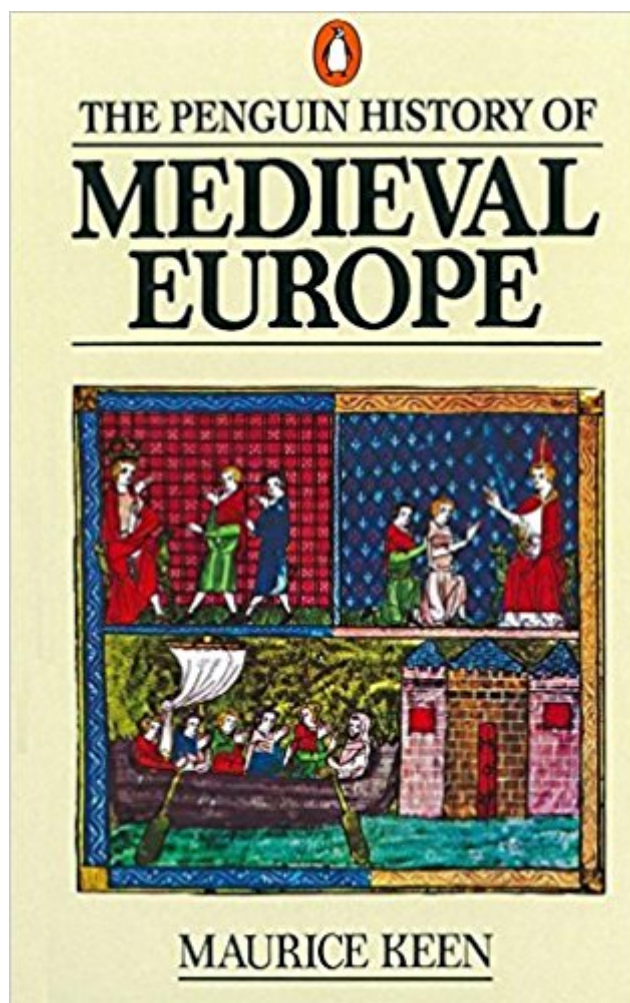


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The Penguin History Of Medieval Europe



Synopsis

A comprehensive, general survey of Europe from the ruins of the Roman Empire to the rise of the Ottoman Turks.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Maurice Keen is Emeritus Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, where he lectured in medieval history from 1961 to 2000.

pleased

A very good, if somewhat dated, survey of the topic. As is usual in the case of a broad survey in paperback, the maps are not entirely helpful. A good start.

For the purposes of this book, the author established the boundaries of the Middle Ages as starting in 800 AD and finishing in 1460. In the Preface he states outright that all such boundaries are arbitrary and then goes on to justify his choices by laying out the three main themes that he then use to explain his position. The three main themes being: the changes in society over this time period; the changes in the power and influence of the Catholic Church during this time period; and the changes in the political landscape of Europe during this time period. As the author goes on to explain, each of these main themes cannot stand alone. They influence and effect each other so

