CLARE A. SIMMONS

POPULAR MEDIEVALISM IN ROMANTIC-ERA BRITAIN


Reviewed by Laurence Davies

Professor Simmons shows no fear of complications. Every noun and adjective in her title guards the entrance to a labyrinth of questions. When, for example, is medievalism a revival of something lost, and when a survival? If a revival, when did the Middle Ages end, and in either case, when did they begin? Again, does “popular” refer to what has been created by the people, or for the people, or sometimes one and sometimes the other, and, in any case, which kinds of people? Simmons’ answers to these questions will not please every reader, but before challenging any particulars of this learned and fascinating book, we might best consider what happens when all of its key terms collaborate. Expanding her title at one point, Simmons declares: “The language of rights and personal freedom is a central part of Romantic-era popular medievalism” (58). This last phrase, she has already explained, means “the imaginative use of the past in creating a vision of what Britain should be in the future by looking back to the origins—as always, real or imagined—of British rights as conceived by those who did not have full political rights” (6).

Simmons’s overall argument requires a series of distinctions: “Whereas Gothic conventions tend to distinguish between the reader’s present and the narrative’s account of events distanced by space and time, medievalism requires an interested, committed reader” (14). Also, “popular medievalism [in Romantic-era
Britain] uses the Middle Ages to challenge class structures rather than to justify them” (6). Moreover, in maintaining rather than critiquing those structures, the Victorians’ “courtly, aristocratic medievalism” required the outlay of considerable amounts of money on artefacts and buildings, making this kind of medievalism quite literally more “expensive” (191-4). One might add that this aristocratic medievalism revived an epoch much shorter than the very long Middle Ages invoked by Simmons. She goes back as far as the Druids, locating the period’s origins even before the Roman withdrawal, an event defined in Richmal Mangnall’s *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions for the Use of Young People* (1801) as the beginning of “a night of mental darkness” (qtd. 195, n. 3). For the radical writers Simmons discusses, however, particularly for William Blake and the scholarly Welsh stonemason Edward Williams, who wrote under the bardic name Iolo Morganwg, the Druids were poets and lawgivers, priests uncorrupted by priestcraft, and, like Boadicea (or Boudica), Queen of the Iceni, heroes of the fight against foreign domination. That the ancient Britons also fought the ancestors of the English is immaterial here. In Simmons’s account, the telling of history is akin to fishing in the sea of stories, and her account of Romantic historiography brings up whole schools of queer fish. Hers is a taxonomy answering to the “how it really was,” or better, “how it really felt” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rather than of the eighth or ninth.

For Simmons, medievalism involves the present as much as the past. While she credits antiquarians such as Bishop Percy and Joseph Ritson for their researches, she reminds us that they sought to understand the past but not to place it in a dialectical relation with the present. Medievalism of the kind she brings to light “is persistently comparative, compelling some level of conscious contrast between the readers’ (or observer’s) present and the medieval past” (12). Her medievalists not
only cherish the emergence of institutions, laws, and traditions that defined and
defended ideas of group and individual rights; they use the past to cast an unflattering
light upon the present, the age of those fierce reactionaries Castlereagh, Sidmouth,
Liverpool, and Eldon. Thus, writes Simmons, “Cobbett argues that there was more
ture ‘civil liberty’ in Catholic times than in the Protestant era” (162). Though far less
sympathetic to the Roman church than Cobbett, Anna Yearsley, “Milk-Woman of
Clifton, Near Bristol” likewise judged her own time by medievalist standards. In an
addendum to the printed script of her *Earl Goodwin, An Historical Play* (1791), she
implies that early medieval justice was more merciful than that of the present-day,
when one might see “twenty men suspended of a morning on a spot of some few
yards wide, in London, and under the cognizance of our *Most Gracious Sovereign
George II*” (qtd. 86).

Because those who write about Romantic-era drama tend to slight plays not
created by a “name” such as Baillie, Maturin, or Byron, Simmons’s attention to a
wide range of scripts is most welcome. They help her considerably to investigate
“popular medievalism,” since people living in cities and even many market towns
could probably afford a ticket to a play more readily than a subscription to a
circulating library. In what she terms the “French Revolutionary Era,” many plays
responded, often in coded ways, to current events (and, on religious topics, were
influenced by the Parisian “théâtre anti-monacal”). Such plays, Simmons explains,
could be *popular* in one of two distinct senses: acceptable to the gamut of political
sympathies, or expressing radical sentiments.

