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Review article

ASPECTS OF SOCIAL LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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Edwin Brezette DeWindt, ed., *The Salt of Common Life: Individuality and Choice in the Medieval Town, Countryside and Church. Essays Presented to J. Ambrose Raftis*. Studies in Medieval Culture 36 (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1995). xvii, 545.

Michael M. Sheehan, CSB, *Marriage, Family and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*. Ed. James K. Farge. Introd. Joel T. Rosenthal (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). xxx, 330.

Sue Sheridan Walker, ed., *Wife and Widow in Medieval Europe*. Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Civilization (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). x, 221.

It seems particularly suitable to review these three books together since they celebrate the work of two very influential Canadian medieval historians of the last thirty years, both of whom belonged to the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto at the time of its greatest prominence. There was at one time a joke in academic circles, inspired by the reputation of the Pontifical Institute and the growing importance of the University of Toronto's own Centre for Medieval Studies, that any good medievalist in North America would surely prefer Toronto over Heaven as a destination after death! The Institute of Mediaeval Studies was first established in 1929 as an offshoot of St Michael's College, one of the constituent colleges within

the University of Toronto, run by the Basilian Fathers. The Institute originally specialized in philosophy and gained fame in that field. The great Thomist, Etienne Gilson, was one of its founders, and the distinguished French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, a frequent visitor. They were both Catholic laymen, but in the early years the emphasis at the Institute was almost exclusively philosophical and theological, and its students primarily clerics. In 1939 it was recognized by Rome as a Pontifical Institute and expanded its range of studies. In addition, growing cooperation between the Institute and the University of Toronto in regard to course credit acceptance and cross-appointments of teaching staffs also helped to encourage more varied medieval studies. By the late Fifties and Sixties the outstanding work being done by the Institute's younger scholars in medieval history, literature, and art, as well as its superlative medieval library, had begun to attract a larger group of extremely able lay students. As the leading young historians at the Institute, both Fr Raftis and Fr Sheehan used their scholarly training and continuing research to establish new approaches to other unexplored topics. In the process they both modified and widened the study of medieval history. As active scholars, as well as prized supervisors of many able doctoral students, they wielded very considerable influence in their own fields.

Their interests were separate but complementary. Ambrose Raftis's original background was in economic history, His published Ph.D. thesis was entitled *The Estates of Ramsey Abbey* (Toronto 1957), but by the time of the appearance of his second book, *Tenure and Mobility: Studies in the Social History of the Mediaeval English Village* (Toronto 1964), his focus had shifted to the specific area that from then on absorbed his scholarly efforts. Through painstaking study of the manorial court rolls and other little-used local records, he worked to uncover the life activities and the possible choices of individual peasants, His work attracted so many able and enthusiastic students, eager to investigate this new material, that those whose views on peasants and village life differed from this new approach sometimes referred dismissively to "The Toronto School."

The Salt of Common Life, a festschrift for Raftis's seventieth birthday, is a tribute by a number of his old students and colleagues to his influence and guidance, and their respect and affection for him, It is pleasant to note that Ambrose Raftis's productive scholarly life still continues. His latest book, *Peasant Economic Development Within the English Manorial System*, has just been issued by McGill-Queens University Press. As well, at the meeting of the Medieval Academy in Toronto in April 1997, a special

session, suitably entitled "Pathways to Peasants Revisited," was planned in his honour. *The Salt of Common Life* is edited by Edwin Brezette DeWindt, a former student, who has also provided an introduction with a brief sketch of Raftis's scholarly career and his fundamental approaches to his research. DeWindt, while drawing attention to the varied subjects that Raftis's students have pursued in their own ongoing researches, also underlines the things they all took away from their work with him: their fundamental respect for the documentary sources and their shared conviction of the importance of the manorial rolls as a means for exploring medieval peasant history. DeWindt also emphasizes Raftis's own beliefs in the fundamental individuality of English men and women peasants, and their ability to make choices for themselves.

