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The New Crusaders Images of the Crusades in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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Michael Brett

How should we read the Crusades? The question begs a host of others, not least how *do* we read them, in the light of how we *have* read them in the past. Beginning as a historian of how the Crusades were regarded in their own high mediaeval time, Elizabeth Siberry has more recently constituted herself the historian of how they have since been regarded in our own. In *The New Crusaders*, a title adapted from Disraeli's *Tancred*, she sets out to follow the British reading of the Crusades during the long nineteenth century, from the wars of the French Revolution to the end of the First World War. On the one hand, the period stretches from the extinction of the last of the Crusader states by Napoleon, passing through Malta on his way to recommence the European invasion of the Middle East in Egypt in 1798; it ends with the culmination of that invasion in the next great European conflict, 1914-18. On the other, it runs from the start of the modern popularity of the Crusades as a historical subject, to their employment as an ambivalent and perilous metaphor of present-day conflict. In describing their fortunes in the interval, the author, as she explains, is engaged in developing the account which she gave in her 'Images of the Crusades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* in 1995. The timescale is somewhat shorter, since she does not pursue the subject beyond the First World War, and the focus on Britain somewhat narrower. Meanwhile the arrangement of the material is different. Where the approach in the *Oxford History* was broadly chronological, here it is not so much thematic, as she claims, but taxonomic, presumably to accommodate the much greater wealth of detail. Thus in the range of chapters, from 'Crusade historiography' at the beginning to 'Music and the crusades' at the end, the First World War is the middle, followed by a discussion

of the way in which the term 'crusade' passed into general use for any kind of cause. The broad distinction is between representation of the Crusades in life, and their representation in art.

The byways as well as the highways of history and literature are always fascinating; and in enthusiastic pursuit of her subject, Elizabeth Siberry has turned up and classified a particularly wide range of references to the Crusades in all kinds of contexts, from church windows to the House of Lords; from pride in one's ancestors to visits to the Holy Land; and from children's literature to reenactments, not only on the stage but in real life, as military men fancied themselves, and their campaigns, in the role of holy warriors, holy wars. All British readers will recognise themselves to a greater or lesser degree in her work, whether in the examples she herself provides, or in those she might have introduced. Since she mentions the War Memorial at Sledmere, for example, it's a pity she doesn't describe the Waggoners' Monument just along the road - a memorial to a transport company raised by the Sykes from the estate. It takes the form of a sculptured strip cartoon, a sort of Bayeux tapestry of the company's expedition to Flanders, culminating in the siege and rout of grotesquely diabolical Germans: it might well have been the First Crusade, and certainly joins the number of Siberry's instances of the concept of holy war upon the infidel, with or without specific reference to the Mediaeval prototype. Nevertheless, her sampling of the mass of material is surely sufficiently wide to notice, and document, the entire phenomenon of the Crusades in Great Britain in her period, with appropriate references to the Continent, especially France, where the same factors were at work in the creation of similar images. *The New Crusaders* will not only be a work of reference. As a taxonomy of the subject, it will at the same time provide a framework for the incorporation of additional material until such time as the accumulation requires a fresh work - perhaps a new edition on which the author, to judge by her occasional remarks, may already be engaged. Meanwhile, are we, the readers of the twenty-first century who see ourselves in her mirror, any the wiser after the shock of recognition, or simply better informed?

The book appears in a series entitled *The Nineteenth Century*, with a Preface by the general editors in which their purpose is declared to be the illumination of the present as well as the past through works which cut across the conventional boundaries of the disciplines and divisions of the subject. *The New Crusaders* certainly cuts across the boundaries of both; as the author recognises, however, the importance of its own subject must not be overstated. The Crusades and their heroes were 'but one of a menu of options available to nineteenth and early twentieth century image makers'. They were, as Siberry's title indicates, largely newcomers to the repertoire, despite their previous celebration in Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, after an eighteenth century in which they had been systematically disparaged by the likes of Gibbon. As such, their popularity, and whatever formative influence they may have exercised over the mind of the century, depended upon their invention, in both senses of the word, discovery and creation, in accordance with the cultural and political criteria of the age: Mediaevalism; Romanticism; Orientalism; Nationalism; Imperialism; etc. How the Crusades may have served to tie all these together in accordance with the desiderata of the series is a problem. Of this problem Siberry is well aware, but as a self-confessed historian of the Middle Ages, refrains from trespassing too far into the realm of scholarship of the period. To this, the reader is referred in her Introduction and her bibliography. In her Conclusion, she confines herself to the observation that the imagery remained constant; that opinion on the merits of the Crusades remained divided; and that in Britain at least, there was no obvious correlation between the use of Crusade imagery and events in the Middle East before the First World War. 'Each use of the crusade image', she concludes, 'therefore deserves to be treated in its own right.'

