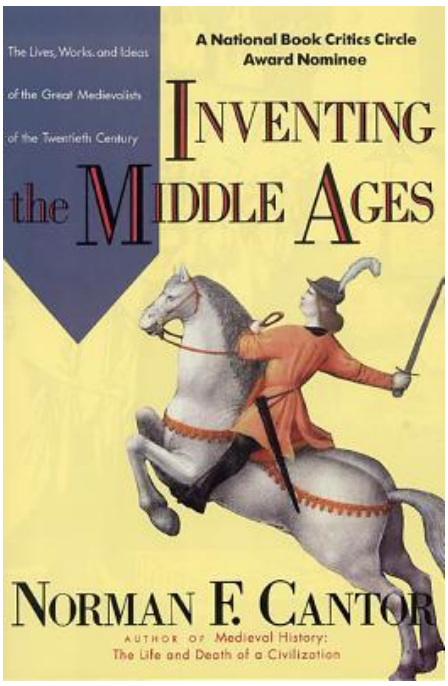

Inventing the Middle Ages

Norman F. Cantor

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Inventing the Middle Ages Norman F. Cantor
The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century

In this ground-breaking work, Norman Cantor explains how our current notion of the Middle Ages-with its vivid images of wars, tournaments, plagues, saints and kings, knights and ladies-was born in the twentieth century. The medieval world was not simply excavated through systematic research. It had to be conceptually created: It had to be invented, and this is the story of that invention.

Norman Cantor focuses on the lives and works of twenty of the great medievalists of this century, demonstrating how the events of their lives, and their spiritual and emotional outlooks, influenced their interpretations of the Middle Ages. Cantor makes their scholarship an intensely personal and passionate exercise, full of color and controversy, displaying the strong personalities and creative minds that brought new insights about the past.

A revolution in academic method, this book is a breakthrough to a new way of teaching the humanities and historiography, to be enjoyed by student and general public alike. It takes an immense body of learning and transmits it so that readers come away fully informed of the essentials of the subject, perceiving the interconnection of medieval civilization with the culture of the twentieth century and having had a good time while doing it! This is a riveting, entertaining, humorous, and learned read, compulsory for anyone concerned about the past and future of Western civilization.

Inventing the Middle Ages Details

Date	:	Published February 26th 1993 by Harper Perennial (first published 1991)
ISBN	:	9780688123024
Author	:	Norman F. Cantor
Format	:	Paperback 480 pages
Genre	:	History, Historical, Medieval, Nonfiction, Medieval History, Biography

From Reader Review Inventing the Middle Ages for online ebook

Katie says

In Inventing the Middle Ages, Cantor manages to pull off what I'd imagine is quite a tricky task - writing a informative, fun, and lively book about historiography. He jumps around through the 20th century, touching on English, French, German, and American medievalists who studied art, literature, kingship, law, and social relations. It's an ambitious book, and it's impressive that it doesn't feel more arbitrary or scatter-shot than it does.

Any work like this is going to be heavily subjective, and it's to Cantor's credit that he owns up to this consistently. Because of that, it's not a great book to turn to if you want get an overview of medieval history. But if you already have a bit of a foundation on the subject, it's a lot of fun to get a peek behind the curtain at the people behind the texts. In fact, to a certain extent Cantor is at his best when he's most subjective, personal, and gossipy. There's a fascinating section near the end concerning Oxford don R.W. Southern, who Cantor sets up as a sort of romantic hero, drawing starry-eyed young medievalists from around the world to his medieval studies round table. It's an odd balancing act between memoir and historiographical analysis and it's one of the most lively sections of Cantor's book. Other sections unfortunately lack the same verve: his discussion of Tolkien and Lewis had the potential to be very interesting, considering their less traditional contribution to the field of medieval studies, but instead they wind up being relatively uninspired (though to Cantor's credit, he admits that he's not a fan Tolkien, but still gives him a fair bit of respect). His commentary on the scholars he met is always better than the more removed and hesitant comments on those he has not.

All said, it's a fun, informative, if occasionally uneven book. Definitely recommended, though!

Tim Weakley says

An examination of prominent historians since 1905. The author makes the point that the work done before this date has very little impact and no validity as history according to the modern definition of the term.
The introduction is a well done overview of the medieval time period, what we know about it, and how we know it. In the following chapters he breaks up the various schools of thought by their best hist and gives us a little biography.
While I think this is a book meant for those interested in the theory of history and not meant to be a popular work, I think the author does a creditable job of making the topics covered mostly approachable. There were very few concepts that I found too technical. While dry in places overall it was a good read that shed some light on the authors of books in my collection.

