

A metaphysical meander in France

Wade Rowland and his family searched for the Cathars, a 13th-century Christian sect, and the result is a charming book of thoughtful rummaging and speculation.

Ockham's Razor A Search for Wonder in an Age of Doubt

By Wade Rowland
Patrick Crean/Key Porter,
264 pages, \$24.95

REVIEWED BY PETER O'BRIEN

There's something charming about this book not getting its own title right: On the cover it is subtitled *A Search for Wonder in an Age of Doubt*, and inside, on page three, the only other time the full title is used, it's called *The Search for Wonder in an Age of Doubt*. That may seem like quibbling, but there are vast philosophical differences between those tiny introductory words, and I think Wade Rowland would agree.

Rowland is, after all, a connoisseur of food, technology and, most important, the facts and fictions that compose our lives. His 1997 popular history, *Spirit of the Web: The Age of Information from Telegraph to Internet*, is a delight, an informed and intriguing compendium of stories and information presented in effortless prose.

taurateur Georges Blanc and even Princess Diana. At times it does become a bit much following Rowland's mythologizing and sometimes didactic finger-waving about salvation, ethics and the separation between mind and matter, most of which is presented conversation-like with members of his family.

The real guiding strength of the book is the desire to bring together, or to distinguish between, the world of science or fact and the world of spirituality or wonder. Few writers are so rooted in the past, or perhaps so forward-looking, as to be able to dissect these two world-views. Rowland does so with a light touch and an eclectic intelligence, and with a deep appreciation of the marvels that are everywhere

Ockham's Razor is a much more slippery read. Part travelogue, part philosophical treatise, part random musing — perhaps it's more helpful to call it equal parts Plato, Robert Pirsig and Peter Mayle — it is a book of metaphysical rummaging, of thoughtful meandering.

The scaffolding for the book is a trip that Rowland, his wife and their two teenaged kids took to France in the summer of 1997, in search of the Cathars. The 13th-century Christian sect believed that the material world was evil and that there were no limits to human knowledge. The Catholic Church, based on faith rather than factual knowledge, naturally had some difficulty with the heretical Cathars, and eventually rooted them out.

around us. As he says to his increasingly impatient son: "The point I'm trying to make, Simon, is that we manufacture the world we live in. In the past we used philosophical and religious 'facts' as our building blocks and today we use scientific 'facts.' But there is no reason to say that one is innately superior to the other, since they're equally creations of our own imaginations."

The title *Ockham's Razor* is a bit curious. The English philosopher William of Ockham (c. 1290-1349) is known to common parlance through the phrase "Ockham's razor," which has come to mean that arguments should be stripped of all extraneous ideas or information, and he does make a few visits to these pages. Rowland's book is

Rowland comes to see the Cathars as "the advance guard of modernism in Europe." In their literacy, work ethic, rejection of ritual and egalitarian views on gender, the Cathars are "thoroughly modern," he writes. He also argues that the war against the Cathars led inexorably to "the mathematics and astronomy of Galileo, the bloodless philosophy of Descartes, the clockwork science of Newton and the triumphant scientific revolution that changed the world forever."

It doesn't really matter if readers choose to follow Rowland's every linguistic or logical switchback with rapt attention. We are treated to visits, sometimes fleeting, from such a varied cast as St. Augustine, René Magritte, Viktor Frankl, res-

many things, but it is not pruned of everything but its factual basis. Otherwise, we would never get imaginative tales of warring ants, visits to bakeries, a family argument at the Orangerie, mention of a newspaper known as The Mop and Pail or a Peugeot speeding by at 160 kilometres per hour, blue smoke pouring out of its engine. Perhaps it's called *Ockham's Razor* primarily to get people thinking, a desire stated explicitly twice within these pages and alluded to throughout. The book is very much "a search," rather than "the search."

Rowland is currently working on a book about the trial of Galileo, which, he writes, is probably "the key event in this entire millennium." I look forward to the new work and to the philosophical and earthly embroidery that will surely inform his next gathering of intellectual enthusiasms.

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