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ORDERING THE MEDIEVAL PAST: ENGLAND AND THE CONTINENT COMPARED

Peter G. J. M. Raedts, Nijmegen

I.

Most medieval English churches display on their walls a proud list of all the incumbents that served the parish, from the times that historical record keeping began, usually the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, till the present day. In their simplicity these lists are an impressive testimony to a sense of solidarity with the whole of the past that still prevails in large parts of England. Holland, too, has its medieval churches. In these churches lists of ministers are also displayed, but they all, without exception, start in the year that the Reformation was introduced to that particular parish, somewhere in the 1570s or 1580s, it is as if the medieval clergy had never existed. The lists show a will to make a clean break with the medieval past. The inscription on the wooden beam that replaced the rood screen in the "Old Church" in Amsterdam sums it all up: "The abuses introduced into God's Church age by age, were suppressed here in the year fifteen seventy eight."¹ Behind the beam the chancel is empty, no altar, no choir stalls, nothing. The pulpit in the nave has been the centre of the church from 1578 till the present day.

This example shows the difference in appreciation of the medieval past in England and on the continent. The English view of the Middle Ages is uncontroversial and untroubled. There is no doubt in the English mind that the thousand years between Rome and the Renaissance are an intrinsic part of our past and that we owe much to the Middle Ages for which we can still be thankful: the origin of parliamentary government, the clear distinction of spiritual and temporal

¹ The original reads: 't Misbryuck in Godes Kerck allengskens ingebracht Is weer afgedaen in 't jaer seventich acht - Xvc. I thank Mr. J. van Zaane, member of the Amsterdam Reformed Church Council, for drawing my attention to this uncompromising abjuration of the medieval past.

authority, the founding of schools and universities and the rise of literacy, and, of course, the beginnings in Italy and Flanders of a successful commercial economy that became the foundation of Europe's dominating position in later ages. For English historians continuity between then and now needs no argument, it is taken for granted. Sandy Murray writes in the introduction to his *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*: "In studying Europe in the central middle ages we study the first direct recognizable ancestor of the society we still live in."² In this he agrees with Richard Southern in his classic *The making of the Middle ages* where he writes in the introduction that in the central Middle Ages Europe became the chief centre of political experiment, economic expansion and intellectual discovery in the world.³ Perhaps the most stunning proof of English belief in the continuity between the present and the medieval past is Patrick Wormald's recent, passionate plea for the "reality of an early English nation-state," that can be traced back into Anglo-Saxon times.⁴ To a scholar from the continent of Europe, even if he dislikes post-modernism just as much as Wormald does, such a plea for continuity is incomprehensible, because it is the expression of a serene and untroubled view of the medieval past that is in the sharpest possible contrast with the acrimonious debate that has surrounded the inheritance of the Middle Ages on the continent of Europe since the days of Romanticism up till now.⁵ In this contribution I would like to make some observations on this remarkable difference in approach to the medieval past between England and the continent.

² A. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1978, 5-6.

³ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, London 1973, orig. 1953), 14.

⁴ Patrick Wormald, 'The eternal Angle: Built slowly from below and built to last: the longevity of England and English institution,' in: *Times Literary Supplement* No 5111, March 16 2001, 3-4.

⁵ Although O. Oexle, *Das entzweite Mittelalter* [The Wrecked Middle Ages], in: G. Althoff (ed), *Die Deutschen und ihr Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 1992, 7-28, mainly speaks about the German debate, his conclusions are *mutatis mutandis* true for all other continental nations.

II.

Until well into the eighteenth century all civilized people in England as well as on the continent would have agreed that the thousand years of the Middle Ages were a most unpleasant time. Gibbon summed up this attitude in his oft-quoted phrase that in his book he had been describing the triumph of barbarism and religion.”⁶ And this was true for Catholics as well. Bossuet was just as disdainful of the Middle Ages as Gibbon was a century later. He was very critical of the medieval Papacy and was convinced that the many abuses in the medieval Church had decisively contributed to the catastrophe of the Reformation.⁷ Even those seventeenth and eighteenth century historians who in our eyes did so much to preserve the medieval inheritance, felt often obliged to apologize for their scholarly efforts. William Camden described the medieval period “as so overcast with dark clouds, or rather thick fogs of ignorance, that every little spark of liberal learning seemed wonderful.” John Selden, to whom we owe a fundamental book about tithing, found it necessary to explain that he had lavished so much attention on that “bare and sterile antiquity,” not out of interest but to cast light on some problems in the relations between Church and state in his own days.⁸

The Gothic revival of the eighteenth century, that produced, besides follies, novels such as Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* and the first editions of medieval poetry (real and fakes), did not alter the verdict on the Middle ages in any fundamental way. Eighteenth century medievalism remained very different from the passionate melancholy, that characterised romantic idolizing of the medieval period. It was noncommittal and playful and really part of a much wider admiration for the primitive and the simple that implied some criticism on social and cultural mores of the time, but was not all that serious. Interest in the Middle Ages was similar to interest in exotic countries, the Orient, or China. People liked to read about these out of the way places, and what they read helped to see the follies of one’s own culture,

⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*, VI. lxxi, ed. David Womersley (3 vols.), London, 1995, or. 1776-1787, iii.1068.

⁷ J.Voss, *Das Mittelalter im historischen Denken Frankreichs*, München 1972, 144.

⁸ Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and history. Origins of modern English historiography*, Ithaca 1987, 93 (Camden), 96 (Selden).

Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* are a prime example, but in the end it was of little consequence. As Alastair Hamilton says about interest in Islam: "It tended to take the form of self-confident curiosity in which there was little question of actual influence."⁹ It all had a very light touch, its purpose was "to surprise jaded palates."¹⁰

Yet, silly as the Gothic revival in many ways may have been, it was a first sign of the end of the rule of classicism and of the coming a new approach to the past. The discovery of primitive cultures in so many parts of the world, raised the question if perhaps European culture had also once known a primitive stage and had, therefore, been very different from what it was now. Had European society perhaps once also consisted of tribes of hunters and gatherers, just as the American Indians now? If that was true, there must have been a long historical development since then, first to an agricultural and cattle-holding society, and finally from the 13th century on, to the commercial society that eighteenth century philosophers thought such a blessing for mankind. Montesquieu had raised those questions, but it was in Scotland that a genetic model of the sequence of societies was first developed. In that scheme the Middle Ages no longer were an unfortunate interval in history between Rome and the Renaissance, the medieval period became a painful, yet necessary stage in the growth of Europe to a free and enlightened nation. The historical works of David Hume and William Robertson are prime examples of this new approach. In the introduction to *The history of the reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769), Robertson gave an account of the Middle Ages that was at the same scathing in the best humanist fashion, and yet brilliantly showed how essential the medieval contribution to the later history of Europe had been. When he writes about scholasticism he tells in the same breath that it was "a vain philosophy," and yet "fruitless and ill-directed as these speculations were, their novelty roused, and their boldness interested the human mind.. The progress of it may be mentioned, nevertheless, among the great causes which contributed to introduce a change of manners in Eu-

⁹ *Times Literary Supplement*, No 5080, August 11 2000, 32.

¹⁰ R. J. Smith, *The Gothic bequest: Medieval institutions in British thought, 1688-1863*, Cambridge 1987, 112.

rope.”¹¹ Just as most other eighteenth century historians he reserves his warmest words for the progress of commerce in the later Middle Ages, he particularly praises Edward III who “endeavoured to excite a spirit of industry among his own subjects, who, blind to the advantages of their situation, and ignorant of the source from which opulence was destined to flow into their country, totally neglected commerce.”¹² Robertson and Hume did not like the Middle Ages, but they both saw it as a necessary and important period in which the seeds had been sown of Europe’s present greatness.

An even more radical change in the view of the past occurred at the same time in Germany. It is fair to say that both Hume and Robertson, although sensitive to historical change, assumed that human nature, in every period of history, had always been fundamentally the same. German historians, for a variety of reasons, began to have doubts about that. If there were so many different societies and cultures both now and in the past, could they be the expression of one underlying human nature, or did one have to admit that people of different cultures were fundamentally different in their nature as well? Their conclusion was that each historical period had its individual character that could not be imitated or copied by later generations, it could only be explained. And if that was true, what authority did classical writers have now, or, indeed, the Bible, since all these literary monuments were products of totally different cultures. Questions like these were asked by theologians such as Michaelis and Semler. Johann Gottfried Herder was the first to develop a new philosophy of history that took the unique character of every culture as its starting point.

Herder’s fundamental thought was that world history was the sum of the histories of all its many nations (*Völker*) and their cultures, each of which had an innate, unique and individual spirit that developed in time. Every nation and every culture deserved respect and had to be judged on its own terms not ours. Herder openly questioned the way in which zealous Christian missionaries dealt with native cultures in Africa, Asia and America, wondering if they did not de-

¹¹ William Robertson, *The progress of society in Europe*, ed. Felix Gilbert, London 1972, 61–62.

¹² Robertson 1972, 66.

stroy more than they brought.¹³ Just as each nation each historical period had its individual spirit. And although Herder assumed that the ultimate purpose of history was the realisation of *Humanität*, it was not so that progress was inevitable, each nation had its periods of prosperity and of decline, which made it all the more necessary to study each period in itself, without comparing it too soon with what happened before or after.¹⁴

But even though armed with such an impressive array of philosophical argument, it was not easy for Herder to be impartial about the Middle Ages, it was going to take more than one man to remove the thick layers of three centuries of prejudice. But Herder really made an effort to discover what the Middle Ages had contributed to the progress of Europe. Especially in his early work (*Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, 1774) he tried to show that the medieval period saw a real advance in civilisation, when compared to Roman antiquity. The Roman world had been exhausted and needed the stimulus of a young and vital civilisation, that of the Nordic people. At first sight the Germanic invaders of the Empire wreaked havoc, but in fact it was the beginning of a period of fermentation that put new life into a dying culture. In his later work Herder is less positive, he is very critical of the role of the Church and the Papacy in the Middle Ages. He accuses both of trying to stifle the national character of the new nations by imposing a foreign Latin culture on them, instead of fostering their own languages. Yet even there Herder sees impressive intellectual progress in the Middle Ages, the founding of universities is to him a sign of the coming victory of scholarship over barbaric Church despotism. And in the universities it is scholasticism, that sharpened men's wits and taught them to ask questions, which he, much like Robertson, admires. But the decisive factor of progress in the Middle Ages were the new cities, the true centres of culture of hard work and of responsible economic stewardship, they marked the transition to modern Europe.¹⁵

¹³ Wolfram von den Steinen, *Mittelalter und Goethezeit*, in: Id., *Menschen im Mittelalter*, Bern 1967, 294.

¹⁴ W. Förster, Johann Gottfried Herder: *Weltgeschichte und Humanität*, in: H. E. Bödeker e. a., *Aufklärung und Geschichte. Studien zur deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft im 18. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 1986, 364–365.

¹⁵ Förster 1986, 365–366, 377–380.

