

Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950-1200

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Author:

Tom Licence

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E. A. Jones

Religious solitaries were a feature of the English spiritual landscape ‘from the dawn of Christianity in England until the sixteenth century’ but, since Rotha Clay (who wrote those words) attempted her overarching survey almost a century ago, coverage of their history has been decidedly patchy.⁽¹⁾ It is less so now, thanks to Tom Licence’s important new book.

Clay and the many 19th-century antiquaries who got the hermit-hunting bug were interested in some basic questions: where did hermits live? When? What were their names? Those questions still need asking, of course, but Licence is interested in a set of higher order research questions, which together seek to place the burgeoning popularity of the anchoritic vocation in central medieval England in its social context. They are laid out early in the book’s introduction: ‘Where did all these anchorites come from? How could they wield such power? What, if anything, was their function? And why did society harbour these people who bypassed its norms and scorned its aspirations?’ (p. 2).⁽²⁾ The word ‘function’ in that third question points to the pair of hugely influential studies with which the whole book is in dialogue: Henry Mayr-Harting’s study of Wulfric of Haselbury, ‘Functions of a twelfth-century recluse’, and Mayr-Harting’s inspiration for that essay, Peter Brown’s ‘Rise and function of the holy man in late antiquity’.⁽³⁾ From those works has emerged an image of the solitary as an outsider to whom the rest of society could look for arbitration and mediation, to smooth over local disagreements or major cultural dislocations (notably, in Wulfric’s case, the Conquest). Licence’s stated intention is to look at these issues again, and to shift the emphasis of the analysis away from anthropology and socioeconomics and back towards the spiritual.

The first half of the book details the rise of hermits and recluses in England, while the second half

concentrates on their function. Licence is acutely aware of the methodological problems even in talking about a 'rise' in the number of anchorites. In the period he is interested in, the terminology for the solitary vocations has not yet settled down, so that it is not always clear when someone described as a 'holy man' or a 'virgin' should be counted as an anchorite, and when not. Some of the more valuable sources of evidence for late-medieval hermits and recluses (wills, bishops' registers, the patent and close rolls) have not got going yet, while the pipe rolls – which Ann Warren made good use of in her study of late-medieval recluses – begin only towards the end of the period.⁽⁴⁾ There are charters and monastic chronicles, and various stray references, but survivals are too unpredictable to use as the foundation for any quantitative analysis. But what Licence does have are narratives of the lives of some charismatic solitaries, which offer evidence not only for those individuals' careers and interactions with those around them, but also for the esteem in which they, and their vocation more broadly, were held. Increasingly, anachoresis came to be seen as a 'career-enhancing attribute' (p. 112) in any saint's life, so that when new lives of Aethelwold and Dunstan – architects of the Benedictine Reform, and no special friends to free-wheeling, non-conforming hermits – were written in the 11th century, their authors decided to introduce anchoritic interludes into both men's careers (see pp. 63–4). Saints' lives have been the focus of most of Licence's previous publications (the life of Godric of Throckenholt that he edited back in 2006 ⁽⁵⁾ features prominently here), and he is a brilliant reader of them, alert not only to all their human interest and cultural significance, but also to their (sometimes overlooked) potential to amuse: the life of Benedict, founder of Selby, is 'somewhat tongue-in-cheek' (p. 56) whereas, of one detail recounted by Godric of Throckenholt's earnest biographer, Licence suggests 'somebody could have been pulling his leg' (p. 103); the relics of Robert of Knaresborough were 'the medieval equivalent of a Victorian patent medicine' (p. 194).

In the earlier chapters of his book, Licence is working against an old-established tradition that sees hermits and recluses as the response of native spirituality to the upheaval in religious life brought by the Conquest. He disposes of that narrative with a neat pincer movement, showing first that hermits had enjoyed the extensive support of English secular lords from at least 950, and secondly (and more familiarly) that a revival of interest in the eremitic way of life was a pan-European phenomenon during the whole of the period under examination. When he turns to the enclosed solitaries or recluses, Licence concedes that the Conquest may have made a difference; but only inasmuch as a distinct terminology for this brand of solitary life (*inclusus, recluse*) seems to be a continental importation. The excellent discussion of these early English recluses reprises Licence's valuable essay in *Anglo-Saxon England*, published in 2007.⁽⁶⁾ The situation of both vocations in their northern European context is particularly valuable, and Licence's will be the standard account of their rise to prominence during this period.

Chapter four begins the turn towards the role of solitaries in English society, looking at various aspects of anchorites' material existence: the support they received from patrons, and the efforts they made to support themselves. Anchorites in this period attracted material support from all levels of society, above the very humblest. There could be a neat symbiosis between land-owner and solitary: the patron granted the hermit some wasteland ('desert'), the hermit worked the land for his subsistence, and when after his death it reverted to the donor, it came back improved, with forest cleared or fen drained. Licence makes sustained use here of his favoured source material, the lives of anchoritic saints, and the chapter is full of fascinating insights into the anchorites' daily routine, diet and labour practices.

