

## Book Reviews

**THE CONVENT AND THE COMMUNITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND: FEMALE MONASTERIES IN THE DIOCESE OF NORWICH, 1350-1540.** Marilyn Oliva. 1998. The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, Suffolk, £50. ISBN 0-85115-576-6.

Marilyn Oliva has produced an excellent work of scholarship, based on meticulous research. She combines detailed knowledge of her source materials with sophisticated analysis, informed by feminist theory and recent research on the late medieval Church. Although a regional study, her book provides an overview which is long overdue, through reference to primary printed and secondary sources for other parts of England. She makes statistical comparisons throughout with the male religious houses of Norwich diocese, an invaluable method for testing her conclusions.

The pioneers of women's monastic history early last century, Eileen Power and G.C. Coulton, were writing in a very different climate of historical enquiry into religious activity. They lacked any sympathy with religious vocation as a positive choice. Instead they painted a picture of surplus aristocratic women and girls living dull but comfortable lives, punctuated by vice and managerial incompetence. Oliva overturns these stereotypes, which have been so influential. She writes in the context of a new phase of research more sympathetic to the religious life, developed by scholars such as Joan Greatrex, John Tillotson and Roberta Gilchrist.

Perhaps Oliva's most significant discovery is that the vast majority of nuns were of lower, or parish gentry status. Only a handful were from aristocratic families, and the few of country gentry status were concentrated at Bruisyard Abbey, a house of Poor Clares, a fashionable order. Evidence for the sincerity of their vocations comes from the length of years many nuns spent in their convents, and personal documents such as wills, in which women expressed pride in their status as religious. Few asked to be dispensed from

their vows, and there were only three recorded cases of sexual immorality.

Although East Anglia was one of the wealthiest regions of England during this period, the women's religious houses of Norfolk and Suffolk were surprisingly poor. All but two were closed in the first round of dissolutions in 1536. Unlike the men's houses, which attracted royal and aristocratic patronage, in general founders and benefactors of the women's houses came from the same parish gentry background as the inmates. Urban and yeoman families provided other large numbers of both nuns and patrons. Their poverty was not a hindrance to the women's religious life. Oliva's work joins a growing body of evidence in support of Carolyn Walker Bynum's hypothesis, that a form of piety which embraced poverty and marginalisation was specific, although not exclusive to women. It could also be argued the other way round, that nuns found within religious discourse a sanctification of the economic and social limitations of their lives.

The male monasteries of the diocese were not necessarily more fortunate in their patronage by royal and aristocratic families. Greater wealth simply led to greater temptations. It was the monks who were criticised in diocesan visitations for their separate households, lack of charity to the poor, secular clothes and use of prostitutes. The nuns were simply too poor to indulge themselves. Oliva sounds a note of caution in believing allegations of vice in convents. Comparison of local with national evidence suggests these may have been routinely manufactured by government officials at the reformation, to avoid paying out pensions. In general, poverty led to the careful management of resources the nuns possessed. Oliva's work uncovers a 'cursus honorum', or progression from lower to higher office-holding within the convents. Not all office-holders were traceable through prosopographical study, suggesting that many were from lower status families, and promotion was based on ability, not birth. Lack of long runs of accounts hampers research, but some patterns may be deduced. In line with general trends, the convents experienced increased poverty in the crisis of the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, but their affairs had stabilized by the mid-fifteenth century. Factors specific to individual houses caused temporary financial problems, but with careful management these tended to be overcome within a few years. Only two of the eleven houses seem to have been poorly managed, Blackborough and Redlingfield Priors, the latter where the prioress Isabel Hermyte was banished to another house in 1427 for various transgressions.

One of the abuses of monastic life cited by both contemporaries and historians, was the distraction of the religious from their vocation by lay visitors and residents. Once again it was the male houses of the diocese, which attracted visitors both male and female of the highest social ranks, those most

involved in worldly affairs. Of the women's houses, Campsey Ash the richest, and Bruisyard the most well-connected attracted aristocratic visitors. In general though, the nuns were visited mainly by women of middling rank. There is a fine line between being drawn into the life of the laity, and the obligation on religious to offer them hospitality and charity. Lay visitors, servants and residents of the locality around a convent, represented an interface where religious could share devotional reading material and meditation practices with literate or semi-literate laity, and encourage others through examples of practical charity. It might be argued that it was the very success of the religious in fostering an independent faith among the laity, which prepared the way for Protestantism, not their failure to do so.

