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Review Of "The Soul Of Celtic Spirituality In The Lives Of Its Saints" By M. Milton

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***The Soul of Celtic Spirituality in the Lives of its Saints.* By Michael Mitton. Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1996. 148 pp. \$9.95.**

Ellen M. Ross

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mented by a detailed bibliography (pp. 371–387) that reflects the intense research that Merovingian France has attracted.

The selection of translated texts begins with a Merovingian text that is not hagiographical, in fact “remarkable for its very lack of religious context” (p. 79), the *Liber Historiae Francorum*. This is the most important Merovingian source for the latter part of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth century. In addition the authors point out that it is only with the aid of the LHF that some political aspects of hagiographical texts can be understood.

Then follow six hagiographical texts that now can be used to introduce new generations of students more effectively to the life and thought of Merovingian society: “The Life of Lady Bathild, Queen of the Franks,” “The Life of Audoin, Bishop of Rouen,” “The Deeds of Aunemond,” “The Suffering of Ludegar,” “The Suffering of Praejectus,” and “The Life of St. Geretrud.” The translations conclude with a section from “The Earlier Annals of Metz.” This is included even though it dates many decades after the Merovingian era to demonstrate “how Merovingian history could be rewritten by later generations, starting with the Carolingian denigration of the reputation of their royal predecessors” (p. ix). (See passages dealing with the Merovingian kings, such as Childeric III, who “in the eyes of his contemporaries . . . was anything but *fainéant*” [p. 25].)

The *vitae* included in this volume “illustrate the political history of this period.” And so the introductory section devoted to “hagiography and history” (pp. 26–58) has special value when discussing the role of saints’ lives in the experience of medieval society.

The concluding topic of the introduction is devoted to Merovingian Latin, and its importance is succinctly described: “To know the Merovingians is to read their Latin” (p. 58). The discussion here about the Latin of the Merovingians leads the authors to conclude that “Merovingian hagiographers used a language admirably suited to their serious purposes” (p. 78).

A useful index concludes this splendid volume. We must be grateful to Manchester University Press for making a comparatively inexpensive paperback edition immediately available.

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***The Soul of Celtic Spirituality in the Lives of its Saints.* By Michael Mitton.**

Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1996. 148 pp. \$9.95.

This book by Michael Mitton reflects on Celtic spiritual traditions with an eye toward how these traditions can inspire Christian ministry and mission today. Its strength lies in its appreciation for history and its recognition that church renewal comes as much from looking back as it does from looking forward. The book is very readable, written in a clear and engaging narrative style.

As Mitton acknowledges, he draws largely on the works of Bede. Although this is primarily a work of inspiration and church renewal and not a scholarly monograph, Mitton’s largely uncritical recounting of tales from Bede ignores altogether the political and religious struggles that are at the heart of Bede’s works. This, along with the portrayal of the Celtic church as “refreshingly free from prejudice” (p. 3) and “culturally sensitive” (p. 77) (but not succumbing to the “danger of syncretism” [p. 80]) in its evangelizing practices, is danger-

ous as an inspiration for church renewal, which takes place always in the arena of political and cultural struggle.

This book is important in its presentation of the power and mystery of Celtic Christianity. It will whet its readers' appetites for more. But one wonders, what is the nature of the Christian renewal these traditions inspire? The asceticism of praying in freezing-cold water, the wanderings far from home, the world of uncorrupted bodies and miracles at saints' tombs—these characteristics of Celtic religion are muted in Mitton's rendering and less than obviously applicable to his vision of Christian spirituality today.

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Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context. By **Karen Louise Jolly**. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. x + 251 pp.. \$16.95.

Happily this book is not one of those that entices the reader with an intriguing title like *Medieval Food* but turns out to contain nothing more than a highly specialized investigation of a minute topic announced only in the subtitle (*Breakfast Menus in a Fourteenth-Century French Nunnery*). Fully four-fifths of this judicious treatment of popular religion in tenth- and eleventh-century England deals with the "context" of late Saxon religion: the gradual process of conversion to Christianity, the growth of local lay-owned (in other words, nonmonastic) churches, the Augustinian worldview espoused by reformers like Aelfric and Wulfstan, and the interplay of medical, liturgical, and folkloric traditions. Only in the final chapter does Jolly focus her attention on texts from the *Leechbook* (around 590) and the *Lacnunga* (around 1050), which contain remedies for various afflictions supposed to have been caused by the attacks of elves. When the matter of the subtitle is reached at last, the reader is well prepared to appreciate these elf charms as richly evocative examples of a particularly creative religious sensibility.

Following the lead of medieval cultural historians such as Aron Gurevich, Jolly's synthetic approach "refuses to regard medieval society from either an exclusively elite or a popular perspective, but examines the interaction between the two perspectives" (p. 13). Similarly, she argues cogently in favor of scholarship that is bold enough to cross the boundaries between the supposed dualities of science and magic, prayer and charm, Germanic lore and Christian tradition. Her understanding of "popular religion" is that it constitutes a "fruitful middle ground in the interaction between the formal church and popular experience" (p. 3). Thus she is neither surprised nor troubled to find texts that mingle Latin invocations of the Trinity and signs of the cross with Germanic folk rituals involving herbs and amulets. She would have us see such interweavings not as evidence for "pagan survivals" or "incomplete Christianization," but as an indication of just how successful the Christian church was in adapting its liturgical and pastoral traditions to an Anglo-Saxon milieu. Jolly is especially helpful in illuminating the crucial role that the local parish priest played (notably in the Danelaw) in negotiating this adaptation through the diverse and often conflicting demands of church hierarchy, proprietary lord, and common folk. She is also to be commended for reminding us that medieval liturgical texts stand as directions for a ritual performance that remains in many respects obscured from our view.