The last chapters of the book then address directly the question of the function of hermits and recluses, as it was perceived by the solitaries themselves, and by those who supported them. The answer can be given surprisingly briefly: it was the eradication of sin. In chapter five, Licence examines various theoretical models of just how the lives of anchorites might eradicate sin (as a form of exile, or purgatory-on-earth, or *imitatio Christi*), before looking at how this worked in practice, the hermitage coming to be seen as a 'purpose-built factory for purging sin' (p. 121). Chapter six concentrates on the penitential practices of the solitaries themselves (hairshirts, mailshirts, immersions, and so on), while chapter seven shows how the wider community could benefit from the presence in their midst of an acknowledged expert in combatting sin. The principal source, richly mined, for this material is again hagiography, and so it makes sense that the book's final chapter should consider 'How anchorites became saints', the focus here being on the local

emergence of a cult, often related to the solitary's penitential practices (so that, for instance, links from Godric of Finchale's mailshirt were found to have curative powers).

Licence has set out to discern the function of hermits and recluses between 950 and 1200, and his answer is the eradication of sin. This must be broadly correct. And yet, although the problem of sin and the possibility of its remediation (in this life and/or the next) loomed large over the central Middle Ages, and although Licence provides detailed and fascinating support for his thesis from his hagiographical case studies, I found the explanation somehow unsatisfying, despite – or perhaps partly because of – the insistent, and rather self-conscious, way the argument is structured and signposted in this part of the book, as if to be sure that the reader does not miss its persuasiveness. Will a single, unified explanation really do? Perhaps the problem here is Licence's concentration (in all other respects a strength) on saints' lives. Acts of penitence are both quantifiable and capable of inspiring awe – attractive qualities to a hagiographer. But if we look at some other sources, a more complex picture starts to emerge. I will restrict myself to texts that Licence himself includes among his range of sources, though he makes less use of them than I would have expected. In the mid 12th-century rite for enclosing a recluse, the lesson would fit Licence's argument well: *Vade populus meus* (Isaiah 26:20-27:3) is all about withdrawal from a sinful world and a vengeful God ('Go, my people, enter into thy chamber, shut thy doors upon thee, hide thyself a little for a moment, until the indignation pass away. For behold the Lord will come out of his place, to visit the iniquity of the inhabitant of the earth against him', and so on). But the gospel (Luke 10:38-42) is the story of Martha and Mary, and Mary's 'better part' that is the contemplation of Christ's divinity. Turning to the *De Institutione Inclusarum*, we find Ailred encouraging his sister to meditate on moments from Christ's life and passion in the affective manner, and in *Ancrene Wisse* the whole treatise builds to its chapter on the love of God and Christ as lover-knight. True, these come at the end of Licence's period (*Ancrene Wisse* in fact, by the usual dating, a little after his *terminus*), but the spirituality they reflect must have been emerging alongside the penitential obsession that Licence so richly documents. Without underestimating the significance of sin, might love not also have had something to do with it?

In fact, the questions I was left with after I had finished the book tended to cluster around the end of Licence's period, and the transition from central to late Middle Ages. He gestures in this direction a few times, and particularly in his conclusion, but for me there remains more to be said on a number of matters. Although, throughout, Licence treats enclosed solitaires (recluses) and wandering hermits as part of the same phenomenon of anachoresis, latterly the distinction between the two forms of life seems to have hardened: how did that come about? How do Licence's hermits fit into the narrative of a 'slide into cenobitism' so familiar in work on the reforming hermit-monks of the 11th and 12th centuries? And gender? Work on reclusion in the late Middle Ages has mostly approached the phenomenon from this angle. While in some ways it is a relief that Licence has found something else to talk about, it is nonetheless the case that, towards the end of his period, gender did make a material difference to the opportunities an individual had to pursue a solitary life, as the relatively unstructured, unenclosed life of the hermit came to be denied to women, and this is a development that surely requires some accounting for.

In short, *Hermits and Recluses in English Society* is impressive and convincing on where the solitary vocations came from; I should have liked a bit more on where they were going. But if I'm being greedy now, it is only because this very good book has whetted my appetite.

Notes

1. *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London, 1914); the quotation is from p. xix. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A quick word on Licence's terminology, which differs from that which is conventional in some other periods. He uses *anchorite* as the catch-all term, designating renunciation and withdrawal; the enclosed *recluse* and freely-wandering *hermit* are subsets of *anchorite*. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *History*, 60 (1975), 337–52; *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80–101. Licence does not make use of the retrospective on Peter Brown's essay – including Brown's own historicisation and critique – in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6, 3 (1998). [Back to \(13\)](#)

4. Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley, CA, 1985).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. 'The life and miracles of Godric of Throckenholt', *Analecta Bollandiana*, 124 (2006), 15–43.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. 'Evidence of recluses in eleventh-century England', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 36 (2007), 221–34.[Back to \(6\)](#)

The author welcomes this review and does not wish to comment further.

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