EDITOR’S WELCOME

The Society has had a very productive interlude between the inaugural Newsletter and this second issue. Our first sponsored Kalamazoo session in May 2011 was well-presented and well-attended, our membership list grew to over seventy members, and our website expanded significantly. (Details about new online additions can be found below.) Other changes have happened, too: the current Syon Abbey community is adjusting to a slightly different existence, as Ann Hutchison explains in her feature article, “Syon Abbey Today.” We wish them the best in this time of transition.

Also in this newsletter, Eddie Jones offers insight into the large collection of printed books, now held at Exeter, that belonged to the sisters, and the rich history of the community that can be gleaned from their pages. Last of our feature articles is a book review of an excellent new edition out of Stockholm.

Among the fascinating books and their owners that Jones details, he mentions Helen M. D. Redpath, who wrote a biography of Birgitta, *God’s Ambassadress* (1947), and professed at Syon in 1924 as Sr Mary Dominic. On a more personal note, I was pleased to learn about Sr Dominic because several years ago at a used book sale I bought a copy of *God’s Ambassadress* that bears the bookplate and signature (dated May 1947) of Harriet S. Waltzer. Tucked within the book is an envelope with a warm letter from Sr Dominic to Waltzer, from 1 June 1959, touching on their efforts at correspondence, reporting that the sisters “have been having very busy times lately with a Silver Jubilee Celebration & various Church feasts,” and hoping that Waltzer’s visit was “a
successful one in Cambridge.” The note was interesting but didn’t mean anything to me at first. It was not until I returned home from a year in Cambridge, where I edited the Middle English translation of the *Regula Sancti Salvatoris*, that I looked again in this book and recognized these names. In 1950, Waltzer received her PhD at Yale with her dissertation, “An Edition of the Middle-English Translation of the *Regula Sancti Salvatoris*,” a work with which I was now very familiar. It seemed serendipitous for me to be starting my own doctoral program at Yale the next year. Now I know more about Sr Dominic and her fascinating, and devout, family.

Perhaps the most significant boon to the Society this past year has been the provision of a research assistant through the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program here at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where I am now an assistant professor in the English Department. Ellen Cope has worked diligently to update the website and help develop all of the new resources described below. Our sincere thanks go to her for all her efforts both this year and next. We hope you will take a look at the new pages, and offer feedback so we can continue to improve our online presence and be a valuable resource for our membership and the wider public.

Kalamazoo 2012, and the fantastic session of papers the Society is sponsoring, is right around the corner. We are planning on video recording this session and making the video available for viewing on our website. This experimental venture will enable our world-wide membership to experience, from afar, the conversations that go on at our sponsored sessions, and also give scholarship on Syon a more public presence. If you are not able to make the session in person, keep an eye on our webpage!

ABOUT THE SOCIETY & MEMBERSHIP

The Syon Abbey Society was founded in 2009 to promote the study of the history and literature of Syon Abbey through online resources, sponsored conference sessions and an occasional newsletter distributed online.

Co-founders:

Laura Saetveit Miles is a Junior Fellow at the Michigan Society of Fellows, and Assistant Professor in the English Department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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Membership in the Syon Abbey Society is free and only involves submission of your email address to syonabbey@gmail.com (email addresses will not be shared with any third party). Members receive five to six emails a year including the Newsletter and announcements for conference sessions sponsored by the Society. This information is also available on the website www.syonabbey.com.

NEWSLETTER SUBMISSIONS

The Syon Abbey Society Newsletter is issued occasionally and is edited by one of the co-founders on a rotating basis. Published in PDF form, the Newsletter is distributed as an email attachment to members as well as being posted on the website for free download by the public. Members are encouraged to suggest relevant announcements for academic or other events, and conference calls for papers which might be of interest to the membership, for publication in the Newsletter and posting to our website. Please submit to syonabbey@gmail.com.

