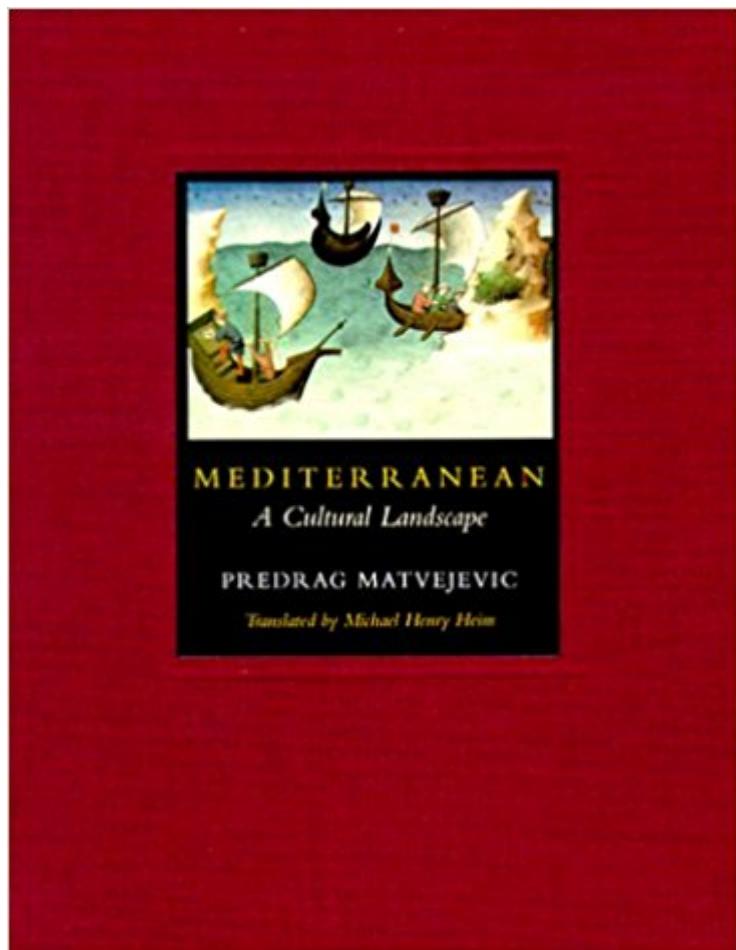


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Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape



Synopsis

Predrag Matvejevic's writing glints and eddies as if subject to the same winds and currents that stir his Mediterranean. "Crickets often crop up in accounts of Mediterranean moods," we read. "The sound or possibly song of the cricket does not disturb insomnia—I know from experience—on summer nights when waking is easier than sleeping and the spirits keep watch and almost seem to merge over the Mediterranean." In the space of a few pages we encounter knots, ballast, voyages, swimming, diving, shipwrecks, burial at sea, sponge and coral gathering, rivers, and the distribution of olive, fig, and agave. The author has stories to tell about each topic and freely mingles the observations and discoveries of fellow travelers, ancient and contemporary, with his own, creating a powerful narrative tide. The book is divided into three sections: "Breviary," "Maps," and "Glossary." "Breviary" catalogs the sights, smells, sounds, and features common to the many peoples who share the Mediterranean—Jews, Arabs, Copts, Berbers, Turks, Syrians, Greeks, Romans (and Italians), Spaniards (and Catalonians), the French, Dalmatians, Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, even Russians. "Maps" retraces the same itinerary through documents up to the seventeenth century that represent the Mediterranean; "Glossary" deals with linguistic diversity and history. The brilliant variety of details and the verve with which they are conveyed will appeal to active and armchair travelers alike. With this portrait of a place and its civilizations, Matvejevic joins a cohort of writers that includes Claudio Magris (Danube), Angelo Maria Ripellino (Magic Prague), and Neal Ascherson (Black Sea)—authors who have created a literary genre all their own, at once personal and objective, imaginative and erudite. Although, as Matvejevic says, "we do not discover the sea ourselves, nor do we view it exclusively through our own eyes," this Mediterranean is joyously his, and it becomes ours as well.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"...there is something irresistible about Matvejevic's pointillist picture..." -- New Republic"Neither exclusively narrative history nor strictly economic analysis, neither sociological interpretation nor literary explication alone, Matvejevic's scholarly encyclopedia of all things Mediterranean is all of these and more." -- Dallas Morning News"Not a work of scholarship or a travelogue in any current sense; it is associative and impressionistic in the manner of a medieval text-an effect reinforced by the physical qualities of this elegant edition, with its duotone illustrations..." -- New York Times Book Review

