



Bettany Hughes

Summers reading on the Kent coast led to a lifetime's odyssey

Books are beautiful, but this was certainly not a thing of beauty. Second-hand, slightly skanky, the 1961 paperback edition of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* by Norman Cohn was on the road with me to the Kent coast. A childhood in London meant that religiously, every Easter, Whitsun and long summer we would wend our way down to the sea. My parents, quite rightly, thought that a dose of fresh air was the cure for pretty much every ill – psychological and physical. So my brother would kick balls around on the promenade and aim stones at tin cans on breakwaters; and I would hunch on the windswept shingle of Hythe for hours on end, and read.

Norman Cohn's book was an unusual companion for the British beach. Radical in its day, it shifted the centre of medieval momentum from high politics to a groundswell of maniacal religious fervour. Cohn's scholarly survey sniffed out a new kind of history – one led by spirit rather than spleen. But it also filled those bleak English afternoons with fantastical European characters: Choreomaniacs who would dance themselves into the ground in an eschatological frenzy, Free Spirit disciples who subscribed to Bacchanalian bouts of free love, or the Flagellants who whipped themselves to gory shreds in an effort to forestall the dreadful days that would precede Christ's Second Coming.

Here were the prophets I'd met on the pages of classical literature, made flesh and tearing apart gentle little communities with their, often heretical, tales of New Jerusalems and the Last Days. And whereas for the ancients, all man's hopes lay in the certainty of the past – here the Frankenstein of the future was allowed to stalk through fields of barley and German market squares. For ordinary medieval men and women the world was changed by stories of a Millennium in which there would be no

suffering or sin – a true paradise on Earth.

I'd always been seduced by an idea I might one day get to Italy, Greece or Central Europe to be among "my people". So when the opportunity presented itself I found myself, aged 15, on a plane to the land where, 500 years before, Millenarianists had made their mark. *The Pursuit of the Millennium* in hand, I made my own pursuit – following the trail of those passionate folk who had crossed Europe to be closer to God.

Cohn's writing was so vivid the ghosts he conjured were my travel companions. I learnt that rumour, fear, exultation were the real dynamos of history and historical change. It opened my eyes not just to how people once lived, but how we live today. That trip was lonely. But I also knew this was my calling; sitting on deserted station platforms to catch a train to what is now nowhere, or tramping tangled mountain paths. Ambitions to be an actress, artist, or animal-rights activist were

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jettisoned; history was the thing.

Twenty years ago, as we married I gave a fresh edition of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* to my new husband. He had been running European circuses when we first met, and I'm sure I was partly drawn by the promise of a dark, wild, world – where normal rules did not apply – one that I'd first met on the chilly Kent coast.

So that dog-eared paperback – more distressed as the summer of 1979 wore on, smeared with Cornish wafer and chippy fingers, took me to another world. It gave me the life I now have.

Bettany Hughes is speaking about her TV series Divine Women at 11.30am on the Wales Stage [Event 365]. She is also taking part in a balloon debate on Sparta vs Athens at 5.20pm in the Big Tent [Event 391]

Did you know that nearly £100m has been invested in arts and film projects, via 32,373 grants, in the last five years alone?

Did you know that lottery funding has helped to fund the Egyptian gallery at the British Museum?