For the Newsletter’s *Features* section we welcome the submission of pieces 1,000–2,000 words in length which consider some aspect of Syon Abbey or related issues and questions. Studies of manuscripts or early printed books, archival surveys, bibliographic review articles, single volume book reviews, and any other type of article which would help promote the study of the Birgittines in England and abroad are particularly encouraged. Please submit documents in MS Word format and conforming to the *Chicago Manual of Style* to syonabbey@gmail.com.

UPDATES TO THE WEBSITE

Research Guide. This research guide is a list of resources to help both scholars who are coming to the topic for the first time, as well as those continuing their research. We are still in the process of adding and organizing resources. If you have any related references to contribute, suggestions about the guide in general, or corrections, please let us know.
Surviving Books List. For the first time, all manuscripts (and many printed books) that survive from Syon have been gathered into one current master list, including the following information: shelfmark; date; ownership; connection to house; cross-references to David Bell’s book What Nuns Read, Christopher de Hamel’s The Library of the Bridgettine Nuns, and Vincent Gillespe’s edition of the Syon library catalogue; and brief contents. “All” manuscripts presents our ideal, if not yet the reality: we aim to make this list authoritative and comprehensive, and hope you can help that happen by sending us additional listings, information, online catalogue links, or corrections. The list is presented in an Excel spreadsheet that should be easily viewed within the website as well as downloaded for your own editing and manipulation. If you have trouble with viewing the list simply email us and we will send you the original file. In addition, we would very much appreciate any suggestions or resources for turning the list into an online searchable database.

Archaeological Evidence. Recent excavations at the original Syon Abbey site have produced interesting finds, and this page centralizes crucial information, otherwise scattered about the internet, regarding the digs. Our research assistant, Ellen Cope, examines the various archaeological explorations and the available resources concerning them. We are working with contacts at the Museum of London Archaeology and Birkbeck, as well as at the Syon grounds, to further develop this online resource; watch the webpage this coming Fall.

INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON MEDIEVAL STUDIES
MAY 10-13, 2011
KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN
www.wmich.edu/medieval/congress/

The Syon Abbey Society Sponsored Session “Monastic Vernacularities”
Friday, May 11, 10 am | Session #225, Bernhard 159
Organizer & Chair: Laura Saetveit Miles

NANCY BRADLEY WARREN, Texas A & M University
“Reading Chaucer and Lydgate at Syon: Politics, Aesthetics, and the Roles of Vernacular Literature in English Brigittine Culture”
This paper examines two manuscripts containing texts by Chaucer and Lydgate owned by the nuns of Syon to explore the political and spiritual dimensions of Brigittine nuns’ reading fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts that might seem to fall toward the more “secular” end of a spectrum of medieval English writing. The presence of such material in the nuns’ library suggests that the Syon sisters seem to have seen themselves, and to have been seen by others, as able to learn lessons of good government and right rule from the Chaucerian/Lydgatean tradition—possibly not the first source that might come to mind to instruct nuns on these topics, and possibly not lessons we imagine nuns wanting or needing to learn in the first place. Examination of these manuscripts also demonstrates that for the Syon nuns such texts had a place, if perhaps not precisely in the camp of vernacular theology, then at least in the camp of works of spiritual instruction, and the spiritual value of the Chaucerian/Lydgatean tradition is linked as much to literary aesthetics as it is to the textual content itself.

BRUCE HOLSINGER, University of Virginia
“Dreaming the Vernacular: Liturgy (just) after Becket”
This paper will investigate the role of liturgical ritual in shaping the history of Middle English lyric and vernacular lyricism more broadly, from the late twelfth century through the fifteenth. Beginning with the liturgical after-effects of Thomas à Becket’s assassination, I will examine a number of poems and collections that exemplify in various ways the formal and institutional pressures of liturgy on vernacular making. The paper will conclude with a brief look at The Myroure of Oure Ladye for its lyrical approach to liturgical genre and form.

