



N. Lee Wood

*Truth or Consequences*  
*Fiction vs Fact in Historical Research*



At this year's International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds, I had the good fortune to hear a paper given by Dr. Marc Wolterbeek (College of Notre Dame) on *Inventing History, Inventing Her Story; The Story of William of Aquitaine's Marital Affairs*, in which he questioned the validity of William of Tyre's Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum as the primary documentation for William of Aquitaine's supposed first marriage to "Hermingerda", daughter of Fulk of Anjou, in 1089 and their subsequent divorce in 1091. Historians have long accepted William of Tyre's word for it without question. Until very recently. William of Tyre's account was written well over 70 years after the supposed marriage, none of his contemporaries nor any of Duke William and Ermengard of Anjou even mention such a marriage, and William of Tyre incorrectly identifies Bertrad de Montfort as Ermengard's mother, all of which cast serious doubt on his accuracy.

Dr. Wolterbeek has attempted to apply objective standards of modern journalism to original source material — charters, decrees, obituaries and contracts — with the objective of reconstructing the past as close to the actual events as possible. This was not, however, the objective for medieval chroniclers such as William of Tyre. Even the term *chronicler* is instructive; tales, epics and legends, even vague rumors and vicious gossip were as important to the medieval mind as were just the facts, ma'am. The Counts of Anjou were quite proud of having Melusine, a supernatural demoness who could shape-shift and fly, as one of their *ancestors*. Did any of the Counts of Anjou actually believe it? Possibly. How much credence would the modern historian give this notion? Probably not much.

Would the Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal be considered an objective and reliable biography of William Marshall, or an exciting episodic narrative *based on the True Story*, slightly polished here and there by his not-so-impartial family editors?

So... When is a story a story and not a record of history?

Le Conventum (vers 1030): Un précurseur aquitain des premières épopées, by Dr. George Beech (Yves Chauvin and Georges Pon, translators; Librairie Droz, Geneva, Switzerland, 1995) investigates just this question. Beech presents an untitled Latin text known as *the Conventum*, composed of 342 lines by an unknown writer circa 1030, which recounts a series of conflicts between Guillaume, Duke of Aquitaine and his vassal, Hughes le Chiliarque. He examines the work not as an historical or legal document as it has long been considered by historians, but as a piece of medieval literature and a precursor of a *chanson de geste*. Beyond the question of whether or not the *Conventum* describes actual events or people, Beech presents an evaluation of the text for its literary structure, its building up of tension by one conflict after another until it reaches a final climax and denouement, its use of dialogue, commentaries by the anonymous author and a psychological analysis.

In each of the three copies surviving in Latin, the earliest dating from the middle of the eleventh century, the author presents Hughes le Chiliarque as the central character of his narrative, a man of duty, loyal and obedient, who has been unjustly cheated of his heritage by his feudal lord. No precise dates or identifications of the twenty other characters in the story are given, but from mentions of Géraud, bishop of Limoges (1014-1022) and Guillaume, Count of Angoulême (988-1028), historians have been able to use other sources to identify characters featured in the text, among them Guillaume V le Grand, Duke of Aquitaine, Hugues de Lusignan, Rohon bishop of Angoulême, and two bishops of Poitiers, Giselbert and Isembert.

Beech disputes the long accepted hypothesis that the work is a legal

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memorandum, as it has none of the usual formulae or etiquettes commonly found with such texts. Rather, its author regularly employs a third person narrative style and, based on an examination of the vocabulary and syntax, it is probable the original text was written in the Poitevin vernacular of the times, echoed in the translation into Latin, rather than written directly in Latin. Beech's analysis of the text is exhaustive, practically line by line, and far too detailed to describe in a short review. Along with the original Latin text (with almost an equal number of footnotes), he includes French and English translations and several other useful appendices.

Beech examines the story elements, from Hughes' personal struggle with his conflict of loyalties, the use of dialogue, emotions and moral judgments, and the similarity of the text to the oldest *chanson de geste*. He questions whether the oral tradition had an influence, that it could have been used as a memory aide for a *jongleur*. Stories have a beginning, a middle and an end; a building of tension, a climax, and a resolution. The *Conventum* fulfills all these requirements. Whether the story was based on actual events and persons, or was simply invented, Beech has presented compelling evidence that the *Conventum* was not intended as a historical document, but as literature for entertainment. A fascinating and complex read.