Oliva details the services the nuns provided to local people, both spiritual through sharing their churches with parish congregations, encouraging fraternities, and through their prayers, and practical by administering wills and caring for the sick and poor. In general the social status of those they helped in the diocese of Norwich was too low for their complaints to be heard at the Reformation. Despite its poverty Bruisyard Abbey was able to use its connections to survive in 1536, but it and the other surviving house, Shouldham Priory was dissolved in 1539.

Oliva has made a careful study of all available materials. Her prosopographical techniques ensure we can see these women as part of the social groups to which they belonged. Sadly the lower status of the nuns, and the lack of wealth and prestige of their convents, makes them harder to study: the documents offer only a tantalizing glimpse of the personal dimension of their lives. Nevertheless this book is well worth reading. It is stimulating and clearly written, and will be enjoyed by the interested general reader, undergraduate and specialist alike.

VIRGINIA R. BAINBRIDGE

**ISABELLE DE PORTUGAL, DUCHESSE DE BOURGOGNE. Une femme au pouvoir au XVe siècle.** Monique Sommé. 1998. Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, Lille. 190 FF.  
ISBN 2-85939-549-0

This is the first major study of Philip the Good's third and most famous duchess and it is truly major in every way: 483 pages of text and 85 of *annexes*, bibliography and indices are densely packed with information—mainly from primary sources—that does not exactly make the book light reading, but turns it into a gold-mine that other scholars will be able to use for a long time to

come. It is in the tradition of Werner Paravicini's monumental study of Charles the Bold's henchman, Guy de Brimeu, and will be used as a reference book on many other subjects than merely the one given in the title.

The contents are divided into four large parts, of which the first, on Isabel's family life, and the fourth, on her political and religious activities, are very readable and of interest to many kinds of students. The second, on her finances and estates, and the third, on her household, are of crucial importance, but necessarily very full of names, dates and figures—fortunately also maps; these sections will be appreciated most by scholars working on related subjects.

Isabel was a grand-daughter of John of Gaunt and appears never to have forgotten her English ancestry, passing on this awareness to the only survivor of her three sons, Charles, to whom she was very close. Dr Sommé sets out in detail her Portuguese background, the negotiations that led to her marriage by proxy on 25 July 1429, when she was almost 32, and her journey to Burgundy, which took her briefly to England. Her relationship with her husband appears to have been amicable throughout their lives, and faithful on her side. She accompanied him on many journeys and both parents spend the major part of their son's early years with or near him. She also took care of many of her Portuguese relatives, fostering their careers and organising their marriages, and she looked after many of her husband's illegitimate children, particularly Anthony, *le Grand Bâtard*. Her relationship with her daughter-in-law, Margaret of York, was so good that the elderly duchess appeared more often at court in 1469, interrupting her voluntary seclusion for joint festivities with Margaret and Charles' daughter Mary.

The duchess had been well endowed, her possessions were numerous and varied—among them the profitable forest of Nieppe in which was situated her favourite and secluded residence, the castle of La Motte-au-Bois—and she took an active interest in their management. Dr Sommé discusses all of the duchess' domains and each category of revenue and other income, such as *aides*, loans and gifts, as well as her activities on behalf of her husband's finances. The structure and ordinances of her household in various periods of her life, her numerous personnel, female and male, the greater part of them known by name, with their offices and wages and their relationship to the duchess and to each other are the subject of the third section, 153 pages long.

The most interesting part of the book explains Isabel's share in the government of her husband's far-flung territories: so committed was she to her political role that she was not present during the final illness of her eldest infant son, Antoine, but, heavily pregnant of her second son, Josse, resided elsewhere with her councillors, while the duke himself was away in his southern dominions. One chapter heading describes Isabel as *diplomate*, '*ministre des finances*' et

*régente*; it discusses the period 1438 to 1445, when the duchess was responsible for the negotiations with England, very much involved in financial policy, and represented the duke during several short but eventful periods. Her responsibilities, actions, correspondence and assistants are treated in great detail.

