

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-64462-5 - The Study of Medieval History: An Inaugural Lecture

Delivered on 17 November 1937

C. W. Previt -Orton

Excerpt

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## THE STUDY OF MEDIÆVAL HISTORY

The first holder of a new professorial chair may well begin his inaugural lecture with some diffidence. He has no inherited credit to support him, no robe borrowed from eminent predecessors which may conceal his own demerits and give some reflected light to supply a faint lustre to his own darkness. It is natural, therefore, that, in this poverty of prestige, I should recall to you that, though the chair is new, mediæval studies are no novelty in Cambridge; that they have been pursued in the University with a zeal and effectiveness which may well bear comparison with other disciplines and other centres of learning. Living names are a forbidden theme, but there is no embargo on citing and on praising the dead. And of the dead there is an illustrious succession of Cambridge men. If not all of them did their work as residents, they had all submitted to the

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training this University gave them and, we may claim, were manifestations of a Cambridge spirit of exact learning and critical enquiry. “*Hinc lucem et pocula sacra.*”

The Middle Ages were hardly done when John Leland, once of Christ’s College, made those Itineraries and Collectanea which were aimed at a systematic research into the history of England “to the intent that the monuments of ancient writers, as well of other nations as of our provinces, might be brought out of cloudy darkness to lively light”. He has been called “the father of English antiquaries”, but his diligent survey makes him the father, too, of the mass of bibliographical, cataloguing, calendaring work which has been the laborious and indispensable adjunct of historical studies, and in which, as in so much else, the late Provost of Eton and King’s has placed us immeasurably in his debt. And Leland’s own date made his theme mainly medieval: the rival modern history had not yet happened; a historian who did not concentrate on ancient Greece and Rome was bound, if he did not

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know it, to be a medievalist. It is to Cambridge, too, that Archbishop Parker, Master of Corpus Christi, belongs, and it is to his college that he left his famous collection of manuscripts. One can only speak with bated breath of the treasures of that library in which Parker concentrated so many of the best and most ancient and rarest materials for medieval history. Beside him stands Sir Robert Cotton, of Jesus, that other prince of manuscript collectors. "If", says Montague James, "these two collections . . . had been wiped out, the best things in our vernacular literature and the pick of our chronicles would be unknown to us now." But the archbishop was not only a collector, he was an editor of medieval chronicles. If his standards of editorship were deficient in critical instinct and he tampered with his texts, to him are due the *editiones principes* of Gildas and Asser and the St Albans chronicles. He was a pioneer in the publication of the sources of medieval history, which has gone on, and continually grown in completeness, in meticulous accuracy, and in equipment, till our own

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day. He may claim to be one of those who have made medieval studies possible.

Less connected with Cambridge than Parker—yet he was an *alumnus* of Trinity—was Sir Henry Spelman, who collected and printed the Councils of the English Church before the Conquest. Here again we are in the region of the publication of sources, documentary in this case, and still more of the work of making them intelligible, for Spelman's *Archaeologus* was a glossary of the obscure law terms of which documents and chronicles were full. Both Spelman's Councils and Glossary of course have long been obsolete: even the *Concilia* of Wilkins, the Prussian scholar who a hundred years later was Lord Almoner's Professor of Arabic, has been superseded in part by Haddan and Stubbs's work for many years, and will be wholly so at not too distant a date. None the less both mark epochs in the study of medieval history.

I can only allude to the work of Fuller of Queens' College. Vivid in his homely realism, he gave us history built largely on contempo-

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rary evidence, the *Holie Warre* of the Crusades, the *Church History of Britain*, the *Worthies of England*, and a history of the University itself. He set out to compile, to retell, and to digest a narrative of events. There is something of the primitive about him, for, himself a frank and utter partisan, he humanly felt the scenes he describes—a thing which so few of us can do—the only recipe to make the dry bones live.

But Fuller with his books has long joined his own *Worthies*. We go to him now, sometimes for literary pleasure, sometimes as a source for facts or thoughts of his own century, not as a teacher for earlier times. A smaller man, who accomplished for medieval history a much greater and more enduring work, is Thomas Rymer, of Sidney Sussex. It is superfluous to insist on the merits of the monumental *Foedera*; that collection of documents meets one in countless notes of countless books and articles. If he was not, strictly speaking, a pioneer, he brought to light and made usable a whole department of one of the richest archives of Europe. No doubt his texts are not

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free from errors; fortunately for his successors, he did not sweep the archives clean of the class of documents he published. But with the *Foedera*, as with the *Concilia*, the medievalist obtained one of the most useful tools in the second division of his sources, the documentary, perhaps now the most fruitful material for new work and new discoveries.

