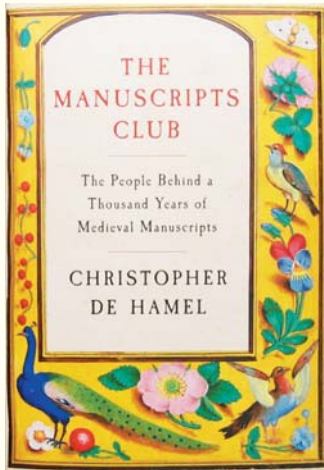


# Book Reviews: Marveling at Medieval

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**De Hamel, Christopher.**  
*The Manuscripts Club: The People Behind a Thousand Years of Medieval Manuscripts.* New York: Penguin Press, 2023. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 616pp. Frontispiece, illustrations. **\$50.00.**

As inscrutably indecipherable as are most ancient documents to the uninitiated, impenetrable on so many levels – long-extinct languages penned in baffling handwriting – the breathtaking beauty of medieval illuminated manuscripts is undeniable. For those of us who succumbed to their allure long ago, it was refreshing to see Christopher de Hamel’s bestselling *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World* create new devotees as it opened up these manuscripts’ many mysteries and made them relatable. It takes a very special scholar with “a very particular set of skills... acquired over a very long career” (apologies to Liam Neeson) to make these magnificent masterpieces accessible to the non-specialist.

De Hamel is one such person, as evidenced in *Meetings* (see review in the Fall 2018 issue) and other titles such as *The Book in the Cathedral: The Last Relic of Thomas Becket* (reviewed in the Summer 2021 issue). His formula of combining dense historical content interspersed with wry personal narrative and present-tense travelogue to the sites where the manuscripts are kept or were created and imaginary meetings with his subjects is irresistible and appealing – he succeeds in making what might otherwise be heavy scholarly material approachable and entertaining. I'm reminded of Umberto Eco's 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose*. Who would think an Italian medieval historian could weave so much arcane medieval history and biblical exegesis into a historical murder mystery so popular it spawned a film and television series.

*The Manuscripts Club: The People Behind a Thousand Years of Medieval Manuscripts* continues this winning formula, a worthy sequel to *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*. It mirrors the twelve profiles of *Remarkable Manuscripts*, but instead profiles twelve significant persons whose lives revolved around illuminated manuscripts in different ways, offered up chronologically and ranging from the 11<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. No two held the same profession, and while many are well-known figures about which a great deal has been written, others are rather obscure. Witness the chapter titles (sans names): The Monk, The Prince, The Bookseller, The Illuminator, The Antiquary, The Rabbi, The Savant, The Librarian, The Forger, The Editor, The Collector, The Curator.

Let me just offer up a dozen far-ranging commentaries – takeaways that most strike this reviewer.

**The Monk:** The manuscript-commissioning mania of St. Anselm (11<sup>th</sup> century Benedictine monk, influential Catholic theologian, Archbishop of Canterbury, founder of French monastery) highlights de Hamel's mastery at extracting information from challenging texts. His aptitude for drawing meaningful deductions from subtle clues in thousand-year-old manuscripts is a marvel – connoisseurship and sleuthing at an impressive level. He delights at showing the medieval roots of

modern attitudes in a powerful way:

...Even in the time of Anselm, literacy was still almost a monastic monopoly. This centrality of libraries to the life of monasteries had two effects. One is that bookish people... frequently became monks, which meant that any inheritable inclination to intellectualism was often eliminated from families by monastic celibacy. The other is that the use of books became associated with virtue. In the face of it, this need not necessarily have been self-evident, but the expense and difficulty of making manuscripts in the Middle Ages rendered books precious.... Despite our consumerist and throwaway society, it is still difficult to destroy a book, even one of negligible cost. Our sense of the moral value of possessing books and the duty of care we owe to them can be traced back to monastic libraries.

So, so true. Ask any antiquarian bookseller: We often see book owners who cannot bear the thought of discarding even the most stained, tattered and abused book held together with rubber bands and duct tape.

De Hamel's travel narratives are another way he effectively brings the past into the present. When touring the remnants of Anselm's monastery in rural France, he comments that in the monk's day "Bindings were wood, usually oak or beech, probably culled from the woods you can still see across the field. The creamy whiteness of the covering leather on the binding of the Saint Augustine manuscript in Paris is exactly the colour of the Charolois cattle."

**The Prince:** Fabulously wealthy French 14th century noble and royal relative Jean Duc de Berry commissioned "Probably the best-known illuminated manuscript of the late Middle Ages... the *Très Riches Heures*, a sumptuous prayerbook... He is generally considered to be the most important royal patron of manuscripts in medieval Europe."

