Peter N. Miller


To write a book about a man as versatile as Nicole-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637), an antiquarian and collector interested in countless different aspects of history, science, and culture, but who never published anything himself and left nothing but his vast correspondence and a huge collection of loose notes now held in the Bibliothèque Inguimbertine in Carpentras, is a challenge. Were it possible to associate him with a single consistent line of research and to follow a chronological development the task would be greatly simplified, but his interests went in so many different directions that the main problem facing those who study him is one of organisation. Peter Miller is the greatest living expert on Peiresc, but, in his new book, there are moments when even he seems to succumb to the difficulties.

By far the longest chapter in *Peiresc’s Mediterranean World* is ‘Writing to the Levant, 1626–1637,’ an introduction to the activity of the indefatigable letter writer. It contains summaries of Peiresc’s letters written over a decade in strictly chronological order. The mass of different names, the huge variety of topics, and the inevitable repetitions make it both confusing and tedious. Even if he maintains that it “could almost stand as a book on its own”—one might sigh with relief that it didn’t—Miller seems to be aware of the difficulties it presents but sees it as an induction into his method of research (a justification that would apply only if historians had never used such research methods before). Readers, who might also be surprised by various errors that suggest some significant weaknesses in Miller’s knowledge of French, are unlikely to have their hopes raised by the following chapter which contains Miller’s reflections on historiography with references to Benedetto Croce, Aby Warburg, Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin, Proust, and other landmarks in European culture, of doubtful relevance to the real subject matter of this book.

Fortunately, however, this approach then changes, and Miller returns to the method he has put to such good effect in the past and discusses his subject thematically. We are now informed about Peiresc’s correspondents and, little by little, Peiresc’s vast network, with its different dimensions, emerges clearly and rewarding. The research behind it is impressive. Miller has immersed himself in the countless scientific matters in which Peiresc showed an interest and, on each occasion, displays an admirable mastery of his subject.

Miller suggests that the ‘stage,’ if not the protagonist, of his book is the sea, and thus conjures up memories of one of the masterpieces of Michelet. But in
fact it might be more accurate to regard the protagonist of much of the book as the city of Marseille, the great port from which Peiresc’s agents set out on their expeditions and which was conveniently close to Peiresc’s residence in Aix-en-Provence. It was there that the majority of the merchants on whom he relied were born and that they reported to their headquarters, the *Compagnie du Levant*. Neither Marseillenorth themerchantshaveeverreallyreceivedthe attention they deserve in this period—by far the majority of the studies concentrate on the eighteenth century—and this is one of the historiographical shortcomings which Peter Miller remedies. The city appears as a cultural centre in its own right—no competitor of Paris, certainly, but a capital of France south of the Rhône.

As for the merchants, they are shown to be an astonishingly well-educated category, intrepid travellers, efficient businessmen, gifted linguists, with an eye for curiosities and antiquities. Those of them who actually recorded their experiences made notable contributions to the knowledge of little known areas and, in some cases, together with Peiresc who encouraged and directed them, were to exert a considerable influence on later travellers and collectors. An example of this is the publication in 1651, well after Peiresc’s death, of three texts on Egypt by three merchants who were close to Peiresc and whose reports he collected—César Lambert and Jacques Albert, both from Marseille, and the Venetian Santo Seghezzi. Although Lambert’s report includes some standard accounts of the pyramids, the Coptic monasteries, and the alleged site of the visit of the Holy Family in Mataria, Lambert and his colleagues introduced a new dimension by adding statistics and details of the country’s current political, military, and economic organisation. These models would be followed closely by the first man to provide a truly detailed description of the country, the German Johann Michael Wansleben travelling in the service of Colbert. His *Nouvelle relation d’un voyage fait en Egypte* (1677) was, in many respects, a forerunner of the *Description de l’Egypte* compiled over a century later by the team of scholars who accompanied Napoleon’s military expedition.

Although Peiresc has gone down in history as an antiquarian Miller rightly reminds us that he was both interested in, and highly knowledgeable about, all the commercial and practical aspects of navigation, from weights, measures, and currency to current timetables. “Peiresc collecting coins,” he writes, “and Peiresc collecting shipping times, Peiresc describing sculptures and Peiresc describing how to circumvent quarantine rules, Peiresc comparing gems and Peiresc comparing profit margins were, after all, the same person.” This vast extent of interests and the quite remarkable research which the understanding of it required will make Miller’s book essential reading for anyone working