What makes the work of men like Robertson and Herder, and I take them as representative of much of late eighteenth century historical thought, so essential in the development of new views of the Middle Ages is not the question whether they admired the period or not. They did not.¹⁶ What matters is that in both their historical works the medieval period was no longer a regrettable incident between classical antiquity and its restoration, the sooner forgotten the better, but that it was an integral and necessary part of the development of all nations in Europe, that it had to be studied by everyone who wanted to make sense of the present. Herder was certainly keener on the Middle Ages than Robertson. He encouraged his countrymen to read medieval poetry (he was particularly fond of Ossian!), but that sprang from the conviction that Germans now would become freer, stronger and more united, if they studied the origins of their nation's spirit that was nowhere as purely expressed as in the ancient Germanic poets. But like Robertson Herder kept his distance, there was no time like the present: the French Revolution, when it occurred, was greeted by Herder as a decisive moment in man's progress to freedom and happiness. Herder had no feelings of nostalgia, nor did he present the Middle Ages as an alternative to modern culture. What he did achieve was to lay the foundations for a sensible and sober evaluation of the importance of the medieval period for European culture without that sense of loss that appeared in the romantic period and that in the end was going to do just as much damage to the reputation of the Middle Ages as humanist neglect.

III.

The myth of the unhistorical character of the Enlightenment versus the historical character of Romanticism, as described in Meinecke's classic *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (1936), has been exposed in all studies of eighteenth century historiography over the past twenty years. And, a reappraisal of the medieval past was part of that historical interest. It remains true all the same that it was the French Revolution and its aftermath of war and bloodshed that fundamentally

¹⁶ See W.D. Robson-Scott, *The literary background of the Gothic revival in Germany*, Oxford 1965, 67-72.

altered the appreciation of the medieval period in all of Europe. In the years around 1800 historians, poets and philosophers began to idealise the Middle Ages in the same way that Classical Antiquity had been idealised for centuries.

To the generation that saw the Terror and the rise of Napoleon the price to be paid for freedom and equality seemed far too high. Equality led to chaos, and freedom turned men into beasts, that was the conclusion of the generation that grew up after 1800. The young German poet Novalis prophesied in 1799: “Blood will stream over Europe until the nations become aware of their extreme madness, a madness which imprisons them, and, touched and calmed by sacred music, they move, in colourful fusion, to previous altars... Only religion can awaken Europe, assure the existence of the nations and install Christianity in its old peace-making function with a new glory visible on earth....”¹⁷ Novalis identified these “previous altars” with the Christian Middle Ages, in Novalis’ eyes a society of peace, order, obedience and unity that had to be restored. Things had begun to go wrong in the era of the Reformation, and the destruction had been completed with the Revolution. Most of the German Romantics agreed with him, although only a few drew the consequence of converting to Catholicism, the thoughts of most turned to a restoration of the medieval *Reich*.

In France the influential political philosopher, Joseph de Maistre, thought that the cruelties of the Revolution clearly showed that the only way to guarantee order and peace was obedience to an authority not based on reason but drawing its legitimacy from God. Only thus could man’s primitive instincts be reduced to acceptable levels. The only person who had such authority, according to de Maistre, was the Pope.¹⁸ What was needed, therefore, was a restoration of the authority of the Roman Pontiff, just as it had been in the Middle Ages. He was not the only one who began to look back nostalgically to the Middle Ages as a period of social, political and religious integration; a period when a clear, hierarchical authority ruled the relationships

¹⁷ Novalis (Fr. von Hardenberg), *Christenheit oder Europa*, in: *Schriften*, 3: *Das philosophische Werk II*, ed. R. Samuel, Darmstadt 1968, 523.

¹⁸ I. Berlin, Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism, *The New York Review of Books*, 37/1990, no 14, 61–62, and no 15, 55–56.

between all ranks of society; a period when the Church had stood above all the parties and had played an intermediary and conciliatory role. Had not the Popes, in those days, been the mediators in conflicts between the secular princes? Had not the monasteries always been a refuge for people threatened by violence? Should it not be so again? Even protestant monarchs, such as the – very unromantic – Dutch King, William I (r. 1813–1840), toyed with the idea that the Pope could play an important part in the restoration of peace and order as the chairman of the assembly of national churches in Europe.¹⁹

Moreover, the young generation of 1800 was no longer interested in the delights of reason and enlightened philosophy. The cult of sentiment of the Gothic revival became a glorification of the irrational, the passionate and the supernatural. “Il n’est rien de beau, de doux, de grand dans la vie, que les choses mystérieuses,” said Chateaubriand in 1802 in his defence of the genius of Christianity against the enlightened citizens of the eighteenth century.²⁰ The great Gothic cathedrals of France gave him “une sorte de frissonnement et un sentiment vague de la divinité.” Like most of his contemporaries Chateaubriand believed that Gothic architecture was natural (as opposed to the artificiality of classicism), because in its play of columns and vaults it imitated the ancient forests of Gaul. By entering a cathedral Chateaubriand felt in touch with the deepest roots of French culture, with the simple and natural religion of his ancestors.²¹ The influence of the Gothic revival of the eighteenth century is obvious. But what was a play then, now became deadly serious. In order to survive European culture must return to the living source, to the naïve simplicity of its origins and most creative period, to the Middle Ages.

¹⁹ J. A. Bornewasser, “Het credo... geen rede van twist.” Ter verklaring van een koninklijk falen, in: J.A. Bornewasser, *Kerkelijk verleden in een wereldlijke context*, Amsterdam 1989, 132, 140–43.

²⁰ F.-R. de Chateaubriand, *Génie du christianisme*, ed. P. Reboul (2 vols.), Paris 1966, i. 60.

²¹ Chateaubriand 1966, i.400–401.

IV.

