

INTRODUCTION

Solitude, or at least some form of significant separation from the rest of society, carries symbolic power – often with religious connotations – in most, if not all, cultures. But the particular forms that solitariness and withdrawal take vary from culture to culture, and are sensitive to changes in place and time.¹ This book is concerned with the principal forms of solitary religious life in England between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries: with anchorites, who lived a life of strict bodily enclosure in a ‘cell’, usually attached to a parish church; and hermits, whose vocation was less clearly defined and subject to fewer constraints. It represents the first comprehensive look at the two vocations in late medieval England in more than a century.²

The solitary lives in the West before 1200

Medieval solitaries could look to biblical models: Elijah, who made the lonely journey of forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb, to hear God’s voice not in the wind, earthquake or fire, but in a ‘still small voice’ (see 1 Kings 19); John the Baptist, the ‘voice crying in the wilderness’ (Matt. 3:3), who, clad in skins and surviving on locusts and wild honey, preached repentance and prophesied Christ’s coming; or Jesus himself, who was led by the spirit into the desert there to be tempted by the devil before he embarked on his ministry (Matt. 4:1–11).

Even more than to the biblical examples, however, medieval solitaries turned for their inspiration to Egypt in the third and fourth centuries, and those Christians who retreated from the rich lands and populous villages of the Nile valley to the surrounding deserts, and who

1 Two wide-ranging and appealing introductions to the history of the solitary life in the Christian West are Peter F. Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The solitary life in the Christian church* (London: SPCK, 1964), and Isabel Colegate’s *A Pelican in the Wilderness: Hermits, solitaries and recluses* (London: HarperCollins, 2002).

2 Its predecessor in this respect is Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*.

are known collectively as the Desert Fathers.³ (Modern scholarship has pointed out that there were Desert Mothers, too, but the Middle Ages do not emphasise the role of women in the early eremitic movement.) With the end of the persecutions of Diocletian and the outbreak of religious tolerance in the Roman Empire under Constantine (emperor 306–337), Christianity had lost its dangerous, ‘edgy’ status as a countercultural movement (it would become the official religion of the Empire in 380). Now that the martyr’s crown was no longer readily available, devout Christians could aspire instead to seek so-called ‘white’ martyrdom (white as opposed to red, because it was achieved without the shedding of blood), by denying and overcoming the body and its desires and appetites. For this programme of disciplining and defining the self early Christian writers borrowed the Greek term *askesis*, originally used for the training undergone by athletes in preparation for a contest. And the prime location for such Christian ascetic practices was the pared-down, ‘bare life’ afforded by the desert.

The best-known of the desert solitaries, though not the first, was St Anthony of Egypt, also known as Anthony the Great (c. 251–356). Details of his life and horrifying diabolical temptations were brought to the West by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria. Soon after, St Jerome wrote his *Life of St Paul the First Hermit*, Anthony’s alleged (and probably apocryphal) predecessor in desert solitude. The desert, it seems, quickly filled up with hermits, whose feats of endurance and self-denial, and gems of wisdom, were recorded for posterity in the collections that came to be known as the *Vitas Patrum* (‘The Lives of the Fathers’). Sources such as these emphasise the exceptional individuals (one thinks most obviously of Simeon Stylites, immortalised as an example of religious extremism by Tennyson’s poem), but the reality of early eremitic practice was more diverse, ranging from pure solitude, through small groupings of solitaries who would come together periodically for shared worship (such a grouping was known as a *lavra* or ‘skete’), to more formally organised groups, living out their solitary vocation together in a community or *coenobium* (from the Greek *koinos*, common, and *bios*, life). They were identified by a range of terms, three of which would be important in the subsequent history of the solitary vocations. Because they lived alone, they were called *monks* (Greek *monachoi*, from *monos*, alone); from their dwelling-place they were

3 For an excellent introductory survey see William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An introduction to the literature of early monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

known as *hermits* (from *eremos*: desert, wilderness), and their retreat from normal human society was signified in *anchorites* (from the verb *anachorein*, to withdraw, though the verb was not originally confined to withdrawal for religious reasons). The three terms seem to have been used interchangeably in these early sources.

