



K O N I N K L I J K E N E D E R L A N D S E
A K A D E M I E V A N W E T E N S C H A P P E N

**Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for History 2010 awarded to Professor Rosamond McKitterick,
University of Cambridge, United Kingdom**

Your Royal Highness,
Members of the Board of the Dr H.P. Heineken Foundation
and the Alfred Heineken Fondsen Foundation,
in particular their chairwoman, Mrs. De Carvalho,
Esteemed laureates,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Professor McKitterick,

It is with some regret that I am using spoken words (orality) in praise of a distinguished scholar who has done so much to show the importance of the written word (literacy), especially in the early Middle Ages. Fortunately, the Dutch translation of what I am transmitting orally in English is displayed behind me in writing, so literacy is not completely absent at this ceremony.

Historians generally used to believe that ideas and opinions were transmitted *orally* in northwestern Europe before the 11th century. They thought that only a few people living there in those times were able to read and write. The entire period before 1100 was seen as a world of boastful chieftains, a world without major population centres, where literacy had practically gone into hiding in small monasteries. Professor McKitterick, however, has argued that literacy began to play a considerable role in the societies of northwestern Europe as early as the Carolingian period, around 800. She demonstrated this in her groundbreaking 1989 study *The Carolingians and the Written Word*, in which she combined a meticulous study of manuscripts with a wide-ranging view of history. She has argued plausibly that literacy was a fairly widespread phenomenon by about the year 800. Princes issued written orders, noblemen donated libraries to monasteries, and former slaves were given written documents as evidence that they were now freedmen.

Her more recent books have highlighted many more aspects of the Carolingian world. In *Perceptions of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, published in 2006, Professor McKitterick traced what the Franks knew about historical texts and explained how they constructed and perceived their own past on the basis of these writings. Her research has culminated in the magisterial *Charlemagne, The Formation of a European Identity*, and published only two years ago. From a limited number of highly varied sources, she was able to construct a grand narrative of the Carolingian era.

In her work Professor McKitterick has drawn a completely new and highly convincing picture of the early Middle Ages in general and the world of Charlemagne in particular. But it is not just her



groundbreaking research that has convinced the jury. There is also her distinguished career, which began with an honours degree from the University of Western Australia in Perth and continued in Cambridge with an MA, a PhD, a Lit D, a lectureship, and a Chair in Medieval History. And there is also her supervision of so many young medievalists who, after obtaining their degree, find academic posts all around the world as members of the famous McKitterick School.

In the opinion of the jury, Professor Rosamond McKitterick deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as, for instance, Jacques Le Goff, Joel Mokyr and Jonathan Israel, who preceded her as winners of the Heineken Prize for History. And the jury has no doubt that her future research will offer pioneering new insights into the early Middle Ages, the source of various important aspects of present-day Europe.