

The Popes - A History by John Julius Norwich.
Chatto and Windus 2011

John Julius Norwich enjoys a deserved reputation as a fine historian, notably of Venice and Byzantium; his latest foray into history is a beautifully written, highly informative and entertaining history not of the papacy as an institution per se but rather as a review of the papacy refracted through the prism of the life and work of the Popes.

The book is divided into twenty eight chapters, starting with St Peter and ending with the present day; what is abundantly clear is that very few popes over the 2000 years of the papacy have been worthy of the role to which they were elected, or connived to achieve, and that the institution of the papacy is historically more putrescent than it is praiseworthy. All in all, it seems something of a miracle that the papacy has survived in any form, let alone that it continues to enjoy such prestige in the modern world.

The Popes is replete with regular villains, villains who were later canonised and a handful of genuine saints; some Popes served for a matter of months, others a few years, and a smattering for much longer, and Norwich makes clear that papal longevity did not necessarily equate with effectiveness, reform or progress for the Church, indeed some of the shorter papal reigns were the most significant.

Perhaps the most enjoyable chapter of all is the sixth, Pope Joan, after reading, which no one will look at a papal coronation in quite the same way! But John Julius is at his most enthralling when looking at the late 19th and twentieth century popes, notably Pio Nono, the Piuses XI and XII, Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI.

This is as enjoyable a book of history as you could wish to read, as informative as it is entertaining and exhibiting that rare quality of taking in a vast sweep of history succinctly without the reader feeling that something important has been left out.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh