

**Laura Cleaver, Andrea Worm (ed.), Writing History in the Anglo-Norman World. Manuscripts, Makers and Readers, c. 1066–c. 1250, Rochester, NY (York Medieval Press) 2018, XII–269 p., 5 pl., 31 fig. (Writing History in the Middle Ages, 6), ISBN 978-1-903153-80-2, GBP 60,00.**

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**Richard Allen, Oxford**

This interesting and relatively wide-ranging volume has its origins in a conference held at Trinity College, Dublin, in May 2015. It brings together eleven essays by a mixture of established scholars and early career researchers, with the aim of re-examining the various ways – and contexts within which – history was written in the Anglo-Norman world between the Norman invasion of England and the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Rather than focus on the historicity of works produced by authors such as Orderic Vitalis, John of Worcester and Gerald of Wales, to name but a few, each essay seeks to shed light on the complex processes involved in the writing of history during the Middle Ages, many of which, the editors claim, have become obscured by the critical editions by which such works are now typically known. By focusing on manuscripts as well as texts, the collective whole looks not only to »offer new insights into the makers of these volumes and the circumstances in which the manuscripts were conceived and created, but also into their contemporary uses, and their later reception and afterlife« (p. 5–6).

Following a useful introductory survey by Michael Staunton, who picks apart and contextualises the various reasons given (or not) by 12<sup>th</sup>-century English historians for why they wrote history, the remaining essays are then roughly divided along thematic lines, which can be outlined as follows: challenges and resources, circulation and dissemination, and audiences and use. The lens through which each contributor examines such themes varies greatly in terms of scope, but even those who concentrate on individual works manage to situate their arguments (and the work in question) within a wider whole.

Thus, Andrea Worm examines a single manuscript, namely a copy of Peter of Poitiers's »Compendium historiae« now at the British Library, which was extended by an anonymous scribe at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century to include medieval rulers. Worm looks in particular at the manuscript's illustrations, especially at its representation of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy, and argues that the maker of this complex volume, which has not received the attention it deserves, sought to promote England's privileged position among the monarchies of Europe at a time when tensions between England and France were on the rise. Likewise, Gleb Schmidt focuses on a copy of the »Excerptio Roberti Herefordensis de Chronica Mariani Scotti« now in St Petersburg, and, through close textual analysis, shows how it bears strong similarities with another copy of this work associated with William of Malmesbury and his milieu, arguing that it may have made its way to the continent through the agency of Orderic Vitalis.

In an example of audiences and use, Kathryn Gerry examines a mid-13<sup>th</sup>-century copy produced by Matthew Paris of the »Deeds of the



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Abbots of St Albans« in order to call attention to the multi-layered nature of historical texts, and skilfully picks these layers apart to shed light on the artistic patronage of two late 11<sup>th</sup>- and early 12<sup>th</sup>-century abbots.

As for those whose net is cast a bit wider, Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Laura Cleaver focus on the challenges faced by medieval historians, and by their modern counterparts who seek to understand their work. Lawrence-Mathers, whose essay is at times as difficult to follow as the fiendishly complex chronological conundrums with which medieval historians had to wrestle (the insertion of subheadings would have helped considerably), traces the reception of the work of Marianus Scotus in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century and its impact upon historical writing in England.

Cleaver, on the other hand, focuses on works by Orderic Vitalis, William of Jumièges and John of Worcester, among others, to argue that the desire to identify »autograph« manuscripts associated with a single author risks obscuring the more complex processes at work in the creation of medieval works of history, which often involved both practical and intellectual collaboration across both space and time. In a similar vein, Charles Rozier provides an interesting survey of the library of Durham Cathedral Priory, one of the richest in existence (both then and now), and traces how the acquisition or creation of specific types of historical works at different times in the community's history reflected an initial need to define and defend its rights, then a desire to engage intellectually with a wider historiographical tradition, and finally the need to situate itself with the course of world history.

But if each of these essays, and those by Laura Pani (on the manuscript tradition of the »Historia Langobardorum« in England), Stephen Church (on the books requisitioned by King John from Reading Abbey during the Interdict), Laura Slater (on the readership of the »Vie de Seint Auban«), and Caoimhe Whelan (on Gerald of Wales and the invasion of Ireland), help illustrate the multi-dimensionality of historical writing in the Middle Ages, this is a collection that does not always deliver what it promises.

In the first instance, despite the volume's title referring to the »Anglo-Norman world«, two-thirds of the essays take either England itself, or an important English centre (St Albans, Durham), as their focus. Admittedly, each contributor, as noted above, is careful to situate their findings within wider geographical and chronological landscapes, and it would be wrong to suggest that the reader does not encounter there various »Norman« historians such as Orderic Vitalis, William of Jumièges and Robert of Torigni. Nevertheless, it is a shame that Normandy itself, and, indeed, Anjou, Brittany, or any of the other French regions controlled by the kings of England during this period, should serve as bit players to the English lead. After all, centres like Rouen, Tours and Le Mans were as important as Durham, Worcester and St Albans for the historical works they produced (or facilitated), and to have not one essay in the volume explicitly focusing on these places leaves its »Anglo-Norman world« somewhat one-dimensional.

Likewise, the range of historical writing examined by this volume is not as broad as it could be. In terms of authors/makers, the focus is almost exclusively on the Benedictine and clerical world. Other monastic orders may not have had the same reputation for history as the Benedictines, but the writing of history was still important for them, as Elizabeth Freeman has demonstrated with regards to the Cistercians (again, in an



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exclusively English context)<sup>1</sup>. As for genres, if the editors note in their introduction that the volume's emphasis will be on narrative histories, they nevertheless insist on the range of texts this includes, such as »chronicles, genealogies, deeds of abbots and the lives of saints« (p. 3–4). The reality, however, is one in which major chronicles (and chroniclers) tend to dominate. Other forms of historical writing, most notably annalistic texts, are almost entirely neglected, even though they are known to have informed the work of important chroniclers (a point made by Charles Rozier in relation to Symeon of Durham), and their manuscript form (compiled over centuries and by various scribes for various purposes) would appear to speak directly to the volume's central themes of challenges and resources, circulation and dissemination, and audiences and use.

All in all, despite these shortcomings, this is a volume that generally remains true to its stated goal of highlighting the ways in which history was read, reproduced, discussed, adapted, and written in the Middle Ages. It is conscientiously edited and well-illustrated, with a wide selection of images (largely black and white, but with some colour plates as well). Its editors are careful to note that the essays it contains are »starting points for future work« (p. 6), rather than definitive studies of their chosen subjects, and while this acknowledgement, and the shortcomings noted above, mean that this volume cannot be said to completely overhaul our understanding of historical writing in the Anglo-Norman world, the quality of the essays, and the originality of many of their findings, should, if nothing else, serve to spur other researchers into action.



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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order. Cistercian Historical Writing in England, 1150–1220*, Turnhout 2002 (*Medieval Church Studies*, 2).