

## The Debate on the Crusades, 1099-2010 (Issues in Historiography)

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Simon John

The writing of history – any history – is shaped by the intellectual environment in which it is written, and by the preoccupations of its writers. As Christopher Tyerman acknowledges in his prefatory remarks, ‘writing history is not a neutral revelation but a malleable, personal, contingent, cultural activity’ (p. xi). The purpose of *The Debate on the Crusades* is to provide an overview of how the crusades have been interpreted by successive generations of western European (and, latterly, North American) historical commentators since the time of the First Crusade. For nine centuries crusading history has been continuously and anachronistically reinterpreted to expound the (often spiritual) preoccupations of later observers. This welcome study investigates the ‘umbilical link’ between current events and the writing of crusade history (p. 39).

The nature of this study pre-determined that Tyerman adopt a chronological, diachronic approach to the evidence rather than a structural one. He begins by making some comments on medieval interpretations of the crusade beginning with the First Crusade (1095–9), before charting the trajectory of scholarly opinions on the crusades through the Reformation and the Enlightenment, through the increasingly critical scholarship of the 18th and 19th centuries. The final chapters assess the state of modern crusade studies. It would be impossible to investigate comprehensively how the crusades have been treated in historical writing in these nine centuries in a single volume. The impact of the crusades permeated the culture of Western Europe so very deeply that the printed outcome of such a scholarly enterprise would come closer to filling a library than it would a book. Tyerman has therefore set the scope of this enquiry carefully to ensure that his task is manageable.

The most significant limitation of scope here is the decision to concentrate on developments in historical

writing from the 16th century onwards. It is to be severely regretted that his chapter dealing with historical writing on the crusades carried out between 1100 and 1500 is limited to only 25 pages. Admittedly much recent scholarly work has been carried out on the origin, authorship and function of medieval histories of the crusades.<sup>(1)</sup> Yet this chapter, brief though it is, represents such a learned and insightful assessment of this critical phase in the evolution of crusade historiography that were it to be expanded to a full-length study, it would represent a major contribution to crusade scholarship. This somewhat bold statement can be upheld by discussing Tyerman's approach to the early 12th-century Latin eyewitness chronicles of the First Crusade. Some scholars regard texts such as the anonymous *Gesta Francorum* (c.1101) as a simple record of what actually happened on the First Crusade. Tyerman though is of the views that none of these earliest of crusade histories can be regarded by scholars even in part as 'mere recitation of events'. Instead, they should be treated in their entirety as 'essays in interpretation' (p. 8). Tyerman's comments here demonstrate that he is at the forefront of current thinking on modern scholarship regarding the earliest written histories of the First Crusade. Undoubtedly there is much more he could have said on medieval historical writing on the crusades that would have been of value to modern scholarship.

Tyerman's first chapter also includes a brief survey of the vernacular literature and oral traditions that grew up around the crusades in the Middle Ages (pp.12–15). We know that in these centuries a significant level of information concerning the crusades diffused through the Christian world in vernacular texts, including *chansons de geste* and Old French prose histories. Scholars who venture into research on these texts (and it is to be hoped that many will) should find Tyerman's sage comments here a useful starting point.

Chapters two through seven form the spine of this book, charting how the crusades were treated in historical writing between 1500 and about 1950. It is with the commencement of the second chapter that *The Debate on the Crusades* comes into its own as a substantial contribution to our understanding of crusade historiography. In these chapters Tyerman carries out an elaborate study of contributions made to historical writing on the crusades made by a long line of historians, writers and authors, including, among many others, John Foxe, Jacques Bongars, Thomas Fuller, Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, Heinrich von Sybel, Joseph-François Michaud, Paul Riant, Heinrich Hagenmeyer, René Grousset, Joshua Prawer and R. C. Smail. Perhaps the most enduring testament to the influence of these men upon crusade historiography is that many of their names can still be found in the bibliographies of modern academic work on the crusades. Tyerman charts the genesis and development of the study of crusade history as an increasingly professional intellectual discipline. He weaves a complex story, tracking the fluctuating impact of a range of cultural and social influences, including various incarnations of Protestantism, nationalism and colonialism. Tyerman maintains a lucid and stimulating exposition on how the history of the crusades was written through these centuries. This is no mean feat.

