

RICHARD SOUTHERN: THE DISCREET REVOLUTIONARY

HELEN STEELE

Professor Sir Richard W. Southern (1912–2001) was one of the preeminent medieval historians of the twentieth century. Educated at inter-war Oxford University, he was inspired by the noted scholars Vivian Galbraith and Maurice Powicke, yet managed to move beyond their traditional interpretation of medieval history to open up new and fruitful avenues of inquiry that have influenced subsequent medievalists. Always awake to the currents of historical theory, he nevertheless rejected the strict confines of a purely Marxian, *Annalist* or postmodern method and forged his own path. His approach, as demonstrated in such major works as *The Making of the Middle Ages*, *The History of the Church in the Middle Ages* and *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, placed the people and institutions of the Middle Ages within a broad sweep of time and place while showing an often acute understanding of the individual.¹ Focusing upon primary sources over secondary, Southern used frequent examples and anecdotes to illustrate his themes. These examples came not only from the top but also from the lower levels of society and often concerned daily life rather than the big events of history. With them, he was able to untangle the intricate and tangled threads of medieval history and bring it new life and clarity.

Richard Southern was born in Newcastle, England, the son of a lower-middle class timber merchant. Educated at a local grammar school, he entered Balliol College, Oxford on a scholarship in 1929 to study economics. He soon transferred to the History department and achieved a First Class degree in 1932.² In the 1930s, Oxford

University had the most distinguished school of history in England but traditional ideas of history, inherited from William Stubbs, dominated the syllabus. In particular, the course emphasized institutional and English constitutional history. It also stressed the continuity of the past as well as the importance of geography to history.³ The aim of the school was, as it had been since the 1860s, the broad training of the next generation of imperial administrators and bureaucrats.⁴ Despite the minor changes that professors such as Maurice Powicke and Vivian Galbraith attempted to institute, Southern noted that the approach meant the omission of “that which is most interesting in the past.”⁵ Nevertheless, Powicke and Galbraith inspired the young student to reach beyond these limitations and in 1933 he received a junior Fellowship at Exeter College, Oxford. From then on, his academic career ran smoothly save for a five-year break for military service during the Second World War. In 1937, he became a fellow and tutor at Balliol. He took the Chichele Professorship of Modern History at Oxford in 1961 and Presidency of St John’s College, Oxford in 1969.⁶ It was at his inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor that he set out his agenda, to move beyond the Oxford traditions and the “barbarous weight of information” to the “study of thoughts and visions, moods and emotions and devotions of articulate people.”⁷

The first manifestation of Southern’s vision was *The Making of the Middle Ages*, published in 1953 to widespread acclaim. An examination of the changes that

¹ For a detailed bibliography of R.W. Southern to 1980 see ‘List of Published Writings of Richard William Southern,’ in R.H.C. Davies and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, eds, *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

² William Palmer, “Sir Richard Southern Looks Back: A Portrait of the Medievalist as a Young Man,” *The Virginia Quarterly*

Review 74.1 (Winter 1998) <<http://www.vqronline.org/>> part I, paragraphs 12–19.

³ Richard W. Southern, *History and Historians: Selected Papers of R.W. Southern*, edited by R.J. Bartlett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁶ Martin Brett, “Obituary: Sir Richard Southern,” *The Independent* (London), February 9th 2001.

⁷ Southern, *History and Historians*, 100–101.

occurred between the 10th and 13th centuries that revitalized Europe, it was less descriptive than analytical, eschewing narrative form and the traditional emphasis upon “big men” and upon constitutional history to reach into the “*mentalité*” of the medieval man.⁸ In this, he mirrored the aims of Lucian Febvre, historian of the Annales School.⁹ In five chapters, described by Peter Charanis as more “a collection of interpretive essays,” Southern examined Europe’s internal and external relations, the forces binding society, changes in the church, intellectual development and the insertion of emotion into thought, spirituality and art.¹⁰

