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Schoolmasters of the Tenth Century

Cora Lutz. *Schoolmasters of the Tenth Century*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1977. Pp. xi, 202. $12.50.

Cora Lutz has written a book which is deliberately revisionist in nature. Her revisionism comes in her rejection of prevailing interpretations of the tenth century and in her insistence that the events and personalities must be judged on their own terms. In Lutz' view even those authors who have attempted to rehabilitate the tenth century have failed to identify the essential qualities peculiar to the century itself. In her search for an appropriate description of the spirit of the age, Lutz has borrowed a French phrase, "la regne des maitres d'ecole," which was used by J. de Ghellinek who was in fact paraphrasing a German author (p. 159ff). Lutz, then, views the tenth century through the lives of ten schoolmasters and their roles as teachers.

In her Preface, Lutz expresses her concern with the problem of imposing inappropriate standards on the past. In attempting to break with the prevalent opinions of the tenth century, she proposes to use only contemporary sources. She states that

> Following these contemporary sources I shall accept their evaluations of the effectiveness of the masters' teaching and not attempt to judge them by modern standards. But I shall try to avoid patronizing them either by suggesting that they are interesting because they have a certain charm of provincialism, or at the other extreme, by implying that they deserve attention because some of their ideas are 'modern.' (P. x).

To appreciate Lutz' approach, it is beneficial to compare her study with that of R. R. Bolgar. In *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries,* Bolgar refers to the tenth century as a fascinating period, potentially valuable to the historian in aiding the understanding of the elements later fused to create the renaissance of the eleventh century. Although he states that intensive research must be done on the developments of the tenth century, he maintains that such work will be fraught with difficulties. To indicate some of these difficulties, he discussed what would be involved in the study of schooling in the period. One of the difficulties which Bolgar sees is that of sources. Whereas Lutz is willing to accept the words of the actors, Bolgar regards reminiscences as "too limited in scope, too unsystematic and too biased to be of value." He views eye-witness reports with some scepticism seeing them as suffering from the "vice of exaggeration." He refers to casual indicators, scattered facts here and there and incidental mention of education by poets and prose writers as very flimsy evidence from which to draw any conclusions.[1]

Opinions as to the reliability and availability of sources in the tenth century are conflicting. Norman Zacour in his recent book, *An Introduction to Medieval Institutions,* dismisses completely the topic of schooling in that century with the following statement.

> The slender, scattered evidence of learning in the ninth and tenth centuries, the infrequent reiteration of injunctions to establish schools, and the obvious difficulties of finding adequate teachers all testify to the short-lived nature of the educational reform after Charlemagne's death . . . [and] evidence for the continuation of schools in the ninth and tenth centuries is thin.[2]

Laistner, however views the tenth century as the foundation for the innovations of the next generations and attributes the lack of study not to the paucity of resources but to the "facile generalizations about the century which have obscured part of the truth."[3]

It is apparent that Lutz is in agreement with Laistner and in her effort to dispel the "facile generalizations," she is prepared to use sources that other historians such as Bolgar are obliged to question. Lutz is aware of the limitations of the sources that she uses: the variety in length, comprehensiveness, and intent. In her Preface, she acknowledges that many accounts were written to extol the schoolmaster's saintliness through stylized and

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[1]R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), pp. 5-7.

[2]Norman Zacour, *An Introduction to the Medieval Institutions* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 207.

[3]M. L. W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe* (London: Metheun and Co. Ltd., 1957), p. 387.

idealized pictures. These seeming flaws, though, suit her purpose. She is concerned with the schoolmasters within the context of their times as seen by their contemporaries. Where Bolgar sees the "vice of exaggeration" in the writers themselves and their biographers, Lutz finds that

> Though they recognized all too painfully their own inadequacies and limitations, they were not apologetic or self-pitying, but with great dignity they presented the best they had. (P. 6).

Bolgar considers the actual locating of the resource materials as an incredibly difficult task. He considers it essential that the Medievalist interested in education painstakingly examine all available libraries, bibliographies and holdings of manuscripts. Since Lutz' primary profession has been that of manuscript collection, her credentials in this respect aptly prepare her for the authorship of a book on Medieval education.

