

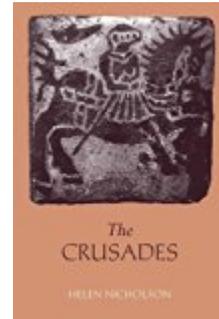
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Jill N. Claster.** *Sacred Violence: The European Crusades to the Middle East, 1096-1396.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. xix + 356 pp. Illustrations. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4426-0058-4; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4426-0060-7.

**Helen J. Nicholson.** *The Crusades.* Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2009. 1 + 196 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87220-619-9.

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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher



## Crusading for Beginners

The demand for studies both of individual crusades, and of crusading as an institution of the European Middle Ages, appears to be booming at the moment. This phenomenon no doubt reflects reasons connected with current political and social issues as well as for the intrinsic interest and importance of these topics. The two books reviewed here about the history of crusades form part of this publishing phenomenon.

Helen Nicholson's short work is part of a series of basic studies of medieval topics ranging from the Black Death and Magna Carta to the Pueblo society of the Grand Canyon (somewhat strangely a summary overview of the contents of each book in the series can be found at the front of the book) aimed at a junior undergraduate audience. It assumes very little previous knowledge and falls into three parts; an historical overview, short biographies of seventeen more or less prominent individuals, and twelve extracts from original source material.

Compressing the history of the crusades from the proto-crusading expeditions against Barbastro and al-Mahdiyyah to the late sixteenth century into just over a hundred pages is a considerable achievement. Nicholson chooses to take a wide definition of crusading, including warfare in Spain, the Baltic, and the crusades against

heretical Cathars and Hussites as well as the more "traditional" Holy Land and then anti-Turkish crusades- what she would define as a "pluralist" position. On the other hand the so-called political crusades launched against the Hohenstaufen enemies of the papacy in the thirteenth century and its Visconti foes in the fourteenth are not covered while the Fourth Crusade and subsequent activities related to the Latin empire in Constantinople are somewhat marginalized.

Obviously, there is a price to pay for this scope of coverage. The sections on individual crusading "fronts" are inevitably brief and couched in very high-level terms, at times degenerating into little more than basic chronologies full of dates and names and often curiously muted- for instance, an account of the First Crusade which loses the epic and miraculous dimensions of that event as experienced by participants (for instance the strange tale of the Holy Lance of Antioch) misses the impact that these aspects had on them and on later generations. The decision to give each of the "fronts" covered roughly equal coverage in terms of length has the benefit of underlining the protean aspect of crusading in medieval European society at least from the thirteenth century, though it does leave a faint sense that Holy Land crusading (arguably always the most important from an emotional and cultural perspective at the time and subsequently) gets shorter

shrift than it deserves. Perhaps predictably the complex processes whereby crusading shifted from being a series of events to an institution are touched on rather than developed in real detail.

Nicholson's interpretations are cautious and carefully balanced, if generally a shade bland; her distinctly negative view of Catharism is an intriguing exception. Despite her background as a distinguished historian of the military orders she does not have very much to say about that particular by-product of the crusades—a pity, given the bizarre after life of the Templars in contemporary popular culture.

The biographies which follow the core text are unexpectedly heavily weighted towards the years after 1200—only four of the chosen subjects were active before that date and only one (Bohemund of Taranto) before 1180. The mix includes some unexpected and intriguing figures like Shajar al-Durr, ruler of Egypt in the name of her deceased husband during the crusade of Louis IX of France, and the blind Hussite general Jan Zizka. Obviously one can quibble about inclusions and exclusions—one might have expected Baldwin I, King of Jerusalem to rate a mention while Louis IX (St. Louis) would be a far more “typical” crusading monarch than the emperor Frederick II. By contrast, the chosen texts are rather more slanted towards the earlier period but still manage to include some genuinely unfamiliar material such as an extract from the Prussian Chronicle of Peter von Dusburg. The book comes with a useful bibliography, though one which is already showing signs of age (the review copy is a 2009 reprint of a book which first appeared in 2004 and the bibliography has not been updated). Some of the works cited there would, however, constitute a pretty steep step up from Nicholson's work in terms of the levels of knowledge they assume. This does however work as a very basic introduction to the topic for those with little or no prior knowledge of the topic and could form the basis for more advanced work if used in conjunction with more detailed works.

Jill Claster's book, in contrast, is not explicitly badged as a teaching resource but her acknowledgement to students in her freshman honors seminar at New York University as part of the inspiration for its creation suggests its target audience—as perhaps does its format, with chapters broken down into multiple, mostly brief, subsections, each with its own title. The subtitle is a shade misleading. The chronological and geographical scope of the book is both wider and narrower than implied. Wider, because the coverage starts literally in the Book of Genesis with

Abraham's move from Ur of the Chaldees and finishes at the present day while referring to the Iberian, Albigensian, and other non-Jerusalem-centered crusades covered by Nicholson. Narrower, because her coverage becomes increasingly sketchy well before the nominal 1396 terminal date and Claster is a self-proclaimed “traditionalist” who does not regard non-Holy Land targeted campaigns as “proper” crusades deserving of much really detailed analysis.

