

ordinary virtues without which Gaita's account of goodness seems curiously dislocated. But if from a Thomist viewpoint this book preserves the relics of a tradition, they are not the shattered and crudely reassembled relics of, say, utilitarianism. Rather, they are large and elegant constructions, relatively undamaged by their isolation, illuminated by a sensitive and patient scrutiny, and inspired by a passionate intensity. Moral philosophy is at last beginning to recover its centre.

MARGARET ATKINS

THE SPIRITUALITY OF CELTIC SAINTS by Richard J. Woods **OP**
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Fortunately, much of this book takes the form of small, narrative sections, about the saints of early Britain, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany and beyond on the Continent and about the religious societies they set up. It was fortunate for me, because I found the narrative sections its easiest items to read. I have no training in theology and was not looking forward to the author's explanation of what he meant by 'spirituality', especially as he said that 'after three decades of study, reading, discussion, and teaching in the field, I have come to think of spirituality as a set of related meanings rather than a single notion'. Oh dear.

But mercifully Woods settles for the old Biblical/Hebrew idea of spirituality as that in the personality which is open to God and responds to His grace. Once Woods has then explained which group of gathered personalities he means when talking about 'the Celts', his subjects in this book are defined. Chapter 1 does the defining in detail, copious notes leaving no doubt en route that it is the work of a loyal Catholic and an American. Some of the spellings are American, and if Woods wants to speed the read, he starts some sentences with 'And', a transatlantic habit I find more distracting than engaging. But these are only mannerisms. I did my best to ignore them and follow Woods's evident delight in various aspects of the subject which I had not considered before.

His chapter on 'The Blessing and the Curse' explains the importance of these features in a society where he 'would emphasize, first of all, the Word (and the word)'. The great early gospel books such as those of Kells and Lindisfarne were what Woods calls 'Shrines of the Word', gazed at in admiration, not read, because hardly anyone could read the written word. In his later chapter 'The Struggle for Justice', Woods simply says of Matt Talbot, born in poor, 19th-century Dublin: 'Though barely literate, Talbot read church history, the spiritual writings of the saints, and radical Catholic social teaching'. It has always been a vexed question exactly who could read what and Woods obviously reckons it was still an unmeasurable one at a late date. Perhaps he is wise to

describe improbabilities without trying to explain or solve them.

Nevertheless, half-references can be frustrating, like the mention of the early Celts resisting writing 'lest the treasures of memory be lost', with no further information given. The culture of the word is left to speak for itself again when Woods tells us that the visions of St Fursa, the 7th-century Irish saint living in the Fenland, 'were transmitted in the oral tradition to the time of Bede'. How much of the oral tradition was made up of sermons, speeches, dramas, descriptions, debates, exaggerations, prayers and services as well as talking? For someone as ignorant as myself, the 'oral tradition' remains a haunting-hole of possibility in this book, indicated but not elucidated.

Fursa is well illustrated. He first appears here in the chapter on 'The Pilgrim Saints of Brittany and Beyond', where he is heralded as 'the third amazing Irish missionary of the 7th century, alongside Columban and Gall'. His preaching was such hot stuff that crowds pressed upon him all over Ireland to hear what he had to say, until after twelve years he decided to emigrate to East Anglia for Christ! He and a few monks based themselves in an abandoned fort given them by the local king, which they transformed into a monastery. Fursa started to move around, see visions and eventually set off for Rome at the head of a gang of pilgrims, preaching as he went, working the occasional miracle, founding the occasional monastery. A lively story. Just like the life of St Columba, also in this chapter.

St Patrick, in the earlier chapter on 'The Saints of Celtic Britain', was less widely travelled and his life reads less like a thriller. He has an air of founding glory about him but his early date — probably late 5th century - makes it hard to be clear about what he founded and what he invigorated. We are told first that 'Patrick instituted diocesan structures, including a hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons', then, 'nor did Patrick's efforts establish a lasting episcopal diocesan structure'. He did not found monasteries either, we are told after a close examination of the first Irish monasteries at the time we see 'Patrick's lifetime and work realized beyond expectation in the monastic tradition as a whole'. Meaning what? This is not a book for one who seeks a straight line, even in the telling of a story, rather the freedom to dip and pick, as the author often does.

It is only in the last two chapters that the process becomes really embarrassing, with their sketchy coverage of the centuries from the Reformation to the present, complete with some extraordinary claims about modern Irish martyrs. I prefer Woods in the period where he seems more at home; any spare time and space could be filled with some more small-letter headings for the index.

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