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The Children's Crusade: Medieval History, Modern Mythistory

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Brett Edward Whalen

Agatha Christie's 1970 novel *Passenger to Frankfurt* might seem like an unusual place to start a history of the Children's Crusade in 1212. To capture the radical youth-culture of the 1960s lying at the heart of her plot, Christie invoked the Children's Crusade as a familiar symbol of misguided and ultimately dangerous youthful folly. Gary Dickson, however, is not interested in history alone. As the title of his book indicates, in *The Children's Crusade: Medieval History, Modern Mythistory*, he tackles both the history of that event and its long afterlife as 'mythistory'. In this engaging volume, he carefully examines the contemporary medieval sources for the Children's Crusade, and also asks how the *peregrinatio puerorum* 'already becoming mythistorical by the 13th century' survived the Middle Ages not just in the realm of professional crusade scholarship, but also in fiction, film, plays, music, and other media. Through the course of doing so, Dickson interrogates the very nature of history-writing, which, he argues, is inseparable from the fabric of myths and social memories that fashion our collective understanding of the past.

In the first chapter of his book, summoning figures like William H. McNeill and Hayden White (1), Dickson introduces the tension and dialogue between history, which looks to contain events, setting them in their context, complicating them and exposing their contingency, and mythistory, which seeks to simplify events, setting them free from their context, essentializing them and obscuring their contingency. He has no interest in trying to separate history from mythistory, its 'Siamese-twin', the sort of approach favored by 19th-

century positivist historians; rather, for Dickson, the mythistory of the Children's Crusade provides a 'port of entry into medieval mentalities' (p. 15). Indeed, the trail of modern images, tropes, and rhetorical motifs surrounding that event leads him back to his medieval sources, which first began the process of 'mythistoricizing' the Children's Crusade. As Dickson writes, 'However we configure the mythistory, history, and memory of the crusading enthusiasm of 1212, we encounter the imaginings and observations of the thirteenth-century chroniclers' (p. 16). Accordingly, he first sets his sights on their creative, textual world, which provided the basis for the subsequent elaborations of the Children's Crusade down to Agatha Christie and beyond.

In chapter two, 'History: The Pope and the *Pueri*,' Dickson sets the Children's Crusade into its proper historical context, a time of religious revival and crusade enthusiasm overseen by Pope Innocent III (1198-1216). 'Set within the Innocentian era,' he explains, 'the Children's Crusade begins to make sense' (p. 17). For all of his meditations on mythistory, first and foremost Dickson is an historian: he wants his readers to understand the crusading enthusiasm of 1212 as a contingent event that occurred at a specific moment in the past. That process of 'making sense' out of the Children's Crusade begins with the broader currents of lay piety that characterized the early 13th century along with the institutional efforts of the Roman Church to channel (and sometimes quash) sentiments of 'religious impossibilism', that is, the belief that all things were in fact possible through the ineffable power of divine providence. This same era, Dickson reminds us, saw not just a sustained emphasis on crusading as an act of piety, but also outbursts of prophetic inspiration, found in the works of figures such as Joachim of Fiore, and forms of religious innovation that ecclesiastical authorities would ultimately define as heretical, such as beliefs and practices of the Amalricians. Although he is careful not to claim any direct causal link between the Amalricians and the Children's Crusade (despite their chronological and geographical proximity), Dickson sees both as a product of the same creative religious forces at play during the papacy of Innocent III, forces also manifest among the early Franciscans and Beguines.

The Children's Crusade, Dickson declares, 'was impossibilism in motion' - a revivalist mass movement, a community of believers on the march' (p. 27). As such, the 'children' (*pueri*) involved in the crusade were participants in a broader spiritual dialogue that included Innocent III himself, a crusading pope who placed the recovery of Jerusalem and defense of Christendom from non-believers at the heart of his papacy. Nor, he clarifies with references to the contemporary sources, did the Children's Crusade consist exclusively of young children, a misconception that has found its way into the works of such distinguished scholars as Paul Alphandéry. (2) At the same time, disagreeing with Peter Raedts, Dickson does not abandon the idea that the participation of children, understood by contemporaries as a distinct age-group, did in fact constitute the hallmark of the crusade, one that captured the imagination of contemporaries. (3) In these terms, the Children's Crusade was a 'youth movement' (p. 35), sharing the religious enthusiasms of the orthodox clergy, but refusing to remain within institutional confines.

