

H-France Review Vol. 7 (April 2007), No. 47

Jacques Le Goff (in collaboration with Jean-Maurice de Montremy), *My Quest for the Middle Ages*. Trans. Richard Veasey. New York and Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. ix + 133 pp. Index, bibliography. \$69.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-4039-7247-8.

Review by Paul Freedman, Yale University.

The genre of academic autobiography has a distinct place in France where, even now, intellectuals are regarded as interesting and the trajectory of their career and projects worth finding out about. Jacques Le Goff, a grand figure within the eminent group of French medievalists trained in the mid-twentieth century, offers here an account of the motivations for his work and his approach to the Middle Ages, an era that is uncanny yet familiar.

In the United States, there has been a surge in the production of academic memoirs, but usually the individual situates himself or herself within larger intellectual movements and events (for example, post-modernism, feminism, or racial discrimination). Few professors on this side of the Atlantic have devoted themselves entirely to recording the unfolding of their ideas. There are a few dramatically personal accounts: the most fascinating recent autobiography of an American medievalist is so peculiarly tormented as to suggest something closer to a particular kind of fiction. Norman Cantor's *Inventing Norman Cantor* is a text whose mixture of harsh honesty and manifest self-delusion places it outside the realm of normal self-meditation and into the world of Nabokov or Ishiguro where the narrator is both compellingly unreliable and unconsciously revealing.[1]

My Quest for the Middle Ages is quite normal, to the point of being unrevealing. Its English title (it appeared originally as *À la recherche du moyen âge*) implies a greater degree of personal engagement than what is in fact on offer. The tone is informal as Le Goff responds freely and with some elaboration to careful and respectful questions by his interlocutor, Jean-Maurice Montremy. We learn something about why various works were written and the principles by which Le Goff has guided his inquiries, but there is nothing about family or students, little about teachers, and no sense of French academia or public life, the impact of 1968, or even Paris. This austerity, in which ideas of the Middle Ages and the attraction of its civilization are the only subjects, is in its way admirable and invites comparison with Georges Duby's autobiography, *History Continues*. [2] Le Goff is less mandarin than Duby, has a little more to say about his war experiences, and is more openly critical of the conservative traditions of the *École des Chartes* and academic study of the Middle Ages before 1950. Le Goff adopts a modest tone about his career and ambitions, but in both his book and that of Duby there is a sense that the author was always a distinguished man of letters, had little ambition, and simply floated from one important commission to another.

The first chapter of *My Quest for the Middle Ages* is autobiographical, but thereafter the book is divided according to various approaches towards understanding the Middle Ages. In this chapter, entitled "Becoming a Medievalist," Le Goff informs us of his early love for Sir Walter Scott's novels and his sense that nostalgia is both a powerful and a legitimate inspiration for becoming an historian. Nostalgia is a struggle against death and in bringing the past back to life, we achieve at least a reprieve from oblivion, both for the Middle Ages and for the individual's existence. Subsequent chapters are oriented around themes to which Le Goff has dedicated himself. "The Long Middle Ages" (chapter two) refers to his sense of the Middle Ages as a "civilization," not merely an historical period, and the enduring influence of that civilization that he sees, more controversially, as surviving until the nineteenth

century. The contours of medieval civilization are further elaborated in chapter three, "A Civilization Takes Shape." In accord with the *Annales* school teachings, Le Goff in his books and essays has presented a broader Middle Ages than that provided by the political and military struggles of rulers and ideologues, but he has done so with a feel for beauty and coherence, not just the conflicts of society or the oppression of the poor. Le Goff has a deeply-felt, non-triumphalist sense of Europe and of the integrity of culture that encompasses high and low: chivalry and rural custom; merchant ambition and scholasticism. Chapter four, "Merchants, Bankers and Intellectuals" shows Le Goff's importance for understanding the connections between spirituality and business, between enterprise and intellectuality. This is further developed in the last chapter, "On Earth as in Heaven," where rather than seeing a disjunction between worldly ambition and an official culture of Christian renunciation, Le Goff reminds us that notions such as purgatory, asceticism, the preaching of St. Francis, and the growth of money and exchange are interrelated.