It was only later, therefore, and only in the West, that the monastic life came to be regarded as distinct from the solitary life of the hermit. The split was given decisive expression in *The Rule of St Benedict*, composed in the sixth century by Benedict of Nursia. Though Benedict himself had lived as a hermit in caves around Subiaco, in the mountains to the west of Rome, before he went on to found several monasteries in the region, his rule does not reflect his own life history. It sees the solitary life not as preparatory, but as supplementary to the life in common – a more challenging vocation to which only exceptional monks would graduate. He speaks of

the anchorites or hermits, who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.⁴

Thus, whilst Benedict continues to recognise the hermit's life as an ideal, he denies its practice to all but a few of his monks. At the same time, Benedictine sources present their brand of monasticism as the fulfilment and completion of the desert project.⁵ The life in common, in these sources, is a natural evolution from, and replacement for, the unregulated existence of the first hermits.

The Benedictine model largely holds sway in the West for the remainder of the first millennium, monasteries of the order increasing in number and – especially in the wake of the reforms instituted at Cluny (founded 910) – in wealth and complexity of liturgical observance. To some, they had become victims of their own success, and the reaction, when it came, took the form of an explicit attempt to reconnect

⁴ *The Rule of Saint Benedict in Latin and in English with Notes*, edited and translated by Timothy Fry OSB (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 1.3–5.

⁵ See, for example, Jean-Marie Sansterre, 'Le monachisme bénédictin d'Italie et les bénédictins italiens en France face au renouveau de l'érémisme à la fin du Xe et au XIe siècle', in *Ermîtes de France et d'Italie (XIe–XVe siècle)*, edited by André Vauchez (Rome: École française de Rome, 2003), pp. 29–46.

monasticism with its desert origins, to recapture the purity and simplicity that had inspired Benedict in the first place.⁶ Across much of Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, monks left their monasteries to live alone or in small groups as hermits. Many would attract disciples, and some would end up founding a monastery – or even a whole religious order – of their own. The movement's first important figure was the Italian Romuald of Ravenna (c. 950–1027). Having left his monastery to live as a hermit, he went on to found monasteries at Fonte Avellana and Camaldoli in which monks lived alone in separate cells, coming together only for recitation of the divine office. Camaldoli in due course became the mother house of the Camaldolese order. Later in the century, in France, the founders of the Cistercians likewise cast their reforms as a return to the values of the desert. These same impulses gave rise to the Carthusian and Premonstratensian orders, as well as a number of smaller and shorter-lived congregations.

Such was the strength of the eremitic revival that, by the mid-twelfth century, Geoffrey Grossus, monk of the reformed house of Tiron, could describe his region of Maine and Brittany in northern France as 'almost like a Second Egypt' for its 'multitude of hermits'.⁷ The phrase is testament both to the renewed visibility of the vocation and to the value attached to a direct connection with its desert origins. In England, prominent monasteries including Fountains, Kirkstall and the refounded Whitby Abbey (N. Yorks.), Jarrow (Northumb.), Bordesley (Worcs.) and Kirkstead (Lincs.) all owed their beginnings to this movement. Elsewhere, some groups of hermits crystallised into small priories, typically of the Augustinian order. This period of innovation and experimentation was, however, brought to an end in 1215, when the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that henceforward no new religious orders would receive papal approval.

In the meantime, the vocation of anchorite had been becoming more clearly defined. Benedict, as we have seen, uses the terms *hermit* and *anchorite* as synonyms, in contradistinction to the coenobitic *monk*. Now 'anchorite' begins to be reserved (alongside other terms, including – in English usage – 'recluse' or the Latin *inclusus*) for enclosed solitaries. Strict bodily enclosure is recorded occasionally for the desert

6 For the hermit-inspired monastic renewal of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, see Henrietta Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984).

