Petrarch’s War

This revisionist account of the economic, literary, and social history of Florence in the immediate aftermath of the Black Death connects warfare with the plague narrative. Organized around Petrarch’s “war” against the Ubaldini clan of 1349–1350, which formed the prelude to his meeting and friendship with Boccaccio, William Caferro’s work examines the institutional and economic effects of the war, alongside literary and historical patterns. Caferro pays close attention to the meaning of wages in context, including those of soldiers, revising our understanding of wage data in the distant past and highlighting the consequences of a constricted workforce that resulted in the use of cooks and servants on important embassies. Drawing on rigorous archival research, this book seeks to stimulate discussion among academics and offer a new contribution to our understanding of Renaissance Florence. It stresses the importance of short-termism and contradiction as subjects of historical inquiry.

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Petrarch’s War

Florence and the Black Death in Context

William Caferro

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This is not the book I intended to write. But archives are subversive and often tell us what we do not want to know. The present volume began as a study of the effects of war on the Florentine economy from 1336 to 1402. I hope to complete that project, now two decades old, soon. But I encountered documents along the way relating to a “war” that I knew nothing about and that coincided with the immediate aftermath of the Black Death. The material connected Petrarch and Boccaccio, added details to their historical portraits, and raised an array of political, institutional, diplomatic, and above all economic questions about Florence that I did not have answers for, nor had even considered.

This book is an attempt to interpret the evidence. It is, at base, a case study of war, the most overlooked aspect of fourteenth-century Italy, for which no justification is needed. Although I had hoped to mechanically add my findings to existing assumptions about Florence, the addition of war altered the assumptions. The evidence forced me to reexamine and revise many of my own hypotheses. The decision to restrict the study to two years was a difficult one, but the material warranted the approach. The book is thus unapologetically revisionist. It argues against the false distinction between long-term “usable” history and the short-term irrelevant form, and it speaks to the dangers of teleology embedded in historical study, particularly with regard to economic data. It takes as its fundamental tenet that contradiction and anomaly are a part of history, and acknowledgment of them ultimately tells a more useful and interesting tale.

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I dedicate this book to my wife Megan Weiler, who transferred her love of Italy to me and with whom I have spent the greater part of a lifetime in the very same parts of the Mugello discussed in this book. Her intelligence and work ethic are my most immediate models. The research for the book coincided with difficult times for both of us, and I dedicate this volume also to friends and family members whom we have loved and miss dearly.