

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert E. Lerner. *Ernst Kantorowicz: A Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 424 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-17282-8.

Reviewed by Lezlie Knox (Marquette University)

Published on H-TGS (September, 2017)

Commissioned by Alison C. Efford

In August 1950, at the height of the Red Scare, the University of California Board of Regents fired employees who had refused to sign a loyalty oath denying membership in the Communist Party. Among those losing their jobs was Ernst Kantorowicz (1895-1963), who taught medieval history at Berkeley. The German émigré appeared an unlikely figure in this controversy as his early life and work had positioned him on the political right. A decorated war veteran, he had also fought against communists in Munich in 1919. He launched his scholarly career in 1927 with a best-selling biography of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (d. 1250) that glorified absolutism and imperial power. Unsurprisingly, Nazi leaders, including Hermann Goring, Heinrich Himmler, and Hitler himself, were enthusiastic readers. Yet as a Jew, Kantorowicz lost his chair in medieval history at Frankfurt in 1934 and had to flee Germany in 1939.

Robert Lerner's compelling new biography uses these events to explore Kantorowicz's political conversion from ardent German nationalist to critic of demagoguery. Lerner is equally interested in his subject's scholarly transformation. It appears as remarkable that Kantorowicz moved from the intentionally heroic *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite* to *The King's Two Bodies: a Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957), which included an assessment of the ideology of power that established his reputation as one of twentieth century's most significant intellectuals. The biography is a major success in its own right in that it helps readers not only to understand these two intertwined transformations, but also to appreciate the compelling personality of the man who experienced them. It is heartily recommended not only to medievalists interested in how Kantorowicz shaped our field, but also to

those working in German and German American studies as well as scholars of the history of ideas, politics, Jewish life, universities, and more.

As a medievalist himself, Lerner is especially well suited to discuss Kantorowicz's scholarship and its reception. Those in other fields will benefit equally from the biography's thorough attention to each period of his life. Lerner assesses his social and cultural environment, moving from interwar Germany and the rise of the Nazi Party to Kantorowicz's refugee experience in the United States, when he struggled to secure a permanent position, through to his final years at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Lerner has read deeply in the extensive archival materials, reviewing drafts of papers, letters, and teaching materials, as well as institutional records. He also interviewed surviving family and friends, persuading many to share personal correspondence and photographs, thus creating a new depository of sources (the "Lerner Archive"). At times, the details can overwhelm or appear trivial (we do learn a great deal about Kantorowicz's love of good wine, food, gardening, and conversation), but overall they help us to understand the man's charisma and extraordinary contributions to historical understanding.

It was unclear early on that Kantorowicz—or Eka as he soon styled himself, a practice Lerner follows—would make his mark as a scholar, much less one in medieval history. Following his military service, he studied economics at Heidelberg in preparation for taking over his family's business. His only history class focused on ancient Rome and he wrote an undistinguished dissertation on "Muslim Artisan Associations." Lerner mordantly ob-

serves that it would have been improved “had EKa actually found a conscientious scholar to criticize his work” or consulted original sources (p. 64). Similar personal observations throughout the book contribute to the biography’s appeal.

More significantly for his intellectual interests, Kantorowicz met the poet and cultural figure Stefan Georg (1868-1933) in Heidelberg. He soon became a favored member of the Georg-Kreis, a circle of mostly young men who were expected to subordinate their personalities to the *Meister*’s. Lerner comments that it would be appropriate to describe Kantorowicz as “in thrall” to Georg during this period, which looks “insanely weird” in retrospect (pp. 77-79). The younger man changed his handwriting and intonation to imitate the poet’s style, and also enthusiastically embraced his ideas about revitalizing German identity. Georg effectively commissioned *Frederick II*, influenced its tone, and secured its publication. Published without any notes (the critical apparatus came five years later), Kantorowicz first defended the book as a statement of nationalism. Later he distanced himself from the work, refusing to allow its reprinting after World War II. Although he never repudiated Georg’s influence on him, Kantorowicz sought separation from those he felt had bastardized the *Meister*’s ideals, including fellow disciples who promoted connections with Nazi ideology.