7 Geoffrey Grossus, *The Life of Blessed Bernard of Tiron*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), p. 27.

period (the former harlot Thaïs was a celebrated example) and sporadically during ensuing centuries, but the practice does not seem to have become widespread or regularised in northern Europe until the late ninth century. Initially it was regarded as a special form of the monastic life (of the kind that Benedict might have envisaged), but in this period of increasing popularity the majority of anchorites were secular priests or laywomen, and they tended more often to be enclosed at parish churches. In some parts of Europe, though apparently never in England, the vocation seems to have been associated more or less exclusively with women. Anchorites appear first in English sources during the eleventh century, and quickly come to prominence during the twelfth.⁸

At the point at which this book begins, then, the age of the reforming hermit-monk was past, and the solitary religious life had established itself into two distinct vocations. The distinction was summed up in 1215 by the Latin scholar Gerald of Wales, who stated, 'Hermits wander about alone, while anchorites are strictly enclosed'.⁹ It is put more colourfully, if less pithily, in the fifteenth-century English *Friar Daw's Reply*:

Some flee from the world and shut themselves within walls,
 Enclose themselves in stone, and speak but little,
 To avoid those sins that human weakness is prey to,
 And these we call *ankers* in the common speech.
 And there are many others seeking contemplation
 Who withdraw to the desert and endure much pain,
 Live on herbs, roots and fruit, all for the love of God:
 And people like this are known as *hermits*.¹⁰

Hermits and anchorites in late medieval England

In the late Middle Ages, it could be argued, the solitary lives are best understood not so much in the context of monastic institutions but as

⁸ The solitaries of this period, including the emergence of enclosed anchorites as a distinct group, have been expertly covered by Tom Licence in his *Hermits & Recluses in English Society 950–1200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹ *Heremitaë solivagi aut Anachoritaë conclusi*. Cited by Francis D. Darwin, *The English Mediaeval Recluse* (London: SPCK, 1944), p. 4.

¹⁰ In James M. Dean, ed., *Six Ecclesiastical Satires* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), lines 290–7, my translation.

part of the range of semi-religious or non-regular vocations.¹¹ Reflecting a growth in levels of literacy, devotional competence and spiritual ambition among the laity, these forms of living increasingly colonised the 'grey areas' in and around established ecclesiastical structures. Such people were not in – or, at any rate, they did not consider themselves to be entirely *of* – the secular world, but nor did they join a religious order; they aspired to a spiritual life more developed than was normal, and normally considered appropriate, for the laity, but were not clerics. Many were women. They pursued a life that claimed a degree of separation and regularity that in the past would have been reserved to the religious orders, but without either the constraint or the security offered by a canonically recognised and approved rule. Alongside hermits and anchorites, the category could be taken to include beguines and tertiaries (though these never took root in England), as well as (especially later in the period) vowesses – women, usually widows, vowed to a life of chastity and withdrawal from the world – and those who sought a 'mixed life' of piety and contemplation combined with a continued engagement with secular affairs.¹² In most cases, compared with the established orders, the lives were unstructured, their boundaries fluid, and their relation to the ecclesiastical authorities *ad hoc*. In late medieval England the question of regularity, and the presence or absence of mechanisms associated with canonicity or orderliness (such as vows, rules, registration), are a recurrent feature in the history of the solitary vocations. For anchorites, such procedures were securely in place by the point that this book begins, and examples are given in Chapter I. For hermits, by contrast, these were active and increasingly urgent questions during the period covered here, and the materials included in Chapter VI give some idea of how the problem was (at least partly) resolved.

The sources collected in this book fall in general into two classes. Either they are concerned with individual hermits or anchorites in their particular circumstances, or they come from theoretical or pre-

11 For a window on this range of possibilities, see John Van Engen, 'Multiple Options: The world of the fifteenth-century church', *Church History* 77 (2008): 257–84. An overview of the solitary lives across western Europe in this period (with a particular focus on enclosed anchorites) is provided by the essays collected in *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe* edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010).

