

This was written for a panel on Southern and *The Making of the Middle Ages* at the Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America in Minneapolis in April 2003, organised and chaired by Paul Freedman.

Southern and the Sinews of Power

One of the many stories current about Dick Southern when I was an undergraduate told how as the tank regiment in which he served in the earlier part of World War II was moving into a new barracks, he was found amid the din and chaos sitting on an ammunition box with that familiar dreamy expression on his face. On being asked what he was doing he replied, 'I was thinking that this is what it must have been like in a medieval monastewy.' The quality of the holy man which that particular *legendum* was designed to illustrate, of course, was the uncanny, almost supernatural clarity of sight which could reveal not only an ethereal vision of the spiritual heights of medieval culture but also a disconcertingly earthy appreciation of the material reality upon which they rested. For many Southern was first and foremost an historian not even of culture, or of ideas, but of religious experience and practice, and his writing, always uniquely vivid, is obviously at its most intimate and intensely felt when he addresses those matters. *The Making of the Middle Ages* has probably contributed more than any other book in English, at least since *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, to the propagation, and even the legitimation, of what is sometimes called the romantic view of medieval civilisation, that which depicts it as an age of faith, characterised above all by the unwavering attachment of the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants, including its unprivileged inhabitants, to Catholic christianity; and of the members of its social elite, lay as well as clerical, not only to Catholic teaching and practice, but to a set of values, including most obviously preoccupation with the inner, spiritual condition and autonomy of the individual, and its relation to outer responsibility and behaviour, which are perceived as fundamentally and distinctively characteristic of western values down to the present day. Historiographically, it is often implied or assumed, this entailed abandoning the traditional preoccupation with administrative and institutional history for the sunny uplands of worship and romance, to pursue the cultivation of the self in all its spiritual and erotic variety. It is hardly necessary to add that the appeal of this vision of the European middle ages has by no means been confined to those who share Southern's own religious convictions.

Whether Southern either intended or welcomed this outcome is a question for those whose personal acquaintance with him was far longer and deeper than mine. How far he actually subscribed to that view as an account of the reality of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe, as opposed to an ideal which he shared with his spiritual heroes - even how interested he was in the difference - I cannot say. But I have to confess that I do not consider it either the most distinctive or the most important quality of *The Making of the Middle Ages*. As to distinctiveness, I am by no means sufficiently competent in either the religious or the cultural history of the twentieth century to account for it, but it seems to me fairly clear that in projecting so sharply focussed a beam towards the inner workings, agonies and aspirations of the human mind, (or if you will, soul), Southern was articulating connections and curiosities increasingly widely shared by the mid-century. To say nothing of developments in other fields at least from the 1930s, including new directions in theology both Catholic and Protestant, the rise of interest in vernacular literature, and the revival of that in Christian mysticism, it is only necessary to mention the names of Huizinga, Bloch and Chenu (the last two at least certainly admired by Southern), to make that point. Another way of doing it would be to notice that another English medievalist, Christopher Brooke, has shown curiosities, sensibilities and insights strikingly similar to Southern's over much of the same period. Brooke was much younger than Southern, and of course greatly admired him, and was doubtless much influenced by him; but he came from another and quite different stable, and when *The Making of the Middle Ages* appeared he was already a formed and established medievalist, within a few years of assuming his (admittedly absurdly precocious) first chair.

This is not in any way to belittle either the originality of Southern's historical vision, or the astonishing power and subtlety with which he realised it. It is to observe that however much he rose above it, he had a wider context in which he has not yet been properly placed - all the more complex and important because his intellectual interests were more catholic, in both senses, and more diverse, than those of many of his fellow historians, especially in England; and it is perhaps to suggest also, though with the reservation that I am not ideally equipped to make this judgment, that it would be easy to exaggerate the extent to which he stood apart in the Oxford of the 1950s and '60s. It is to try to place him in this context, and that of the Oxford history school more generally, that I am chiefly concerned here.

It would be a mistake to measure Southern's standing or influence by his failure to persuade his colleagues in the Faculty of History to amend substantially the regulations of the undergraduate degree, for which, certainly, his regard, unlike some of theirs, fell short of idolatry. Another story from the student underground, and this one came to me at first hand, tells how a couple of weeks before their preliminary examination in Anglo-Saxon history he summoned a freshman class which had been enjoying the fleshpots of the Northumbrian renaissance and the sermons of Wulfstan to say, 'I've been thinking that pwehaps you ought to pay some attention to the sort of things that might intewest your examiners. Something *mundane* like...(pause for illumination, triumphant smile) The Wise of Mercia.' Further pause, and then, with the perfection of timing that made his lectures such delight, 'I don't know what you can *say* about The Wise of Mercia. It just *wose!*' ^{*} In 1961 I sat rivetted to my seat in the examination schools while Southern in his inaugural lecture on *The Shape and Substance of Academic History* pleaded for a loosening of the constraints of the syllabus both in the manner and in the matter of undergraduate study, and felt tears in my eyes when I was told that, as one of the undergraduates of today more industrious and more serious than the generality of my predecessors, I had nothing to lose but my chains. Southern was only the latest in a long line of Oxford professors to beat his head against the stone wall presented by the unyielding ranks of the college tutors, and unlike most of them had the satisfaction, if satisfaction it was, of seeing real breaches in it before he retired - but he would probably have said that that owed more to the times than to him, and he would probably have been right. Nevertheless, very few of those college tutors, I believe, would have hesitated to acknowledge his pre-eminence among them, and if Southern chafed at the constraints imposed by the domination of the institutional tradition he was also not only aware of its strengths, but himself a brilliant practitioner of it. There is something to be said for taking him at his word in what must be one of his last published comments on these matters when, long after he had any personal interest at stake in the vagaries of the Oxford or any other history school, he commented on a perceptive review of the first volume of *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe* by David D'Avray. D'Avray described *Scholastic Humanism* as in part 'the last and finest product of a collective enterprise' by a group which had formed around Powicke in the 1930s - Beryl Smalley and W. A. Pantin were others - whose members, D'Avray suggested,