From 1446 Isabel gradually retired from the political scene—though her role in Anglo-Burgundian relations remained important and included preparations for the marriage between Duke Charles and Margaret of York. In 1457 she settled at her castle of La Motte-au-Bois and spent her days at her devotions and in charitable work. Her favourite saint was St Anthony of Padua, a Portuguese, but her castle at La Motte—like Margaret of York's castle at Male—had a chapel to St Thomas (Becket?) and her almoner at the time was one Thomas Spark or Sparkele, who, judging by his name, may have been an Englishman.

There is little mention of Isabel's books, about which almost nothing is known, and not much about her literary patronage, which is usually supposed to have been extensive and of great influence on her son.

A summary like the one attempted here clearly does not do justice to the thoroughness and originality of the research that went into making this book and the amount of factual material that may be found in it. Perhaps it is best to epitomise the merits of Dr Sommé's work by expressing the hope that one day someone will attempt to produce a similarly extensive study of Isabel's daughter-in-law, Margaret of York.

LIVIA VISSER-FUCHS

**A HISTORY OF BUSINESS IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE 1200–1550.** Edwin S. Hunt and James M. Murray. 1999. Cambridge Medieval Textbooks. Cambridge University Press, £30 (hb); £10.95 (pb).

ISBN 0-521-49581-4 (hb); 0-521-49923-2 (pb)

**WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH SOCIETY.** Mavis E. Mate. New Studies in Economic and Social History. 1999. Cambridge University Press, £22.95 (hb); £7.95 (pb).

ISBN 0-521-58322-5 (hb); 0-521-58733-6 (pb)

These two books on widely different subjects in fact have much in common. Both are refreshingly short, and both introduce the reader to complex historical debates. That is their first and greatest virtue. Much of what is written today, and particularly on economic and demographic history, is technical and complex. The non-specialist reader—and at times the specialist reader—needs

guide posts along the way, to indicate points of entry to the debates. These books provide them, and are much to be welcomed for that. They are both polemic, since Murray and Hunt and Mavis Mate take their own distinct lines of argument. But they also present both sides of the case fairly, and readers can make up their own minds as to the merits of their argument. Interestingly, one sees progress, the other the maintenance of the status quo, so that they make a good, contrasting pair.

To take business first. Hunt and Murray define it in broad terms, from the small, artisanal workshop to large international manufacturers and marketeers, and they try their best to maintain their broad coverage throughout their book. It does not entirely work, simply because few records of small artisanal producer/traders have survived. There is information about international merchants and their markets, and they inevitably play a leading role in this study. The focus is, understandably, entirely on business. The agrarian sector is considered only in so far as grain was a major commodity of local, regional, national and international trade in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Peasants supplied the surpluses, merchants converted them into money, traded that for desired luxury goods, sold them to the lords, and profited from the role of entrepreneur. The first great age of European business was nothing more than a nearly infinite number of variations on this simple theme, and Hunt and Murray quite unashamedly advance the argument that medieval business was driven from beginning to end by the continuous demands of the élite.

You may or may not agree, but you know exactly where you are from the start. The books falls into the predictable pre- and post-plague sections, but there is no cut off at 1500. The Middle Ages did not end at the turn of the fifteenth century, and most of European economic expansion in the first half of the sixteenth century was based on developments in the previous hundred years. These included large-scale mining operations, mass-market fisheries, new financial mechanisms and slave-worked plantations 'to name but a few' [sic]. In the High Middle Ages the business environment was characterised by the need to provide necessities and luxuries for increasingly prosperous towns and increasingly prosperous rural magnates from increasingly long distances. The Black Death's importance was as much symbolic as real, epitomizing a period of severe disruption, of recurring famines and plagues, and endemic warfare, which profoundly affected the psychology and demography of Western Europe, and to which business had to adapt. Adapt it did, in pursuit of opportunities to secure low-cost sources of goods, wherever they might be found. There was another change, too. At the beginning of the thirteenth century the ruling classes and their bureaucracies largely determined how surpluses were spent, whether on cathedrals, castles, infrastructure, or luxuries. After the

Black Death, the demands of governments began to influence the direction of investment and thus of innovation. Their decisions were increasingly accompanied by reams of enforcing regulations. 'At the end our story', the authors argue, 'governments are vigorously engaged in controlling trade at all levels, but with diminishing success.'