12 On these phenomena, see P.H. Cullum, 'Vowesses and Female Lay Piety in the Province of York, 1300–1530', *Northern History* 32 (1996): 21–41; and Nicole Rice, *Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

scriptive texts such as rules or liturgy whose relation to the lived experience of real solitaries it is usually impossible to recover.¹³ It falls to this Introduction, then, to try and give a sense of the overall picture of numbers and distribution: how widely were the solitary vocations practised in late medieval England, and by whom? In fact, the question is far from straightforward to answer. Whereas for the clergy we have ordination lists, and for monks and nuns we have annals, visitation records and sometimes extensive administrative documentation, the solitary lives were not subject to any consistent system of registration, and often what we know about a particular individual we owe to serendipity. The last concerted attempt to record all medieval English solitaries was made a century ago, by Rotha Clay.¹⁴ Working almost entirely from such sources as were then available in print, she found in excess of a thousand individuals at more than 750 sites. The true figure must be substantially higher. Where further research has been done on a particular locality or region, Clay's totals have been exceeded by at least fifty per cent. For her 1985 study of anchorites in England, Ann Warren identified 780 enclosed solitaries at 601 sites between 1100 and the end of the Middle Ages, again mostly from printed sources.¹⁵ Comparable research on unenclosed hermits is still to be done, but there is no reason to doubt that it would yield similar numbers. And then there must be many more of both kinds of solitary in unpublished sources, not to mention those who left no trace in the record.

So we are still some way from a complete picture of the hermits and anchorites of late medieval England. Instead, we can glance through a few snapshots. In London, for example, there were anchorites attached to the churches of St Peter Cornhill, St Benet Fink, St Clement Danes, and the Dominicans' church of Blackfriars [6b]; hermits in the parishes of St Clement's, St Lawrence Jewry and Charing Cross, and solitaries dwelling in or near the city wall at Aldgate, Bishopsgate, Cripplegate [40], [62], All Hallows in the Wall [6a], [35b], and at the Tower of London.¹⁶ In Norwich between Julian of Norwich at the

13 On this, see Mari Hughes-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism: Ideology and spiritual practices* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012).

14 Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*. I have a long-term project to revise Clay's study. Records of individual solitaries will be found in the database *Hermits & Anchorites of England* at <http://hermits.ex.ac.uk>.

15 See Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons*.

16 William Page, *The Victoria History of the County of London: Vol. One: Including London within the Bars, Westminster and Southwark* (London: The University of London, 1909), pp. 585–8.

end of the fourteenth century and the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth, at least 35 and perhaps as many as 47 solitaries appear in the record. Norman Tanner estimates that 'From the 1420s to the 1470s there were probably at least eight hermits and anchorites living in the city at any given time'.¹⁷ In 1271, the Oxford merchant Nicholas de Weston left money to nine anchorites in and around that city. When Henry Lord Scrope made his will in 1415 (he was about to be executed for treason), he included a very substantial bequest of 100s to John, the anchorite of Westminster, 40s to Robert, recluse of Beverley, 13s 4d to John the hermit outside Pontefract, plus the same amount to anchorites at Stafford, Kirby Wiske, and Peasholme near York, to the male recluses at Kexby and the Dominicans of Newcastle, to anchorites at Wighton, Chester, Thorganby, Leake by Upsall, Gainsborough, Kneesall by Southwell, Stamford, Dartford, and at the Dominicans of Shrewsbury, the same to Elizabeth the former servant of the anchorite at Hampole, 20s to the anchorite at Wath, and 6s 8d to each anchorite and recluse in London and its suburbs, and in York and its suburbs, and to each anchorite and anchoress who should come to his executors' attention within three months of his decease.¹⁸ Whenever Margery Kempe visits a new place, one of the first things she does is to look up the local anchorite. Household accounts often include small gifts to hermits who appear at the castle door, or who are encountered on the way, apparently as a matter of routine [44]. Literary texts from Langland to Malory introduce hermits or anchorites casually, without seeming to feel the need to explain to their readers what they are. Solitaries were, in short, a familiar feature of the late medieval English landscape.

Almost without exception, all hermits were men. (An Alice Hermit is recorded in Norwich in the early fifteenth century. Assuming that 'Hermit' is a description, and not a surname, she is our only example so far discovered of a female hermit.)¹⁹ Given medieval anxieties about unenclosed women's bodies, this should probably not surprise us. By the same token, it is perhaps as to be expected that more women than men

17 Norman P. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich: 1370–1532* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), p. 58.

