

Book Reviews

The Devil's Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past by Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. viii + 198 pp.; illustrations, notes, further reading, index; clothbound, \$50.00; paperback, \$21.95.

There has been no shortage of work done on modern appropriations of the European Middle Ages over the last five or so years in both popular publications around the world as well as more traditional scholarly venues, and with significant contributions made over social media platforms. This new book, although published by an academic press, seeks to thread the needle between all those different types of venues—it's light, readable, and inexpensive, but does include some of the most recent research in medieval studies.

The book is divided into six chapters and includes a brief introduction and epilogue. The introduction runs through the stakes involved in talking about history, while chapter 1 does similar work when it briefly attempts to myth-bust some of the most common misconceptions about the medieval world. This approach sets the tone for the remainder of the book, with problems introduced, their roots and impacts briefly relayed, and then the historical facts “disproven” with contemporary scholarship (though more on this below).

Chapter 2 confronts the way the European Middle Ages have been used to underpin nationalist sentiment since the nineteenth century, with discussion of former president Donald J. Trump and other modern authoritarians. The focus here is about political legitimacy, with a reframing section on actual medieval “cosmopolitanism” at the end. Chapter 3 pays attention to Nazis and their nostalgia for the medieval, but is really more concerned with moments of zero-sum violence under the umbrella of Samuel P. Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis—how the medieval has been adopted by antisemites and Islamophobes who look to the past to legitimize their hate. Topics in this chapter range from Edmund Allenby's conquest of Jerusalem in 1917 to 9/11 and modern far right terrorism, with a coda about medieval interreligious communities.

The American experience specifically is the subject of chapter 4, beginning with the Ku Klux Klan but broadening out to engage other fantasies of whiteness. This chapter also surveys some contemporary scholarship about the roots of modern race thinking in pre-modernity, and its attentiveness to the lines of alliance drawn

between hate groups and disparate historical moments is particularly welcome. The next chapter deals with the idea of “chivalry” and its attendant issues, including sex, gender, and patriarchal masculinity. Then, the final chapter tackles religion. It is a curious editorial decision to segment this topic off, as the theme is woven through many of the previous chapters. An opening quotation from Edward Gibbon about how theology is corrupted by man sets the tone; the rest of the chapter deals with religious groups (ISIS, far-right Catholics, etc.) and how they nostalgically evoke a particular vision of the medieval past and how they too have “corrupted” religion. This is an understandable rhetorical choice in this context, but one that is problematic from the standpoint of the history of religions, as it can lead one into the trap of “heretic-hunting,” thinking that “real” religion is pure theology rather than something culturally constructed and historically situated. Finally, the brief conclusion sounds hopeful notes about a way forward for talking about the Middle Ages—one that is playful, creative, and already embodied in some elements of contemporary pop culture.

It is a bit of a truism that writing history often means either recuperating your period of study or denigrating it. Although there are small moments in which this book takes the latter path, it falls squarely, it seems, in the former camp. The authors, as I noted above, structure the book around “myth-busting.” In each chapter, they detail one or more uses of the medieval past by extremists and then offer at the end of that chapter some “real history” to counter those abuses. This, again, is an understandable choice but one that comes with its own pitfalls and limitations. Such an approach can obscure as much as it illuminates.

The authors are indeed correct that right-wing extremists often simply have their facts wrong, that the real past is much more complicated than they would like it to be. But this approach obscures the reality that these extremists often actually have their facts *right* and that there’s a weight of scholarship—usually but not always from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with its attendant racism, sexism, and Christian supremacism—they use to justify their odious conclusions. As such, the focus on myth-busting (or fact correction) can sometimes be an ineffective strategy to do the work the authors so clearly want to do. In other words, this is not a case of either/or but rather one of both/and. What sometimes gets lost in this is (a) the complexity of the Middle Ages, which were violent, bigoted, and xenophobic, even as they were peaceful, tolerant, and permeable; and (b) how scholars themselves have been and still are (sometimes) complicit.

All that said, *The Devil’s Historians* is an accessible and quick introduction to many of the problems we confront in studying the medieval past in the twenty-first century, laying out both the stakes and some possible avenues of countering the use of history to support hate. It would pair well with other scholarship tackling this topic from different perspectives, such as the removal of nineteenth-century monuments to white supremacy, or the voluminous work being done on masculinity and white American evangelical Christianity.

Extremists want the medieval past to seem simple, but anyone who says that history is simple is selling something. They are carnival barkers and it is the work of historians to puncture their spell, to complicate the simple story the barkers tell, and to instead engage with the crowd by showing them the realities—in all its complexity—of the human experience. The authors have here taken important steps in that direction.

Matthew Gabriele, Virginia Tech

Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy by

Ethan J. Kytte and Blaine Roberts. New York: The New Press, 2018. 349 pp.;

illustrations, notes, index; clothbound, \$28.99, paperback, \$19.99.

Since the book's original publication in 2018, *Denmark Vesey's Garden* has been highly praised by historians and lay audiences alike, garnering mentions in the nation's top newspapers and being praised by the *Civil War Times* as "a stunning contribution to the historiography of Civil War memory studies."¹ This praise is well-deserved. The book will undoubtedly serve as a remarkable case study for scholars studying the role of memory in shaping popular understandings of the past. Analyzing the city of Charleston, South Carolina, and its complex legacy of slavery, secession, and civil rights resistance, Ethan J. Kytte and Blaine Roberts take readers on a centuries-long journey of public memory from the city's founding in 1670 up to the tragic massacre of nine African American parishioners at Emmanuel AME Church by a white supremacist in 2015. While the book is full of useful insights for public historians, three are worth mentioning here.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway of *Denmark Vesey's Garden* is the creative use of source materials to examine public memory in Charleston. Readers will see sources used in previous Civil War memory studies such as public speeches, newspaper articles, dedication ceremonies for public statutes, and popular literature. However, one will also come across a rich analysis of guidebooks promoting historically themed tourism to the city, musical performances of African American music by the all-white Society for the Preservation of Spirituals, the use of Confederate flags at sporting events, and tour companies working to interpret Charleston's history to contemporary audiences. Kytte and Roberts successfully use these sources to paint a portrait with many messages. On the one hand, they demonstrate how white Charlestonians used their city's status as the "Cradle of the Confederacy" to celebrate a Lost Cause interpretation of the Civil War and to downplay the harmful effects of slavery on Black Charlestonians, both then and now. Historically, white political and cultural leaders in Charleston

¹ Quoted in promotion page for *Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy*, The New Press website, <https://thenewpress.com/books/denmark-veseys-garden>.