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BEAUTY IN A WOUNDED PLACE

Review of: Gary Paul Nabhan 1993. *Songbirds, Truffles, and Wolves*. New York: Penguin 227 pp. ISBN 0-14-023972-3

[Twenty-fifth in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

I think I can safely say that your average catholic saint is not someone you would care to know in real life. Many of them are downright creepy. The outstanding exception is Francesco di Bernardone (1182-1226). He is the one saint that everyone professes to love and admire, as seen in the many popular books (e.g. Kazantzakis 1962) and movies about his life.

Songbirds, Truffles, and Wolves is an account of the author's nine-day walking pilgrimage through central Italy with veteran backpacker Ginger Harmon. Beginning at Francis's monastic retreat in Monte la Verna, Tuscany, they ended at the small city of Assisi, Umbria, where he was born and died.

This is a landscape that calls for some explanation. The Mediterranean region has been densely populated for millenia, and this has of course brought about a major transformation of the environment. The original forest cover persists only in wisps and fragments, mostly of a very secondary nature, and the soil has been impoverished and rendered drier from its original condition. It is probably not a great stretch to say that what has happened to Haiti and parts of Central America over 300 years happened in the Mediterranean in antiquity or earlier. It is, then, a badly wounded landscape.

At the same time, Tuscany and Umbria are associated in our minds with lovely scenery, a region where it is a pleasure to wander at will over the hills. On a train ride through this region a few years ago, a telecommunications specialist native to the area remarked to me and the compartment as a whole that he thought they lived in the most beautiful country in the world. This evoked a general murmuring of "Amen" and "Aint it the truth?" It was, indeed, most agreeable to sit and look out the window as the pictures slipped past. As Nabhan remarks toward the end of the book, "If you cannot find terrain magnificent enough to take your breath away, gravitate to places that can at least increase your heartbeat." What the people of central Italy have done, then, is to transform their environment into something that is at once beautiful to behold and virtually devoid of wildness.

Francis of Assisi was the outstanding counterforce of his time to the tendency to tame and destroy mediterranean nature. He was prepared to meet animals on their own terms, and his legend contains a famous story about making peace with a wolf that was terrorizing a village. (An estimated 300 wild wolves live in Italy today, although none along the pilgrimage route; one chapter is titled "Where the Wild Things Aren't".) Much of Nabhan's focus is a search for signs of the franciscan attitude among the country people of central Italy today, while casting a naturalist's eye over the countryside and villages.

The core theme of Nabhan's voluminous writings -- his best-known book is probably

The Desert Smells Like Rain (1982) -- is food as a major aspect of culture. There is plenty about food in *Songbirds, Truffles, and Wolves*, with special attention to naturalized vegetables of New World origin. There is also a great deal of introspection and soul-searching, most of which I skipped.

The book has a superb structure, and Nabhan shows a fine sense of narrative. Each of the seven chapters treats a stage in the pilgrimage, most of them wrapped around discussion of particular food plants of the region. Among other things, then, the book is an essay on landscape and agricultural practice in central Italy today. The final chapter treats the over-hunting of songbirds around Assisi. This is unsubtly ironic, given Francis's famous affinity for birds.

While Nabhan is a very knowledgeable guy, he is no know-it-all and is quite ready to be humorous about his own occasional lapses. He opens one chapter with an anecdote of stopping to pull out his guidebook to trees, explaining to Harmon that this tree in front of them seems familiar, but he can't place it. To this, Harmon asks if he means the tree "with all the chestnuts underneath?"

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References

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