The book itself presents fourteen papers, divided into three main sections: Town, Countryside, and Church. A good number deal with very specific topics stemming from Raftis's approach. Maryanne Kowaleski adds to the considerable body of work that she has already done on various aspects of life in Exeter, the largest borough in southwestern England. Her paper provides a detailed account of the changes in the patterns of the fourteenth-century grain trade there, paying special attention to the differences between the pre-plague and post-plague patterns and amounts. There are a number of useful charts and tables. Anne Reiber DeWindt discusses the question of economic development in the town of Ramsey between 1290 and 1523. Her paper is a careful analysis of the changes in the town over this extended period as it can be perceived in the documents that give names, numbers of trades, involvement in agriculture, etc. She finds the inhabitants of Ramsey were both resilient and flexible, able to profit from the move from an economy dominated by the strong local abbey to one more widely based and nationally regulated. Ellen Wedemeyer Moore in "Aspects of Poverty in a Small Medieval Town" pursues a sociological study of St Ives, one of the Ramsey manors, trying to clarify who exactly was considered "poor" and what difference it made to their lives within the manor.

Three papers move from the smaller towns to specific issues in London, England's only real city. James Masschaele focusses on the activities of a pair of London merchants in "The Trials of Partnership in Medieval England," a study of a particularly well-documented case in 1304, which draws on the accounts of the partnership as they were brought forward in the Exchequer when the partners disagreed. The case provides a number of interesting details on partnerships that dealt with trading assets outside of England and the methods that might be used to settle disputes when partners disagreed.

Judith Bennett, in a very substantial paper, looks at an important section of London commercial activity in "Women and Men in the Brewers' Guild of London, ca. 1420." In line with her previous studies on women in the brewing trade, she tracks the shift from female to male brewers, especially in large towns such as London, using the particularly good records of William Porland, clerk of the London Brewer's Guild in the early fifteenth century. Her paper throws useful light both on the status and activities of brewers and the continuing, though lessening, opportunities for even single women within the trade. Alexandra F. Johnston and Robert Tittler in "To Catch a Thief' in Jacobean London" illuminate the criminal activities there in the early seventeenth century with a case history. They use the expense account of an agent of Sir Thomas Temple of Warwickshire, who was sent to London by his master to track down three criminals who had conspired to forge Temple's seal and signature in a plot to extract cash from a prominent vintner of London who was also Temple's business associate. The diligent agent only managed to capture one, underlining the frequency and success of nonviolent crimes and full-time swindlers.

In the Countryside section, the six papers belong to two groups. Three are particularly inspired by Raftis's work and methods: Ian Blanchard's "Social Structure and Social Organization in an English Village at the close of the Middle Ages: Chewton 1526"; David N. Hall's "Hemington and Barnwell, Northamptonshire: A Study of Two Manors"; and Sherri Olson's "'Families have their Fates and Periods': Varieties of Family Life and Experience in the Pre-Industrial Village." Their rather extensive titles suggest the lines in which their work has continued to build on the approaches originally suggested by Raftis. Also in the Raftis manner, though in a very different context and translated to southern Germany, is Richard C. Hoffman's "Fishers in Late Medieval Rural Society around Tegernsee, Bavaria," which looks at Martin Vorchel, a tenant and fisher for the Benedictine abbey there, as a discoverable example of a coherent group of abbey servants. Bruce M.S. Campbell's "The Livestock of Chaucer's Reeve: Fact or Fiction?" compares Chaucer's description of the reeve's farming with the actual farming pattern, and notes the similarities. Kathleen A. Biddick strikes a very different note as she brings us sharply into the twentieth century in "The Historiographic Unconscious and the Return of Robin Hood," which gives a very modernist reading to the study of Robin Hood.

