

***Inventing Norman Cantor: Confessions of a Medievalist.* By Norman F. Cantor. Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Occasional Publications 1. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002. Pp. 256. \$28.95/£24.00. ISBN 0-86698-293-0.**

As a teaching assistant at Princeton in the early 1950s, Norman Cantor was asked to lecture on St. Augustine for an undergraduate humanities survey. “I focused on Augustine’s powerful sex drive,” he tells us, “and, as a native North African, his contempt for Rome, and his authoritarian belief in the use of violence against heretical Christian minorities” (27). The course’s appointed professors, the head of the Religion Department and “a classical philosopher of standing” (26), were not amused, and the young Cantor was not invited back.

The incident forms something of a paradigm for Cantor’s posture throughout a manifestly turbulent career: anti-authoritarian, ethnically self-conscious, stubbornly asserting the reality of the passions, and just a little eager to noodge the Establishment. In this memoir of a professional trajectory spanning a range of institutions—Princeton, Columbia, Binghamton, Brandeis, Barnard, NYU, and the University of Illinois at Chicago, along with a Fulbright stint at Tel Aviv—Cantor portrays himself as a chronically self-divided outsider, struggling for acceptance yet willfully impolitic, deeply attracted to the academy yet keenly attuned to its pretension, venality, and doublespeak. Son of a Russian Jew improbably reborn as a Manitoba cattle rancher, Cantor grew up suffocated, as he describes it, by “the smell of manure and dust” (1) and looked to escape through scholastic achievement. But he soon came up against a similarly noxious cloud of anti-Semitism, losing out on prizes because, as his principal put it, “the college’s Board of Trustees are on my back” (6) and advised to pursue graduate study outside Canada because, in the words of a “canny Scottish” mentor, “they don’t like Jews in this country” (7). Despite earning a fellowship, Cantor found himself socially marginalized at Princeton as well because he was sartorially challenged (“You won’t be around here long, Cantor, unless you get some Ivy League clothes” [33]) and didn’t play poker; “vestigial anti-Semitism” (57) repeatedly blocked his professional advancement. It should be recognized, of course, that Cantor himself falls into recurrent self-caricature as traditional *schlemiel* and *schlimazl*, folkloric archetypes surely familiar from his early immersion in Yiddish culture (12-13); he mocks, for example, his rejection by one of the “emerging beauties of Winnipeg Jewry” in favor of a shoe salesman (9) and admits salivating (his word) *à la* Portnoy after “one of those tall, blonde, rich *shiksas* in a camel hair coat I witnessed getting off the train at the Princeton station” (36). One almost imagines a film version with Woody Allen in the title role.

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This is, in other words, a deeply human self-portrait, at once comic and moving. Cantor is unsparing about his faults and foibles (lines like “I was a fool” come up frequently), and he makes no effort to hype his scholarly laurels, something that as one of the preeminent medieval historians of his generation he might well have done (*The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, first edition 1963, has gone through forty printings [108], and he estimates that nearly a million copies of his books are currently in print [199]). Instead, he gives us an account of a career marked by error, bewilderment, and the indignities of seemingly incessant psychological and financial strain—yet informed as well by a persistent idealism and repeated gestures of magnanimity. His record of relations with well known scholars like Joseph Strayer, Theodor Mommsen, Ernst Kantorowicz, and others—an extension of his earlier book *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1991)—similarly depicts these giants (Cantor’s word, 49) in terms of a warty humanity (Strayer’s aloofness and troubled marriage, Mommsen’s sense of inferiority to the towering ancestor whose name he shared, Kantorowicz’s nightly stroll to the deli for “two red Delicious apples and a quarter pound of Westphalian ham” [69]) but acknowledges their collective and paradoxically moral achievement: “hardworking, ambitious but in no way corrupt,” “selfless, laborious, immensely learned” (49, 63).

We learn something of the books that shaped Cantor’s mind--Ferdinand Lot’s *The End of the Ancient World* (which he says he memorized, 14), A. L. Rowse’s *The England of Elizabeth* (“a beautiful and underappreciated book,” 20), Richard Southern’s *The Making of the Middle Ages* (read “with rapture,” 93)--and he delivers himself of various provocative opinions: his great admiration for art historian Kurt Weitzmann; his judgment that Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies*, despite Cantor’s originally negative review, “anticipates the postmodern deconstructionist kind of medievalist inquiry pursued in the 1990s by Carolyn Walker Bynum and Gabrielle Spiegel” (71); his considered opinion that “our concepts of human behavior are the same as those of medieval people once you get beyond a thin veneer of language differences” (224); his admission that his own view of the Middle Ages has become progressively “darker and less idealistic” (227).

