

## BOOK REVIEW

*Medieval Schools: From Roman Britain to Renaissance England.*  
By Nicholas Orme. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University  
Press, 2006.

*MEDIEVAL SCHOOLS*, NICHOLAS ORME'S important study of the history of education in medieval England, overturns much of what scholars and laymen alike thought they knew about the subject. As the typical rendition would have it, schools were few and far between in medieval times, and what schools did exist were dominated by religious subjects. Orme makes a convincing case for something like the opposite of this view: education was in fact relatively widespread in medieval England, was typically provided in a nonmonastic setting, often at the hands of lay teachers, and its subject matter included important secular subjects, even business skills.

A common refrain in discussions of the history of education is that prior to the modern age, and particularly to the introduction of universal compulsory education, education was a rare and highly exclusive commodity, typically available only to the clergy and the very rich. At some level such an outcome is unavoidable: at a time when production methods are primitive and the productivity of labor extremely low, siphoning off precious labor resources into years of formal schooling would have been nonsensical to the point of absurdity. What Orme shows, however, is that even bearing in mind the smaller numbers of people for whom education could be feasible in an age of general impoverishment, far more people of modest means received some type of formal education than scholars once realized.

Arthur Francis Leach discovered in the late nineteenth century that the tradition of the freestanding school—that is, with no institutional affiliations to monasteries or any other organization—was in fact quite old, and that it had been a mistake to date its widespread emergence as late as the fourteenth century, or even into the Reformation. Well before that time, Leach believed, education had primarily been the province of these independent schools, which were staffed either by laymen or secular (rather than monastic) clergy and were open to the general public. In his discovery Leach went to the extreme of disparaging to the point of near-dismissal the

educational contributions made by the monasteries—an error Orme does not commit—but he had nevertheless made an important contribution to the study of education in medieval England.

In *Medieval Schools* Orme lends further support to Leach's startling conclusion. The freestanding schools, he explains, were open to the public:

Anybody (at least any boy) could go to them. Their teachers and pupils were secular priests, clerks, or laity who lived in the world, not people who withdrew from the world like monks, nuns, or friars. From the twelfth century onwards these were the major schools of medieval England, embracing a larger proportion of the population than the private schools in the households of the nobility or the schools of the religious orders. (p. 55)

Education in medieval England was far from uniform, and thus we have some locales in which reading and music were taught in one school and grammar in another, more advanced school, and others in which all these subjects were taught in the same institution. Grammar was a more advanced subject than mere reading, and involved the reading and analysis of more advanced and difficult texts. Those texts included a great many important works of classical poetry and prose. A description of an ideal school curriculum, drafted shortly after 1200, calls upon the student to learn

the useful compendium of morality which the multitude supposes to be that of Cato, and let him pass from the *Eclogue of Theodulus* to the eclogues of the *Bucolics* [of Virgil]. . . . Then let him read satirists and historians, so that he may learn about the vices to avoid in the age of minority, and let him look for the noble deeds of those [who ought] to be imitated. From the joyful *Thebaid* [of Statius] let him pass to the divine *Aeneid*, nor let him neglect the poet [Lucan] whom Cordoba brought forth . . . . Let him reserve the moral sayings of Juvenal in the secrecy of his breast, and study hard how to avoid the shamefastness of nature. Let him read Horace's *Satires* and *Epistles* and *Art of Poetry* and *Odes* with the book of *Epodes*. Let him hear Ovid's *Elegies* and *Metamorphoses*, but especially let him be familiar with the little book [by Ovid] of *The Remedy of Love*. (p. 97)

It is well known that the medieval universities taught secular subjects in abundance, and that in fact theology was the least common degree earned (law being the most). Orme shows that such subjects also featured heavily at the pre-university level. By the fourteenth century at the latest, so-called grammar schools had come to teach business skills for those seeking employment in trade and administration.

Such instruction might include “dictamen” (the art of writing letters), the methods of drafting deeds and charters, the composition of court rolls and other legal records, and the keeping of financial accounts. (p. 68)

Between 1200 and 1400 it was common for such documents to be written in French, so these students often learned French as well.

Although desiring to call attention to the frequently overlooked freestanding schools, Orme does not seek to dismiss the quantity of instruction dispensed by monasteries and the mendicant orders, both of which made education available beyond the confines of their own members. Offering education even to those who would not go on to become monks had been a fairly common feature of the monastic tradition from its beginnings: in the sixth century, St. Benedict personally instructed the sons of Roman nobles, for instance, and St. John Chrysostom tells us that it was already customary in his day for people in Antioch to send their sons to be educated by the monks. St. Boniface established a school in every monastery he founded in Germany, and in England St. Augustine of Canterbury and his monks set up schools wherever they went.

“Altogether,” Orme writes,

the importance of the schools of the religious orders in medieval England cannot be doubted. They were responsible for the further education of large numbers of monks, canons, and friars in grammar, arts, and theology, and they enabled many thousands of lay boys and girls to be educated. . . . At university level they established some nine or ten communities at Oxford and half a dozen at Cambridge. (p. 287)

Such education was severely disrupted, if not altogether brought to an end, by Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s.

What, according to Orme, do medieval educators have to show for themselves?

They were meticulous in their analysis of Latin and inventive in teaching it to children. They devised the foreign-language textbook as we understand it, first for Latin and later for French. They helped create modern English, in its spelling and style, through using it for teaching Latin. They laid the foundations of the structure of schooling in England today: the custom of going to school between about five and eighteen, the hierarchy of primary and secondary schools, the three-term year, and the six-form organisation. Even the philosophy of education was being studied by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, from the works of continental scholars like Hugh of St. Victor, Vincent of Beauvais, and Giles of Rome. (p. 345)

Nicholas Orme has made an enormous contribution to the study of medieval education, even if he confines himself to the English experience. “Apart from schooling for all,” he concludes,

which did not become a national policy until the late nineteenth century, there is hardly a concept, institution, or practice of modern education that cannot be traced, somewhere or other, in medieval England. (p. 345)

This oversized book, printed on heavy stock paper, is lavishly illustrated throughout with scores of works of medieval art. It is, in short, an essential starting point for future research into medieval education, and an important contribution to the ongoing avalanche of scholarship overturning the caricatures that once constituted the conventional wisdom about the Middle Ages.

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