Nostalgia for a society where everyone knew his place, where the Church was the guardian of peace and concord, nostalgia for the times when people were simple and natural, those were at the root of the romantic admiration for the Middle Ages. But that is not the whole story. Despite the wave of romantic nostalgia the innovative approach to the medieval period of the late eighteenth century survived. In the first half of the nineteenth century there were many historians and philosophers who did not so much consider the Middle Ages a lost civilisation to be restored, but as a stage in the development of modern Europe, as Herder and Robertson had done fifty years before. In France the reason for this was that many left-wing intellectuals, although they approved of the revolution in principle, agreed with their counterparts of the right that it had totally got out of hand with the reign of Terror under Robespierre in 1793-1794. Such a break with the past was humanly impossible and had, necessarily, led to the bloodshed of those two horrible years. Left-wing historians did not want to be seen as supporters of such radicalism and, therefore, had "to appropriate the historical field, to discover and celebrate precursors of their cause."²² They had to show that the revolution in its first constitutional phase, with the abolition of feudalism and the establishment of a National Assembly, had not been a radical break with the past but, on the contrary, had been in continuity with the whole of French history. In 1827 Augustin Thierry came to the conclusion that the history of France must be rewritten to show that the spirit of liberty and independence had always been as strong in the French as in any other nation, ancient or modern. The problem with French history was that it had always been written as a history of its kings, insignificant men: "des ombres sans couleurs, qu'on a peine à distinguer l'une de l'autre." What was needed was a history of the people, beginning with the revolt of the burghers of the towns of northern France against their bishops in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It ought to celebrate the rise of the Third Estate in the fourteenth century, and to commemorate that Charles VII owed his throne to the courage and the patriotic fanaticism of the poor and of the

²² Ç. Crossley, *French historians and romanticism*, London 1993, 4.

militias of the towns and boroughs. These brave men had defeated the English, not the king. Thus it could be shown that “la nation souveraine” came into being in the days of Clovis and Charlemagne and became fully developed in 1789.²³ In much the same way Guizot, later prime minister under Louis Philippe, described the history of France as the rise of the Third Estate and the elimination of noble privilege, beginning in the Middle Ages and culminating in 1789.²⁴

Jules Michelet in his *Histoire de France* also set out to prove the continuity of France. But whereas Thierry treated the French people as a race, Michelet wanted to show that the French became a people by overcoming the confines of geography, localism and race, by forging themselves through a series of historical decisions into a united nation, in short that France was a product of history, not of nature, a triumph of will over fate, of spirit over matter: “La France voudrait devenir un monde social.”²⁵ The Middle Ages were a crucial time in that process of forging the people. In the early Middle Ages the foundations were laid, the Church and its ally, the Franks, imposed a sort of first unity upon the many races that inhabited France. But it was not until the accession to the throne of the first native monarch, Hugh Capet, that the history of France as a nation really took off.²⁶ To Michelet the Crusades, which he characterises as a French enterprise, were an essential moment in overcoming the confines of race and localism. By heading the call of Pope Urban II the French people was drawn away from local servitude: “Ils cherchèrent Jérusalem et rencontrèrent la liberté.” He sees the revolts of the cities of Northern France against their bishops as an immediate consequence of that new-found liberty.²⁷ The other guardian of liberty in the twelfth century was the Church, which in its struggle for freedom with the princes, represented at that period the interest of all mankind. About

²³ A. Thierry, *Lettres sur l'histoire de France*, Lettre 1ère, Paris 1827, 14–20, quotation: 20.

²⁴ Crossley 1993, 77.

²⁵ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France*, II.iii, (1833¹), in: P. Viallanneix (ed), *Oeuvres Complètes de Michelet* (= OCM) IV, Paris 1974, 328.

²⁶ P. Raedts, *Geografie en geschiedenis: Jules Michelet (1798–1874) en de oudste geschiedenis van Frankrijk*, in: M. B. de Jong e.a., *Rondom Gregorius van Tours*, Utrecht 2000, 137–147.

²⁷ Michelet, *Histoire de France* IV. ii and IV.iv, OCM IV, 422–423, 444.

Becket's conflict with Henry II Michelet notes: "Les libertés de l'Eglise étaient alors celles du monde."²⁸ The Church by fighting for its universal claims drew mankind out of its local and geographical boundaries. All that changes with the pontificate of Innocent III. Although he seemed to triumph over all his enemies, his use of violence against the Greeks, the English and the Albigensians, made his victories empty, because peace ought to be the weapon of the Church, not war. "Si l'agneau mord et déchire, si le père assassine," then it loses all claims to respect, it loses its sanctity. The real victor was the king of France, who inherited the sacred role that so far had been played by the Church. It was the irony of history that the holiest of all French kings, Louis IX, by virtue of his holiness, made this historic transfer possible, and thus made an end to the Christian age of the world.²⁹ With Philip the Fair and his humiliation of Boniface VIII the modern age began. The Church, because of its universal mission, had contributed its share to the triumph of history over geography, but from 1300 on was no longer a historical force.³⁰ Nevertheless in 1833 Michelet saw the period of the Christian Middle Ages as a necessary and positive contribution to the progress and happiness of mankind in general, and of France in particular.

V.

Michelet worked on his history of France till 1844. Then the work was interrupted, and not resumed before 1855, when he published the first volume on the Renaissance period. In the introduction to that volume Michelet recanted everything that he had said about the medieval period before. He claimed that in 1833 he had been merely describing the ideal of the Middle Ages, what he did now was describe "sa réalité, accusée par lui-même."³¹ Now he argued that all that had been done in the Middle Ages had in the end amounted to nothing. The Middle ages were bizarre, monstrous and artificial.

²⁸ Michelet, *Histoire*, IV, v, 652, see also IV, vi, 655.

²⁹ Michelet, *Histoire*, IV, viii, 551, 582.