experienced 'a creative tension between, on the one hand, their research interest in intellectual history, and on the other, their teaching, which Oxford tradition pulled towards the history of government and wider historiographical fashion towards social history.' Remarking that it was not only in Oxford that 'even for twenty years after the second War the history syllabus was still largely based on an institutional and national approach to the past', and that 'the important thing about all these varieties [of history taught in various places] was that they were all in various ways institutional and public in their emphasis, and they could all be studied as extensions of a broadly institutional approach to history', Southern continued: 'If this is broadly true of the past, the question for the future of historical studies seems to be this: does this institutional approach still satisfy us; and, if not, what is to be put in its place? This is an extraordinarily difficult question to answer.... [but] one has only to look at [current regulations in 1996] to see that the subject has become apparently irretrievably fragmented.' He does not elaborate, but the question has always been an extraordinarily difficult one to answer, and the last conclusion likely to be reached by any reader of *Scholastic Humanism* - which brings together to an extraordinary extent themes and concerns that were pursued by Southern through the whole of a very long working life - is that he would have welcomed the irretrievable fragmentation of the subject.

We can, however, be rather more precise than that. Just as the rhetorical vigour with which some of us like to conduct our professional debate is not invariably accompanied by the personal animosity that students watching eagerly from the sidelines are understandably inclined to infer from it, the championship of one aspect or variety of our discipline does not necessarily involve denigration of another, though in this case too observers from the sidelines may be forgiven for occasionally failing to grasp it. That Southern resisted the pedagogic imbalance represented by the dominance of the institutional and public tradition in the undergraduate curriculum is no evidence at all that he failed to appreciate either the intellectual distinction of that tradition in its own right, or its centrality to any worthwhile analysis of medieval society and culture, including of course religious thought and sensibility. It is hardly necessary to remind you that his first published paper, written within a very short time of his graduation, was on Ranulf Flambard, or that he chose for his Raleigh Lecture to the British Academy - a major landmark in even so distinguished a *cursus honorum* as

his - the magnificent paper on 'The Place of Henry I in English History'. Great as they are, those papers are only two of the prolegomena to the concluding, and sadly unfinished work whose whole thrust and purpose is to show how the governmental ambitions and intellectual horizons of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europeans shaped and were shaped by each other, and how the inner lives, the personal insecurities and the sometimes glittering but always precarious careers and towering achievements of the men (and this is a book about men - not even Southern could do everything) who did that shaping were inextricably bound together in the construction of a singularly coherent and durable ruling culture.

This was so precisely because Southern himself was the product of what was, in its way, also a singularly coherent and durable ruling culture, and one whose often noisy and bitter border disputes between the protagonists of the history, as one might put it, of church and state, concealed a deeper underlying consensus than was always obvious, either to them or to us. It is particularly worth recalling that neither Southern nor his mentor Powicke was the first Oxford medievalist to show great distinction both in intellectual and in administrative history. In 1881 Reginald Lane Poole, already a versatile linguist and widely travelled in Europe, was awarded a fellowship by the Hibbert Foundation which took him to Leipzig, where he secured his doctorate, and then to Zurich. This made him, I think, the first Oxford historian to be exposed as a student to modern German scholarship, and made him also the author of *Illustrations of Medieval Thought and Learning* (1 ed.1884), and in due course of *Lectures on the Exchequer in the Twelfth Century* and on *the History of the Papal Chancery*, and editor of the *Historia Pontificalis* of John of Salisbury. By the curious but entirely Oxonian anomaly that while married men were no longer forbidden to hold tutorial fellowships they were not permitted to sit the examinations by which such fellowships were obtained, Poole, who married young, was never a college tutor, which makes his influence difficult to assess in the conventional way, through the list of his pupils. But apart from being the university's lecturer in diplomatic for thirty years, and editor of the *English Historical Review* for almost as long, he remained an influential and immensely venerated figure well beyond his retirement in 1927. Southern must certainly have known him: he was the mentor, and his son Austin a close personal friend, of Southern's Balliol tutor, V. H. Galbraith. And like Poole, but unlike Powicke or Galbraith, Southern took advantage of his first fellowship to study in

Europe, for twelve months in Paris and three in Munich, reflected in the footnotes of *The Making of the Middle Ages*, which show a markedly easier familiarity with continental scholarship than most comparable English work then or for some time after.