Having set the Children's Crusade into its moment, Dickson's second chapter sees him find its place of origin: the 'Chartrain', the region around the cathedral town of Chartres not far from Paris. Although scholars in the past have sometimes hesitated to assign the crusading enthusiasm of 1212 - which surfaced in both France and Germany - a single, definitive point of origin, Dickson settles on France, specifically the Chartrain, beginning in the spring of that year. The Chartrain, he argues, borrowing a concept from American revivalism, was a 'burned-over district', one that had been 'repeatedly inflamed' over a century of crusading activity (p. 42). The year 1212 was one of particular intensity due to the recruitment for the Albigensian Crusade during the previous years (which Dickson calls the 'impetus' for the Children's Crusade) and the immediate crisis occasioned by Almohad aggression in Spain (the 'stimulus' for the crusade). Dickson sees Pope Innocent III's effort to rally the faithful against the threat posed by the Almohads as playing a key role in the genesis of the Children's Crusade. As the Christian warriors of Spain prepared for battle against the Muslims, the pope called for preaching, prayer, and liturgical processions throughout Christendom to support their effort. This call for a processional ambulation was heeded in May 1212 at Chartres, which Dickson sees as the time and place of the Children's Crusade's 'birthpangs'. Drawing in particular upon the chronicle from the Cistercian monastery of Mortemer, he argues that a group

of participants in the liturgical activities at Chartres decided to preserve the ecstatic mood of the moment and to move on to bigger and better things. Dickson describes the initial Children's Crusaders as "ardent post-Chartres enthusiasts" (p. 57).

Who were these enthusiasts, what did they want, and where did they proceed from there? In the following three chapters Dickson identifies some of the key players in the early stages of the Children's Crusade, tracks it from France to Germany and then from Germany to its hazy conclusion in Italy. Drawing upon the 13th-century chronicles of John Le Long and the Laon Anonymous, and also Max Weber's notions of "charismatic" leadership, he identifies "Stephen of Cloyes", a young shepherd, as the probable leader of a group whose initial pilgrimage from Chartres was directed not to Jerusalem, but rather to Saint Denis with the hope of meeting the French king, Philip Augustus (according to the Laon Anonymous, Christ, meeting Stephen in the guise of a pilgrim, had given him letters to deliver the monarch). Ultimately, following this report, the king commanded the "boys" to return to their homes. Other contemporary accounts, however, imply that the *pueri* began to turn toward greater goals, a veritable "pilgrimage" in search of God. The Children's Crusade, a mass revivalist meeting on the move, would not be so easily stopped. Drawing upon a document from the French royal archives, Dickson finds the next appearance of the ambulatory youth-movement near Saint-Quentin, 140 miles northeast of Saint Denis. Here, a dispute broke out between townspeople who, Dickson argues, agreeing with Gaston de Janssens "unverifiable" but "plausible" hypothesis (p. 79), supported the passing throngs of children, and the local clergy who greeted them with suspicion. (4)

The episode at Saint-Quentin, in turn, provides a "tantalizing ambiguous road sign" (p. 82), pointing from France toward Germany, where the next chapter of the Children's Crusade unfolded. Breaking from some previous scholars, Dickson sees a clear, sequential relationship between the French and German manifestations of crusading enthusiasm in 1212, perceived by contemporary chroniclers as part of "a single, unitary phenomenon", even if hard "direct evidence" for such a connection is lacking (83-4). In the contemporary German chronicles, he finds signs that the aspirations of the Children's Crusaders had continued to evolve: "Long before historians and mythohistorians imagined them," he writes, "the *pueri* imagined themselves" (p. 89). An increasingly heterogeneous group of youths, peasants, lowly urban laborers, and other humble elements, the crusade-enthusiasts had become the "poor of Christ", pilgrims with the goal of liberating Jerusalem and recovering the relic of True Cross, seized by Saladin at the battle of Hattin in 1187. Under the leadership of a new charismatic figure, Nicholas of Cologne, the Children's Crusade moved onward into Italy, first stopping at Genoa, and later other cities including Rome. What happened to the Children Crusaders when they not surprisingly failed to find transport to the Holy Land? As they entered this stage of their journey, Dickson argues, they again assumed a new identity, this time as immigrants rather than crusaders or pilgrims. Based on the limited evidence, it seems clear that the *pueri* settled down in various cities around Italy, some no doubt remaining poor, others finding new fortunes. "Particularly in its transalpine phase," Dickson concludes, "the Children's Crusade was an urban migration, one of the geographically most impressive, large-scale urban migrations in medieval history" (p. 127). So much for the "history" of the Children's Crusade. In chapter seven, "Mythistory: The Shape of a Story", Dickson returns to the basic problem posed at the beginning of his book, how "mythistory" reshapes and recasts historical events in ways that give them universal applicability, moral clarity, and, simply put, more dramatic punch. One of his most keen insights lies at the heart of this chapter: the fact that the "mythohistoricizing" of the Children's Crusade was already underway in the mid 13th century works of the French chronicler Alberic of Trois-Fontains, the English chronicler Matthew Paris, and the Dominican encyclopedist Vincent of Beauvais. Drawing upon earlier chronicles, oral reports, and apparently their own imaginations, this next generation of "authorities" on the Children's Crusade embellished it with many of the marvelous characteristics that still inform the popular memory of that event. Invoking the Holy Innocents killed by Herod, the crusade-enthusiasts of 1212 became younger and younger. A good story needs villains. Alberic introduced "Hugo Ferreus" and "William Porcus", wicked merchants of Marseille and servants of the Devil, who promised to transport the children to the holy places, but instead sold them into slavery under the Muslims. In his *Speculum historiale*, Vincent of Beauvais claimed that the infamous "Old Man of the Mountain", the leader of the feared Assassins, lay behind the whole affair, intended as a ruse to gather fresh