³⁰ Michelet, *Histoire*, V, préface, in: *OCM V*, 39: 'L'ère nationale de la France est le XIVe siècle. ...Jusqu'ici la France était moins France que chrétienté... Aux prêtres, aux chevaliers, succèdent les légistes; après la foi, la loi.'

³¹ J. Michelet, *Histoire de France au seizième siècle*, in: *OCM VII*, 49.

There was no reason in the Middle ages, no freedom, the human spirit was castrated and denatured, till its recuperation in the Renaissance. The free towns had forfeited the freedom they won in the eleventh century and had been reduced to obedient children. The centralisation of government under Louis IX and Philip the Fair, which Michelet had hailed as the beginning of modern France in his earlier work, he now denounced as a ploy to universalise catastrophe and bankruptcy. Approvingly he quotes the Renaissance lawyer La Boétie: “Le monde est vide depuis les Romains.”³² Where he once saw growth, he now sees only decay, a world of fools and cowards, a people that was unable to live and chose death instead. When the revolution of the 16th century came, it met with a “mort incroyable, un néant, et partit de rien.” The 16th century was a hero.³³

Michelet’s sudden change of opinion may have had personal reasons, but it was also typical of the changing appreciation of the medieval past in the 1840s and 1850s. In the first half of the nineteenth century the Middle Ages had been universally admired, either as a place of pristine happiness, peace and justice, or as the cradle of the nation, or both. Radicals and reactionaries agreed on this with very few exceptions. But in the 1840s, when political debate was revived and revolution was in the air once more, the debate about medieval history on the continent of Europe became a matter of contemporary politics. Michelet’s change of heart about the Middle Ages had nothing to do with scholarly research, but came when in 1842 he discovered, during the debate about the monopoly of the university, that the Catholic Church, far from being a romantic remnant of the medieval past, that could now be left in peace to die gracefully, was in fact a political force to be reckoned with. Michelet voiced his anger by writing angry pamphlets about the influence of priests on women and of the Jesuits in particular. After the failed revolution of 1848 things went from bad to worse in the eyes of a liberal like Michelet; the Church even regained part of the supervision of education that she had lost after 1830. That is why in 1855 he drew the bitter conclusion that the medieval world went on and on, and could not even be killed

³² Michelet, *Seizième siècle*, 59–62.

³³ Michelet, *Seizième siècle*, 54.

off, because it had been dead already for such a long time. Of all the dead medieval remnants the worst was the clergy: “Frappé par le temps, la critique et le progrès des idées, il repousse toujours en dessous par la force de l’éducation et des habitudes.”³⁴ It is a heartfelt though somewhat odd complaint for a historian, from whom one might expect that he deals with things as they are, not as they ought to be.

The revolution of 1848 was a failure, not only in France, but in all of continental Europe. The main consequence of this all-out victory of the forces of the right was that it hardened the split between the left and the right, a split that was not really overcome until the end of the twentieth century. It is important to note that the churches invariably chose to associate themselves with the right, thus promoting a strong anticlericalism, and even secularism, on the left. In that conflict the Middle Ages became an instrument in the hands of the forces of reaction. The vague romantic nostalgia for the lost ages of faith and order, that had been so characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century, now was forged into a political programme for the right, in which a return to the values of authority, obedience and religion stood on the top of the list.

Nowhere was that legitimating use of the medieval past as successful as in the Catholic Church. Up till 1848 the Church authorities had been very sceptical about the romantic dreams of a revival of the medieval Church. It was altogether too mystical and too radical for their taste. The condemnation of Lamennais in 1832 showed clearly that the Church had no use for romantic hotheads, even if they ranted on about the authority of the Pope. But after 1848 the romantic picture of the Christian Middle Ages with its emphasis on strong leadership of the Pope and the unquestioning obedience of the laity became a powerful historical image in the hands of the Church during the strong centralisation and the rallying of the Catholics around the papacy that took place in the period between 1850 and 1900. What in fact was perhaps one of the most thoroughgoing reorganisations that

³⁴ Michelet, *Seizième siècle*, 52.

³⁵ See P. Raedts, ‘Prosper Guéranger O. S. B. (1805–1875) and the Struggle for Liturgical Unity,’ in: R.N. Swanson (ed), *Continuity and Change in Christian Worship*, Studies in Church History 35, Woodbridge 1999, 333–344.

the Catholic Church had witnessed for many centuries was presented as a return to the halcyon days of Gregory VII and Innocent III.³⁵

The cult around the person of Joan of Arc in France provides an excellent example of the monopolisation of medieval history by the Church and by the right. In 1803 Napoleon had restored the commemoration of Joan of Arc in Orléans cathedral, because her actions, as he said, proved that French genius was at its best when national independence was threatened. Once again it was Michelet who canonised Joan of Arc as a heroine of the people. For him Joan personified the French people at the moment of its greatest ordeal in history, the occupation of half of France by the English. Her decisive victory at the siege of Orléans obliged France to become "la France consciente et libre."³⁶ But in 1869 the Church moved in, when Bishop Dupanloup during the annual commemoration of the siege of Orléans announced that he had requested the Pope to canonize Joan. It proved an immensely popular move, all the more since it happened on the eve of the defeat against Prussia in 1870. After that the right could hold up the example of Joan to prove that France could only be victorious if it honoured the Church and the King. On May 30th 1878, the anniversary of the death of both Voltaire (centenary) and Joan of Arc, the victory of the republic was celebrated at the Théâtre de la Gaïeté in Paris, the fall of the monarchy in the fields of Domrémy, where Joan had heard the voices of her saints. Joan and the Middle Ages had become the property of the right, as Pope Leo XIII confidently stated in 1894: "Joanna est nostra."³⁷

VI.

