

Chronicles

The Writing of History in Medieval England

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Review of Chris Given-Wilson's "Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England"

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Assignment 01

History and Historians

It is perhaps easy to assume that the writing of history is straightforward: historians collate and review evidence before committing the events, described as they happened with high accuracy, to paper. Amongst other qualities, we expect modern historians to consider their own biases, to consider sources critically, and not to editorialise. The medieval practice of writing history was, however, performed by a different set of expectations.

Chris Given-Wilson's book "*Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*" encourages readers to assess medieval historical writing with a more critical eye.¹ Given-Wilson is an accomplished professor of medieval historiography, and his approach to writing this book seems to be to make it as accessible as possible whilst not compromising on detail. The book is written in a manner appealing to casual readership and is meticulously researched, with many chroniclers referenced across a four-hundred-year period. A comprehensive bibliography is included, further split into manuscript, primary, and secondary sources; and the broad usage of footnotes throughout the book leads to an extensive notes section which not only provides further background to the main text, but also provides thoughts and further background as well as sources.

The book opens with a chapter on truth, explaining that the concept of truth could mean two things to chroniclers: accuracy and trustworthiness, and that neither of these concepts are as clear cut as they may seem.² This is a clever way to open the book; to explain to the reader that chronicles are not "truthful" in the way that we may expect, and that their reliability needs to be considered within historical context. "Didactic truths" were seen to be as important as "factual truths", for example, with Given-Wilson giving the example of chroniclers describing not only the hard facts describing battles (terrain, numbers of soldiers etc) but also describing how battles *ought* to be properly conducted, serving as a sort of template for future battles.³ From here, we move onto topics as varied as portents and prophecies, the role of memory (which has an interesting segment on how King Edward I gathered chronicles and other written evidence from over thirty monastic houses to prove that he had the right to the Scottish throne)⁴, the role of chronicles in genealogy, the use of language, and a large section at the end of the book about the evolving role of historical writing in fifteenth century England, which touches on subtopics such as censorship, propaganda, and the writing of disasters.

¹ Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (Hambledon and London, 2004).

² pp. 1-20.

³ pp. 2 – 3.

⁴ pp. 65 – 69.

The chapter discussing portents, prophecies, and other visions is particularly interesting. An example is given of a fierce snowstorm which occurred on Henry V's coronation in 1413, and this is considered in different contexts – one written by Adam Usk right after the event and one written by the St Albans chronicler several years later.⁵ The reader can see how portents can be used to suit the author's agenda, with Usk factually reporting the storm and the mishaps which occurred during the coronation, with no real speculation as to what they may mean, but with the St Alban's chronicler depicting it as a symbol for a weak ruler. The latter chronicler did, however, have the benefit of six years passing between writing and the coronation itself. Given-Wilson's excellently presented explanations and comparisons equip the reader with the ability to critically analyse sources like these and not to accept them at face value.

Another highlight chapter is on the role of language, form, and identity of writing.⁶ Until this point in the book, discussions have been focused on what should be written, but here a different approach is taken and discusses how things *should* be written. A chronicler must decide on which language to write in, whether to write in prose or verse, and whether to identify themselves as the author. Each option came with its own benefits and pitfalls. For example, Given-Wilson explains that writing in Latin, by far the most dominant language of Chronicles from the time of the Norman conquest to the fifteenth century, was seen as the “serious” language of choice for writing histories, but began to be supplanted by French and eventually English (which was making a comeback from pre-Norman chronicles, eg the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*) as the medieval era progressed.⁷ This was driven partially by lay patronage commissioning texts in languages they understood, but the discussion left me wondering whether the late medieval era and the start of the early modern political climate created a trend for a stronger English identity, which could be reflected the writing language of choice. This could lead to further investigation and provides one of many jumping-off points which Given-Wilson subtly prompts to throughout the text.

There are eight black and white image plates contained in the book, seven of which are photographs of text from manuscripts (some illuminated, some not) and one is a self-portrait of the chronicler John Rous. Unfortunately, because they are black and white and because they have been compressed to fit within the confines of this book, they are of limited use. The text is largely illegible, and the images cannot be fully appreciated without colour (although the image of John Rous is again depicted larger and in colour on the back of the dust jacket). However, that

⁵ pp. 28 – 29.

⁶ pp. 137 - 152

⁷ p. 139

is not to say they are without merit; we get a sense of the grandiosity of some of the works by the images that surround the text, and a sense of how the writing was structured and planned (layout on the page, margin notes, etc). We must consider too that the book was first published in 2004, when everyday access to manuscripts was not as readily available as today, so relevancy of these images may have been lost due to technological advances in accessibility. This is, however, a minor criticism; all images are fully referenced and could theoretically be looked up online.

Given-Wilson states in the preface to the book that he took inspiration from two other works (Antonia Gransden's *Historical Writing in England*, and John Taylor's *English Historical Literature in the Fourteenth Century*) which, whilst on the same general topic as this book, are very different in style, presentation, and audience. He has taken the scholarship, analysed it further, and created a fantastic book which plugs the gap for an accessible oversight and analysis of medieval chronicles – and will likely be used by students, academics, and casual readers with an interest in historiography alike for many years to come.