



the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the editors of The Journal of Interdisciplinary History

[Feuding, Conflict and Banditry in Nineteenth-Century Corsica]

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Comment and Controversy

The Editors:

I appreciate Petruszewicz's thoughtful review essay devoted to my *Feuding, Conflict and Banditry in Nineteenth-Century Corsica*.¹ She makes a number of assertions toward the end of it, however, which misrepresent my stance in the book and which I would like to correct.

She attributes to me the view that "feuding was incompatible with modernization and had to give way [to it]," which is on the face of it simply a truism (300). But one of my arguments is that, although true in the long term, such a generalization does not take account of the way that in Corsica and elsewhere feuding and violent conflict coexisted with more modern forms of dispute settlement and the regulation of competition. "In practice," I wrote, "systems of blood vengeance and courts systems could and did coexist and interconnect over long periods of time" (Wilson, 269). I also stressed that such modern forms, including elections, could and did exacerbate feuding and violence, an idea which Petruszewicz puts forward as her own in criticism of me (Wilson, 307–308).

She states too that "feuding in Corsica declined, not during the second half of the nineteenth century, as Wilson suggests, but fifty years later, after World War I" (300). The testimony of the judicial and other records, which I tabulate, indeed suggests a decline from the mid-nineteenth century in the incidence of serious feuds and more so from the 1890s (Wilson, 54). I do not suggest that there were no feuds in the twentieth century—I describe one of them at Venzolasca—but they do seem to have become less important and less likely to involve homicide.

Finally, Petruszewicz berates me for "almost totally ignoring" the "Francisization" of Corsica during the nineteenth century (300). This assertion is absurd. One of the book's primary concerns is the incorporation of a traditional island into the modern French state. I do not discuss this process in the idiom of current

1 Stephen Wilson, *Feuding, Conflict and Banditry in Nineteenth-Century Corsica* (New York 1988), reviewed in Marta Petruszewicz, "Corsica: Old Vendetta and the Modern State," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXI (1990), 295–301.

nostalgic nationalism, and I would and do attribute as much weight in the outcome to “economic forces,” notably exposure to external markets and mass emigration, as to any policy on the part of French governments. The French state was centralizing, but to use Acquaviva’s term “genocide” in this context, even metaphorically, is distinctly unhelpful (300). Mass extermination is very different from cultural domination. The emotive term also implies that Corsicans were passive and helpless victims, which was far from the case. Incorporation was always a two-way process, in which Corsicans used and adapted both old institutions and cultural forms like patronage and the vendetta and new ones like elections, courts, schools, and, for those who left the island, the continental political and administrative system and organized crime.

Stephen Wilson
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The Editors:

It is well known that when a new idea is proposed it is frequently rejected in an intemperate manner. Indeed, such rejection may constitute evidence that the author of the new idea has escaped from orthodoxy. The longer and the more negative a review, the more assured readers may be that something is going on. Just what, they cannot be sure.

In the case of Hardy’s review of my recent book, *Poisons of the Past*, I invite readers to notice that the reviewer has given no indication of her scientific credentials, if any; that she has cited not a single scientific source on mycotoxins (mold, or fungal poisons); and that she has not referred to any original work of her own relevant to the subject matter of the book that she is reviewing.¹ It is unclear why she was chosen by the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* to write this review.

In all fairness I must compliment her for having the courage to state her position clearly in print, for then it is possible to

1 Anne Hardy, review of Mary Kilbourne Matossian, *Poisons of the Past: Molds, Epidemics and History*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXI (1991), 509–513.