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# Introduction

*Peter Coss*

In 1996 Maurice Keen published a collection of his essays that stretched back over thirty years, the first appearing in 1962. In his foreword he wrote the following:

At the time when I started out as a researcher I was more than once given the impression that chivalry was not, among my elders and betters, regarded as a very serious topic for historical study, and I supposed that I might find myself ploughing a lonely furrow.

With characteristic humility he neatly sidestepped his own role in making ‘the subject of chivalry what I had not expected it to prove, a lively and vigorous branch of late medieval studies’, by highlighting the major work undertaken by some of his contemporaries. It is universally acknowledged, however, that Maurice’s work, pre-eminently his *Chivalry*, first published in 1984, for which he won the Wolfson Literary Prize for History, was seminal in bringing about this shift in interest. *Chivalry* was swiftly acknowledged as a masterpiece of historical writing, one of the great books of medieval history produced in the Anglophone world during the last quarter of the twentieth century. It was, and remains, a trailblazer and pathfinder for further research. There are perhaps four interconnected reasons why this should be so.

The first is the approach. Maurice defined chivalry at the outset as ‘an ethos in which martial, aristocratic and Christian elements were fused together’. It was, arguably, his exploration of the nature and manner of this fusion that was the prime factor in producing such a deeply satisfying account of this peculiarly western blend of the warrior ethos. Whilst by no means denying the significance of clerical learning nor indeed the role of the crusade in the western warriors’ make-up, Maurice nevertheless removed the priestly veil from the eyes of the observer, revealing chivalry to be in essence ‘a mode of living’ within which secular values supplied the hard core. Knightly piety was certainly more than a veneer and a whole panoply of pre-existing ideas were drawn into the mould, yet chivalry was fundamentally ‘the secular code of honour of a martially-orientated society’. The subtlety with which Maurice handled the interpenetration of Christian and secular values earned great admiration from fellow historians. His treatment of his sources, giving precedence to those closest to the lived experience of men and women over those of a didactic or fictive nature, whilst at the same time analysing the serious impact and significance of

the latter, produced a compelling and deeply satisfying sense that the reader was appreciating chivalry from the inside.

The treatment of the sources is the second reason for *Chivalry's* distinctive reputation. The depth and the breadth of knowledge of the source material are equally breathtaking. At the same time Maurice revealed the capacity to stand back from his sources and widen his perspective. This perspective has both geographical and chronological dimensions. Few scholars of medieval England aspire to, let alone achieve, the degree of internationalism displayed in *Chivalry*. Finally, although fully anchored in the past, Maurice's study is present-minded in the best senses of the term. Chivalry has an historical significance beyond the age in which it was formed, for it 'had a key impact on the fashioning of the idea of the gentleman'. On his own admission, Maurice is fascinated by his subject; but he is not beguiled by it. He sees both the idealism and the naked careerism and self-interest of the medieval warrior. He sees both the civilising impact of courage, courtesy and largesse and the awful brutality of the warfare that was the lifeblood of chivalry. He sees the binding power of ceremony and the aesthetic dimensions to pageantry and display, but he recognises, too, that chivalry could be 'exhibitionist and extravagant – often to the point of vulgarity'.

Not least because of the breadth of his treatment and of his sympathies, Maurice Keen's *Chivalry* and the studies that were anterior to it were able to illuminate a whole range of issues. These include: the origins and definition of chivalry; the idea of nobility; the ceremony of dubbing; the tournament; the historical mythology of the courtly world; patronage; heralds and heraldry; the granting of arms; the order of chivalry; and so on. And just as the chivalric world was constantly evolving, because it was a world of real people as well as of values and ideals, so Maurice has continued to this day to wrestle with the great issues that make the subject such a vital one.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many of the contributors to this volume take up and develop areas where Maurice's work has provided the starting point or signalled the way forward. James Campbell opens with an essay on nobility, reflecting one of Maurice's enduring interests. It was the subject of his Creighton lecture, delivered at the University of London in 1985. The nobility is a phenomenon which no medievalist can avoid encountering, but Maurice's interest was closer to Continental than to British scholarship in its reflections upon the *idea* and the *concept* of nobility. The origins of the nobility, in particular, remain a subject of concern to this day. Campbell, in perhaps characteristic Anglophone fashion, links nobility and mobility. Taking the arguments put forward by W. R. Runciman in 1984, he reviews the evidence for social promotion into the nobility in Anglo-Saxon England. In doing so he demonstrates that some vital features of the period Maurice Keen concentrates on were already alive, often in different guises and often under different names, in Anglo-Saxon England, among them fairly complex patterns of recruitment of followers (retinue), rules of conduct in war, compensation in place of vendetta (ransom), lordship as an affective bond (good lordship); even conventions over the sharing of booty, and the marauding of something like the later medieval

