

Clay, Rotha Mary., The Hermits and Anchorites of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1914.

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ANCRES AND HERMYTES

For sum fleen from the world and closen hemsilf in wallis,
And steken hem in stones, and litil wole thei speken,
To fleen sich occasiouns as foly wole fynden ;
And these we clepen anres in the comoun speche.

Also in contemplacion there ben many other,
That drawn hem to disert and drye [endure][sic] muche peyne,
By eerbis, rootes, and fruyte liven fro her goddis love,
And this maner of folk men callen hermytes.

—Friar Daw Topias (Political Poems, ed. Wright, ii. 64).

INTRODUCTION

In every age and amongst all peoples a certain wonder and reverence have been excited by the solitary life—a life so abnormal that those who have watched it from without have not only been interested in its eccentricity, but also strongly attracted by its spiritual mystery. It has always been felt that a life so independent of the common intercourse of human relationships must possess a secret known only to a few, and asceticism has therefore been venerated alike in Oriental fakir, the Stoic sage, and the Hebrew prophet.

This withdrawal from the world was not at first encouraged by the Christian religion. Tertullian, writing about A. D. 197, says : “We are not Indian Brahmans or Gymnosophists, who dwell in the woods and exile themselves from ordinary human life . . . we sojourn with you in the world”. During the third century, however, the Church developed a monasticism of her own which was in its beginning solitary (μῆνι ἀσκήσει, to dwell alone). Although Paul of Egypt—called

“the first hermit”—dwelt alone in his desert cave, his successor Anthony attracted round him many followers, and in this way the hermitage developed into the *laura* or group of cells. The solitary monk frequently became the founder of a body of cenobites—monks dwelling in community. The great Benedict himself was a son of the wilderness.

The history of many of the monastic house of England shows that they also were of eremitical origin. Guthlac and his hermit companions dwelt in fenland solitude in a group of single cells ; but in course of time Crowland became a famous

--xv--

abbey. The hermit Guy was joined by so many brethren at Malvern that he formed them into a large convent. Benedict, a Norman monk, lived in seclusion at Selby, and thus formed the nucleus of a monastery of which he was the first abbot.

It is, however, with the solitary rather than with the social aspect of monasticism that we are now concerned—with the solitary but not necessarily self-centred state of life to which the recluse felt himself called. From a modern standpoint this retirement from the world might perhaps be considered selfish ; but it must be borne in mind that the problems of that time were different from those of to-day, and that those who thus withdrew themselves from their fellow-men did not become useless to the community. It is true that their primary object in retiring into solitude was the cultivation of the soul, but in so doing they became living witnesses to the reality of the spiritual world. Theirs was no easy religion. Indeed, hermits were regarded as heroes, because of the physical hardness they endured. Their life was one of strenuous effort. They strove after Christian quietude by bending all their activities to self-conquest. They upheld a lofty and austere moral ideal in the face of self-indulgence and their manner of life was a silent rebuke to rudeness, and exercised a chastening influence in an age of violence.

Further, they could not but have some social intercourse. There were, indeed, two distinct classes of solitaries : the *anchorite*, enclosed within four walls, and the *hermit*, who went out of his cell and mingled with his fellow-men. The ideal of both was the contemplative life, but even in the case of the anchorite, this concentration upon religious exercises did not imply complete absorption in this own spiritual interests. Intercession was his appointed work. Aelred of Rievaulx mentions some of the needs which would call out the sympathies of the anchoress : the misery of the poor, the sigh of the orphan, the desolation of the widow, the need of the pilgrims, the danger of voyagers, the hardships of soldiers, the vows and temptations of nuns and monks, the cares of bishops. It is evident that those who lived this life of contemplation

--xvi--

were recognized as being qualified to exercise spiritual influence and give ghostly counsel. Awed by such austerity of life, the conscience-stricken and heavy-laden resorted to them in order to receive comfort and benediction after unburdening themselves of their sins and sorrows. In some cases anchorites devoted their quiet hours to study, and placed their literary or artistic powers at the service of others. The Lindisfarne Gospels were wrought and adorned with the aid of recluses. Scholars sent forth from their cells books of devotion, historical works, poetry, and at least one valuable dictionary. Anchoresses, too, found useful occupation in making clothes for the poor.

The hermit, with his larger measure of freedom and activity, had a still wider sphere of influence, and undertook many social duties. He taught and preached, celebrated divine offices in his chapel for the benefit of wayfarers, or acted as guardian of some shine ; he gathered alms for the relief of the poor at home, or for the freeing of those in captivity amongst the heathen ; he helped to cultivate the waste places of the land and to clear the forest ; he made roads and bridges and kept them in repair ; he erected sea-marks and lighthouses for the guidance of mariners. In fact, the hermits were pioneers of philanthropic works which in these days are undertaken and carried out by public bodies.