That, for her, is what makes the subject so diverse and so interesting. The present reviewer, like Siberry a historian of the Middle Ages rather than modernity, can only concur - up to a point. Historians of the (long) nineteenth century, or students of its literature, or its arts, might look for more. Siberry's approach is completely the opposite, for example, of Edward Said's; but one does not have to be an out-and-out postmodernist, or take to the moral high ground of cultural pluralism, to think that on the evidence of the material assembled here, a different, if somewhat longer book might have been written in explanation of her subject. Her title announces, and her material documents, a new phenomenon: a turnover in attitudes from eighteenth-century disapproval to widespread identification with the Crusades; with the Crusaders; and with Crusading itself as a reenactment of the past and a metaphor of the future. Tyerman, in his pithy little book, *The Invention of the Crusades*

, is more forthright on the subject of this 'prolonged orgy of self-congratulation' on the part of Europeans riding the crest of a political, economic and scientific wave of success; Siberry counters by emphasizing a continuing streak of disapproval; but neither gives a satisfactory answer to the question of why, in this context, the *Crusades*?

The question is all the more relevant since, when we turn to the historiography described in Siberry's first chapter, it is apparent that this is the question which the new crusaders were always asking themselves. There is a notably apologetic literature, forever putting the best construction on what the authors invariably regard as deluded, uncivilised, or downright wicked behaviour. The panoply of excuses begins with Gibbon's opinion (mentioned by Tyerman but not Siberry) that the Crusades helped break down the feudal system, while opening up the economic and intellectual horizon of trade, manufacture and scientific invention. This Whig interpretation of history can be seen endlessly repeated and elaborated in Siberry and Tyerman's authors, where it is extended to cover the preservation of Europe from the Muslim/Turkish/barbarian menace, and hence the march of human progress. Somewhat inconsistently, it also embraces the access supposedly gained by the Crusades to the sciences of the East as a factor in the rise of modern, sc. Western civilisation (though I rather like the contrary idea that the Fourth Crusade was required in order to destroy Byzantine art, thus freeing the genius of the West to launch the Renaissance). On a different tack, history as philosophy teaching by example is turned on its head, so that Gibbon's condemnation of human folly becomes admiration for the idealism and self-sacrifice of the Crusaders, redeeming their many faults. When this notion of idealism is associated with that of 'the people', it returns to the level of historical explanation, and eventually of historical progress. Thus Cox, writing in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, regarded the First Crusade as a combination of popular feeling and religion; neither, said he, in the manner of Ibn Khaldun, could have succeeded without the other. In Wells' *Outline of History* (not considered by Siberry, though surely, in 1920, just within her remit), this popular demand represents a major step forward for humanity: the Crusades were the first great instance of the common man moved by common interest for a common cause. Lest any doubt the validity of such justifications, and the authors' own righteous abhorrence of the Crusaders' misdeeds, these are meanwhile vilified with considerable gusto; the heroic Coeur de Lion in particular is as likely to be damned as praised.

Two remarks by the author of *The New Crusaders* help to contextualise all this pleading in extenuation of what, to the historians of the nineteenth century, was fundamentally alien and unacceptable behaviour. Siberry's initial caution about the danger of overstating the importance of the Crusades in her period is matched by her concluding observation that 'it is humbling to a historian to realise the relatively minor part played (in the image of the Crusades) by scholarly analysis based on primary sources'. This was not simply because the British public preferred an image based on Tasso and Scott to a different impression given by professional historians. So far as British historical scholarship was concerned, the Crusades seem to have been of only marginal concern, and little scholarly interest. Tyerman rather more than Siberry makes it clear that the primary sources themselves were mainly published in France, while the analysis was largely done in Germany. And where on the subject of work published in Britain, Siberry simply quotes an adverse review of Archer and Kingsford's *The Crusades*, he is scathing on the subject of their scholarship at the end of the nineteenth century. The explanation for such negligence may be glimpsed in *The Historians' History of the World*, edited in twenty-five volumes by Henry Smith Williams and published in London by The Times in 1907. In Volume VIII the unattributed 'History of the Crusades' cites no authorities later than Mills and Michaud in the first half of the nineteenth century; the text, together with the prefatory essay by the Rev. William Denton on 'The value of the Crusades in the light of modern history', falls into line with all the rest of what Siberry charmingly says 'might be described as serious or semi-serious histories of the crusades', pointing morals and adorning tales. Among the contributors to the series, if not to this particular volume, however, was the great T.F. Tout. In his *Advanced History of Great Britain*, first published in 1902, the account of the First Crusade is in line with the version of Cox in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; and it is simply, and inexcusably, wrong. Tout's concern, of course, was with the history of Britain; but the passage is symptomatic of his, and others', indifference to the subject of the Crusades. Even as distractions, they do not figure at all in J.R. Green's *Short History of the English People*, 1874. Green, admittedly, was concerned with the making of a nation; but so, for that matter, was Walter Scott in *Ivanhoe*,

where the Crusades exist not for themselves but almost for the sake of Magna Carta. Throughout Siberry's period, their history, in Britain, was left to her apologetic storytellers.