Brady Clemens says

This book is certainly interesting in places, but Cantor's presentation of the topic is too heavy on gossip and ultimately too meandering to be of interest to more than a few who are already knowledgeable about the historiography of the Middle Ages.

Siria says

Having finished this book, I've sat and pondered for a while how best to describe Norman Cantor. Bitter? Egotistical? Historiographically wrongheaded? A raging douchebag? All those terms alone seem somewhat inadequate—perhaps some combination of all of them, with maybe a couple more thrown in.

When I came across this book in a secondhand bookstore, I knew I'd heard of it vaguely before, and the premise sounded very interesting—an exploration of the lives of some key twentieth century historians of the medieval period, examining their contribution to medieval studies and the historiographical context in which they wrote. I wanted to learn more about the history of the field in which I worked, and hey, it was only $3. (If only I'd mentioned the name to a professor of mine before I shelled out those three bucks—she practically spat on hearing the title. I could have spent the money on something else.)

I will not say that there's nothing useful in this book—I learned some things I hadn't known before, and have a much better sense of the connections between some key figures in the field. However, this is such a nasty, mean-spirited piece of work—a scorched-earth assessment of his colleagues which loudly trumpets Cantor's own intellectual superiority but which displays only a real inferiority of mind. Cantor was a Princeton grad and a Rhodes Scholar, but seemed to fancy himself as an establishment outsider, out to get back at The Man with *Inventing the Middle Ages*. The resulting book is a hatchet job which relies on dubious evidence and spurious attempts at understanding scholars' writing through incoherent psychoanalysis. Cantor seemingly despises historians of women's, Jewish, Islamic or African-American history—they are partisan ideologues, he declares, incapable of doing good work. (For white heterosexual male scholars, of course, can never engage in identity politics.) Only one female historian appears among the 27 discussed here, and even then Eileen Power is confined to a few pages in the last chapter, headed 'Outriders.'

Cantor's contextualisation of medieval history for the general reader does not make this book worth reading (it's often incorrect or woefully outdated; he clung to a conservative historiography long after it had been demonstrated to be false), nor does his turgid, adjective-laden prose. (If I had a nickel for every time he talked about a historian from Paris as a 'French mandarin', I'd probably recoup the cost of this book.) Even the bibliography at the end of 125 core books for anyone with an interest in medieval studies is laden with picks that are outdated or bizarre—what on earth is Barbara Tuchman's work doing there? Not to mention that, despite Cantor's lofty reassurances that this list has been double-checked against Princeton's (well!) own card catalogue, the reader is directed towards the work of Henri 'Pierenne', while Dáibhí Ó Cróinín becomes Dalbhi O. Cronin.

By the end, I was quite glad to see that Cantor was dismissive—actually downright offensive—about the founder of my own particular doctoral lineage. Praise from Cantor, I fear, would have been quite the indictment against his scholarship. A nasty, sneering, condescending work. Avoid.

Zeny says

Though I've no intention of concentrating on Medieval studies, I found this book very interesting. It was also very easy to understand, though perhaps the author had intended for the book to be understood easily. The concepts in the book, I think, aren't only exclusively applicable to Medieval history (and the invention of its

image) but also to other Historical disciplines as well (for example, I think, Orientalism and how 'Othering' creates an image or a "type" for both the 'Othered' and the one who 'Others').

Finely written and highly recommended for those who want to be further informed of "historical trends" (basically academic-gossip).

Ted says

The Middle Ages as we perceive them are the creation of an interactive process in which accumulated learning, the resources and structures of the academic profession, the speculative comparing of medieval and modern worlds, and intellectualization through appropriation of modern theory of society, personality, language, and art have been molded together in the lives, work, and ideas of medievalists and the school and traditions they founded.

Whew! Thank goodness we don't find too many sentences like that one in Norman Cantor's 1991 *Inventing the Middle Ages*. Usually Cantor has a bit more fluid style.

But the sentence does explain, upon reflection, what the title of the book means. Cantor believes that in historiography, the historian, try as he might, *cannot escape the present* … that there is always some part of the historic past that is "invented" by the historian. This is not something to condemn the historian for, since it is unavoidable – but it is the reason why history should not be allowed to calcify from this invented wisdom into a *received* wisdom which is no longer reexamined.