In the German lands much the same thing happened, although it was the struggle for unification and the process of industrialisation more than the role of the Church that was decisive for the politicisation of the medieval past. Jacob Burckhardt was no doubt, after Ranke, Germany's leading historian of the nineteenth century. The development of his views on the Middle ages provide a prime example of what happened to the Middle Ages in German historiography in general.

³⁶ G. Krumeich, *Jeanne d'Arc in der Geschichte*, Sigmaringen 1989, 61, 64.

³⁷ M. Winock, Jeanne d'Arc, in: P. Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire, III: Les France, 3: De l'archive à l'emblème*, Paris 1992, 708.

In his youth Burckhardt fully shared the romantic nostalgia for the Middle Ages of most of his German contemporaries, as he showed in his first published work, a biography of Conrad von Hochstaden, archbishop of Cologne (1238–1261), and the builder of its cathedral. The book appeared in 1842, the same year that Frederick William IV of Prussia announced that building on Cologne cathedral was going to be resumed, to create a witness in stone to the rebirth of the fatherland after so many centuries. Burckhardt was enthusiastic about this. In his book on Hochstaden he described the era of Frederick II as the heyday of the German spirit, when poetry and architecture had reached a perfection, that had not been seen again until his own days. Now was the time to revive those glorious days, maybe even restore the imperial throne.³⁸ But in the years between 1846 and 1854 Burckhardt turned away from the Middle Ages completely. His earlier admiration now seemed a youthful indiscretion, the sentimentality of an adolescent who refused to grow up and found support for that in a childish and naive period as the Middle Ages now were to him. In the 1850s Burckhardt embraced the ideal of the German “Bildungsbürger,” the heir of Goethe and Schiller, a man with a liberal ethos and art as his religion. The result of this conversion was his masterpiece *The Culture of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). Central to Burckhardt’s argument is that the Renaissance was the time of the discovery of the world and of man as an individual. In the Middle Ages, so Burckhardt argues, man was neither aware of himself nor of the world. He lived in a dream, half asleep, and saw the world through a veil of faith, childishness and delusion. There was no way that medieval man could conceive of himself as an individual, he could only see himself as part of a race, a nation or a family or any other collective body.³⁹ Perhaps since Gibbon no historian has done so much damage to the memory of the Middle Ages as Burckhardt did in this classical passage. For once and for all he established a view of the Middle Ages as the culture that had stood for everything modern society rejected, the anti-culture in fact.

³⁸ R. Stadelmann, Jacob Burckhardt und das Mittelalter, *Historische Zeitschrift* 142/1930, 474–475.

³⁹ J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur (or: Cultur) der Renaissance in Italien*, Wien 1860, IIer Abschnitt, 76.

So far Burckhardt's intellectual development showed a remarkable similarity to that of Michelet. Both had been ardent romantics in their youth and had hailed the Middle Ages as the time of Europe's innocent youth. Later on both came to see the Middle Ages as the contrast of modern culture, to be forgotten, and where it still existed, to be rooted out. Both had personal motives for their change of heart, but it is also obvious that the resounding defeat of liberal ambitions in 1848 profoundly shocked the solid Basel burgher just as much as the radical French professor. The interesting thing is, and here a major difference between French and German culture becomes visible, that Michelet stood by his verdict, but that Burckhardt in the 1870s once more turned to the Middle Ages for comfort. Not that he changed his view of the Middle Ages as the opposite of the modern, he held on to that, but what changed was that later in life he completely lost confidence in the modern, together with many of his contemporaries in Germany. Although as a Swiss citizen, teaching at Basel, he was an outsider to what happened on the other side of the Rhine, he was appalled by the cruelty of the French-German war of 1870, by the ruthless unification and centralisation of the German lands by Bismarck, and by the industrialisation of Germany which he saw as a Jewish plot. He once more began to view the Middle Ages as an alternative for the political, social and moral fiasco of modern society, in which individual persons had become tools.⁴⁰

His cultural pessimism was shared by most German intellectuals after 1870. It remains an interesting question, though not for this essay, why a society that was so immensely successful and prosperous, generated a culture that was so pessimistic, inward-looking and distrustful of modernity. But that was what happened. In 1887 the founding father of sociology Ferdinand Tönnies published his classic *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. In that work Tönnies roundly condemned modern society for its cold and calculating rationality and presented the Middle Ages as viable alternative, a time of organic order (*Ordnung*), a time when community took priority over the individual, and freedom was wisely limited by benevolent authority. It

⁴⁰ Stadelmann 1930, 494–512, 500: 'Wir halten [jetzt] die Individuen für bloße Werkzeuge.'

became a commonplace in Germany to compare the German *Kultur*, founded in the Middle Ages, restored in the nineteenth century, with the superficial and ahistorical *Zivilisation* of the West, where the only things that counted were ruthless competition and rampant individualism. For the vast majority of German intellectuals that was sufficient reason to go to war with the West in 1914. The Republic of Weimar for most Germans was nothing but a victory of *Zivilisation* over *Kultur*. The call for a return to the Middle Ages, a return to community, obedience and strong leadership, became even stronger in the 1920s than it had been before 1914. What the new leader of Germany could look like, was described by Ernst Kantorowicz in his biography of the emperor Frederick II (1927). Just like Burckhardt had done, Kantorowicz idealised the era of the Hohenstaufen as Germany's heyday, and Frederick II as the messianic leader who in his person had united the German people. It was Kantorowicz's express intention with his biography not only to paint a picture of the past, but to present an alternative for the future. He did not have to wait long before the alternative presented itself.⁴¹

VII.

