

**Inventing the Middle Ages:
The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth
Century**

Norman F. Cantor

William Morrow 1991

A book review by [Danny Yee](#) © 1997 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Popular but scholarly historical writing is not so hard to come by. Racy, riveting, and scholarly works of historiography are much rarer — in fact *Inventing the Middle Ages* is the only real example I have seen. A mixture of biography, historiography, and history, it is a study of twenty of the great modern medievalists and their works. Maitland and Southern get chapters to themselves; others are grouped by background, with chapters on Schramm and Kantorowicz, Halphen and [Bloch](#), Panofsky and Curtius, Haskins and [Strayer](#), Knowles and Gilson, and [Lewis](#), [Tolkien](#) and Powicke. A final chapter covers Huizinga, Power, Postan, Erdmann, and Mommsen in less detail.

Cantor goes into the biographical details of his subjects' lives only where he sees them as important to an understanding of their historical work, or where they have their own attractions. He writes far more about Knowles' private life, with its elements of mystery and scandal, than about Gilson's, for example. Personal information about them is interwoven with summaries of their historical work. So we have accounts of Norman state building, the career of Emperor Frederick II, the origins of English common law, and a variety of other topics. The spotlight is on the unique perspective each of the medievalists brought to bear on the discipline.

They are also placed in broader historiographical currents, with the inclusion of brief accounts of other figures of note in medieval studies as well as descriptions of whole academic traditions. Alongside Bloch and Halphen, Cantor provides brief accounts of Durkheim, Pirenne, Lot, Berr, and Febvre, as well musings on [Braudel](#), the Annalist school, and the structure of French academia. The chapter on Haskins and Strayer explores the legacy of Woodrow Wilson in the history of the United States; the chapter on Panofsky and Curtius contains an account of the rise of

formalism and iconology; and the chapter on Knowles and Gilson contains a mini-history of the Catholic church's response to secular scholarship in the twentieth century.

Parallels are continually drawn between the modern and medieval worlds, at all sorts of levels: Schramm's biography of Hitler is compared with Einhard's life of Charlemagne; an extended analogy links Southern with King Arthur; the Wilsonian program is compared with the state building of the 13th century English and French monarchies; and Bloch is "a great medieval churchman ... canonized as a saint after his death" and "transformed into an intellectual deity whose shrine demanded worship by all the academic mandarins of postwar Paris". Cantor offers more popular analogies, too: he writes about "the counterculture ruminations of the central Italian guru St. Francis of Assisi and [his] freaked-out followers", for example, and compares Maitland's study of parliament in the year 1306 with the television series *Yes, Prime Minister*.

Cantor has his own biases, and subtle innuendos permeate his work, often concealed by the rhetorical flourishes of his language. He is disparaging of the entire Annalist school, for example, insinuating that their successes have been a result of good "marketing" (and the desire of the University of Chicago Press to make a fast buck). Cantor also seems more forgiving of racism, anti-semitism, or even outright nazism than the slightest taint of marxism. Economic history receives only perfunctory attention (in the brief section on Postan and Power), while the only mentions of [technology](#) are a single paragraph on agriculture and the plough in the introduction and noncommittal asides on Lynn White's "thoughts" about stirrups and windmills. But Cantor doesn't pretend that his choice of "the great medievalists" or his treatment of them are impersonal — and this is, often, an advantage, especially when he relates personal memories of Southern, Strayer, and Mommsen (and of a single meeting with Powicke).

In his final pages Cantor presents a peculiar manifesto for the future. He suggests that "visionary university presidents ... will begin to disassemble departments representing disciplines which have lost their rationale and are bared ruined choirs of superseded modernism: anthropology, sociology, much of literary criticism, and conventional history"; in their

place we will see a retromedieval revival which will construct "a neomedieval-based culture for the twenty-first century". This illustrates just how strongly idealist his philosophy of history is.

These are minor foibles, however. *Inventing the Middle Ages* is a splendid book, unusual in its combination of different genres and its mixture of scholarly assessment with popular style. It lacks footnotes or references, but it has a core bibliography (of medieval studies works available in English) and endnotes with brief bibliographic annotations to each chapter. (The latter contain some of the most interesting material, including half a page about films with medieval settings, and should not be skipped.) I added several dozen books and authors to my "to read" list as a result of reading *Inventing the Middle Ages* and if you are at all interested in medieval history I recommend adding it to yours.

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