In *Military Cultures and Martial Enterprises in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of Richard P. Abels*, editors John D. Hosler (US Army's Command and General Staff College) and Steven Isaac (Longwood University) have gathered a glittering phalanx of contributors to honor one of the shining stars of medieval military history. Bernard S. Bachrach, Stephen Morillo, John Gillingham, Kelly DeVries, John France, Richard W. Kaeuper, and Clifford J. Rogers are just a few of the towering names that should be familiar to anyone with even a passing interest in the field.

As is traditional for works like this, editor Hosler opens with a summa of Abels's shining career, tracing his influence in research, his teaching at the Naval Academy, and his wide-ranging influence among his fellow scholars spanning multiple generations. It is an elegant and heartfelt introduction, one that seems to capture the cultural sensitivity of the last several decades not only within the discipline of medieval military history but also within its community of scholars and students. In the appendix follows Abels's abbreviated but still impressive curriculum vitae.

The content is arranged in a chronological manner, again spanning a considerable range beginning with Charlemagne and spanning through the Hundred Years’ War, from the sociocultural treatments of cowardice and crusade to operations and physical culture. Usually, a mix of this variety would be hard to bind, but the editors have successfully forged them into a coherent and dynamic collection that will be referenced for many decades to come.

The book opens appropriately with Abels’s longtime colleague (and intellectual sparring partner), Bernard S. Bachrach (University of Minnesota), whose “Charlemagne's Invasion of Spain in 778: The Anatomy of a Strategic Failure and Its Impact” builds on Bachrach’s decades of study, presenting a compelling operational analysis of Charlemagne’s strategy in his famous campaign and the reasons for its failure. Bachrach nimbly integrates a variety of sources, from chronicles to related secondary studies, tempering each source in such a way as to reflect Abels's similar approach—an eminently appropriate, reflective salute. Indeed, so many of the notes are references to Bachrach’s own distinguished works that his own parallel career is equally showcased—not inappropriately, given his and Abels's long association.

The senior Bachrach’s son, David (University of New Hampshire), follows with “Military Intelligence and Strategic Planning under the Ottonian Kings of Germany, 919-1024,” another salute that
spans generations and reflects Abels’s own long focus on intelligence, strategy, and planning. Indeed, David S. Bachrach and Abels are two scholars who have fought the same battle, countering “the long-standing view that pre-crusade Europe lacked anything resembling military science,” firmly establishing recognizable military practices, such as scouting, digestion of intelligence, and planning at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels (p. 41). Bachrach extends this discussion to the Ottonians, neatly breaking actions down into their component levels and discussing each in turn, concluding that “the Ottonian kings of Germany were no less focused on these matters than their West Saxon contemporaries” (p. 60).

Ryan Lavalle’s (University of Winchester) “Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chickens” takes a cultural perspective looking at instances of mistaken identity in war, robbery, and rebellion, with examples from the seventh through the twelfth centuries. As Lavalle concludes, “There is a tragic, often tragicomic, universality to the fleeing warrior, which could be said to transcend specific regions or even historical periods” (p. 79). Lavalle ties the complexities of such fleeing to loss of reputation, resulting in stiff social penalties, and argues that, reflecting perhaps the writing of Ramon Lull, the accoutrements of war were closely tied to one’s identity; he notes that this is not so much a chivalric association as a transcultural one.

In “Count Baldwin V of Flanders: Broken of Eleventh-Century Power,” DeVries (Loyola University) salutes Abels with a rare foray and return to writing of earlier time (DeVries is known for his late medieval work). He finds in Baldwin V an influencer of such note that he was known as the “brilliant’ broker of eleventh-century northern European power,” making Flanders a power that lasted until the end of the Middle Ages (p. 98).

A key theme for Abels was an approach to medieval history from a cultural perspective, the “cultural turn,” as it is sometimes termed. All the writers in this volume reflect the resonating impact of this movement on their writing. France (emeritus, Swansea University), Morillo (Wabash College), and Jennifer Paxton (Catholic University of America) exemplify this approach, blending traditional operational approaches with others that seek to examine storytelling and the crucial meaning that such tales were intended to convey. Morillo, in particular, highlights the crucial importance of human emotion, citing Alex Rosenberg’s How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories (2018).

Morillo follows with “Kings and Fortuna: The Meanings of Brémule.” Morillo has written previously on the battle in his Warfare under the Anglo-Norman Kings (1994) but took this opportunity to take a less tactical approach, fitting the battle into narratives, story, and meaning, a development that reflects his own over the past two decades. To Morillo, Brémule reflects “intracultural warfare,” noting that “intracultural warfare crosses no cultural boundaries ... which describes the world of Anglo-Norman and French chivalry in the early twelfth century” (p. 105). As a result, it can tell us much about the norms and mores of that world from its own perspective, as opposed to wars between cultures, like the Crusades—a topic taken up later in the collection by Gillingham and Kaeuper.