The author

Norman Cantor (1929-2004) was a Canadian-born medieval historian. He was known for an engaging style, and authored many books that were widely read. One of the first books Cantor wrote, in 1963, The Civilization of the Middle Ages, is still in print in a revised edition. Though best known for his work in the medieval period, Cantor also published books on Alexander the Great and on Jewish history. Cantor held positions at several Universities during his career, including Princeton, Columbia, Brandeis, the University of Illinois, NYU (where in addition to lecturing he was Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences), and Tel Aviv University.

Photo by Phil Gallo, from the book jacket

Throughout his career, Cantor was interested in writing for an audience more public than academic. Many of his books were well-received by this reading public, but more narrowly focused academic historians were from time to time on bad footing with him. In the book reviewed here, he occasionally reflects on some of these strained relationships.

In summarizing Cantor's career, Wikipedia says, "His books generally received mixed reviews in academic journals, but were often popular bestsellers, buoyed by Cantor's fluid, often colloquial, writing style and his lively critiques of persons and ideas both past and present. He was intellectually conservative and expressed

deep skepticism about what he saw as methodological fads, particularly Marxism and postmodernism, but he also argued for greater inclusion of women and minorities in traditional historical narratives."

The book

This book is not *about* the Middle Ages, or even really about the *invented idea* of the Middle Ages which we may have in our own minds. It is, instead, about **those who did the inventing**. Cantor says in his preface

> This book is the story of the founding era of medieval studies from 1895 to about 1965, through the lives, works, and ideas of the great medievalists, and is an evaluation of their continuing impact, into the 1980s, on how the European Middle Ages are interpreted.
>
> From my own personal acquaintance with seven of the twenty master medievalists on whom this book is primarily focused, from a variety of biographical and autobiographical sources, as well as from accounts passed along to me, I have tried to construct in each instance a life narrative along with an assessment of ideas and an analysis of the continuing impact of these medievalists' interpretations.

This is not to say, of course, that there is nothing about the ideas being assessed. Naturally Cantor explains the main body of work that each of his subjects has contributed to our view of the Medieval world, as well as offering an assessment of it.

He starts off, in the first section of the book, talking about three popular creations of the recent past which were about, or set in, medieval times: Barbara Tuchman's 1978 A Distant Mirror, the 1984 English translation of Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose, and Donald Howard's 1987 biography Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World.

> Barbara Tuchman never had more than a B.A. from Radcliffe College and was proud of being a self-taught, nonacademic historian. Eco and Howard were literature professors at major universities. But in all three instances their popular books were based not only on their own reading and research but also on the vast corpus of mainline scholarly work in the twentieth century on the European Middle Ages. Much of this scholarly work is too technical to be accessible to the general college-educated reader. But it is the base upon which highly readable accounts of the medieval world are constructed.

So, who are the "master medievalists" who constructed this base upon which we envision the Middle Ages?

12

Allow me first to list twelve of them very briefly, in more or less chronological order. Frederick William Maitland (1850-1906), the father of English legal history, in the chapter *Law and Society*; Charles Homer Haskins (1870-1937) and Joseph Reese Strayer (1904-1987) in the chapter *American Pie*; Marc Block (1886-1944), cofounder of the Annales School, and Louis Halphen (1880-1950) in *The French Jews*; Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956) and Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), in *The Formalists*; Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz (1895-1963) and Percy Ernst Schramm (1894-1970) in *The Nazi Twins*; Michael David Knowles (1896-1974) and Etienne Henry Gilson (1884-1978) in *After the Fall*; and Richard William Southern (1912-2001) in *The Once and Future King*.

+ 5

To these Cantor adds, in a final chapter, *The Outriders*, five more: Theodor Ernst Mommsen (1807-1903), who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1902; Eileen Edna Power (1889-1940), a pioneering female medievalist who wrote *Medieval English Nunneries* and the posthumously published *Medieval Women*, among many other studies; Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), author of the monumental Waning of the Middle Ages; Carl Erdmann (1898-1945), medieval political historian who also wrote about the Crusades; and Michael Moissey Postan (1899-1981), a British medievalist specializing in economic history.

(= 17)

Before looking in a bit more detail at the final three, note that in each of his ten chapters, Cantor, for some unknown reason, possibly playfulness(?), constrains his narrative to fit into exactly four titled sections. Since the chapters deal with one, two, three or *five* medievalists, this no doubt presented him with an interesting problem: how does one structure what one wants to say about these historians into four separate topical sections? You will have to read the book to find out, for most of these chapters.