Medieval Lives: Eight Charismatic Men and Women of the Middle Ages, by Dr. Norman F. Cantor (Harper Collins, New York, 1994) is a modern attempt to present history in a fictional format. Cantor is a professor of history, sociology, comparative literature and law at New York University, trained at Princeton and Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, has written over thirteen books and been nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His scholarly credentials are outstanding. His book is not. Unfortunately.

He credits Eileen Power's Medieval People, published in 1924, as a rough basis in scope and format for his own work, but differing from Power's in several ways. Where Power's interest was social and economic history of middle and working class people, Cantor

focuses on the cultural and intellectual history of the ruling elite. Power, according to Cantor, had a wonderful freshness and naivete, an irresistible British 1920's medieval enthusiasm, and portrayed her medieval people as a generally contented, unoppressed, and happy lot. Cantor, pointing out that of the forty-five works listed in his bibliography only one would have been available to Power, has a much more cynical viewpoint, his ruling class *burdened by the cares of leadership*, making them anxious, conflicted and stressed out by life in a more complex and sadder Middle Ages.

He states his intention is to make these small biographical *fictions* of five men and three women accessible to the lay reader or the college student. Lifting phrases from actual historical manuscripts to place words in the mouths of his characters, he has invented imaginary conversations with dialogues in a more colloquial voice. Thus, in his fictionalized version of Eleanor of Aquitaine, he has Fitzneal say: "King Henry says we have to cut back on our expenses... In going over your accounts I see you have bought thousands of pounds worth of imported silk for gowns for yourself and your ladies of the court here. We might begin by economizing there."

To which he has Eleanor reply with quiet fury: "What you are saying, Master Fitzneal, is that I must restrain my expenditures so that the king has the resources to pay middle-class hatchet men like yourself." She then makes a few snide comments about Henry's and Fitzneal's lowly ancestry compared to her lofty own, then continues: "Isn't all this talk of law and administration just another way of saying we are going to put these uppity women back in their towers of confinement and renew their ancient subservience? When women have shown they can learn, talk, write, and govern as well as any man, you come along, you and other middle-class creators of the new order, and say: We are changing the rules of the game... and guess what, no women are allowed in ruling precincts!"

Ugh. I find it hard to believe such simplistic fictionalization is necessary to satisfy the average lay reader or college student. It

seems aimed just a bit younger than that, and might have been easier to read without grimacing if Cantor hadn't then thrown his own reliability into doubt by stating that Eleanor died in 1194 (she died in 1204), during the reign of her son Richard the Lion-Hearted (King John, actually). That Eleanor was very much alive and kicking after 1194 is extremely well-documented, the best reference for source material on her activities being Irene Baldet's Essai d'Itineraire et Regestes d'Alienor, Reine d'Angleterre, Duchesse d'Aquitaine, 1189 - 1204, written as her Mémoire Principal for her Diplôme d'Etudes Superieures under Professor LaBande of the University of Poitiers, France.

A shame, really, since his previous book, Inventing the Middle Ages: the Lives, Works and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century (William Morrow & Co., New York, 1991), comes perilously close to being a brilliant masterpiece. History is one those annoyingly *squishy* sciences, where  $e$  doesn't always equal  $mc^2$ , and the square of the hypotenuse is currently considered a hopelessly dogmatic misinterpretation by the square of the other two sides. Cantor has instead focused on the authors, the people who, quite literally, invented the Middle Ages. In large part, our ideas about the medieval world have been shaped only in the past hundred years, fashioned and refashioned by eminent European and American scholars, none of whom was immune from the pressures of their times, ideals, politics and personal foibles.

Succinctly, Canton puts it: "The Middle Ages as we perceive them are the creation of an interactive cultural process in which accumulated learning, the resources and structures of the academic profession, the speculative comparing of medieval and modern worlds, and intellectualization through appropriation of modern theory of society, personality, language and art have been molded together in the lives, work and ideas of medievalists and the schools and traditions they founded." He then presents a comprehensive overview of no less than twenty of the most celebrated and influential medievalists of the past century, many of whom Cantor knew personally.

We are introduced to the *Nazi Twins*, Percy Ernst Schramm who published his sympathetic memories of Hitler in 1963, and his Jewish friend and colleague, Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, who attempted to hide his earlier fascist politics after accepting a position at Princeton. The tragic life of Marc Bloch makes for fascinating reading. A prominent French Jewish scholar, a brave underground member of the resistance and a lousy father, he was tortured and shot by the Gestapo ten days after the Normandy invasion. His heroic death had enormous impact on the French academic world, elevating him to the rank of near sainthood and his work as the unassailable foundations for medieval historians like George Duby, Le Roy Ladurie and Jacques Le Goff.