Today's tiresome "certificate of authenticity" issue rears its

ugly head when de Hamel addresses the prince's other collection: "relics of saints... which the Duc gathered passionately too. He owned hundreds of them." Most serious dealers (myself included) look askance at these tarnished papers often produced by unknown "experts" often to lend legitimacy to questionable items. Duc de Berry owned large numbers of saintly bits and bobs, including "the engagement ring of the Virgin Mary given to her by Joseph, or a stone which Jesus had changed in the wilderness into the shape of a loaf of bread... or the body of one of the Holy innocents of Matthew 2:16... [a] piece of the True Cross... fragments of the nails used at the Crucifixion... [a] head of one of the virgins [of Saint Ursula's Eleven Thousand Virgins] was described as accompanied by a certificate of authenticity." The Duc was credulous when it came to provenance.

A fictional tour of the Duc's manuscript collection guided by the prince himself may sound corny, but de Hamel pulls off these imagined one-on-one's quite well. "I expect that the Duc would have brought out the exquisite little House of Jeanne d'Évreux, which I have held a number of times, for it is now in the Cloisters collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York... You can just about enclose it in the palm of your hand. The Duc was doubtless captivated by the extreme contrast of size between this miniscule Book of Hours and his exaggeratedly large *Grande Heures*. If I had commented on this, he would probably have been amused to show me an even more miniature manuscript in his collection. It is described in the inventory as a tiny Gospel of Saint John no larger than... a common base coin of the period about an inch across. Miniature books are well-known bibliophilic collectibles today, but it is remarkable to learn of one from the Middle Ages..." De Hamel's fictional meetings are an altogether clever and satisfying means of showcasing samples from a large collection – not only does it avoid the sense of merely running through an inventory, but it allows him to project his sense of the subject's personality.

**The Bookseller:** I wondered whether de Hamel's chapter on 15th century Florentine bookseller Vespasiano da Bisticci would prove a 36-page recap of Ross King's *The Bookseller*

of Florence (reviewed in the Fall 2021 issue). So did he – his detailed endnotes record his “nail-biting anxiety” that such was the case. “Extraordinarily,” he concludes, “we hardly overlap... I greet Mr. King as a fellow tourist... but our shopping bags are different.” I concur.

One of the charms of *The Manuscripts Club* is de Hamel’s knack for lending ancient texts *immediacy*, which keeps his narrative fresh and lively. One example from among dozens: Vespasiano writes suggestions in the margins of an enormous 5-volume set of Cicero’s writings to the scribe he’s commissioned to pen it on behalf of a British aristocrat. “Such marks would usually be erased when the headings were inserted, but somehow they survived,” he observes. “Comparison with known autographs in the Archivio di Stato in Florence and elsewhere shows that these minute guidewords are in Vespasiano da Bisticci’s own handwriting. Almost a thousand miles from Florence and nearly six centuries later, we are suddenly very close to the man himself.”

De Hamel emphasizes more so than King that “Vespasiano largely cornered the upper end of the market for humanistic books, classical and Renaissance, and the standard texts of medieval intellectual history,” but both quote the bookseller’s oft-cited comment about one manuscript collection he assembled – that “had there been one printed volume it would have been ashamed to be in such company.” Writes de Hamel, “It could be the mantra of his whole life. It also marks his downfall, for he never adapted to the black art of the printing press, then sweeping across Europe.” He rightly compares Vespasiano’s stubbornness to “those of an older generation in our own times who defiantly blocked their minds to digital technology and found themselves becoming unexpectedly lonely.”

Once more bringing out the past’s collision with the present, de Hamel notes Vespasiano’s retirement at age 55 rather than facing the moveable type juggernaut. He sells his business and settles into a countryside villa a few miles outside Florence. De Hamel diligently tracks it down, “a substantial cream-coloured building on a commanding site carved into the steep Belmonte

hillside, terraced with very old dry-stone walls. We came up a private drive lined with cypress trees....”

