

Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (eds) *The Regular Canons in the Medieval British Isles* Brepols: Medieval Church Studies 19, 2011. 514 pp. € 130 ISBN 978-2-503-53248-6

This volume represents the proceedings of a conference and the editors introduce it as follows:

..the different groups of regular canons have never, to this day, achieved the status of other religious orders in the writing of monastic history and consequently have remained, historiographically speaking, in the shadow of their considerably better-researched Benedictine or Cistercian colleagues. When we decided therefore, in 2007, to organize a conference dedicated to the regular canons in the medieval British Isles, we did so in part with the aim of providing a platform for recent research on what appeared to be, judging by the state of published scholarship, a somewhat under-represented religious group in this part of Europe. That this under-representation in no way reflects the attention and interest the canons are currently receiving from scholars, however, became immediately clear when we were inundated with proposals for contributions to this project, and not only from historians but also from archaeologists, architectural historians and art historians, from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales (p.1)”

The book is divided into four sections. Part I is entitled “Origins, Organization and Regional Developments” and begins with a paper by Sheila Sweetingburgh describing the eleventh-century foundation of the Augustinian house of St Gregory’s in the crowded ecclesiastical complex of Canterbury and its subsequent fortunes in what the author describes as “Canterbury’s spiritual economy” (p.33). This is followed by Janet Burton on the association between regular canons and diocesan reform in northern England which discusses the interplay between royal and baronial patronage which provided the context for archepiscopal interest in the “introduction of the regular canons as a first step towards introducing order” (p.42). In the politically fraught environment of that region during the early twelfth century, she concludes that this programme “was about territorial power and spiritual power and about identity” (p.48). Continuing this theme, Anne Mathers-Lawrence sees the Augustinians “as a powerful force for breaking Northumbria from its past, for introducing genuine ecclesiastical reform and for consolidating the hold of a new baronial and spiritual elite in the region” (p.77). Andrew Abram, in something of a contrast, suggests that it was through their preservation of earlier church sites and the memory of earlier and especially royal saints that Augustinians “marked the transition from the ‘old’ church to the ‘reformed’ church in the territories of Anglo-Saxon Mercia (p. 94).

The Augustinians proved popular in England where the number of houses of regular canons exceeded two hundred and fifty (p.98). Karen Stöber provides an overview of the regular canons in Wales, indicating that in the Principality, they were rather less popular than the Cistercians, with nine houses as opposed to thirteen. The Welsh houses varied considerably in nature with two being located by the

important Anglo-Norman urban settlements of Haverfordwest and Carmarthen while northern houses were founded by native Welsh rulers and originated in ancient native religious establishments (including one house, at Bardsey where they replaced a Céli Dé community). Collectively, however, Stöber sees them as sharing what Gerald of Wales characterised as a humble and modest mode of life and a concern for pastoral provision. Andrew Smith and Garrett Ratcliff's discussion focusses on the funding of Scottish Augustinian communities which numbered seven independent houses before the Fourth Lateran Council (p.116), concentrated in the south-east (p.3). Their income came both from landed endowments and from *spiritualia* drawn from parishes and particular attention is drawn to the mixed rule at St Andrews and indeed, the mixed origins of the canons who served there, including another group of Céli Dé resident at the cathedral (p.119-20). This community provides an interesting contrast with Bardsey which was an eremitical island community serving an important, if remote, pilgrimage site and indicates that the Augustinians were not unique in their flexibility of function and organisation. Miram Clyne, for Ireland, provides a discussion of the origins of the Praemonstratensian foundations in Ulster and Connacht and outlines the evidence for their landholdings in considerable detail. She situates these primarily in the context of twelfth-century reforms of the Irish church and, basing her inference on figures provided by Gwynn and Hadcock, suggests that Anglo-Norman colonists were considerably more generous than Gaelic lords to Augustinians in general, founding twenty-six houses to approximately ten in Irish territories and characterised by rather larger endowments (p.147).

