



## Reviews

**WALSINGHAM IN LITERATURE AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO MODERNITY** edited by Dominic James and Gary Waller, *Ashgate*, Farnham, 2010, pp. xv + 251, £55

**WALSINGHAM AND THE ENGLISH IMAGINATION** by Gary Waller, *Ashgate*, Farnham, 2011, pp. ix + 237, £55

In his paper in the first of the titles here under review, Barry Shurr reminds us of the references to Our Lady in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Since Shurr makes the point in a rich book of papers exploring different aspects of Walsingham, another phrase of Eliot's irresistibly comes to mind. It's in the final line of *The Dry Salvages*, the third *Quartet*. Eliot makes the phrase: 'The life of significant soil'.

Some of England's 'significant soil' is at Walsingham in Norfolk. According to the fifteenth century *Pynson Ballad* in 1061 a local woman, Richeldis de Faverches, received a vision of the Virgin. She was told to build a copy of the house of the Annunciation. But there was more. The Virgin told Richeldis to build on either of two sites, but the workers found themselves unable to build on the one which Richeldis chose. As soon as she realised her mistake Richeldis prayed to the Virgin, and the next morning all the building material had miraculously moved to the other site more than 200 feet away.

As Gary Waller says in his excellent and engaging sole-authored book: 'Between the mid-twelfth century... and 1538, when it was closed and largely wrecked, Walsingham grew in popularity as a pilgrimage site, rivalling and even at times surpassing the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury'. Indeed, Walsingham, 'before the rise in the fifteenth century of the shrine of our Lady of Loreto... was probably the most important center for the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Europe' (p. 4). The appeal of Walsingham came from its connection with visitation and miracles, its holy wells, and also from the veneration of its statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, the relics of a vial of Mary's milk and a knuckle of St Peter. Walsingham was one of the first of England's religious foundations to fall victim to Henry VIII.

There the story might have ended, with Walsingham becoming little more than an evocative ruin much like Glastonbury say. But Walsingham was pulled back to life in the late nineteenth century by a complex range of forces: the need of still-only-recently Emancipated Catholicism to re-embed itself in English soil, a neo-Arts and Crafts return to the pre-modern and the rise of Anglo-Catholicism. The ancient Slipper Chapel was rediscovered in 1894 and gifted to the Catholic Diocese of Northampton. In the 1920s Walsingham became a centre of Anglo-Catholicism through Hope Patten, an Anglican priest of distinctive sartorial inclination, who oversaw the establishment of a statue of Mary and, in 1931, the building of an Anglican Shrine Church. In 1934 the Slipper Chapel became England's National Shrine. In more recent years two Orthodox chapels have also been established in the area. Unsurprisingly Walsingham has become an ecumenical site, and its special place in relationships between the Anglican

and Catholic churches was signified by the institution of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham in 2011.

This landscape is animated – the ‘significant soil’ is given ‘life’ – by regular and well-attended individual and group pilgrimages. And there are also protesters. Evangelical Protestants often can be found hurling abuse at the ‘idolators’. Yet even as they have such a lack of respect for the pilgrims the protesters show that Walsingham matters to them as much as it does to the devout. If it did not they would scarcely be objecting. They too have a need to be there. Walsingham is indeed ‘significant soil’.

This is a surface-level history of Walsingham. But as these two fascinating volumes make clear, the story is much more complex than this. In his own book Gary Waller provides an elegant and subtle analysis of how Walsingham is intimately connected with imaginations of England and Englishness. He does not however take the line of Peter Ackroyd’s *Albion*, in which England and Englishness are essentially connected and identified as intrinsic qualities (Ackroyd does not mention Walsingham). For Waller, England and Englishness are ‘invented traditions’ expressed in ritual, literature, art and constructions of cultural memory. He deftly shows how Walsingham is a site – a ‘significant soil’ – which is at once central to, and contested within, such inventions. Yet the strength of Waller’s book is that even as it displays some – maybe appropriate – scepticism about the historical veracity of the foundational stories of Richeldis, it does not deny the possibility of their containing glimpses of a truth. Waller explores the *mutation* of the imaginations about Walsingham, and he is alert enough not to take populist pot shots at such significant soil.

The collection Waller has edited with Dominic James should be approached differently. It is not about the mutation of foundational stories, so much as it is focused on the historical and contemporary multiplicity of meanings which have been, and are, invested in Walsingham. It is a collection about the lives of the significant soil. The chapters are wide-ranging. Each is engaging and thought-provoking, putting Walsingham in a broad context of literature, architecture, archaeology, history and anthropology. Yet these are not dry papers. Each of them, albeit in different ways, is focused on trying to understand what Walsingham meant to those who went there, and what it means to those who go there today. In other words, this collection manages to show that this significant soil might well have different, even conflicting, lives.

In the end perhaps these excellent books can be read as raising a cautionary note, albeit a note none of the authors write themselves. Walsingham is most certainly ‘significant soil’. But the challenge is to ensure that the different lives of such significance do not dilute the true significance. It is a soil of anticipations of, to use Eliot again, ‘The hint half guessed, the gift half understood’.

KEITH TESTER

**THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO C.S.LEWIS** edited by Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward, *Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, pp xx + 326, £ 18.99 pbk*

This excellent book has made me realise how fortunate I was in reading C.S.Lewis’s books in the random order in which I was able to get them. I began with *Miracles*, went on to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, after which came *The Great Divorce*, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Instead of seeing Lewis as a literary historian or a theologian or a philosopher or a children’s writer, I was introduced to what someone has called ‘The Christian World of C.S.Lewis’.