Review Essay: Field, P. J. C. *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*

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and the appeal of the work to more modern aesthetes. Whatever the subject, however brief the treatment, the work as a whole is remarkable for the lucidity of its presentation, its detail (Appendix II, for example, lists 328 readers of the text prior to 1700), and the thoroughness of the investigator.

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It is a paradox worthy of high romance that the most influential of Arthurian romances, Caxton’s book of “noble chyvalrye, curtosye, humanyte,” was likely written by a persistent felon charged with extortion, rape, church-robbery, cattle-raiding, horse-stealing, and lying in ambush to murder his ducal patron. For over a hundred years, since Oscar Sommer and G. L. Kittredge first named Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, his criminal record has seemed so incompatible with the chivalric idealism of the *Morte Darthur* that critics have persistently looked elsewhere for the author. There was no shortage of alternatives: at least nine Thomas Malorys are recorded in the relevant period. But a century, two book-length studies, and a host of articles later the same man emerges as the only one of the name known to have been a knight and in prison when the *Morte Darthur* was completed by a “knight-prisoner” in the ninth year of Edward IV (1469–1470). That is the core conclusion of this new investigation by Peter Field, incorporating the results of various studies published by him in recent years.

This new biography, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, sketches the Malory ancestry, the four hundred or so recorded members, most of them descended from one of eight branches of a twelfth-century ancestor of French stock. The cadet branch to which Thomas Malory belonged held lands in the Midlands from the early
thirteenth century, including Newbold Revel, acquired by marriage in the midfourteenth, inherited from his father, John, after John's death in 1433/34. It seems likely that Thomas was then still a minor since the estate continued to be administered by his mother, Philippa, until at least 1437. If so, he will have been born about 1416, contradicting the tradition that he served under Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, in the French campaigns of Henry V. He entered adult life as a member of a Warwickshire society of a dozen peerage families and some 120 gentry families like his own, loosely linked in the constantly changing affinities of "bastard feudalism," shifting their allegiance from one magnate to another in pursuit of patronage, power, office, and land, each as a means to the others. Family connections might have made Malory a member of various affinities: that of his paternal uncle (or possibly cousin) Sir Robert Malory, Prior of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in England, from 1432 to 1439/40, and one of the greatest magnates in the kingdom; that of the lords Ferrers of Chartley through his maternal cousin Sir Philip Chetwynd, under whom he may have served in Gascony; of Henry Beauchamp, Earl, later Duke, of Warwick, to whose influence Malory may have owed his election as an M.P. for Warwickshire in 1445; or of his rival for influence in the county, Humphrey Stafford, Duke of Buckingham. Whoever his patron may have been—no doubt he changed affinities from time to time—there is evidence of Malory's standing in his society: his service in Parliament (once certainly, possibly three times); his assumption of knighthood (unlike his father), despite the limited income his estates are likely to have yielded; the various documents that testify to his involvement in national and domestic affairs. The art of the book lies in the interpretation of documents, a complex process further complicated by uncertainties of identification (amongst them the extensive Malory kin and occasional missing pieces in the jigsaw), enhanced by increasing availability of records, by modern techniques of interpretation, and by Peter Field's skill and experience as editor and biographer of Malory. Uncertainties persist on individual issues; these are frankly admitted, but the outline of a career emerges convincingly.
One aspect of that career, long familiar, remains intractable—the catalogue of criminal charges against Malory: the October 1443 charge of assaulting, imprisoning, and robbing Thomas Smyth; of driving off cattle from Lady Peyto's estate at Sibbertoft, probably in 1453, of lying in ambush with twenty-six armed men to murder the Duke of Buckingham (4 January 1450); of breaking into the house of Hugh Smith and raping his wife, Joan (23 May 1450); of extorting money by threats (31 May); repeating both crimes in August, again raping Joan Smith and carrying off her husband's goods to the value of £40 on the sixth, and on the thirty-first extorting money by threats. On 4 June 1451, Malory and others raided stock from his neighbors at Newbold Revel, and on 20 July, while Buckingham was leading a posse to arrest him, he carried off deer from Buckingham's park at Caludon and did damage to the value of £500. Arrested by Buckingham on 25 July, Malory broke out of prison two days later and the next night broke into Combe Abbey with ten accomplices to steal ornament and money, returning the next day to repeat the offense. Noting how the timing and even, in some cases, the location of Malory's crimes interrelates with the Parliaments in which he may have served, possibly under the patronage first of Buckingham, later of the Duke of York, Field suggests that, in an age of endemic violence, his acts may have been politically motivated, the Buckingham ambush presumably signaling the change of allegiance.