free companies figure. All of this ‘indicates that the noble mobility, one might almost say internationality, characteristic of the age of chivalry had a very long past’. At the same time, however, nobles were readily recognisable. The Northumbrian nobleman, Imma, ‘was betrayed by his tongue. You could already tell a toff by his speech.’

David Crouch turns to the question of the origins of chivalry itself. In his great work Maurice Keen understood chivalry as an ethos, one which crystallised during the mid- to late twelfth century. This dating accorded well with the work of the French scholars Jean Flori and Georges Duby and with that of Linda Paterson on Occitan sources. Some of the work undertaken since then, however, has implicitly or explicitly challenged this chronology. Two historiographical trends have converged to create what Crouch regards as an anachronistic sense of the emergence of chivalry. One is the tendency to use the term operationally rather than, as he puts it, epistemologically, so that any noble conduct, especially in war, which mirrors or approximates to those later understood as chivalric becomes evidence of the earlier existence of chivalry. The second is the tendency, stemming from the influential work of Stephen Jaeger, to conflate chivalry and courtliness. The fusion of these two trends – the one emphasising conduct in war, the other the paradigm of the ‘affable, liberal and courtly man’ – has induced some scholars to envision a chivalric world already in existence in the eleventh century, if not before. One can see the force of this argument. At the same time there is no doubt that there was something distinctive about noble conduct as presented by Chrétien de Troyes and other writers from the 1170s on. How do we reconcile these differing perceptions? Crouch’s answer is to reaffirm the distinction between the historian’s construct on the one hand and the medieval writer’s self-conscious codification of values on the other. At this point he turns to Pierre Bourdieu and the notion of the social habitus. The habitus comprises all those norms of behaviour to which people are conditioned by their social environment. These norms are reinforced by avatars, those individuals who are seen to embody social expectations. So it was with aristocratic behaviour, the avatar here being essentially the *preudomme*. The habitus in this instance is the aristocratic way of life in which the deep roots of chivalry are embodied. Crouch moves on to provide us with some insight into how this particular habitus gave rise to chivalry. He contrasts the work of Arnaut-Guihelm de Marson, an *ensenhamen* of secular, aristocratic values written around 1170 for his fellows, with that of Raiman Vidal de Besalú, a work of moral instruction written in the first decade of the thirteenth century and resembling the *Ordene de Chevalerie*, whose significance was stressed by Maurice Keen. In the meantime chivalry as ‘a self-conscious code of noble conduct’ had been born.

Christopher Tyerman follows Maurice Keen in another direction, in examining crusading within the social, cultural and political contexts of noble life. In doing so he takes us deep into the mores of elevated society in early fourteenth-century France. His subject is Louis I, duke of Bourbon (c. 1280–1342). Louis was intimately involved in crusade planning although, in the end, he never actually saw the Holy Land. In 1316 he was declared leader of

the French scheme for a new crusade and in 1317, with fellow *crucesignati*, he founded the confraternity of the Holy Sepulchre. Louis understood that commitment to the crusade was not something to be treated lightly or cynically. He knew the opprobrium that might attach itself to those who failed to go, as his chivalric gesture of exiling himself from Paris until he had fulfilled his vow makes clear. He was the genuine patron of crusaders, including many from the rich Parisian bourgeoisie who were so keen to participate in tournaments and other expressions of chivalric life. As Tyerman puts it, in the 'texture of prosaic experience the crusade was normative, not eccentric, sustained by and reflecting many other aspects of noble life'. Louis was a thoroughly active man in most spheres of contemporary life: battlefield, tournament, government, diplomacy, ceremony, political manoeuvring, patronage in both lay and religious contexts, management of household and estates, and so on. He was also a man of wide cultural interests. Nonetheless, his values remained rooted in the chivalric code. From Watriquet of Couvin he commissioned an elegy for his companion-in-arms, Gaucher of Châtillon. This stressed prowess, courtesy, honour, largesse and loyalty. Tyerman envisages Louis as a practitioner or exponent of that other great chivalric quality, conviviality; enveloped in display, this was 'a part and consequence of practical *courtoisie*'. If not exactly one of Crouch's 'avatars', Louis lived his full life steeped in chivalric ideas.

