REVIEW


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This book, the latest item published in the Medievalism series directed by Karl Fugelso and Chris Jones at Boydell & Brewer, “examines how nineteenth-century Britons connected seasonal celebration with a conception of the medieval past that helped them think more sympathetically about what their ancestors’ lives may have been like before the Reformation” (p. 1). Clare A. Simmons, the author of Popular Medievalism in Romantic Era Britain (2011), here presents us with a richly illustrated text (twenty-three illustrations in all), a bibliography, and an index. The index is all the more invaluable as the author refers to and also partly analyzes the work of more than a hundred writers, poets, and essayists from Geoffrey Chaucer to Christina Rossetti in her attempt to show how they borrowed from one another and also how they contributed to reconstructing pre-Reformation festivals to challenge the nineteenth-century idea, when Britain was the most industrially advanced nation in the world, that the present was superior to the past. According to her, “the tension between an imagined past and the sometimes grim realities of the present is especially acute in works that show a consciousness of time and season” (pp. 1–2). As in Peter Laslett’s The World We Have Lost (1965), which, like Keith Thomas’s seminal Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971), is unfortunately not mentioned in this study, Simmons argues that such a preoccupation with medievalism was “a struggle with a sense of loss” (p. 3).

After an introduction taking stock of the many nineteenth-century publications studying the calendar, like John Brady’s Clavis Calendaria (1812), John Brand and Henry Ellis’s Observations on Popular Antiquities (1813), and William Hone’s Every Day Book (1826–27), and of the popularity of almanacs like those published by the weekly magazine Punch from 1841 onward, the first two chapters present the competing models for the year: the Christian attempts by John Keble and John Henry Newman to keep the concept of the liturgical year; Robert Browning’s more secular sense of the year in his poem Sordello; and what the author calls “Medievalist Calendar Experiments” in the works of William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, William Morris, or Alfred Tennyson. The five following chapters then illustrate in turn the subtitle of the book by moving around the calendar from Christmas to the late autumn Lord Mayor’s Show, and the book ends with a rather strange epilogue about Christmas ghosts and a return to Dickens, which, I imagine, serves as a conclusion to the whole. Chapter 4 deals with St. Agnes and Valentine’s Day, chapter 5 with rites of spring and May Day celebrations, while summer festivals are essentially considered in chapter 6 under the angle of mystery plays and pageants.

Simmons has here set herself an immense task of exploration in attempting such a synthesis of fragmented customs of sometimes dubious origins (following Ronald Hutton’s Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain [1996], she warns us against assuming that there
was a “continuity between pre-Christian times and the practices of the Middle Ages” (p. 130) and in seeing them reflected and illustrated in the works of so many writers. The author insists that her “focus is primarily literary” and that her study “avoids scholarly anthropology” (p. 13). In fact, in her chapter about Christmas, for example, the texts she selects serve as illustrations of Christmas traditions (carols, Boxing Day, pantomimes, mumming, the story of Dick Whittington), and she quotes passages from antiquarians like Joseph Strutt and William Hone, followed by excerpts from Dickens, William Wordsworth, and Rossetti. Such syncretism is certainly pragmatic, but it nevertheless poses a problem of methodology as the structure of the chapters and of the book in general follows that of an almanac (this impression is reinforced by the style of most of the illustrations) rather than the usual format of a scholarly study. All the same, the author carefully chooses to stick to the caveats of historians and anthropologists to make sure that she avoids following those who, like James George Frazer, for instance, explained that many holiday customs and seasonal traditions were a revival of ancient fertility rituals. In this, she also departs from Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens (1938), when stating that “so many recreations are re-creations of believed earlier practices whose origins have been lost” (p. 14).

One of the most interesting contributions of this study is found in chapter 6, where the author analyzes the work of the antiquarian William Hone (Ancient Mysteries Described [1823]) who was unsuccessfully prosecuted for blasphemy in 1817. A cartoon collaborator with the illustrator and caricaturist George Cruikshank, Hone regarded political parody as a form of free speech, while his interest and research into medieval mystery plays were other ways of challenging the structures of oppression. For Simmons, Hone’s writings come close to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of carnival insofar as he studied plays “in the context of hierarchical-disrupting festivals such as the Feast of Fools and the Boy Bishop” and saw in the Middle Ages a “form of multi-vocal expression that their own societies suppress … especially parody” (p. 157).