Southern continued to demonstrate a focus upon the mind of the medieval man and the forces at work in medieval society in later works, including *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, first published in 1970. Commissioned as a volume of the Penguin History of the Church, Southern strained against the limitations imposed by the series editors, especially of length. It would be to “attempt the impossible” to cover such a huge subject in one volume.¹¹ Thus, Southern decided to save issues of spirituality and theology for a separate volume.¹² This omission was neither due to lack of interest in the subject or to ignorance. After a period of atheism in his youth, Southern had rejoined the Anglican Church in 1936 and remained a committed and devout man until the end of his life.¹³ He complemented this with a deep understanding of spirituality and spiritual men. Historians of theological and church history consider his work on St Anselm and upon the intellectual cleric Robert Grossteste as classics in their

field.¹⁴ Instead, Southern managed to stamp his authority upon the work through his choosing to focus upon the place of the medieval church within the greater society, “to understand the connection between the religious organizations and the social environment of the church.”¹⁵ Unlike previous church scholars such as Dom David Knowles, Southern analyzed rather than merely described.¹⁶ He averred, “It is important to appreciate the forces that confined and directed the development of the church.” These interactions between secular and spiritual had long been ignored or downplayed by earlier historians. Indeed, he noted that given the “integral part the church played in [medieval] European society” this was a crucial and fatal flaw in earlier histories.¹⁷

In *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, Southern concentrated upon one theme already touched upon in both *The Making of the Middle Ages* and *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. In this, his last work, first published in two volumes in 1995 and (posthumously) in 2001, Southern examined patterns of thought emerging in early twelfth century Europe within the context of medieval culture and society.¹⁸ In volume one, he defined and analyzed the concept of scholastic humanism, identifying how society, culture and theology affected its study and the formation and development of the universities. In volume two, he concentrated upon the individual scholars set within their schools and evaluated their impact upon medieval society. Indeed, Brian Tierney noted that this focus means that the book is “not at all a

⁸ Richard W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

⁹ Palmer, paragraph 5. For more information on Febvre and the Annalists see Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Approach*, 5th Edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2003) 117.

¹⁰ Peter Charanis, “Review: *The Making of the Middle Ages* by R.W. Southern,” *Speculum* 29.4 (October 1954) 819.

¹¹ Richard W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, The Penguin History of the Church volume 2 edited by Owen Chadwick (London: Penguin, 1990) 15.

¹² This companion volume was never published, although many of the themes appear in Richard W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).

¹³ Palmer, part IV, paragraph 1.

¹⁴ See, for example, Richard Luman, “Review: *St Anselm and his Biographer* by R.W. Southern,” *Church History* 33.4 (1964) 493–494 and Robert Bartlett, “The Cobbler’s Art: a review of *Robert Grossteste: the Growth of an English Mind in Medieval Europe* by R.W. Southern,” *The Journal of British Studies* 26.2 (April 1987) 258–261.

¹⁵ Southern, *Western Society and the Church* 16.

¹⁶ See for example, David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1953).

¹⁷ Southern, *Western Society and the Church* 15.

¹⁸ Richard W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe, Volume I: Foundations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) and *Volume II: The Heroic Age* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

conventional history of ideas,” but rather a contemplation of the role of ideas within a greater whole.¹⁹

Despite sharing some of the aims of Febvre, in many respects, Southern did not follow Annalist methods. In particular, he shunned the emphasis of Annalists like Fernand Braudel or medievalists such as Sylvia Thrupp upon demographics and statistics.²⁰ Indeed, while he mentioned the increase in population in Europe briefly in *The Making of the Middle Ages*, he asserted that the data was too limited and that “to extract a coherent story from these records [was] beyond our power.”²¹ He did refer to secondary sources in his works, but to enter into a dialogue with them rather than as a source of information.

Instead of data and secondary sources, Southern focused upon primary accounts, especially the chronicles and contemporaneous biographies of medieval men and women. Nevertheless, he took nothing at face value noting rather that, “words are only straws in the wind.”²² He thus did not read primary sources for “truth, but to understand the author and his environs.”²³ This seems to echo postmodern concerns about the ability of historians to find a single truth, especially given the constraints of language.²⁴ However, Southern still believed that chronicles could have a place in history as long as the historian remained awake to the motivations of the original author and his place within his culture.²⁵ He was thus one of the first medievalists to rehabilitate the chronicles and assert their validity to history. Contemporary medievalists have continued this work, including Chris Given-Wilson, whose work on late medieval chronicles has elucidated the