It tends to be assumed, as indeed David d'Avray assumes in that review I quoted earlier, that the great influence on Southern was F. M. Powicke, who by the mid 1930s - but not before - was directing students to the intellectual history to which his own attention was being drawn by the manuscripts of Merton College which P. S. Allen had persuaded him to catalogue, and who also shared with Southern an intensely religious personal temperament. Oxford students in those days, however, and for long after, were shaped and influenced by their undergraduate tutors. Graduate supervision simply did not exist, and the greatest of Powicke's many frustrations was his total failure to persuade Oxford to take the idea of graduate teaching, or indeed graduate study, seriously. Galbraith, like Powicke, to whom he could scarcely have presented a greater contrast in every other way, was a Manchester pupil and impassioned admirer of T. F. Tout. It must be admitted that Galbraith had no conspicuous flair for the history of spirituality. He once demanded of me, when I was a freshman, 'Tell me, why did the barons support St. Anselm? I'll tell you why. The barons were aristocrats. Religion is a substitute for thought, and if there's one thing an aristocrat won't do it's think.' This, one feels, was not the spirit that inspired *Portrait in a Landscape*. But Galbraith, when he taught Southern, had lately come back to Oxford from seven years in the Public Record Office where, as he said, under the impact of the enormous but ultimately ordered mass of the records of English government, 'the urge towards "writing books" faded out before the effort to understand and relive the remote past directly as these men had known it.' It was from Galbraith that Southern derived his feel for administrative history, and especially his flair for putting flesh on those once-dry bones, as he did unforgettably for Ranulf Flambard and the *novi homines* of Henry I. Everything that Galbraith wrote was driven by the urge to understand why some document that we have from the middle ages - pre-eminently for him, of course, *Domesday Book*, the greatest of them all - came to be written and kept in the way it was, and at the time it was. This was not simply a matter of the formulae, or the technicalities of drafting, sealing and so forth, but of uncovering the human needs and passions from which they had arisen, in the

conviction that 'humanely studied' - note the adverb - "'the wardrobe of a medieval king, the panoply of a medieval knight, the structure of the *Great Harry*, the rig of a frigate" can illuminate the past and the present in exactly the same way as the words of a Herodotus or a Thucydides.'

One reason why *The Making of the Middle Ages* remains after fifty years an incomparable introduction to the middle ages is the marvellous series of vignettes by which key concepts and crucial changes are unforgettably captured - the castles of Fulk Nerra, Anselm's forgetfulness of food, drink and prayer itself as he searched for his proof of the existence of God, the Virgin rewarding the devotion of the thief Ebbo when he was hanged by holding him up for two days so that the noose would not strangle him. I suspect that there are some in this hall who have remembered for even more of those fifty years than I have the account of William, 'the brother of Reginald, born of free parents, being moved by the love of God, and to the end that God might look favourably on him', standing before the altar at Marmoutier with the bell rope round his neck, placing four pennies from his head on the altar. 'The appeal to religion in our document', the sentimentalist is briskly warned, 'is meaningless as a guide to individual motives' - but 'not meaningless as a guide to the social theory of the time' - and there follows not only what remains, if I may say it in the presence of Paul Freedman, one of the finest discussions of the nature and origins of serfdom I know, but also a remarkable account of how it fitted into the religious values and issues of the time. And that discussion is based not on any scholastic treatise or contemplative excursus, but on a charter - a diplomatic document, contextualised and analysed with a virtuoso display of the skills appropriate to its use. Skills which, though here applied with startling originality, had been imparted and honed within a tradition of which Southern was, in his wholly individual way, both a product and a highly distinguished exponent.

If I ask, in conclusion, why after fifty years *The Making of the Middle Ages* is still one of the first books I would put into the hands of any college or university student - though it is by no means easy reading for a beginner, and especially perhaps a young beginner - the answer is not quite straightforward. It is not likely greatly to change whatever preconceptions they may have about the medieval world, precisely because it has contributed, directly and indirectly, so much to forming those preconceptions.

Or rather, to be precise, because misreadings, or partial readings, of it have contributed so much to forming them. That is a better reason for giving it to a graduate student than to a beginner, and indeed it is probably the main reason why across the decades I myself reread it more often than not before teaching almost any course on these centuries.

Nor, it goes without saying, does *The Making of the Middle Ages* provide much of the bread and butter that a straightforward introduction must be largely composed of: to expect students to rely on it for sustenance would be to risk the fate of a pedagogic Marie Antoinette. In fact, the only compelling reason for staying with it at this level that I can come up with is that it is so good - that it shows so completely and so entrancingly what we should be trying to do. On any list of books to exemplify how history should be studied and how it should be written, *The Making of the Middle Ages* must come somewhere pretty near the top. And one reason for that, though consummate artistry makes light of it, is its mastery of the mundane whose more solemn practitioners Southern occasionally mocked. He may have been a great historian because he could see into the depths of the human spirit - but he would not have been if he had not understood with equal clarity the realities of earthly power.

*I owe this story to Martin Brett, who was there