KATHERINE ZIEMAN, University of Notre Dame
“Rolle Three Ways: BL Add. 37790, BL Add. 37049, TCC O.2.56 and Carthusian Vernacularities”
This paper will examine three appropriations of the works of Richard Rolle in Carthusian manuscripts: first, the situating of Richard Misyn’s translation of the Emendatio vitae and Incendium amoris, along with excerpts of Rolle’s English writings in the Amherst Manuscript, alongside the visionary works of Julian and Marguerite Poret; second, Rolle’s lyric presence in BL Add. 37049; and finally, Richard Methley’s imitation of Rolle in the spiritual diaries of Trinity College Cambridge MS O.2.56. Though only the first two manuscripts are in English, I argue that all three represent facets of “vernacular” practice in ways that prompt us to question both the parameters of what we mean by “vernacular” as well as the kind of interchange between lay and monastic spheres that these Carthusian vernacularities represent.
The ‘wanderings’ of the Syon Abbey community over its near 600-year history are well-known. Having returned to England in 1861, they came to rest in South Devon, and in 1925 acquired Marley House, an eighteenth-century manor house near South Brent, just off the main Exeter to Plymouth road, a few miles west of Totnes. The community at that date numbered almost thirty, and they came to Marley House having outgrown the accommodation at Chudleigh, where they had been since 1887.

In the late 1980s the community decided to move out of the main house. A group of farm buildings on the estate was converted for their use, and Marley House itself was sold and converted into apartments. The Lady Abbess and seven choir sisters moved into the new Syon Abbey on 15 October 1990. As part of the preparations for the move, the community decided to put its library in order. The collection of some 9000 volumes had not previously been catalogued, there was no formal classification system in place, and the books were not gathered together in a single place. Although most were kept in the library, a considerable number were to be found in other conventual rooms, including the community room and the novitiate; and further books were held in individual sisters’ cells. In initial consultation with John Feather of the University of Loughborough, Marion Glasscoe of the University of Exeter secured a grant from the British Academy to fund the cataloguing of the library. The work was done over six months during 1989-90 by Claire Johnson, a recent Loughborough graduate, together with Marion Glasscoe herself.3

As a result of this work, the sisters decided to entrust the most valuable part of their library to the University of Exeter. More than 1100 books printed before 1850 came to Exeter at this time, the earliest probably a 1513 edition of Jerome’s letters printed at Lyon.4 None of the books appears in the medieval library catalogue,5 and the majority must have been acquired during Syon’s exile. They constitute a rich, and still to be explored, resource for the study of counter-reformation and later Catholic print culture. The remainder of the library (with the exception of some duplicate volumes, which were disposed of) went with the sisters to their new accommodation.

For the catalogue, it was decided to arrange the books in sixteen classes each designated (as in the great medieval library catalogue) by a capital letter, as follows:

3 Claire Johnson went on to work in records management in the private and public sectors, including a decade at the University of Glasgow. She is now an independent consultant. See http://cj-imc.co.uk/.
4 Some books are undated. For a list, go to http://lib.exeter.ac.uk/search and perform a search on the local classmark ‘Syon Abbey.’
(by class-mark and three-digit number), and any inscriptions present. The index cards were xeroxed and bound into seventeen volumes, and these volumes are now collected as MS 265 in University of Exeter Special Collections.\(^6\) The information was subsequently recorded digitally, and though the media (5¼-in. disks) and database software (an early version of Nota Bene) employed have passed out of use, it has been possible to recover the data. It is available as seventeen plain-text files, and could almost certainly be reconstituted as a properly searchable database.\(^7\)

Claire Johnson (left) and Marion Glasscoe cataloguing books in the Novitiate at Marley House, summer 1990. Exeter University Library MS 265, envelope of unnumbered photographs.

