

James G. Clark (Editor) *The Culture of Medieval English Monasticism*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2007. £50.00, ISBN 978 1 84383 321 5 (hardbound) pp. xvi + 219

Reviewed by Fr David Lannon, Salford Diocesan Archives, January 2008.

The origin of this book was a British Academy sponsored Conference held at Robinson College, Cambridge, in September 2002. All but two of the essays were delivered there as papers. The easy familiarity, deep knowledge and sympathetic understanding of the subject matter demonstrated by an international cohort of scholars makes this book fascinating reading yet a challenge to review, so rich is the content, with many quotable phrases and sentences.

A key to the whole lies in the introduction by James G. Clerk, Senior Lecturer in Late Medieval History at the University of Bristol, in which he defines and outlines the culture of Medieval English Monasticism. Other essays then look at four areas of monasticism: observance, learning, the culture of women religious, and the culture of religious community.

For monks, "*cultus*" would be understood primarily as worship or cult. Roger Bowers, Emeritus Reader in Medieval and Renaissance Music in the University of Cambridge and Emeritus Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, considers how choral polyphony was used to enhance monastic worship and match in quality that celebrated in the great secular cathedrals and churches from 1480 onwards. He examines the hiring of professional cantors, the training of boy singers and perhaps the hire of men singers by monastic communities, the repertoire, the contracts and expenditure, the copying of scores and much more, before ending with an insight into two possible consequences revealed at the Dissolution.

Linked to worship was study and reading. Miriam Gill, Slide Curator in the Department of History of Art and Film at Leicester University, examines how what was read inspired the mural decorations of several monasteries, in particular Westminster and Coventry. This study differentiates between such monastic decoration in contrast to that found in parish churches and demonstrates how in their own turn they reinforced and supported study and reading.

Three essays are devoted to learning. G. R. Evans, Professor Emeritus in Medieval Theology and Intellectual History in the University of Cambridge, explores the meaning of Monastic Culture during the life of St Anselm and his contemporaries. A. J. Piper, Keeper of the Cathedral Muniments in the Special Collections Department of Durham University Library, investigates the study of Scripture by the monks of Durham and R. M. Thompson, Professor of Medieval History in the University of Tasmania, looks at the work of the Worcester Monks in education around c. 1300 and their links with the developing Universities.

Dealing specifically with Nuns, David Bell, Research Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, explores what they read. Details of the books owned by about 40% of medieval convents are known. About 65% of known books date from after 1400. About half the surviving books are liturgical. Of the rest 20% were in Latin, 10% in French and 70% in English. It is not possible to infer the size of the convent libraries. A study of how literate the nuns were in Latin and French follows with some interesting conclusions. Recent research into the content of books written in English, suggest a revitalisation of religious life after 1450. Areas for future study are identified. One conclusion is that the intellectual attainments of later medieval women religious have been gravely underestimated.

Mary C. Erler, Professor of English at Fordham University, New York, considers the evolution of private as contrasted with public reading in convent life, as the growth of privacy within a communal setting developed, and the consequential development of a spiritual interiority based on such reading modified the concept of religious life itself.

Barry Collett, Senior Fellow in the History Department of Melbourne University and Research Fellow at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, considers the female monastic vocation in the diocese of Winchester on the eve of the Reformation. Bishop Fox had translated into English the Benedictine Rule for the use of the convents in his diocese, adding expansions and interpolations. His vision accepted that senior

nuns had a degree of independent authority, that nuns would receive appropriate education and intellectual training, that they would remain conscious of their gender as women, that they would live within a monastic family, and that each nun would grow in holiness. Together they would also create corporate efficiency within their community, so that each nun would gain heaven through her love of God. How this was achieved is amply demonstrated in this essay.

Community life is and was the medium by which each individual religious lived and developed their vocation. Joan Greatrex, formerly Assistant Professor of History at Carleton University, Ottawa explores the cultural environment of a monk at Christ Church, Canterbury in the Fifteenth Century. His name was William Glastynbury who entered the monastery in 1415, was ordained priest in 1419 and began to hold different offices within the community after 1435. He kept a notebook which enables the reader to place this ordinary Benedictine monk in the cultural setting of his day, revealing one person's response to the understanding and faith, spiritual growth and daily worship experiences in the cathedral priory.

Julian Haseldine, Senior Lecturer in Medieval History in the University of Hull, considers the meaning of *amicitia* or friendship within a religious vocation and community. This is studied in depth, particularly through the writings of St Anselm and St Aelred, and the analyses made by their modern interpreters. A fuller understanding of such friendship must form an integral part of our appreciation of monastic culture.

J. D. North, formerly Professor of the History of Philosophy and the Exact Sciences at the University of Groningen, investigates a triple concept of monastic time. Reference is made to the work of the Benedictines in laying the basis of Western scientific consciousness and to the desire for reform that led from the Julian to the Gregorian Calendar. Consideration too is given to the development of the clock and its use within monasteries. Though short in length, this essay is deep in concept and a fascinating contribution to the book.

These twelve essays "exploit newly catalogued and newly discovered evidence, including manuscript books, wall paintings, and even the traces of original monastic music, to recover the cultural dynamics of a cross-section of male and female communities". As I put the book down, I felt I had been transported through the barriers of time and place in such a way that I had in some way shared with those monks and nuns their experience of living their vocation. Our reformation studies too often fail to take sufficient account of the situation before the Dissolution of the monasteries. With great scholarship this study sympathetically describes that situation in all its richness and vitality. All who read it will benefit from their efforts. I certainly did and owe a debt of gratitude to the authors.