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PART I

*Modern mentalities: historiographies,  
methodologies, preconceptions*

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## CHAPTER I

*Modern mentalities and medieval politics*

‘Today, the question “What do you do?” means “How do you earn your living?”’, wrote W. H. Auden of the successful poet’s dilemma.

On my own passport I am described as a ‘Writer’; this is not embarrassing for me in dealing with the authorities, because immigration and customs officials know that some kinds of writers make lots of money. But if a stranger in the train asks me my occupation I never answer ‘writer’ for fear that he may go on to ask me what I write, and to answer ‘poetry’ would embarrass us both, for we both know that nobody can earn a living simply by writing poetry. The most satisfactory answer I have discovered, satisfactory because it withers curiosity, is to say ‘Medieval Historian’.<sup>1</sup>

I don’t want to wither your curiosity this evening, but in spite of my professional pride I suspect that Auden’s recipe probably works. My subject has a low reputation for practical value as well. A few years ago the Ministry of Defence ran a recruiting advertisement showing a scene which was a modern version of ‘the Gatling’s jammed and the colonel’s dead’. The caption was ‘What Use is a Degree in Medieval History?’, and the clearly implied answer was: none whatever. The only thing to be said for it was that it gave you a Trained Mind, which would serve you well when pinned down by the Ukrainians across the valley. A brief parenthesis here: this is a defence historians themselves use, especially when faced by quality assessors demanding to be shown transferable skills. It’s difficult to subscribe to it: to claim that a subject trains your mind is to make it the equivalent of the exercises you do in fitness studios – you know they *must* be doing you good, because they’re so tedious that you wouldn’t dream of doing them for pleasure.

That’s a diversion, however – a good medieval figure of speech with which to begin a medievalist’s lecture. I’m not going to offer you a defence

[This is the author’s Inaugural Lecture at the University of Southampton, in 1995. A few notes and references have been reconstructed based on his indications.]

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, ‘The Poet and the City’, in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (London, 1963), p. 74.

of my subject tonight, because it needs none. I simply want to establish that my subject is socially and politically innocuous. As a moderately well-paid, white European, middle-class, middle-aged male, I obviously oppress by my very existence, and no amount of carefully chosen race-gender-and-age-neutral language, or abstention from car-ownership, or purchase of coffee from Cafédirect can compensate for this. But I don't *add* to oppression with the subject I study: like the late Paul Eddington, we medieval historians can claim that we do very little harm, compared, for example, with – I had a long list in an earlier draft, but I think you can fill in your own favourites. The study of medieval history does not obviously reinforce hegemonic discourse. Nor does it obviously subvert it. When Dr Nicholas Tate of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority recently demonstrated his ignorance of what historical studies are by calling on teachers of history to pay less attention to interpretations and more to providing children with an established account of the past including 'heroes and heroines' as role-models, some national dailies asked historians for hero-lists. Some of these were 'establishment', some 'alternative'; but all concentrated on the modern period. The only medieval 'hero' named was William the Conqueror, and it wasn't really clear why he was included or how he might be instrumentalised. Andrew Roberts praised him for bringing about 'the coming together of the English people'; presumably he had the burial pits on Senlac Hill in mind.

So if you want to understand how medieval communities functioned, can you simply get innocently on with what you are doing? Well, yes in the sense that that's mostly what we do. But equally, no: even we harmless medieval historians aren't isolated from the societies we live in, from which we import assumptions and then re-export them in the guise of seemingly neutral, research-based truths. British medievalists are not unique in this, of course, and I shall be looking at our counterparts elsewhere, for these universal processes come in distinctive national flavours. I spent twelve years at the heart of the German medieval tradition at the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* in Munich, before coming here. I was then *in* that tradition, and yet not wholly of it, having had a normal English academic socialisation. At the same time I was reviewing extensively for the house journal of the MGH, which has an annual annotated bibliography of 4–500 pages. Since my mother tongue is English, it was easier for me than for my colleagues to deal with most of the English-language work, and as an English native-speaker I found myself taking on most of the output of Anglolexic medievalists. Here too I was reading as an outsider; not

quite the kind of outsider a German would have been, but equally not as a part of that tradition. I avoided schizophrenia – I hope – but I did emerge with a sharpened awareness of the sheer contingency of what an academic discipline is and does. There are nine-and-sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, and even if every single one is not right, many of them are.

