

Reading Medieval Reviews

***Hermits and Anchorites in England, 1200 - 1550*, translated and annotated by E.A. Jones (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2019)**

At a first glance at the title on the cover of this work, it looked as if it could be an update to the classic work by Rotha Mary Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites of England*. Instead, it proved to be a collection of sources (or extracts from sources) relating to English anchorites and hermits, in a modern translation by Professor Jones. These are arranged by topic, with a general introduction to the topic at the beginning of the chapter and then a short commentary to accompany each source. The chapter headings, which set out the topic covered by that chapter, include 'Becoming an anchorite', 'A cell of one's own', 'A day in the anchoritic life', 'Scenes of eremitical life', 'Renegades, charismatics and charlatans', and end with a chapter on the Dissolution.

Before the chapters containing the sources, there is a fairly brief introduction to the religious solitary life. This begins with an outline of the history of this vocation beginning with the Desert Fathers, through the cenobitic development of the Benedictines to the revival of a more solitary form of monastic life in the 11th and 12th centuries, such as the Camaldolese and Cistercians. This is followed by a description of the solitary professions of anchorite and hermit in England in the later Middle Ages and the increasing regulation of these vocations up to their virtual disappearance at the Dissolution under Henry VIII.

As might be expected from one of the current leading experts on English anchorites and hermits, the sources are well selected and give a good coverage of the various topics. In many cases this is the first time a translation has been published, and in the Introduction Professor Jones states that for more than twenty items the original source has never before been available in print. The translations aim to match the type of content; for example, legal documents are rendered in more formal language than books of guidance for anchorites and hermits. Each text indicates its source and the original

language, and items within the text that need further explanation are dealt with by footnotes. At the end there is a full bibliography.

The main audience for this book would seem to be those teaching courses on medieval religious life, or medieval English society, and their students. The arrangement of sources by topic will be a welcome time saver for those preparing such courses; while there will probably be few who would have the time or inclination to use all of the sources in each topic, selection of those suitable for a particular course is made easier. For the students, particularly those who do not have familiarity with Latin or medieval English and French, the translations will aid comprehension, as will the explanatory footnotes. However, more advanced students will probably need the original source as well as the translation. These can be located from the references, but this may be time consuming.

Given Professor Jones' reputation in the field of anchoritic and eremitic studies, the book will probably also be read by specialists in this field. Some of the less well-known sources which he has located will be of interest, but the introductory matter is unlikely to contain any surprises for the specialist.

Hilary Pearson

***An Anglo-Norman Reader*, by Jane Bliss (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017)**

Multilingual approaches to medieval literature have been very much in vogue in the past few decades. There has been particularly sustained dialogue between scholarship in Middle English and study of the language variously known as Anglo-Norman, the French of England or Insular French. However, the impact of this engagement has largely been felt at graduate level and in academic circles. Anglo-Norman remains a relatively marginal presence on undergraduate degree courses. This is, in part, due to the inaccessibility of many editions of texts in that language. With some notable exceptions, many works in Anglo-Norman are only available in editions aimed at specialists, rather than at students.

Jane Bliss's *Anglo-Norman Reader* opens up a range of texts to non-specialist, student audiences. This volume presents a variety of short excerpts from works in Anglo-Norman with facing-page translations into English, alongside ample notes and introductory materials. While the translations are her own, Bliss has drawn on existing editions for her base texts. This means there is some variation in editorial practice across the volume, but it also allows a reader to follow up the full text in a given edition, where relevant. The book is attractively laid out and easy to navigate; however, use of line numbers in the facing-page translations might have made reference back to the original easier for readers with a limited grasp of Anglo-Norman. The range of texts covered is wonderfully varied. For instance, relatively well-known works like Wace's *Roman de Rou* sit alongside extracts from more obscure legal and medical works and the volume presents fabliaux and satirical pieces as well as homilies and saints' lives. Bliss's selections also reflect Anglo-Norman's interactions with regions beyond England. The volume includes works like the *Roman de Fergus* set in, and possibly associated with, Scotland. Other entries present Anglo-Norman versions of texts by important authors in continental French, such as Christine de Pisan.

Bliss's book is a model of how an introduction to a complex field can be accessible while also opening up further vistas to readers. The introductory materials and commentary assume no prior knowledge of medieval studies in general. Any student whose interest is piqued by the materials Bliss presents will find ample suggestions for further reflection and more detailed reading in her footnotes and extensive bibliography. Accessibility here is a matter of form as much as content. The hardcopy of this book is complemented by a free-to-download PDF available from Open Books. This also opens up this book for use on courses where only one or two items are required from the *Anthology* and where investment in such a book might otherwise have been resisted.

Proficiency in French is increasingly rare amongst undergraduates and modularisation brings with it time-constraints that work against even the most basic language-learning. *An Anglo-Norman Reader* does the sort of work for Anglo-Norman that Elaine Treharne's *Old and Middle English: An Anthology* did for Old English. It should

provide an accessible and engaging range of snapshots of the field, while also whetting undergraduate appetites for more.

Aisling Byrne
University of Reading