

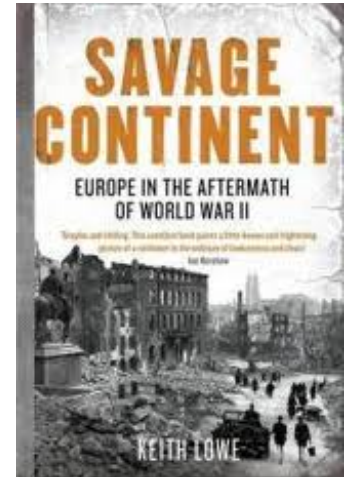
Summer Reading: Heresy, Savagery, Geology and Ghosts

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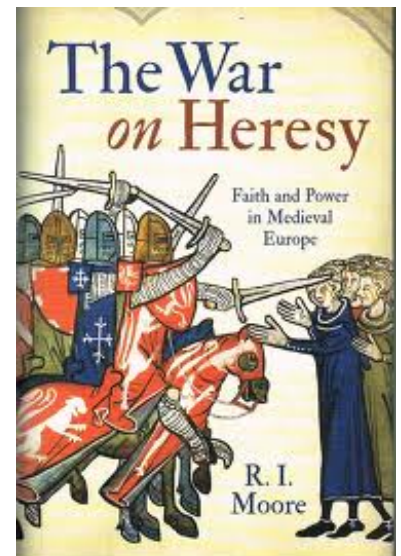
2012-8-11

I've been getting down to some seriously interesting reading this summer. Here's a selection that I would recommend.

[Savage Continent](#) by Keith Lowe is a thoughtful and balanced narrative of the horrors that swept through Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Nothing that we saw in the Balkans or now see in places like Syria compares to the disease, murder, rape, poverty and abuse that made the last months of the war and the first year or so of the peace such a nightmare across the Continent. Five years of total war and genocidal slaughter was bad enough but what followed was in many ways as significant in shaping later European politics and psychology.



I have been interested in the idea of heresy for some time. I am fascinated by the idea of unorthodoxy. You may be familiar with the brutal crusade by the medieval French monarchy in cruel partnership with the papacy against the Cathars of the Languedoc. [The War On Heresy: Faith and Power in Medieval Europe](#) by R I Moore is a brilliant deconstruction of that story and the whole evolution of the idea of heresy at the beginning of the second millenium. He shows with compelling case studies how most heresy was actually fabricated by the authorities deliberately and unconsciously as a way to unify the Church and support those with power and wealth in the emerging European states. Moore shows plenty of suffering on the part of 'heretics' but the really disturbing part of the thesis is the way that our modern nations and European outlook is based on the creation of a false threat – sounds familiar?



My garden is littered with rocks picked up on my travels. These stones are beautiful but I am also intrigued by how they shape the landscape and how the landscape created them. [The Planet In A Pebble](#) by Jan Zalasiewicz shows how the forces that forged our planet can be seen in every little piece of rock. This book is 'a journey into the earth's deep history' that shows how chemistry, astrophysics, biology, weather and awesome geological forces make the world around us. Zalasiewicz writes in a popular science style that manages to explain this all to a non-scientist like me without resorting too often to those grating jokes, fey whimsy or overdramatic hyperbole which curses so many of these kinds of books. If you've ever picked up a pebble, pick up this book.

I am about to head off to the far north of Europe again this summer, so I picked up Sarah Moss' novel *Cold Earth* to help get in the mood. I love places like Iceland and Shetland but this is set on the even more inhospitable coast of Greenland. A group of postgraduate students are on an archeological dig during a global pandemic scare. I won't spoil the (quite gripping) plot but it seems that the Vikings who built the settlement they are investigating have not entirely disappeared from the scene. Moss uses multi-voice narrators which is good because the posh girl who begins the story soon becomes very irritating. This debut novel is not a perfect book by any means, but it does make for an atmospheric chiller.

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