

Mapping Medievalism: An Indigenous Political Perspective

Review of:

Mapping Medievalism at the Canadian Frontier edited by Kathryn Brush, London Ontario Canada: Museum London and the McIntosh Gallery, 2010, 172pp, 91 col. plates, \$25.00can ISBN 978-1-897215-30-2

Mapping Medievalism is a collection of essays written by the course director and students of a graduate course in art history at the University of Western Ontario (nine of the essays are written by the students and two, including the introduction, by the course director). The essays are connected in-so-far as they all explore the different ways *Medievalism* shaped Canadians' understandings of themselves and the world around them, primarily (but not exclusively) in Southern Ontario at the dawn of the 17th century. The authors use the term *Medievalism* in a very broad sense. In most of the essays, it refers to the ways in which settlers in the colony drew upon their imaginations of European medieval history to construct and understand their society on Turtle Island. The concept, used in this manner, is applied to analyses of art, literature, travel logs and architecture. *Medievalism* is also used, however, more sparsely, and much more curiously, by some authors to refer to pre-“contact” Aboriginal cultures. This use of the term seems here to be an attempt to make the project more inclusive of Canada's Aboriginal heritage.

Before discussing the individual essays, we would like to take a moment to help situate this publication, which is one part of a much larger project. In addition to this publication, the exhibition *Mapping Medievalism at the Canadian Frontier* took place at three venues consecutively: the Macintosh Gallery, the Museum of London, and D.B Weldon Library, at the University of Western Ontario. The exhibition included the paintings and images that are discussed in the publication. The Art Lab at the University of Western Ontario also completed a project with the students in the studio program. An audio work was composed by *Audio Lodeg* a Canadian sound art collective based in London, Ontario. Their piece titled *Time Transposition 1010* creates an approximation of what the southern Ontario landscape might have sounded like 1000 years ago. Finally, in conjunction with *Mapping Medievalism*, artists Jeff Thomas and Shelly Niro exhibited *Mapping Iroquoia*, an exhibition of contemporary art investigating the period of 1500-1800 ce in the Iroquoia confederacy. As Iroquoia artists their exhibition provided the overall project with a contemporary indigenous perspective on the history of Southern Ontario.

Many of the essays in the book deal primarily with the impact imaginings of the medieval have had on Canadian architecture, art and literature. Claire Feagan's chapter explores the factors which influenced the choice of gothic architecture in London, Ontario. Hillary Walker Guban's chapter examines the way medieval

motifs were used to market the colony of Upper Canada to prospective British migrants, by making the colony appear familiar. Simon Bently's chapter explores the manner in which medieval and colonial notions of masculinity converge in artistic depictions of the colonial administrator Colonel Thomas Talbot. The course director, Professor Kathryn Brush, provides a chapter that focuses on the influence imaginings of the medieval had on the work of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. These chapters all provide nuanced insights into the development of Euro-Canadian settler society. These chapters would be most interesting to scholars with a particular interest in medievalism.

However, our interests lay elsewhere. Vanessa is an Aboriginal artist based in Toronto while Warren is a non-aboriginal graduate student at York University with interests (both personal and academic) in resisting colonialism. Accordingly, we were most interested in the essays that deal with colonial ideologies and discourse, including Ahlisa Moussa's, which demonstrates that author Anna Jameson's writings were unwittingly complicit with colonial discourses. Likewise, Rebecca Gera explores the role of European consciousness in Euro-Canadian imaginings of the landscape of Turtle Island. Erin Rothstein examines the manner in which Frederic Verner's art positions himself as both Canadian and European, allowing him to both identify with the Canadian wilderness and also "project his colonial imagination over it."

One of the chapters we found most interesting was 'Dismantling Frontiers: Cross referencing the Material Culture of Europe and the Great Lakes Region, c 1000-1500 CE' by Stephanie Radu. Radu analyzes the manner in which medieval European and pre-"contact" Aboriginal material cultures are often compared and categorized. She argues that drawing comparisons between these two historical societies reinforces colonial ideologies (primarily the idea of "progress"). Her chapter concludes with the claim that that academics were able to locate similarities between the two cultures because of the vast number of artefacts acquired (which necessitated sweeping categorizations) as well as the academics' preoccupation with medievalist themes of nature and spirituality.

Emma Arenson's chapter, 'Cross-Cultural Technologies Adaptations: Exploring Intersections Between "Medievalism" and Native Material Culture', provides an interesting critique of a very pervasive colonial trope commonly referred to as *European Diffusionism* – the idea that all relevant culture and technology is developed in the Western world and then diffuses outwards to the periphery. Arenson's analysis of settler-Aboriginal relations demonstrates that cultural exchange in historic South Western Ontario was a two-way process.

