William Chester Jordan, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, 1996)

In the summer of 1314 heavy rains lashed Northern Europe. To the population, both rural and urban, this was unfortunate but not catastrophic. Yet when the rainy season turned into a bitter winter and then the following spring the rains returned, concern began to set in. By 1316, when a third summer of inclement weather had caused yet another crop failure, the situation had become a calamity. In *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, 1996) William Chester Jordan examines the genesis and course of this catastrophe within the context of the early rural and urban landscapes of Northern Europe. Drawing upon both fourteenth century chronicles and contemporary scholarship, he has produced a comprehensive and vivid portrait of the disaster.

Scholars have long argued about the true situation within Europe prior to the famine of 1315–1322. Was it a "Golden Age" of peasant prosperity or a period in which the peasantry lived close to the edge of subsistence as production barely met the needs of a greatly swelled population? Certainly, the population of Northern Europe had risen to unheard of levels amid the warm weather and agricultural expansion of the thirteen centuries. Crop yields, while widely variable, remained low and historian Fritz Curschmann asserts that there existed a "precarious equilibrium," a Malthusian deadlock indicating a population under stress. Traditional histories maintain that when the crops failed with the disastrous weather, famine was thus inevitable. Jordan, however, argues that the weather alone was not to blame. Although it was certainly calamitous enough to trigger the crisis, he asserts, "much more was involved" (15). He maintains that a combination of factors – population pressure, bad weather and production failure, distribution failure, war, animal and human disease and a fundamental naïveté of the peasantry with regards to the possibility of famine – all contributed to the disaster.

The appalling weather of 1315–1322 is the most striking and obvious culprit for the subsequent events. Heavy rains led to widespread crop failures across Northern Europe. Jordan points to the records of the Winchester Manor in rural England to show that crop yields in the worst years fell by almost fifty per cent as wheat, rye and oats could not ripen in the fields or were attacked by plant molds and pests that flourished in the wet conditions. Ordinarily, the population might have been able to weather shortages by relying more upon animal products but a wave of animal murrains – probably rinderpest – swept over the herds. The dramatic nature of these animal deaths led to fear of contamination and owners burned rather than utilized the carcasses. Additionally, with the shortage of fodder, herdsmen had to send their animals out into the freezing winters for sustenance and many died of cold or hunger. Those that survived produced fewer offspring. Thus, herds rapidly diminished in size leading not only to shortages in animal products such as milk and cheese, but also to a shortage of draft animals that made working the land yet more difficult. This led to a catastrophic drop in the availability of a wide range of resources. This dearth could not be filled given the fragile nature of the early fourteenth century economy and distribution system.

The market economy of Northern Europe that had emerged from the tenth century onwards had developed vigorously on a local level, resulting in a large growth in market towns and an improved transportation infrastructure by 1300. However, that had not yet translated into a fully developed long-distance or international market that could make up local shortages. Although both princes and urban communities attempted to bolster supplies with imports from Mediterranean Europe, they met with variable success. Piracy, war and the reluctance of southern communities to sell too much of their own surpluses limited the amount of grain that reached the North. What the economic situation *did* do was create a volatile economy that encouraged hoarding and speculation. This exacerbated rather than relieved the crisis as scarcity led to spiraling prices. Although economic historians have maintained that

this was an "economic good" that would lead to a stabilization of consumption, Jordon argues cogently that there was little room for such constriction. He demonstrates that, although wages rose somewhat especially among occasional laborers, the price rises far outpaced any such raises leading to a cost of living crisis and widespread undernourishment of the population.

In 1316, this undernourished population began to succumb to weakness, disease and death. Admitting the difficulty of establishing reliable figures for both pre-famine demographics and famine deaths, Jordan nevertheless uses a wide variety of sources to reach a mortality figure of between five and ten per cent for both rural and urban populations. These, he also notes, varied widely by location. Highly populated, sedentary populations suffered the greatest. In particular, these populations succumbed not necessarily to starvation but rather to a wave of diseases that overcame a weakened populace. Nevertheless, outwardly similar towns or regions could suffer differently. In particular, he notes the disparity between the mortality in the neighboring towns of Ypres and Bruges to illustrate the difference that community response could make to mortality rates.