As well as the bound volumes of xeroxes, MS 265 includes eleven boxes containing the original loose index slips, plus various ancillary materials: Glasscoe’s and Johnson’s handwritten notes made during the cataloguing process, together with some xerox copies of secondary sources; two pamphlets relating to the history of Syon Abbey by F. R. Johnston – his *Syon Abbey: A short History of the English Bridgettines* (Eccles, 1964) and *Syon Abbey*, an offprint from *South Western Catholic History* 5 (1987) – and an envelope containing eleven color photographs that record the process of cataloguing the books and packing them for removal from Marley House. (Two of these photographs are reproduced above.) Two further items are currently closed: a folder containing records of the books that Glasscoe and Johnson found in Syon’s eight occupied cells and that the sisters had borrowed for their own personal use, and a xerox of the commonplace book kept by Sr Mary Gabriel.

Section A of the catalogue comprised the pre-1850 books that were shortly afterwards sent to Exeter. Those contained in classes B—R do not, perhaps, contain many examples that would be of comparable market value. Individual volumes do, however, have other kinds of value as material objects. In particular, we should be grateful to Glasscoe and Johnson for their recording of titlepage inscriptions. In many cases these consist simply of a record of the name of the donor, and an injunction to pray for him or her: a continuation of the practice established in 1471, when (as the *Martiloge* records) it was agreed that the Office of the Dead would be recited for the souls of all who donated books to the libraries of the brothers or the sisters, or for common use.\(^8\) A prosopographical investigation into these ‘friends and benefactors’ could have much to tell us about the patronage and support that helped to sustain Syon in the early years of its re-establishment in England, and the networks of English catholics into which Syon was inserted.

As they had been from Syon’s earliest days, books were the markers and conduits of many of the Abbey’s relationships. These included their relationships with other Bridgettine houses. In 1973 (to mark the 600th anniversary of her death) a translation of Bridget’s revelations was sent ‘To our dear sisters in Syon from all of us in Vadstena.’ The inscription is dated 7 October, the anniversary of Bridget’s canonisation and her old feast day (F065). The Bridgettines of Altomünster, the last remaining house of the order in Germany, had sent a volume celebrating St Alto in 1930 (F160). Other English monasteries also feature. Prinknash and nearby Buckfast gave a number of books. One copy of T. E. Bridgett’s *A History of the Holy Eucharist in Great Britain* (London, 1908) records that it was ‘Presented by the Carmelite Commu-
nity Darlington to Lady Abbess & Community of Syon - on the occasion of the 5th Centenary of the coming of the first Brigittines to England. December 8th 1908’ (ZF003 – illustrated below). Other institutions were donors too: a New Testament dated 1941 was ‘Presented by the Army of the United States’ (B166).

A History of the Holy Eucharist in Great Britain (ZF003), flyleaf inscription.

Institutional links are important of course but, as one browses through the records, it is often the individual and personal that catches the eye, with its spark of human interest, and its testimony to a relationship continued across the enclosure. Copies of Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women and Little Men were given ‘To Dearest Dreenie with love from Peggie & Biff’ and ‘To Dear ‘Dreenie’ Sister Mary Gertrude … from Peggie’ in summer 1961 (R001, R003). A copy of The Madonna of the Poets, an ‘Anthology of poems in our Lady’s praise gathered by A. Bartle’ (London, 1906) was new out when it was presented ‘To dearest Mother Prioress, with many loving wishes for a very happy birthday, from your very affectionate. Julie Bampfylde April 19th 1907’ (J161 – illustrated below). Kathleen Partridge’s Light at Eventide (Norwich, 1972) was given ‘To my very dearest Sister Mary Paul on this your profession day, with much love & prayer. from Margaret’ (J193). Sr Mary Gabriel was given a volume of the newly-elected Pope John Paul II’s poetry ‘with much love & prayer Easter 1979. from Margaret & Uncle Bill’ (J282), while a copy of Chesterton’s Greybeards at Play is inscribed ‘Sr M. Gabriel from Lala’ (J069). Just as colourful in a different way is the copy of Liam Ua Cadain’s book on Knock Shrine in Galway (1936), whose inscription records that ‘This Book was given by Letitia Reynolds (Tatters) the account of whose cure is given on p. 111’ (N012).