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For a few years "Mediterranean. A Cultural Landscape" has been one of the most popular book here in Europe. One of the most cited and the most praised. There are wonderful travel related books about the Mediterranean. Besides the many famous, I remember with gratitude the excellent "Mediterranean. Portrait of a Sea" by Ernle Bradford, possibly the best book ever written on this argument - and the most evocative, true poetry in prose, "On a Voiceless Shore - Byron in Greece" by Stephen Minta with the priceless metaphor that begins: "There is a frontier in Europe, marked on few maps.... It runs eastward from Galicia in northwestern Spain, turns south ..., ...takes a fringe in coastal France...then runs down the coast of old Yugoslavia into Albania and Greece. This is that marks the northern limits of the olive tree..." What about this book? Did I enjoy the work of Matvejevic? Well... actually I'm still asking myself the question. And the answer is not easy. I'd probably re-read with pleasure, yes, and I would recommend it to friends, yes. Undeniably this is a book that stimulates imagination and has the ability to evoke, but... But the "dish" is sometimes a bit too elaborate, descriptions most of the time a bit too synthetic to enjoy at leisure and also exposition is - possibly willingly (in the style of ancient Latin "satura") - haphazard. Like with an elaborate dish by nouvelle cuisine, here everything looks, smells and tastes good... you are captured by endless variations of colors and forms, but in the end you feel frustrated by scarcity and with a distressing sense of hunger. Its main virtue consists in being a successful effort to evoke a world almost totally disappeared, stressing on the points of contact between the many peoples and cultures living on its shores (the Latin, Slav, Greek, Turkish, Jewish and Arabic) more than on the already over-stressed

differences. On the other hand, if you do not know already the background, it will be difficult to follow, perceive and appreciate the argument. Because most of the book is rotating on a endless variation of the same themes, presented under different points of view, and often in a most rarefied poetic dimension. This happens specially in the first of the three parts in which the book is divided ("Breviary" - the other two are "Maps" and "Glossary") while in the other two this impression is less vivid. Anyway most of the world here presented as still existing, was already totally vanished by the 1960s' and since then it has been transferred to the realm of mythical utopia, that blunders edges and fades true colors. But, of course, the evocative and poetic dimension is overwhelming. What Matvejevic seems to ignore completely is the presence on its shores of the British (since at least 1704), as well as the fascination that our sea commanded since the XVIII century on German and Northern People (Goethe, Winkelmann, Byron, the British enclave in Florence... but what to say of the Russians in the Cote d'Azure?), a distinct aesthetic sensibility that greatly contributed to shape the poetic and sentimental image of our sea. And what about the chaotic multicultural cities of early XX century: Forster's and Kavafis' Alexandria, just to name one (but also Salonika, Istanbul, Triest,...)? This is possibly the greatest "sin" of this lay breviary.

The book Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape represents global, objective and unburdened approach to topics of our civilization's cradle. Namely the author managed to write about so complex and multiculturally entwined subjects on a certain way that is acceptable to and appreciated by all mediterranean nations and religions and by all who are interested in overall historical and cultural development of this part of the world. The Matvejevic story about Mediterranean is far from being scientificaly cold and dull, as he is intertwining in it a lot of his own observations, which are witty, sparkling and deep at the same time. In the same sense his approach isn't sticking to chronological or geographical order, but wise comparing of different eras, cultures, civilizations, nations and religions of this "sea, surrounded by land". It is the book that unites. The medieval form of breviary, that the writer is using, is giving the treated topics some special nobleness that is emphasized by poetical language which is fluctuating like the Mediterranean sea.

Yeah...what those other guys said. I thought it was a great book. Don't forget your dictionary.

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