

## Privacy and Solitude in the Middle Ages

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Tom Licence

On the opening page of her new book *Privacy and Solitude in the Middle Ages*, Diana Webb identifies its driving interests: first, 'in what medieval people regarded as reason or justification for retreating, permanently or temporarily, from the wider society, and secondly in their awareness of their dwelling spaces'. Social scientists may welcome this book as a sociological study. Webb likens her research proposition to that of the American sociologist Barrington Moore Jr, whose volume *Privacy: Studies in Social and Cultural History* (New York, 1984) came together because its author (as cited by Webb on her opening page) 'wanted to see how other cultures treated this problem and if they were even aware of it'. Another nod at the integration of history and sociology comes three pages later (p. x), with an Annalesian suggestion that Webb's book could help to chart the evolution of privacy as a concept. 'It has become fashionable recently', she notes, 'to investigate the medieval antecedents of such features of modern society as scientific and commercial mentalities; perhaps the same can be done for the ancestry of our attitudes to privacy.' At this the reader is left wondering whether the past is to be used as a hunting ground for antecedents of the present. This would be one way to read Webb's book, but her instinct is that of a historian: to investigate the past for its own sake, and she eschews the theorising that would have been necessary to establish her study within a sociological framework.

Again suggestive of an Annalesian inspiration is the idea, on the next page (p. xi), that privacy as a concept came hand-in-hand with the emergence of a middling sector in society, whose members inclined towards intellectual pursuits and were at greater liberty than the great or lowly to employ living space as they pleased. The emergence of a middling sector, ascribed to various centuries, has been a nostrum for Annalists, most notably Jacques Le Goff in his book on purgatory. Webb hints at it recurrently, and in the absence of guidance as to her main hypotheses it may be assumed on that basis to be one of them. If Webb

retains Annalesian impulses, however, they have shared in that movement's fragmentation. Her opinion of what history should entail, and what it in no way can, is plain from her apologies, that 'it would have been quite impossible to trawl the literature and hagiography or the art, architecture and archaeological discoveries of the whole of medieval Europe' to find data to inform her investigation (p. xvi), and that she is neither anthropologist nor psychologist (p. xvii). Such defences put her in a class of cultural historians who defer to a vision of total history yet recognise that it has become unattainable in our age of specialised knowledge. In its place, Webb offers a 'personal and very incomplete exploration' (p. vii), 'as I have said, a personal exploration' (p. xvii). It is an approach to the writing of history answerable to no evaluative criteria, for how is one to assess a professedly subjective exercise? Webb may be marketing her book to postmodernists as well as to social anthropologists, but because it sets out to sell itself so broadly and sets out neither hypotheses nor methodology, the sensation is of setting out on a mystery tour.

Webb's book is structured so as to trace the emergence, from classical antiquity, of two main forms of withdrawal, which are its interweaving themes. The first is the religiously motivated quest for solitude (monks, nuns, hermits, recluses). The second is the lay quest for private living space. Chapter one introduces both by assuming a refreshing perspective on the first from the viewpoint of a Roman mentality shocked at its rejection of sociability. Monasticism was as far removed from early 5th-century Roman mores as east is from west, and yet - Webb skilfully drives home the paradox - it came eventually to be seen as the custodian and preserver of all things Roman. The secular quest for privacy is prefigured in Pliny the Younger's retreats in pursuit of *otium*, i.e. constructive leisure. Senecan and Ciceronian ideas concerning solitude, or 'virtual' withdrawal into one's own thoughts as an occasional means of improving man's more natural condition of sociability, are likewise introduced only to resurface in later chapters reformulated by monastic and humanistic thinkers. So the scene is set, but without an initial explanation of the route chosen this reviewer took a while to shake off the sensation that monasticism and the lay quest for privacy make strange bedfellows. As it turns out, the link (at any rate, by the later Middle Ages) was the pursuit of literacy. The usefulness of Webb's experimental study may lie in the fact that by wedding these different forms of withdrawal together it illuminates the unresolving dialectic involving their relative contributions to learning. Nevertheless, it remains an objection to the coherence of her design, that the quest for solitude was religious, whereas the quest for privacy was literary and recreational. What have self-flagellating hermits to do with Renaissance men of letters? In the introduction, Webb hints at antecedents, but sociologists will have to work out the theory for themselves.

