

3-1-1997

Review of Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland, by W.I. Brenneman and M.G. Brenneman

Joseph F. Kelly

John Carroll University, kelly@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kelly, Joseph F., "Review of Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland, by W.I. Brenneman and M.G. Brenneman" (1997).
Theology & Religious Studies. 22.
http://collected.jcu.edu/theo_rels-facpub/22

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.

Catholic Parish Life who designed it to be a real history, striking a balance between accounts of clergy, laity, and vowed religious, setting the story in the context of the history of the city of Natchez, giving primacy to the spiritual dimension, and accounting for the parish community's relationship with other local religious communities. In addition, it deals with a parish founded in 1788 that has kept unusually complete records. It reveals that the Catholics in Natchez were not an impoverished minority surviving on the periphery of the civic community, but a group that contributed its share of mayors, aldermen, sheriffs, state legislators, newspaper publishers, and businessmen to the city and had a long tradition of constructive engagement with other churches and the local Jewish community. The author hoped to produce a parish history that would be a standard, although few parishes will have the archival materials that will allow for a comparable treatment.

University of Portland
Portland, Oregon

JAMES T. CONNELLY

Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland. By WALTER L. BRENNEMAN, JR., and MARY G. BRENNEMAN. Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1995. xii + 141 pp. \$27.95.

The authors spent more than a dozen years researching this book, primarily by visiting Irish sacred wells, that is, wells which some local people consider to be sacred and devotion to which, if not approved, is at least not censured by the Catholic Church. (None of the wells are in Protestant areas.) The book deals partially with the significance of the wells in the lives of the people, specifically with what they hope to gain by visiting them, but mostly it concentrates on the nature of the veneration. Under this heading fall such topics as the location, size, and shape of the well, the physical setting and condition, the legends associated with it, the forms of veneration (for example, the practice of attaching clooties, or pieces of cloth, to a bush or tree at the site), and, where feasible, accounts by local people. The authors emphasize their sympathy for local views but fail at times to distinguish between folk traditions and rank superstition.

The historian occasionally feels uncomfortable with the method of referring to Irish myths with no regard to their date or provenance, but in some cases the authors have clearly hit upon a phenomenon which historical data could not verify. Examples of this include the progression from the apparent pagan character of a site, a surface Christianization in the name of Brigid, and a deeper, more organized Christianization in the name of Mary—all of this done *à la mode Eliade*.

There are numerous photographs, some helpful to the text but others which are only confusing. For example, the reader cannot see any water in a picture of

a well (pp. 59, 68). This is a promising topic for which the authors should consider a more detailed, nuanced study.

John Carroll University
Cleveland, Ohio

JOSEPH F. KELLY

Histoire du christianisme en Suisse: Une perspective œcuménique. Edited by LUKAS VISCHER, LUKAS SCHENKER, and RUDOLF DELLSPERGER. French edition supervised by OLIVIER FATIO. Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1995. 345 pp.

This history of Christianity in Switzerland is the product of an ecumenical working group composed of over thirty Swiss scholars drawn from the Roman Catholic, Old Catholic (Christ-catholische), and Swiss Reformed churches. Intended for a popular audience, the book is richly illustrated and is filled with vignettes focusing on individuals, events, and concepts significant for the Swiss church. The text is divided into three equal parts: the first covers the period from the earliest evidence of Christianity in the territory of present-day Switzerland through the Middle Ages, the second moves from the Reformation to the end of the *ancien régime*, and the third describes developments from 1800 to the present. While the first two sections are fairly general, the final section assumes a familiarity with modern Swiss history. Reflecting its ecumenical intent, the book pays special attention to the relations between the confessions in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, during the Kulturkampf, and since the Second World War.

University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska

AMY NELSON BURNETT

Crimes of Perception: An Encyclopedia of Heresies and Heretics. By LEONARD GEORGE. New York: Paragon House, 1995. xx + 358 pp. \$29.95.

The author defines heresy as “a crime of perception—an act of seeing something that, according to some custodian of reality, is not there” (p. xii). The “custodians” range from historic expressions of Christianity to an ill-defined series of cultural and social authorities who disapprove of occultic, esoteric, sectarian, and utopian figures, movements, and ideas. Because the author’s definition of heresy is so broad, the justification for including certain entries is obscure. The heresies and heretics included in this volume range from heretical Christian groups and individuals, as well as historic Christian groups and individuals who disagreed with conventional authorities but might not be seen as heretical now (like the Mennonites and the Mormons), to the various esoteric and occult groups in Western history. The author wrote all of the entries rather than asking others to write in their areas of expertise. He lists works for further reference in a final section of reading lists divided by several major headings that include numerous subtopics. For example, the reader who