

# Trying to Learn from History

A Book Review by William H. McNeill

This book sums up recent historical research on the migration of peoples which took place in Europe, when the Roman empire broke up in the West, and survived a bit precariously in the East, despite waves of barbarian invasion. The author, a professor of medieval history at the University of Caen, divided his book into two parts. First comes a rather bald narrative of three successive waves of Germanic invasion, starting with the Visigoths in 374 A.D. and ending with the Lombard invasion of Italy between 363 and 572. Then follows a chapter on Britain where Picts and Scots rivalled Germanic barbarians as extinguishers of Roman culture. Each invading group is dealt with separately, and what is known and what remains uncertain in each instance is precisely and carefully set forth.

A concluding chapter then attempts to account for the shift of linguistic frontiers that had occurred by about 600 A.D., and assesses the mingling of Roman and barbarian heritages that emerged within each of the barbarian kingdoms of Western Europe.

These five chapters constitute "Part I: The Facts," and as generations of students will attest, a collection of facts like this — even when carefully stated and meticulously assembled — is not very interesting. Far livelier is "Part 2: Unsolved Problems and Subjects for Further Research." Nearly all the really interesting questions remain to be answered, and Musset describes recent scholarly efforts to do so without committing himself on disputed points. The book is in fact aimed at beginning graduate students of medieval history, and points them toward issues that might profitably be studied more closely.

But for readers of this journal, Musset's pages are likely to be disappointing. So much remains uncertain! What impelled the invaders to cross the Roman frontiers? How and why were they able to overcome Roman armies? Why did the mingling of peoples across all of the western Roman empire

provoke a (relatively modest) shift of language frontiers along the Rhine and Danube, and in Britain, but not elsewhere? What was the nature of the invading hosts — how brought together, how organized, armed, supplied and provided with transport? How important was religion in defining ethnic identity as against language or other indicators? What attracted barbarians to Roman ways of life? What counter attraction did the Germanic tradition exert among Romans? All remains unknown or a matter of guesswork.

Musset sums things up as follows: "The history of the invasions ... is like Penelope's task: theories are woven out of such information as we have, only to be unravelled when fresh evidence comes to light... This ... is singularly instructive. It teaches

us that Europe has constantly benefitted from all her experiences, even though under duress at times, to create innovating syntheses. The willingness to absorb, while modifying, to draw renewed vigor from the ruins, is a recurring motif throughout our account. It is the distinguishing feature of civilization..." (p. 238).

This concluding remark strikes me as a bit too cheerful. The clash between Romans and Germans that Musset deals with in this book shows that even when interaction across a cultural boundary remains intense, so that both parties borrow freely from one another, a peaceable and prosperous upshot cannot be guaranteed. Instead, the Germanic invasions were accompanied by economic decay, widespread depopulation, and a general disruption of secular urban culture. We have come to expect economic and other forms of growth, but such growth is quite unusual. And perhaps the history of western Europe 400-600 A.D., when everything went the other way, ought to give us pause. If so, this little book may serve as a convenient place to learn about what actually happened, so far as that is knowable. ■

THE GERMANIC INVASIONS: THE  
MAKING OF EUROPE AD 400-600  
By Lucien Musset  
New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993  
287+xiii pages

*Gustav Uhlich is a retired gastroenterologist and a writer with a keen interest in the interplay of psychology and biology.*

# Descarte's Error

A Book Review by Gustav A. Uhlich

Rene Descartes lived in the first part of the 17th century in Holland. He was the leading mathematician and philosopher of his time. What was his error, and why should it matter to us? Damasio provides compelling answers to both questions.

Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." Damasio counters: "I am, therefore I think." Descartes maintained that the essential "me" — the soul, the spirit, the mind — is entirely distinct from our body and in no way connected to our biological make-up. Damasio sets out to prove the opposite.

In Part I of the book we are introduced to the clinical evidence linking patterns of behavior to the anatomical structure and functional organization of the central nervous system. The fascinating case history of one Phineas P. Gage, a 25-year-old railroad construction foreman, sets the stage for exploring the results of traumatic brain damage. In the summer of 1848, while blasting his way through the rocky terrain of Vermont, Phineas had the misfortune of prematurely setting off an explosion. A three-foot-long iron rod shot through his skull. Miraculously, Phineas survived, but he was not the same man he had been before. A contemporary report attests to his rather complete physical recovery; however, his "equilibrium or balance, so to speak, between his intellectual capacity and animal propensities" had been destroyed. As a result, he lost the ability to plan his future as a social being. He lost his job, and died in 1861. His punctured skull was preserved at Boston's Harvard Medical School Museum.

Damasio, with the help of modern computer technology, is able to reconstruct the extent of frontal lobe damage suffered by Gage. The devastating consequences of Gage's acquired "character disorder" bring to mind a few disturbing questions. "There are many Gages around us, people whose fall from social grace is disturbingly similar. Some have brain damage

consequent to brain tumors, or head injury, or other neurological disease. Yet some have had no overt neurological disease and they still behave like Gage. If we are to solve humanely the problems they pose, we need to understand the nature of these human beings whose actions can be destructive to themselves and to others. Neither incarceration nor the death penalty — among the responses that society currently

offers for those individuals — contribute to our understanding or solve the problem." What best can help us to solve social problems — that is the question.

Part II of the book is devoted to the search for intelligent answers. What allows humans to behave rationally?

How does the normal brain work? Damasio is careful in delineating the scope of his undertaking and in noting the speculative nature of some of his contentions. His hypotheses are based on careful observation of some 1800 patients studied at his laboratories at the University of Iowa over a period of 17 years. The difference between science and mere philosophy deserves attention. The pursuit of both requires imagination, creativity, and inventiveness. Science, in addition, demands reproducible observations and experimental verification before a hypothesis can claim credibility. Philosophy and religion are not hampered by such restraints. Their credibility is based primarily on the prestige of the prophet and the emotional impact of the message. In the case of Descartes, a multitude of true believers still populates the earth in spite of what we know, or should know, about neurobiology.

The sheer multitude of facts and opinions presented by Damasio may at times confuse the reader. Careful attention to the definition of terms used throughout the text is essential to an understanding of Damasio's line of reasoning. On page 86, for instance, we are informed, "Whenever I

EMOTION, REASON,  
AND THE HUMAN BRAIN  
Antonio R. Damasio  
G.P. Putnam's Sons, NY, 1994  
312 pages, \$24.95 (Can.\$32.50)