thoughts of medieval people regarding a turbulent period in English history.²⁶

From these primary sources, Southern demonstrated the complex themes he espoused through anecdotal examples. In *The Making of the Middle Ages* he illustrated early church politics with an account of Wifred the Hairy and his scions, while he used Agnes of Poitou to discuss women’s roles in High Medieval noble politics.²⁷ Similarly, in *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, he illuminated the interplay between bishops and secular power with a fascinating and “lurid” sketch of the German bishop, Henry of Gueldre.²⁸ Certainly, these well-chosen examples illustrate complex ideas far more effectively than any long passages of description or confusion of statistics. Indeed, Palmer noted that Southern’s description of the visit of Pope Leo IX to Rheims for the Feast of St Remigius “conveys better than any assertion could the personal power and majesty exercised by medieval popes.”²⁹ In *Scholastic Humanism* Southern expanded these illustrations to be especially illuminating. In particular, his treatment of John of Salisbury and the two Peters of Blois, the Elder and the Younger, shed light upon the role that scholars played in the growth of medieval government.³⁰ Southern showed the uncertainty of court positions for these men who shifted from place to place, serving different masters, yet managing despite this to assert a collective influence beyond their apparent lack of individual importance.³¹ This, Charles Radding characterized as Southern’s “extraordinary gift [...] at explicating telling and typical personalities and events to make moments of the past come alive.”³²

For the most part in such examples, Southern avoided a concentration upon the well-known magnates,

¹⁹ Brian Tierney, “Review: *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe, 1: Foundations*, by R.W. Southern,” *Speculum* 73.3 (July 1998), 900.

²⁰ Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life, Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 1992) and Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989)

²¹ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 45, 75.

²² Southern, *History and Historians*, 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁴ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1995) 213.

²⁵ Southern, *History and Historians*, 23.

²⁶ Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in the Medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004).

²⁷ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 77, 118–9.

²⁸ Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, 199.

²⁹ Palmer, part I, paragraph 8.

³⁰ Southern, *Scholastic Humanism, Volume II*, 168 and 179.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

³² Charles M. Radding, “Review: *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe, 1: Foundations*, by R.W. Southern,” *The American Historical Review* 102.2 (April 1997) 441.

popes and intellectual figures such as Henry II, Urban II or Peter Abelard to concentrate upon less distinguished characters. This is especially true in *The Making of the Middle Ages*. Even when he did touch upon a powerful man, as he did when he talked about Pope Gregory VII, he avoided straight biography to concentrate upon a few telling aspects of Gregory's life that vividly illuminated his subject.³³ Edward Miller described this as "one of the virtues of this book."³⁴ Nevertheless, in *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, Southern had to consider the "big men" in the context of the church, given the importance of popes and the higher echelons of clergy in church society. He could not, nor did he try to deny their powerful influence upon church development. His analysis of them, however, is particularly acute, placing discussion of them clearly within the greater picture of secular, spiritual and intellectual change.

This anecdotal approach to history bears some similarity to microhistory. However, unlike Carlo Ginzberg's *Menocchio*, Southern's exemplars were not from the lower or peasant classes but mostly from the emerging intellectual classes.³⁵ This is, in great part, due to the lack of information about the peasantry from the period. In addition, Southern was careful to note, "no single pattern of political development holds good for the whole of Europe."³⁶ He did not use his examples to draw overarching conclusions but rather to illustrate specific points.

In addition to avoiding a concentration upon "big men," Southern also argued against the concentration by earlier historians on "big events." He noted that, "the significant events are often the obscure ones." In *The Making of the Middle Ages*, for instance, he mentioned the *Magna Carta* only briefly, examined the Crusades only for what they could say about the mentalities of those involved

and described neither battles nor specific political events except as they applied to the greater picture.³⁷ There was little or no chronology or narrative flow within his works. This made his books a challenge for those without some existing grasp of medieval history. However, for those with such a background, its omission allowed for a concentration upon far greater and more important issues. Southern was interested not in "what" or "when" but in "why."