+ 3

Let's now take a look at the chapter called *The Oxford Fantasists*, in which Cantor discusses the three medievalists I haven't yet named: Frederick Maurice Powicke (1879-1963), Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963); and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973).

That's right: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and some chap named Powicke.

The chapter's first section, *Save the Beloved Land*, is about both Lewis and Tolkien. In it we learn of the Inklings, a group of Oxford dons who, in the early forties, "during the height of the war years, while a bomber moon shone down upon the deer park on the grounds of Magdalen College", met in "Jack" Lewis's rooms to drink beer and tea, smoke heavily "in the British manner", and read manuscripts to each other. One of the Inklings was Tolkien, a renowned authority on Old and Middle English, whose academic career seemed on a downward trajectory. He had published a children's fantasy, *The Hobbit*, but had not yet been able to produce a sequel. Lewis, on the other hand, was at this time England's best known Christian polemicist. But Cantor is here mostly interested in the fantasy literature of both these men, it's connection to their medieval knowledge, and the "profound and indelible" effect it has had on world culture.

Each of the remaining three sections of the chapter are chiefly devoted to a single one of Cantor's three protagonists. *The Medieval Imagination* to Lewis; *The Long Journey* to Tolkien; and *A Proustian Dreamworld* to Powicke. The first two delve into similarities (and differences) between Lewis and Tolkien; and topics such as Tolkien's multiple interpretations of his *Lord of the Rings* saga, especially in the context of medieval history, and Lewis's views on medieval art, literature, and neo-Thomism. The *Dreamworld* section is the only one in which Powicke appears (though the other two appear again, in comparisons with the main character).

Powicke was the Oxford regius professor of modern history – a discipline that at Oxbridge in the 1940s still meant "after the fall of Rome A.D. 476". Powicke, being forced into retirement at the age of sixty-seven, was still engaged in his enormous manuscript on the reign of Henry III. When he finally delivered it to OUP late that year, they were stunned. They had contracted with Powicke for an undergraduate survey textbook on the thirteenth century (1216-1307) of about 600 pages. What he delivered only reached to the year 1272, in 800 pages (with its "obsessively detailed" index it eventually resulted in 858); and what he had written was not a

textbook. In Cantor's words, it was *a Proustian dream vision of the politics and culture of the high aristocracy in the thirteenth century, a work very difficult and far too long for undergraduates to read and too imaginative and avant-garde for most of the pedestrian medieval historians of postwar Britain to endure.* Cantor goes on at some length about his comparison of *Henry III* to Proust, and to modernism in the novel. Very engaging stuff.

PS. OUP graciously published what he had submitted in a very handsome edition, then asked him again for the textbook. Cantor says he delivered it a few years later, and it was terrible. Filled with details about battles in obscure Welsh valleys, and saying next to nothing about the beginnings of Parliament.

= 20!

I found this volume to be extremely pleasurable reading, though it took me a while to get into it. The mix of biographical information, schools of medievalism, and foibles of the master medievalists is not only entertaining and informative, but provocative. Some readers may be a bit put off by Cantor's personal judgements of the historians he covers, by perhaps an over light-hearted tone when discussing this or that aspect of a historian's views. But there's enough worthwhile historiography in the narrative to give occasion for thought to most readers, if they have an interest in Cantor's topic – where the view we have of the Middle Ages came from, and what about it needs to be viewed with caution.

Charlie says

Inventing the Middle Ages is a history of history, as well as a raised glass to one's colleagues and ancestors. Norman Cantor surveys the works of the most influential, and even some of the marginal, medievalists of the 20th century. He shows that the mental picture that contemporary people (or at least medievalists) have of the Middle Ages was painstakingly crafted by the meticulous and imaginative yet highly personal labors of a handful of intellectuals.

Cantor's approach to his subjects is highly, sometimes oddly, psychological. Parallels abound between the lives of medievalists and the content of their works. Cantor unveils history writing as an enterprise fundamentally human, blessedly human, sometimes all too human. Cantor personally knows several of his subjects, and knows the rest through an intermediary. He is certainly not adverse to name-dropping and indulging a bit of gossip and speculation, but he is a gentleman, and his toast remains a tribute to others, not an opportunity for self-aggrandizement.

Inventing the Middle Ages is a rare book, not without flaws, but entirely without rival.