Beside Rymer and Fuller there stands another collector and editor of manuscripts and biographic historian, Henry Wharton of Gonville and Caius College; in Stubbs's words "this wonderful man died . . . at the age of thirty, having done for the elucidation of English Church History . . . more than any one before or since". We still use texts published in his *Anglia Sacra*. To publish, however, and even to explain and narrate is not necessarily to interpret, and to reach interpreters of medieval history who are near enough to us to produce answering thoughts, and who do not translate, so to say, from one dead language into another, we must come down to the nineteenth century. In that nearer time should be com-

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memorated two authors, exact contemporaries, now too little read, Samuel Roffey Maitland of St John's and Trinity, and Thomas Greenwood of St John's. Both deserved, first and foremost, the epithet of scholarly. They went back to the sources, they constructed afresh and for themselves from the sources, and discarded the facile repetition of earlier views which so easily becomes a parody or a fiction. Greenwood may be described, perhaps, as a Gibbon *manqu *. Too much of the dignity of history told by the superior person appears in his pompous, rotund periods and in his austere judgement of the Popes. None the less his *Cathedra Petri*, the *History of the Great Latin Patriarchate*, is still profitable to consult. Maitland, the more familiar, is still a storehouse of authentic anecdote and still interesting for his lively controversy and ready learning. He rescued for English readers the Dark Ages from contempt and oblivion.

It is hard to appreciate rightly more recent figures, who have really formed the existing Cambridge school of medieval history, al-

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though they were not only bred at Cambridge but taught there. For they did not limit themselves to the Middle Ages. Cunningham, a true pioneer, was an economic historian who took the Middle Ages in his stride. Frederick Maitland, our greatest indigenous name, was a lawyer. Yet the one penetrated deep into the social fabric and material conditions which were the mould of medieval life, and the other with his brilliant imagination made both law and history a study of the human mind and of human nature with their powers and their vagaries. The driest detail took life and colour from his pen, and somehow, while long-dead thoughts and a past environment became sympathetic, intelligible, and clear, Maitland himself, with his wit, his wisdom, his insight and learning, is always before the reader, like the sunlight in a landscape. There is no vain attempt of the author to confuse himself with his theme, nor does the hoarse bass of an older time shrill to us mildly in a modern treble.

Last of all, I may perhaps mention Corbett, for here again the *genius loci* seems evident, the



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ideal of history based on the sources by critical investigation, each problem considered slowly, thoroughly, independently, afresh, yet with full knowledge of former solutions. That power to keep the mind and judgement free amid the plethora of learning is given to few. In his too scanty monographs Corbett attained it.

There is something non-committal in the title given to the period of European history which these scholars studied: *Medium Aevum*, the Middle Age which lies between Antiquity and the Modern Age in which we live. The name, so far as so colourless a phrase can suggest anything, presupposes more of those other ages than of itself: on the one hand the triumphant Renaissance, the expansion of the world, the discovery and the subjection of the forces of Nature, the growing rationalization of thought, of society, and of government; on the other the dead civilization, still luminous like its marbles, of Greece and Rome, which had crumbled and been submerged in barbarism, yet whose relics were the teachers and

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inspirers of the intellectual advance of modern Europe. The Middle Age would seem to be the uninhabited, featureless heath dividing from one another ancient tribes cantoned in their tith and pasture.

It has been the task of medievalists to substitute for this impression of nullity a very different picture, and to give reasons for their faith in the importance and absorbing interest of their study. First of all, to take the humblest defence, they may stress the part played by continuity in the understanding of history. The story of mankind will hardly be rightly conceived if it is known as a succession of disconnected, if brilliant, scenes, separated by blank darkness. True, we do see a decline, which is nearly a collapse, of civilization in Western Europe when the Roman Empire dissolves. But, even if we for the moment disregard the continuance of Antiquity, all important both then and in the future, in the Roman East of Byzantium, yet some part of Rome's ideas and cultural heritage, at the lowest reckoning, lived on and were part of the medieval elements out of