Buckingham presided at Malory's arraignment at Nuneaton on 23 August. There followed eight years of imprisonment in various London prisons, broken by occasional periods of release on bail, during which it proved impossible to impanel a jury of his fellowmen of Warwickshire—with the effect, perhaps intentional, of holding him in London. The implication is that Buckingham contrived the prolonged imprisonment of a disaffected adherent as an example to others. The fact that Malory was bailed on various occasions by senior members of the affinity of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, a leading Yorkist, and that his ultimate release apparently followed the Yorkist victory at Northampton, the capture of King Henry, and the death of Buckingham on 16 July 1460 suggests a change of patron.
The Thomas Malory who, freed from all charges against him by the first general pardon of Edward IV, served the king in the siege of three northern castles held by Lancastrians certainly looks like a committed Yorkist. But he was specifically excluded from the second general pardon of 1468 and the third of 1470. When the *Morte Darthur* was finished in the ninth regnal year of Edward IV (1469–1470), Malory was in prison, and had apparently been so throughout its composition, without known charge or trial. As for his crime, Field assumes something arising from Malory's association with Warwick, whose gradual estrangement from Edward brought him to open rebellion in July 1469 (when he imprisoned the king until forced by a Lancastrian rising to restore Edward to power) and to eventual self-exile in France—possibly resulting from involvement in a Lancastrian conspiracy discovered by Edward in June 1468. Only when Warwick returned in reluctant alliance with the invading Lancastrians and drove Edward into exile in October 1470 was Malory likely to be released. Malory died, according to his epitaph in the fashionable Newgate church, Greyfriars—a testimony to his status—on 14 March 1471, the day Edward landed again on his way to victory at Tewkesbury.

The enigma of the life and work remains. Field, though warning of the risks of the process, suggests some possible thematic reflections of the author's personal and political experience in the *Morte Darthur*: the influence of Sir Robert Malory's Order of Hospitalers as reflected in the political seriousness and sporadic crusading references of the *Morte*; awareness of the restraints which financial insecurity imposed on a poor knight in courtly society mark the need for him to find a "good lord" to serve; the virtue of loyalty and the shame of breach of faith, expressed in the *Morte* by a lament for the political fickleness of the English, which perhaps reflects Malory's own guilt at deserting the Lancastrian cause. But the relationship of life experience to literary expression, Field recognizes, would require another book. The most valuable aspect of this present study is its demonstration of how much Malory was a man of his age, an ambivalent age when civil war had undermined the chivalric values that Caxton
identified in the *Morte Darthur* with the "cowardyse, murdre, hate" that he also noted there.

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The Columbus-Quincentenary has produced a number of studies both on the great explorer and on the general historical aspects of his discovery. Some have glorified Columbus's achievements; others have pointed out his gross misunderstandings and failures. From a philosophical point of view, however, it does not matter what he accomplished in concrete terms, but what consequences his journey had for the development of the modern world. We also know that Columbus approached the American continent with largely false concepts, since he was deeply steeped in medieval ideology about the Exotic, its countries, people, fauna, and flora. One of the best monographs dedicated to this aspect recently published is Mary B. Campbell's *The Witness and the Other World* (1988; not consulted here). Valerie Flint's approach in *The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus* does not deviate remarkably from this traditional avenue of research, but she adds much color to the canvas of Columbus's mind, retelling and analyzing a large number of contemporary chronicles, travel accounts, geographical records, and other types of texts concerned with the Exotic.

Flint does not unfold a broad array of novel research but builds a puzzle picture from a diverse range of sources. These include not only Columbus's own writings but also the works by Roger Bacon, Pierre d'Ailly, Marco Polo, and John Mandeville. Other types of texts are accounts written by people such as Pliny, Ovid, Plutarch, St. Augustine,