Terry says

This is probably the most gossipy 'academic' book I have ever read. Cantor takes as his purpose the outlining of the birth and growth of medieval studies as an academic field and discussing how the main players in each of the phases of its development that he has identified shaped our perception of the middle ages by incorporating their own generational, societal, and personal concerns into what was ostensibly an impartial research of the facts. Thus we have the specific interests and preconceptions of each succeeding generation of scholars subtly (or not so subtly) changing the face of our understanding of the medieval

period...sometimes for better and sometimes for worse.

Cantor does not stint in his discussion of each of these major players from divulging facts (and I imagine hearsay) tied to each of them and painting each of them with a rather broad brush so that they can be more easily classified. We can even see this in the chapter headings Cantor utilizes where certain scholars are either "the Nazi twins", "the French Jews", "the Oxford fantasists" or "the Once & Future King". I gather that Cantor himself was something of a controversial figure in the field and I am sure this book did not make him any more loved by his enemies. I am not sure how high I would rate this book as a real scholarly introduction to the study of the Middle Ages (not very highly I imagine), but I did find it useful as a source for what scholars and works I ought to look into to get a foundational grasp of the development of medieval studies...and it was certainly an entertaining read.

Eduardo says

The first time I heard this book referred about was in graduate school, when I took a class on Spanish medieval literature. Our professor mentioned it in class and also included it in her suggested readings. I did not have time to read it then. But, as it's said in Spanish, *nunca es tarde cuando la dicha es buena* [it's never late when the enjoyment is this good]. It is a highly subjective, brash, sharp-tongued and cynical, "brilliant" and "immensely satisfying" (using his own adjectivation) book at times. Cantor leaves out twentieth century Iberian, Italian, Russian, Scandinavian, Easter European medievalists entirely; did they also not contribute to the inventing of the Middle Ages, even if in a modest way?
One encroaching derivation of undisguised subjectivity is bias, positive and negative, and there is a lot of it in Cantor's book. Some times it is explicit, many other ones, implicit. But, as the discipline of history is always personal, human interpretation of written sources (written by other equally subjective and biased people), there are no unbiased historians, anyway. And the better for it.

Cat says

Cantor ablely lays out the various schools of thought in 20th century Middle Ages Studies. This book was close to a god send for me. I've been reading almost exclusively out of the Annales school, like a blind man, having no idea that there were other areas to explore (more accurately, what those avenues might be).

Cantor uses the personalities and backgrounds of the major midievialists to explain their works. Along the way he offers excellent summations and critiques of the various works. He includes a list of 125 books that provide a "core collection" of the subject.

If there is a thesis or over riding theme in this book is that the great tragedy was the triumph of the instutition builiding Annales school at the expensive of the more talented (and English) R.W. Southern. Cantor goes so far to present Southern's refusal to create an institute in his image as an "Arthurian tragedy".

I understand what he's talking about since I've been reading on the subject for over a year and have yet to come across anything other the annales school and their decendants. Funny.

I haven't been this excited about a book in a couple years. I read it in about a day and if you have gotten to the point where you are reading this review, I HIGHLY recommend you get this immeditately.

Jacob Aitken says

Norman Cantor (1991) takes the various approaches to medieval historiography and uses them to illustrate scholarship in general, and from there draws a number of interesting conclusions about modern politics, religion, and social life (Cantor, 410-414). Cantor got in trouble for writing this work. While 80% of this work is brilliant scholarship, the other 20% make the tabloids look like peer-reviewed journals! The subtitle of the book should read “Professor Guilty of Sex Scandal: Cantor Tells All!” Then again, that is also why the book is so highly entertaining. After reading this book one may legitimately talk trash about various historians. Just kidding…sort of.

The study of the middle ages in the twentieth century was a microcosm of the larger battle for Western civilization. We see the Hegelian dialectic at work in which the culturally conservative U.S. Government (just go with it for the moment) was funding radical left-wing schools in France whose only merit was they were not politically active Communists. We see conservative reactions in the Formalist school, yet even this school merely asserted cultural conservatism--it never defined it at its roots.

The Functionalists

The functionalist school of the Middle Ages represented the apex of modernity's scholarship: it's objective was to (rightly) note that people in the Middle Ages (or whenever) did something for a reason. Actions presupposed a function (53). Representative of this approach was Maitland. The problem with this approach represents the problem with modernity in general (and the University in particular): it isolated one aspect of reality and unwittingly identified that aspect with the whole of reality. Further, it is unable to write about larger strands throughout a period of history (Versluis 2000).

