

Milne, Krista A. 2025. *The Destruction of Medieval Manuscripts in England: Institutional Collections*. Oxford Studies in Medieval Literature and Culture. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 311. ISBN 978019892022.

Reviewed by Carlotta Barranu 
University College London
carlotta.barranu@ucl.ac.uk

This publication contributes to recent scholarly efforts to understand the impact of lost historical sources and the knowledge they preserved. Alongside popular history monographs such as Richard Ovenden's (2020) *Burning the Books* and Robert Bartlett's (2024) *History in Flames*, Milne's work joins specialist studies that are relevant to manuscript destruction, such as *Re-using Manuscripts in Late Medieval England* by Hannah Ryley (2022) and *Perceptions of Medieval Manuscripts* by Elaine Treharne (2021), which consider the motives behind the fragmentation of medieval books. All of them grapple with the question of how the loss of this historic material affects and reshapes our understanding of the past.

Milne takes the Dissolution of the Monasteries as her starting point. Often described as a catastrophic episode of book destruction in England, she asks whether the prominence accorded to this event is justified, comparing evidence from the Tudor period with losses sustained during the Middle Ages and after the death of Elizabeth I. The questions guiding her study are: what kind of manuscripts had more chance of survival? How did they survive or when were they destroyed? Who were the figures or communities that facilitated these processes? Was everyday loss comparable to event-led loss, and how did these actions impact our understanding of medieval manuscript production? This list reveals at a glance the level of complexity underlying her research.

Making use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, Milne focuses her examination on bound handwritten volumes specifically, although single-sheet documents and early printed books are occasionally touched upon when helpful for comparison. Milne also establishes AD 1500 as an arbitrary cut-off point for her analysis, which helps to minimise bias in the gathered data insofar as it "is tied to neither the rise of print nor the Dissolution of the Monasteries, nor to any other historical event that is typically associated with the end of the [medieval] period" (17). Despite the caveats inherent in quantitative research, which Milne duly acknowledges, this investigation offers compelling evidence that overturns assumptions about the impact of the Dissolution on the loss of medieval

manuscripts in England. It becomes evident that other events, such as Elizabeth I's injunctions, were far more reaching and effective.

As the monograph draws extensively on existing scholarship, this publication can also function as a helpful reference work or entry point for those who are unfamiliar with quantitative research in medieval history. While Milne takes time to recount what is known about medieval manuscript loss, her study adds granularity to our understanding of loss rates and underscores the potential of quantitative methodologies for complex research questions that span long periods of time. It also creates a model for future research on other European collections. Therefore, she not only contributes a fresh perspective on book destruction and the loss of knowledge in England, but also demonstrates the benefit of diversifying methodologies. In this case, the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods makes clear how much material culture can influence our understanding of social and economic history.

Admittedly, the complex nature of the task at hand means that the discussion often returns to key points extensively and carefully, which can become repetitive. However, when the study is not read cover to cover, the reiteration of key points can be helpful to clarify the approach in each chapter. Similarly, each conclusion is drawn very cautiously, reminding the reader that the "significance along any of these axes is of course subject to debate" (8). The overall frustration from this monograph has nothing to do with Milne's work and all to do with the nature of the subject: "The question [about how much has been lost] cannot be answered in any definite way, but asking it is fundamental for how we understand the literary and cultural landscape of medieval England" (25).

More specifically, the study shows that, despite the hostility and at times targeted efforts to destroy knowledge and books under the Tudors, manuscript loss rates were considerably higher during the medieval period, resulting primarily from more mundane factors such as wear, changing taste and practices (especially for liturgical manuscripts), as well as theft. Milne also warns about taking medieval records at face value, since extant inventories and book lists carry the bias of those who wrote them. This issue is evident when she considers the impact of the Civil War on medieval manuscript loss, showing how Royalist accounts exaggerated the role of the Parliamentarians in destroying medieval books, most of which was accidental rather than targeted. The closer we get to the modern day, the lower the loss rate, partly due to a pattern that Milne calls "age without vintage" (86).

This simple and brilliant phrase is perhaps the most important concept to take away from this study: no matter the period, a book is most vulnerable when it is about 50 to 250 years old—old enough to be obsolete, but not old enough to be perceived as "heritage" worth preserving. This is suggested not only by antiquarian collection patterns from the early modern and modern periods, but

also by a 13th-century book list from Glastonbury Abbey, where a book that at the time was 50–150 years old is noted as *vetusti* (old), while another one that was 350–450 years old is described as *vetustissimi* (very old) (54). Both survive as London, British Library, Royal MS 12 C xxiii and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F. 4. 32 respectively. It is this broad pattern that informed much of manuscript loss.

Furthermore, what transpires from this study is that the Tudor period marked a turning point in attitudes towards medieval manuscripts, which increasingly came to be seen as remnants of the past worth preserving. In this respect, when Milne discusses the collecting habits of Matthew Parker and Robert Cotton, she signals a rare instance where language affected survival rates. At a time when England was establishing itself as a Protestant kingdom, the interest in its own past (and in finding precedents for an English church) flourished anew. It also becomes clear that contemporary perceptions of an object—be they purely utilitarian or influenced by political, religious and cultural affiliations—shaped the rationale for acquisition, disposal, or retention across time.

Milne also asks what counts as a lost book, remarking on the volumes listed as missing by the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury in 1337. Do these books count as lost because we do not know their whereabouts? Can we presume they were destroyed at some point? Such items may be considered a true grey area for a study on manuscript loss, as it would be premature to assume their destruction. However, even if they were destroyed (which is a likely possibility), the question remains open: were those books returned, found, or discarded? This prompts Milne to ask a corollary question that is relevant for current heritage institutions: can a medieval book that is kept under lock and key, rarely viewed in the flesh, be considered lost? Perhaps not, as it would still be part of the many cycles of interest, disinterest, and accident described in this very monograph. This is not to say that inaccessibility to medieval manuscripts is desirable. Rather, it brings attention to the fact that the keepers of medieval manuscripts determine the likelihood of survival of these objects. The collections we inherit are not neutral, as the knowledge they preserve carries values, assumptions, and consequences for those who engage with it. As custodians of that knowledge, our choices inevitably reflect and reinforce particular perspectives. Therefore, by offering an investigation on the fates of medieval books, Milne's study also sparks reflection on contemporary heritage practice.

To conclude, *The Destruction of Medieval Manuscripts in England* not only provides new quantitative data but, more importantly, reminds us of the value of quantitative methods when studying the heterogeneous patterns of knowledge creation, migration, retention, and destruction. Going from medieval attitudes towards books to the “near-universal sense of the inherent value of medieval manuscripts” (265) in the 20th century, Milne tackles the question of survival

and loss with clarity and caution, demonstrating how assumptions about the Reformation led to an exaggerated perception of manuscript destruction during the early modern period.

References

- Bartlett, Robert. 2024. *History in Flames: The Destruction and Survival of Medieval Manuscripts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ovenden, Richard. 2020. *Burning the Books: A History of Knowledge Under Attack*. London: John Murray.
- Ryley, Hannah. 2022. *Re-using Manuscripts in Late Medieval England: Repairing, Recycling, Sharing*. York Manuscripts and Early Print Studies 4. York: York Medieval Press.
- Treharne, Elaine. 2021. *Perceptions of Medieval Manuscripts: The Phenomenal Book*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(Received 02/06/2026)