The Madonna of the Poets (J106), flyleaves. Note the alteration to the bookplate, relocating Syon from Chudleigh to South Brent.

Some books were given by their authors, and testify to a significant relationship with the community. Class J (Poetry) includes half a dozen books by Jack Gilbey. Jack (John Newman) Gilbey (b. 1888) was the older brother of Alfred Newman Gilbey, long-time Catholic chaplain of Cambridge University. He was the author of several collections of devotional poetry, and copies of most of them appear in the catalogue. In Loving Memory & Other Poems (1936) was presented ‘To my kind friends at Syon Abbey with all best wishes from Jack Gilbey. April 1942’; Milestones & Other Poems (1943) is inscribed ‘To the Lady Abbess & Community at Syon Abbey with all best wishes, from Jack Gilbey. 7th Aug. 1943’, and Snowdrops at Dusk (1945), ‘To Reverend Mother Superior and the Community of Syon Abbey. with love & best wishes from Jack.

Gilbey. September 8th 1945. Most fully, In All The Signs (1944) bears the affectionate inscription ‘To the Very Reverend Mother Superior and to the Community at Syon Abbey, whose loving prayers have been such a help and inspiration in the writing of these poems, I give this copy of my new book with my love and my gratitude. From Jack Gilbey. Hastingswood. Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Lady August 15th, 1944’ (J100—J103; J100 illustrated below).10

In All The Signs (J100), flyleaf inscription.

Another significant author-donor was the Canadian Amy Redpath Roddick (1868-1954). She was the granddaughter of John Redpath (1796-1879), one of the leading entrepreneurs of nineteenth-century Montreal and founder of the refiners Redpath Sugar. She is remembered for being the wife of Sir Thomas Roddick, professor of medicine at McGill University, the man behind the

Canada Medical Act (1912), and president of both the Canadian and British Medical Associations; for her donation of McGill’s Roddick Gates (1924) in her late husband’s memory; and for the family tragedy that had left her mother and brother dead of gunshot wounds at their Montreal home in 1901.11 She was also a prolific poet and playwright. She gave copies of her plays The Birth of Montreal (1921), In a Venetian Garden (1926) and Tharbis (1937) (K044—K046), and of her poetry collections From Montreal Elsewhere (1929), The Inquisition Enjoy a Perfect Day (1939), Waiting’s Wedding (1941) and The Tomahawk (1938), this last inscribed ‘Given to Sister M. Dominic by the author. Christmas 1938’ (J209—J213).

Sr Mary Dominic was in fact Amy Redpath Roddick’s cousin, Helen Redpath (b. 1876), who was professed at Syon in 1924. She brought with her a Latin New Testament that had been given by her cousin, Amy’s brother, Jocelyn Clifford Redpath, or Cliff, who had died in the 1901 shooting.12 The book is inscribed ‘H.S. Redpath Xmas 1897. from J.C.R.’, to which Sr M. Dominic has added ‘(Jocelyn Clifford Redpath) R.I.P. (Died June 13 1901) Pray for his soul & for the soul of his + mother who died in the same day. My Jesus mercy! Jesus, Mary, Joseph!’ (B153 – illustrated below). As Helen M. D. Redpath, Sr M. Dominic was the author of an important study of Bridget of Sweden, God’s Ambassador (Milwauk ee, 1947). One of the five copies in the 1990 library records: ‘This, the first copy, sent by the publisher to the author, reached England. April 21 1947. being the 527th anniversary of the first professions at Old Syon Isleworth. (Apr. 21. 1420)’ (D872).