that there are not clear cut demarcation points at any one time where a clear and sharp boundary takes place between eras. Nonetheless, to help the readers in understanding the various effects and counter-effects, the book is divided into four, roughly equal, time periods. The starting point for the book was the crowning of Charlemagne by the Pope as the Roman Emperor. This event is a good starting point as from here on, everything started changing. The main social construct in Europe at the time was feudalism. As a system, it made sense then due to the nature of the society "which was mostly agrarian with far flung small villages who needed local protection from bandits and marauders. The trade off was that the people would agree to work for the local lord in return for his protecting them from the physical violence of the age. The clashes of these small lords were important locally, but did not really impact society as a whole and, since everyone was relatively religious at that time, had everyone looking to Rome and the Popes to resolve the more major disputes. The Emperor was designated as the temporal head and right arm of the pope to resolve by violent means, if necessary, those issues that the Pope could not resolve by piety and discussions. As society evolved, with greater reliance on trade and more connections between groupings of people, the societal relations changes such that local protection became less than sufficient and so greater and larger groupings started getting formed. This leads directly into the growth of nations and countries and has the plethora of minor lords fighting it out amongst themselves to become the leaders of the larger entities and therefore kings and princes become more important and meaningful. At the same time, while religious fervor has not subsided, these kings and princes have less and less to do with the Popes and they take on a large and larger role in their own clergy's lives such that the Catholic Church's influence declines in terms of being able to raise or depose various Kings. In the middle of all of this we have the Popes initiating the crusading movement, which peters out as the societal evolution described above proceeds. The Catholic Church's position is not helped when, at seemingly many critical moments, it does not follow a logical path to maintaining its control, but is rent from within and has to deal with schisms and local petty politics. The writing style is engaging and the author inserts plenty of anecdotes and descriptions of either events, or personalities such that our interest is maintained in continuing to read this book. Nonetheless, this is not a casual read. It is intended to be an introductory text book into a complicated era and it manages to survey all of it while making sense of what is going on through the author's knowledge of the subject and focus on telling the story in a meaningful way. Many books that serve as historical texts for long periods of time "such as this book" fail. That is due to the authors falling into a trap of parading their knowledge of arcane factoids and the books become dull lists of place names, people names, and

dates with very little of interest to the average reader. This is a trap that this book has managed to avoid. Even with a 660 year scope, and much confusion about who is related to whom, in what way, when, and why there were fighting each other, this book provides enough information that pulls all of this together. So, when we read about this or that particular King, his era, his enemies, and his dealings with the Popes of the time, it actually makes sense since we are seeing this through the lens of the larger story that surrounds those events. This does not make reading this book suitable for beach or vacation reading, nor does it make it into a cozy mystery, it does however, make it more than palatable as an introductory historical text that can be enjoyed even by lay readers, like myself, and probably most of you who read this review.

This is an old but worthy book, I read it as an undergraduate, and just recently went back to it, and found it still a solid synthesis, told as a narrative. Of course current medieval history looks very different (this book is mostly about kings and popes and what happened in 1095), but if you want to have a spinal cord of what happened when, from Charlemagne to the Great Schism, you could do a lot worse.

The book presents a useful introduction to aid understanding of Europe's complex medieval history, especially the later well-documented periods. However the early Barbarian formation of the individual countries and states is based on scant historical evidence, and could benefit from an update to include the latest genetics, archaeological research etc. Indeed in this respect the settlement pattern seen as data plots along the Roman roads depicted in <http://fchknols.wordpress.com>, suggest trade may have been important in establishing the variety of languages of this region.

I thoroughly enjoy reading Keen's book and have read it several times. Of course, it is a popular book and not a textbook, but it is very complete and chock full of information in a very pointed, fluid, and pithy style. It is well written and an easy read. Keen has superimposed definite limits to make it more readable. In a book that mainly concerns England and France, and maybe the Pope, we find nothing on Byzantium or Islam, and little on Italy, Spain, and Germany. Within these self-described limits, there is much more than the amateur could ever hope to absorb.

If all you are looking for is a clear and concise overview of the Middle Ages, avoid this book like the plague. I found the author's dry and dull writing style and ridiculous overuse of commas to be

absolutely unbearable after just a few short pages. By the hundredth page, I began to wish that I was reading beside a fireplace so that I could dispose of this book in such a way as to prevent it from ever wasting another man's time as it had mine.

I thought that Mr. Keen's book was an excellent read for the student of Medieval history. His accounts and insights of medieval religious and political thought were thoroughly explained. The author spends a great deal of time on the complex relationships of the Papacy, England, France, Germany, and Italy with each other. The one negative about the book is that the author spends practically no time on medieval Spain. The bibliography was good, though it should be updated. Overall a good short work for someone to get a good basic understanding of Medieval history.

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