

SERIOUS ENTERTAINMENTS

The Writing of History in
Twelfth-Century England

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Introduction: THE READING OF MEDIEVAL HISTORY

IT IS SAD TO THINK THAT HISTORY, "REAL SOLEMN HISTORY," WAS not sufficiently "horrid" to compete for Catherine Morland's attention with "Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries"—her holiday reading list.¹ And yet, in spite of kings and popes and pestilences (and a great deal of invention), Catherine was right; by the end of the eighteenth century, history could not very well compete with novels as popular entertainment, and during the next two centuries, it was to develop into a kind of writing more "real" and "solemn" than anything the heroine of *Northanger Abbey* could ever have imagined.

Her friend Miss Tilney, with more refined taste and extensive literary experience, defended history against the charge of being both invented and dull by asserting that history books are substantially true and thus edifying, and that where they are false the superior taste of the modern age has probably improved upon antique reality. She is easily and correctly imagined as the reader to whom, a few years before her conversation with Miss Morland, the author of a popular history of England (abridged from Hume, Smollet, and others) addressed his prefatory remarks:

It will be sufficient, therefore, to satisfy the writer's wishes, if the present work be found a plain unaffected narrative of facts, with just ornament enough to keep attention awake, and with reflection barely sufficient to set the reader upon thinking. Very moderate abilities were equal to such an undertaking; and it is hoped the performance will satisfy such as take up books to be informed or amused.²

Those persons "such as take up books to be informed or amused" had, for centuries, taken up history books in expectation of just those facts, ornaments, and reflections promised by the modest historian (although any working historian may object that keeping a reader awake and thinking is not such a

humble ambition after all). Both Miss Tilney and the modest historian appreciated history as a higher form of entertainment and, in so doing, may be considered among the last educated persons to accept fully a tradition of historical reading and writing continuous for nearly three thousand years and now substantially dead.

The works of Mr. Hume and Mr. Robertson are still available to us, but the serious reader, the scholarly reader, no longer chooses to read them unless he is a student of early eighteenth-century thought and letters. Certainly the student of early English history will resist the attractions of graceful prose and will approach his popes and pestilences through other sources—he would prefer, in fact, those unimproved “genuine words of Caractacus, Agricola, and Alfred the Great”—if he could only get at them. Eighteenth-century works on early English history, opinionated, embellished, elegant, are, by strict scholarly standards, expendable. The histories written during much earlier centuries are fiercely biased, unconscionably invented, and often inelegant as well; they are not expendable at all but continue to be read for a variety of historical purposes and in a variety of scholarly moods. The reader whose mood is one of realistic sympathy is constantly (and abruptly and funnily) taught to remember that the first and best readers of medieval histories, the learned patrons, for example, without whose interest many historical works might never have been written, held those books up to a standard not very different, in modern eyes, from the “horridness” that so distinguished *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

No great literary patron like Alexander of Lincoln would have been gratified to find his name conspicuously flourished in the preface to, an austere catalog of events and dates, however accurate. [Serious and skillful medieval writers did not all attempt universal histories, but if their ambition rose beyond the modest annal to the dignity of high literature, their work had to arrest the attention and divert the imagination with scenes of great triumphs and failures, inside information about princes both secular and ecclesiastical, matters of provincial but intense interest, scandalous gossip, tales of exotic places, and, of course, accounts of exemplary lives and evidences of God's continuing interest in human affairs to elevate the mind—and all this in as

beautiful a style as the writer could command. Not many historians could manage to satisfy thoroughly all contemporary requirements for information, morality, amusement, and beauty *and* leisure of language, especially at the ample length their generations of leisurely readers admired. [Current standards for historical scholarship and composition have changed irrevocably and drastically from the informal, expansive canons medieval historians hoped to meet. Readers have changed as well: we now demand “hard” information, disdain amusement, resist morality, and we no longer read at leisure.]

