

Hans Baeté receives the History Prize ‘Duke d’Arenberg’ 2010 for his book “Miradal” Palais des Académies, Brussels, 5th of November 2010

Acceptance speech by Hans Baeté

Dear persons present,

The book *Miradal* recounts the geology, archaeology, history and ecology of a forest complex east of Brussels. First of all, I would like to thank all the people, plants, animals, soils and climates for helping to realize *Miradal*. A special expression of gratitude goes to the House of Arenberg; not in the least for keeping the place *Miradal* forested during many difficult times its densely populated environment had to face. For example, almost sixty percent of the Zoniën Forest near Brussels was deforested during the 1830’s, while more than ninety percent of the old ducal *Miradal* complex kept its lush, woody cover...

Some of the forests we take short cuts through or walk our dogs in today, were known to our prehistoric ancestors. In those days - and up to the end of the 19th century - they were ‘working woods’ in many ways. Forests like *Miradal* still conceal a rich heritage of age-old crafts, partly because the presence of trees protected its soil from erosion. Such lessons from the past, like many prehistoric and Gallo-Roman sites in *Miradal*, should not be neglected, as Duke Engelbert Marie of Arenberg already noticed more than a century ago.

Now I would like to mention a strange twist in today’s policy that concerns not only *Miradal* but everybody in this beautiful hall. In the poorly forested northern part of Belgium, several woodlands were recently converted into heathland for so-called conservation purposes. The rationale was that the trees on it were non-indigenous and, hence, unwanted, as opposed to so-called traditional heathland shrubs. I don’t agree with this. First of all, it takes a long time to convert heathland back into woodland, irrespective of the tree species planted on it. Secondly, in our climate, properly managed trees can build up a more healthy relationship with the soil than heathland shrubs. I had to conclude that ‘bad habits’ of exotic species are always emphasised, even if they are the result of improper management, while the so-called indigenous ones never seem to take the blame. Nevertheless have I seen magnificent populations of edible mushrooms destroyed as a result of cutting down unwanted conifer trees, while indigenous but allergenic birch trees were planted near a school...

Thinking a little further, I realized there is no such thing as indigenous. Organisms as well as cultures have always been on the move and – partly as a result of climate change - always will be. When Gallo-Romans or other peoples introduced apples, chestnuts, walnuts and other living beings in the *Miradal* region, they didn’t gabble about indigenoussness. They just wanted to enjoy good food, amongst other healthy, joyful and useful things. Today, conservationists try to protect certain apple trees in the *Miradal* forest from being overgrown

just because they are considered 'native' or 'wild'. I'm not saying these 'Miradal apples' shouldn't be protected. But there are better reasons for doing so, such as the preservation of a possible Gallo-Roman heritage, or the possible use of these apples' resistance against certain diseases. A rigid rejection of exotic species and a blind passion for what we call our own, reminds me of certain excrescences of nationalism. An ecology professor eloquently called it a story of eco-xenophobia...

So let's consider a more reasonable and open-minded approach to our heritage. Ethics, creativity, functionality, aesthetics and, of course, health, including planetary health, are far more relevant to humankind than blind conservationism. Lessons from the past show us many different kinds of relations we can build up with ourselves, with other living beings and with our environment: healthy, creative, beautiful or even sacred relations, as well as unsavoury and destructive ones. I have tried to introduce the reader of Miradal to some of these long-term relationships, considering old woodland crafts such as fern glass production and clog making for water mills; or age-old forest management techniques. By understanding such stories we can learn, adapt and evolve... without prejudice.

I thank you all for listening. Your questions and remarks are most welcome.