

Thinking Medieval: An Introduction to the Study of the Middle Ages

Review Number: 581

Publish date: Thursday, 1 March, 2007

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ISBN: 9781403912947

Date of Publication: 2005

Price: £52.00

Pages: 168pp.

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Publisher url: <http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?is=1403912947>

Place of Publication: Basingstoke

Reviewer: Stephen Church

Most of us become medievalists by accident. We fall under the spell of a charismatic teacher at school or university, or, having been introduced to the subject—sometimes as pressed men and women, by the dictates of our chosen university's curriculum—we find that the study of the middle ages speaks to our inner psyche. Few of us seek to justify our choice of subject beyond the simple 'because we enjoy it', but when we, in our turn, get university jobs and are confronted by students, some of them reluctant followers of the prescribed curriculum, bemused by the need to study the middle ages; or by colleagues who cannot quite see why the department should support another medievalist; or by a Secretary of State for Education who thinks medievalists are 'ornamental' and thus a luxury for which 'there is no reason the state [should] pay', we find we have to justify the study of our subject more fully. And it is for his efforts to provide just such a justification, and to explain why it is worth studying the middle ages, that we all owe Marcus Bull a great debt of gratitude. Certainly he has made me more focused on the reasons why my subject deserves to remain on the university curriculum.

Marcus Bull's book is much more than a defence of medievalism; in fact its real value lies not in justifying the study of the middle ages, but in providing students of the subject with a guide on how to study the subject on which they have embarked. Bull's methodology is engaging and informative. His discussion is peppered with discussions of key historical events and movements, interwoven with clear and lucid explanations of the medieval historian's craft. Students, for example, will find his explanations for the place of crusading in the medieval world informative and thought-provoking. Equally instructive are his discussions of the development of the English language and of the impact of the Vikings. Each example is used to demonstrate a particular argument that Bull develops, though each may be read in isolation as good introductions to the current state of our understanding of the subjects he discusses.

Especially useful to students is the chapter headed, 'The Evidence for Medieval History'. In this chapter, Marcus Bull weaves an analysis of the technical business of document analysis between enthralling anecdotes. His tale of the nineteenth-century French forgers, Henri Courtois and Paul Le Tellier, who created 'medieval' documents for those wishing to connect their families to those who had taken part in the crusading movement that had begun at the end of the eleventh century, is especially engaging. His vividly

told tales of the destruction of the Archivio di Stato in Naples, and of the survival of the Bayeux Tapestry, give students a succinct account of the perilous journeys that our sources have had to make in order to cross the ages from their time to our own. These stories help Bull to demonstrate the ways in which medievalists have to deal with occasional 'oases' of material in the large wasteland of the 'documentary desert' that is the medieval past.

Marcus Bull's final chapter, 'Is Medieval History Relevant?', is, for students and teachers alike, the most thought-provoking part of the book. He takes us through the various defences for the continuation of medieval history in the university curriculum. Each of the arguments for the defence of medieval history is explained and its weaknesses are then revealed: the argument that the study of history imparts important skills is countered by the point that these skills are generic to many subjects in the humanities, and those skills that are perhaps history-specific can be taught around any area of the past, not just in the field of medieval history; the argument that history has a relevance to the present is countered by the fact that even the most enthusiastic medievalist would find it difficult in an essay on the origins of the first world war, for example, to find anything more than an opening paragraph on the Treaty of Verdun in 843. Bull concludes, however, that the study of medieval history does have relevance to the modern world, and that its relevance lies in what he calls 'alterity'. This is the one piece of jargon to enter a book on the study of history which is blissfully free of that sin. 'Alterity' is, in Marcus Bull's words, 'the exploration of ... the ways in which people in the past understood their worlds'. By studying a world that is so obviously different from ours, we are freed from the possibility of seeing those who inhabited that world as being like us (only with bad teeth and smelling of wood smoke). In studying the crusades, for example, if we are not to be anachronistic, we have to make a 'mental adjustment' to understand them. In studying the middle ages, we are encouraged to see those who lived then as 'fascinatingly diverse' and different from ourselves, and, by extension, we are encouraged to see ourselves in the same, nuanced, way.

Of course, even this justification for medieval history has its weaknesses, not the least of which is the argument that there are many parts of the past that need the imaginative leap that the pursuit of 'alterity' requires. In the end, perhaps the only defence for our subject in this world where 'utility' is the watchword is that students still wish to study the middle ages. I work in a history department where students are introduced to medieval history in the first semester of their first year, after which they never have to do medieval history again. And yet our second year medieval units regularly attract more students than all but the 'sexiest' of modern history units. At East Anglia, the question, 'why study medieval history', is answered by the response, 'because it is interesting', and, 'because it appeals to a significant minority of students'. These students get the same skills as their colleagues who study the more recent past, and they do so while enjoying the subject they study. These students therefore learn the skills imparted by the study of history while engaging with a part of the past that they find stimulating. This, it seems to me, is the real justification for studying the medieval past: because students want to study that past while acquiring the skills that will make them very employable in the world outside academe. As medievalists we must defend our subject by making it popular (that does not mean dumbing it down). As long as students wish to study the middle ages, the subject will survive. As soon as students stop wishing to do medieval history, our subject will go the way of all disciplines that have failed to recruit, no matter how good our arguments are for the continuation of the presence of the middle ages in university curricula. The continued existence of medieval history in university history departments lies in our own hands.

This book is erudite, thoughtful, sometimes provocative, sometimes inspiring, always stimulating, and it is informed by a profound understanding of both the middle ages and the discipline of history. Marcus Bull has a real feeling for his subject and for the way that those embarking on a study of the middle ages might receive it. And a further bonus is that it is written well. Marcus Bull draws the reader along with a style that is compellingly page-turning. Once you pick up this book, you will want to read through to the end. And, during that journey, you will be reminded of stories you had thought you had forgotten, and you will be introduced to stories you did not know. The warning (p. 123) against 'wormhole effect' in history is especially useful, and one to which you should point all your students. The 'wormhole effect' in history, if you are not familiar with such things from the science fiction world, is, in Bull's words, 'when a piece of the

past is brought into immediate contact with a piece of the present without asking awkward questions about what happened in the interval between them'. Your students will understand the analogy of the wormhole much better than any other explanation you are likely to come up with to explain the phenomenon of linking event A to event Z without worrying about the alphabet of possibilities that lie between the two events. I used this technique with a group of second-year students with the result that they understood immediately what they had done.

This book is both informative and useful and it ought to be required reading for all medievalists, for all students embarking on a study of the middle ages, and for all Secretaries of State for Education who want to know why the study of the past, and especially the remote past, matters.

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