Southern examined intricate topics, the analysis of which had either been ignored by previous historians or poorly analyzed. In the second chapter of *The Making of the Middle Ages*, for example, he turned his gaze to the condition of serfdom and freedom within medieval society. Previously, medievalists – with their focus upon institutions and constitutional issues – had ignored the serfs as a class for their perceived lack of agency in high politics.³⁸ Indeed, Southern concentrated upon the potential for the peasantry to influence not politics but rather society as a whole. Although he cautioned that, "the period of growth [of the peasantry] is one of silence" due to lack of records and accounts, he still concluded that signs of peasant growth and consequent influence upon society could be seen in other evidence. By examining what is known about medieval society as a whole, Southern asserted that the "rhythm and standards of workmanship" of the peasantry were mirrored in society not just within the lower but also the middle and upper classes.³⁹

Studying serfdom in particular, Southern did not describe the lot of the serf or their slow movement to freedom as a class but rather asked the more interesting question of why such men submitted to serfdom during this period. It was, he concluded, due not to desperation but rather to a complex mix of economic, religion and psychological factors.⁴⁰ He also drew unique and fascinating conclusions about medieval liberty, noting that the "free" were subject to more laws than the serf and that the primary issue was not one of freedom *per se*, but of the

³³ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 140.

³⁴ Edward Miller, "Review: *The Making of the Middle Ages* by Richard Southern," *English Historical Review* 69.272 (July 1954), 432.

³⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

³⁶ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 90.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13, 54.

³⁸ Palmer, part II, paragraph 11.

³⁹ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 74–75.

⁴⁰ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 98.

difference between the rational rule of law versus the arbitrary “rule of will.”⁴¹ Sidney Painter calls this analysis “masterly.”⁴² Southern also refuted the earlier assumption that the “Gregorian Reforms” of the 11th century issued from the pope downwards, noting that these reforms were more a result of spontaneous practical considerations in the lowest ranks of the church.⁴³ He thus gave these minor church officials an agency previously they lacked. Southern was not necessarily writing a purely “bottom-up” history but clearly he acknowledged that a “top-down” approach omitted important factors in the medieval dynamic.

Southern was thus not afraid to counter long-standing views of academic scholarship. Reviewing *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, David D’Avray noted that “aficionados of Southern’s work will feel the usual thrill as they realized that he has discreetly removed the pin of another grenade.”⁴⁴ In his review of *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, F. Du Boulay particularly praised Southern’s unique explanation of the place of forgeries in the role of ecclesiastical, especially papal, power politics.⁴⁵ In particular, Southern seemed to delight in scotching long-held assumptions about the church. In *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, for example, he argued that the traditional view of a unified, all-powerful church throughout the Middle Ages was a mirage. He maintained that even from the beginning of the early medieval period, a single Christian church never really existed in practical terms. The Latin West and Greek East had followed diverging paths, and episcopacies in the Middle East fell to

Islam. These divisions came not from an all-powerful papacy, but rather from internal pressures from below and external, secular influences.⁴⁶ Similarly, in *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe* Southern took to task the many medieval historians who defended the place of the School of Chartres rather than Paris as the center of medieval scholasticism.⁴⁷ Analyzing a wide variety of primary sources, he delved deeper than earlier scholars to conclude that the predominance of Chartres was a “romantic misunderstanding.”⁴⁸ Southern’s books thus often work best when viewed as a launching point for further scholarly discussion as David Luscombe noted in his review of *Scholastic Humanism*.⁴⁹

In geographical scope, Southern often mirrored the Annalists, most resembling the medievalist Georges Duby whose studies of medieval society were similarly broad-based yet acute.⁵⁰ All of Southern’s major works were surveys that covered the whole of Europe. In *The Making of the Middle Ages*, Southern’s first chapter, “The Divisions of Latin Christendom,” drew a broad picture of the emergence of Western Europe from the insularity of the early Middle Ages to the cosmopolitan nature of the thirteenth century, not only in relation to itself but also within the context of the Islamic and Byzantine spheres of influence. He especially noted the shift from a Germanic dominance in the tenth century to the hegemony of Latinate, especially French, speakers by the thirteenth and the ensuing tensions between Northern and Mediterranean Europe.⁵¹ He also looked at the effect that international trade and the Crusades had upon European unity and upon

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴² Sidney Painter, “Review: *The Making of the Middle Ages* by R.W. Southern,” *The American Historical Review* 59.2 (Jan 1954), 356.

⁴³ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 150.

⁴⁴ David D’Avray, “Review: *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe 1: Foundations*, by R.W. Southern,” Institute of Historical Research Reviews in History, Nov. 1996 <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/southern.html>>, paragraph 6.

