

The 'Pirenne Phenomenon'

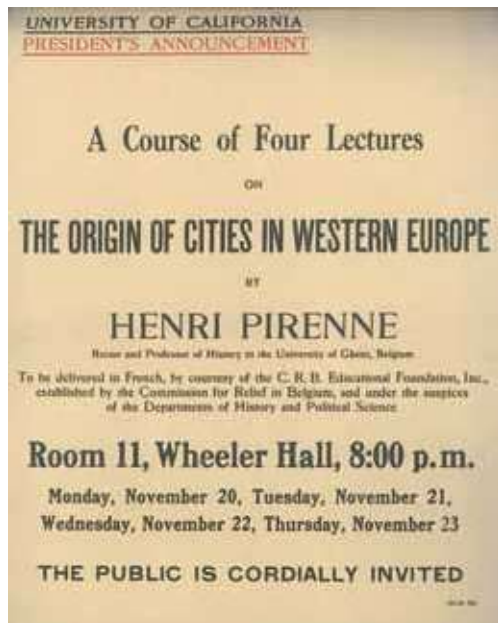
It is hard to imagine an academic historian today receiving the kind of public acclaim that befell the Belgian Henri Pirenne (1862-1935). Along with fifteen honorary doctorates and the presidencies of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the International Union of Academies, he received the Belgian Grand Cross of the Order of the Crown, became a *Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur* in France and was honoured by President Warren Harding at the White House during his tour of the United States in 1922. As Sarah Keymeulen and Jo Tollebeek explain in this short but entertaining biography, Pirenne was of course no ordinary historian. Contemporaries lauded his seven-volume *History of Belgium (Histoire de Belgique)*, which presented modern Belgium as the natural outcome of a historical process reaching back to the Middle Ages and forged by the relatively harmonious coexistence of Latin (Walloon) and Germanic (Flemish) populations. As the first scholarly history of the young nation, the work legitimized Belgium's existence and raised it up as a model for peaceful international relations after the carnage of the First World War. In fact, that war was primarily responsible for Pirenne's international fame. When the German authorities attempted to re-open Ghent University as a Dutch-language institution in 1916, Pirenne (a Walloon) led academic resistance to those plans. His arrest and deportation to German prison camps, reviving the image of "plucky little Belgium" brutalized by German aggression, turned him into a celebrity for the cause of democratic civilization on the world stage.

Pirenne's current reputation as a historian does not rest so much on his *History of Belgium* as on his innovative work on the history of early capitalism, the medieval origins of European cities, and on the daring "Pirenne" thesis, which identified the rise of Islam in the seventh century as the crucial moment in the transition from classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages, ending an



economic system centred on the Mediterranean and forcing new networks of trade to develop that oriented Europe decisively toward the Atlantic. Even though about 75 years of new historical research have undermined most if not all of his theories, his brilliance at historical synthesis and his talents as a speaker and writer are not in doubt.

He is most certainly a fascinating figure, the subject of one full-length, largely adulatory biography by the American medievalist Bryce Lyon (1974) and several assessments since then, some hostile. Keymeulen and Tollebeek have distilled the essence of these debates in a respectful but critical essay written for a large audience. Their great contribution lies in the rich visual documentation drawn from the Pirenne records at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*. Conscious of Pirenne's significance as an academic and national icon, his family preserved even the most minute mementos of his life and career, from his wife's scribbled note to the maid, asking her to fetch Pirenne's umbrella upon his imminent deportation in 1916, to images of the *deuil national* proclaimed by the press upon his death in 1935. They document Pirenne's earliest reflections on his historical plans in 1882-88, when he



envisaged, curiously, a history of “the Low Countries” (*les Pays Bas*, translated here as “the Netherlands”, p. 25) rather than of Belgium. They illustrate his influence abroad in unexpected ways, as in the wonderful photograph of Pirenne relaxing on a *terrasse* in Cairo in 1933, with his notes for a lecture on Europe and Islam jotted down on Continental Savoy hotel stationary. To retrieve the precise historical context of these images is no easy task and there are a few slips. A rather enigmatic cartoon in *Le Clarion Hardy* of January 1922, showing Pirenne “as a painter of Belgian history” with the “captured *âme belge* (Belgian soul)” in a cage, as the authors suggest (p. 70), must be an allusion to Armand du Plessy’s 1921 film of the same title (*L’Âme Belge*), one of several patriotic silent movies circulating in those days. The devastated city printed on the menu for the Pirenne banquet organized by the *Ligue National du Souvenir* in 1921 does not depict “the burning [of] Ghent” (p. 69) but the “Fire of the Ypres Cloth Hall in 1914” by Alfred Bastien, part of his famous “Panoramic View of the Yser”, completed in 1921 and exhibited in Ostend in the 1920s to cash in on the lucrative tourist trade in “Flanders Fields”. Pirenne was indeed a “national treasure” comparable to the Ypres town hall.

Although most of their book naturally deals with the war experience and the later years, Keymeulen and Tollebeek rightly call attention to Pirenne’s meteoric rise earlier in his career. The “Pirenne phenomenon,” as they call it, owes much to the 1880s–90s, when internal political tensions and the emerging Flemish movement weakened the young Belgian nation. This talented son of a liberal industrialist freemason and a pious Catholic mother seemed the right person to provide the nation with a common past in which trade and manufacturing brought people together, regardless of ideological or linguistic differences. It is a reminder that, although Pirenne’s great fame came after the First World War, he really was a man of the nineteenth century, for whom Walloons and Flemings were destined to prosper united under the leadership of an enterprising bourgeoisie.

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Sarah Keymeulen and Jo Tollebeek, *Henri Pirenne, Historian: A Life in Pictures*, Lipsius, Louvain, 2011, 123 p., 108 colour and b/w illustrations (ISBN 978 90 5867 885 0).