**The Illuminator:** Most unusual factoid in this chapter on a miniaturist about whom little is known (all too typical for manuscript illuminators) is that this Dutch artist was born around 1484 – an astonishing “thirty years after the invention of printing in Europe, and even about a decade after printing presses had been introduced into the southern Netherlands. Simon Bening then spent his entire life making and illuminating manuscripts at a time when they were frankly quite unnecessary.” The notion that handwritten manuscripts phased out relatively quickly after the introduction of printing presses is quite simply false – manuscripts continued to be produced for many decades as printed books slowly took precedence, and luxury illuminated manuscripts such as employed Bening remained in demand far into the 16th century. It boggles the mind that “when, after a thousand years, the illuminator had finally become the principal virtuoso in the production of manuscripts, the market was almost over.” Perhaps even more mind-boggling is a living artist de Hamel visits:

To get some flavor of what it might have been like to visit Simon Bening at home, I arranged to go to see Brody Neuenschwander, scribe and illuminator in Bruges. Brody is an American by birth, genial and articulate, and it was he who first taught me how to lay gold leaf on parchment at a course in Minnesota more than thirty years ago. He is a professional maker of illuminated manuscripts, about the age Bening was at the height of his fame, and his own clients are even more international. Brody Neuenschwander is in no sense a creator of spurious medieval pastiches, but a modern artist working in startlingly original styles. He does, however, use traditional manuscript makers’ techniques and tools, and his house and workshop might not be so different from Bening’s in the 1540s.

Neuenschwander, doing today what Bening was doing 500 years ago, sheds extraordinary light on medieval illumination techniques and work methods. Talk about the present illuminating the past!

**The Antiquary:** Sir Robert Cotton was a well-connected high level civil servant of the late 16th–early 17th century whose lifelong obsession for historical research resulted in a large and fabulous collection. He entered the fledgling field of antiquities studies in London in the 1580s as a young man with a passion for medieval manuscripts. “For a relatively small outlay,” de Hamel writes, “a possibly lonely rich man was swept welcomingly into an antiquarian circle which provided camaraderie and a shared interest without regard to age or social inequality. Cotton was spellbound and longed for inclusion.” As greedily acquisitive as was Cotton, he could also be generous in loaning out treasures. “He sought manuscripts only because every item is exclusive to its owner,” comments de Hamel, “and he relished that it was by definition a unique authority. He then made them strategically available for consultation by politicians, landowners, churchmen and antiquaries.... For 1621, for example, there were no fewer than 125 separate loans of manuscripts from the collection.”

Most intriguing is de Hamel’s attempt to explain Cotton’s bizarre habit of combining, mixing and matching of seemingly unrelated manuscripts, even snipping tiny portions from one manuscript and affixing them into another:

It is easy to laugh at Cotton’s misguided efforts and to accuse him of vandalism or stupidity, but actually this is where we do finally encounter Cotton as a closet bibliophile.... Here is a solitary man instinctively trying to make some connection with his treasures. He delights in the process of arranging texts and assembling books.... He is looking for order and neatness in his troubled times. Cotton knows, truthfully, that some of the manuscripts are of rather dull appearance and he wishes they were prettier. In the long evenings, untutored and alone in his library, he tries to make up

for this. There, at last, is his soul, and his love of the manuscripts.

That's a lot of supposition, but his theorizing shows de Hamel's boundless empathy for the quirks and peccadilloes of collectors, even those hundreds of years distant.

**The Rabbi:** Behind each of these figures de Hamel strives to move *beyond* the biographical facts of their lives and details of their collections. He wants to put a finger on what makes them tick, what informs their desire to gather medieval manuscripts. For late 17th–early 18th century German Rabbi David Oppenheim “Collective memory was (and is) extremely important. That dreadful sense that accumulated Jewish wisdom might be lost lies closely behind the library of Rabbi Oppenheim and other great collections of Hebrew books.” The religious leader “did not need Bibles for their text: that was not in danger of disappearing and he probably knew most of it by heart anyway.” De Hamel contends that “Every one of his few biblical manuscripts has some additional feature beyond the scriptural text, providing records of Jewish use or scholarship. . . . That is why Rabbi Oppenheim wanted them.” De Hamel feels this also explains another trait of Hebrew manuscripts. “In the Christian tradition,” he notes, “which goes back at least [to] the fifth to sixth centuries, illumination was seen as honouring the text. . . . It would be extremely rare to illustrate a Hebrew Bible. It is inconceivable that a Torah scroll could ever be decorated, and to depict God in art at all is unimaginable. Hebrew script does not even allow for initials since all letters are usually written in the same size.”

As far as the intense interest in dating manuscripts, “Many collectors of Hebrew books, very probably [Oppenheim], hardly cared how old they were. The identity and status of the author were important, but whether a particular manuscript copy was itself twelfth- or sixteenth-century was of negligible interest to many Jewish scholars, and this is true even now.” Condition, too, is a whole other matter when it comes to Hebrew manuscripts. Whereas most collectors “care immensely about a manuscript’s



freshness and the quality and sparkle of the artwork, Hebrew books are generally judged differently.... Damage was evidence of past study, shared by others in a long tradition of the manuscript's usefulness. A flawless and untouched Hebrew manuscript... would be deemed unloved, unused and somehow less desirable. It is difficult to deny the logic of this.... The purpose of a Hebrew manuscript was to be used."

