

Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250: Essays in Honour of Professor Frank Barlow

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Is biography still a legitimate activity for professional historians in the twenty-first century? In contrast to many of the newer approaches towards the past, biography smacks of a very traditional top-down, mostly man-centred, approach. Medieval biographers face the particular problem of relatively restricted source material which led K. B. McFarlane to the view that their task was impossible (1). Yet the lack of information directly relating to a subject's interior life is not confined to the middle ages. All biographers face the challenge of portraying character and personality, so medievalists simply have to be more rigorous in interrogating such source material as they do have.

Writing Medieval Biography is the volume arising from most of the papers delivered at a conference held at Exeter University in 2004 to honour Frank Barlow, himself the author of three distinguished historical biographies (of Edward the Confessor, William Rufus, and Thomas Becket), and in memory of the late Tim Reuter, one of the moving spirits behind the conference. The papers range in date between 750 and 1250, and the authors have concentrated on the topic posed at the conference; the limits of medieval biography. The prefatory essay by David Bates, Julia Crick, and Sarah Hamilton outlines the history of biography, with most attention being devoted to the medieval centuries but briefly reviewing the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and outlining some of the key themes of the conference. The footnotes provide a particularly

useful directory of up-to-date writing on biography.

The papers fall into four main groups. One is composed of reflections on the contributors' own biographical writing, a second relates to source material, a third to medieval authors, and a fourth to gaps in medieval biographical writing. In the first group, Janet Nelson explicitly addresses a central problem for all biographers getting to grips with the interior life of a subject who lived so long ago and about whom surviving source material is at first sight unhelpful. She discusses how far it is possible to understand the interior life of the Emperor Charlemagne, arguing that it is possible to piece together information about his family life, sense of humour, his sex life, and the desire for reformation of self. Marjorie Chibnall looks back on her biography of the Empress Matilda to reflect similarly that, once a biographer has got to grips with the sources, informed speculation can help to flesh out the bare facts. Pauline Stafford casts a retrospective eye on her biography of two eleventh-century English queens, Emma and Edith, in an essay which she describes as 'a theory of past practice' (p. 99). She admits to having been influenced in the past by the impact of the social sciences on history, with a tendency to see individual lives determined by society, a tendency strengthened in the later-twentieth century by postmodernism in which individuals became, 'little more than epiphenomena of social and linguistic structures' (p. 106). Yet she has come to the view that seeking the individual choice within structures and norms is both a necessary and important task for historians.

Three contributors, Richard Abels, Simon Keynes, and David Bates discuss the challenge of writing about well known medieval figures, where the biographer has to clear the ground of past historiography before turning again to the sources. Abels writes of his efforts to offer a revisionist view of King Alfred, only to find himself coming under the spell of the Alfredian image created at that king's court. Keynes faces a different problem when writing of King Æthelred, whose reputation as a pretty-hopeless king rests on a narrative in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which oversimplifies what was evidently a complicated period by creating an impression of an inexorable build up of Danish attacks against which English resistance inevitably failed. Bates, too, is also concerned to explore the narrative sources relating to his subject, William the Conqueror. He points to the need to recognize the mixed views with which contemporaries regarded William and the conquest of England, and suggests that more attention should be given to the Conqueror's evident concern with penance and atonement.

A second group of papers considers different types of biographical writing in the middle ages. Jane Martindale discusses two different autobiographies from early-twelfth-century France, the Latin life of Fulk le Réchin, count of Anjou, and the vernacular life of William, count of Poitou and duke of Aquitaine. Whilst drawing attention to the differences in language and content, she nevertheless points to a remarkable overlap of vocabulary which raises questions about the education available to laymen. Christopher Holdsworth discusses the miracles attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux in the first 'Life', arguing that they demonstrate the saint's developing confidence in his own powers. Barbara Yorke reviews the sources available to those who wrote the histories of female saints in Anglo-Saxon England, suggesting that in a few cases these included nuggets of genuinely biographical information.

