

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: IAN WOOD, *THE MODERN ORIGINS OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES* (OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013). XIII + 374 pp. ISBN: 978-0199650484

Just as family history appeals to many, so do historians find their own intellectual genealogy fascinating. For Ian Wood this resulted from a Damascene Moment, occasioned by pondering on his thesis supervisor's wartime activities; thoughts which also led him to feel that 'a study of the historiography of the Early Middle Ages could provide something of an answer' to 'the recurrent question of the value of early medieval history' (p. x). This is perhaps to take Charles Clarke, a now almost entirely forgotten politician who posed a rhetorical question about the value of medieval history, rather more seriously than he deserves. Besides which, it is hard not to feel that writing a book on some eighteenth- to twentieth-century historians, most of whom are now even more unremembered than Clarke, seems unlikely to persuade such sceptics as philistine politicians, penny-pinching vice chancellors, and predatory modernist colleagues with their eyes on the medievalists' budgets, that early medieval history has utility.

Most genealogists want to push the family tree as far back as possible, but in this case, an absolute limit is set in the 1720s with the posthumous publication of *De l'etat de France* of Count Henri de Boulainvilliers. Why he is here regarded as the founding father of the line is apparently because Michel Foucault tells us so; a fact repeated no less than three times, doubtless the better to convince us of its truth. Though what authority Foucault has in the matter is not discussed. Boulainvilliers' own intellectual ancestry is thus left in decent obscurity, but so too, more surprisingly, are the resources upon which his work relied. It is upon the discovery, study and editing of texts, as much as the opinions of the historians that used them, that any account of the development of scholarship on the Early Middle Ages should depend, but this dimension is missing from this book.

This is not the only example of such unexpected absenteeism. There is scarcely any mention of purely ecclesiastical subjects, while the chronological and topical focus of the actual contents is deliberately restricted. It consists largely of the various ways that the two questions of the causes of 'the Fall of the Roman Empire' and of the nature of the Frankish settlement in Gaul have been answered over the last three centuries. This bifurcation beneficially obscures the artificial distinction between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages. However, Spain is explicitly excluded, Britain implicitly so, while Italy is allowed a bit more latitude but only in respect of the Lombards. Little relates to anything after c.700, though the Early Middle Ages are normally thought to last another three centuries. Only in the final chapters dealing with the period after 1945 does the scope of the enquiry expand to include more of those scholars who have not devoted their professional lives to the study of France and Italy in the fifth and early sixth centuries.

There are hints of a desire to be disconcerting for its own sake. Thus, Gibbon is said to be less significant than Mably (pp. ix-x). Downplaying those authors that readers may have heard of, and even possibly read, tends to flatten the whole intellectual landscape rather than raise new peaks, reducing it to the equivalent of Belgium rather than Switzerland. The large scale of what is being attempted, and the need to provide synopses of the arguments of so many of the authors herein discussed, also leaves little scope to bring them to life as individuals, except by means of the occasional biographical 'tweet', such as 'Fauriel [...] the lover of Mme de Condorcet, had been secretary to Fouché, Napoleon's minister of police and an old acquaintance of Montlosier's, but he had also been drawn into Mme de Staël's circle' (p. 101). Whether any of these attributes made him a better historian is unclear.

The book commences at a stately pace, with eighteen pages devoted to Boulainvilliers and to his successor in the task of creating 'a new historico-political discourse' (p. 19), the Abbé Du Bos, both of whose contrasting ideas on the Frankish settlement of Gaul are helpfully reduced to easily digested synopses of their work. This remains the procedure throughout the book, though authorial decision is exercised over which writers are subjected to more elaborate dissection, and which are passed over in a paragraph or two, or are even entirely ignored. The scale chosen for this first substantive chapter could probably not hope to be maintained in a single volume work. Faster and faster the decades fly and fewer become the historians treated to detailed exegesis of their oeuvre. Occasionally, we are detained by some extended examples, but such delays become fewer, as the yellow brick road leads us inexorably towards the Wizard of Oz of late antique studies, Peter Brown, whose *The World of Late Antiquity*, published in 1971, is the culmination of the quest. What follows is one of the best sections in the book, aided by the fact that Brown has recently been writing his own legend, with different versions for British and American readers; a process here lauded as 'a level of self-reflection [...] uncommon among historians, at least in print' (p. ix). A final brief chapter, leading to the present, records the subject area's first anointing with EU gravy in the *Transformation of the Roman World* project, and then lists a series of exhibitions, some of which remain memorable.

This sequence of authors, from Boulainvilliers to Brown, is no antiquarian meander, but is intended to identify the 'dominant discourse' (words that reappear with a frequency that will grate on those lacking postmodernist proclivities) in each period, while analysing the nature and roots of each of the selected writers' distinctive contribution to it. In the chapters on the twentieth century, this often involves discussion of their involvement in and reactions to the two World Wars, though there is also a good section on the equivalent impact of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Not surprisingly, some of these personal experiences influenced the ideas of several of the historians here studied, but

there is always a danger of conflating the work with the author, especially when published obituaries and eulogies by former students make most of these scholars more biographically accessible than their predecessors. Overall, while it may not be the sling shot that fells Charles Clarke, that latter day mini-Goliath, as a family history for the historian of the Early Middle Ages, this book contains much engaging erudition, valuable reconstruction and novel connections.