



England in the Late Middle Ages

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Michael Cayley says

A book on the history of England from the reign of Edward II to the start of the dissolution of the monasteries. A R Myers rightly emphasises the continuity between the time of Edward IV and the early Tudor period.

The book is divided into three sections, covering 1307-99, 1399-1471 and 1471-c.1536. In each section there is a brief account of political history, but the reader who is mainly interested in political, diplomatic and military history will need to look elsewhere. Rather, the emphasis is on social and religious changes, economic developments, constitutional and legal evolution, and education and culture. Over the period covered, England changed from a country dominated by the church and by a fairly small number of aristocratic families to one in which the middle classes were much more prominent and secular values assumed far greater importance. As a side effect of these changes, many peasant tenants found themselves evicted and impoverished. The book gives a very good account of these developments.

The book was first published in 1952 and last revised in 1978. In its focus, to some extent it reflects that. Neither family life nor the role of women have any significant attention. The emphasis is mostly on those in positions of power or influence. What A R Myers expounds, he expounds well; but a more modern work would have a slightly different balance.

David says

An interesting way to cover history. He divides the late middle ages into 3 eras, then covers (in separate chapters), government, arts, religion, economy. It's very thorough in that approach, but it is handy to have a list chart of kings nearby. Within each section he constantly refers to other times in comparison, and it is sometimes hard to follow whom he's talking about.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in June 1998.

Like D.M. Stenton's English Society In The Early Middle Ages: 1066 1307, this book forms part of the Pelican History of England. It's aim is similar - to provide a popular level, short history which maintains high standards of scholarly accuracy.

Myers divides the period into four, and examines various facets of the historical picture with the same chapter headings in each section (basically looking at political, economic, social, religious and art history). He doesn't stop at the usual endpoint given for the English middle ages, 1485 and the establishment of the Tudor dynasty, and he gives convincing reasons why 1536 (the dissolution of the monasteries and the establishment of the Anglican church) marks a better division. (These reasons include the common policy of the late Yorkist kings and early Tudors, the lack of continental humanist influence, the continuing faithfulness to Rome and the monastic idea, and so on.)

A very good basic history, though the concise nature means that certain aspects need to be skimmed over rather too rapidly. One area where this is particularly noticeable is the unquestioning acceptance of the standard picture of Richard III's murder of the princes in the tower; even if Myers felt that the traditional view is correct, his omission of any argument is not really helpful.

Philip says

England In The Late Middle Ages (1307-1536) by A. R. Myers forms the fourth volume of The Pelican History Of England. Now sixty years old, this particular text examines a period of transition, perhaps from the traditional towards the modern, at least in spirit. The author cites the fifteen thirties as the decade beyond which medieval values and assumptions were in terminal decline. The modernity that replaced them was merely incipient, however, and took centuries more to transform English society, but the case made in this book for the fifteen thirties forming the cusp of that change is compelling.

The book certainly presents history as a top-down affair. The king and his concerns are ever central, and most of the rest revolves around this core. It is Myers's case that medieval societies were characterised by a need for an all-powerful figurehead whose authority was perceived as derived directly from God. And given this, the history of the entire period was thus the history of the exercise of this authority. There were strong kings, who commanded the allegiance of those who held power of their own, and there were weak ones who thus invited plot, conspiracy and instability. The divine right of kings, it seems, was subject to Darwinian market forces: those who succeeded in attracting sufficient authoritative godliness prospered, while those who did not were deposed.

A measure of the monarch's strength during this period seems to have been the ability to fight foreign wars. The word "foreign" is problematic if the Angevin origins of this empire are acknowledged. In the eyes of those who viewed contemporary life, perhaps, England and their France were never perceived as separate entities, but merely part of the same, unified heirloom estate that happened to have a strip of sea through the middle. This view of the political geography of the time is not stressed by Myers, so a sense of England versus France pervades the narrative.

Myers devotes time to the arts, economy, society in general and ecclesiastical life, as well as to descriptions of court life, intrigue and military campaigns. His discussion subtly charts the growth of trade and the rise of a class of nouveau riche business families who eventually supplant the older, land-owning aristocracy. And it is these people who eventually provide the stimulus that encourages the adoption of humanism and other renaissance traits that had developed a century earlier on mainland Europe. They thus appear to occupy the role of a modernising elite.

The fourteenth century in England was a century of plague amidst almost constant warfare, either with France or, if that had temporarily run out of steam, internally, where the Wars of the Roses saw the Houses of York and Lancaster vie for the English throne. It was perhaps this conflict that resulted in medieval values persisting in England when elsewhere they were already in decline.

But what is really satisfying about Myers's account of late medieval England is that in a short volume he manages to communicate and illustrate the complications and exceptions, as well as the general thrust. This is a work of true scholarship and understanding that strives to portray the big picture, but accomplishes this via an attention to detail that brings the story completely to life.

MT says

This is a fairly comprehensive guide to this period. But I mean hell, what do I know. It's all castles and serfs to me.

As a rough guide for reference or timeline etc, it's good, but for the deeper stuff, probably not so much. And the author has a terrible habit of introducing someone important, say the new king or queen, with 'well, there was heaps of work for Mary to do once she ascended the throne.' Does that mean the last king died? Is that how you're gonna kill him off? Something obviously happened to the guy if his daughter's currently facing the trials of rule. I just spent pages reading how he got the magnates in control (spoiler: liberal execution, some exiles, a ton of imprisonment) and instead of a lavishly detailed funeral with appropriately grieving thanes you give me a segue?

Oh, and I learnt that England used to fight France for pretty much no reason at all. The wife's turned into a crone by 22, the thralls are restless and I've now got to export wool due to the plummeting price of oats. May as well skip town for a while and pester the crapauds.

Although I think as a derogatory appellation crapauds came much later.

Kenneth says

Assigned reading for a two semester course in English history I took in college. An excellent overview of English history 1307 - 1536, covering the periods starting with the accession of Edward II and ending with Henry VIII's break with Rome. During that time, you have the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, the Wars of the Roses between the Houses of Lancaster and York, culminating with the triumph of the Tudors. There are chapters on government, economic and social developments, religious and educational movements and the arts. The early part of this period was the Age of Chaucer.
