

9-1-1991

# Review of The Medieval Pilgrimage to St. Patrick's Purgatory: Lough-Derg and the European Tradition, M. Haren and Y.D. Pontfarcy, Editors

Joseph F. Kelly

*John Carroll University*, [kelly@jcu.edu](mailto:kelly@jcu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://collected.jcu.edu/theo\\_rels-facpub](http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kelly, Joseph F., "Review of The Medieval Pilgrimage to St. Patrick's Purgatory: Lough-Derg and the European Tradition, M. Haren and Y.D. Pontfarcy, Editors" (1991). *Theology & Religious Studies*. 10.

[http://collected.jcu.edu/theo\\_rels-facpub/10](http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub/10)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology & Religious Studies by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact [connell@jcu.edu](mailto:connell@jcu.edu).

*The Medieval Pilgrimage to St. Patrick's Purgatory: Lough Derg and the European Tradition.* Edited by MICHAEL HAREN and YOLANDE DE PONTFARCY. Enniskillen: The Clogher Historical Society, 1990. viii + 242 pp. IR£20.

Ireland played a major role in European cultural and religious history in the early Middle Ages, but the viking invasions and the English occupation of the eastern coast put Celtic Ireland literally beyond the pale from 1200 onwards. Ironically, that made this remote western land, the place where the sun last set in Europe, a source of fascination to many continentals. It is no accident that Ireland's chief wonder in the late Middle Ages was a supposed gateway to the other world.

What this book regrettably lacks is a clear physical description of St. Patrick's Purgatory. The authors refer to it simply as a cave but provide no account of its depth or length or of any remarkable features. This is regrettable because the various pilgrims who left accounts of their experiences report strange phenomena, and, lacking information to suggest the contrary, the modern reader must assume their experiences were phantasmagorical or psychosomatic. These are plausible, but one would still like to know if any phenomena were rooted elsewhere than the pilgrim's psyche.

Michael Haren demonstrates that the pilgrimage began with the arrival of the Augustinian canons in Ireland in 1140. They promoted the devotion, and their European contacts helped to spread its fame. Simultaneously, the archbishops of Armagh, the heirs of St. Patrick, were anxious to extend their influence in the west of Ireland, especially since Croagh Patrick, the traditional site of the saint's retreat, was in the diocese of Tuam; Armagh was happy to promote a site in its own territory.

The heart of the book deals with the various pilgrims, and what impresses the reader is the geographical range of their homelands: England naturally, but also France, Switzerland, Hungary, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Belgium, between 1170 and 1497. A surprisingly high percentage of them wrote accounts of their experiences, and these accounts attracted yet more pilgrims. The local guardians of the shrine certainly prepared the pilgrims for visions, ceaselessly urging them not to go into the purgatory because they would die from its terrors, requiring them to fast for up to two weeks before entering the cave, and then locking them inside the moment they entered. Many of the essays describe the pilgrim's visions, some remarkably vivid and detailed, and demonstrate how much a concern for the Other World dominated late medieval piety.

But a new piety arose. In 1497 a Dutch Augustinian complained to the pope of being lowered on a rope into a pit, of seeing no visions, and of being deluded by the local clergy for financial gain. The pope (Alexander VI) closed the purgatory, although as Haren argues, "penitential exercises replaced otherworldly visions" (p. 200), and that is probably the reason why

so popular a pilgrimage was closed, rather than on the complaint of one canon. This is a good book but for a limited audience, that is, those interested in the church history of Ireland and in medieval piety and visionary literature.

*John Carroll University*  
Cleveland, Ohio

JOSEPH F. KELLY

*John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s.* By GREG WALKER. Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. xv + 228 pp. \$39.50.

John Skelton demands from his readers a variety of interests and skills. Probably the most significant of the early Tudor poets, he requires the trained attention of the literary critic. An exceptionally bold—even vicious—political and social satirist, he capitalizes on situations which only a Tudor specialist is likely to be able to identify. A priest of conservative theological tendencies, he expects from his audience the kind of awareness of late medieval ecclesiastical life which belongs to the church historian. A royal tutor and a vocal opponent of humanist pedagogical theory, he raises issues which interest the educational historian. And two further problems complicate the work of criticism. First, the evidence for Skelton's life, apart from his own poetry, is extremely sparse. Second, Skelton's poetic *persona* is so vain and petulant that few of his critics have succeeded in liking him.

Greg Walker's book is the first that can lay serious claim to being a full-length interdisciplinary study of John Skelton. As a historian Walker identifies the poet's veiled allusions to contemporary affairs and his sources of information and gossip in order to draw literary conclusions about the structure and purpose of his poetry. As a literary critic Walker distinguishes the conventional and formal elements in Skelton's work from the immediate and particular, in order to draw historical conclusions about the poet's social and political context.

Walker focuses at length on Skelton's trilogy of poems of 1521 to 1522 aimed against Cardinal Wolsey. Christopher Haigh used these poems to reinforce his picture of factional intrigue in the royal court, and J. J. Scarisbrick in *Henry VIII* relied on them exclusively as his evidence for the nobility's antagonism to Wolsey. Walker shows, however, that the poems draw very largely on the stock phrases and ideas of anticlerical convention and the literature of complaint, and that they therefore do not throw direct light on the contemporary political and ecclesiastical climate. They are "a confection, decorated with details of the Cardinal's life and set in a conventional mould" (p. 143). Walker also challenges as an invention of H. L. R. Edwards's influential but overly imaginative 1949 biography the suggestion that Skelton was hired by the Howards to vilify Cardinal Wolsey, and argues