The Nazi Twins

Jewish historian Ernst Kantorowicz must be an embarrassment to international Jewry: he is a Nazi Jew! Against the Formalist school (see below), Kantorowicz read the Middle Ages not as a unified consensus, but as a dialectical development waiting for a charismatic invididual to exploit it (Cantor 1991: 203). Cantor's original project was a revisionist biography on Frederick II. It was criticized by scholars as "unscholarly" and "pop history," but who cared? Kantorowicz simultaneously captured the spirit of great men while communicating history in a clear and engaging manner. Unfortunately, one can easily see the connection to Hitler, whose rise eventually forced Kantorowicz to leave Europe. On the other hand, his masterpiece was The King's Two Bodies, which traced the dialectical impact of "the twinned-person" idea on Medieval politics and is arguably the finest genealogical critique of late Western medieval theology.

The French Jewish School

One could probably summarize its approach, not surprisingly, as left-wing and nigh close to Marxism. It was not officially Marxist, though. This distinction is important because it is this distinction which allowed the CIA to fund radical left-wing institutions in Paris as a left-wing alternative to Marxism, presumably with American tax dollars (149). The ideology behind this school was heavily endorsed in the American universities.

Cantor's discussion of the French Mandarin system is worth the price of the book (124-135). In this system one worked his way up through the respected eschelons of the university hierarchy. If one had the ability to write well, local salons would publish his work, making him a celebrity. American universities, always wanting to be fashionable, would discuss (and informally endorse) this philosophe's work and invite him on a lecture circuit in the U.S. As Cantor notes (and as only he could), "He will be idolized by the prexy's wife at the reception afterwards, and female graduate students will offer him both their minds and their bodies" (126).

The limitation of this school of thought is in the limitations of Marxism itself. When Marxism ceased to go out of style in the Academy, and other historical models were suggested, the Annales approach found itself marginalized.

The Formalists

The Formalists were the cultural neoconservatives of medieval studies. Their focus was primarily on art and iconography, and they advanced the sensible thesis that artistic works (and probably culture at large) could not be separated from the texts that inspired them (161). For the functionalists, this presupposes a continuity between religious and cultural texts. For anyone familiar with Patristic and Medieval Theology, this is exactly the case (more so with Patristic theology in the East). This is in contradistinction to the Functionalist school and in radical contradiction to the French Jewish school.

The truth (and problem) of the formalist school is with their argument: it is true that texts cannot be divorced from the life around them—and the best way to communicate this life is in art (and poetry). If one is positing a unified continuity from the Patristics to the 15th century, then one is sadly mistaken as it ignores the huge differences between the Franks and Eastern Romans on one hand, and the Celts and Western Romans on the other.

The Oxford Fantasists

This is probably the most famous part of the book. Cantor discusses the two most beloved writers of the English language in the twentieth century: Clive Staples Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Their project is simple: draw upon the glories of medieval culture to rebuilt the shattered England from the ashes of WWII. While they accomplished no such goal, few can deny the staggering impact they have had on readers across the world.

It is at this point in the narrative that scholarly conservatives (and evangelicals in particular) will cry “shenanigans!” Cantor suggests Lewis was sexually repressed and was unable to consummate his marriage for several months, only to have his wife forcibly seduce him (211). The first problem with this statement is the obvious one: evidence? None. The culprit is nearby, however. One suspects Cantor is relying upon the speculations of Ian Wilson, who bore no love for Lewis. Yet, does not Cantor admit that Wilson failed in the basics of scholarly research and the demonstration of evidence (430)? Why should we take Wilson seriously?

The American School

The American school is the ideological brainchild of Woodrow Wilson. It’s particular historical methods are not that important. On the other hand, Woodrow Wilson’s worldview has dominated American politics (and by extension, literally the rest of the world) for 90 years. Not surprisingly, we see the American medieval history school as a justification for post-Christian Western politics.

The actual historical arguments by representatives Strayer and others are not that interesting, except for this: it is a specific justification of the Norman invasion of England, and the replacing of Saxon culture with a specifically Norman and Papal culture (269). Such a task also involves a rewriting of the "other" culture's history. Interestingly, Strayer was also a CIA asset (262). One cannot help but speculate on the connections between Wilsonian progressivism, Norman and Frankish historiography, and the CIA: all of which contribute to the relativising of traditional communities around the world (at least today).

