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*The Cosmographia of Sebastian Münster: Describing the World in the Reformation* by Matthew McLean

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Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* was one of the most popular books of the 16th century. First published in 1544, by its 1628 edition over 50,000 German copies of the book had been printed. And yet, to modern readers, Münster's book remains almost unknown. Even historians who refer to it have seldom taken the time to read it from cover to cover and are often content merely to dip in, especially for the more sensational descriptions of Plinian peoples or exotic others. As Matthew McLean indicates so aptly, this is an incorrect reading of Münster and we lose an understanding of the book, the author, and the era if we think Münster's interests were confined to (or indeed, particularly attracted to) these peripheral places and interests.

McLean seeks in this book to introduce us to the full richness of Münster's *Cosmographia*. He argues that Münster set out to rectify the errors of the ancients with regards to Germania and, through a huge network of correspondents and contributors, produced an encyclopedic work that provided a bridge between mathematical and human geography, between Protestant and Catholic thought and communities, between old and new knowledge of the world. In this task, Münster's irenic convictions, his home in Basel, and his work as a scholar of Hebrew were all important contributors to his conception of this mammoth undertaking.

The major contribution of this monograph is that it provides us with a close reading of Münster's work. McLean demonstrates that the organization of the *Cosmographia* is by *periegesis* (that is, by following geographical travels). After describing the section on Alsace to give us the flavor of this layout, he examines how Münster

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describes the geography, the history, the ethnography, the flora and fauna, and the prodigies of nature of all the parts of the world. In terms of geography, Münster has a mini-Atlas at the beginning and a first chapter explaining geographical terms and surveying techniques. McLean does not seem to know that Münster here employs a standard geographical structure, perhaps borrowed from Peter Apian. History is a major preoccupation of the *Cosmographia* and McLean does a fine job of discussing Münster's use of ancient and more modern authors. In assessing Münster's descriptions of peoples of various regions, McLean points out that Münster produced measured and temperate descriptions, only descending to national stereotypes on occasion. McLean further points out that Münster's descriptions of so-called prodigies of nature—odd races of humans, fabulous plants, volcanoes, and so forth, constitute a very small portion of the book, despite the fact that these are the sections most commonly cited by modern commentators.

McLean also reveals Münster's web of correspondents. He points out that Münster composed the *Cosmographia* by forging a huge network of contributors and supporters throughout Europe. Münster did this intentionally and systematically, which is why the book expanded from the 1544 to 1550 editions so much and also (perhaps) why it was so popular. While the section on Germany was at the heart of the book, contributions from other parts of Europe ensured an impressive coverage.

Münster was a deeply religious man, beginning his career as a Franciscan monk and ending it as a Protestant scholar in Basel. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that one of the strong underlying messages of the *Cosmographia* was that of the importance of providence. McLean argues that the *Cosmographia* was in fact designed to show the power of God's providence to raise up and lower empires or to make the land fertile or infertile, for example. We must be mindful of this power, Münster tells us, since poor behavior can lead to a withdrawal of God's favour, as we see in historical examples around the world. Interestingly, the *Cosmographia* itself says little about the Bible *per se*, largely, argues McLean, because it was to be a companion piece to the Bible, as well as being aimed at an ecumenical audience.

Unfortunately, there are some major problems with McLean's book. While he does a wonderful job of reading Münster's text

and explicating it for us, he is much less able at situating it within its intellectual context. The chapter on the sources of the *Cosmographia*, especially, is very weak. This chapter is essentially a potted history of geography and cosmography from Antiquity to the 16th century. Most of it is accurate, although it cites a lot of quite dated material and is not informed by some recent debates. Each chronological section is unconnected to the next, so there is no flow of narrative or argument from one time period/section to the next. McLean starts with Antiquity, arguing that there are two cosmographical traditions—mathematical (from Ptolemy's approach) and anthropocentric (from Strabo's). While I think McLean is mistaken in calling the former experimental, the basic distinction works. He does not try to put any of this into social context, however, or even to show the relationships of thinkers to each other. We then move to the Middle Ages, where McLean narrates a sort of modified 'dark ages' story about the loss of ancient knowledge. Although he tries to recover from this by arguing that the world of the *mappae mundi* was coherent and complete, he still presents us with a very old fashioned view of the Middle Ages. We then jump to the late 15th and 16th centuries, the recovery of Ptolemy, and the explosion of cosmographical writings. This section jumps back and forth chronologically and from country to country. It is rather confused, with only a naïve argument about the huge increase in this cosmographical genre. There are lots of details about individual scholars, but there is no clear overarching argument. His discussion of what constitutes cosmography (as opposed to geography) is simplistic and is not informed by recent scholarship.

It would have been better if McLean had concentrated on the more recent context of the 15th and 16th centuries. For example, how does Münster's geographical work compare with Apian's or Frisius'? How does his historiography compare with other renaissance historians? While the chapter does provide a broad sweep from the Greeks to the 16th century (it is almost one third of the book), Münster's work is not situated historically, culturally, or intellectually.

McLean's book, therefore, is a flawed piece of scholarship. While he makes an important contribution through bringing Münster's masterpiece to a new generation of scholars and by giving us wonderful detail of this book, its organization and contents, the lack of engagement with modern scholarship and debate make it of more limited

value for historians. The book is largely unattached to recent debates about, for example, the changing nature of cosmography in this period, the place of geography within intellectual change in the early modern period, and interpretations of the scientific revolution and geography's role therein. This is unfortunate, since a clearer understanding of Sebastian Münster is very important to our interpretation of these issues.