slaves for incorporation in his nefarious profession. In the hands of such writers, the Children's Crusade moved from 'history' into 'mythistory,' serving as a miraculous example of innocent self-sacrifice or a cautionary tale against foolish ignorance.

In the final two chapters, Dickson moves selectively across the centuries, from early modern histories of the crusades, such as Thomas Fuller's *The Historie of the Holy Warre*, to the 18th-century works of Voltaire, to the first professional crusade histories of Michaud and Friedrich Wilken. He locates the mythistory of the Children's Crusade in popular histories, including George Zabriskie Gray's influential *The Chrildren's Crusade* (5), children's literature, historical novels, plays, musical performances, and fiction, including not just the work of Agatha Christie, but also Kurt Vonnegut's anti-war novel *Slaughterhouse Five or the Children's Crusade*. Even in its most fantastical formulations, however, the mythistory of the Children's Crusade never became outright myth. No matter how it was configured and reconfigured, Dickson reminds us, the Children's Crusade as mythistory assumed such meaning and durability because of its claim to historical status. 'So if the memorability of the *pueri* was to a certain extent independent of its historicity,' he concludes, 'its perceived historicity was crucial to its survival' (p. 195).

Two points about this original, thoughtful piece of scholarship need particular consideration. First, there are certain moments when Dickson's desire to situate the popular enthusiasm of the Children's Crusade within the broader trajectory of institutionalized crusading piety raises questions. For example, he claims that the Children's Crusade was the primary source of inspiration for Innocent III's decision to mobilize all the faithful to take the cross during the preparatory stages of the Fifth Crusade, well aware that most of them would commute their vows into a cash payment. 'This fundamental shift in papal recruitment policy,' he writes, 'bore the imprint of the *pueri*' (p. 114). This might have been the case, but surely the fate of the Fourth Crusaders, whose chronic lack of funds and debt to the Venetians led them to attack the Christian cities of Zara and Constantinople, was also on Innocent's mind when he tapped into popular enthusiasm for the crusades, a source of critically needed revenues?

Second, as might already be clear from the discussion above, in order to reconstruct the origins and course of the Children's Crusade, the 'hard history,' if you will, Dickson is forced to make some tenuous, sometimes speculative connections based on limited evidence. For all of his appreciation for the power of mythistory, Dickson is an historian who still wants to recover, if not the 'truth,' than at least an 'authentic' sense of what happened and what it meant to contemporaries. In order to link the origin of the Children's Crusade to the liturgical procession at Chartres, and the youthful group from Chartres to the young pilgrims at Saint Denis, and the pilgrims from Saint Denise to the disturbance at Saint-Quentin and so forth into Germany and Italy, he often has recourse to phrases such as 'highly likely?', 'there can be little doubt?', and 'most probably?'. At points, he explicitly notes that he is inferring connections where the evidence is suggestive but not conclusive. This express recognition of his own creativity and limitations as an historian, however, fits with the very point that Dickson makes about the nature of history as opposed to mythistory.

'Mythistorians,' he notes at one point, 'are invariably certain' (p. 111). Dickson does not claim certainty, but rather, offers a plausible, well-considered interpretation of the medieval sources without trying to paper-over or obscure the thin patches in his narrative. A convincing historian *of* mythistory, a mythistorian Dickson is not.

The author is grateful for such a thorough and conscientious reading. Prof. Whalen's two concluding points are well taken and perfectly justified.

Notes

1. Dickson cites William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1986); and Hayden White, 'The historical text as literary artifact', in *The History and Narrative Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Roberts (New York and London, 2001). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Paul Alphandéry and Alphonse Dupront, *La chrétienté et l'idée de croisade* (2 vols., Paris, 1954, 1959), pp. 339-72. [Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Peter Raedts, 'The Children's Crusade of 1212?', *Journal of Medieval History*, 3 (1977), 297-323.
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Gaston de Janssens, 'Étienne de Cloyes et les croisades d'enfants au xiii siècle?', *Bulletin de la société dunoise* 90 (1891), 109-33. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. George Zabriskie Gray, *The Children's Crusade: A History* (1870; New York, 1972). [Back to \(5\)](#)

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