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John Cotts, *The Clerical Dilemma: Peter of Blois and Literate Culture in the Twelfth Century*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009. xi + 320 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0813216768.

Review by Daniel Hobbins, Ohio State University.

Perhaps no category in medieval history is more secure than the notion of a twelfth-century renaissance. An entire generation of scholars in the previous century established it as one of the key turning points in European history. In the past generation, some scholars have called into question the benign effects of that renaissance, as R. I. Moore has done in arguing that the period also saw the birth of the “persecuting society.” More recently, Fiona Griffiths asked what that “renaissance” meant for women. Yet the movement and its interpretation remain closely tied to the religious orders, and no study so far has attempted to explore how the twelfth-century renaissance was experienced by the clerical bureaucracy. That is essentially what John Cotts has done in this excellent study of Peter of Blois, an aspiring cleric who never reached past the middling ranks of the clergy (he spent most of his life as an archdeacon), and yet whose letter collection was soon being read alongside authorities such as Ambrose, Gregory, and Bernard. The collection survives today in more than three hundred copies. And yet how many medievalists today could say the first thing about these letters? Peter is best-known today, perhaps, as a primary witness to the Becket affair.

Peter wrote more than just letters: crusade treatises, dialogues, saints’ lives, an abbreviation of Gregory’s *Moralia*, a treatise on spiritual friendship, a manual on letter writing, and a few poems. Cotts has carefully read all of these texts, and his mastery of the entire corpus of Peter’s writings, along with the writings of better-known contemporaries such as John of Salisbury, Walter Map, and Gerald of Wales, has given him a broad vision for Peter’s place in the world of twelfth-century schools, courts, and ecclesiastical households. The book thus transcends the study of one individual and offers an important commentary on the meaning and the penetration of the twelfth-century renaissance.

While devoting some chapters to Peter’s treatises, Cotts focuses primarily on the letters. Anyone who has worked with medieval letters—most of them stripped of the local detail that makes them interesting for the historian—will appreciate the difficulty of this task. Like most medieval authors, Peter intended his letters to serve rhetorical and moral ends, not to serve as evidence for his autobiography. Most of the letters survive in collections compiled by Peter himself, long after their original composition. (As an archdeacon, and unlike a bishop, Peter probably would have had to preserve his letters himself.) One tantalizing feature of these letters is that Peter revised some of them substantially for inclusion in a later collection. A longstanding debate concerns just how often and how thoroughly Peter revised his letters between the 1180s and 1200s (scholars have argued for anywhere from one to six revisions). Assuming that Peter had obsessively “niggled over every word he wrote” (p. 272), Sir Richard Southern dismissed Peter as a vain dilettante. But he did so partly because he interpreted as authorial changes to the text what Lena Wahlgren later argued were scribal changes. A great deal hinges on our understanding of how Peter compiled and revised these letters, a process that Cotts admits we may never fully understand. One helpful feature of this study is an appendix

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that concisely summarizes the scholarship on this question, and proposes a model for understanding the growth of the letter collection.

To recover the historical Peter of Blois, Cotts faces more than just textual challenges. Peter's biography must be teased out of letters assembled into a collection much later on, and mostly lacking in biographical detail. We cannot be sure of the relation of the letters as found in the manuscripts to the original correspondence. A few were completely altered from their original form. Together, the letters lack clear focus, and address individuals ranging from the great and powerful (including a half dozen to Innocent III) down to clerics and scholars like Peter himself. Even the purpose of the collection is unclear. Cotts dismisses the address of the entire collection to Henry II as "a literary convenience" (p. 63). Henry was in no real sense Peter's patron.

Despite these challenges, Cotts skilfully exploits the letters to draw a fresh and nuanced portrait of a secular cleric in the twelfth century. At the heart of the book lies the "clerical dilemma" of the title: Peter's sense of the need to balance his career goals with the grave demands of the spiritual life, to forge a successful career as a secular cleric in a morally acceptable way. In one sense this is nothing less than one of the central challenges of the medieval church in microcosm--balancing the material support of an ecclesiastical office with its spiritual obligations. Clerics like Peter routinely drew the wrath of contemporary reformers for their secular involvement, especially their participation in court culture. Peter himself held secular offices at various times, and he did in fact achieve financial success, though he complained to the end of his life that he was short on cash.

Perhaps, in the eyes of reformers, the biggest failing of clerics like Peter was simply this: they were not monks. And indeed, Cotts argues, the secular clergy remain a "blank space on our conceptual map of the High Middle Ages" (p. 12), on obscure figures on the margins of religious life, overshadowed by the monastic orders and, before long, by the friars. And yet the high and austere vision of monastic spirituality touched Peter profoundly. He borrowed--sometimes word-for-word--from writers like Aelred of Rievaulx, blurring the line between compilation and plagiarism (p. 243). This monastic vision shaped his outlook on the clerical life too, and led him to defend two incompetent archbishops who were also monks, and poor successors to Thomas Becket. Salvation of souls mattered more than construction of buildings (p. 208). His defense of these archbishops led him to consider the proper posture of the prelate toward the secular ruler, and thus to ponder the fundamental question, who runs the church? Priests or laymen? Here Cotts traces a development from deference to authority toward a more antagonistic position in Peter's later letters. Other complexities abound. Peter had a deep interest in books and took a long view of literature and writing, like some twelfth-century humanists, but he was dubious of the pagan classics and thought that practical application mattered most. He was educated in the best schools of his day (at Chartres, Tours, Paris, and Bologna), and yet he often distanced himself from the scholarly world, having no taste for dialectic, which he attacked for its lack of connection to real-world problems. Peter wrote nothing in any of the scholarly genres.

Cotts' fine treatment does raise some interesting questions not dealt with here fully or at all. Cotts does not explore the popularity of Peter's letters in later centuries. Did it have something to do with the late medieval appreciation for the "mixed life," a combination of the active and contemplative life, as we find it described in Walter Hilton or in Jean Gerson? Do we have any sense of who read the letters? Or of their impact? (We still lack a critical edition, though one is announced in the *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*.) Such questions take us well beyond Cotts' purpose in this book, and other readers will pose different questions. These matters aside, John Cotts has done medieval studies a great service. His subtle portrait of Peter of Blois offers the first thorough reading of the entire corpus of Peter's works, while also expanding our understanding of the twelfth-century renaissance.

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