The chapters devoted to monasticism are two, three, five and six. The first two explore its emergence and touch on the interrelation of its twin impulses (eremitic and cenobitic) in the deserts of late antiquity and in western Europe up to the middle of the 11th century. Chapters five and six investigate 12th-century conceptions of solitude, focusing on Carthusian and Cistercian commentators, and the life of hermits and recluses respectively. Throughout these four chapters, with an eye alert to spatial and conceptual solitude, the author scouts territory that should be familiar to monastic scholars. I doubt that her real interest lies here, but rather in the later chapters on lay aspirations to privacy. This may explain why there are one or two holes in the mesh. Chapter two, although it embraces Henry Chadwick's position that monasticism as a movement was born of the desire of religious zealots for separation from the ordinary faithful, omits the context, that the recent nominal conversion of the Roman Empire diluted the status of God's *soi-disant* elite. (1) Without this context and some discussion of the sins which monasticism contrived to escape, it is not made as plain as it should be that 'solitude' and 'privacy' are not very easily yoked. An odder omission, from a chapter entitled 'In search of lost solitude' (chapter five), is the loss of all reference to the man who most missed it, John of Fécamp, and the inattention paid to the corpus of scholarship on this topic that is the lifetime achievement of his editor, Jean Leclercq. Here, or between the treatment of Peter Damian at the end of chapter three and Webb's discussion of Bruno of Cologne in chapter five, this reviewer also expected at least a nod in the direction of Henrietta Leyser's 'new hermits', who typically subordinated their quest for solitude to the duty of pastoral care. One should at least have hoped for comment on that other key debate concerning 'the crisis of cenobitism', given that a quest for solitude was intrinsic to Romuald of Ravenna and Peter Damian's rejection of Cluniac monasticism as a suitable mould for their devotions. It is a pity that Webb does not engage with these elements of the historiography, which touch so much upon her theme.

Chapter two, which sketches the career of St Antony before painting a picture of desert religion with a medley of anecdotes and apothegmata from Rufinus, Palladius, Cassian and others, resembles a window on to a chaotic scene with few contours or signposts. Questions are raised and not answered (several rapid-fire questions in the penultimate paragraph of p. 15 are as rapidly abandoned), and there is little sustained argumentation. To be fair to Webb, it is perhaps an idiosyncrasy of this reviewer that he prefers the Collingwoodian principle of structured evidential argument, if without the certitude of historical knowledge, to this freer, exploratory approach. The latter has arguably the benefit of allowing a historian to range across all interesting terrain. Webb's exploration brings to light original, compelling ideas. Her interpretation of the Evagrian St Antony as the hagiographical personification of a riposte to classical Roman assumptions that solitude was degrading (in that the saint was unspoiled, even ennobled by it) is a case in point. Equally interesting is the analysis in chapter three of different expressions of solitude visible in the *Life* of John of Gorze. In contrast, it is a little disappointing that after alighting on Peter Damian's seam of metaphors for the solitary life in *Dominus uobiscum* Webb neglects to exploit their potential for developing her discussion. Damian eulogises the hermit's cell as a paradise, a prison, a warehouse, a workshop, a cleansing bath and, altogether, a catholicon. This was an opportunity for Webb to discuss the spirituality of the solitary life from the viewpoint of a man who knew more about it than most (p. 44). Again, Jean Leclercq's labours would have been helpful. (2) Chapter six, on recluses and hermits, titled 'In the Midst of People', works its way to the conclusion that these religious 'lived in a ... condition of proximity, and even dependence on, the local lay population'. It is a conclusion true of recluses and a few hermits in their old age. Of hermits generally, it inverts the truth. The hermitages at Throckenholt near Wisbech, at Finchale (in its early years) and at other studied locations were self-sufficient plots carved out of wastes by assarting and endowed initially or enlarged by aristocratic sponsors, kin and converts. No one in medieval society was less dependent on or proximate to other people than hermits, even if a few famous ones made their names as gurus. Webb is normally attentive to terminology and definitions, but in the case of hermits and recluses there is conflation of the two categories, and this perhaps might have led to confusion. My final problem with this chapter and also with chapter three (in its use of the *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae*) is its uncritical citation of hagiography, apparently to supply historical information. In the case of Robert of Knaresborough, Webb turns to the metrical Middle English *Life* instead of the substantially earlier and more authoritative Latin *Lives*.

