

Medieval manuscripts enter the Digital Age

The most innovative interpreter of medieval manuscripts resides not within Oxford's historic Bodleian Library or the hushed confines of the British Library, but rather in a cramped corner room of an unprepossessing office tower at the University of Melbourne.

Bernard Muir is Professor of Medieval Language and Literature in the University's English Literary Studies section and is also the driving force behind an award-winning series of CD-ROMs that have transported evocative Middle Ages' literature into the Digital Age.

In addition to his innovative studies of ancient texts, Professor Muir has recently made an authentic replica of a medieval manuscript and captured that process in a fascinating 45-minute video documentary.

Using vellum (calf skin) pages imported from England, cover boards made from German beech, waxed linen to sew the quires together, and alum-tawed leather thongs to secure them, the book took nearly four days to make, and the exercise primarily utilised replica tools that were available to bookbinders in the Middle Ages.

The video will be accompanied by a two-hour presentation that provides a detailed analysis on how the project was undertaken. Other presentations will be developed from the nearly 30 hours of raw film available that will target the interests of societies concerned with various aspects of book production.

"Few people who teach codicology (the study of the book) will have had the opportunity to participate in the making of a manuscript as it would have been done in the Middle Ages," Professor Muir said.

"It was decided that, in order to appreciate better what was involved in this process and the skill of the medieval craftsmen, we would recreate this experience, being as faithful as possible to our understanding of how it was done.

"Replica tools and devices were used whenever possible."

Although the video is not scheduled for release until later this year, such is Professor Muir's reputation among scholars and enthusiasts that he received pre-publication interest in the documentary project from renowned universities Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, London and The University of Jerusalem's Hebrew Paleography Project.

He has won critical acclaim for his previous digital learning aids *Ductus* (the study of ancient Latin scripts), *MS Junius 11* (an extensively-illustrated book of Anglo-Saxon Christian poetry from around 980 AD) and *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry* (circa 965 AD, arguably the oldest and most important surviving collection of vernacular poetry).

Ductus has been used throughout the world (including at Harvard and Cambridge universities) to teach manuscript studies.

The poetry manuscripts have been produced in conjunction with Oxford University (home to one of the world's largest repositories of medieval manuscripts) where the *MS Junius 11* CD-ROM was launched three years ago in Oxford's famous Divinity School.

The launch came almost a decade after Professor Muir travelled to Oxford to propose his idea for a computer-based version of important medieval manuscripts.

Now, through a combination of technical wizardry and cottage industry from within his office at the University of Melbourne's Parkville campus, Professor Muir has brought some of the world's most precious texts within reach of anyone with computer access.

The appeal of the digital facsimiles of ancient documents lies in their innovative level of interactivity.

As well as allowing readers to zoom in on selected passages of text and display complementary information about the author, the work's history, translations, literary criticisms and how it was produced, the software effectively creates the feel of leafing through an imposing document of more than a millennium in age.

A digital impression of a hand appears to allow users to flick through the pages, and there is a series of audio recordings that provide readings in Old English or modern-day translations, as well as a series of Gregorian chants sung in Latin.

All the vocals were recorded by Professor Muir in a sound studio in the University's Horwood Language Centre.

Professor Muir's range of resources, which are distributed through his website www.evellum.com, will soon be expanded to include the *Six Latin Comedies* written by second-century BC Roman playwright, Terence, and the Vernon manuscript of Middle English poetry.

He is also developing *Scriptorium*, which describes in interactive form the materials and processes involved in the production of a medieval illustrated manuscript (including recipes for ink and paints, descriptions of how parchment was prepared and video images of how quills were fashioned for writing).

As Professor Muir notes, the software is not only an invaluable teaching and learning resource for scholars of medieval history.

"This is an area that increasingly has broad appeal across the community," he said.

"Every time a film such as 'Lord of the Rings' is released, there is a surge in interest in things medieval."