Le Goff was among those who from the 1970s directed the *Annales* project towards the study of mentalities and away from the geographical and social analysis of material conditions that had been the other main agenda item of the journal. Le Goff never lost sight of the links between modes of thought and social conditions, and this is partly what he means when speaking of the Middle Ages as a "civilization." His work has always displayed a balanced sense of the real-world consequences of thought patterns and the appropriation of habits and ideas across the spectrum of class. Above all, Le Goff has advocated a view of the Middle Ages that emphasizes simultaneously the power of religious devotion and love of the earthly life. As he remarks in connection with his work on Saint Louis, "I frequently came across the same love of earthly life in numerous different people. As good Christians they believed life was worth living and that they were preparing for salvation here and now not only with acts of penance but also by measured enjoyment of this world" (p. 96).

The division into chapters notwithstanding, the book is really a monologue, guided lightly by his interviewer, M. Montremy. Sometimes Le Goff evades even this gentle questioning, as when he is asked if medieval civilization enslaved or liberated people and responds by describing the functions of angels and devils (pp. 109-10). In style and tone the book is too modest and not strongly opinionated enough to be called a species of "Tabletalk," but it has some of the same breeziness of that genre. In keeping with this informality there are a number of errors—or at least peculiarly presented opinions—that might indeed occur in a purely oral discourse but that are surprising in what is, after all, a written (hence, presumably, considered) work. For example, salt was not the only way to preserve food in the Middle Ages (p. 48)—smoking, pickling, drying were all well-known. The barbarian chieftain Odoacer may or may not have been ruler of the Heruli, but the alleged Scandinavian descent of this and other people of the late Roman Empire has been pretty well discredited. The image of the wheel of fortune is said to contradict the idea of providence in order to underscore Le Goff's contention that non-Christian ideas pervaded society (p. 77). But surely Boethius, just to start with, showed that what is misperceived as earthly fortune is actually divine providence. Harmonizing the wheel of fortune and with higher coherence and purpose was a cliché of medieval didactic and creative literature. The statement that "finally" when Columbus set out, the West for the first time braved the ocean ignores the Portuguese expeditions to Africa during the previous seventy years, to say nothing of the North Atlantic exploits of the Vikings centuries earlier (p. 81).

It is perhaps pedantic to point out these mistakes, but their presence does not inspire confidence in the consideration that went into more sweeping statements such as "the Western medieval world had no plans to conquer anyone, unlike the Muslim world" (p. 82), or the invidious comparison between the "hidebound" commentaries (*ligotés*) on the Koran with the progressive critical methods of Christian exegesis "in which we already see scientific principles at work" (p. 56).

This is probably not the best introduction to Le Goff's thinking about the Middle Ages. An earlier, more extensive dialogue, *Une vie pour l'histoire: Entretiens avec Marc Heurgon*, presents a much warmer and

more vivid personality and a more intriguing story of intellectual interests and growth.[3] Le Goff's many important books and collections of articles, such as *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, *The Birth of Purgatory*, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, and *The Medieval Imagination* are an even better point of entry for appreciating the imagination, wit, and breadth of this great historian.

NOTES

[1] Norman Cantor, *Inventing Norman Cantor: Confessions of a Medievalist* (Tempe: Arizona State University Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002).

[2] Georges Duby, *History Continues*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); originally published as *L'Histoire continue* (Paris: O. Jacob, 1991).

[3] Jacques Le Goff, *Une vie pour l'histoire: Entretiens avec Marc Heurgon* (Paris: La Découverte, 1996).

Paul Freedman Yale University paul.freedman@yale.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (April 2007), No. 47

ISSN 1553-9172