Readers of this Journal will obviously be more interested in the second half of this history, but they should not neglect the earlier section. It has much of interest to say, the argument being that in 1200 business units were small, simple, and particularistic, but business itself was extremely complex, requiring multiple transactions in order to transform raw materials into finished goods, and to move products from place to place. This business complexity was costly and harmful to trade. So there was an unmistakable trend towards larger and more complex units, coincident with a move towards simpler business processes. Improved technology and new financial instruments significantly reduced costs, especially in the textile industry, allowing mass production of cloth in Flanders. Finally, in the latter half of the thirteenth century the Italian super companies emerged, the Bardi, Peruzzi and Frescobaldi. Professor Hunt has already published a study of these companies, and his analysis of why they failed will come as no surprise. It had little to do with loans to Edward III, much more to the collapse of the international commodity market in grain in the Mediterranean world. The super companies all disappeared within thirty months of each other, never to reappear.

They were replaced, post-plague, by businesses willing to adapt. New technology may have been surprisingly slow to spread, but the reaction of business to changed circumstances was surprisingly swift. Through increased competition, greater sensitivity to consumer demand, and closer attention to costs, they made a wider variety of goods available to a wider range of consumers, at lower prices. The aggregate volume of production may have declined, but the volume per capita probably increased, and the quality and variety of consumer goods unquestionably improved. The key here was the drive to reduce costs. It could be done by adapting old processes, by improvements in the mining and fishing industries, by mobilising capital more effectively, and here governments had a key role, through new developments in commercial credit and exchange, and by a collaboration between government and business in overseas exploration, so that by 1500 a new age for business was dawning. But in this brave new world England played very little part. The laggard of Western Europe was slow in picking up the new technologies and too long addicted to the war-like excesses of her kings. In mining and metallurgy, paper making and printing, and fishing, England was not competitive with continental producers. In brief, England in the late fifteenth century was still stuck in the High Middle Ages,

still focussed on old industry, notably woollen textiles, and still building great cathedrals.

This is not the place to launch a counter-attack on such arguments, even if one wished to do so. What has to be acknowledged is that Hunt and Murray present a very interesting challenge to those historians who see nothing but decline in the fifteenth century. They argue that the two centuries after the advent of plague were not an economic wasteland and, convincing or not, their case is clearly presented and readily intelligible. So is Mavis Mate's. This is actually a book about women in the later Middle Ages. Their status in the six-and-a-half centuries between 600 and 1250 is considered in some twenty-one pages. It is an eminently sensible survey, which concludes that at no time in the early Middle Ages did women enjoy equality with men, in spite of notions of the Anglo-Saxon era as some sort of 'golden age' for women. Most of the second section, covering the years 1250-1530 actually deals with the period after the plague. It examines the economic activities of women, their political power, education and religious experience, and their legal status. All this is done with a brevity and clarity that most of us would envy, and giving both sides of the argument in all cases. Readers will obviously concentrate on the topics which interest them most. For this reviewer these were questions about the age of marriage, life-cycle servanthood, the extent to which women benefited from the general post-plague shortage of labour, which gave them new employment opportunities, and the new legal procedures which may or may not have helped women, as widows, to secure their inheritances. These contain the best short statements of the current state of knowledge, and the nature of the debates on these issues. Her conclusions: that the explosion in the number of heiresses after the Black Death and the increased number of women in the labour force did not lead to any transformation in women's roles. They remained economically and legally subordinate to men. Women continued to control a much smaller percentage of landed resources than men, and high status positions remained firmly in male hands. No major transformation in the position of women in society occurred in the century after the Black Death.

Both books leave the reader saying 'Yes, but . . .' or 'Oh, come off it . . .' and are much to be appreciated for doing precisely that. They do so in admirably concise ways. Read and enjoy and disagree and be annoyed, in the case of *A History of Business*, at the use of American spelling in a book published in England but printed in the U.S.A. That might be good business practice. It will do nothing to improve the already atrocious spelling of British undergraduates at whom this textbook is aimed.