Having surveyed these four chapters (two, three, five and six), one might conclude that the omissions and

the undeveloped treatment of the theme of monastic solitude stem from an ambitious attempt to cover too much ground. A book solely on monasticism could have focused the writer's research and thoughts. Happily, more is to be gained from the chapters on privacy in the later medieval centuries, especially chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12. Chapters four, seven and eight open up this avenue with explorations of aristocratic privacy in the early Middle Ages, the later designation and partitioning of living space, and religion in the home (which is more a study of religiously oriented people living at home than of ordinary lay piety). The last five chapters (8-12), which draw extensively on Italian material, show Webb moving comfortably around her own territory. In chapter nine an argument takes shape through the identification of a conceptual switch within the context of Italian Renaissance humanism - what may be termed the Petrarchan moment - when Petrarch, out of his syncretism of classical and Christian thought, arrived at a novel idea of solitude as an amenity for personal improvement. Was this the birth of privacy as we all enjoy it today? Webb is rather too canny a historian to peddle such a notion as the birth of a new concept. Even so, she does imply that privacy as an idea akin to its modern counterpart first appealed, to leisured intellectuals (like us?), about this time. Chapter 10 pursues the implications of this new hypothesis with an innovative study of the emergence of the study as a private work place, initially in a Dominican context then increasingly in Benedictine monasteries. Webb's research here has uncovered some early appearances and variants of the word 'study' both in Latin and the vernacular. She also provides evidence of lay ownership of such rooms in the 15th century. It was at roughly this point that the reviewer shook off his concern that monasticism and the lay quest for privacy might never have had anything in common. By drawing attention to the study's emergence in monastic and lay settings (at roughly the same time) as a place for private learning, Webb arrives at a definitive symbol of their common ground: an interest in literary and intellectual pursuits.

Chapter 11 discusses the evolution of gardens as recreational spaces, the criterion for identifying them as such being aesthetic pleasure as opposed to functionality. Chapter 12, which is certainly one of the strongest, is entitled 'Loss of community' and makes the valid observation that late 14th-century commentators in England and Italy thought that social elites were withdrawing to dine in private. It also explores such matters as the erosion of the common life in monasteries and the emergence of chambers and partitioning, although it does not engage explicitly with the debate concerning late medieval lay piety, as to whether or not the gentry were withdrawing from the wider congregation of the laity into private chapels, chantries and their own books of hours. A millennium beforehand, monasticism and the classical pursuit of otium had little in common, but by c. 1400 (Webb notes) the ideal of penitential isolation was losing ground to the more comfortable and sociable ideal of privacy. Monks and the laity in practice preferred the latter, even if the corollary was that they appeased their consciences by holding the discipline and isolation of Carthusians and anchorites in correspondingly higher regard. Coming after these impressive chapters the conclusion is not as structured as might have been hoped, but there is at least a sense - albeit a retrospective benignity which by now has crept over the reader - that the book has at last come together.

I did not stumble upon many errata, but the following idiosyncrasies and slips may confuse or mislead. The author of the book *Reason and Society* (p. x, n. 3) is not A. Grant but A. Murray. 'Ancient Egyptian monasteries' (p. 62) refers to Egyptian monasteries of late antiquity. Also, the reference to the recluse Matilda of Wareham, as living in 'the women's cemetery' (p. 86), is a misreading of the Latin 'obuiam habuit in cimiterio mulierem' ('he ran into a woman in the cemetery') from p. 82 of Maurice Bell's edition of the Life of St Wulfic of Haselbury, cited elsewhere in Webb's footnotes. *Convent* (used on p. 70, n. 39, and p. 216) refers collectively to a religious community, not the premises it occupies, and the use of the word *religiosus/religiosa* to describe an individual who lived a religious life without adhering to a rule was no new development of the 13th century (cf. p. 79). (3) Christina of Markyate seems to have been consecrated at St Albans as a nun or *religiosa femina*; this ceremony should not be confused with the special consecration ceremony for a recluse, as performed by Bishop Alexander of Lincoln in the 1130s at Sempringham, which involved sealing the postulant inside a cell (cf. p. 84, n. 18). In the endnotes, the author introduces two translations printed by Benedicta Ward, both of which include the word *Sayings* in the title. Confusingly (at least to me), she then uses *Sayings* as a short title reference (to the Alphabetical Collection, published in 1975). She also employs three translations that include the words *Desert Fathers* in the title. After this she uses *Desert Fathers* as a short reference. For clarification, readers should refer to notes five, six, seven and

nine, (pp. 225-6) and chase subsequent short references from there.

## Notes

1. H. Chadwick, 'The ascetic ideal in the history of the church', in *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition: Papers Read at the 1984 Summer Meeting and 1985 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. W. J. Sheils, (Oxford: Blackwell,1985), 1-23. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The first significant study of Peter Damien's spirituality was Leclercq's, 'Saint Pierre Damien, ermite et homme d'église', *Uomini e Dottrine*, 8 (1960). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See for example S. Foot, *Veiled Women I: the Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 179-88. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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