To close this very substantial book, Denis Brearley and F. Donald Logan look at the place of churchmen in this era. Brearley declares his debt to Raftis's methods to help him in rounding out originally genealogical work

into a more complete picture in "The Social, Economic, and Intellectual Life of Richard Depyng, Vicar of Fillongley (1487-1529)." Logan provides a very suitable closing point in this tribute to Raftis as the devoted student of Ramsey Abbey records in his paper on "Ramsey Abbey: The Last Days and After." As can be perceived even by this summary description of the contributions, *The Salt of Common Life* is both an extensive and a fitting recognition of a respected and influential historian.

Michael M. Sheehan, the historian commemorated in the two other books under review, died in an unfortunate accident in Toronto in the summer of 1992. The widespread sorrow at Fr Sheehan's untimely death was felt far beyond the academic community of which he was such a well-known and respected member. As the Memorial Service for him at St Basil's church in November 1992 attested, this sense of loss was also a tribute to his outstanding human qualities and to his wide range of friendships among all those who came into contact with him in any of his many varied activities. The Pontifical Institute gave further proof of the respect and affection that Michael Sheehan inspired by setting up a memorial scholarship in his name, which has been generously funded by family, friends, colleagues, and admirers.

His academic legacy has not been overlooked. There have been formal obituaries in many academic journals that paid warm tribute to his scholarship and his writings but also underlined the depth and range of his scholarly interests in such diverse subjects as medieval art and archaeology. The 1993 volume of this journal was dedicated to him as a founding member of its editorial advisory board. Sessions in his honour were put on at various medieval conferences by his old students and other colleagues, among them one at the Society of Canadian Medievalists at its 1994 meeting in Calgary. A Round Table at the 1996 International Congress of Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo was dedicated to "The Historical Legacy of Michael M. Sheehan." Its sponsors have put together a memorial volume of essays, entitled *Women, Marriage and Family in Medieval Christendom*, edited by Joel Rosenthal and Constance Rousseau, which was due to appear in 1996. Sue Sheridan Walker had collected a volume of papers, *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, designed to serve as a surprise festschrift for Michael Sheehan, though his sudden death before its publication in 1993 meant it had to be dedicated to his memory. In addition, James Farge, a fellow Basilian at the Pontifical Institute, has edited a volume of Fr Sheehan's collected papers entitled *Marriage, Family and Law in Medieval Europe*.

Although the two priest-historians were relatively close contemporaries, their training and their interests took somewhat different paths. Ambrose

Raftis obtained his Ph.D. from Cambridge University and was much influenced by M.M. Postan, the economic historian who was his supervisor. He has always retained his interest in economic data, though he has devoted himself primarily to the discovery of peasants and the pattern of village life. Michael Sheehan, however, after completing his M.A. at the University of Toronto, moved to the licentiate program at the Pontifical Institute and was sent off for two years of study at the *École pratique des Hautes Études*. There he was encouraged to investigate the then relatively unexplored subject of the will in medieval England. On his return to Toronto he adopted this subject for his doctoral thesis. The published monograph, further refined and expanded, entitled *The Will in Medieval England: From the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to the End of the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto 1963), was enthusiastically reviewed and has been of continuing value. Starting from the original Anglo-Saxon bequests of property upon death, he traced the development of the Christian concept of a last will and testament, regulated by canon law and accepted in English common law. His focus in this work was primarily on the importance of the will as a legal instrument. As he began to explore the canon law further he came to see the possibilities of using wills as a tool to understand some wider problems in medieval society.

Fr Farge's collection of Michael Sheehan's major papers in *Marriage, Family and Law in Medieval Europe* is chronologically arranged, thus allowing the reader to pursue conveniently the new directions of his research and developing thought. The collection is enhanced by a generous introduction by Joel Rosenthal, a historian at SUNY Stony Brook, who is proud to claim Michael Sheehan as a friend, as well as witness to his calibre as a historian. While never abandoning his interest in canon law, Sheehan began to investigate more than wills, proceeding to describe and clarify the canonical statements on marriage as they affected both theory and practice. He discussed in detail the canonical requirement of free choice and consent for a valid marriage, and explored the implications. This in turn brought him to an ongoing investigation of the various situations of medieval women, which provided both constraints and possibilities. His continuing interest in these matters was signalled by the 1990 bibliography, *Domestic Society in Medieval Europe*, which he drew up with the assistance of Jacqueline Murray. It remained in the forefront of his interests as he and Dr Murray were working on its update the day before his death.

