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Janet Burton and Julie Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, New York: The Boydell Press, 2011. viii + 244 pp. Map, glossary, bibliography, index of Cistercian houses, general index. £25, \$45.00 US (hb). ISBN 978-1-84383-667-4.

Review by Brian Patrick McGuire, Roskilde University, Denmark.

This is an excellent introduction to the Cistercian Order in the Middle Ages, providing a well-balanced and easily accessible overview of the monks and nuns who made up the first international organization in medieval Europe, aside from the Church itself. It is recommended to anyone interested in monastic or medieval history, also as an overview of the prodigious research and publications in this field during the past few decades.

Janet Burton and Julie Kerr begin with an Introduction entitled “Reform and Renewal,” showing how the Cistercians were but one of many reform movements in medieval monasticism. They promise to show in the following chapters “what it was that made the Cistercians distinctive” (p. 7). Already in chapter one, “The ‘desert-place called Cîteaux,’” they delineate the special quality of Cistercian organization that made the Order unique. Burton and Kerr take the reader through a maze of sources and work through the present debate about the origins of the Order. They point out that our texts “are later representations, or reworkings of the Cistercian story” (p. 13) and supply the best distillation yet of the sometimes confusing results of the attempt by Chrysogonus Waddell to date the early Cistercian documents.[1] Many researchers will in the future turn to these pages in order to understand Waddell’s conclusions.

It is not until chapter two, “The Spread of the Cistercian Order,” that the authors reveal that Waddell’s view was challenged by Constance Berman, who “has argued that all the documents on which we construct our arguments are either forgeries or of a later date” (p. 30).[2] The authors gently but firmly reject this view and show how Bernard of Clairvaux took it for granted that he belonged to a monastic order separate from the Benedictines (pp. 33-4).[3] The authors agree with Berman, however, that recent research has disposed “of the myth that the Cistercians were hostile to women and that women had no place in the history of Cistercian expansion” (p. 27). Burton and Kerr challenge Berman’s assertion that “the Order grew largely as a result of the adoption of Cistercian customs by existing houses rather than by colonization” (p. 41). Here as elsewhere, the authors are forthright in their point of view but do not engage in polemics. In this case the reader will be able to appreciate Berman’s signal contributions to Cistercian identity, while at the same time being shown where the authors disagree with her.

The single map in this book, “The Spread of the Cistercian Order in the Middle Ages,” is a half-page overview with black dots for monasteries which leaves much to be desired (p. 43). The Cistercians were so abundant on the ground that it is difficult to do justice to the dissemination of their houses visually, but it would perhaps have been better to provide no map at all instead of this frustrating dot collection.

The authors are best when dealing with England (especially Yorkshire), Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Flanders and Scandinavia. For each of these areas they provide a faithful and illuminating overview of Cistercian life, as in chapter three, “Lonely wooden places’: The Cistercians, their Sites and their Buildings.” But once Burton and Kerr have left behind the original foundation at Cîteaux and Bernard’s monastery of Clairvaux, Burgundy and France are more or less neglected. There is little

about the German houses, many of which were daughters of Morimond. Their number and wealth enabled them to send out daughter houses in Eastern Europe. It is, of course, not to be expected that a general work on the medieval Cistercians would cover all aspects of what became a European movement, but the slanting towards the British Isles and Scandinavia betrays a proclivity for English language publications, making those in French and German secondary. While modern students might prefer books and articles in English, more references to German and French works would have been helpful.

Chapter four, "Unity and Concord: The Administration of the Order," takes on several subjects: the role of the abbot in the individual monastery, discipline, the role of the General Chapter, the visitation of houses, and women's houses. It is commendable that the authors study the functioning of the monasteries and the Order as a whole in such an overview, but their concentration on the conspiracy at the Irish house of Mellifont in the thirteenth century distracts from a larger controversy between the abbots of Clairvaux and Cîteaux. In my mind this latter dispute weakened the General Chapter and the Order as such and deserves further attention.

The chapter's last section, "Demise and reform" (pp. 101-2), takes the reader into modern times and gives a too concentrated summary of later developments. It would have been much better if the authors had saved this section for a final chapter about the later Middle Ages and beyond. The book is structured topically and often does not provide a sense of a chronological development in the Cistercian Order. It thus does not address with enough detail the common assumption that the Cistercians departed from their original ideals after their golden age in the twelfth century. The question of decline requires a separate treatment which could have been provided in a final chapter, but that would have considerably expanded the book. I assume the authors worked under length constraints, so it is commendable how much they manage to compress into 200 pages.

Chapter six, "Angels of God': Cistercian Spirituality," fails to define the slippery term "spirituality," while the authors do deal with the meaning of "mysticism." Unfortunately "spirituality" is reduced to saints' cults, Marian devotion, and relics. All these very concrete manifestations of religious belief are important, but a description of spirituality requires something more abstract, an address to the very Cistercian spirit which authors such as Gilson, Leclercq and Waddell have attempted. The book is thus best in dealing with material realities, though it does succeed in suggesting a spiritual dimension through its frequent use of the *exempla* or edifying stories that circulated among the Cistercians and which the Trappist Cistercian monk Martinus Cawley made more accessible.[4] It is delightful that the authors often return to the stories translated by Cawley, which offer a sense of the lives of female Cistercians.

Chapter seven, "*Conversi*, granges and the Cistercian economy," is perhaps the best in the book, for the authors, with their orientation towards the material world, provide a superb and convincing overview of the lay brother institution and its development, the importance of the granges and their continuation through the Middle Ages and even beyond, and the versatility of the Cistercian economy, which branched out in many directions and was not always solely agricultural. This chapter will become an important reference point for scholars in search of how the Cistercians cultivated the land, kept sheep, and manufactured a large range of products not usually associated with the quiet of the monastic cloister.

The final chapter, "Lanterns shining in a dark place': The Cistercians in the World," starts out well with the idea of charity and commitment to others so well evidenced by Martha Newman.[5] Burton and Kerr see the Cistercians as enthusiastic in their preaching against heresy in the south of France and their support for the Crusades. The chapter also mentions how the monks in the thirteenth century founded *studia* in several university towns, but the authors neglect the debate that took place at the General Chapter about whether it was wise to found a Cistercian college in Paris. The very identity of the Order in terms of contemplative spirituality was at stake, and it is perhaps here that the Cistercians definitively abandoned the ideals of the twelfth century.

This book succeeds in summarizing new research from Europe and North America and sees the Cistercians as a central monastic movement of the Middle Ages. It enjoys a clarity of style, and

while it treats both male and female Cistercians, it takes full account of the great advance in Cistercian studies since the 1970s to give women the place they deserve. In spite of my few reservations, I find this book to be a garden of delights that goes a long way in presenting the Cistercians in their variety, uniformity and ambitions.

## NOTES

[1] Chrysogonus Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*, (Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses, 1999).

[2] Constance Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Monastic Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

[3] I offered a similar argument in an article not included in the bibliography: B. P. McGuire, "Bernard's Concept of a Cistercian Order: Vocabulary and Context," *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses* 54 (2003): 225-49.

[4] Martinus Cawley, trans., *Send Me God: The Lives of Ida the Compassionate of Nivelles, Nun of La Ramée, Arnulf, Lay Brother of Villers, and Abundus, Monk of Villers* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2003).

[5] Martha Newman, *The Boundaries of Charity: Cistercian Culture and Ecclesiastical Reform 1098-1180*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1996).

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