⁴⁵ F.R.H. Du Boulay, “Review: *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, by R.W. Southern,” *The English Historical Review* 87.342 (January 1972) 109 commenting on Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, 92

⁴⁶ Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, chapter 3.

⁴⁷ For examples of these arguments see R. Klibansky “The School of Chartres” in Marshall Clagett, *Twelfth Century Europe and the Foundations of Modern Society* (Madison, 1961) 3–14 or Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: the Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972)

⁴⁸ Southern, *Scholastic Humanism, Volume I*, chapter 2, 58.

⁴⁹ David Luscombe, “Review: *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe, 1: Foundations*, by R.W. Southern,” *The English Historical Review* 112.448 (September 1997) 946.

⁵⁰ Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980) and *Women of the Twelfth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980).

⁵¹ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 19, 25.

perceptions of self.⁵² Similarly, while his focus often turned to Rome or to Paris when he surveyed the Church or intellectual life in his later works, he placed them firmly within a broader vista. In *Scholastic Humanism*, Southern covered a broader sweep of Europe than most previous scholars, who concentrated upon particular masters or a specific school.⁵³ In his review of *Scholastic Humanism*, Radding did note that Southern concentrated upon Northern Europe at the expense of Italy.⁵⁴ However, this seems rather an overstatement as Southern spent a full chapter discussing the Italian situation and many of the issues discussed elsewhere applied equally to Italy.⁵⁵ D'Avray also commented that while the school of Paris had a structural base, the school of Bologna rose to importance only because of a single master, Gratian.⁵⁶

Unlike Annalists like Braudel or Kenneth Pomeranz, however, Southern did not attempt to come to a sweeping solution about his period of interest or its end.⁵⁷ To him, there was no *longue durée*. Medieval society was in constant flux, but did not move to a specific point. He noted, "it seems inevitable that thematic linear histories [...] may be in tracing long chains of consequences from document to document, and from century to century" would become irrelevant, that "whatever truth they may exhibit, it is not truth about the past." He especially decried linear history for its potential to "promote a cause in present and future."⁵⁸

Thus, while Southern discussed the impact of economics and class upon people's lives and upon the formation of a more united Europe or a central church, it is clear that he did not subscribe to solely the linear material explanation for history.⁵⁹ Despite associating with the October Club, one of the main Marxist groups in 1930s

Oxford, he never joined the club or the Communist Party.⁶⁰ Later, he characterized Marx as the inheritor of "prophetic" traditions of history.⁶¹ He understood the demand satisfied by Marxist theories of history for "a more 'relevant' chain of consequences" but believed that "[it] suffered the [...] fate of revealing itself in the end as both untrue to the past and irrelevant to the present and future."⁶²

Medieval Europe underwent great changes in the period from the eighth through to the fifteenth centuries. To Southern, however, there was no single or even simple explanation for the changes occurring over the medieval period. Rather, innumerable factors interacted, intermingled and coexisted. Medieval church history, for instance, cannot be explained without reference to the complex flow of the spiritual and the secular, the impact of trade and the cash economy, the resurgence of scholarship and underlying anxieties of the period.⁶³ From small and uncertain beginnings, when doubt and disunity dominated the psychology of medieval peoples and turned them to the spiritual for succor, Europe grew, prospered and became more confident. The needs of both the laity and the clergy changed and the delicate balance between church and state faltered, leading to new tensions and new solutions.

Some historians lay the root cause as economics or demographics. In this review of *The Making of the Middle Ages* Painter regretted Southern's lack of emphasis on economic factors;⁶⁴ Miller also believed that Southern might be underestimating such factors as economics or demographics.⁶⁵ In *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, however, Southern further expounded upon these forces, carefully not downplaying the role that economic change played in the development of the church.⁶⁶ In this, he prefigured work done by such contemporary scholars as Lester Little.⁶⁷ While noting the

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵³ For example see Michael Wilks, ed., *The World of John of Salisbury* (Blackwell: Oxford 1984).

⁵⁴ Radding, 441.

⁵⁵ Southern, *Scholastic Humanism, Volume I*, chapter 8, 268–282.

⁵⁶ D'Avray, paragraph 6.

⁵⁷ Braudel and Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)

⁵⁸ Southern, *History and Historians*, 129–130.

