

Jo Ann Kay McNamara, Feminist Scholar: A Pioneer in Transforming Medieval History

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JO ANN K. MCNAMARA died in New York City on May 20, 2009, at age 78, from complications from a shoulder surgery in March. Her most recent book is a translation of *Paris in the Middle Ages* (2009), written by Simone Roux. Prof. McNamara was a scholar of world-wide renown. Her most widely acclaimed book, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia*, was published by Harvard University Press in 1996 and reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review* by Antonia Fraser. McNamara argued that women as nuns have struggled through the ages to create a separate life which subverts the traditional gender roles assigned to women in every era. The body of her scholarly work has focused primarily on the history of the early Middle Ages and has ranged broadly over the areas of religion, gender, institution-building, and an attempt to reperiodize and reinterpret the years from 400 to 1100.

Dr. McNamara was a pioneer in making visible women's roles in medieval society, including the role of women in religion, bringing these perspectives into the mainstream of writing about medieval history and inspiring a new generation of medievalists. Scholars who undertake gender studies and medieval history today automatically turn to McNamara's contributions. The broad sweep of her innovative thinking turned to rethinking the transition from Roman to medieval times. She early began to argue forcefully that Roman culture did not decline and fall in the fifth century (*pace* Edward Gibbon), but continued to influence subsequent centuries down to the twelfth century.

Jo Ann McNamara was also among the first scholars to insist that the paradigms of women's history could be applied to men's history. In her first essay on the subject, she coined the word "*Herrenfrage*" ["the Men Question"] to convey the concept that gender for men was

as problematic and socially constructed as it was for women. This article, “The Herrenfrage: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150,” appeared in *Medieval Masculinities* (1994), edited by Clare A. Lees. Accordingly, McNamara saw the great ecclesiastical reform movement in eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe as an effort to make celibate priests the new “manly men,” a concept of masculinity meant to replace the warrior as hero and still serve as the role model for Christian society. In this context, she wrote of “chastity” as comprising a “third gender.” Embracing chastity also made both women and men more nearly co-equals than were the two sexes whose separate reproductive roles in secular society underpinned their distinct and hierarchically assigned gender roles.

McNamara’s commitment to exploring new questions regarding sex and gender in the Middle Ages was a part of a life of concern about the world around her. During her student days, in the 1960s, all the burning issues of civil rights, the Vietnam War, and the women’s movement made her very politically aware. She actively joined antiwar activities and, when the National Organization for Women brought a legal suit against the “men only” policy at McSorley’s Old Ale House in New York City (1970), she joined a sit-in to help make the point. She maintained the life of a political activist and sharp critic throughout her life, along with her deepening scholarly questioning of all she had been taught about medieval history as a graduate student. Doing so, she was replicating the experiences of other feminist historians for whom the women’s movement opened up new questions about their own lives and the lives of women in the past.

Professor McNamara’s academic research began with a book on *Giles Aycelin: Servant of two Masters* (1973). Thereafter she turned to path-breaking work on women, gender, and power in both secular and religious contexts. For this work she was honored by two volumes of medieval history. The first, published in 2003, entitled *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, is co-edited by Maryanne Kowaleski and Mary C. Erler. The volume is dedicated to her and includes an essay by her (entitled “Women and Power through the Family Revisited”) reflecting on a now-classic article she and Suzanne F. Wemple wrote together in 1973. The second volume of essays dedicated

to her is *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe* (2008), edited by Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz. It is inscribed: “To Jo Ann McNamara *magistra doctissima et mater omnium bonarum*” [“most learned teacher and mother of all good things”]. Other essays in this volume examine many of the new interpretations she had brought forward in a series of articles that followed the publication of her book *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (1983).

Asked to contribute an autobiographical essay to *Women Medievalists and the Academy* (2004–2005), edited by Jane Chance, McNamara wrote about her active participation in the causes about which she felt deeply. She entitled her essay “The Networked Life,” and with a nod to “sympathetic men,” she wrote: “I look back today at the women who befriended me in graduate school, the women who hired me and the innumerable women I knew and those I never knew who have struggled in my lifetime to secure our place in the academy and to advance a scholarship that gives us the means to understand our own experiences. Sisterhood is powerful indeed and it provides a working model for all humanity.”

Born in Janesville, Wisconsin, in 1931, McNamara moved every few years with her family, following her father who held a job as an executive with General Motors. Her early education was in Catholic schools run by nuns. Thereafter, she spent two years as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania as a Theatre Arts major and completed her undergraduate education in Columbia University’s School of General Studies as an English major in 1956. To “recoup her finances,” as she put it in her autobiographical essay, she worked in the military for two years in France as an entertainment director. Back at Columbia University for graduate school, she worked as a secretary in the Geology Department. She now turned to medieval history, earning her PhD in 1967. By that time she had begun teaching part time at Hunter College, in its evening session, which was coed, the college itself becoming so in 1964 after a long tradition as a woman’s college. She joined its History Department full time when she had earned her doctorate, and later, in the 1990s, became as well a mentor to graduate students at the City University Graduate School.

At Hunter, McNamara took part in the founding of the Women’s

Studies program in the mid-1970s. She joined sister historians in the New York area to form a branch of the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession (now the Coordinating Council on Women in History), established in 1969 as a caucus within the American Historical Association. She also joined the new Institute for Research in History, created to meet the needs of historians with and without an academic affiliation during the fiscal crises of New York City in the mid-1970s. She helped found a research group in Family History and continued to meet with it until her death, as she did with an equally long-lived interdisciplinary Hagiography research group she founded for studying the lives of saints. She played an active role in the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women from its beginning in 1973, insisting on including medievalists in its programs and co-chairing the entire conference in 1982. An active participant in the annual meetings of the American Historical Association, she joined its Program Committee in 1991 and co-chaired that committee in 1992.

Jo Ann McNamara married Eldon Clingan in 1959, retaining her own name, and was divorced from him in 1973. She is survived by her son Edmund Clingan, who has followed in his mother's footsteps to become a professor of history at Queensborough Community College, CUNY, in the field of modern German history. Other survivors are her sister Patricia Gail Leopardi of Beesleys Point, New Jersey, and her widowed sister-in-law, Carolyn McNamara of North Tonawanda, New York. Her death is greatly mourned by friends and colleagues in this country and throughout the world.