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William Chester Jordan, *A Tale of Two Monasteries: Westminster and Saint-Denis in the Thirteenth Century*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009. xviii + 245 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-691-13901-2.

Review by Constance B. Bouchard, University of Akron.

William Chester Jordan has established himself as one of the leading American historians working on thirteenth-century France, especially the monarchy. In contrast to all the attention routinely given the twelfth century, the thirteenth remains comparatively under served, so more studies of the period are always welcome. Here Jordan compares Saint-Denis, the monastery where most French kings were buried but were not crowned, and Westminster Abbey, England's great royal monastery, where kings were crowned but were not routinely buried. In particular, he focuses on the period beginning in 1258, when, virtually simultaneously, Mathieu de Vendôme became abbot of Saint-Denis and Richard de Ware became abbot of Westminster. Both were young men when they were chosen as abbot, and each ruled for a quarter century. The two monasteries enjoyed ecclesiastical exemptions in the thirteenth century, owing obedience only to the pope. Both abbots nonetheless served their kings loyally, and the two men came to know each other well.

The two monasteries, especially Westminster, still preserve many archival documents from the thirteenth century; in his preface Jordan evokes the pleasures of entering the Westminster Muniments reading room, where, it is estimated, one could have access to an astoundingly large number of medieval documents, over 50,000, including deeds, letters, account books, and the like. The majority date from after Jordan's period, but there are still a great many from the time of Abbot Richard. The documents are woven into the book's narrative without ever bogging down what is, in effect, a story.

The book begins with a narrative chapter on the histories of England and France in the first half of the thirteenth century, including England's loss of its Norman territories and the revolts against Henry III, and France's successful establishment of a strong, effectively-run monarchy, with the resources to allow Louis IX to go on Crusade. In the second chapter we are introduced to the two abbots and their monasteries at the mid-point of the thirteenth century. Subsequent chapters tell of the ongoing rivalry between the French and English monarchies, complicated because Henry III and Louis IX, who were brothers-in-law, shared such key interests as trying to reclaim the Holy Land, and further complicated by fraught successions in the 1270s. War and diplomacy, memories of old claims, and old grants gave rise to continuing wrangles through which Jordan leads the reader. An epilogue pulls together comparisons of the two abbots, remarkably similar in that they both came from non-noble backgrounds to become some of the most significant figures of their kingdoms.

One of the most potentially intriguing aspects of the story is the effort of both the English and French monarchies—and monasteries—to strengthen their positions by promoting the cults of sainted kings. In England, the king was Edward the Confessor, whose tomb was at Westminster and who had been considered saintly long before his twelfth-century canonization.

In France, the King was Louis IX, already considered a saint as his bones made their way back from North Africa to Paris and soon canonized at the urging of his grandson, Philip IV. In addition to their holy kings, the two monarchies also had other relics that could be used to buttress their positions: the Crown of Thorns in France, a vial of Christ's blood in England. Jordan presents the promotion of competing royal saints and relics as part of the rivalry between the two kingdoms, here carried out not only by war and negotiation but also by trying to demonstrate that their saint was more holy and more appropriately revered.

Thirteen illustrations show documents and illuminated manuscripts from the two abbeys, as well as images of their buildings—both modern photographs and old pictures of what they used to look like (especially important for Saint-Denis). It is regrettable that the press decided to group them, rather than spreading them out through the book. They are printed on the same stock as the text, so there was no reason not to place them next to the passages they illustrate. As it is, because the captions do not refer to specific pages, they appear more as an appendage than an integral part of the story. The map could also have been more detailed; a number of important places mentioned in the text, such as Angoulême, Pontigny, and Fontevraud, do not appear.

The book is gracefully written, a pleasure to read, due to Jordan's ability to evoke the thirteenth century and to make his subjects come alive, even while always making clear the difference between what he knows from the sources and probable inferences. Although the archival research and the footnotes aim the book at a scholarly audience, it should also be enjoyed by members of the broader public.

In spite of complaints from some quarters that narrative history is dead, this book indicates that it is alive and well. Indeed, from a scholarly perspective one of the chief criticisms that could be levied is that it is very much history in the old-fashioned mode, which relates what happened in an intriguing way. This is evident from the first chapter, where, Jordan acknowledges, much of his account is inspired by narrative histories a century or more old (p. 2, n. 2). A good deal of the material here also goes over the same ground as he covered in his study of Louis IX on Crusade, some thirty years ago. To the modern reader, it is frustrating that he does not try to develop a broader argument that would help us to see the thirteenth century or monarchy or royal monasteries in a new light. Larger points about social mobility via an ecclesiastical career or about the ways that secular rulers and monasteries—even officially exempt monasteries—needed each other are suggested in the final chapter but never really developed.

In a book on wealthy monasteries, one might have expected a better sense of the uneasy balance between acting like a secular corporation and true religious conviction. Jordan comes down heavily on the side of the former. For example, he treats the miraculous holy nail kept at Saint-Denis as simply a tool by which the monks tried hypocritically to win more attention from the gullible faithful (p. 32). One would have hoped that modern scholarship had progressed beyond this kind of cynicism, to take seriously what medieval people took seriously.

One also wishes that Jordan could have had a broader discussion of powerful women in the thirteenth century. Women receive surprisingly short shrift in the book, considering their crucial role in the politics of the time, as regents, as heiresses, as excuses to go to war. In recent years a number of regional studies have indicated that, far from being silent or marginalized, as described twenty years ago by Georges Duby and R. Howard Bloch,^[1] powerful medieval women could often exercise the same kind of authority as their brothers or husbands. The four sisters who jointly inherited Provence and Toulouse seem to call for more attention, since between them they married two kings (Louis IX and Henry III) and two younger brothers of kings. And some of Jordan's characterizations of the activities of the women attached to the

great royal households do not ring true. It is difficult, for example, to see Louis IX's decision to take his queen with him on Crusade as a sign of "increasing personal distance between the king and his wife" (p. 21), when it might suggest exactly the opposite.

In spite of such quibbles, this is the kind of book one would happily recommend to a non-medievalist who wanted to learn more about the politics and personalities of the time. It is just frustrating to someone who is already a medievalist because, in spite of its many strengths and delightful prose, it could have been so much more.

NOTE

[1] R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, eds., *History of Women in the West*, Vol. 2: *Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

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