The essay that we found most interesting was Megan Arnott's, which provides an analysis of the role of historic Norse voyages to Turtle Island in Euro-Canadian nationalist mythology. Arnott argues that the mythology of Norse voyages is used by Euro-Canadian settlers to insert themselves into the history of Turtle Island. This becomes most extreme in accounts that assert that the Norse mixed with Aboriginal populations. Arnott argues that these accounts often

attribute Aboriginal cultural ingenuity to interaction with the Norse, thus making Europeans appear “almost as indigenous as the Natives.” This chapter provides an excellent demonstration of the way settler-colonial ideologies operate, and would be useful to assign for a first year Native Studies class.

While the book provides interesting discussions of the relationship between medievalism and colonial ideology/discourse, we found some aspects of it to be problematic. These problems seem to be rooted in two theoretical issues. First, some authors utilized the term *Eurocentrism* to essentially mean looking at the world from a European point of view. To do so removes the sweeping value judgements involved in Eurocentric thought: Eurocentrism is not merely seeing the world as a European does, but assuming that European people, culture, ideas, et cetera are, as a whole, superior to their non-European counterparts. This becomes most problematic in Rebecca Gera’s chapter, ‘Imag(in)ing the Medieval: Gothic Encounters in the Literary “Wilderness of Upper Canada’’. The article concludes by lamenting the fact that a European influence “stubbornly persists in Canadians’ understanding of their surroundings.” From our perspective, this type of critique completely misses the point with regard to Canadian colonialism because, as some of these essays attest, Aboriginal Peoples have always been open to utilizing culture, ideas and technology from Europeans. In fact, these technologies and ideas have frequently been used by Aboriginal Peoples to resist colonialism. Broadly speaking, there is nothing that is *a priori* wrong with European culture, ideas or people.

A second theoretical issue emerges when some authors convolute colonialism with “intolerance”. This is most obvious in Moussa’s chapter, ‘Medievalism and Feminism in Anna Jameson’s Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada’’. The article, in part, examines the way Anna Jameson’s texts reinforced colonial tropes. She then goes on to remind us that Jameson was quite *tolerant* of Aboriginal Peoples, and even befriended some Aboriginal people. This seems to serve as a qualification of, or an apology for, colonial ideology/discourse. Again, we feel that it misses the point.

As we see it, the point is really not so much whether or not these colonial figures were European or whether or not they were personally rude to Aboriginal Peoples. We are not interested in character judgements or sweeping critiques of European culture. We are much more interested in the fact that that these settlers, friendly or not, were dispossessing Aboriginal Peoples of their territory and laying the material and ideological groundwork (often unwittingly) for a nation/state building project that was grounded in cultural genocide and the perpetual dispossession of Aboriginal Peoples’ territories. Accordingly, the essays that shed light on these processes were most useful and interesting.

Finally, we are both a little unsure of the utility of Kathryn Brush’s use of the term “Middle Ages” to refer to Aboriginal societies between the years of 800-1550 ce. It seems to be an attempt to be inclusive, to make space for Aboriginal history in medieval studies. However, we are unsure as to whether or not referring to Vanessa’s ancestors as “medieval” really helps to provide more space for

meaningful engagement with Aboriginal histories. The way Brush utilizes the concept in her article is quite telling: after an extensive analysis of the artwork of Thomson and the Group of Seven, Brush laments that these artists pay no attention to Canada's "Middle Ages" (pre-"contact" Aboriginal societies). To rectify this issue, Brush provides us with an image of an archaeological artefact from Iroquoian culture, which is apparently either a pendant or an amulet. This image tells us nothing of Aboriginal Peoples' contributions to contemporary society on Turtle Island. Furthermore, it provides no sense of the historical or contemporary violence directed against Aboriginal Peoples. It simply shows us a relic of an apparently bygone and erased era, removed from any meaningful context and with no connection to contemporary Aboriginal realities. Her use of this term is particularly confusing given the fact that some of the student contributions to this publication explicitly criticize the colonial implications of adopting the trope of medievalism to understanding Aboriginal Peoples.

The essays draw on several main institutions for their research and exhibition. These are: Archives and Research Collections Centre; D.B Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario; Malcouve Collection, University of Toronto Arts Centre; McIntosh Gallery, University of Western Ontario; Museum of Ontario Archaeology; Serge A. Sauer Map Library, and the University of Western Ontario. These institutions have thorough and excellent collections to draw upon for projects of this sort. However, the authors' ambition to be more inclusive of Aboriginal cultures and people may have been more successful if that had utilized a collection managed by Aboriginal Peoples. For example, the authors could have consulted the Woodland Cultural Centre, which contains one of the largest museums in Canada managed and administered by First Nations.

Over all we found the most useful and relevant essays in *Mapping Medievalism at the Canadian Frontier* to be those which investigated and demonstrated settler/colonial ideologies and discourses. These essays can assist both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal readers in better understanding the colonial development of Canadian society. Using art history is an inventive and effective way to accomplish this investigation. The authors' objective to create a more inclusive history in a meaningful way is a difficult task and this publication falls short in this regard.

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