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12 For an undated tribute to her cousin, see http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/redpath/dramatispersonae/jocelynnredpath/5321en.html. His portrait and a poem by Sr M. Dominic in his memory hung in Marley House.
Novum Jesu Christi Testamentum (Tournai, 1886; B153), flyleaves.

Other members of the Redpath family were substantial donors to the library in the first half of the twentieth century. Many books came as the bequest of Sr M. Dominic’s sister Alice Redpath in 1940, and there were frequent donations over this period from another sister, Lucy Redpath. She was the author of a 1941 pamphlet Dante and the Present War, which likens the tyrants of the trecento to Hitler and Mussolini, and sees the war in Europe not as an Inferno, but a Purgatory, whose ‘pain if rightly accepted should be purifying,’ believing ‘that it will be the means, under Providence, of bringing in a better world-order, and perhaps a permanent peace’ (p. 5).13 She looks forward (somewhat prematurely, as it turned out, in 1941) to a time when, victory achieved, ‘we may indeed be able to build a new and a far happier world upon the ruins of the old’ (p. 36). The essay includes a consideration of the enduring value of the monastic life that her sister had chosen:

The modern world is for the most part either indifferent or hostile to the life of the cloister. And even many who profess belief in a theocentric religion look upon such a life, apart from any ‘good works,’ as a selfish waste of time and energy. Intercessions in church they consider are right and fitting, especially in times of national emergency. But ‘that good part’ chosen by Mary in the Gospel, although approved by the Founder of Christianity, they seem to regard as negligible. … All the same, even in this mechanical age there are many who think with awe and gratitude of the multitude of men and women who throughout the ages have offered up prayer and self-oblation to the Throne of Grace, making a golden pathway from this dark and storm-tossed world to the abiding peace and immortal light of Heaven. (p. 28)

The Syon library did not contain a copy of her Dante pamphlet, but she did give the community her Paradiso (trans. Binyon, 1943), recorded at J006.

The history of Syon Abbey and its books is framed by two monumental library catalogues. The riches of the medieval Registrum are well-known and, thanks to the work of Vincent Gillespie, accessible to modern researchers. The catalogue of Syon’s library a half-millennium later is a resource still to be explored. Whether it will yield the dividends of Thomas Betson’s pioneering work remains to be seen, but Glascoe and Johnson’s catalogue and its associated materials offer a fascinating insight into the size and shape of the library of a late twentieth-century monastic community; its reading practices, its relationship with books, and the relationships it maintained through books.

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Syon Abbey Today

ANN M. HUTCHISON
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On 31 August 2011, the nuns of Syon Abbey marked the 150th anniversary of the community’s return from Lisbon in 1861, and its entry into the diocese of Plymouth. At that time they settled at Spettisbury in Dorset, but twenty-six years later in 1887 the thriving community moved to Chudleigh in Devon, the county in which they have remained. Once again, in 1925, their numbers having expanded, they relocated in the beautiful setting of Marley House near South Brent, where they remained until 1990. That year they moved into a smaller, especially designed house on the same property, but further down the drive in an area which had housed some of the farm outbuildings. Here, in early September of 1991, with the permission of the bishop, the Sisters hosted a small conference of international scholars who had gathered to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the canonization of St Birgitta. It is in this setting too that for more than twenty years the Abbess and the Community have been graciously receiving scholars and other visitors interested in learning about the Order of the Most Holy Saviour, as it is formally called, and its founder, St Birgitta; about their long unbroken history going back to 1415 when Henry V laid the foundation stone for their first house at Twickenham on the Thames; and about other aspects of their way of life as enclosed contemplatives.

