Review Essay: David Nicholas, *The Domestic Life of a Medieval City*

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David Nicholas, *The Domestic Life of a Medieval City*, University of Nebraska Press, 1985. $26.50

This excellent study of domestic life in Ghent in the fourteenth century begins with a useful assessment of the literature of historical demography. David Nicholas rejects the theories of Philippe Aries and Edward Shorter concerning the family in favor of the models suggested by Peter Laslett and Jean-Louis Flandrin. He subscribes particularly to the model of Flandrin, who found that the extended family was powerful only if its members lived in proximity. Families in Ghent conform to Laslett’s four characteristic features of the Western family: nuclear, comparatively older childbearing mothers, small age gap between spouses, and servants as part of the household. The author finds the medieval family much closer to the modern one than is commonly realized.

Concentrating on women, children, and the family, Nicholas provides an informative study based on limited though sufficient sources. Women, although regarded in Ghent as intrinsically inferior to men, were very active in the economic life of the city while at the same time they had no political rights. They held no office but did manage businesses. The business activity is partly explained by inheritance in Ghent which was absolutely partible affording no special rights for males or for the eldest. The author asserts that neither legal nor ecclesiastical prohibition had profound impact on sexual life in Ghent.

Children in Ghent were a sufficiently important part of family life to refute Aries’ claim that childhood did not exist in the medieval mind, according to Nicholas. Special records were kept of property belonging to orphans, physical abuse of children was prosecuted by the magistrates, and interest was allowed on the investments of minors in usury-conscious Ghent.

Nicholas has found that high death rates, frequent remarriage, wetnursing, and apprenticing made the nuclear family less self-contained than today. Several generations frequently lived together. Clans were important where alienation and inheritance of property were concerned. They functioned as peacekeepers too, through holding the right to commit offensive and defensive violence on behalf of clan members.
Nicholas’ study helps to destroy several misconceptions concerning medieval society: that childhood was discovered only in modern times; that the conjugal family in preindustrial Europe was an economic but not an emotional unit; that affection and sexual attraction had little place in marriage; and that women were either systematically oppressed or overly protected.

Ghent, the fourth largest city of Europe at the time, is often neglected because of attention to the more famous Bruges. Nicholas illuminates social life in Ghent and contributes significantly to our understanding of the European family. However, one would wish to learn something of Jews in this center of commerce and industry. The author is always sensible about the available evidence and does not fall to the temptation to say more than the evidence allows. The book has ample notes, 12 tables and 4 graphs, and a nearly comprehensive index. The few typos it contains detract only a little from its handsome presentation. Nicholas’ readable book will occupy a respected place in medieval social history.

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James Weisheipl, *Nature and Motion in the Middle Ages*, Catholic University of America Press, 1985. $31.95

The late Professor James A. Weisheipl’s *Nature and Motion in the Middle Ages* is Volume II in the *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy* series published by the Catholic University of America Press. It is made up of eleven essays that were originally published between 1954 and 1981, a small portion of Weisheipl’s contribution to the literature of the history of and philosophy of science. Although each of the essays was originally written as a separate study, the collection is unified and a coherent whole because of its limited focus: the concepts of nature and motion in the Middle Ages. Many of the essays can be read with profit by anyone interested in medieval science. Weisheipl was a gifted writer who, without simplifying or distorting, was able to make clear many of the complexities of the medieval science of motion.

It should be pointed out, however, that the scope of the book is limited, not only by its concentration on the problems of nature and motion, but also because of its focus on the natural philosophies of St. Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. The collection is not a history of the concepts of nature and motion in the Middle Ages, but a discussion and clarification of those concepts from the point of view of a Thomas. *Omne quod movetur ab alio movetur* appears as an almost Wagnerian *leitmotif* in almost all the essays. But the author’s refined and sophisticated discussion of that Aristotelian-Thomist principle can also serve as an object lesson to students and historians of science.