Cantor examines the Catholic influence on medieval historians such as the charismatic and iconoclastic Dom David Knowles, while not neglecting to examine the intriguing private life of this British Benedictine monk in constant conflict with his superiors, who kept a Swedish psychiatrist as a secret mistress and salvation against homoerotic emotions. Cantor, who knew Knowles, manages to examine both the man and his work with honesty and compassion, no mean feat. The impact of novelists C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien on the academic history is described, as well as a wonderful peek into the friendship between wealthy and fashionable Jack Lewis, whose triumphant smile shone from the cover of a 1949 Time magazine, and Ronald Tolkien, frantically banging out 600,000 words of his fantasy, Lord of the Rings, on an old typewriter in his shabby garage. The far-reaching effect of their fiction established and shaped the image of medieval history into the popular imagination. The up-side is the Renaissance of scholarly research making the annual medieval conferences at Kalamazoo and Leeds meccas for thousands of academics. The down-side is the glut of badly researched, badly written medieval fantasy novels cluttering up bookstores and the Society for Creative Anachronism whose motto is *The Middle Ages As They Should Have Been*.

Cantor's inclination toward fictionalized writing is seen even here,

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where he describes his own experiences at Oxford: "There was a fair king once in those sunny, simple days of the Eisenhower era, who set up (we thought) his Camelot court at Oxford and summoned us from the distant isles and ombre forests and cold climes. We imagined he had sent us a trumpeted message in his luminous book: Come and build with me a Camelot of mind and learning, and we shall start something very real and take over the world. And we came, and after a while we saw there was no round table, and Camelot was our own projection onto him of our wish fulfillment... And there was no once and future king, only Professor Sir Richard William Southern... president of St. John's College and all the other tawdry tired persiflage of Oxbridge academia."

Inventing the Middle Ages is a rare delight in the midst too many stuffy, pedantic and often ploddingly dull books on the medieval world; it's outrageous fun! Cantor has grabbed academia by the collar and given it a good shaking while maintaining an enormous measure of affection for the people and the field in which they, and he, work. If fact has always supplied a wealth of material mined by poets and novelists, fiction has always been a conduit into the rigors of serious research. I personally know astrophysicists, quantum mathematicians and rocket scientists who were drawn into their fields by reading pulp science fiction novels in their youth. How many medieval academics started out reading the novels of Tolkien and Lewis, imagined themselves as knights or fair maidens in Mallory's mythical England on school playgrounds, or had their mothers read Edward Eager's classic Knights' Castle to them at bedtime?

And if the fascination with the medieval world has resulted in the burgeoning popularity of the Middle Ages as a background for modern fiction, perhaps it's possible to follow the trail back, past everything from barbarian *Chicks in Chainmail* anthologies to Umberto Eco's Name of the Rose, to pinpoint the Ur-novel of modern medieval fantasy: Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.

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In 1991, Tor Books in New York published a mass market paperback edition of Twain's novel, ingeniously packaging it as it might any other generic fantasy novel. "Wizards and dragons better pack and get out!" the blurb on the front cover declared. Even the lurid cover art was not too different than any other a browsing shopper might pick up off the racks, and, indeed, I suspect there are a few obtuse souls out there who have never heard of Mark Twain eagerly awaiting the sequel to this, like y'know, rilly awesome book. Published in 1889, Connecticut Yankee was more than just an irreverent satire. Twain used his version of King Arthur and a fictionalized medieval setting as a condemnation of the oppression of feudal England, and a not so subtle comparison to the society he himself lived in. His was a strident voice of social protest at a time when American life after the Civil War was suffocating under the conservatism and materialism of the Industrial Revolution. It is no accident that in the novel, Hank Morgan, *aka* the Boss, introduces such modern American style improvements to medieval life as soap, toothpaste, baseball, electricity, telephones, newspapers, bicycles, education for the common people and free democratic elections, only to see it all evaporate quite violently under the bootheel of an ignorant and repressive feudal ruling class. Now, more than a century later, Twain's pessimism and bitterness, his love of democracy and hatred of corruption and tyranny still has resonance for our modern society. Like Twain, historians have tended to view the past through the lenses of their own particular culture, even those who are acutely aware of the difficulties in separating "fact" from "fiction" in sifting through accounts written during the Middle Ages by chroniclers with their own set of values and perspectives. But that's what makes medieval history... well... a hell of a lot of fun.