Apart from these tidbits, *Inventing Norman Cantor* admittedly holds little interest for medievalists *per se*: he himself chose medieval studies, Cantor reveals, only because his college advisor, “chuckling” (!), told him there was “little competition for student money in that obscure field and a dearth of entering students” (8). As an historian’s retrospective on the changing directions in higher education over the last fifty years, however, Cantor’s book has much to offer. He traces the modern American academy to what he calls “British liberal humanism”: a “thought-world” (Cantor’s rendering of Foucault’s *épistème*) rooted largely in the upper middle class of Victorian Britain, living and perpetuating itself through

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printed texts (22), marked by an uncritical social superiority but grounded in respect for English law and an indefatigable impulse to do good: “With all that was class-ridden, anti-intellectual, exploitative, smug, even racist about the old Brits, they were relatively speaking the salt of the earth, the best mankind had to offer” (22). Stultified in impoverished postwar Britain (as a Rhodes Scholar Cantor was appalled by Oxford’s Olympian imperviousness to “centuries of sanitary technology,” 98) and tainted at rising American universities like Princeton by complicity in Cold War politics (Strayer, Cantor notes, was a CIA consultant), this culture inevitably collapsed under its own complacency—“They thought their discourse would never be challenged” (72)—and gave way before the imperatives of demographic change, emerging behavioral sciences, and an advancing mass media revolution it preferred to disdain.

His admiration for the old humanism notwithstanding, Cantor clearly felt liberated by its displacement, envisioning a new synthesis of “traditional learning with vanguard ideas of the human sciences and attentiveness to contemporary popular culture. There was a new world of ideas to be examined and a new kind of history to be written” (91). In his second career as university administrator (at Binghamton, Illinois-Chicago, and NYU) he actively promoted the hiring of women and minorities, and he credits the vigor of his later work to Foucault, Derrida, and Lévi-Strauss. In commentary on the post-1960s culture wars, however, Cantor avoids the standard grooves of political correctness, reporting his commiseration with “shrunken, sallow, and defensive” males he interviewed at AHA conventions and predicting rather sadly that “History by 2010 will be like nursing; mostly a female profession” (83); he regrets the “sloganeering and blood feud” (134) into which the debates degenerated, and expresses puzzlement at fashionable disaffection (“I can understand why leftist icons and powerbrokers focus on the iron triangle of race, class and gender . . . what I cannot understand is why they are so angry at and critical of the United States which treats them so well” [193]). He chafed also, he relates, at the increasingly dominant Conant policy that subordinated teaching to research (217). Battle-scarred by protesting students, contentious faculty, obtuse trustees, recurrent government cutbacks, and occasional physical danger (a smoke bomb was once detonated under his car), Cantor left administration, returned to fulltime teaching (though in somewhat anomalous circumstances, having suffered a political expulsion from NYU’s history department), and developed what he calls his third career, writing history for the commercial market.

If Cantor has any axe to grind in this book, it is probably situated here, in the professional tension between writing history for academics and writing history for the educated public. In 2001 (9 November) Cantor wrote the *TLS* to contend that the “most important historians right now are Simon Schama and Joseph Ellis, because their books are heaped up at the front of the chain bookstores and are

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national best-sellers”; I recall his telling an audience at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University that given the burgeoning popular market for their subject, medievalists reminded him of South African Boers at the turn of the century, struggling to wrest a living from the soil while sitting on top of a goldmine. “Is historical writing to be addressed to a small group of academics,” Cantor asks, “or is it to be communicated to the educated world at large? I stand with the latter proposition, that history books are communicable to and accessible by the educated public at large. The ultimate task and obligation of a historian is to bring this kind of illumination to as wide an audience as possible” (223). In the increasingly rarefied atmosphere of formal scholarship, it is interesting to register this proposal’s capacity to startle.

Though Cantor points fingers and names names, this is ultimately by no means bitter book: indeed, by the end of his *apologia pro vita sua* Cantor seems to have won through to an almost beatific self-acceptance, affirming, if not his administrative interval, his writing for the general reader and more ardently his teaching of undergraduates: midway through his career, he says, “I just let it come from my heart” (218). “Teaching is a kind of love,” he asserts, “which St. Augustine defined as a union of wills” (216). This, and the Augustinian reference in his title, combine to suggest a core perspective Augustine would surely have understood: that there is no narrative of academic history apart from contingency, no cultural paradigm apart from individual lived experience; and that what we call history inevitably plays out, as Cantor’s final sentence has it, through “the happiness and sadness of our own lives” (228).

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