At the same time that on the continent of Europe the Middle Ages became the object of bitter political controversy between the left and the right, between Catholics, Protestants, anti-clericals and secularists, the opposite happened in England: a shared, uncontroversial image of the medieval past became part of the historical inheritance of all Englishmen. This had not always been so. In the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth century the medieval past had been as much a matter of public, political debate in Britain as it became in continental Europe in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whigs and Tories had argued about the prerogative of the King, the antiquity of Parliament, and the status of Magna Carta, and historical discussion about these issues had always had a sharply contemporary political angle. But that changed after the Settlement of 1688. Per-

⁴¹ O. Oexle, *Das Mittelalter als Waffe*. Ernst H. Kantorowicz' "Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite" in den politischen Kontroversen der Weimarer Republik, in: O. Oexle, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus*, Göttingen 1996, 163-215.

haps David Hume was the last historian of the English Middle Ages who caused a serious political controversy, when he argued in his *History of England* that liberty was something that was established in the seventeenth century and not restored from some medieval precedent. Hume showed that the Anglo-Saxons were not free warriors, but the clients of their lords. Post-conquest England was in many ways a despotic society, and under the Tudors the English enjoyed about as much liberty as the subjects of the Grand Turk. The arguments of the Whigs about the ancient English Constitution were historical nonsense, royalists such as Henry Spelman and Robert Brady had been much the better historians.⁴² Hume was no supporter of Stuart absolutism, the point he wanted to make was that to understand the English political present, one need go back no further than the seventeenth century, the Middle Ages were irrelevant, everything had changed since then. Not everyone understood that, many Whigs thought that for the constitution of 1688 to be legal, it had to be the same as that of medieval England. In their view Hume was undermining the historical foundations of the Glorious Revolution by denying its medieval roots. But what could have become a source of bitter controversy between the advocates of historical change and those of an unchanging past, was in fact defused by Edmund Burke. He showed that such a choice between continuity and change was not necessary, continuity with the past was possible, even while all was changing.

Burke expressed his views on England's unique history most succinctly in his *Reflections on the revolution in France* (1790). The purpose of that book was to show that a clean break with the past, as had now happened in France, was the end of civilization and freedom, that it must lead to "a ferocious dissoluteness in manner, and of an insolent irreligion in opinions and practices."⁴³ True freedom was only possible, if it was tempered by a sense of obligation to the past, in Burke's words: "Always acting as if in the presence of canonized

⁴² J. Burrow, *A liberal descent. Victorian historians and the English past*, Cambridge 1981, 25-27; Smith, *Gothic bequest*, 77-81.

⁴³ E. Burke, *Reflections on the revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien, London 1986, 125.

forefathers, the spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and excess, is tempered with an awful gravity.”⁴⁴ Note that Burke does not say that we should now act “as” our forefathers, but only “as if in the presence of” our forefathers, the difference is crucial, as can be seen from his discussion of the theory of the Ancient Constitution. Burke explicitly refers to the work of Henry Coke, perhaps the most uncompromising supporter of that theory. But the important thing to Burke is not whether Coke and other Parliamentarians were right in maintaining the unchanging nature of England’s laws, it is the fact that they wanted to consider England’s past as part of their present: “From Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right, it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties, as an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity.”⁴⁵ Continuity in Burke’s eyes is not an objective property of history, it is a way in which the present generation looks upon history, it is the will of the living to respect the authority of the dead. From there it follows that continuity does not exclude change; the English political system is not a dead weight, it is like a living organism, “a permanent body composed of transitory parts,” it is constantly in the making, and yet remains the same. Burke concludes that in that constant dialogue with the past “we are guided not by the superstition of antiquarians, but by the spirit of philosophic analogy.”⁴⁶ Burke was a man of the eighteenth century, not a romantic, so medieval England was not special to him, it was not an era to be singled out for special praise, or to be returned to (that would be ‘the spirit of antiquarians’), but it was an essential part of the history of English constitutional development.

Burke’s influence on England’s way of dealing with its past has been decisive. Burke himself was only talking about the English Constitution as a living organism, but in the course of the nineteenth century his model of continuity and change, was transferred from strictly constitutional history to the history of England as a nation.⁴⁷ In its finished form this Whig interpretation of history ran somewhat

⁴⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, 121.

⁴⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, 119.

⁴⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, 120.

⁴⁷ Burrow, *Liberal descent*, 106.

like this: Contrary to the unfortunate nations on the other side of the Channel it was England's great and unique privilege to have, since the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons at least, a history of unbroken continuity, where change only affirmed that continuity and strengthened it. It was a history of growing freedom, prosperity and success, the medieval stage of which was marked by Magna Charta and the beginning of Parliament. There was nothing in that past that an Englishman needed to be ashamed of, every period had made its own invaluable contribution to the nation's glorious progress in time, in Freeman's words: "Our ancient history is the possession of the liberal."⁴⁸ In the course of the nineteenth century it became a vision shared by all Englishmen of every political conviction.⁴⁹

That is not to say that everyone in England felt as comfortable and happy about the country's present and past situation as the Whig interpretation of its history assumed. All through the nineteenth century there was a powerful undercurrent of unease, fed by romanticism, about the political and economic modernisation that was changing the country out of all recognition at the same time that the dominant ideology was celebrating its continuity. That unease was frequently expressed in the form of nostalgia for the simpler days of the lost Middle Ages, just like on the continent of Europe. In fact continental nostalgia was often fed by English romantic medievalists, mainly by Sir Walter Scott, undoubtedly one of the century's most popular novelists on either side of the Channel. Scott's descriptions of Saxon virtue, of their rough but honest manners and of chivalry as an ideology of altruistic leadership contained a strong note of criticism on the social customs of his own days, as did the fact that he always pictured the Middle Ages as a time of plenty, a time that no one ever went hungry. That was certainly not the case in his own days.⁵⁰ But Scott's critical notes remained very moderate, in the end he believed too much in a Burkean version of the English past to become a radical critic of his own society.⁵¹ Later on in the century

⁴⁸ Burrow, *Liberal descent*, 3.