Claster's book is divided into three sections. The first sets the scene and recounts the tale of the First Crusade, taking events down to the foundation of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The second recounts the internal history of the Latin Kingdom down to the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187. The third covers the Third Crusade and subsequent developments. The result is somewhat lopsided; the century or so between Pope Urban II's sermon at Clermont in 1095 and the 1192 truce between King Richard I of England and Saladin receives over 170 of the 318 pages of text. The internal history of the crusader states, which is the main focus of the second part of the book, becomes increasingly marginal to the account after about 1200 and almost vanishes as a subject in its own right after Frederick II's expedition in the 1220s. Admittedly the chronic factionalism and self-destructive feuding which marked the politics of the Acre-centered “Kingdom of Jerusalem” and the other Latin principalities in the thirteenth century defy easy summary and the institutionalization of crusading in that century makes it easier to write a history whose main focus is the various expeditions which went east. The shift in gear after 1200 is, however, somewhat disconcerting.

Taken as a basic narrative history of the Crusades and the pre-1187 crusading states, Claster's account is serviceable enough. Unlike Nicholson's rather austere presentation, there is no shortage here of drama and epic overtones. Nor is there any shortage of judgments. Indeed Claster is very willing to express her views on the characters and personalities of crusading commanders, Latin rulers, and their foes. In many cases her assessments echo those of the chronicler William of Tyre, whose genuine qualities as a historian can all too easily lead the incautious modern reader to forget that he was very much a player in the political crises in the Kingdom of Jerusalem he records.

This is merely one aspect of the distinctly old-fashioned tone of Claster's text. It would be unfair to suggest that the author is unaware of recent scholarship. Indeed one of the peculiarities of the work is the slightly

awkward juxtaposition of older and newer approaches. For instance, Claster cites the relatively recent archeological work of Ronnie Ellenblum and others which has called into question the traditional view that there was minimal rural settlement by people of west European origin in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (p. 125) but still accepts Sir Steven Runciman's estimate that the total "Frankish" population of the kingdom was no more than 120,000 (p.167), which dates back to the 1950s and was based on now questionable assumptions about settlement patterns. Elsewhere, however, Claster appears to be wedded to traditional views which would now command little support. For instance her view of Frederick II retains echoes of Ernst Kantorowicz's highly colored interpretation which was long ago challenged by scholars like David Abulafia. She also repeats arguments fashionable some fifty years ago that a "missed opportunity" for a crusader/Mongol alliance existed, even though the credibility of these arguments has long been challenged—not least by Peter Jackson, whose 2005 study summarizing his views figures heavily in the volume's bibliography.

Despite the very early starting point for the narrative, there are some unexpected gaps, particularly outside the "core" 1095-1192 period. Some might feel that the Byzantine wars against the Persians and the Persian occupation of Jerusalem in the early seventh century—not to mention the complex ecclesiastical schisms and persecutions which left many of the Christian populations in the Syrian, Palestinian, and Egyptian provinces of the empire feeling less than totally committed to its survival and which in the longer term exercised a major influence on the structure of the society over which the Latin kings of Jerusalem ruled—were rather more relevant to the prehistory of crusading than the events recounted in the Pentateuch, which get more coverage in Claster's account. Coverage of the intellectual developments which made the proclamation of the crusade in 1095 thinkable for senior ecclesiastical figures in the Latin Church is minimal—Nicholson's account of this aspect is actually rather fuller. At the other end of the period, Claster's

implication that Pope Boniface VIII was taken to Paris to stand trial as a heretic in 1303 is simply wrong while her account of the destruction of the Order of the Temple is muddled and confusing. Even in the "core" period there are some strange omissions. It is, for instance, surprising (especially given that the importance of pilgrimage for Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike is one of the themes of the book) that she fails to mention Reynaud de Chatillon's bizarre Red Sea expedition aimed at capturing the body of the Prophet Muhammed which he believed was kept at Mecca—an expedition which did little to improve relations between the kingdom and its Muslim neighbors and figures prominently on the traditional charge sheet against Reynaud's role in the fall of the kingdom in 1187.

The book is handsomely produced with plenty of illustrations both in black and white and color (though the maps come from rather diverse sources and do not always reproduce well). The text however has a fair sprinkling of misprints and errors (particularly relating to dates, though extending to other matters—the "John of Burgundy" at Nicopolis was not the Duke of Burgundy but his son, John, Count of Nevers). Moreover, Claster has been poorly served by her editor on what one might call "continuity" issues—a number of repetitions have crept into the text while on other occasions references to matters supposedly covered later in the text do not appear to be picked up, and the epidemic which devastated Robert Guiscard's 1085 invasion of the Byzantine Empire is given as cholera on p. 23, but then as typhoid on p. 53.

It is appropriate that Claster closes her work with a quotation from Sir Steven Runciman. Though markedly more sympathetic in her tone than Sir Steven's patriotic and pro-Byzantine (or more accurately anti-Latin Christian) distaste for the crusades and those who participated in them, her book still very much reflects the focuses, concerns, and even to a considerable extent the judgments and interpretations of his classic but now very dated work. It should only be used with considerable caution to build on Nicholson's foundations.

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