



Sociedad
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Estudios
Medievales

Interview

BERNARD F. REILLY (IN MEMORIAM)

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1. Question: A brief biographical overview: Where were you born, studies, papers, current residence...

Answer: My wife and I are very much Philadelphia people. She was born there in Pennsylvania and I only ten or so miles away in New Jersey. My family moved back to Philadelphia and all of my advanced degrees are from Philadelphia institutions and we currently reside at 710 Hedgerow Drive In Broomall, Pennsylvania which is about twenty miles west of Philadelphia.

I received my Bachelor's degree in 1950 from Villanova University, paid for by what was called the GI Bill, after having served in the US Army from January 1944 to May 1946. I secured my Master's degree in Medieval History from the University of Pennsylvania in 1955 and my Doctorate in 1965 from Bryn Mawr College. The latter two degrees were earned part-time while I worked for I had married and begun a family in 1948. I had already begun to teach undergraduate students at Villanova in 1955 and continued to do so very happily until I retired in 1997.

2. Q: How it was your participation in the Second World War?

A: As to my World War II experience, I was drafted into the army in January of 1944 at age 18. The experience educated me and aged me.

The American Military of the time still thought in terms of World War I as it prepared for the invasion of Normandy in the spring. I was sent to North Carolina to do basic training as a field Artilleryman in what was foreseen as a repeat slog across the North of France in the wake of massive artillery barrages and equally massive infantry assaults ala WWI. But by April of that year more modern military minds, Omar Bradley and George Patton, apparently had prevailed and a war of aircraft and armor was now expected. That new thinking probably saved my life. What do you do with surplus artillerymen? So I missed the carnage of D Day.

Instead I was sent to Texas to do a second basic training as a combat engineer. Engineers, it was expected would be much needed in that theatre and, in the meantime, could build barracks and camps for troops to be transferred from the European theatre as that campaign should begin to wind down. Luzon in the Philippines was to be the staging area for the invasion of Kyushu and my unit was to provide support and service there to the 2nd Airborne Division. We traveled in convoy across the Pacific Ocean from San Francisco to Manila and by the end of August in 1945 we were on Luzon near the Gulf of Lingayen building encampments when the slaughter occurred at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Imperial Japanese government surrendered and again my life was probably saved.

Instead of an invasion my unit became part of the army of occupation between September, 1945 and March of 1946

3. Q: When did you feel attracted by the medieval history of Hispania, and why?

A: I had been attracted to the study of history even as a boy but of course that was the history of the United States. My undergraduate work at Villanova introduced me to archaeology and to historians of wider horizons such as Arnold Toynbee and Christopher Dawson. I had settled on the history of the European Middle Ages as my particular interest by the time that I had begun to do graduate studies at Penn.

There I undertook a seminar paper on the career of Pope Calixtus II who had conceived the interesting idea of a pact renouncing the temporal possessions of the church in the empire in return for the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V's renunciation of imperial rights over the selection of bishops, the bishop of Rome in particular. Of course the emperor finally decided it would be simpler to kidnap Calixtus and most of his cardinals as well and the entire idea came to nothing.

Later at Bryn Mawr when I had to select a subject for a doctoral thesis I returned to Pope Calixtus II to see what ideas his collected papers might furnish. There I discovered an active correspondence between that pope and a bishop of an episcopal see in the northwest of Spain of which I had never heard until that time. That led me to the *Historia Compostelana*, of course, to Bishop-archbishop Diego Gelmirez, to the Santiago legend and the pilgrimage. With the run-up to Vatican Council II in the background I did my thesis on the idea of church reform at Santiago de Compostela in the early Twelfth Century.

My first publication was "Santiago and Saint Denis: The French Presence in Twelfth-Century Spain," *Catholic Historical Review* (October, 1968) for, of course, my study led me to the pilgrimage and eventually to Fernando I, to Urraca I, to Alfonso VI.

And finally to the whole of medieval Iberia. It has been an intellectual adventure which I have never regretted and mostly enjoyed.

4. Q: Is it difficult to become a medievalist in the USA?

A: No one grows up hoping to become a medievalist in a country that itself has no medieval history. The path is devious and of substantial length. First of all one has to be aware that the United States of America is a profoundly English and Protestant country. It pretends to be some "third thing, altogether different, born

for the future” but that is a delusion. Instead this special connection binding it to Great Britain that so distressed Charles De Gaulle is not a recent phenomenon but one that is older than the United States itself.

Consequently the quite distinguished school of medievalists in the United States naturally concentrates on the English Middle Ages, the Plantagenet's, growth of Parliament, the growth of the British “Raj. When it thinks of the Iberian Middle Ages it largely has focused on the “Spanish Inquisition” and the “Spanish Armada.” That sort of thing.

There are honorable exceptions of course but they result from attention to a sort of pre- history of the United States. The results are the Iberian Middle Ages presented as a background, William H. Prescott, “History of the Conquest of Mexico” (1843) and “History of the Conquest of Peru.” (1847) or Roger Bigelow Merriman, “The Rise of the Spanish Empire in the Old World and the New,” 4 vols. (1918-1934).