⁵⁹ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 41.

⁶⁰ Palmer, part III, paragraph 1

⁶¹ Southern, *History and Historians*, 65.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 129.

⁶³ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 130.

⁶⁴ Painter, 356.

⁶⁵ Miller, 432.

⁶⁶ Southern, *Western Society and the Church* 34.

⁶⁷ Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

potential for laity to act a single class, Southern did not believe that clerics identified themselves solely as churchmen. Rather, “the ecclesiastical hierarchy formed part of the society in which it was placed.” Thus, the church changed to become more amenable to issues important to the laity, such as trade or war.⁶⁸

In addition to the undoubted role of economics, class, demographics and urbanization in the development of the church, Southern also looked to the mind of the common man, their anxieties and needs. He gave psychology, social considerations and intellectual development each a role in ecclesiastical change and gave those both inside and outside the church, even at the lower levels of society, agency.⁶⁹ Sometimes, he noted, this led to radical changes in the church, including the creation of fringe orders, anti-orders and lay movements, yet other times, it conversely increased church and secular conservatism.⁷⁰ For instance, Southern noted how the anti-clerical attitudes of Wat Tyler and his men in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1371 actually strengthened ties between church and secular government.⁷¹ This shift from the idea of the sole dominance of the popes as initiators of change was important and prescient.

Southern expanded upon these themes in *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*. He clearly continued to believe that not only did society profoundly influence medieval scholarship but also that the schools had a deep and lasting impact upon society beyond their own existence. He noted, “a large part of the teaching of the medieval schools continued to influence the thoughts and conduct of the majority of people in Western Europe on both sides of the great divide between Roman Catholic and Protestant until the twentieth century.”⁷² Although modern scholarship has often scoffed at the scholarship of the Middle Ages, preferring instead to exalt the literary humanism of the Renaissance, Southern asserted that while the latter was elitist, medieval humanism was unique in

that it characterized the entirety of mankind as a “uniquely endowed, conscious and cooperating link between the created universe [...] and the divine intelligence.”⁷³ As Brian Tierney noted, it “asserted the dignity of all humankind, even of fallen humanity.”⁷⁴ This was an unusual and intriguing thesis despite being at odds with conventional ideas about the medieval period.

Despite minor misgivings of reviewers Painter and Miller, however, *The Making of the Middle Ages* soon became an acknowledged classic of medieval history. On publication, Painter declared it of “rare value;” Miller called it “indispensable.”⁷⁵ Later, noting its multiple editions and translations, Palmer described it as a “seminal work [that] decisively altered the landscape of medieval history.”⁷⁶ Prominent medievalist Christopher Brooke declared in 2001, “[it] instantly bewitched us.”⁷⁷ For Southern had synthesized and even anticipated new ideas about history to create a challenging but revelatory work. With vivid yet telling examples, a focus upon the individual and the complex interacting skeins of medieval thought, people and groups across a wide vista, he took medieval history beyond the traditional top-down, institutionally and nationally focused narrative into new realms. Medievalists such as Robert Bartlett, whose *The Making of Europe* followed and expanded upon Southern’s themes, have focused upon the primary documents and chronicles to ascertain what they can say about the medieval mind, setting them within the broad scope of Europe rather than within the restricted and institutional framework favored before Southern.⁷⁸

Reviewing *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, Rhys W. Hays bemoaned what he

⁶⁸ Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, 39.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 45–51 and *passim*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, chapter 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷² Southern, *Scholastic Humanism, Volume I*, 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷⁴ Tierney, 900.

⁷⁵ Painter, 356; Miller 431.

⁷⁶ Palmer, part I, paragraph 1.