The eighteenth-century Miss Tilney who took pleasure in reading history found it perfectly natural and proper that historians of the highest literary and intellectual character should include much in their works that was “false,” with the implicit assumption that such falseness was not intended to deceive or corrupt the reader's mind. She assumed, as readers and writers had for centuries, that literary embellishment was a beneficent and welcome mediator between boredom and historical narrative; she knew quite well how unlikely it was that a modern history should contain the very words of Alfred the Great, but she had no objection to reading a good speech if an historian could write one. [Alexander of Lincoln revealed a similar feeling in 1124 when he commissioned a history of England from a poet.] One authority whom Alexander would have accepted, Isidore of Seville, maker of august and useful clichés on every subject, had distinguished history from other forms of prose on the basis of its truthfulness of content, but he had considered that to be a fairly minor distinction.³ Prose in the high style constituted a literary endeavor essentially undivided by the fictional or nonfictional character of its subject matter. [The chief events of *historia* were to be received or observed, not invented, but in every other respect of verbal play and elaboration history had to resemble fiction if it aspired to dignity.] History was left, for centuries, in an informal and capacious antechamber of the arts, with few restrictions but the accumulating weight of tradition. [During the whole of the Middle Ages, history enjoyed many of the freedoms of fiction; and fiction, in turn, conventionally masqueraded as fact—no serious deception was intended by either.]

Odd as it may seem to jump precipitately from the Middle

Ages to the eighteenth century, there was throughout that span of time (with various exceptions and developments) an essential continuity of assumptions that could be brought to the reading of history. By the eighteenth century, histories were more orderly and less rambling than their venerable and, by then, uncouth-sounding ancestors and saints and miracles had given way before statesmen and parliament. Nevertheless, the educated Christian of the eighteenth century was not yet ready to relinquish belief in the miraculous (however skeptical about individual cases), and he could still read Alfred's speeches with pleasure. By the end of the century, the change to modern rigor and persevering inquiry was already well begun; it would soon be ludicrous for an historian, like the self-effacing person quoted above, to dismiss, for example, the Britons before the arrival of the Romans with blithe contempt: "It is fortunate for mankind, that those periods of history which are the least serviceable, are the least known."⁵ That remark was made in 1771. Some 570 years earlier, William of Newburgh had been of much the same opinion; one hundred years later, such an opinion would be held in utter contempt.

We have simply lost contact, albeit willingly and rightly, with everything that could allow us to approach medieval histories naturally and directly. And yet those works have continued to be read by scholars variously puzzled, bored, critical, and intrigued, because they are the sources for information otherwise unavailable. They have been plumbed and sifted, often brilliantly, for the nugget of truth in the swamp of "falseness," and that ruthless and methodical dissection of medieval histories has been the first step of modern scholarship on its way to rewriting the past in newly persuasive, dispassionate, and verifiable modes. But even that austere undertaking, like any other, contains the beginnings of its own special absurdity, as shown by one intriguing study that compares eclipses noted in medieval chronicles with modern astronomical charts and proposes establishing thereby a sort of correctness quotient to which to evaluate the usefulness of medieval histories⁶—harmless enough, or perhaps a small further hardening of modern sensibilities to the past.

The older, longer tradition of history as serious entertainment was a particularly rich one in England, as is most recently

witnessed by the impressive size, among other impressive things, of Antonia Gransden's survey of English historical writing from 550 to 1307 (and always by those Rolls Series volumes, shelved and awesomely endless); that tradition has been examined with particular depth and elegance in essays by C. N. L. Brooke and Sir Richard Southern.⁷ The hovering, magisterial presence of Bede in English intellectual life made history writing important and dignified; it inspired imitation and suggested possibilities for form and meaning in human history to many generations of new historians. The Norman Conquest, which brought to England men with no English traditions of loyalties and thus threatened to erase English memories of saints and saintly kings, had its quickening effect on the notable twelfth-century English gift for memory-keeping, history-writing.⁸ The English wrote a great deal of history in the twelfth century, much of it of fine quality, all of it worth attention. I chose three historians: Henry of Huntingdon (writing during 1125–1154), William of Newburgh, and Richard of Devizes (both writing around 1200)—three who are interesting representatives of the best possibilities in twelfth-century English historiography. Each was an ecclesiastic by profession (Henry an archdeacon; William an Augustinian canon; Richard a Benedictine monk), intellectual and literary in his education and tastes, and each wrote a history of England at the request of a friend or patron. Diversity of subjects, leisurely digressive avenues, and open possibilities of historical interpretation characterize the books these men wrote, and I have tried to examine them as carefully and sensitively and flexibly as I have been able. My choice of these three historians required no unusual discovery or discernment; I did not intend making an ultimate selection, but an interesting one. Each of the three simply "works," and works with and against the others effectively.

