

# University of Western Ontario

## *Michael Fox*

In late eighth-century France, Alcuin of York was largely responsible for the program of education and reform which Charlemagne was attempting to implement. In addition to helping to draft Charlemagne's documents of reform, Alcuin contributed a diverse body of written work—including riddling dialogues, grammatical treatises, theological tracts and exegesis—and undertook to teach as many as he possibly could. In fact, for Alcuin, teaching was the penultimate goal in learning (second only, of course, to a better understanding of God). As Alcuin put it, "Devotion to learning is worth little without the desire to teach, as Solomon said: 'Unseen treasure and hidden wisdom, what use is there in either?' So the whole concern of the intelligent man must be in teaching, or his labour in learning will be in vain. As we read in the prophet: 'They who teach many shine as the firmament with everlasting light.'"

At the beginning of the twenty-first century at the University of Western Ontario, Alcuin's prescription for the interaction of research and teaching seems to be alive and well among medieval faculty. With medievalists working and training as graduate students in many different departments, including English, French, History, Modern Languages and Literatures, Music History and Visual Arts, the range of research and teaching interests is necessarily broad. What seems to unite medievalists across the various disciplines, more than anything else, though, is enthusiasm for the subject. In essence, this translates into a general attempt, through research, teaching and service, to bring the unseen treasures of the medieval world to light.

In the Department of English, there have been major changes over the last few years, as several well-known medievalists have moved to universities outside Canada. The loss of Richard Green (Ohio State), Fiona Somerset (Duke) and Nicholas Watson (Harvard) has been partially redressed by the addition of Russell Poole (from Otago,

NZ) and, most recently, Jane Tolmie (from Harvard and Oxford, to join the department in 2004). Though these changes mark a distinct change in areas of research focus, the future of medieval studies in the department is assured. Russell Poole's primary area of interest is Old Norse-Icelandic language and literature, though he also works in Old and Middle English. In his teaching, he is currently experimenting with a mix of traditional language and literature teaching and *practica* in story-telling as part of, for example, a course on medieval narrative. Jane Toswell conducts research across a wide range of Anglo-Saxon literature and is currently editing the Paris Psalter. For six years, she has also been the editor of this journal, *Florilegium*, the journal of the Canadian Society of Medievalists. Her teaching includes a course on "The Millennium, Then and Now," which is, incidentally, an excellent example of how medievalists in the department fuse traditional medieval subjects with more contemporary topics. Jane Tolmie, though she has yet to arrive, promises, with her interests in medieval drama and Old Norse-Icelandic literature, to add interesting new perspectives on medieval literature, particularly with respect to the representation and characterisation of women.

The Department of Modern Languages and Literatures also has several faculty who work in medieval subjects. Melitta Adamson, who is cross-appointed with the History of Medicine, conducts research mainly in the interdisciplinary area of the history of food and preventive medicine, but also has interests in medieval German literature and daily life in the Middle Ages. Her teaching includes courses on "Literature and Life in the Middle Ages" and "The Body in Medieval and Renaissance Discourses." Laurence de Looze works in medieval and Renaissance literatures and medievalism, and James Miller in medieval and renaissance poetry. Marjorie Ratcliffe is primarily interested in medieval Spanish literature and the role of women in that literature, and will next year be introducing a compulsory survey of medieval Spanish literature for undergraduate students (in Spanish).

In the Department of Music History (in the Faculty of Music), Terry Bailey runs the CANTUS project, and James Grier is a specialist on Aquitanian music 900-1200, and specifically on the musical activities of Ademar de Chabannes (989-1034). Because medieval music is a regular component of the B.Mus. curriculum at Western, Grier often teaches courses in it, from the introductory survey to upper level courses, as well as the occasional cross-listed interdisciplinary course, on such topics as "Aquitaine from Charlemagne to the Albigensian Crusade" and "Textual Criticism: Ancient, Medieval and Modern."

In Kathy Brush, Western boasts one of the very few full-time faculty members in medieval art at universities in English-speaking Canada. Her long-term research project concerns the thirteenth-century west choir screen at Mainz cathedral (a project for which she had a Humboldt, 1997-8), and she is also interested in the historiography of medieval art and the discipline of art history at large. Her teaching covers the spectrum of medieval art, from full-year surveys on, for example, art from late antiquity through the year 1000, including the art and culture of Byzantium and Islam to specialised seminars.

With the possibility of hiring two new medieval faculty this year, the Department of History has made a renewed commitment to its medieval component. Current members of the department include Maya Shatzmiller, who specialises in the history of the medieval Islamic world, particularly in Spain and the Middle East, and who teaches such courses as, for example, “Crusaders and Moslems in Twelfth Century”; B. Murison, whose research interests include English and Scottish history in the early modern period and who teaches courses on “War in the Ancient and Medieval World” and “Britain to 1688”; and Thomas Sea, whose speciality is the social, economic and political history of Reformation Europe, though he regularly teaches survey courses on medieval Europe.

Without a central program in medieval studies, it might seem as if members of individual departments would work in isolation, only meeting in certain rare circumstances. However, there are at least two initiatives, one long-standing and one new, which (will) bring medievalists and their students into contact. The Medieval and Renaissance Seminar, first of all, has a long tradition of hosting conferences and invited speakers. Control of the Seminar is generally passed on a yearly basis to any medievalist or Renaissance scholar wishing to hold a conference. In the last two years, for example, under the aegis of the Seminar, the University of Western Ontario has hosted three international gatherings of scholars and students: “Robin Hood Conference,” May 2001 (35 speakers); “Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages and Renaissance,” March 2002 (33 speakers); and “Les motifs merveilleux dans les littératures française et francophone: une étrange constance,” October 2002 (24 speakers).

Currently in the advanced stages of planning is also a new undergraduate minor in medieval studies. The hope is to establish a central register of medieval courses and a plan to enable students interested in medieval subjects to obtain access to those courses in other departments and faculties. There will be no ‘core’ medieval studies

course, and the entrenching of certain key subjects, such as Latin, as compulsory within the minor has been deemed counterproductive, largely for reasons of difficulty with multiple prerequisites. However, when the medieval studies minor comes into existence, it will be an important step forward for medieval studies at Western and it will provide undergraduates with an opportunity to develop a miniature program that should prove a good starting point for (interdisciplinary) graduate studies thereafter.

A long-standing tradition at Western has been a Valentine's Day reading of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*. Students from various sections of the full-year Middle English survey course meet and, with the poem divided into the appropriate number of parts, recite the poem in its entirety (which usually takes less than an hour). The spirit of the event is primarily social, but students invariably come away from the reading with a deeper appreciation of Chaucer and of what we do as medievalists. The narrator of the *Parliament* recognises the potential of book learning—"I wook, and other bokes took me to / To rede upon, and yet I rede alway" (695-6)—and also, perhaps, the benefit of sharing that learning, as he (somewhat self-consciously) composes his poem. Certainly, we would share his observation that 'lyf' is short and the craft 'long to lerne,' but the joy of the journey is what we attempt to impress upon our students.

## Notes

1 *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae IV, Epistolae karolini aevi II*, ed. E. Dümmler (Berlin, 1895), Epist. 289. The scriptural quotations are from Sirach XLI.17 and Daniel XII.3.

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