



# The Portable Medieval Reader

*James Bruce Ross , Mary Martin McLaughlin*

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In their introduction to this anthology, James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin remind us that "no area of the past is dead if we are alive to it. The variety, the complexity, the sheer humanity of the middle ages live most meaningfully in their own authentic voices." **The Portable Medieval Reader** assembles an entire chorus of those voices—of kings, warriors, prelates, merchants, artisans, chroniclers, and scholars—that together convey a lively, intimate impression of a world that might otherwise seem immeasurably alien. All the aspects and strata of medieval society are represented here: the life of monasteries and colleges, the codes of knighthood, the labor of peasants and the privileges of kings. There are contemporary accounts of the persecution of Jews and heretics, of the Crusades in the Holy Land, of courtly pageants, popular uprisings, and the first trade missions to Cathay. We find Chaucer, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Saint Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas and Abelard alongside a host of lesser-known writers, discoursing on all the arts, knowledge and speculation of their time. The result, according to the **Columbia Record**, is a broad and eminently readable "cross section of source history and literature...as rich and varied as a stained glass window."

## The Portable Medieval Reader Details

Date : Published May 26th 1977 by Penguin Books (first published September 1949)

ISBN : 9780140150469

Author : James Bruce Ross , Mary Martin McLaughlin

Format : Paperback 690 pages

Genre : History, Historical, Medieval, Nonfiction, Literature, Medieval History

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# From Reader Review The Portable Medieval Reader for online ebook

## Russell says

Excellent collection of quotable quotes from the era of Chivalry, a little before and a wee bit after as well. Looking for Guido Cavalcanti? He's here. How about Lambert of Hersfeld? Look no further!

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## Tara Calaby says

I don't remember a lot about this one, beyond the fact that I definitely read it for my undergrad degree.

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## Jeff Crompton says

A wildly varied collection of writings from the Middle Ages: history, philosophy, household hints, poetry, travel writing, "science," etc. The selections range from the fascinating to the boring to the exasperating; I devoured some and skimmed others. But I certainly understand the Medieval period better now. For example, I certainly was not aware, but should have been, I suppose, of the extent that life and politics, not just theology, revolved around the Catholic church.

The recipe for "eels reversed" is not to be missed, nor are "The Rules of Courtly Love" ("XX. A man in love is always apprehensive"). The juxtaposition of writings about the Crusades by crusaders, Arabs, and Greeks is amusing: each group thought the others stupid and barbaric.

The philosophical writings dissolve quickly, for the most part, into Biblical platitudes. I was excited to start reading Roger Bacon's "On Experimental Science," thinking that it would be a breath of fresh air among the philosophical and pseudo-scientific pieces here. But it was one of the most maddening selections of all; we learn that "...it is certain that wise men of Aethiopia have come to Italy, Spain, France, England, and those lands of the Christians in which there are good flying dragons, and by the secret art they possess lure the dragons from their caverns." Oh, well - I guess you've got to crawl before you learn to walk.

This is an interesting and enlightening collection. Just don't feel that you have to read every word.

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## sologdin says

these Viking readers are usually too ambitious, attempting to pack in massive amounts in limited space. A for effort, I guess, but the selections are too cursory for anything other than a general introduction.

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## Kajah says

This eclectic collection of text from the medieval times is at turns fascinating, funny, horrible, and illuminating. "Notes upon first encountering some Turks" (or something like that tittle) accounts a skirmish of Franks with certain Saracens and their combination of disdain and admiration, and complementary to this is the "Upon First Encounters with a Frank" by an Islamic author: both of these excerpts are fun, personal enlightening sketches of what one of the most important historical confrontations in western history might have been like at an individual level. I will definitely be reading and rereading this compilation for a long time to come.

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## Wanda says

The book is a selection of excerpts from various original documents on just about every aspect of European medieval life, although most of the excerpts concern England, Italy or France and a bit of Germany and the Holy Land.