Volume VIII of *The Historians' History* is meanwhile remarkable for its juxtapositions. The history of the Crusades is followed by that of the Papacy, making in milder form the invidious connection between the two which Tyerman notes as a feature of Protestant historiography in the seventeenth century. It is preceded by that of the Parthians, Sassanids and Arabs, for which the great German heavyweights of Islamic scholarship have been enlisted: Noldeke, Wellhausen and Goldziher. In the body of the unattributed text, Islam itself is disparaged as derivative, dull, and out of date; but holy war is reserved for defence against attack, not fanatical aggression, and the account in general is not only very well informed, but notably sympathetic to Arab civilisation. Noldeke himself had previously made a major contribution to the article on 'Mohammedanism' in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, where he was joined by the French scholar Stanislas Guyard; the latter's historical narrative of the Caliphate was extended in the article on 'Seljuks' by another major Orientalist, Houtsma. Houtsma's verdict, that the Seljuks not only saved Islam from its internal divisions, but promoted its civilisation through 'the intimate union of Persian and Arabic elements', was notably favourable, and in complete contrast to that of Cox on Islam and the Turks in conclusion to his article on the Crusades: 'a tyranny that has blasted the fairest regions of the earth'. Between Cox and Houtsma in the *Encyclopaedia* comes the Rev. Henry F. Tozer on the Greek, sc. Byzantine empire: the Turks may have been destructive, barbarian nomads, but at least from the Eastern point of view, the Crusaders were an unmitigated evil. On a point of fact, Tozer points out what Cox (and Tout) ignore, namely the role of the Byzantines, and specifically Alexius Comnenus in soliciting, and prompting, the intervention of the Pope.

Crusading historiography in Britain thus appears not only apologetic but also isolated from, and well behind, the mainstreams of scholarship at home and abroad. In the context of the nineteenth century, it appears as a response to, rather than a cause of the interest in the Crusades which it clearly promoted. Quantitatively, as Siberry says, the interest grew with the size of the audience in an age of increasing literacy and increasing travel, not least to the Holy Land. Qualitatively, we can begin to see how it took hold in Siberry's chapter on Scott: how an interest in romance and the Romantic; in chivalry; and eventually in historical fiction as a means, *inter alia*, to 'please the modern world', transformed his own Gibbonesque sense of the folly and the savagery of the Crusades into a repertoire of motifs to catch the imagination of a public fascinated by the Middle Ages as the Romans were by the circus, by the spectacle of the savage other. The use that he made of them in his phenomenally successful novels was clearly a major factor in the subsequent popularity and high profile of the Crusades; but as we can see from *The New Crusaders*, Scott had far too many contemporaries to be held chiefly responsible for the initial enthusiasm. A full explanation of the rise of the Crusades in the esteem of the nineteenth century would require a different treatment from Siberry's, most obviously a chronological history of the whole rather than the parts of the phenomenon which she documents section by section. Such a history would, one might hope, explain the connection between the two halves of her subject, between the voyeurism of the arts and the posturing on the part of the new crusaders themselves. We sense the movement from literature to life, and to some extent vice versa, although Siberry is no doubt correct to insist that the correlation between interest in the Crusades and events in the Middle East was occasional rather than reciprocal. But her discrete approach means that we are not really prepared for the eventual union of the two in the catalytic circumstances of the First World War.

It would be a Whig reinterpretation of Siberry's evidence to suggest that all of her individual instances were so many roads to this same end. But as we see from her record, in 1914 the Crusades sprang to mind in ways which reveal the extent to which they had taken hold of the imagination a century or so after they first became popular. The instances then listed by Siberry are a measure of the distance travelled from their initial exoticism to this ultimate identification of the present with the past. Each, as she says, may deserve to be treated in its own right; but together they conclude an evolution of which, in her book, we only see the parts. That evolution was bound up not only with literature but with religion; and it is here that the reader may detect a serious omission: a separate discussion of the way in which the Crusades were taken up by Church and Chapel in this great age of Christian thought and action. Siberry gives plenty of examples; but amid all

her references, ranging from church windows to ecclesiastical warmongers, evangelicals and missionaries only make their appearance under the rubric of 'A Crusade miscellany', to illustrate the way in which the term came to be 'widely used, and one might argue abused', for all kinds of cause, all kinds of campaign. The reinterpretation of the Christian warfare of one age by the Christian warriors of another, however, ran right through the establishment; the anti-Islamic historian Cox was the Rev. George William, a high churchman who nearly became Bishop of Bloemfontein in the front line of the faith in Africa. It was, moreover, of the heart as well as the mind. I find no reference in Siberry to the battle songs of the Kingdom, to the soldiers of Christ and the Christian soldiers. But in 1914 we can see how easy it must have been for the singers to forget that they were merely marching as to war. Perhaps Gibbon had a point.

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