Generally speaking, however, Iberian medieval scholarship in the United States has bloomed since World War II as the result of yet other currents. One of them has been the new awareness of the dependence of the cattle ranching inheritance in the American Southwest on techniques and practices developed in Iberia in the late Middle Ages. Perhaps the most famous of such scholars was Charles Julian Bishko (1906-2002) who trained an entire generation of American medievalists of Iberia at the University of Virginia. But Julian was profoundly interested as well, and is chiefly remembered for, his studies in Iberian monasticism. Second only to Julian was Father Robert I. Burns, S.J. (1921-2008) who did the same first at the Jesuit University of San Francisco and then at the University of California in Los Angeles. Father Burns was influenced of course by the Iberian foundation and the founder of his order, Ignatius Loyola, but also by the renewed interest in all things Catholic in the United States during his own youth and early maturity. Finally there is Joseph F. O’Callaghan who steered the graduate program in the Iberian Middle Ages at Fordham University in New York City where he taught from 1954 until his retirement forty years later.

As I have already sketched for you, my own involvement in this movement, for such it was, originated in a rather different, somewhat haphazard fashion, though obviously affected in some measure by similar religious currents. I taught in a relatively smaller university and one without a history graduate program in medieval studies of any character. I have preferred to teach undergraduates in any event because of the breadth of field of study which it offers. Nonetheless these men have been my personal and professional friends. Julian Bishko proofread the entire manuscript of my first book, that on Queen Urraca (1982). I collaborated with Father Burns in the foundation of The American Academy of Research Historians of Medieval Spain. That Academy became the vehicle for the promotion of Iberian medieval studies in the United States from its foundation in 1976. Joe

O'Callaghan steered me to the rental of my first apartment in Madrid on the then Avenida de General Mola where my wife and family joined me to vacation in the summer of 1972 while I pursued my research in the mornings, within walking distance of the Archivo Historico Nacional on Serrano.

5. Q: As a medievalist, what do you think about the kingdom of Leon?

A: I believe that the critical events of medieval Christian Iberia occurred during the reigns of Fernando I and Alfonso VI of Leon. These were, not necessarily in order of importance, the appropriation of the northern meseta and the establishment of a permanent advance-post at Toledo on the southern meseta. The dominance of the entire peninsula followed more or less inevitably thereafter as the North African Almoravid, Almohad, and Marinid attempts at reconquest in turn fell short. This shift of power was obscured and limited at the same time by the schism in the family of Alfonso VI which led to the emergence of a permanently independent Kingdom of Portugal in possession of the critical Atlantic seaboard. At the same time the corresponding emergence of an independent Aragon-Catalonia made Leon, and later Castile, a largely landlocked kingdom.

At one and the same time the opening of Fernando I and Alfonso VI to the French, to Cluny and then Citeaux, and to Rome and the Gregorian Reform set in train a cosmopolitan, European development from script to architecture to intellectual and to economic currents generally that penetrated the entire peninsula and confirmed and consolidated its European character at the expense of a more diffuse Mediterranean orientation.

6. Q: Being a foreigner allows you a more objective view of the Hispanic medieval history?

A: The question of objectivity – impartiality? – is a hornet's nest. Certainly the non-native historian may bring a different perspective to the same historical development which can be useful to the extent that he is truly informed. At the same time he is bound to miss, to some extent, the familiarity with things in the native tradition that are perhaps differently weighted in his own and, to that extent, can talk past sometimes critical differences without being aware of their existence. Much depends on having "an ear for the music." I am fairly confident in what I have ventured just above in No. 5 has already caused dismay in some circles who have read it, perhaps precisely because of some unfamiliarity in its expression or even because it echoes one or the other position in a dispute already old in Iberia.

7. Q: The strategic “defensive desert” of the Duero defended by Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz: myth or reality?

A: The question of the “deserted Duero” is one such, perhaps a critical question which bears on an entire series of questions about the lineage as well as the “legitimacy” of the post-Visigothic evolution into the Spain of “imperial” Leon-Castile. Sanchez-Albornoz did not for nothing spend most of his scholarly life in partisan exile. Yet he raised a critical question, indeed, an entire series of them, and posed answers that are both informed and formative for most of the discussion that has ensued and still continues. It seems to me that he himself set the terms for an investigation that he could not complete. Certainly he pressed the arguments from the chronicle tradition and from the extant documents as far as they may perhaps ever go. In any event as far as he could take them as an exile from the turf of his patria itself. But then too, he was not a primarily a linguist and perhaps those latter savants will have more to say, along the lines pioneered by Menendez Pidal perhaps. Work is currently being done that has promise in that how people expressed and described themselves can be rendered to yield up much of who they were. Archaeology as well, especially that of pre-Romanesque and pre-Gothic ecclesiastical architecture, but also of the humbler sort of local fortifications and domestic designs. The very occupation and desertion of sites may well prove to have a rhythm that is evocative.