Neo-Thomism

Cantor has a sexually charged chapter dealing with the neo-Thomists David Knowles and Etienne Gilson. It makes for interesting reading, but if the reader is either ignorant of Freud, or rejects Freud, or simply doesn't care, then much of this chapter can be skipped. In all seriousness, Cantor does highlight the inability of Thomist Catholicism to offer a coherent account of the Middle Ages from Augustine to Ockham. Gilson tries, but Cantor dissects him quite well. (Personally, I think Cantor is wrong, but his analysis of Gilson is correct. Here is the problem: Cantor says Gilson cannot offer a unified reading because the discontinuity between Augustine and Aquinas is too great. However, granting the discontinuity, one can also say that Aquinas is the dialectical synthesis of Augustine. Or rather, he is the antithesis and Ockam is the synthesis. Obviously, Gilson will not take that interpretation).

Outriders

In a daring stroke of genius, Cantor illustrates the truth of his project by devoting a chapter on feminist writers who either reject medievalism or reconstruct its accepted tenets. These feminist critiques illustrate the limitations of the above historical models, but also the real gains and the directions in which future medieval history will take.

Conclusion

The book is outrageous because of its daring. Part of it is brilliant historiography, the rest of it is scandalous tabloid. Let's be honest: few can deny the book's entertaining value. Fewer still can deny its scholarly arguments. Indeed, we followed his arguments because he tied them in with the moral peccadilloes of most of his comrades. Granted, I think he overdid it, nor do I ascribe the same normative and omnipotent value to psychoanalysis, especially the sexual aspects.

On the other hand, this book is a must read in terms of historiography. It should be mandated in all freshman history and liberal arts classes. It is interdisciplinary in character and demonstrates the best ways to integrate various fields.

Sources:
Cantor, Norma. Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991.

Versluis, Arthur. "Western Esotericism and Consciousness." Journal of Consciousness Studies, 7 (no.6) 2000: pp. 20-33.

Suzannah says

This is a phenomenal book, a kind of parallel history of the Middle Ages and the twentieth century combined with biographical sketches and book reviews of the great twentieth-century medievalists and their work. Every single chapter in this book was endlessly fascinating. For me, a major highlight was the chapter on "the Oxford fantasists" notably CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien. I had never before read a serious assessment of the Inklings from an academic historian's perspective even though they were by and large academic historians themselves. Cantor is far from dismissive of them, which in 1990 when this book was published cannot have been a very respectable perspective.

But I'm tempted to go through this book chapter by chapter. There are lightbulbs on every page and the whole thing is wound up with a wonderful appendix containing a list of major historical works on the middle ages. There are fascinating details on the influence of Woodrow Wilsonian statism in the study of the Norman duchy, or the pre-Vatican II Roman church's extremely difficult relationship with its best and brightest medieval scholars, and much more. Cantor is unabashedly interested in how the great medievalists' lives and worldviews informed their perspective on the history, which works well when he confines himself to their overt beliefs and becomes nonsensical when he attempts psychoanalysis and alleges various sexual repressions. There are a number of other places I'd disagree with Cantor's conclusions (eg, I agree with him that medieval society was a persecuting society, but that was not because of a lack of separation of church and state but rather because of a top-down, hierarchical conception of both institutions, as well as the family).

Overall, however, this could be the most helpful and enlightening single book I have read on the Middle Ages, a high-level overview that opens up many more avenues of exploration. Don't miss this book!

Tommy says

I liked it. The book looks at the different schools of thought and scholarship on the middle ages in each chapter and I felt my enjoyment of the book waxed and waned depending on the chapter and personalities of the scholars being presented. Also, I felt that Cantor's personal opinions got in the way a lot. I'd recommend it to someone who wants a more scholarly and snobbish look at the actually writing of the history on the middle ages but not for someone looking for a book on middle ages.

The Pirate Ghost (Formerly known as the Curmudgeon) says

Ah-HAH! Now I understand why this is important to lover's of fantasy. Cantor's discussion of C.S. "Jack" Lewis and J.R.R.Tolkien (Ronald) ....(could that be as in "Weasly?").

I dare say Cantor probably would not appriciate or invite as close an inspection of his personal life as he gives C.S. Lewis, accurate or not. I don't disagree with a thing he said, but he has difficulty loosing the snobbish tone he picks others apart with and I wonder if his inclusion of these two is more for noteriety, so he can sell his book, than a serious argument about the encroachment of Conservative Christian values into

Don't get me wrong, he's absolutely right about them. I just think he could have been less condescending. Lewis must have pissed on his porridge when he was a young lad. I'm sure after the exensive research he has done on Block and other mideval historians he understands how a casual comment, even if true, can ruin a sound and legitimate message that is also true buy savaging the messenger.

