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Author

Hadden, Barney

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Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 477 pp.

Inventing the Middle Ages proposes the improbable: a medieval historiography which will be both accurate and interesting. We get the expected cast of characters—bookish men and women whose lives were spent poring over manuscripts and trying to get the chalk dust off of their coats—and yet there is drama that cannot be ignored in the stories which Norman Cantor tells. Suddenly we are captured, hostages to our own curiosity about an aristocratic Jewish scholar whose learned if wistful biography of a medieval emperor secured for Hitler the allegiance of a generation of German academics. Or we hear the story of an American academic whose commitment to progressive policies took him to the peace talks which resulted in a new and unstable central Europe between world wars. We learn also of the French medievalist Marc Bloch, a champion of social history, who was betrayed by his landlady and killed by the Gestapo, but whose death led to the ascendancy of his academic predilections. From a London attorney with a practice so moribund that he had time to read through nearly all the English plea rolls of the Middle Ages to an English monk who consecrated the host each week for his psychiatrist/lover, the lives of these academics are never what we expect.

Beyond the interest of the lives, Cantor has given us something more weighty. He probes the milieux from which these scholars emerged, and finds the influences which shaped their thinking. The history of the middle ages, he argues, is in a peculiar way the product of the twentieth century, both because we recognize in it a likeness to ourselves, and because the major and definitive studies of the age were made in this century, using its methodological tools. Psychology, sociology, comparative anthropology, iconography, structuralism, and semiology all contributed to the very descriptions of the Middle Ages which now dominate our reception of that period, and Cantor demonstrates how major historical works were produced under the influences of these nascent sciences.

Cantor's work can be viewed as an introduction to the study of the period: it even contains a "Core Bibliography for Medieval Studies." As an introduction, it has a distinct advantage in that it is challengingly reflective and evaluative. It lets the landmarks of historical study speak to the reader, instead of leaving their contribution hidden in the notes. But the book can never be a standard textbook on the time, because Cantor himself is in a constant dialogue with the works and scholars he discusses. The ideas of the historians treated are represented fairly, often by lengthy quotations from

their most distinguished writings, and their achievements are justly celebrated. This discussion of ideas is given pride of place in each chapter. Cantor does not forget that, no matter how fascinating the life of the historian might have been, it is his or her ideas that secure a lasting reputation. These ideas are scrutinized with the aid of succeeding historical inquiries and the dialectic methods Cantor ably employs. The *sic et non* thus produced sheds light on the process by which ideas gain ascendancy in the academy, and on how original thought helps guide those who follow.

The world of university scholarship also comes under examination. The political machinations by which some are advanced and others relegated to less stellar institutions and more terrestrial reputations is accurately recounted. The histories of elitism, anti-Semitism, racism, and intellectual nepotism are revealed in their troubling darkness. The university takes some hard hits. The willingness of German universities to obsequiously follow the National Socialists, the path of Ernst Kantorowicz from brown-shirt assassin to darling of the American left, and the royal court held yearly by Charles Homer Haskins of Harvard all come under Cantor's scrutiny. Though he is clearly preoccupied with the effects of anti-Semitism more than economic and racial injustice, he can be forgiven, since the effects of this intolerance were felt more severely in this century by Jews than by any other people. And it is really a history of the twentieth century that Cantor is writing.

Less forgivable, but perhaps just as understandable, are the rather poetic passages describing Cantor's own dissertation director, Richard Southern. The chapter on Southern is chronologically the last in the book, though another chapter is included discussing scholars whose work, while influential, did not attract legions of disciples. This penultimate chapter seems different in character from the others in the work, a touch less objective and critical, perhaps. The eulogy plays less well than the more circumspect discussions in earlier chapters.

The most regrettable aspect of this work, however, is that it is not longer. Perhaps because of its length, the book unjustly relegates literary scholars and art historians to an inferior position, since at times the works of these disciplines have informed historical studies rather than the other way around. Certainly a few more chapters would not have been regretted.

Barney Hadden
Department of English
University of California, Los Angeles