

Among the Medievalists

INVENTING THE MIDDLE AGES: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century. By Norman F. Cantor. Morrow. 477 pp. \$28

The most recent period in history may be the Middle Ages. At least the Middle Ages often seems the era most appealing to contemporary audiences. We flock to a film about a medieval bandit (*Robin Hood*). Children read a comic-strip version of the Middle Ages (*Hagar the Horrible*). An ordinary detective story (Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*) is set amid the intrigues of the medieval church, and it becomes an international bestseller. Another book (Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*) makes the farfetched claim that the 14th century is a *Doppelgänger* of our own times, and it becomes a bestseller.

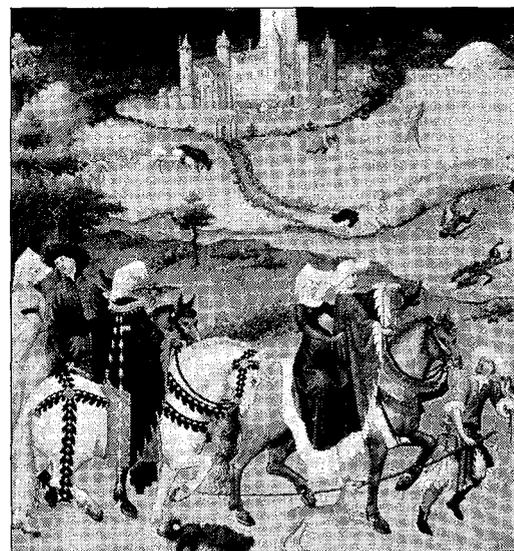
Even on a scholarly level, it can be argued that the Middle Ages is of quite recent vintage. This is precisely the case made by Norman Cantor, an historian at New York University. The Middle Ages, he suggests, did not exist as a proper subject of history before the 20th century. Previously, people might have referred to the Middle Ages, but what they talked about was not a distinct age but their own shadows projected backwards.

The Italian humanists of the 15th century first coined the term "Middle Age" or "Middle Ages" in order to denigrate the thousand years between the fall of brilliant Rome and the rise of their own almost equally brilliant epoch. During the next three centuries, the "Middle Ages" served mainly as a convenient synonym for barbarism and ignorance, superstition and cultural decline.

In the early 19th century, however, John Keats, Sir Walter Scott, Jules Michelet, and Caspar David Friedrich discovered a different, more romantic Middle Ages. In opposition to the sooty, utilitarian world of the Industrial Revolution, they wove an

idyllic tapestry of heroic individualism and intense communal feeling, a Gothic culture steeped in idealism, spirituality, and the adoration of women. After 1840, the Victorians replaced that romantic idealism with their own ideals about nationalism, social determinism, and Darwinian struggle and proceeded to find the Middle Ages brimming with such phenomena. Cantor cautions us not to waste our time considering this early, pioneering scholarship: "No book written about the European Middle Ages before 1895 or so is still worth reading . . ."

The problem facing the Victorians was, curiously, that they had too much raw material to work with. The 19th-century understanding of the ancient world remains highly significant, Cantor says, precisely because the surviving documents from antiquity are relatively few. By contrast, the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library in Collegeville, Minnesota, alone has microfilms of 73,000 medieval books; this represents but a fraction of existing source materials today, most of which had in fact been available—and overwhelming—to



the Victorian scholars, who were largely brilliant amateurs. It was left to the more diligent, professional scholars of the 20th century to penetrate this thicket of sources and to discover, decipher, decode, and finally reveal the true contours of medieval Europe.

Cantor proposes to draw back the curtain and escort us backstage and, amid the hammering and the tinkering with lights and the costuming, demonstrate exactly how an historical era is reconstructed. He boasts that his is, in fact, the first intimate portrait of a group of scholars at work. From him we learn what Phyllis Rose called "the higher gossip"—that is, the tittle-tattle, the scandal, and the juice—but we learn it only for instructive purposes: to understand how an academic's personal life intertwines with the social forces of his time and how, out of that glorious mishmash, true and accurate history can emerge.

Consider, for example, Cantor's own mentor—Joseph Strayer, the chairman of the Princeton history department during the 1950s, whose textbook shaped an entire generation's views on the Middle Ages. Strayer would conduct his late-afternoon seminars in a nearly dark office. When asked why the lights couldn't be turned on, Strayer growled, "So you dummies will not be able to bore us by reading your verbose notes and will have to speak succinctly from memory." For two years, Strayer's graduate students did nothing but read medieval tax roles, and in his own lectures Strayer rarely referred to the colorful kings and prelates who populated the Middle Ages. Strayer's Middle Ages was one in which good administration and law made civil life possible. This vision of medieval Europe, with its centralized political systems governed by a learned elite, Cantor observes, was essentially "a mirror of the New Deal"—"public-spirited, uncorrupted but power-hungry bureaucrats who worked on behalf of society's welfare as they perceived it."