13 The theme is picked up explicitly by Sebastian Knowles in his more recent A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War (Philadelphia, 1990). A quotation from Redpath provides his epigraph: see p. xi.
During these last twenty years, however, the community has decreased. For the last few years, there have been only three members, the Abbess and Sisters M. Julie and M. Bridget. After having endured two especially hard winters in 2009 and 2010, when extreme weather left the small community marooned, especially the winter before last, when, on account of the heavy snow and ice, the tanker carrying the liquid gas for the boilers could not navigate the drive, the very difficult decision was made to sell the Abbey building and its beautiful surrounding gardens, lovingly created and tended by Sister M. Bridget, which contributed so much to the atmosphere of peace and tranquility that characterized the community. Not surprisingly, it did not take long, and on 10th August the sale to a woman who teaches meditation to both Christian and non-Christian groups and who felt the “atmosphere of prayer which pervaded the Abbey” was agreed; completion took place on 7th September.

During the spring and early summer of 2011, arrangements were made for the contents of the Abbey. Sacred vessels and treasured items from the Chapel went to nearby Buckfast Abbey in recognition of long-standing association and friendship between the two houses. Most recently the Abbot had arranged for Mass to be offered at Syon each Sunday afternoon, often coming himself, since Syon was without a resident priest. On the 31st May, the carved stone portion of the gateway of Syon Abbey at Isleworth on which it is believed that part of the body of St Richard Reynolds was placed after his martyrdom on 4th May 1535, left Syon Abbey for the first time. Perhaps the most highly prized of all Syon’s treasures, since it remained with the community through all its “Wanderings,” this beautifully carved stone of the high Gothic period gives some hint of what the pre-Dissolution Abbey must have looked like. It is now in the Church of the Blessed Sacrament in Exeter along with the red chasuble used at Mass on St Richard’s feast, a painting, and other material concerning his life. Since it is thought that St Richard was born in Pinhoe, a village now part of the parish, this donation seems especially fitting. Books not presented to the special collection at the University of Exeter, which already has the medieval manuscripts and early printed books, were sold, given away, left in the Abbey at the new owner’s request, or retained for the use of the Sisters. The extensive archives – over 100 boxes – went to the University of Exeter. Holy relics were sent to Farnborough at the request of the Abbot who plans to set up a “Relic Chapel.” Two old seals were donated to appropriate homes: one from the 1570s, when the community was in Belgium, was given to the local historical society in Eckeren; and the other, much earlier, of 1385, of Richard Auncell, a monk of Tavistock Abbey and the first Prior of St Michael’s Mount, Cornwall, was passed on to James St Aubyn whose family has lived on the Mount since 1610.

On 6th August, the feast of the Transfiguration, and Syon’s patronal feast, the bishop of Plymouth offered a last Mass of Thanksgiving at Syon Abbey both for the long unbroken history of Syon Abbey – 596 years – and for the 150 years since its return from exile in Lisbon as well as elsewhere on the Continent. A month later, on 7th September, Mother Anna Maria and Sister Mary Julie moved to the house of the Sisters of Nazareth in Plymouth. For the time being they are in a temporary residence, Peirson House, awaiting the refurbishment of Nazareth House, which is expected to be completed “sometime in the summer.” With the closure of Syon, Mother Anna Maria has reverted to her baptismal name, Sister Anne. Earlier, on 25th August, Sister Mary Bridget, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease a few years ago, moved to a home in Plymouth, St Peter’s Care Home, which is able to offer the attention she now needs. Even with Alzheimer’s, Sister M. Bridget had been able to manage the daily routine in an environment that in many ways she herself, with her special sense of kinship with the natural world and her deep spirituality, had fostered; but Alzheimer’s, as those who have met it know, does not respect such gifts; inevitably Sister will need more and more care. Many of us feared the results of the relocation, and indeed at first she had a hard time. More recently, however, she has begun to adjust, has become calmer and once more she seems to enjoy colours and sounds, especially of the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

