

Some Reflections on Medieval Studies in Canada

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In June 1987, at a large international conference in Rome organised by Canadian art historians to honour both Richard Krautheimer and Leonard Boyle, Roger Reynolds delivered a tribute to one of the two honorees entitled “Leonard Boyle and Medieval Studies in Canada.” In the published version of this essay, Reynolds documented the role of those many scholars—among them Etienne Gilson, Raymond Klibansky, Philippe Verdier, John Leyerle, and of course Leonard Boyle, to name but a few—who had brought their vision of a new discipline of “medieval studies” to this country, and had subsequently worked hard to promote it, primarily although by no means exclusively through the vehicle of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto.¹ And of course one must add to that distinguished list the name of Roger Reynolds himself, whom I was very privileged to have first encountered as an undergraduate student at Carleton University in the early 1970’s. Indeed, I still have the notes which I took at his lectures! Canadians should be very proud that the notion of “medieval studies,” as we understand it today—in other words, a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the Middle Ages that encompasses not only the intellectual territory of many traditional disciplines but also the large spaces between them, along the lines of Classical Studies—should have been largely created and matured in this country, and that we continue to produce a number of significant journals in this field, including the flagship *Mediaeval Studies*. As Reynolds explained in his paper, the spin-offs have been huge: the subsequent development of programs in medieval studies at many Canadian universities, and significant international projects such as *The Dictionary of Old English* or *Records of Early English Drama*, to name but two.

Toronto may have been the original catalyst for much of this, but the impact can be felt across the country from one coast to the other. Even at the University of

Victoria, located on a distant island in the Pacific, the undergraduate program in Medieval Studies has produced an amazing number of students who have gone on to become scholars in the field, and the annual Medieval Studies Workshop routinely fills one of the largest lecture theatres on campus and leaves its audience begging for more. The record of achievement, when one starts to add it all up, is hugely impressive.

But can that record be maintained? Here pride in past glories must give way to uncertainty for the future, and there is no shortage of causes for alarm. Just as the humanities have become increasingly marginalised within the Canadian academy (witness the relative funding to SSHRCC compared to the other national granting councils, or the distribution of Canada Research Chairs, or the priorities espoused by provincial ministries of postsecondary education), so too have medievalists become marginalised within the humanities. How many humanities departments, faced with having to make choices about replacing faculty members who have left or retired, have opted simply to reduce or phase out coverage of the Middle Ages from their curriculum, or perhaps to replace tenured professors with sessional lecturers, usually as a “temporary” measure? I can think of quite a few, particularly within my own discipline of art history. Indeed, the number of full-time “medieval” art history positions in Canada has now declined to the point that they can be counted on the fingers of one's hands. And this is by no means a problem restricted only to Canada, although it is perhaps particularly severe here. Similarly, I can also think of many highly qualified medievalists who have not been successful in finding regular employment, with the result that some have given up and left academic life altogether, while those that hang on do so at considerable personal and financial expense. Studying the Middle Ages is not *as relevant*, we are told far too often by senior administrators. Is that true? Do we care? If so, what are we doing about it?

Most academics, and certainly those who are active scholars, are far too overworked and over-stressed these days to think very far beyond the circumstances of their immediate situation; others refuse to waste their energies in what they perceive to be a losing battle. Thus I should like to issue a challenge to all readers of *Florilegium*: please make an effort in the coming year to do at least one thing on your home campus to promote “medieval studies,” be it a lecture, a seminar, a workshop, a study day, or whatever—and, most importantly, involve the larger public if you can. The University of Victoria Medieval Studies Workshop, held annually on the second Saturday in February, has for 15 years attracted about 200 members of the general public, quite apart from dozens of students, who are prepared to pay \$50 per head to be challenged

and entertained over the course of a long day. And don't think that deans and VP's don't take notice! If Medieval Studies is to thrive in this country we must capture a place in the academic mainstream—and to do that we shall need very broad public support. But that support has to begin with a conscious and concerted effort by all of us who care. From my perspective, despite our glorious past, the future of medieval studies in Canada does not look very healthy. I sincerely hope that I'm wrong.

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Note

1 R.E. Reynolds, "Leonard Boyle and Medieval Studies in Canada," *Rome: Tradition, Innovation and Renewal*, ed. C. Brown, J. Osborne, C. Kirwin (Victoria, BC, 1991), pp. 23-38.