Finally, what was the character of the human occupation of the Cantabrians at the end of the Visigothic period? – or of Galicia? – or of the coastal Portuguese tierra from the Limia down to the Tajo? What was the duration and extent, more importantly, the intensity, the density, of the Berber occupation? Finally, the examination of the character of the population of the whole course of the Duero from the Atlantic eastward up to Osma needs still to be completed. Was it a repopulation in fact? Who was a Galician, who a Portuguese, a Cantabrian, a Muslim, a Mozarabe. These were the human materials with whom the “repopulation” that began with Fernando I worked and who formed the “new” Leon.

Substantial work has been done in many of these fields during the last fifty years but I would venture to imagine that as much or more remains possible and would be fruitful.

8. Q: What do you think of the independence of Portugal from the Kingdom of Leon? Was it inevitable?

A: As regards the largely separate development of Portugal and Spain in the modern period I consider it to have been anything but inevitable. That argument turns, I think, on the untenable hypothesis that nations are an inevitable and desirable

development of some primal and racial difference. That is nonsense. Demonstrably all modern European nations are late medieval constructions dependent upon intellectual, economic, and international contingencies quite haphazard in their development. The role of geography is obvious. The role of technology is almost equally so. Moreover, can one imagine a separate Portugal without the intervention of the English in the late Middle Ages? None of the European nations developed in isolation of one another but in an interrelation which was more influential than any purely domestic development, if indeed one can imagine such a thing as that latter.

9. Q: Can we speak of “feudalism” in the kingdoms of Leon and Castile or on the contrary the feudalism never existed in those realms?

A: I am aware of the arguments over feudalism, both in Iberia and elsewhere, but I have never been terribly interested in them. If feudalism is defined narrowly as a set of contractual relations, governing inheritance and the property in land and custom that they transmit then I must confess that the study, however worthy, puts me to sleep. My weakness no doubt. On the other hand if it is posed as a set of literary conceptions of differing merits, most of which never had much currency in the non-literary world, then I wake a bit. (At one point in my college career I almost became a literature major).

On the other hand if the topic is construed broadly the resulting disputes interest me greatly. Does feudalism include the conception of a monarch who is a war chief in the first instance and the member of a dynasty of divine provenance in the second instance? In this particular regard most, pre-modern Iberian governments would qualify. Does it include a nobility also founded on military prowess (The horsey set!) or the usual presumption thereof? Again Iberian governments pass the test. Does it mean that the monarchy is quite undeveloped institutionally and depends heavily on churchmen for its administrators and nobles for its army. Correspondingly the crown finds it difficult to make its writ run beyond its own estates and relies on a regular tour of the kingdom to bring what prestige it has to bear. Surely until at least 1200, and in many respect until the French Revolution, we are discussing the common constitutive elements of society in Western and Central Europe.

What then is the argument? I confess that I have current friends in the field who are distressed by the notion of “sacred monarchy” and continue to demonstrate that the bulk of contemporary documents can’t possibly mean what they say. I also have other friends currently in the field who feel that the public order of Rome

endured in some meaningful sense until it was disrupted by a baneful, feudal usurpation dated somewhere after 900 or so. I suspect that they mean particularism of all sorts but I very much think that they would not care for the Roman variety of commonwealth. In Iberia all of this to and fro is much connected to the “afrancesado” thing since demonstrably much of the “feudal” trappings and the literature it sprouted are derivative, at least in the first instance. I am told that good Mexicans have a saying, “Pobre Mejico, tan lejos de Dios, tan proximo a Los Estados Unidos.”

10. Q: Do you think that the Spanish historiography has properly dealt with the history of the kingdom of Leon, or on the contrary it has been too influenced by the Castilian chronicles and epic poems (“cantares de gesta”)?

A: I do think that some exciting work remains to be done on the historiography of Iberia. With all respect to the labors of those who have preceded us it is still salutary to recall just how recent are the critical editions of the great works of Iberian medieval history and how much more recent are the attempts to digest its sources and its intellectual milieu. Because they may not be well known I would refer, immodestly, to my own “Bishop Lucas of Tuy and the Latin Chronicle Tradition in Iberia,” *The Catholic Historical Review*, 43 (2007), “The Rediscovery of count Pedro Ansurez, Cross, Crescent, and Conversion: Studies on Medieval Spain in Memory of Richard Fletcher (2008) “*The Chronica Latina Regum Castellae: Historical Composition at the Court of Fernando III of Castile, 1217-1252*, *Viator*, 41 (2010) and “*The De Rebus Hispanie and the Mature Latin Chronicle in the Iberian Latin Middle Ages*, *Viator*, 43 (2012). I also have, in what I hope will be the something less than posthumous publication, another close study of the *Chronicle of the Emperor Alfonso VII*.

These, and a good deal of my earlier work on the *Historia Compostelana* for example, have left me convinced that the history of medieval Iberia is a unity whose proper description has been wrestled with by historians almost from its beginning. In whatever shape they have cast it that history, meticulously examined, reveals a richness that is a product of Asturian, Leonese, Castilian, Aragonese, even Catalan sources. And, of course, their scrabble to find usable sources have led them to vitas of bishops and saints, and to family histories as well as to the works of their predecessors.

The gradually emerging picture is one of a richness and a creative, interactive imagination across genres and across provincial divisions that requires a tongue as yet to hymn it.



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