At any rate, it could have been worse. He's not completely disrespectful and, it seems he did try to give them credit for being actual medieval historians first and writers by devotion. I did find the story about how Lewis became a semi-willing semi aware tool of the conservative Christian Movement in England interesting, and, already known. He saw Tolkien as not so willing a tool, as a vessel with a similar message, either that or too lazy and mediocre for the Christian right to want him as their messenger.

So the saga continues and the message is either, "All these guys who came before me, between 1900 and the present gave views of medieval history that was coloured by their life experiences and not so much reflective of the values of Culture in the middle ages," or, "If I'm right, then you can't even trust my opinion because it's been coloured by my life experiences and has been projected on the Middle Ages too, just like everyone else."

To be less cynical, the value here is that he has looked at their lives and what they wrote and believed in (based upon letters and speeches etc.) and absolutely, they have transfered some of there values on the Middle Ages then broadcast them to the Western World. I'm not sure that's news, but now, rather than "supposing" it is this way Candor has mapped it out for us. I still wonder how this would feel if someone applied to him, the process he has applied to them.

In some cases, I'm not sure his compassion is well placed, in others, i believe his compassion might have been more warranted than his scorn.

It's important to know the values of the historian to interpret his work and this tells us those things, and, since that's kind of a "no-brainer" (of course thier life experiences colour how they view the world) and, this is probably true of everyone, even Cantor, I'm not sure the contempt is well served. Facts are facts, even when served on a nuetral plate, at least without the side of concieted kechup.

There are some revalations in here for me. Perhaps not so much revalations as moments where what I should have known or suspected all along was revealed as a truth. Some of this is just Cantor telling us that these

things happened and offering little proof (which he accuses others whom he writes about as doing to the Middle Ages). That doesn't mean that they aren't accurate though it may be playing on something that has earned almost religoius belief status without ever being proved and therefor may not be true.

Specifically that the many pre-WWII scholars, particulalry the French, were Marxist or socialist and that is why they tended to play up the role of the peasant and vilify the role of the Church and the Aristocracy in the middle ages. I also found it particulaly interesting how much credit Cantor gives to the almost culturally conceded belief that Midevial Historian books written about Otto and Fredrich some how set the stage enabling Hitler to take control of Germany. That did put int context what Cantor wrote about how that affected any opinion given credence or using the schools of thought that lead to that and how that affected anyone even mentioning iconology in conjunction with artistic expression in the Middle Ages. We can't talk about a messianic figure any more, or everyone will freak out and adopt the next hitler.

According to Cantor, McCarthy was right. There were Scholarly Socialists under every Acedemic rock and lurking in the shadows, poisoning our young and impressionable adults with the glorifacation of the middle class and peasants. I'm reasonably sure Cantor's candor is accurate about how Mideval Historians saw themselves and their role in the world (including Candors) and equally certain that the influence of Acedemics in real world has not been nearly as profound as he believes they are.

All things need a frame to judge their purportions correctly and how much influence on the world they really have. Hitler would have taken power without "Freidrich II" having a book written about him and the socialism and marxism that candor spoke about is more along the lines of Arthur Blair's Democratic Socialists and very different from Stalinist Soviets. And, again, it is likely these are accurate assessments in content, if not in importance to the bigger picture of the world, but, this makes a dash of salt seem like a "spoonful of sugar," and he ain't exactly" Marry Poppins full of sunshine" in the way he explains things.

So I rate it as 3 stars, because I think the author gets caught up in his own importance, and the importance of those he'w writing about more than is good for us. I also think it's an important book, because it "says" what we al have suspectef for years. At somepoint, somebody does need ot say it... so, try not to shoot the messenger. Darn, I pulled a Cantor and told you to not do that which I have already done.

Jane says

I realize that this book is not very highly regarded by professional medievalists, but I found it extremely interesting, even though at times the style was rather OMG and I had serious ideological differences with the author, who is quite conservative. But his writing is incredibly engaging, and a picture emerges of the tremendous revolution in medieval studies between 1890 and 1965 that I found extremely compelling and helpful.

A few notes on the Goodreads headnote: obviously the romantic idea of the Middle Ages as being full of knights and tournaments predates Maitland's study of English common law. This is about the emergence of a more substantive academic understanding of medieval culture. Also, a very important thread in this book that will interest many readers is the tremendous impact of Jewish scholars during the era of fascism and WWII. Really fascinating.