**The Savant:** The only figure in *The Manuscripts Club* with which I was entirely unfamiliar proves to be, like character actor Erich von Stroheim, "the man you love to hate" – French 18th century bibliographer Jean-Joseph Rive. The arrogant and opinionated and brilliant abbot authored "the most bad-tempered book on manuscripts ever written" a thinly-veiled 1789 "fiction" which de Hamel characterizes as "more than 500 pages of tirade about the unfairness he has endured through all his life and the wanton incompetence of seemingly everyone he has ever met or whose books he has read.... [his] diatribes are so relentless and his accusations so trivial that one sometimes longs for him only to be quiet, as doubtless they did too. Every page is padded with references to obscure reference books intended to demonstrate his own enormously wide reading and prodigious memory...." A larger chip on the shoulder one rarely encounters, so if brutally snarky is your cup of tea, the adventures of this librarian to aristocrats is just the thing. Love Abbé Rive or hate him, in the end de Hamel admits that "His sense of connoisseurship has become the basis of manuscript bibliophily ever since, especially in France, where condition and text are still pre-eminent, and his recording of evidence is part of the lore of manuscript scholarship."

As an aside, I thoroughly appreciate de Hamel's spot-on narrative of buying books under pressure – what he calls "raw connoisseurship at express speed, and every bookseller lives by it":

...Over many decades, I have previewed countless auctions of manuscript and it is an experience I know well. You sit at the table in the viewing room and

they bring you one volume after another. You pick up each book, weigh it in the hands, open it up and might scribble down a quick impression, whether it is lovely or disappointing... and then you look more closely, turning pages, judging condition and comparing the auctioneers' description and making rapid judgments on their suggested attribution and date, and maybe comments on the manuscript's earlier history or anything relevant which might affect the price or indicate problems for a buyer, and you finally decide... whether it is a book to compete for, and at what price. Then you move to the next lot. Sometimes it takes only a few moments.

My heart quickens and palms dampen just reading this. Whether previewing medieval manuscripts at a high-end auction as was de Hamel or gauging a private collection of modern books and autographs, the adrenaline-pumping process remains the same. The only thing I would add to his description is the all-important "sniff test."

**The Librarian:** The British Museum's keeper of manuscripts for a good chunk of the 19th century was Frederic Madden, who de Hamel portrays memorably as "of exceptional and still-enduring importance in creating one of the outstanding public enterprises of the nineteenth century" – never mind that his colleague and nemesis "considered Madden to be high-handed, dapper, Tory, xenophobic, snobbish, quick-tempered, easily offended and staggeringly uncooperative." De Hamel weighs this seminal figure even-handedly, concluding that he "became probably the most important public acquirer of manuscripts in any country or period of history."

**The Forger:** One of the most overlooked forgers of modern times is this colorful 19th century Greek with the roll-off-your-tongue name Constantine Simonides. Perhaps his absurdly outrageous parchments of unheard-of antiquity are so over the top he is too easily dismissed and forgotten. He surely bucked all the rules of modern forgers. Forgers must of course "distance their names from their own productions," de Hamel writes, as

any Forgery 101 student knows. Simonides' most outlandish creations include an early transcript of Homer and fragments of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on papyrus (including phrases the viewing public would most like, "a convenience uncharacteristic of ancient manuscripts"), and his vanity propelled him to sign some of these to proclaim himself as discoverer. The volume and audacity of his forgeries was breathtaking if not downright foolish. "It was reported in Germany," writes de Hamel, "Simonides had tried to sell a manuscript of forty-seven comedies by Menander, a playwright then known only in fragments, the complete plays of Sophocles and the library catalogue of Alexandria." Subtlety was not his forte.

I'm pleased that de Hamel goes out on a limb that some historians refrain from climbing and tries to psychoanalyze his subject. "Simonides' clear inability to conceive how others saw him is the first evidence we have of his likely bipolarism," he observes. His complete oblivion to being accused of forgery to his face prompts de Hamel to note, "He was a pathological liar" and "like many such, he probably came to believe in his own fantasies and in the authenticity of his forgeries.

**The Editor:** It took a figure as widely known as Nobel Prize-winning 19th century German scholar and historian Theodor Mommsen to set our image of the absent-minded professor. Just as Thomas Nast created in ink our images of Santa Claus, the Democratic Donkey and Republican elephant, Mommsen's slovenly appearance and eccentricities cemented another picture: "Mommsen's hair was always shoulder-length and untidy, turning grey and finally white, resembling a witch or a wizard.... Wild hair in old age became a recognizable badge of an eccentric professor or genius, cultivated by Einstein and generations of academics ever since...."