The yes and the no link to my two themes this evening, the behaviour of medieval historians as a set of tribes and the ways in which these tribes fit into the world they inhabit. Yet these divisions along national lines are not simple. The medieval politics of my title are those which existed between about 400 and about 1300/1350, which as far as I'm concerned is when early modern history begins. Within this millennium, however, there's a clear difference between the historians of the early Middle Ages, where I spend some of my time, and those of the high Middle Ages, where I spend the rest of it. Early medievalists meet at international conferences like the one held every spring in the beautiful town of Spoleto. But their internationality is not defined simply by British, Dutch and Polish historians eating strangozzi with truffle sauce, or sniffing the early Umbrian spring's evocative smells of wet cobblestones and wood-smoke, or even by the piles of écus handed out as grants by the European Science Foundation. Early medievalists tend to be international in the sense that they are familiar with each others' existence and writings in a whole range of languages, international in the way they think of their early medieval societies as local variations of a generic European society. As we'll see, this is not typical of all of us.

If early and high medievalists are distinct academic subtribes, where does the division fall? General agreement puts it, for differing reasons, within a few decades either side of the millennium. It's no coincidence that this is also the point from which most modern European countries can trace a recognisable descent. When does England begin to exist, for example? You could point to the conversion to Christianity in the sixth century, or perhaps to the rulers who exercised a kind of overlordship in the seventh and eighth, or of course you could go for 1066 and the burial pits at Hastings. But the consensus is a different one, and not only among us professionals. John Major is not unusual in seeing England as being defined by 'a monarchy founded by the kings of Wessex over 1,100 years ago'. In his inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1870 John Ruskin spoke of England as a land 'rich in an inheritance of honour, bequeathed to us through a thousand years of noble history'. Like John Major's speechwriter, Ruskin was probably thinking of Alfred's accession in 871, about to be centenarised

and instrumentalised by the Victorians. The rest of Europe is similar in end-result, though the specific bundle of key dates and events varies from country to country: wherever you live, somewhere between about 900 and 1100 you can start to see where the society you inhabit (or study) has come from.

But will you view that society as a local variant of a generic European society? At this point I ought of course to show that that is indeed the right way to view things. That would take another lecture, so I'll ask you to take it largely on trust for this evening. To see that we should even if we often don't, consider some of the books which would figure on any list of the best products of Anglolexic medievalism since the war – Richard Southern's *The Making of the Middle Ages*, Sandy Murray's *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, Susan Reynolds' *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe*, Rob Bartlett's *The Making of Europe*.<sup>2</sup> These do treat post-millennial Europe in precisely this way, and they do so very illuminatingly; and yet they have the rather curious status of being widely admired but comparatively unimportant. The approach they imply has not caught on more generally: the watershed period may be *The Crucible of Europe*, in Geoffrey Barraclough's phrase,<sup>3</sup> but only in the sense that that's when we all start being different from one another, a *Europe des patries*. There's no English exceptionalism in this; the French and Germans are the same.

The most obvious and straightforward reason for this retreat into a national Middle Ages for the period after the millennium is that comparison is difficult and there's enough to do without it: more stuff in the archives, more historians around, more cluttered bibliographies. But that's not the whole story, because there is also less *desire* to keep up; it's not an attitude enforced by the community of scholars. I think this has much to do with the way the subject has grown. The rise of 'professional' historical writing in nineteenth-century Europe was largely state-financed, and it was expected to reinforce an officially defined national identity, in England, France, Germany and elsewhere: even Dr Nicholas Tate is not a new phenomenon. As Reba Soffer has said of university history teaching in this country, writing about the interaction between history teaching in the universities and the formation of elite attitudes in this country between

<sup>2</sup> R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London, 1953); A. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1978); S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1984, 2nd edn Oxford, 1997); R. Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (London, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> G. Barraclough, *The Crucible of Europe* (London, 1976).

1870 and 1930: ‘The past was used to document the values preserved and extended through England’s evolution rather than to explain what had really happened in a particular historical time and place.’<sup>4</sup> Comparisons were made, but they were intended to stress our otherness and our superiority. In other words, embedded in the very beginnings of the subject as a discipline, in this country and elsewhere, was a Grand Narrative about how the various We’s are Us and not Them; and although we perhaps no longer consciously think like this, that’s not enough. You may expel Grand Narratives with a pitchfork but they will always return, as Horace might have said to Lyotard.

That’s an external cause, but there are internal ones also. Medieval historians (like other sorts of historians) have an anthropology which has taken a different course in each country – they occupy different territories, and have different academic neighbours (and different attitudes to them). These variations have shaped their sets of concepts, technical terms and working assumptions at least as much in response to their own land-claims (and those of academic allies and rivals) as in harmony with those used by their equivalents in other countries. For example, you can explain some of the differences between the preoccupations of French and English medievalists by the different relationships between historians and geographers in the two intellectual systems, as has often been noted; equally, legal history has traditionally been done by lawyers in Germany to a far greater extent than it is here.

