

The Old French Crusade Cycle

The British Academy awarded a series of research grants to Nigel Thorp for the preparation of a critical edition of an epic poem, *La Chanson de Jérusalem*. The work formed part of complete new edition of the Old French Crusade Cycle, an international project under the general editorship of Emanuel J. Mickel, University of Indiana, and Jan A. Nelson, University of Alabama. **Professor Emanuel Mickel** describes the work, which has recently reached completion with the publication of the final volume in the series.

THE vast cycle of epic poems that constitutes the Old French Crusade Cycle has its historical focus in the events of the First Crusade. In over 80,000 lines, the narrative recounts the capture of Antioch in 1098 and that of Jerusalem in 1099, under the principal leadership of Godfrey of Bouillon; it also provides Godfrey with a fabulous ancestry, in his descent from the legendary Swan Knight. The principal sections recounting the battles for Antioch and Jerusalem had been edited before, but the ten-volume edition that has now been completed for the University of Alabama Press represents the first time that the cycle has been published in its entirety and according to modern standards.

My colleague, Jan Nelson, and I decided in 1965 to provide a scholarly edition of the cycle complete with all variant readings, a study of the manuscripts and language, glossary, index, and introduction. All the manuscripts from around Europe were filmed and we worked on them for some eight years before completing the first volume in 1977. Other volumes appeared regularly thereafter every three or four years and the final volume, the *Chanson d'Antioche*, was completed in 2003. The two of us served as general editors for the entire project and we also edited a number of the individual volumes: Nelson and I co-edited the *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne* (volume 1), Nelson the *Chevalier au Cygne* (volume 2), myself the *Enfances Godefroi* (volume 3), Nelson the *Chanson d'Antioche* (volume 4, and the last to be published, since an independent edition had appeared in France: we based our edition therefore on another important manuscript). Scholars who had been working separately on other sections were invited to join the team – Geoffrey Myers for the *Chanson des Chétifs* (volume 5), Nigel Thorp for the *Chanson de Jérusalem*

(volume 6), and Peter Grillo for the post-Jerusalem branches (volumes 7 and 8); volumes 9 and 10, with prose versions of the poems, were edited by Edmond Emplaincourt and Jan Boyd Roberts. The British Academy's involvement in the project came in its support for work on *Jérusalem*, one of the longest sections (9,900 lines), at the University of Glasgow.



A thirteenth-century picture of Godfrey of Bouillon leading his men to the Holy Land

Originating in the early part of the twelfth century, the cycle is unique for being about a relatively contemporary event, the First Crusade. The narrative is extended by later writers, however, beyond the conquest of Jerusalem to the time of the Third Crusade of Philippe II of France and Richard I of England (1187–1191). Written during the period of the great growth of French and Latin literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it combines three genres of writing: history, romance, and epic (*chanson de geste*).

The earliest sections – in terms of composition, rather than genealogical order – are the *Chanson d'Antioche*, the *Chétifs*, and the *Chanson de Jérusalem*, which narrate the central events of the First Crusade. The *Antioche* is very close to the 'true' history of what took place but elevates Godfrey to a place of prominence that he did not have historically; the *Chétifs* is an entirely imaginative work about hostages taken after the disastrous defeat at Civetot and how they survived captivity to rejoin the crusade outside Jerusalem; and the *Jérusalem* itself retains the figures of the crusade and much geographical detail, but the events and characters do not have the same roles or historical accuracy as in the *Antioche*. A Spanish translation of an earlier version of *Jérusalem*, the *Gran Conquista de Ultramar*, shows nonetheless that the poem was once much closer to history.

The series of poems that followed gives a fictional ancestry of Godfrey of Bouillon. Instead of his actual grandfather, Godfrey the Bearded, a feared adversary (at varying times) of both the Holy Roman Empire and the Church and a brilliant figure in 11th-century Europe, Godfrey is given a less controversial and a more glorious ancestor (in terms of romance narrative) in the Swan Knight. The Swan Knight legend seems to have been created here in this form, grafted onto a folk tale found in the Latin *Dolopathos* of Johannes de Alta Silva, of around 1190, which tells of the birth of seven swan children, one girl and six boys. In the *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne* there are two distinct versions of the story. In the *Elioxe* version, which is probably the older of the two, king Lothair goes out hunting and loses his way in a wood outside his kingdom, where he meets Elioxe, an heiress of nine cities and fifty castles. She agrees to marry him, predicting that she will die giving birth

to seven children and that this lineage will expand to include a kingdom in the East. In the king's absence she does indeed die, having given birth to the children, who are born with gold chains around their necks. The king's mother claims that she gave birth to seven serpents and has the children taken into the forest, but the henchman to whom they are entrusted leaves them outside the hut of a hermit, who raises them. When their identity is disclosed later, the king's mother contrives to have their chains removed and the six boys are turned into swans, but their sister, who was hidden at the time, retains her human form. In due course she recognizes the swans as her brothers and feeds them every day until Lothair finally discovers what

has happened, restores the chains, and the swans turn into young men. However, one chain had been melted down and one of the brothers announces that he will always take care of this brother who must remain a swan. Thus he becomes the Swan Knight.

The second volume in the series concerns the adventures of the Chevalier au Cygne, his marriage to Beatrice and the birth of their daughter, the historical Ida of Bouillon. The *Enfances Godefroi* concerns her marriage to Eustace of Boulogne and the birth of their three sons, Eustace, Godfrey, and Baldwin, all heroes of the First Crusade. The *Enfances* tells how Godfrey inherited Bouillon, and this is the bridge to the *Chanson d'Antioche*. Texts following the *Jérusalem* were added to the

cycle in the 13th century and concern fictitious events and sometimes characters who were famous but from another period. They have the same names as persons prominent in the post-Jerusalem period, including Saladin, but their exploits are wholly imaginative. The final part of the verse text is lost, and the volumes which complete the edition give an abbreviated translation of the poems into prose.

Professor Nigel Thorp reports on pages 31 to 35 on his more recent occupations with the correspondence of J.M. Whistler.