Bolgar emphasizes the need for historians to examine the teacher's background, intellect, and personality as well as the students' backgrounds in assessing the role of schooling in Medieval times. He stresses the subjective nature of the learning situation and the importance of the interaction of the participants. Bolgar is prepared to suggest that the private characteristics of the individuals are not as important as the public cultural characteristics of the period described. To determine the spirit of the age, he feels that it is necessary to review the outlook of the age socially, culturally and economically.[4]

It is at this point that Lutz's work falls short. She gives execllent portrayals of the schoolmasters; however, her book would tell the novice nothing of the political, religious or economic conditions of the tenth century. Despite some discussion of the students themselves, there is no mention of the kinds of families that they come from, or the kinds of life experiences that they may have had. There is no information on the daily life of the people of the day, either within the monasteries themselves, or the surrounding countryside.

Lutz is an historian of education in the Cubberley tradition.[5] She has written a history of education of the tenth century by divorcing the schools and the schoolmasters from the confines of their society. Within her interpretation of the tenth century as "la regne des maitres d'ecole," Lutz describes her actors only in terms of their roles as schoolmasters. Lutz acknowledges this as a serious problem in her Preface (p. x). For readers conscious of the revisionist schools of educational history, this is a glaring fault; however, within the context of the historiography of the tenth century, Lutz' work makes sense, as no doubt Cubberley's did when no other history of American education existed. The major difficulty of Lutz's approach is that it limits the appeal of her book to those people who are already knowledgeable enough of the times to put her work into historical perspective.

Bolgar and Lutz differ on their interpretation of the role of the schoolmasters. Bolgar has attacked the schoolmasters. He states that "the patience, habit of petty authority and systematic orderliness that are natural attributes of a good schoolmaster shrivel the spirit." He maintains that few individuals that are competent at their daily tasks are able to be original or creative. He disassociates the schoolmasters from the intellectual leaders of the community.[6] Thus, he would not look, as Lutz has done, to the schoolmasters for the intellectual leadership of the tenth century. Bolgar's distinction may have been applicable to other periods but Laistner agrees with Lutz that the work of the schoolmasters furthered the cause of intellectual advancement in the tenth century.[7]

To support her interpretation, Lutz presents convincing evidence of the schoolmasters' innovativeness and love of learning. Selfconfidently, they tackled challenging questions on the basis of their secure knowledge of the classical heritage. The schoolmasters set their imaginations to the creation of new methods of teaching — using tables, illustrations, models, etc. They developed new translations in the vernacular to help their less bright students. They wrote poetry, religious plays, commentaries on problems in theology and advanced the work of the hagiographers. They saw no bounds to their vocation and formed a vanguard in the intellectual pursuits of the century.

The rigid structure of education had been set by the fifth century liberal arts encyclopedia of Martinnus Capella. Bolgar may have been influenced by the fact that this text exerted

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[4]Bolgar, pp. 5-7.

[5]As described by A. Cremin, *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia, 1965).

[6]Bolgar, pp. 174-5.

[7]Laistner, pp. 387-8.

its influence for over one thousand years.[8] Within the text, Dame Grammar represents the typical teacher. She stands with whip in hand terrorizing a subdued class of boys. According to Lutz the schoolmasters of the tenth century were little influenced by this stereotype and portrayed the teacher as an understanding guide to the young (p. 150). They adapted their methods to suit the capabilities of their students, used multi-media techniques to make the concepts clearer and disciplined their students with love and humour. This may in fact reiterate their love of learning in contrast to the pedanticism of other generations.

Lutz expressed regret that the literary form flattened and sequentialized her main characters (p. ix). She visualized a revolving stage on which the players could act simultaneously. Perhaps, with her style and intent she should have used the play form. For, her style is dramatic and becomes rigid and almost quaint on the printed page.

The author of the *Schoolmasters of the Tenth Century* may have neglected the political, social and economic climates of the day but she has eloquently captured the intellectual flavour of the times. She has painted the openness of the era — the travelling of men and manuscripts through areas that have been portrayed as feuding territories. She has shown the innovativeness in technique and content in schools that have been portrayed as merely imitative. She has conveyed the passion for learning in men who have generally been considered pedantic. She has demonstrated a thirst for knowledge and beauty in an age that has been defined as barbarous. If ever a century needed a poet, it was the tenth century, and it has found such a poet in Cora Lutz.

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[8]F. J. Hearnshaw, *Medieval Contributions to Modern Civilization* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1921), p. 203.