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Brian Patrick McGuire, *Bernard of Clairvaux: An Inner Life*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2020. xvii + 358 pp. Maps, figures, notes, sources and references, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781501751042; \$16.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781501751547.

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Bernard of Clairvaux: An Inner Life is the first biography of Bernard of Clairvaux in over a century, written by Brian Patrick McGuire, one of the great monastic historians of his generation. Written in the style of the classic biographies of Anselm by R.W. Southern (McGuire's thesis supervisor at Oxford),^[1] McGuire's study of Bernard boasts an engaging, conversational narrative style: no footnotes, but a curated and annotated bibliography at the end (particularly focusing on secondary works in English and English translations of Bernard's writings), and an affordable price, likely in an effort to make it a biography accessible to a wide audience. While certain aspects of the portrait ultimately make it a difficult work for non-specialists to enjoy, readers benefit from McGuire's deep familiarity with Cistercian sources, his encyclopedic knowledge of the relevant historiography, his intimate acquaintance with the goings-on in Trappist and Cistercian monasteries in the United States and Europe from the 1950's to today, and his own obvious fascination with and love for Bernard's life experiences and achievements.

McGuire is explicit about his particular take on Bernard, stating that: "In our time there is still a deep-seated prejudice that sees medieval people as manipulated by the Church and forced to live in a certain way. But in point of fact many people of the twelfth century saw the Church as their mother, giving them access to God's grace and looking after them in the drama of life..." (p. 11). McGuire sets out to depict Bernard's "inner life," to see "Bernard as a human being with hopes, dreams, frustrations, and moments of pure joy" (p. 4) who always maintained an "awareness of the presence of God" (p. 10). Having worked on Bernard in one way or another for over fifty years, McGuire has certainly earned the right to present us with his particular portrait of Bernard; while he does put forward occasional criticism of certain of Bernard's actions (he states that his book is "not intended to be a hagiography" on p. 245), McGuire is obviously deeply impressed by Bernard and "the inner life of an extraordinary human being" (p. 245). In fact, McGuire asserts that Bernard is the "first European" (p. 2) who, moreover, contributed to the launch of a "genuine reformation" (p. 8) in the central Middle Ages: while one might call Charlemagne the "first European" on a political basis, McGuire bestows this title upon Bernard based on his spirituality, namely his efforts in unifying a European-wide Christian culture, one defined by an "openness to the achievements of the human spirit, guided by Christian revelation" (p. 249). In this way, McGuire is a loyal student of Southern's, understanding Bernard of

Clairvaux to be essential to the transformations of twelfth-century spirituality, and such spirituality to be essential to the development of European culture writ large.

To make his case, McGuire chooses to narrate a very traditional biography, using the “chronological framework...that a biography requires” (p. 260) for the first 249 pages of his work. The next section of *Bernard of Clairvaux: An Inner Life* is entitled “Fifteen Questions About Bernard: The Background for My Portrait,” and it is the most analytical section of the entire book (it is also the only part of the book with notes). Here McGuire briefly discusses the primary sources for Bernard’s life, the relevant historiography, and then several special topics that are not extensively addressed in the biography itself: Bernard’s relationship with women, with the body, with his own health, with his own sexuality, with Clairvaux and the Cistercian order, with the Second Crusade, with the Jews, with Peter Abelard, Gilbert de la Porrée, and Peter the Venerable, with monk-knights, and with (R.I. Moore’s) “persecuting society.” The final section, “Sources and References,” lists relevant primary sources by chapter and chapter section, and also includes McGuire’s annotations and opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of various secondary sources (although not always the most up-to-date ones).

The chronological framework that McGuire employs heavily depends on a detailed excavation of Bernard’s letters, the *Vita Prima* and *Fragmenta*, and several of Bernard’s treatises. This source foundation results in a biographical account that sometimes reads as “one thing after another” (p. 152) and “one appeal after another” (p. 221), and could be disorienting for readers who do not understand the larger significance of each of the events discussed. While his accessible and conversational language might indicate that the book could be inviting to undergraduates, the absence of the wider medieval context might leave any novice reader wondering about certain terms (e.g., what is “investiture?”), or about Bernard’s uniqueness among other medieval people (e.g., do all abbots straddle the secular world and the spiritual one, or just Bernard?), or even about Bernard’s importance relative to other twelfth-century figures (e.g., why is Bernard the lynchpin here, and not Abelard or Peter the Venerable?). Though McGuire repeatedly asserts that Bernard’s actions represent “central phenomen[*a*] in twelfth-century life and spirituality” (p. 247), he does not define what those phenomena might be, leaving the uninitiated reader with a collection of facts, hungering for greater perspective. Still, McGuire’s biography assembles an intriguing collage of moments from Bernard’s life—stand-outs include the discussions of Bernard’s attachment to his biological family members (in chapters two and three) and a lovely (and too brief!) section on Bernard’s sermons on the *Song of Songs* (in chapter xix).