Tyerman identifies the publication of critical editions of primary sources of crusade texts as key milestones in the development of crusade historiography. Jacques Bongars' 1611 compendium of crusade texts is argued here to be 'the most significant single contribution towards providing the foundations for crusade history before the nineteenth century' (p. 45). He also discusses the *Recueil des historiens des croisades*, a multi-volume collection of printed editions of crusade produced in Paris by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres between 1844 and 1906. The impact of the publication of this series upon scholarship on the crusades requires little exposition here. The volumes of the *Receuil* continue to adorn the shelves of libraries throughout the world, while the familiar abbreviation *RHC* has featured in the critical apparatus of every serious academic treatment of the crusades written since this landmark series was published. Despite its flaws (of which there are many), Tyerman rightly deems the *Receuil* 'indispensible' for historical writing on the crusades (p. 143).

Undergraduates in particular will be especially interested in chapters seven and eight, which deal with historical treatments of the crusades from the 20th century to the present day. It is likely that much of the material here will be mined during the composition of historiographical essays. The seventh chapter commences with a close analysis of Carl Erdmann's seminal 1932 study on crusading motivation. Tyerman makes plain the significance of Erdmann's revolutionary contribution to crusade scholarship. He even manages to say something of Erdmann's detractors, considering the ideas of scholars including Louis

Bréhier and John Gilchrist. Tyerman then considers the work of Steven Runciman, whose three-volume largely narrative histories (1951–4) played a key role in shaping how Anglophone scholars understand the crusades long after its conclusion. Tyerman’s dissection of Runciman’s work exposes its many flaws (p.192–9), while making it clear why it has nonetheless been so influential.

Tyerman lastly appraises current historical writing on the crusade. The first portion of this appraisal is a response to a study published in 2001 by Giles Constable, who suggested that modern crusade historians could be divided into four groups.<sup>(2)</sup> While it is not necessary to rehearse Constable’s schema here, except to say that Tyerman subjects its ‘inherently artificial’ divisions to considerable scrutiny, finding only limitations rather than anything of use (pp. 225–8). For Tyerman, the Constable schema is an overly simplistic solution to a far more complicated problem.

Tyerman’s treatment of the career of the renowned crusade scholar Jonathan Riley-Smith may be to the chagrin of some. Few would argue that Riley-Smith has had anything other than a huge impact on modern crusade historiography. His *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (1986), for example, is still a standard work on many aspects of study on early crusading. However, Tyerman simply gives an overview of Riley-Smith’s approach to crusade history, rather than make specific comments on any of his publications, references to which are relegated to the critical apparatus. Moreover, while Riley-Smith’s own research has been hugely significant, many of his pupils have also made profound contributions to modern crusade studies. At one point Tyerman speaks of a school of crusade scholarship that developed at Cambridge and London, though it is left unsaid that Riley-Smith spent much of his career in these two places (p. 229). Others might have been content to describe this network of scholars as the ‘Riley-Smith’ school. Tyerman is also at pains to highlight the influence of other British schools of study on the crusades, citing other clusters of prominent scholars based at places such as Oxford and Nottingham. This eighth chapter may thus leave some readers feeling that Riley-Smith’s influence on crusade studies has been underplayed.

Curiously, while Tyerman does cite some of his own publications in the critical apparatus, they go unmentioned in the text itself. The result is that information on important work such as his provocative *The Invention of the Crusades* (1998) has to be mined out of the notes. Few with any knowledge of modern crusade historiography would have levelled the charge of immodesty at Tyerman had he discussed his own contributions to modern historiography of the crusades. Yet, Tyerman’s selection of material and choice of focus cannot be criticised too strongly. He was charged to provide his interpretation of crusade historiography, and this he has done. Other scholars are welcome to offer their own.

This study will undoubtedly be of interest to those whose interest in the crusades is casual. Its greatest use, however, will be to those who are engaged in professional academic research on the crusades. It is an accessible survey of the development of an often controversial field of historical study over nine centuries. Tyerman’s prodigious command of the English language is here deployed to full effect. His prose is never anything other than compelling and often exhilarating. He has a remarkable capacity for forming well-wrought sentences which convey his meaning perfectly without so much as a syllable out of place. It is to be hoped that the publication of this book will precipitate further investigation into the very significant subject of how the crusades have been presented in historical record. Those that do embark on research in this vein will find that in *The Debate on the Crusades* they have an indispensable point of entry.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, Jean Flori, *Chroniqueurs et propagandistes: introduction critique aux sources de la première croisade* (Geneva, 2010).[Back to \(1\)](#)
  2. Giles Constable, ‘The historiography of the crusades’, in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh (Washington, 2001), pp. 1–22.[Back to \(2\)](#)
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