In “Fighting the Last War: Remembering the Norman Conquest during the Anarchy,” Paxton, echoing Abels, reminds us once more that the accounts of wars frequently reflect the experiences and stresses of previous ones experienced by the writers. In this sense, it reflects the aphorism “written histories tell us more about the era they were written in than the era they were written about,” despite professional beliefs about objectivity. Paxton’s fine treatment of accounts written in the mid-twelfth century is connected to events that resonate locally with her sources, and she makes a strong case for setting monastic chronicles in particular within their local history context, concluding that chroniclers wrote in “very
deliberate ways ... to advance a particular view both of the Conquest and of more recent events, and of how these events could be made to comment on each other” (p. 132). It is a lesson more broadly applicable to written histories, then and now.

The iconic France returns to the pivotal tenure of Baldwin V and his times in “Gilbert of Mons’ Chronicle of Hainault as a Source for Military History in the Twelfth Century,” an inspired choice given Abels's long focus on the use of chronicle as a source of political and cultural insight. France notes that the chronicle is short on tactical but long on political detail and offers tantalizing cultural clues from a realpolitik and noble perspective. He writes that Gilbert “provides us with exceptional pictures of the way war was fought and some insight into the thinking of commanders.... [He was] caught up in the business of war that was the prime task of government. Although he did not participate in the fighting, he accepted entirely the values and outlook of those who did ... [though] there is little here of what is usually called ‘chivalry’” (pp. 151, 154).

David Crouch (formerly University of Hull) presents “At Home with Roger of Howden,” colorfully opening with a summa, “Master Roger of Howden may not have written the most attractive, witty and engaging chronicles of his life and times, but their importance is beyond any dispute” (p. 156). This treatment underscores the need to understand authors in context, an excellent reminder delivered alongside careful scholarship establishing Howden's travel itinerary.

One of the collection’s editors, Hosler, uses a modern idea to springboard with an intriguing possibility, that historical commentators may well have known each other and even exchanged notes. In “Embedded Reporters? Ambroise, Richard de Templo and Roger of Howden on the Third Crusade,” Hosler painstakingly reconstructs the itineraries of three key Christian sources, and the reader is invited to speculate how such interaction might have influenced each writer’s chronicle. It is an intriguing presentation, a useful extension of such verbal interactions more familiar from the Renaissance, and worthy of consideration.

In “The Treatment of Male and Female Prisoners of War during the Third Crusade,” Gillingham (emeritus, London School of Economics) blends his long interest in crusading with Abels's cultural turn and the study of prisoners of war and examines how the treatment of those prisoners illuminates otherwise hidden aspects of culture and belief. Gillingham's prose is typically well wrought, sometimes disturbingly clear, as is appropriate given that he deals with the troublesome and painful treatment of prisoners on both sides of the conflict, unblinded by romance or partisan affinity.

Continuing the crusading theme, Kaeuper (University of Rochester), better known as a scholar on violence and chivalry, offers a wry and clever essay, “Exempla, Crusade and Chivalry.” Kaeuper extends his study of chivalric literature to include crusading exempla, stories meant to inspire, often included in collections and in sermons. I will not spoil any of the intellectual surprises he offers but, suffice it to say, that many of the stories are as entertaining as they are illuminating. In the spirit of a good-natured and humored point, I would challenge the idea of armor being “securely bolted” together (usually rivets held one plate to another, or sometimes they were articulated on internal leathers for ease and flexibility), but the author's point about chivalry and crusading being part of a functional whole remains thoroughly intact (p. 219).

Rogers (United States Military Academy at West Point) breaks the temporal boundary in “Frontier Warfare in the St. Omer Chronicle (1342-1347).” Rogers draws the reader's attention to the little-known chronicle, highlighting its rich detail in matters both tactical and operational. Notably, he crosses swords with Bernard Bachrach
and DeVries, augmenting his long position that medieval cavalry was indeed a potent force on the battlefield, even with the “Infantry Revolution” of the fourteenth century, posited as part of the broader “Military Revolution” debate in Rogers’s 1995 essay “Military Revolutions in the Hundred Years War.”[1] Indeed this current essay is connected to the rest with its focus on the power of the emotion of fear, among common fighting men, and as a function of the cavalry charge. He notes that “fear and effectiveness were interrelated: the charge was successful because it could be effective, and was effective partly because it was feared” (p. 232). Indeed, Rogers has done the late medieval military history a great service in drawing attention to the St. Omer Chronicle, and one hopes an edition will eventually see publication.

Carroll Gillmor (PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles) rounds out the Abels Festschrift with an intriguing look at physical culture in “Some Observations on the Training of Medieval Warhorses.” Gillmor challenges some historical thoughts on the “rollback turn,” finding it a modern concept derived from modern equitation, an attempt to fill in the gaps with what amounts to frog DNA (p. 246). Gillmor well documents the crucial underlying maneuver of the collection, blending academic with practical knowledge to conclude that a turn on the haunches would have been far more practical than the modern-derived “rollback” turn. It is a well-written and valuable addition to the work.

Overall, the authors and editors succeed in honoring Abels with work that will continue to be referenced at least for decades to come. Moreover, reflecting his passion for teaching and research, works such as Rogers’s and Gillmor’s will hopefully spur future generations of scholars into similarly productive research forays.

Note

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