Craig Taylor returns us to England with an analysis of English writing on chivalry and warfare during the Hundred Years War. He points to the striking fact that most of what was available in England was rooted in the distant past. Despite the work of Froissart, this was true even in terms of chivalric history. It was also true of didactic writing on these themes, until the very end of the Hundred Years War. A writer like Hoccleve could recommend only the Roman writer Vegetius when it came to the practical 'art of chivalry'. Taylor asks why such works were rare. The contrast with France is striking, where the content of didactic works was not only broad, extending to practical advice on such matters as strategy, discipline and leadership, but was also part of an even wider literature on government and society. The status of the French language meant, of course, that such works did not need to have been written in English to have an impact here. However, French treatises on chivalry and warfare do not appear to have circulated extensively in England. Taylor finds the explanation largely in the differing experience of the war in the two countries. The French were writing in the context of crushing defeat and appalling violence against civilians. This gave rise to wide-ranging public debate which comprised calls for discipline and unity under a strong monarchy, discussions of military conduct, and the justification for war. It is true, he acknowledges, that in England vernacular writers did 'reveal the fundamental tensions inherent within the culture of chivalry', but they fell far short of the level of exploration, and indeed practical advice, that was prevalent among French and Italian writers. Only at the very end of the war were translations and new works commissioned as the English began to stare at defeat.

Adrian Ailes introduces heraldry, a subject in which Maurice has been deeply

interested since the beginning of his career and where he has made another major contribution in *Origins of the English Gentleman: Heraldry, Chivalry and Gentility in Medieval England, c. 1300–c. 1500* (Stroud, 2002). Ailes focuses on royal grants of arms in England, the earliest known example being in 1335. The bestowal of arms, as he points out, was ‘a clear and formal act of patronage expressed heraldically’. Thus its incidence tends to reflect the atmosphere of the various reigns. Given that it was ‘a very public way’ of rewarding friends and allies and of expressing a close relationship between the king and particular subjects, it is hardly surprising to find it first recorded in the reign of Edward III. Nor is it surprising that heraldry figured prominently in the regal display which was so much a feature of Richard II’s court. One of his most spectacular marks of favour was to allow several of his favourites to quarter the arms of Edward the Confessor, as he himself had done. Few grants are evidenced from the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V, although in the latter case more must actually have been made given the king’s part in developing the role of heralds and his attempt to control the unwarranted assumption of arms. Grants of arms seem to have lapsed during the minority of Henry VI to be followed by a flurry between 1439 and 1449, including those to his colleges and his clerks. The decline in grants after 1450 was due in part to political circumstances but also to the increasing role of the kings of arms (the senior royal heralds) acting under royal authority. In Edward IV’s day the king’s direct participation seems to have been required only where distinguished foreigners were concerned. The granting of arms has to be seen, of course, from the point of view of the recipient as well as from that of the crown. There is no doubt that from the fourteenth century onwards (if not before) there was particular prestige in receiving one’s arms from a monarch. Moreover, as Ailes makes clear, royal grant of arms involved real benefits in status terms. It was Henry VI, however, who took the ultimate step in including the grant of new arms in letters of ennoblement, bringing England into line with Continental practice.

Vivid and intense display was not a matter only for princes. Indeed, it permeated all levels of gentle life. It is another phenomenon that has interested Maurice throughout his career; see, for example, his deeply thoughtful and thought-provoking introduction to *Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2002). In his contribution to the present volume Nigel Saul contributes an examination of the language of chivalry displayed in the parish church of Trotton in Sussex. Although Trotton is famous for its brasses of the Camoys family, its scheme of wall paintings and the combined effect of its chivalric art have not, until now, received the attention they deserve. Saul describes what must have been a truly startling display of chivalric imagery. As he shows, however, context is as important as content in appreciating the full historical significance of such schemes. Trotton, of which the Camoys family held the advowson, had been their mausoleum for several generations when Thomas, Lord Camoys (d. 1421) commissioned his wall paintings. Thomas showed himself to be acutely aware of his family history, especially its military history and its powerful associations. Service was

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