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that Strayer would telephone Cantor late at

night, instructing him to prepare a lecture and deliver it to Strayer's class the following day. Summoned mysteriously out of town, Strayer, Cantor later learned, was following a second career, working for the CIA and advising Allen Dulles on high-level matters. To Strayer this seemed perfectly normal. Such secret parleys within a bureaucratic elite had been integral to the Middle Ages and had helped ensure a happily ordered society.

Strayer's rational, elitist, but ultimately democratic bureaucracy was, however, hardly the model other scholars found for the Middle Ages. In Germany, the exact opposite image of medieval Europe had earlier taken shape. Percy Ernst Schramm and Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, whom Cantor calls the "Nazi twins," were born shortly after the Second German Empire was created under the Prussian Hohenzollerns. Both projected back into the Middle Ages theoretical justifications for the royal leadership of society. They penned brilliant biographies of royal messianic figures—Schramm of the 10th-century emperor Otto III, Kantorowicz of the 13th-century emperor Frederick II—who brought order to the German nation. In their political life, both men (though Kantorowicz was Jewish) believed they had found such a contemporary political savior in none other than Adolf Hitler.

And so it goes, as Cantor describes how each towering medievalist soldered together an image of the Middle Ages congenial to his own milieu. C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien shaped a vision of romantic traditionalism and medieval spirituality that embodied the typically conservative outlook of Oxbridge dons who found the contemporary world distasteful. The French historian and resistance fighter Marc Bloch projected a social communitarianism to counter the terrible reality of his beloved France falling apart before the invading Germans. Cantor depicts the various medievalists with a liveliness and flair that can vary from the amusing, as when he characterizes the flamboyant Le Roy Ladurie as a "middle-aged David Bowie," to the nearly libelous, as when he

implies that Natalie Zemon Davis is a neo-Stalinist.

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Yet what, finally, do Cantor's descriptions of the various medievalists all add up to, since they don't add up to anything resembling unanimity about the Middle Ages? Ironically, Cantor refutes his own premise. In the end, his great 20th-century scholars, who supposedly wrote real history, are almost indistinguishable from those 19th-century dilettantes who projected their fantasies onto that earlier age. Cantor believes that the 20th-century historians do present a "truer" Middle Ages, but his claim comes down finally to something other than their having perused more documents and burrowed deeper into the archives.

Alfred North Whitehead remarked that all people are either Aristotelians or Platonists, meaning that a person inclines to seeing either the minute particulars or the generalizing essence. In the course of *Inventing the Middle Ages*, Cantor goes from recording the particulars of medieval historiography to glimpsing the Middle Ages in its archetypal wholeness. And, amazingly, the archetypal Middle Ages appears to be an early rough draft of the 20th century. "The 20th century invented for itself a medieval mosaic that was significantly patterned by its own agonizing experiences," Cantor admits, but that mosaic is still valid history because our agony resembles the medievals': "We have met the medievals and recognizably they share our sensibilities and anxieties."

Cantor argues that medieval civilization is "the intriguing shadow, the marginally distinctive double, the secret sharer of our dreams and anxieties" because both periods are obsessed with "the tension between the spiritual and the material, the intellectual and physical." Of course—but

which historical period was not so obsessed? Cantor's arguments here lead almost into anachronisms in which medieval men seem to perform quite trendy stunts. Thus the 12th-century theologian Peter Abelard tries "the radical neo-Freudian approach of high eroticism (copulation makes you free) à la Wilhelm Reich, Norman O. Brown, and Herbert Marcuse." What, one wonders, is the medieval equivalent of "neo-Freudian," the Thomistic formulation for "à la Wilhelm Reich"?

Yet it is this hyperenthusiasm that makes *Inventing the Middle Ages* more than just a dutiful academic study. Indeed, Cantor ends up rather resembling a figure out of the Middle Ages, a monk or visionary who has glimpsed the True Grail. But for Cantor, what will save us is not Christ or God but the Middle Ages itself. He challenges some bold university president to disassemble the anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, and conventional history departments and invest instead in medieval studies, which contain—who would have guessed?—"the key ingredients of the new culture of the 21st century." Cantor closes with a grand neoconservative vision or perhaps hallucination: The retro-medieval world of the next century will turn back "the welfare and regulatory state from impinging drastically upon, or even in totalitarian fashion swallowing up, society . . . Like the Roman Empire, the modern age will crumble . . . and in the murky streets of ruined cities and meeting grounds of a billion humble habitations, our heroes and saints will show us how to begin history anew."

Back to the Future? After presenting his dazzling gallery of brilliant and eccentric scholars, Cantor thus reveals himself the most creative and crotchety medievalist of them all.

—Jeffery Paine is the literary editor of the *Wilson Quarterly*.