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Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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Jean Cuvelier, The Song of Bertrand du Guesclin. Translated by Nigel Byrant, Woodbridge (The Boydell Press) 2019, X–432 p., 3 maps, ISBN 978-1-78327-227-3, USD 99,00.

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Michael Jones, Norwell

Anglophone readers already owe a considerable debt of gratitude to Nigel Bryant for translating important medieval French literary and historical works into clear, modern English. Several have related to the Grail legends. Closest to »The Song of Bertrand« is Bryant's »History of William the Marshal«. Both recount the lives of the two outstanding knightly paragons of their respective generations, originally in poetic form. After his death Bertrand, Constable of France, 1370–1380, was even called the »tenth worthy«. There is also some overlap with »The True Chronicles of Jean le Bel«, dealing with the early years of the Hundred Years War, although Le Bel does not mention the young Du Guesclin, then making his reputation as a military captain in his natal Brittany.

Non-native English-readers will also benefit from this presentation of Cuvelier's epic in modern guise. Bryant's prose enables the story to flow more dynamically than the verse original often allows with its repetitions and forced rhymes. Naturally he takes some liberties, replacing fourteenth-century proverbs, saws or colloquialisms with current ones, for instance, sometimes giving the literal version in a footnote. Otherwise notes are used economically. The majority identify some of those appearing in the text, or allusions to *chansons de geste* in which Cuvelier was well-read. The index also contains a few indications on this score. A few misidentifications have been perpetuated. One at least goes back to Cuvelier himself; he conflates the careers of Jean d'Évreux, an alleged Norman supporter of Navarre, with that of an important English knight, Sir John Devereux († 1393). For it is surely he who fights alongside his fellow countrymen like Hugh Calverley and Walter Hewitt on so many occasions rather than a probably mythical Norman. Such blemishes are few. Moreover The Boydell Press has produced an attractive volume with generous margins and spacing that make it easy to read. Why should we do so?

Cuvelier (his first name is unknown) was in all probability a cleric closely connected to the French royal court. Less is known about him than about the history of his text. It is in the somewhat dated form of a *chanson de geste*. In the standard modern edition it consists of 786 short but variable stanzas (*laisses*), extending to 24 346 lines. Written in the years immediately after Du Guesclin's death in July 1380, like Froissart, Cuvelier could have talked to many who took part in the events he describes. His work circulated in several manuscript versions. Seven are known, varying considerably one from another. But it was a prose adaptation made in 1387 at the urging of Jean d'Estouteville, captain of Vernon, who had as a young man fought alongside Du Guesclin,

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that ensured its lasting influence on subsequent historiography long after the original poem was largely forgotten.

Printed in 1487, this prose life has served as the main source for the innumerable biographies that have been written about Du Guesclin over the centuries, a tradition still very much alive. To take just one example: Cuvelier is the sole source for stories about Bertrand's youth, his ugly physical appearance, initial rejection by his parents and sibling rivalry, about his manipulation of teenage contemporaries, above all, about his early military life both at tournaments and in the woods and wastes of Brittany as the leader of resistance fighters. Few biographers can resist using such vividly presented material as they relate how a minor Breton noble rose against the odds to serve in France's highest military rank. Thereby he helped revive the fortunes of the Valois monarchy after the disastrous first phase of the great war with England. It is this achievement which still attracts wide popular attention, while medievalists in several different fields labour to interpret what Cuvelier tells us about the world in which his hero lived.

There is still room for debate over Cuvelier's intentions and the nature of his work. In 1991 Jean-Claude Faucon published a critical edition taking all the known manuscripts into consideration. But he chose, as Bryant notes, as his base manuscript a copy (currently split between Montpellier and Paris) that »is generally the fullest« but which »is by no means consistently so« (p. 17). This copy presents other difficulties as well because its scribe was not particularly careful, introducing errors and »sometimes meaningless renderings (many of them conservatively retained by Faucon)«. Bryant does not attempt a critical, scholarly translation by footnoting every time he uses other manuscripts to amend Faucon's text. He has, however, »always adopted the text of other manuscripts whenever they offer a clearly better reading or include significant lines, passages and episodes omitted by the scribe of the Montpellier/Paris manuscript« in order to »present the most complete version possible«.

Bryant acknowledges that Cuvelier has been criticised by literary scholars for the inelegance of his style as he struggled to complete the rhymes his chosen literary form required. Historians, too, criticise him for sometimes exaggerating Bertrand's role in the events described, ignoring discreditable incidents or behaviour, his lack of geographical knowledge and hazy chronology. Bryant nevertheless makes a strong claim in a short but perceptive Introduction for his story-telling skills. He also reminds us that Cuvelier wrote in a context of »epic time and an epic landscape« with »a different purpose altogether from a chronicler or biographer … seeking to establish Bertrand as an outstanding hero in the epic tradition, in order to restore the prestige of French chivalry in the wake of the disastrous defeat at Poitiers« (p. 2).

Although not blessed with the imaginative talent of Froissart, some set-pieces around which the narrative is arranged (the battles of Cocherel and Auray, the expeditions to Spain, his first campaigns as Constable) are full of events colourfully related. And since his intention is not simply to recount the bold deeds of one outstanding knight but is, like Froissart, to celebrate them even

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when enemy knights display courage and valour, Cuvelier is not afraid to digress on occasion. An example is his informed account of the skirmish at Lussac Bridge (31 December 1369) when Sir John Chandos was fatally wounded and the Breton Jean de Kerlouët took the starring role. However the absence of any sustained account of the last seven years of the Constable's career should be noted. In sum, whether or not the poem is epic propaganda for the Valois cause (cf. p. 14–15), it provides much valuable evidence on the practice of medieval warfare, its stratagems, tricks and deceptions, and the men involved. Though some may find that eventually Cuvelier's exposition becomes rather repetitive and predictable in form, Bryant is to be congratulated in making this frequently underestimated source accessible to a wide readership.

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