That’s not to say that there aren’t quite genuine regional variations, not least because of our different starting-points. Where does what we think we know about the operation of medieval politics before about 1300 come from? The answer is that the knowledge base is very variable. We write political history from a number of different kinds of source: contemporary and later narratives of various sorts, letters written by contemporaries, legal documents recording property transactions, records of administration – Domesday Book, though in fact highly untypical, is probably the one most familiar to the non-specialist – law-codes. But the surviving mix of these varies greatly over time and place. At one extreme you have regions like the Iberian peninsula in the seventh century, from which we have few narratives, very few records and an abundance of law-codes, or the kingdom of Burgundy (meaning the Rhône valley and the western Alps) in the tenth century, from which we have very little evidence at all. At the other you

<sup>4</sup> Reba Soffer, *Discipline and Power: the University, History, and the Making of an English Elite, 1870–1930* (Stanford CA, 1994), p. 129.

have Normandy or Saxony in the early eleventh century, which have left us narratives with a baroque abundance of symbolically laden anecdote but precious little else, or Catalonia or Tuscany in the same period, where there are rich archives but no narratives. For reasons which ought to be clear by now, medievalists tend not to be aware of the peculiarities of their chosen area, but if you do take a bird's-eye view you can see just how great the variety is and how unlikely it is that different kinds of material will in themselves yield similar accounts.

There is thus a paradox: all these societies may indeed be regional variations of one society, but the variety of evidence obscures this and makes it easy to fall back on a kind of nationalist nominalism, especially as historians are trained to stress difference rather than similarity: 'not on Easter Island' or 'not in the south' are working phrases for us just as much as for anthropologists, sociologists and geographers. Of course, these regional differences may actually have been around for 900 years or so, but in that case it's odd that they should map to the boundaries of our era rather than to those of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries. Belgian, Dutch, Swiss, Austrian medieval history exist because of what is around now much more than because of what was around then; even England and France are in a sense anachronistic terms for the high Middle Ages, and that's even truer of Germany, Spain and Italy. Yet each 'national' community of medieval historians has its own preoccupations and working assumptions: its own discourse, if you like.

These distinctions of socialisation and evidence affect even quite low-level problems. For example, one of the debates currently exciting historians of the French Middle Ages is whether there were political and social changes in the period around the millennium so important as to amount to a 'feudal revolution': a dissolution of public order and its replacement by interpersonal obligations, a regrouping of power and settlement around fortifications.<sup>5</sup> Although the historians who have discussed these changes have drawn up a supposedly European model, they've done it almost exclusively from French history, plus one or two studies of Mediterranean regions by French medievalists. In doing so they've used the locally current terminology: *seigneurie banale*, for example, which translates roughly as 'lordship based on usurped public authority'. As a result it's actually quite difficult for those of us working on English or German history, say, to tell

<sup>5</sup> See T. Bisson, 'The "Feudal Revolution"', *P&P* 142 (1994), pp. 5–42, and the debate involving D. Barthélemy, S. White, T. Reuter and C. Wickham, and Bisson's response, in *P&P* 152 (1996), pp. 196–205, 205–23, and *P&P* 157 (1997), pp. 177–95, 195–208, 208–25. [The author's contribution appears below as chapter 4.]

whether the model fits or not. The words we use and the standard assumptions we make are subtly different; we can perhaps translate the terms used, but it's more uncertain whether we can either translate the things they refer to or say confidently that we are looking at something different.

I want to look now in a little more detail at some of the effects of these combinations of national differences and academic socialisation and identify some ways in which these variations are most conspicuous. Three caveats to begin with. First, I'm using political history for my examples because I'm most familiar with it, not because I'm claiming any kind of priority for it. It simply happens to make up most of the history I've done up to now, though I'm making no promises about the future, and so I'm better placed to analyse the intellectual anthropology than I would be for, say, gender history or intellectual history, though I know enough about these to know that there are comparable regional variations in both attitudes and evidence. Second, I'll be talking more about English historians than others simply because this is Southampton, not because our practice is uniquely wrongheaded or problematic: if this lecture-theatre were in Stuttgart or St Andrews I'd be using different examples to make the same general argument. Third, I'm going to be more generalising and more prescriptive than I would if I were writing a book: few of us are like this all the time, and some of us are not like this most of the time, but all of us are like this enough of the time to make what I have to say meaningful and necessary.

Of the possible ways of treating medieval polities – apart from moving to do a different kind of history altogether – I'd point to three. You can decide that the traditional 'national' focus is not really a very significant or meaningful one, and that it's more interesting to go off and look at a region. This has been the response, by and large, of French and Italian medievalists, and of some German medievalists as well. Or you can decide that the narratives which survive from the past are the only or at least the principal reality we can know, in which case you would start to analyse them in great detail. This has been a significant German response in the last few decades. Or, finally, you can seek to go below the veil of contemporary narrative and reach down to what really happened; and this has been, and by and large still is, the stance of English medievalists. Thirteenth-century England, for example, has recently seen the rise of a whole school of historians who prefer to examine the record evidence to find out what was really going on, explicitly rejecting Powicke's aim to write history 'from the heart of a subject, by what people thought and said and felt', meaning from the writings of contemporary observers.



