the religious war against the bear, there is no claim of direct continuity and the three sections of the book feel somewhat disconnected from each other. There is an implicit assumption of an enduring and consistent relationship with bears until the introduction of Christianity. The central thesis of the book—that the Church was responsible for driving the sustained destruction of the bear—may be attractive from the perspective of Christian iconology but from a holistic perspective is, at present, untenable. This is largely because what is presented is evidence of the conceptualisation of the animal projected within very specific contexts (e.g., bestiaries, beast fables) with no demonstrable link to physical ecology or to forms of wildlife management, as well as regionally and temporally diverse hunting customs which are mentioned but not integrated with the other forms of evidence.

What Pastoureau's book demonstrates very clearly is the variable cultural deployment of the bear by a range of different groups within medieval Christian Europe, from kings, nobles and clerics through to the more corporate monastic and civic communities. It also presents an intriguing hypothesis, although the attribution of the degradation of the natural world to Christian value systems is not new. Perhaps then a more focused, Ginzburgian micro-historical approach would have been better suited to exploring the dual impact of religious and ecological change? But in the absence of the extensive inquisitorial documents which enabled Ginzburg to reconstruct the *minutiae* of the world of his protagonists, a study focusing on a more intangible agent such as the bear requires a wholly inter-disciplinary approach drawing on many lateral strands of evidence. If successful, it would have provided a more detailed context for responses to the bear, without an overwhelming focus on the species itself. This context is not wholly absent from Pastoureau's synthesis, but it is incomplete and often erratically presented.

Overall, Pastoureau's *The Bear* is a fascinating collection of evidence pertaining to various aspects of the bear and a veritable mine of information, but it is far from a systematic and careful study which incorporates the broadest body of data. Its central tenets are not convincingly argued and despite the suggested emphasis on ecology and the relationship between the physical and conceptual animal, there is a noticeable absence of zooarchaeological and environmental data. This is certainly mentioned, but not truly integrated. Pastoureau would make no apologies for this and his book is very much presented as a thoughtful and controversial thesis, a seminal work of cultural history which aims to provoke further discussion, and in the process, develop our understanding of one of the most important species repopulating the modern European landscape.

NOTES

[1] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) (first published in 1966 as *I Benandanti: Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento*).

[2] One of the most prolific writers on these discontinuities is Ronald Hutton, particularly his *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

[3] Christopher Loveluck, "Rural settlement hierarchy in the age of Charlemagne", in Joe Story ed., *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) pp. 230–258, at pp. 251–252.

[4] Adam Douglas, *The Beast Within: Man, Myths and Werewolves*. London: Orion, 1993.

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