⁷⁷ Christopher Brooke, “Richard Southern,” *Royal Historical Society Newsletter* (March 2001)

<<http://www.rhs.ac.uk/nmar01.html>>

⁷⁸ Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

characterizes as Southern's tendency to generalization.⁷⁹ However, Southern himself admitted that *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* was only survey, a "preliminary step" towards greater understanding of the medieval church, its structures and the people who influenced or were influenced by it. In particular, he regretted the absence of a voice for the very lowest in the scale of society, for they "left no record of their thoughts and experience." He acknowledged that there was a great deal of work to be done to understand better the minds of these people and their interactions with the church, and that his book was a "necessary introduction" to the field.⁸⁰ Du Boulay clearly agreed, describing the work as an "original" and "satisfying" review, "rich in learning and speculation" that would lead only to further and fruitful discussion.⁸¹

Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe is still considered a fine addition to the scholarship on the subject.⁸² Tierney found "fresh insight" in each chapter and notes the book's "richness of texture;" Luscombe noted that in "this powerful book" Southern combined "robust argument" with "firm attention to accuracy."⁸³ It thus seemed a fitting culmination to Southern's life and scholarship and one that will continue to be a valuable addition to the scholarship not only of intellectual history but also of medieval Europe as a whole.

In all of his works, from *The Making of the Middle Ages* at the beginning of his writing career to *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe* as he reached its end, Southern showed a coherence of vision and of technique. He was acutely aware not only of the current trends in historiography but also of the history of the writing of history itself. In *History and Historians*, he discusses both with typical astuteness. In his own

philosophy of history, however, he rejected strict adherence to any single method.

Although he adopted some of the ideas of Febvre and Duby, especially the search to understand the mentality of the medieval mind and the use of a broad canvas, it is clear that he rejected the Annalist macrohistorical emphasis upon data, statistics and secondary sources. Instead, he used primary sources with a sympathy hitherto little seen in medievalists. This, both D'Avray and Palmer attributed to an unusual level of identification with his subjects, especially the medieval scholars and clerics who wrote the majority of his sources and with whom he has so much in common.⁸⁴ The medieval authors provided Southern with the source for what Palmer characterized as an "idiosyncratic" yet deeply appealing style, especially the use of short anecdotes and character analyses to illuminate a wider point.⁸⁵ Microhistorians cover a single or few subjects in greater depth and medievalists such as W.L. Warren and John Gillingham have used the technique too, but few with such insight and vivacity.⁸⁶ Southern thus created a "sense of the past" with emotional resonance.⁸⁷

This sense of past was also broader and more satisfying than traditional history, for Southern moved medieval history away from a focus upon institutions and narrow geographical bounds. Reflecting and even predicting modern historiographical trends, he gave agency not only to the big men of history but also to scholars, churchmen, merchants, wandering knights and even peasants. He saw history not in simple terms, as the result of a single underlying cause such as economics or class but understood its complexity. He perceived and clarified the tangled skeins of factors intertwining and influencing each other. Yet, despite the intricacy of many of his arguments, he had an unerring ability make them comprehensible and engaging. As he wrote in 1969,

⁷⁹ Rhys Hays, "Review: *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, by R.W. Southern," *Church History* 42.4 (Dec. 1973) 557.

⁸⁰ Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, 359.

⁸¹ Du Boulay 108–111.

⁸² Radding, 441.

⁸³ Tierney, 901 and Luscombe 945.

⁸⁴ D'Avray, paragraph 1 and Palmer, part IV, paragraph 2.

⁸⁵ Palmer, part I, paragraph 7.

⁸⁶ See for example W.L. Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) and John Gillingham, *Richard I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999)

⁸⁷ Southern, *History and Historians*, 67.

“The first work of a historian is to produce a work of art [...] works that are emotionally and intellectually satisfying, that combine a clear unity of conception with a vivacity of detail and portray people whose actions are intelligible within the framework of their framework and character.”⁸⁸

Like St Anselm, Richard Southern was a quiet revolutionary. He challenged historians and sparked debate with a keen mind and yet a discreet and subtle manner. Brookes noted that even as Southern “demolished” two of his papers and “shattered [his] arguments” he taught “one of the most fruitful lessons in historical method I have ever received.”⁸⁹

Few dispute the importance of Richard Southern to medieval history. As Radding notes, “There would not be much debate about the proposition that R.W. Southern has been the most influential English medievalist of the postwar period.”⁹⁰ Dubbed “the once and future king” of medieval studies, Southern was “so well known, so admired and so widely read” that his works and his ideas filter throughout the field to this day and will surely continue to do so into the future.⁹¹

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁹ Brooke, paragraph 7.

⁹⁰ Radding, 441.

⁹¹ Palmer, part I, paragraph 1 and Alain Boureau, “Richard Southern: A Landscape for a Portrait,” *Past and Present* 165 (November 1999) 218.

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