Non-medievalists may be surprised by the degree to which Lerner emphasizes Kantorowicz’s opposition to the Third Reich. Certainly *Frederick II*’s imperial allegory contributes to the common perception that its author’s religion was all that kept him from being a Nazi. Moreover, Kantorowicz described himself as “of Jewish descent, not Jewish belief” (p. 17), indicating that he did not see religion as central to his own identity. But Lerner intends to demolish accusations made by another medieval historian, who characterized Kantorowicz as “the ideal Nazi scholar and intellectual” and claimed he sought the patronage of National Socialists.[1] In rebuttal, the biography documents anti-Nazi attitudes in Kantorowicz’s personal letters and public talks, demonstrating that he was a unique example of a German professor willing to speak out against Nazi ideology. Through the 1930s, his own research shifted from Georg-inspired nationalism to political rhetoric and theories of rulership. To pursue his career, though, it was clear he would have to leave Germany.

Financial support from the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars was critical for bring-

ing Kantorowicz to the United States in the spring of 1939. Yet despite the efforts of friends and colleagues, he would have only one-year teaching positions and small research grants to support himself until he was at last appointed professor with tenure at Berkeley in 1945, beginning what Lerner identifies as the happiest period of his life. Remarkably, surviving class materials and interviews have allowed Lerner to reconstruct his teaching career and report that the lectures were “dazzling in their insights, juxtapositions, and sometimes even new knowledge but also were works of art, structurally and rhetorically” (p. 273). Outside his academic work, Kantorowicz socialized with émigré friends and students, as well as extended family who also had escaped Nazi Germany (despite his efforts to bring his mother to the United States, she died in Theresienstadt). The closing chapters, focused on the loyalty oath controversy and *The King’s Two Bodies*, are briefer and feel somewhat out of balance with the deeply researched account of his earlier life. However, these topics are better known, and Lerner has prepared us to understand how Kantorowicz’s earlier work led to his most significant publication. While scholars still may not agree on exactly what the *King’s Two Bodies* argues or even read some of the more esoteric chapters, its nonlinear, sometimes contradictory history of how political ideology was embodied in the king opened a new research area.

Lerner’s empathy for his subject is manifest through the biography. This is especially clear in his treatment of Kantorowicz’s personal relationships, although other scholars may want to develop them further. Throughout his life, Kantorowicz cycled between male and female partners, with the admirable quality of maintaining friendships even after love affairs ended. Lerner’s fitting openness in discussing these affairs make it somewhat curious that he discounts homoeroticism in Kantorowicz’s relationship with Georg. While the two lived together for months in Heidelberg, Lerner emphasizes that the poet always embraced a Platonic ideal in which homophilic language coexisted with chastity (p. 75). Lerner respects his sources, which do not reveal a physical relationship between the two, but Georg’s own biographers suggest other possibilities. Kantorowicz did adopt his mentor’s attitude that sexual relationships should not interfere with a commitment to one’s own intellectual work and brought it to his own relationships with his students. It was not that he saw his students as romantic subjects, but rather his intense personal involvement in their lives—wine-fueled seminars at his home, disappointment when his graduate students married, his own

dislike of intellectual women—is intriguing and suggests avenues for further research here and in other areas uncovered by Lerner. This major accomplishment deserves wide attention from historians of all stripes.

Note

[1]. Norman Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists*

of the Twentieth Century (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 95. Cantor paired Kantorowicz with Percy Ernst Schramm in a chapter entitled “The Nazi Twins.” This jaundiced account, which often presents unsubstantiated rumors, was widely read—and challenged—by other professional medievalists. It also was an improbable selection of the Book of the Month Club. Lerner shows how Kantorowicz defended Schramm at his denazification trial, pp. 288-292.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-tgs>

Citation: Lezlie Knox. Review of Lerner, Robert E., *Ernst Kantorowicz: A Life*. H-TGS, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50296>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.