J. L. BOLTON

**FRIENDSHIP IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE.** Edited by Julian Haseldine. 1999.  
Sutton Publishing, Stroud Ltd, £55/\$92. ISBN 0-7509-1720-2

The main impression about ancient and medieval friendship that the reader gets from this book is one of formality. The illustration on the cover depicts this formality: Anna and Joachim embrace and kiss each other on the mouth with genuine affection but its outward show is restrained and dignified. Though friendship on the whole always took the same shapes and knew the same diversity as it does today, much of the available evidence about medieval times naturally shows its more formal and ritual sides, contained as it is in treatises, charters and letters written with a larger audience in mind. There were also differences, however, for even forms of friendship familiar to us, such as the 'network', knew rules and rituals far more defined than anything we would find acceptable.

The book's contents are arranged more or less chronologically, the first three contributions dealing with early Christian, patristic examples of friendship and the influence of the 'ancients'. The first, by far the longest and perhaps the most valuable, James McEvoy's 'Friendship in the Latin Middle Ages', very conveniently sets out the approaches to friendship from Pythagoras, through Socrates, the Stoa and Aristotle to St Augustine, using both contemporary and later exponents of these 'schools' and listing some of the basic terms and theories. Eoin Cassidy, 'Classical and Christian perspectives on the limits to friendship', covers partly the same ground and discusses the problem of reconciling Classical and Christian theories. 'Friendship in absence', by Carolinne White, concerns patristic views of relations between friends separated by distance and attempting to preserve their friendship by letter writing.

'Friendship and political order', by Gerd Althoff, paints a brief, intriguing picture of the rituals and importance of political 'networking' in early medieval Germany, while Julia Barrow's 'Friends and friendship in Anglo-Saxon charters' attempts to do something similar from the phraseology of official documents. A very short contribution by Hans-Werner Goetz concentrates on Boniface and Alcuin and asks four questions concerning the early medieval concept of friendship: who is called a 'friend', what is meant by 'friend', how are 'friends' made, and what is expected from a friend? Peter Hatlie, 'Friendship and the Byzantine iconoclast age' and Margaret Mullett, 'Friendship in Byzantium: genre, topos and network', study the theory and political practice, the dangers and threats of friends' networks, in their chosen period, the eighth/ninth and twelfth centuries. In between these two papers

Yoko Hirata, 'John of Salisbury, Gerard Pucelle and *amicitia*', describes the development of the problematic relation between a supporter and an (eventual) opponent of Thomas Becket.

I.S. Robinson, 'The friendship circle of Bernold of Constance . . .', is about the work of the late twelfth-century canonist and supporter of Gregorian reform; Gabriela Signori in 'Muriel and the others . . .' reveals the amazing literary world of the nuns of the Angers area and their exchange of ideas and knowledge with male scholars around the year 1100. Mark Williams' contribution is a re-consideration of the personality of Rather, Bishop of Verona (died 974), from his remarks about friendship in his *Praeloquia*.

The section on the later middle ages is opened by Brian McGuire's very readable 'Jean Gerson and the end of spiritual friendship'; in Gerson (1363–1429) the author 'find[s] a loss of faith in the place of friendship in human and Christian life'. That some fifteenth-century writers considered marriage and male friendship of equal value and morally comparable is argued by Reginald Hyatte, and finally Peter Burke looks at friendship as 'a social institution' in the sixteenth century and also makes some general statements about the historiography of friendship and the need for a typology of friendships.

The book ends with a 'Supplementary Bibliography' and an index. It is of impeccable scholarship throughout with a tendency to be esoteric and may not be at the top of the request list of a student of fifteenth-century history. It is also beautifully produced, with endnotes to each chapter, and prohibitively priced.

LIVIA VISSER-FUCHS

## Notes on Contributors

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*J.L. Bolton* was a Senior Lecturer in the History Department at Queen Mary and Westfield College from 1965 to 1994, and is now Senior Research Fellow in the History Department there.

*Cecil H. Clough* has published extensively on aspects of the Italian renaissance and on the cultural ethos of fifteenth and early-sixteenth century England.

*Helen Combes*, having obtained an M.A. in Medieval History at Royal Holloway College, London, she is now conducting further research into the churchwardens' accounts of St Nicholas Shambles.

*Livia Visser-Fuchs* is finishing a thesis on Jean de Wavrin's historical work and the reputation of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, in the Low Countries.

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Daniel Williams, 'The hastily drawn up will of William Catesby Esquire, 25 August 1485', *Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society Transactions*, vol. 51 (1975-6), p. 48.

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