The selections were of uneven interest to me personally, but all held at least some attraction and after finishing all 690 pages of the Penguin edition I read, I had a much clearer understanding of the world as it was some 40 generations ago. As the lucid and informative Introduction quotes Walter Map as saying, "They make their own past present in our times."

There are some poetry selections, and this stanza from "When Diana Lighteth" (author not specified), gave me a sense of what it was like to be alive in the 12th Century:

*Sleep through the wearied brain  
Breathes its soft wind  
From fields of ripening grain,  
The sound  
Of running water over clearest sand,  
A mill wheel turning, turning slowly round,  
These steal the light  
From eyes weary of sight.*

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## Robert says

On one level, nothing beats this: going straight to the source, reading what the ancients had to say about their lives, their world, their thoughts. Bernard of Gui describing the Inquisition, not as someone trying to justify it to posterity but simply as a leader of that movement describing what it was he did; or Roger Bacon laying out the principles of what we would come to call the scientific method--while at the same time expressing his own deep faith, and his certainty that this method he was explaining was a most excellent way to draw closer to God. It's true what they say, that the seeds of the modern world were sown in the medieval period, and this book brings that home forcefully and clearly.

I really only have one quibble: the only context for the many excerpts comes from a long essay at the beginning by the editors, but with a book this long (nearly 700 pages), it isn't long before you've forgotten most of what was in the introduction. I suppose I could have kept leafing back to the intro, but I kept

thinking how it would have been to have a few lines before each piece, describing who wrote it and what the context was. Instead, I kept finding myself going to Wikipedia to find out more. (Not the worst thing in the world, as it means I was thoroughly engaged with the book and kept wanting to expand beyond it. Still, it would have been to have had dozens of smaller intros rather than, or in addition to, the one big essay at the front.)

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## **Holly says**

A great broad introduction to the way people lived and thought during the Middle Ages in a collection of writings and excerpts by the people who lived during this time. Most enjoyable was reading about the barbarous Irish and then reading a couple different views on crusaders by a Greek and an Arab. A little bit of everything here.

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## **Drew says**

Let me say that my choice of 2 stars is more a reflection of my own interest in this book and not necessarily of the book itself. I picked it up from a used bookstore since I was kind of approaching the medieval period from two sides (forward from the ancient world and ever backward from the 17th century). I figured it was time to delve a little deeper. After reading these selections, I can see my interests are elsewhere. However, there were things I learned, including some neat nuggets, and I will keep this volume as a reference for the future.

Of what I liked, there were some that stood out, such as the two pieces on Arnold of Brescia, a precursor to the people who would lead the Reformation (p. 338, 341). I liked reading about the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, a learned man who promoted literature, fought against popes and furthered law and government (p. 362). I enjoyed the selection from the poet Usamah (Usama ibn Munqidh), who wrote of his experiences with the Crusaders (p. 447), although some historians today say his work cannot always be trusted.

It was fun to see that students never change, with some in the 12th century wanting to postpone their studies to play and enjoy life (p. 502). Coluccio Salutati was very cool in his piece on the Defense of Liberal Studies, calling out those religious conservatives who would forbid the reading of Virgil and other “heathen” poets (p. 613). Finally, Leonardo Bruni’s “In Praise of Greek” (p. 618) resonates with me and is still valid today. So much of our logic, philosophy and great poetry came from Greek, so he writes that it is worthwhile to study the language to engage with the texts in their original voice.

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## **Cate Neuhauser says**

Some of the sources were amazing, others were boring and unneeded

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## **Jeremy says**

The selections in this collection are broad enough that anyone interested in the High Middle Ages will find

something to enjoy. However, the scope of the anthology is also a drawback - readers will find passages or entire sections that likely do not interest them. The major weakness of the text though is the lack of introductory or contextual notes for the passages. There are a few pages of general introduction at the beginning of the compilation that explain the authors' editing choices, but the selections themselves feel somewhat random and are floating in the book without context or background. This book could be vastly improved in a subsequent edition with some short introductory notes. As it stands, be prepared to refer to Wikipedia for background information if you aren't already an expert in medieval history and literature.

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