All who embraced this separate life were under vows of some kind. They were subject to authority, and had a recognized place in the ecclesiastical system. The hermit, if a monk, needed only the approval of his abbot ; if a layman, he applied to the bishop for his habit. No man or woman should become an anchorite without the permission of the bishop, who enclosed them in the cell with solemn rites. The Appendix contains a valuable translation of the *Office for the Enclosing of Anchorites*, contributed by the Rev. C. S. Taylor, to whose ready and generous help this book of Mr. F. C. Eeles, an *Office for the Benediction of Hermits*, transcribed by him from a sixteenth-century Pontifical in his possession. After pro-

--xvii--

fession in either of these orders, solitaries were under some definite Rule of Life. The best known is the *Ancren Riwe*—a book of wise and tender counsels for anchoresses, compiled by one who knew in an intimate manner not only the homely details of their outward circumstance, but also the special needs of their inner life.

The solitary life thus developed into an established institution. So widespread did it become that there was not a single county in England which had not at some time or another a recluse's cell. It will be seen from the Tables appended to this volume that there is evidence for the existence of at least 750 cells, whilst the actual names of over 650 hermits and anchorites occur in the following pages.

Dim traditions exist of solitaries in Celtic Britain. The Christian martyrs under Diocletian are said to have included two anchorites of Caerleon. We learn from Bede that a recluse was the oracle of the British Church at the time of the Conference with Augustine. Elgar the kidnapped slave, Kenyth the crippled

prince, and the wonder-working women Keyne and Modwen, are shrouded in the mists of legend, it is true, but these and others, who like them lived apart from the world, helped to keep the faith alive in those early days.

Among the Saxon saints are numbered many hermits ; Cuthbert, drawn from his northern retreat to become a bishop, and his faithful friend Herebert of Derwentwater ; Guthlac, the soldier-monk of the eastern fens, whose presence transformed that grim wilderness into a “glorious plain,” and Neot, the nobleman of the western wilds ; Alnoth the serf, and Edwold the prince ; Plegmund and Dunstan, archbishops of Canterbury ; Werstan the martyr, and Wulsi the seer.

The religious revival of the twelfth century produced five great ascetics ; Roger, the monk of Markyate ; Christina “of the Wood”—remarkable alike for her fortitude and for her gifts of wisdom and counsel ; Wulfric of Haselbury—prophet and confessor, stern and uncompromising alike with himself and his king ; Godric—the sea-roving adventurer, the tender son, the pious pilgrim, the simple, stout-hearted solitary of

--xviii--

Finchale ; and that other undaunted northerner, Bartholomew of Farne—to whom, for the space of over two and forty years, people resorted for comfort and exhortation.

Amongst later hermits two famous Yorkshiremen must be named ; Robert of Knaresborough—the poor man’s friend ; Richard of Hampole—an evangelist burning with the fire of love. Nor can we forget Dame Julian of Norwich “strong in sure trust in weal and woe,” whose *Revelations of Divine Love* show the eager and joyous spirit of the writer. From the dawn of Christianity in England until the sixteenth century many men, perhaps even more women, continued to dedicate themselves to this separate life.

“The life of the recluse,” says a recent writer upon mysticism, “is now seldom chosen and never respected.” In the period which we are about to study, it was, however, regarded as the state nearest perfection. In the *Liber Vitae* of the church of Durham, anchorites rank second to royal benefactors, and take the precedence of abbots and others. The life of action, indeed, was apt to be despised by religious teachers, save by such rare saints as Hugh of Lincoln, who would speak in this wise to persons unable to practice the more perfect life of contemplation : “By no means shall monks alone, nor yet hermits, nor even anchorites, attain to the kingdom of God” ; adding, that when the Lord should judge any man at last, He would not require of him to have been a hermit or monk, but rather to have been truly a Christian—to have had love in his heart, truth in his mouth, purity in his life.

In the following account of the lives of English hermits and anchorites no attempt has been made to consider the scientific truth and value of the miraculous element in their history. To ignore it, however, would be not merely a loss of the picturesque, but also a denial of spiritual facts. Modern science forbids us to doubt the reality of the spiritual forces exercised by those self-disciplined men

and women. To investigate and determine these imperfectly understood powers lies beyond the scope of these pages. Indeed, no attempt has

--xix--

been made to penetrate into the subject of Mysticism, which has recently been so ably dealt with by Miss Evelyn Underhill. The aim of this book is rather to give a picture of the daily life of the lonely dwellers in fen and forest, hillside and cliff, cloister and churchyard, and to show something of the way in which their influence made itself felt.

--xx--

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