The chapter on drama is one of six on quite specific and varied topics. “The
Topography of Ancient British Law” considers the Druidical revival; “The National
“Melody” treats the vogue in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales for patriotic songs recalling ancient history and legend; “The Radical Bestiary” examines the widespread use of beastly personifications in poetry and polemics from both Left and Right; “Buried Alive” shows how Gothic fiction and drama re-enacted the alleged medieval practice of walling up transgressive nuns; and “Scottish Lawyers, Feudal Laws” studies the treatment of common and statute law (the former coming down from “time immemorial,” when law was oral and customary, the latter the written instrument of authority) in two novels: Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819), described here as “the textbook of nineteenth-century British medievalism” (14), and John Galt’s *Sir Andrew Wylie of That Ilk* (1822).

This is quite an assortment. The argument driving the chapters has a goal, but the reader must be agile in following the author across the intervening fissures. Some of the stops along the way offer better views than others, and less slippery footholds. For instance, though the immuring of nuns was only one of many entries in the catalogue of literary Gothic horrors, it epitomized just what made the Gothic imaginary seem so distant from the modern world: gloating cruelty, enclosure, sexual discipline, the connivance of aristocratic families, spine chilling terrors, prurience. Thus it helps to confirm Simmons’ distinction --quoted above-- between Gothic and medievalist. One may not agree with this distinction, and she herself concedes that “readers of Gothic novels did make at least subconscious comparisons with their own society” (157), but one can see why she claims that medievalists were more conscious of their own time. “The Radical Bestiary,” however, strains credulity. Noting the animal imagery to be found in writers across the political spectrum, from Burke and Arthur Young to Paine and Percy Shelley, she links these images to “the medieval form of the bestiary, in which characteristics of animals are used to make
moral points” (13). To use a medieval analogy, she stretches her argument here upon a rack. Yes, the discussion of Tory and radical polemic is admirably done, and yes, in the Middle Ages, preachers, lay writers, and lay audiences, not to mention those who embellished churches and private dwellings, all loved beast fables. But so did contemporaries of Aesop and theatre-goers in seventeenth-century London—one need only scan the cast list of *Volpone*.

Perhaps the net is too capacious, and the weave too fine? Or perhaps the problem lies with the mapping of the fishing grounds, or with the way the catch is sorted? Whatever chronology you use to identify the Middle Ages, starting points and ending points must always be a little arbitrary, because there’s always some continuity bridging the change. How would William Morris have reacted to the idea that the medievalism of his day was class-bound and expensive? What are we to make of rituals and celebrations observed to this day with at least as much claim to being “popular” as the poetry of Wordsworth, discussed at some length in Chapter One? (One can now find online pictures of the *Hood Game* originating in the fourteenth century, and played each year on the Feast of the Epiphany.) In fact Simmons herself dedicates several closely argued pages to John Galt’s *Sir Andrew Wylie of That Ilk* (1822), the story of an Ayrshire cottage lad who makes his fortune as a lawyer in London, returns to Scotland and becomes a laird. To justify her inclusion of a novel whose narrative begins in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and is set in Galt’s own lifetime, Simmons argues that Sir Andrew “thinks feudally” (189). He does so, however, because some of the practices as well as the language of feudalism had lingered on in Scotland—another example of historical continuity rather than rupture.

Cultural and political geographies further complicate the task of definition. Though the excellent chapter on “National Melody” features Thomas Moore, he was
Irish, and the nationalist resonances of his poetry have always been heard in Ireland, so his residence in London doesn’t quite justify his presence in a volume supposedly confined to Britain. Extending the book’s range to cover Ireland, however, would have solved the problem and perhaps made room to mention Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806); recently discussed in Susan Egenolf’s *The Art of Political Fiction*, this novel combines medievalism with Irish nationalism. Also, while the same chapter offers a delightfully sympathetic account of Felicia Hemans’s *Welsh Melodies* (1821), her “sense of what medieval Wales was like” (76) was less vague than Simmons suggests. For example, when Hemans writes of Welshmen drinking “yellow mead,” she is not confusing them with Anglo-Saxons but choosing a familiar English word rather than *metheglin*, the Welsh word for the same venerable tipple. In Hemans’s case, moreover, the somewhat hostile account of antiquarianism as “largely the province of wealthy males” (13, 58-65) breaks down. Several of the *Melodies* are clearly adapted from William Owen’s translation of *The Heroic Elegies of Llywarch Hen* (1792). Owen was a solicitor’s clerk who lived frugally in London; like some other scholars of little means, he was supported in his work by fellow emigrants from Wales, few of them wealthy and none of them grandees.

Nevertheless, these are minor quibbles about a rich and suggestive book whose strengths heavily outnumber any weaknesses. As a deep scholar, Simmons quite obviously loves her field. Although the demands of academic discourse have occasionally led her to over-categorize her material, she draws a finely nuanced and original picture of an age in all its paradoxical energy.

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