All in all, this is certainly an ambitious book, which has the double merit of laying stress on the importance of medieval festivals and pre-Reformation holiday occasions in the Romantic and Victorian eras and of establishing a number of interdisciplinary bridges between literature, religion, anthropology, and popular culture in a rather rich ensemble. At the same time, the problems of such an approach, rather inevitable it seems to me, lie in what looks like an embarrassment of riches with sometimes loosely related analyses from one author or one topic to the next, and also in a lack of differentiation between truly medieval sources like Chaucer or Geoffrey of Monmouth and those relating to Shakespeare’s age. In those days, as Philip Stubbes’s Anatomy of Abuses (1583) reveals, calendrical celebrations, if certainly on the wane, had not disappeared, far from it, and they were sometimes revived for political reasons, as James I’s Book of Sports (1617) shows. They are also very much present in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries as they provided opportunities for entertaining the groundlings who were fond of jigs, clowning, and morris dancing. Strangely enough, Shakespeare is hardly ever mentioned by Simmons, and this may be regarded as something of a surprise given his domineering presence in the works of Romantic and Victorian writers. He too is certainly one of the “friendly ghosts” mentioned in the preface whose backward glance toward the past rejoicings of “Merry England” contributed to the construction and circulation of this type of nostalgia (p. 1). Of course, her topic is basically medievalism, but medieval roots and sources are almost everywhere in Shakespeare, even if, given the wide scope of this particular study, one
may well understand that the author of Richard II, Romeo and Juliet, and A Midsummer Night's Dream should have been left aside in this book. But a few words making this quite clear for the reader at the beginning would have done no harm, it seems to me. In a way, one might say that Simmons is more anxious to clarify historical and anthropological notions than to specify the exact limitations of her literary choices. This is important because one will always argue that such or such writer, which is missing in the selection, vast though it may seem, would have been more significant than another.

Speaking of omissions, one is confronted with a rather abrupt and awkward start in the introduction with a reference to Walter Scott's novel The Antiquary (1816), a novel that, according to the author, was "published somewhat ominously at the beginning of what should have been summer in the notorious Year Without a Summer" (p. 1). This is rather puzzling, at least to nonspecialist readers, and a footnote might have helped them understand the allusion by explaining that "the year without a summer" deserved this appellation after the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora in the Dutch West Indies, which provoked a volcanic winter all over Europe. And just a few paragraphs below, Simmons alludes to "a reform of the calendar that seemed to some ... a theft of eleven days of their lives" without further ado. It is only on page 131 that she explains that "in 1752, when England converted from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar systems, May Day became eleven days earlier in the solar calendar." A simple cross-reference at the bottom of page 2 would certainly have helped clarify the issue. There are also a few grammatical slips on pages 26–27 due to unnecessary repetitions; omissions (verb omitted in note 48 on page 136); and some misprints as with the name of Philip Stubbes, sometimes correctly spelled as such but also as "Stubbs" in note 33 on page 130 and in the index. Note 22 on page 103 cites Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain for the reference to "the medieval concept of the incubus" without giving the date and page of the edition used, a work that is omitted in the bibliography.

These are of course minor defects that are far from having a negative impact on this copious and often interesting book. More remains to be done in this specific field of research and Simmons must be thanked for paving the way for more articles and studies in this vast and fascinating topic.
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François Laroque is emeritus professor of English literature at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3. He has published articles on William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and early modern English drama. He is the author of Shakespeare’s Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage (1991) and Shakespeare: Court, Crowd and Playhouse (1996) and has edited several volumes published by Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3. He has also published new editions and translations of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and their contemporaries in the two-volume anthology of non-Shakespearean drama (1490–1642), Théâtre Élisabéthain (2009), which he co-edited with Jean-Marie Maguin and Line Cottegnies. He is also the author of John Webster: The Duchess of Malfi (2018) and has recently published translations of Jane Austen (Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Mansfield Park, and Persuasion) for Livre de Poche Classique and Editions RBA.

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HOW TO CITE


The Journal of Festive Studies (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from H-Celebration, a network of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and is the inaugural journal published through the H-Net Journals initiative. It can be found online at https://journals.h-net.org/jfs.