Responses to the crisis varied at an individual, institutional and communal level. Certainly while some found opportunity the vast majority struggled to get by. Large landlords such as secular magnates or large church institutions attempted to bolster shrinking incomes by selling freedom to serfs, extracting tithes, fines and donations from pilgrims and increasing pressure upon tenants and serfs. Meanwhile, poorer peasants pressed harder for access to land, abandoned marginal lands and shifted from a crop-based agriculture to pastoralism. Urban burghers offered life annuities to stimulate investment. Yet it was rarely enough. As bankruptcies and near-bankruptcies increased and levels of debt rose, many were forced to sell or lease (alienate) land or rents and take out extended credit just to eat. Few remained in a financial position to acquire these lands but those that *were* wealthy enough could grab large tracts of land cheaply, concentrating it in fewer hands and leading to increased levels of absentee landlordism. Other financial beneficiaries included those able to win windfall profits from the sudden increase in the price of rare commodities such as salt and creditors who defied church doctrine to impose high levels of interest on loans. Jordan portrays a society in which the notional spirit of *communitas* frequently gave way to venality and profiteering.

Indeed, the crisis forced some of the worst hit church institutions, especially in Flanders and Yorkshire, to disband and rustics to abandon villages and take to the road in search of relief. This led to a concomitant fracture in the social fabric as the community of village and urban life gave way to crimes of desperation, urban violence and the (exaggerated) rumors of cannibalism. Still, some did attempt to mitigate the disaster. Churches tried to continue to offer alms to the needy and magnates endowed new hospitals and almshouses. Princes attempted to control prices and speculation and to encourage imports of desperately needed foodstuffs while containing outbreaks of violence. Yet the latter rarely succeeded in these measures and the contribution of their continuing and destructive wars to the problem usually more than offset these attempts.

The crisis of food production, distribution and cost of living shortfalls that led to undernourishment, death and widespread economic and psychological distress only began to recede in 1322. For almost eight years, Northern Europe had suffered "savage death" and unimaginable losses. Yet Jordan concurs with Mavis Mate and Christopher Dyer that traditional views of the aftermath of the famine are incorrect. Rather than being the beginning of a relentless downward slide to the horror of the Black Death, he argues that recovery was surprisingly rapid. Although population levels did not regain their earlier height, the population often could eat better and memories of the famine rapidly faded. Nevertheless, he posits that the famine did have long-term effects. Social tensions between the haves and have-nots increased with the concentration of wealth. In addition, poor nutrition during the famine in

young children and the pre-born led to weakened immune responses that resulted in a greater susceptibility to disease and higher mortality among these now grown adults during the Black Death. Also, populations must have become more aware of the possibility of crisis and look to preparing better for the future. Certainly, he notes, no later famine reached the "extent or acuteness" of that of 1315–21.

Jordan thus draws a picture of the Great Famine from causes through responses and results to its aftermath, covering a wider geographical and thematic spread than any previous works on the subject. While other historians have concentrated upon a smaller area or upon a narrow theme such as the causes of the crisis, Jordan has taken their works, examined them in light of his own study of fourteenth century chronicles and records and synthesized something of considerable importance to the study of fourteenth century Europe. His own use of primary sources is often acute and perspicacious and although he confesses to being "timorous" with the sources, the result is a well-reasoned and moderate overview of the topic that avoids the overly polemical tone of some historians without over-generalizing or simplifying the conclusions he reaches. Many of the sources he utilizes are statistical and empirical in nature rather than narrative. This suggests an approach in line with an Annalist such as Ferdinand Braudel and a resulting de-emphasis upon the human side to the catastrophe. Indeed, many of Jordan's conclusions have real heft to them and will be of great value to specialist historians. Yet, he does not lose sight of the psychological and emotional amid the facts and figures. While he avoids over-dramatization or imagined narratives of suffering, the greater picture nevertheless often emerges from the data and from his tone. For example, his response to the economic historians' clinical avowal of an economic good to high prices shows a sensitivity to the human condition that continues to emerge throughout the book. This makes the work more accessible and valuable to more general historians and those interested in the period. Indeed, while the threat of famine has receded from the industrialized West, its continued shadow over the developing world, especially Africa, the ideas and conclusions in this book will continue to have relevance far beyond its own temporal and geographical scope.