All medieval histories contain more that is valuable to us than scraps of verifiable information, although what that "more" is, exactly, varies from book to book and is sometimes difficult to describe. The history of written history is a peculiarly modern study in its mirror-gazing self-consciousness; much of the fascination of the subject focuses on the authors—sometimes totally obscured behind copied "authorities" and personal reticence, sometimes daringly present. There are, from the twelfth cen-

tury—that period which is distinctively one of reemerging personality and even idiosyncrasy—a variety of authorial voices asserting themselves over annal-anonymity and tempting the reader to the reconstruction, in mosaic bits, of a mind and a personality.⁹ Twelfth-century historians increasingly tended to record many things other than their ostensible subjects: best of all, their own voices. These minds and emotions make the act of observing, registering, sifting impressions make the really irresistible object for our minds; these were, after all, the men who would, in later centuries, be academics. They were educated and reasonably articulate, and they were writing in a genre that encouraged digression and quiet idiosyncrasy. They have unexpected things to tell about themselves and their part of their world.

But, if the objects of historiographical study press forward in hospitable invitation, the most suitable manner for accepting that invitation is not entirely clear. There is no single method to bring to historiographical studies. Too many ready-made tasks executed firmly on the text threaten to overwhelm the vulnerable past with the aggressive present, a too-little-disciplined attention may result in nothing but a mildly appreciative reading. History during the twelfth century and long after did not constitute an intellectual specialization and it forces—often happily—much of its own wayward variety on its students. It has been nicely observed that the history of history is a subject in which there is “a fantastic miscellany of strange and unexpected things which, after being kicked out the door, are summoned back by the window—all of them to be absorbed into the history of historiography.”¹⁰ But only a little experiment is necessary before one learns that no matter how fantastic and miscellaneous the instruments one brings to the opening of a twelfth-century text, they are never enough. The subjects that came under the author’s attention may range from crusades, through medical prescriptions, to demonic toads, and one is hard pressed to keep in sight the travels of a curious and wide-ranging mind. Then there is the intriguing imponderability of sensibility: changes in taste, in basic reactions and expectations concerning the world, habits of mind, the universal absence of the laws of physics (in the way that things unknown are, in a very real sense, absent), the universal belief in supernatural events. Un-

able to reproduce in ourselves the unconsidered assumptions of past minds, we can only attempt a discriminating sympathy.

I attempted to read my histories as thoroughly as I could, with the intention of acquiring a live sense of the writer’s mind and personality and a palpable sense of his book—of its texture, its intellectual style, its appeal—and all this, with the conviction that every man who writes a book, whatever its subject, is capturing in some way an image of his world and that it, too, can be “read.” It was not my intention to move from the particular historians to generalized abstractions about the philosophy of history, but to move back and forth, to shift focus between the foreground of the text and the middle distance of its special world and thus to capture both. I wanted to trace the connecting lines between the historian and his book and the world he watched and cared about (and took for granted and ignored) and to describe what I had found so as to invite the reader to go back to Henry and William and Richard and see them again—but perhaps not quite the same as before. The student of historiography does not (I am thankful) begin quite alone. For English medieval history, there is now Antonia Gransden’s compendious and exact *Historical Writing in England*, c. 550 to c. 1307 (the second volume is in preparation), which must be the best starting point for historiographical studies.¹¹ Robert Hanning’s *Vision of History in Early Britain from Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* is a particularly successful study of a major theme in early English history.¹² Beryl Smalley’s essay, “Salust in the Middle Ages,” makes sharply observed and useful comments on the tone and style of medieval historians,¹³ as does her book, *Historians in the Middle Ages*. There are the invaluable essays of Eric Auerbach in *Mimesis*; and all of Arnaldo Momigliano’s standard-setting essays, but especially those on late Roman historiography.¹⁴ I mentioned above the work of C. N. L. Brooke and of Sir Richard Southern, but note especially Sir Richard’s four presidential addresses to the Royal Historical Society (1970–1973) on *Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing*.

But even with admirable aid in the work of others, the student of medieval historians is left peculiarly alone with his author and must willingly follow wherever he eccentrically leads, gathering his tools along the way, and must inevitably see, as scholars

always have, "that it is too late to look for instruments when the work calls for execution, and that whatever abilities I had brought to my task, with those I must finally perform it."¹⁵ I have hoped to say something plausible and useful to others about three twelfth-century histories of England in a way that is orderly enough for intelligibility yet does not betray the characteristic informality of the originals by imposed patterns; I have also attempted to build, out of whatever came workably to hand, three portraits of twelfth-century historians that must remain necessarily unfinished, but are perhaps distinguishable.

HENRY OF HUNTINGDON

