



Die Alpen: Raum, Kultur, Geschichte [The Alps: Space, Culture, History]

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Die Alpen: Raum, Kultur, Geschichte

[The Alps: Space, Culture, History]

By Jon Mathieu. Stuttgart, Germany: Reclam, 2015. 254 pp. € 38.80. ISBN 978-3-15-011029-4.

A well-known adage has it that a book should not be judged by its cover. Jon Mathieu's *Die Alpen: Raum, Kultur, Geschichte* represents an exception to this rule, for it is a magnificent volume to behold. By the sheer virtue of its impressive weight, the title's elegant silver engraving, and the textured cover image, readers are informed that this is an important book—and indeed, it won the 2016 Science Book of the Year prize awarded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science, Research, and Economy.

The author himself recalls one reason for the book's uniqueness at its outset. Jon Mathieu, professor of history at the University of Lucerne, suggests that an accessible overview of Alpine history had not so far appeared. Mathieu should know, for he is one of the best-known Alpine historians and has published widely on mountains in general and the Alps in particular. His last work, *The Third Dimension: A Comparative History of Mountains in the Modern Era*, was published in German and English in 2011; 3 years earlier he received the King Albert I Mountain Award for his research.

In *Die Alpen*, Mathieu addresses the deep connection between humans and nature in the cultural landscape of the European Alps, ranging from the Mediterranean coast to Slovenia. The canvas of his cultural history encompasses all phases of human settlement from roughly 50,000 years ago to the present. The long outlook serves to underline one of his main arguments, namely that the continuous process of mutual interaction between society and the environment has given rise to highly diverse imaginaries and materialities of what French historian Fernand

Braudel has described as an exceptional range.

It is worth noting that, in considering the exceptional character of this cultural landscape, Braudel and Mathieu are joined by Werner Bätzing, whose magisterial fourth edition of *Die Alpen* also appeared in 2015 (Bätzing 2015a). However, although Bätzing's outlook—like that in *The Mountain* by Debarbieux and Rudaz, also published in 2015—is somewhat somber, prompting him to issue a polemic on the future of the Alps (Bätzing 2015b), Mathieu emphasizes how Alpine adaptation and resilience to crises is the result of coevolution with wider Europe's larger ups and downs—such as the Little Ice Age, the religious wars before and after the Reformation, or the devastating nationalisms of the 2 world wars. From this historical perspective, Mathieu finds inspiration in the 1991 Alpine Convention, which has signaled increased ecological awareness and transboundary regionalism. He considers booming tourism a sign of hope for an imperiled agricultural sector that has been the linchpin of the region's cultural landscape.

Mathieu presents the evidence for his argument in a carefully structured way. This makes for an enjoyable read, even if the language is sometimes more appropriate for a scholarly audience than for a lay audience. *Die Alpen* includes a brief introduction, 10 chapters, and a useful annex complete with a chronology, a carefully annotated commentary on further reading, a bibliography, and a detailed index. More than 80 illustrations, many in color—with almost 20 in a special section on the Alps in arts and crafts from the 14th to the 20th centuries—round out the volume.

The chapters provide fascinating insights, frequently illustrated by detailed accounts on topics such as the history of tunnel construction, differences in farmhouse architecture between the western and eastern Alps, or the transition from sheep herding to cattle farming. Because the chapters are not strictly

chronological, the partial overlaps reinforce the sense that the Alps have been, and remain, many things to many people. The parallel, thematic treatment of human settlement, economic organization, and political developments, for instance, amplifies the multilayered and spatially differentiated character of the Alps, particularly against the background of modernity's impact. Although this approach to constructing the book makes up for the necessary selectivity inherent in such a project, only the more informed readers will be able to appreciate the trade-off.

Die Alpen is an indispensable book in any Alpine connoisseur's collection, and of equal interest to students of the history of cultural landscapes in nonmountainous regions. The work is at once a sweeping analysis of interest to comparativists and a cabinet of curiosities to intrigue even seasoned Alpine experts. It is perhaps this latter trait that gives rise to the wish for a slightly more sustained integration of the chapters' main messages.

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