Where does this idea of penetrating the veil of narrative come from? What lies behind this neglect of narrative sources by English medievalists, by comparison with their continental counterparts? There's a whole range of possible reasons for this anti-literary stance. It's a natural response, first of all, to the Public Record Office [now The National Archives], with its rich records of government beginning about two centuries before most of the rest of Europe. There is also the way historians in this country are socialised. Until the recent rise of taught MAs there was little explicit training in method; it was passed on informally, not without distortions and vulgarisations. One of these is the idea that the evidence of the past found in archives is of inherently superior quality. This you can trace in part to the great works on method by writers like Droysen and Seignobos which summed up the professionalisation of historical writing in the nineteenth century. They distinguished between sources as 'traditions' and 'survivals'. 'Traditions' are produced when writers *intend* to inform about their subject-matter; the intention produces bias and distortion. 'Survivals', by contrast, give us information in passing, and so untouched by their authors' conscious intentions.

The problem is that all written remains of the past are simultaneously tradition and survival. The account of Henry I given by the Norman historian Orderic Vitalis is 'tradition', but it is also the 'survival' of Orderic's own thought-processes and those of the world he lived in. Equally, a writ issued by the same king is a 'survival' in what it happens to tell us about the judicial process, but in what it says about the issue involved or indeed the king's opinion on the matter it is a 'tradition'. This is a rather subtle distinction to keep in one's head for more than about five minutes, however, and historians have often preferred a once-for-all distinction between kinds of source: some are traditions, some are survivals. The distinction meshes neatly with the peculiarly adversarial flavour of the English legal system, which is very influential culturally: we instinctively think in terms of the 'reliability' of testimony, much as in a law-court, and as in a law-court we are naturally disposed to reject mere hearsay, rather than asking ourselves what it can tell us. I've sometimes been told that no one thinks like this any more; but they do, they do. Here are two recent quotations from English historians, writing as it happens about twelfth-century Norman Sicily. The first is: 'Modern historians . . . are disinclined to believe too much of what chroniclers report unless their hearsay can be confirmed by reference to official documents.'<sup>6</sup> The second runs: 'This is not to deny that the chronicles

<sup>6</sup> D. J. A. Matthew, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 167–8.

*Modern mentalities and medieval politics*

II

and travellers' tales which constituted the diet of past historians are without a vitamin value of their own':<sup>7</sup> an unsuccessfully deployed triple negation, with the Freudian consequence that the author says what he really believes rather than what he means.

Many of you will have seen reports of a new biography of King Alfred which claims that the *Life* of him by his friend and contemporary Bishop Asser of St David's was really written over a century later.<sup>8</sup> I'm not going to take sides here, especially not in the presence of several Alfredian experts. But I have noticed that both sides in the looming controversy, at least as quoted in the press (academic journals take longer to respond to these things), appear to be taking up rather unsophisticated positions: either Asser really wrote the *Life of Alfred* attributed to him, in which case it's by a contemporary who knew Alfred well and therefore a reliable source; if Byrhtferth of Ramsey wrote it in the early eleventh century, it's worthless.

To pass over contemporary narratives in favour of records is likely to mean missing out on contemporary consciousness and rationality and substituting your own. As my Birmingham colleague Chris Wickham has put it, it's like trying to reconstruct what the Faculty of Arts intends from Faculty Board minutes, which of course aren't very helpful at all for that purpose.<sup>9</sup> Without contemporary gossip, there's no way into contemporary minds. The most striking recent demonstration of this is a massive tome by the distinguished German medievalist Carlrichard Brühl, which shows how what we call France and Germany slowly emerged from the wreckage of the ninth-century Carolingian empire.<sup>10</sup> It's a work with a great deal to commend it, especially in its incisive demolitions of earlier historiography. Its weakness is Brühl's rejection of the accounts of events given by tenth-century historians. He prefers to construct his own from charters and from minimal annalistic accounts which seemingly record mere facts untouched by contemporary concerns. The result is not greater objectivity; it's a tenth-century world populated by Carlrichard Brühl. But Brühl is, in German terms, unusual; he's consciously reacting against a trend in current German scholarship. Translate him into English and he'd look much less out of place.

<sup>7</sup> D. Abulafia, *The Two Italies: Economic Relations between the Norman Kingdom of Sicily and the Northern Communes* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995). [For a sense of how the debate has evolved in the past decade, see several of the contributions to T. Reuter ed., *Alfred the Great* (Aldershot, 2003).]

<sup>9</sup> C. Wickham, 'Gossip and Resistance among the Medieval Peasantry', *P&P* 160 (1998), pp. 3–24, at 16–17.

<sup>10</sup> C. Brühl, *Deutschland – Frankreich: Die Geburt zweier Völker* (Cologne and Vienna, 1990).