Two very substantial papers (both originally published in *Mediaeval Studies*), "The Formation and Stability of Marriage in Fourteenth-Century England: Evidence from an Ely Register" (1971) and "Marriage Theory

and Practice in the Conciliar Legislation and Diocesan Statutes of Medieval England" (1978), laid the intellectual foundations for his approach to one of the central issues of women's history. In 1982, in a joint session with David Herlihy, a widely recognized and sympathetic expert in this field, Sheehan presented a paper designed for a more general audience. "The Wife of Bath and Her Four Sisters: Reflections on a Woman's Life in the Age of Chaucer" was based on his wide knowledge of canon law and marriage, but signalled his growing interest in and concern for the realistic depiction of the lives of medieval women. As a personal aside, I wish to acknowledge my own debt of gratitude to him. Although I was an independent scholar with no legitimate call on Fr Sheehan's expertise, he was always a friendly but searching critic of my early books. When he gave me a copy of this lecture, he expressed his pleasure that this was the general orientation of the book I was then working on. His critical suggestions helped a great deal in improving *A Small Sound of the Trumpet/Women in Medieval Life*.

The authors of the eight essays edited by Sue Sheridan Walker in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* represent a wide spectrum of scholars involved in the study of the frequent, if sometimes stormy, connection between wives and widows and the requirements of the law. All have benefited from Sheehan's earlier seminal articles on very specific sections of canon law dealing with marriage and the resulting English statutes, with a particular emphasis on the position of widows. James Brundage, who has written authoritatively and extensively on canon law, with particular reference to sex and marriage, has entitled his essay "Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Classical Canon Law." It deals with a topic that bedeviled medieval canon lawyers with its theoretical and practical applications. Joel Rosenthal addresses the situation of fifteenth-century widows, and brings forward a number of individual cases, while Barbara Hanawalt looks at the ways in which marriage could be a possible option for rural and urban widows. In a more localized study, Cynthia Neville describes the plight of the widows of war in Scotland at the time of Edward I. Richard Helmholz in "Married Women's Wills in Later Medieval England" examines the way in which their testamentary capacity evolved over the centuries. The other authors are particularly concerned with women in the courts. Janet Senderowitz looks at Magna Carta's influence on the widows attempting to ensure the possession of their dower in the early thirteenth-century, while Sue Sheridan Walker describes the suing for dower from ca. 1272 to 1350 as a personal quest. Finally, Charles Donahue analyzes the female plaintiffs in marriage cases in the court of York during the later Middle Ages. All these

worthwhile papers echo the deepest interests and concerns of Michael Sheehan himself, and illustrate the influence of his thought. In her introduction, Sue Sheridan Walker emphasizes the wisdom and affection he gave all his scholarly colleagues. Her final sentence captures a widespread feeling among Michael Sheehan's admirers: "We are very grateful to have been enriched by his life as well as his learning."

Both Ambrose Raftis and Michael Sheehan broke new ground in their historical studies, not only in the use of previously unexploited or under-used sources, but in raising new questions that scholars should be prepared to ask of their sources. Both were naturally influenced by the developments in historical studies that, during their prime working years, began to lay new emphasis on social history, prosopography, the history of women, as well as a wide variety of ethnic minorities. As innovators in their own fields, they were encouraged and supported by their colleagues at the Pontifical Institute. During their most fruitful years the Institute was still basically unaffected by budget cuts and the serious personnel losses that have since weakened it. In these fortunate conditions, Raftis and Sheehan were able to influence not only the considerable number of young medieval scholars whom they supervised, many of whom have gone on to make their own impressive contributions to the field, but also to make a valuable and durable impression on their own chosen fields of medieval history.

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