After such a long and resilient history during which on many, many occasions the community has demonstrated its extraordinary “staying power,” it would be almost incredible to find that Syon Abbey is no more. Earlier this year, however, Sister Anne wrote with the news that “According to Canon Law Syon Abbey has not been suppressed (as often happens on closure).” Some years ago, the foresighted community had unanimously requested permission to move to Nazareth House “when the situation arose that [they] would need to move.” The permission was granted from Rome in 2007, and the letter to Bishop Budd stated: “The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, after careful consideration of the situation of the Bridgettine Sisters of South Brent and with the assurance of the Superior General of the Congregation of Nazareth Sisters to provide for the spiritual and physical needs of the nuns, this Dicastery grants to your Excellency the faculty to relocate the Bridgettine Sisters to the area in the convent provided for them for the necessary period of time.” Thus Sisters Anne and Mary Julie will continue to perform the Office as has been the custom of the Order.
over the centuries, and with more general participation in mind, Sister Anne is working on an English translation of the Bridgettine Office. We may now look forward with them to celebrating the 6th centenary in 2015!

Book Review


reviewed by ALEXANDRA DA COSTA
St Hilda’s College, Oxford, UK

Elin Anderson’s edition of the Responsiones Vadstenneses is much needed and at last opens up to a wider readership this important contribution to Syon’s early formation and practice. It is essential reading for Birgittine scholars wishing to understand the questions Syon had about the Birgittine life and their early attempts to flesh out the skeletal guidance provided by the Regula Salvatoris.

The edition presents two previously unpublished texts in their original Latin with facing-page English translation. The first and longest is the Responsiones, “a collection of questions and answers concerning the Birgittine Rule and Birgittine regulations and customs, of which the main part was written as a result of two English brothers visiting Vadstena in 1427” (1). It survives in two copies in Uppsala University Library, MSS 74 and C 363. The second text, the Collacio, Anderson describes somewhat equivocally as “not unlike a sermon and reflecting similar topics” (1). It survives in London, British Library, MS Arundel 11. The edited texts are preceded by an account of the characteristics of the Birgittine order in the early fifteenth century and its central legislative texts.

One of the major strengths of this edition is the clarity with which Anderson provides a framework for understanding the texts. She begins with a literary survey – which highlights how these previously unpublished texts have been underappreciated and under-examined – before going on to cover the structure of the Birgittine monastery; the most important of the early Birgittine ‘legislative’ texts; the establishment of Syon; the 1427 visit to Vadstena; the general chapter of 1429; and the correspondence between Vadstena and Syon leading to the composition of the Responsiones. Given the sheer volume published on these topics, it is no mean task to provide a readable, accurate account in brief. Anderson has a keen eye for what is useful to the reader and future researchers. This is exemplified by her providing a catalogue of correspondence between Vadstena and Syon, which cannot but encourage further research in this area by its tantalizing summaries.

Furthermore, Anderson gives new life to what has sometimes felt like a well-worn narrative by drawing on her extensive knowledge of unpublished Syon material. For instance, she quotes a letter by John Whethamstede, abbot of the Benedictine abbey of St Albans and conservator of Syon, which emphasises that Syon craved “practical experience and instruction from the older house” rather than mere legislative clarification (17). She is also adept at relating this historical account to the development of the Responsiones and regularly piques the reader’s interest with her persuasive interpretations of the historical record. Thus, having discussed the unsettled status of the different sets of Birgittine rules in the early fifteenth century, she goes on to argue that in the texts she has edited “a strong interest on Syon’s part as to the early versions of the Rule and the authenticity of Birgittine texts in general can be seen” (6), as well as a scepticism of Prior Petrus’ Addiciones.

Finally, the edition itself is scholarly and attentive. Anderson has adopted an admirably transparent critical approach and provides a great deal of information in her critical apparatus concerning corrections, additions and editorial suggestions. The translation also captures some of the style of the original without losing clarity and succeeds in opening the text up to readers with little Latin.

Anderson should be commended for her careful, scholarly work on this much needed edition, which encourages us to look afresh at early fifteenth-century Syon and reconsider in more detail the challenges of the Birgittine vocation there.

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