Throughout McGuire’s study of Bernard, he emphasizes the continuity of Bernard’s actions. Bernard had so deeply internalized the psalms and biblical prescriptions that those words became the moral foundations of his actions, which were “a way [for] his inner life [to take] on integrity...to express what he thought was God’s will (p. 54).” McGuire underscores that Bernard, like many abbots, was pulled between society and solitude, between “seeking peace and quiet” and “making a loud impact on his surroundings” (p. 12). “However much he claimed to desire to be only at Clairvaux, Bernard kept confronting the world and going out into it to face its moral and theological dilemmas” (p. 140). This caused Bernard to at times be righteous, even ruthless, and McGuire admits to Bernard’s “difficult” personality, but he nevertheless remains deeply awestruck by Bernard, because “what he considered to be good for himself had also to be good for others...[so he had a] great capacity for generating enthusiasm” (p. 24). McGuire insists that Bernard’s attempt to unify Christian actions, beliefs, and institutions places him at

medieval Christianity's "very center" (p. 214), "as if the world could not exist without him" (p. 234).

Central to McGuire's analysis is his conviction that Bernard's "inner life" is accessible to historians. He regularly makes assertions in this vein: "We are dealing with literature, but literature reflecting lived experience. What Bernard composed can indicate what he had lived" (p. 122); and "[w]hatever he allowed to emerge from his literary workshop is what he intended to reflect his own inner life, thought and feeling" (p. 297). While McGuire's critical judgments are sharp in his analysis of Bernard's medieval and modern biographies in the "Fifteen Questions," McGuire feels comfortable leaving aside such judgment when it comes to his ability to ascertain Bernard's "inner life," which he sees as a part of the "bare facts of Bernard's life" (p. 260). Other historians might question McGuire's assurance that Bernard's writings are not filled with discourse and rhetoric (indeed, there are whole schools of historical thought that have developed around methods of analyzing the history of "inner" experience and emotion that McGuire neglects), but McGuire feels a deep affinity to the kind of history written by Southern and Jean Leclercq, and produces a volume that would make both of them proud as a result. It is somewhat disappointing that McGuire does not really explain why only certain of Bernard's writings are useful "for penetrating his inner life and affect" (p. 300)—*vitae*, letters, a few treatises—while others—notably sermons—are not. He leaves the reader wanting to learn more about the historical methodology he employed for distinguishing Bernard's "inner" life from "outer" performance.

As *Bernard of Clairvaux: An Inner Life* progresses, however, the reader begins to better understand what McGuire means by "inner life"—and, given McGuire's own scholarship, it shouldn't come as a surprise.^[2] To McGuire, Bernard's spiritually-motivated actions and "special Cistercian charisma" were undergirded by "a sense of identification with his brethren sharing in the life and sufferings of Christ" (p. 307). McGuire sees Cistercian life as guided by *affectus*, which he understands as "the search for attachment, both human and divine" (p. 249). All of Bernard's outer actions can, to McGuire, be traced back to this "inner" impulse for affective connection: "Theologically Bernard was innovative, but the most remarkable aspect of this unique expression of human loss and suffering is that consolation came to mean expressing the rightful need of one person for another" (p. 127). This "inner" drive for human and divine connection is ultimately what motivates Bernard in McGuire's view, and what motivates the twelfth-century advances which he instigates. Such friendship and community, it should be noted, likewise seems to drive McGuire as well: in Bernard's spirit, McGuire peppers the biography with his own friendships: words of wisdom from Leclercq and Southern; past experiences at various Cistercian monasteries; accounts of encounters with scholars at conference panels and lectures; a charming observation about Beryl Smalley's eating habits (pp. 304-5); and a dedication to his "Cistercian friends." As a result, *Bernard of Clairvaux: An Inner Life* reads as intensely personal to McGuire, as it is an outcome of his own scholarly formation, personal relationships, and internalization of the Bernardian *affectus*.

NOTES

[1] R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and His Biographer: A Study of Monastic Life and Thought, 1059-ca. 1130* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) and idem, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[2] Here I am referring to McGuire's magnum opus, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience, 350-1250*, new edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010) (originally published in 1988).

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