Part II is entitled "Community Life" although, in point of fact, three and possibly four of the five papers are primarily concerned with the interaction of Augustinians with outside groups. Allison Fizzard's paper deals with later medieval corrodies or contracts with canons to provide food and shelter or a monetary equivalent for individuals who could be living both within and without the settlements with which they were contracted. Dave Postles talks about the canons' use of resources and, in particular, elite foodstuffs such as wheat products, fresh fish and wine to cement social relationships between the Augustinians and outside bodies. (This paper begins with an eye-catching phrase: "The Augustinians were openly much more carnivorous than the Cistercians" (p.233) although the implications of this statement are not further discussed in any detail.) Nicholas Orme highlights the involvement of Augustinians in local and early stage education for both laity and clerics and contrasts this with their relatively minor roles in the great universities where they had no house of study for much of the Middle Ages and where their scholarship was largely confined to the fields of theology and canon law (p.224). Judith Frost uses biographical information on Thornton Abbey (the largest and wealthiest Augustinian house in north Lincolnshire) to conclude that previous managerial experience was generally required of canons who became heads of their communities. Although no one particular office or role was deemed crucial to such ambitions, the office of sacrist in charge of the conduct of religious services occurs most frequently (p.261). Headship was generally gained

approximately twenty years after ordination although in times of plague the rapid turnover in personnel could quicken the process of promotion. Martin Heale uses a personal register of abbot Henry Honor of the middling-sized Missenden Abbey in Buckinghamshire to show that, as well as heading up a community of ten canons, managing leases for abbey lands and acting as papal judge delegate, the abbot had other commitments including involvement in local funerals and acting as arbiter of local disputes amongst what appear to have been his social peers. These were a “middling group of laity: small gentry landholders, merchants and professionals” with whom he apparently shared a “simple, practical piety” (p.286).

Part III is entitled “Social Contexts” and its prevailing theme is that of local patronage. Glyn Coppack explores the archaeological remains for the early developments at the Gilbertine foundation at Sempringham (Lincolnshire). This order, often described as the only monastic order created in England, had a mixed rule which was, in part, written by Bernard of Clairvaux and influenced by Cistercian practice. It was intended primarily for female religious but it also introduced canons to provide spiritual care. These men, interestingly, followed a modified Augustinian rule (pp.292-3). The statistics for the resultant communities are intriguing: in 1247 Sempringham housed two hundred nuns and lay sisters, thirteen canons and sixty lay brothers while Watton (in east Yorkshire) had one hundred and forty nuns and lay sisters, thirteen canons and seventy lay brothers. (pp.293-4). Men and women had separate cloisters and water courses were used to demarcate areas within the settlement.

Nick Nichols provides detailed statistics to illustrate that possession and exploitation of parishes and their spiritualities is key to understanding the nature of Augustinian income in the Worcester diocese but that the records show that canons could, on occasion, be remarkably inefficient for periods of up to eighty years at a time in their oversight of such legal rights. Graham St John declares that that the Augustinian canons “overwhelmingly formed the mainstay of religious benefactions” in the fourteenth century (p.339) and he suggests that it was their flexibility and a relative lack of what he terms “religious ambition” which made them so popular; patrons preferred an order “that would allow them to have some amount of personal involvement and control over the order of prayers and manner of commemoration” (p.341). Emma Cavell describes the interest of three generations of a thirteenth-century family in Shropshire in the local priory of Wombridge founded by their ancestor, Sir Roger Musson. This was despite the fact that his manor of Uppington (whose chapel comprised an advowson of the priory and a proportion of whose waste and woodland was donated by Sir Roger in return for prayers for himself and his wife) was divided on his death between nine daughters, all of whom were eventually married and three of whom married twice. This resulted in such changes in land ownership that, by 1292, only three to four descendants of Sir Roger still had an interest in the lordship although they continued to support the priory.