A third group of papers looks at medieval authors. Edmund King offers a reconsideration of the identity of the anonymous author of the *Gesta Stephani*. On the basis of the author's perceived interest in the west country, R. H. C. Davis argued in favour of Robert of Lewes, bishop of Bath, but King draws attention to references to the prominence of London, and suggests, reasonably enough, that the author may have been a monk or a canon of London. David Crouch puts himself in the shoes of John of Earley, the biographer of William Marshal, and considers the source material on which John could draw, speculating that there may have been a Marshal family archive, chamber accounts, and even possibly a tournament roll. John Gillingham considers that the meagre information about Roger of Howden's career may be fleshed out by looking at the subjects he chooses to report in detail as a means of judging whether he was at court or on crusade, and if he eventually retired to his Yorkshire parsonage.

Fourthly, two papers raise the very interesting question of gaps in the evidence: why was there no biographical writing about lay people in eleventh-century Flanders (Van Houts), and why were there no biographies of the Plantagenet kings (Vincent)? Van Houts draws attention to the seeming paradox that

although there was a good deal of hagiographical writing by Flemish authors, they did not turn their attention to the lay nobility. She suggests a possible reason may have been that potential patrons were not seen as figures who could deliver peace. Vincent ponders the absence of biographies of the Plantagenet kings. Despite historical writing at Henry II's court, no-one seems to have been inspired to write a biography of the king, his sons, or grandson, in contrast to the royalist historiography associated with the Capetian dynasty emanating from the monastery of Saint-Denis—a relationship which had no real parallel in England. There are various possible explanations, including different literary preoccupations for writers based within the Angevin empire, and he points out that historians should not be beguiled by these into exaggerating the contrast between the English and French monarchies.

Only one of these papers is actually a biographical study, and this neatly pays tribute to Barlow's own earlier work in editing the letters of Arnulf of Lisieux (2). This is Lindy Grant's discussion of the cultural milieu of Geoffrey of Lèves, bishop of Chartres, whom she sees as a mentor for Arnulf. Geoffrey was every bit as important a political figure as the better known Abbot Suger, and his architectural patronage deserves closer attention for, as Grant points out, the famous portals of the west facade of the cathedral at Chartres date from his time.

Finally, one contribution stands out as a startlingly different approach to medieval biography. Robin Fleming offers an analysis of the evidence of bones from medieval cemeteries to discover what can be known about the nameless members of medieval communities. She begins with 'Eighteen', a seventh-century woman who died before she was twenty years old, and was buried with her bed at Barrington in Cambridgeshire. The nameless woman was a leper whose face must have been hideously disfigured, yet she was apparently treated with respect and was buried with objects of considerable wealth at the heart of the communal cemetery. From this example, Fleming moves on to consider what the latest techniques of bone analysis reveal about such communities, about the higher mortality rates for women, and malnourished orphan children, arguing that historians must think about the implications of these statistics for the early middle ages. Life then was literally nasty, brutish, and short—at least it was until the close of the twelfth century when, it seems, things were beginning to improve. Of all the contributions to this fine volume, it is the discussion of 'Eighteen' whose brief life will linger.

This review began by posing the question whether biography should be regarded as a legitimate activity for the professional historian. *Writing Medieval Biography* demonstrates that it is still clearly alive and well. Sources present challenges, not just for what they say but what they leave unsaid, for striking a balance between portrayal of stereotypes or of individuals, for telling stories which may or may not reveal more than a talent to amuse. All the biographer can do, having reflected on text and context, is to have a sense of his subject and thus be able to interpret his actions. In that way he can at least gain some impression, however incomplete, of character and personality. As Barlow himself put it in the preface to his biography of William Rufus,

...close attention to recorded actions and the views of their recorders puts at least the outward behaviour of the actors on display; and most of us think, with the canonists, that there is usually some relationship between the exteriora and interiora (3).

Notes

1. K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973), p. ix. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Letters of Arnulf of Lisieux*, ed. F. Barlow, Camden Society, 3rd series, 61 (1939). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. F. Barlow, *William Rufus* (London, 1983), p. xi. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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