⁴⁹ Burrow, *Liberal descent*, 2, 241.

⁵⁰ Alice Chandler, *A dream of order. The medieval ideal in nineteenth-century English literature*, London 1970, 45.

⁵¹ Smith, *Gothic bequest*, 134.

criticism of English complacency took much more radical form, with Carlisle, the Young Englanders in the Tory party and artists such as Ruskin and Morris. In the latter we can see that even socialism can have roots in an idealised picture of the Middle Ages. But important and intellectually challenging as these critics of liberal England may have been, they never, even for a moment, threatened the Whig consensus about the English past. And that was all the more true of the medieval past, it was the possession of all English, not just of a party or faction within England.

There are two reasons, I think, why the image of the medieval past could become such a common inheritance. The first is political. In Continental Europe the medieval past became controversial, because Europe was the stage of bitter political struggle all through the nineteenth century. England had fought its constitutional battles in the seventeenth century and had reached a consensus on essential matters by 1688, a Settlement that has been interpreted and developed, but that has never really been challenged since. Hume was right, of course, when he argued that the Act of Settlement was modern and had no real medieval precedent, but the appearance of continuity with the medieval past was preserved and religiously believed in by most. Moreover ceremonies such as the coronation of the monarch, the division of Parliament in a hereditary House of Lords (spiritual and temporal) and an elected House of Commons, the Established Church, it all may not have been medieval, but at least it looked medieval, certainly hundred years later when on the continent much more radical reforms of government were being advocated. Because this partly real, partly imaginary link with the medieval past was so woven into the constitutional consensus in England by 1800, it became a natural, unchallenged part of the success story of England as a nation when it was written up by the great historians of the nineteenth century.

The second reason has to do with the Church. In the nineteenth century everyone saw the medieval past as a Catholic past, in fact the most glorious part of the Catholic past. Claiming the medieval past, therefore, implied in some way heeding the claims of the Church of Rome. In Europe that proved a decisive stumbling block in accepting the whole of the medieval past as the nation's past, in the first place

in Protestant countries, but perhaps even more so in Catholic countries where the Church remained a powerful political presence claiming an allegiance that, in an age of nationalism, rightly seemed to belong to the nation, as we saw from the example of Michelet. The amazing thing that happened in England was that the Established Church, although it was Protestant, managed to reclaim the medieval past as part of its inalienable inheritance. That was, of course, the work of the Oxford Movement, a religious revival unparalleled in the rest of Protestant Europe. In almost all Protestant Churches there was an orthodox revival in the nineteenth century to stem the tide of liberalism and state interference. In 1834 Dutch Protestants rose in revolt against a government that tried to turn the Reformed Church into a national church of an almost non-denominational character. But the purpose of their revolt was a return to a stern Calvinist orthodoxy, as had allegedly existed in the days of the Reformation.⁵² The same happened in Scotland and Germany. What made England special was that the call for a purer and more independent Christianity took the form of a Catholic revival, a return to the doctrine of the Church Fathers and the authority of the medieval Church. The opposition against the Tractarians was massive, as Protestantism to most Englishmen was the religious counterpart of the English love of freedom. It became even worse when some of its most eminent leaders did join the Roman Church, but in the end the Oxford movement changed the face of the Church of England completely, not so much in its doctrine, but where it mattered most, in its rituals and its church interiors. Altars replaced pulpits, medieval vestments were introduced in worship, statues of saints were erected, church interiors became so 'medieval' that now it is hard to imagine what the interior of an Anglican church looked like in the eighteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century the Church of England was as much in possession of its medieval past as the nation, whose Church she was. The

⁵² One Protestant Dutch theologian, P. Hofstede de Groot, *Beschouwing van den gang, die de de christelijke godgeleerdheid in het algemeen dus verre in Nederland heeft gehouden*, *Nederlandsch archief voor kerkelijke geschiedenis* 2/1842, 121-190, tried to construct the history of Christianity in Holland as that of a Dutch national Church, that originated in the Modern Devotion, and was characterized by its dislike of pomp, its love of freedom, and its ethical character. Neither Protestants nor Catholics believed him for one moment.

whole of the Middle Ages had been absorbed into the story of England's growth to prosperity and freedom.

Burke was quite right when he said that continuity is not a property of history but the will of the living to stay in communication with the dead. In that sense the English story of the medieval past as the beginning of the modern is just as much a construction as the continental myth of the Middle Ages as the opposite of the modern. In both constructions important parts of the medieval past tend to disappear from sight. English historians rarely emphasise the barbarous and violent character of medieval society, continental historians usually forget to tell that rationalism, individualism and even scepticism were as much part of the Middle Ages as faith and obedience. In the writing of history we need constructions, but we must always stay aware of the fact, that we do use them to tell our stories. Even more important is that we need to be aware that in using those constructions we help to shape the present as much as we try recreate the past. And it is precisely on this point that it is my "melancholy duty," as Gibbon would say, to conclude that continental medievalists have failed to see that truth. By presenting the Middle Ages as the prototype of a non-modern society, medieval historians have played into the hands of political and social reformers who wanted to limit or even abolish individual freedom, who preferred instinct and irrational passion to critical reason, and who put the ties of blood and race above those of citizenship. The English story of the medieval past may be a myth as well, but it can certainly help continental historians to take leave of the destructive nostalgia, that for so long characterised their work, and to make them aware of the fact that the Middle Ages are not an alternative to but a part of the history of modern Europe.