In the final paper of Part III, Claire Cross indicates that in sixteenth-century Yorkshire the Augustinian canons had twelve houses for male religious while the Cistercians had eight and the Benedictines five and there were over two hundred canons as opposed to two hundred and thirty Cistercian monks (p.387). In order to persuade these men to disband their communities under the new arrangements sponsored by Cromwell, pensions were offered to individual canons at comparable rates to the stipends of secular priests while heads of communities could be offered considerably more. The subsequent careers of such men were generally more conservative than otherwise with the exception being Robert Ferrar who had joined a Lutheran cell in Oxford in 1528 and became bishop of St Davids in 1548 under Edward VI before being imprisoned under Mary and subsequently martyred in Carmarthen in 1555 (pp 393-4). Many of these Yorkshire canons appear, in fact, to have largely abandoned professional involvement in the church and to have devoted themselves instead to lay teaching, a profession in which they lived out the rest of their lives in relative obscurity.

The final section, Part IV, is entitled “Cultural Contexts” with culture, in this instance, being understood to be literature (including historical works), creation of memorials and architecture. James Clark suggests that later medieval Augustinian codices show traces, if not of a humanist sensibility, than at least of diverse and vigorous patterns of learning. Julian Luxford argues for an involvement in the widely spread phenomenon of the creation of what he terms “visual retrospection” (p.442). Jennifer Alexander provides a case study in the examination of architectural fragments of Thurgarton Priory Church (Nottinghamshire) while Tadhg O’Keeffe completes the volume with a highly optimistic overview of our understanding of the history of the regular canons of St Augustine in Ireland, concentrating primarily on his own field of interests in architectural styles and layout. The fact that he cites Sarah Preston’s short article of 2000 rather than the 1996 Ph.D from TCD on which it draws rather undermines this reviewer’s willingness to endorse his assessment. As someone interested in the processes of twelfth-century reform but who is more knowledgeable about the earlier Irish church, I certainly would not concur with statements such as “we are, on the whole, in a good place” (p.470) and I would argue that the very widespread adoption of Augustinian rules by Irish churches originating in earlier eras still requires substantial investigation, notwithstanding Geraldine Carville’s 1982 review of this question in *Cistercian Publications*. (The latter was not cited by O’Keeffe).

The strength of the volume under review here must be that it provides the reader with a clear understanding of many of the major currents in modern research into the regular canons in medieval Britain and Ireland. It is clear that much valuable work is going on, particularly in the field of local and regional studies. Patterns of landholding and the management of agricultural estates, long the backbone of medieval British church history, continue to be studied with profit. In England, in particular, there appears to be an ever growing number of individual histories of specific Augustinian communities, arising out of research into a wide variety of sources. Whereas a previous generation

operated, of necessity, at a level of broad interpretative models, the sheer volume of new work will eventually allow us to create a much more nuanced understanding of the overall picture of the origins, development and variety of roles played by the regular canons in the medieval history of these islands.

Eventually but not yet. In this volume, at least, there has been no attempt to tie the very specific insights arising out of individual studies into any kind of over-arching model. Words like “reform” are used widely in the earlier chapters but no attempt is made to define the nature of such reforms, the reasons why they were deemed necessary by church authorities or why so many different people in diverse areas were inspired to dedicate their lives to orders who followed Augustinian rules rather than others. Similarly, words like “spiritual” occur relatively frequently but without explanation or exploration and despite a statement in the introduction that the “theological.. achievements” of Augustinians were to be explored (p.8), this was not observable in the studies included in the volume. Moreover, some of the phraseology implies, to this reviewer at least, a certain lack of empathy with the communities under review. Examples include a reference to a patron’s “familial prayer-factory” (p.348) or a footnote which comments on a visitation report condemning the wearing of fashionable dress by canons: “It is not clear what need regular canons had of a stuffed codpiece” (p.271). In their introduction, the editors state “one cannot escape the feeling that for [David] Knowles the success of a medieval religious house lay with those communities that sustained a convent of sufficient size and resources that would enable it to ensure the full performance of divine service throughout the generations” (p.7). One does not have to be either a professed priest or a Benedictine monk, both of which David Knowles was, or indeed a practitioner of any creed other than that of the historian, to feel a considerable degree of sympathy with his position.

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