In a long and productive career studying ancient manuscripts and publishing his findings, Mommsen traced manuscripts to their most authentic sources and pioneered the field of textual genetics. "The principles of textual genetics were still relatively new," writes de Hamel. "The idea is that by plotting cumulative errors of transcription one can hypothesize the different

ancestors of manuscripts and their moments of divergence, even if the prototypes themselves do not survive.” In the case of one landmark history of the Goths, “Mommsen placed sixteen manuscripts in his first family, with half a dozen derivatives too corrupt to be useful; three in his second family, with another eight dismissible descendants; and eight in a third family, which he considered largely irrelevant.”

Shockingly, so great was Mommsen’s renown that major manuscript archives thought nothing of loaning him priceless manuscripts. An 1880 home fire in which he lost his large library eroded this trust – perhaps Mommsen should be credited with advancing modern security practices. One of his daughters was dying at the time of the fire, and de Hamel speculates, “It is conceivable that it was a suicide bid, in a time of great personal stress, envisaging a classical death in a pyre of his own books. It is most likely that Mommsen had left the room for some reason or had fallen asleep with a candle unsecured, although he did not admit to this....” Today, even with appropriate academic credentials, it is sometimes challenging to gain permission to view certain manuscripts even in the inner sanctum of a repository.

**The Collector:** Us medieval manuscript aficionados appreciate de Hamel’s not making us feel like the dilettantes that most of us are as he offers up insights, context, judgment and comparisons. We’re shown an evocative 13th century Justinian manuscript that 20th century British collector and advisor Sir Sidney Cockerell and his employer William Morris bought for a pittance in France in 1894. “For William Morris and his impressionable disciple, it was treasure indeed,” yet de Hamel points out that “Mommsen would have dismissed the manuscript as textually irrelevant for the transmission of Roman law, Madden as being of a most common type, and the Abbé Rive as damaged and unilluminated.” I relish these reminders that different people value manuscripts for differing reasons.

In a long and illustrious career as a museum director, connoisseur and collection advisor par excellence, “Cockerell became the national arbiter of taste in the acquisition of

illuminated manuscripts. Curators as well as private individuals sought his advice, and some received it whether they had asked for it or not.” But perhaps the most astonishing factoid about Cockerell is that, having spent seven decades closely studying and handling medieval manuscripts mostly of a religious nature, he himself remained, as de Hamel twice notes, an atheist.

**The Curator:** The most contemporary of all those profiled in *The Manuscripts Club*, Belle da Costa Greene comes across as a breath of fresh air in the stuffy, elite, almost all-male world of medieval manuscripts. J. Pierpont Morgan’s private librarian, later librarian of the Morgan Library, wasn’t at all what she seemed, as a biography only recently revealed. No one knew she was African-American and other background data was equally hazy – “she moved her birth date around as others moved potted plants,” quips de Hamel.

Belle Greene had rapidly become irreplaceable in Morgan’s daily life and confidence. She clearly took genuine delight in rare books and manuscripts, not to be underestimated, and she was extremely efficient. She was quick-witted and socially acute, often exploiting or exaggerating her girlishness, which was unusual... in the very male world of bibliophily of the time. Her business correspondence is often peppered with disarming informality, even jokey flirtatiousness. Those who met her commented on her stylish and flamboyant clothes, including a love of hats.

Despite the flashiness and falsifications, you’ve got to like Belle Greene. She learned from famed art historian Bernard Berenson how to “[weigh] and [judge] the value of art by its aesthetic quality” and with J.P. Morgan’s buying power at her disposal for making acquisitions, “Seldom has any curator had such fun” – and did so wisely and astutely. “Belle Greene probably did as much as anyone in the United States,” de Hamel sums up, “to bring medieval manuscripts in to popular consciousness in the second quarter of the twentieth century.”

If my random comments on *The Manuscripts Club* give the impression that medieval manuscripts take a back seat to personalities, make no mistake: They are front and center throughout. Medieval manuscripts are a constant presence, a dizzying stream of famous or significant beauties that appear and change hands, only to reappear than vanish again, surfacing elsewhere centuries later. The many fine color illustrations, too, profile these manuscripts perhaps more fully than the persons under review. The sheer beauty and variety dazzles anyone open to learning about them, but to de Hamel they are all clearly old friends. *The Manuscripts Club*, given its dense and historical material, is not fast or light reading, but Christopher de Hamel's deft touch energizes and enlivens its challenging subject. *The Manuscripts Club* and the earlier *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* illuminate each other equally.