

Paolo Giovio. *La descrizione del Lario, 1537.*

Ed. Franco Minonzio. La Biblioteca Perduta 17. Milan: Edizioni Il Polifilo, 2007. xxxii + 84 pp. illus. €22. ISBN: 88-7050-336-4.

In October 1537 Emperor Charles V invested the Milanese senator Francesco Sfondrati with lordship over the settlements of Mandello, Varenna, Bellano, Corenno, and Monte Introzzo, which were strung along the eastern shore of Lake Lario, better known to many as Lake Como. The senator was apparently unacquainted with his new territories and sought out a native son to provide him with a verbal description. He chose Paolo Giovio, a *comasco* by birth and temperament. Giovio was a man of medicine and an Aristotelian, trained and educated in Pavia and Padua. Today Giovio is known as the premier historian of Cinquecento Italy, and as something of an eccentric collector and curator. Sfondrati was fortunate in catching him on the way up and enticing him with an assignment that really was a matter of pure joy to the mature humanist (“*huic ioculatorio labori nostro*,” he wrote [79]). Giovio even went so far as to embark on a short coastal survey for this project, no doubt confirming youthful impressions and gaining a coherent understanding of the territory. The result is a sensitive tour of Como and the region and reflection on what the editor Franco Minonzio calls the “density” of human history that resides in the natural and manmade landscape. Giovio blends classical and medieval history, local lore, an archeologist’s insights, and a surveyor’s sense of the lay of the land, and utilizes a lucid humanist Latin that is straightforward yet elegant. Alongside references to the two Plinys, who also hailed from nearby, and to his own ancestors and their lands, Giovio treats his

reader with descriptions of rushing streams and shady rock outcrops, good spots for fishing, and better ones for resting. Of Nesso he wrote, "In this place one is exposed to a continual breeze, and is able to enjoy serenely the view of [Lake] Lario and the wooded hills. And for those who really enjoy that rich refuge, it is also possible to dine happily from a table of marble" (42).

Several years ago Edizioni Il Polifilo launched La Biblioteca Perduta, a series of editions and translations of texts of historical interest from the sixteenth through early twentieth centuries that are "rare, unpublished, or hard to find." Paolo Giovio's brief *De chorographia Larii lacus* constitutes number seventeen in the series, and fits it well. This light work of the great historian provides a counterpoint to his ponderous tomes, as well as a reminder that the humanist could indeed find sheer joy and pleasure in the natural world, whether Pliny remarked on it or not. Though Giovio's hand is rarely heavy, we easily derive a sense of the lost world that his words recount, just as his is a world lost to us but for the images he and our other ancestors provide. Minonzio's Italian translation is clear and accurate and shares its model's simple suavity, while his introduction and notes provide the reader with useful background on and insights into Giovio's geography, history, and text.

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