18 Thomas Rymer, *Foedera* (10 vols, The Hague: Joannes Neulme, 1739–45), vol. 4, part 2, p. 132. Several of these solitaries appear in this volume: for Westminster, see [28], [15b]; for Newcastle, [23]; for Kneesall (an earlier occupant), [3a]; for Stamford, [15]. The convent at Hampole was connected with Richard Rolle [21], [47].

19 Tanner, *Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, p. 202.

chose the stricter vocation and became anchorites, though other factors may have included the more limited range of opportunities for women to express a religious calling compared with men, and, more positively, the evidence (especially from continental sources, but perhaps relevant to England too) for anchoritism as a distinctively female, or feminine, vocation. Statistical analysis done by Ann Warren in the 1980s showed that female anchorites outnumbered male throughout the period, by a ratio of at least 3:2, and in the thirteenth century by more than 3:1.²⁰ Most male anchorites were priests; some had previously been monks or friars, though they were a minority compared with the secular priests. Similarly, only a few women came to the anchoritic vocation having previously been nuns. (See [31] for an example of a woman who tried and failed to make this transition.) (The old theory that Julian of Norwich had previously been a Benedictine nun at Carrow Priory in Norwich has no solid evidence behind it.) With very few exceptions, hermits were laymen. Most supported themselves by manual work and begging, and they could be difficult to distinguish from other members of the labouring class from which many of them originated. (See [36] for William Langland's satirical take on contemporary hermits' social origins.) Anchorites had to be of sufficient independent means to guarantee their support during a lifetime of enclosure [2], [3], [6]. A few candidates may have been of relatively humble origin, and a few were noble, such as the well-known sisters Loretta and Annora de Braose, enclosed in the thirteenth century at Hackington (Kent) and Iffley (Oxon.) respectively,²¹ but (like the majority of late medieval monks and nuns) most belonged to the burgess and gentry classes.

Solitaries seem to have enjoyed support from all levels of society. Ann Warren's systematic study of anchoritic patronage showed that recluses benefited from endowments, bequests, and customary and occasional gifts, from everyone from the king and his barons down to relatively humble individuals (see [13]–[17]). Hermitages were rarely endowed (but see Cripplegate in London [40] for an exception). More often, hermits were the beneficiaries of casual gifts, though such charity could be given official encouragement by licences to beg [37] or indulgences [38], [39]. Unlike some earlier periods, there are no significant signs of tension between solitaries and the secular or regular clergy.

20 Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons*, pp. 18–29.

21 On Loretta and Annora, see Catherine Innes-Parker, 'Medieval Widowhood and Textual Guidance: The Corpus revisions of *Ancrene Wisse* and the de Braose anchoresses', *Florilegium* 28 (2011): 95–124.

The motives of patrons and donors, in so far as we can recover them, were often conventional: in return for alms, the solitary would pray for the donor's soul. But there are signs, too, that individual patrons placed particular value on a direct personal connection with a holy man or woman. On the night his father died, the future Henry V prepared for his coronation by visiting the anchorite at Westminster Abbey, and making his confession to him. He made a further gift to the anchorite on the occasion of his queen's coronation in 1421, and remembered him in his will the following year.²² One of Henry's foremost knights, Richard Beauchamp, earl of Warwick, consulted Emma Rawghoton, anchoress at All Saints North Street in York, on several occasions. She was known for her visions of Our Lady and for her gift of prophecy, and correctly predicted both his role as guardian of the young Henry VI and the birth of his own son, Henry, in 1425 [26]. Medieval England's most famous visionary, Julian of Norwich, was an anchorite too, of course. Today, thanks to her *Revelations*, we know rather more about her inner life than the circumstances of her enclosure at Conisford in the south of the city. During her lifetime, however, she was better known as a spiritual adviser than a writer, as her visit from Margery Kempe bears witness. The first of the 'Middle English Mystics', Richard Rolle, was likewise sought out as a spiritual director, and after his death was revered as a saint. Much of his writing touches (sometimes quite defensively) on his life as a hermit: his improvised entry into the vocation is [47] (and see [21] for an excerpt from his writings). And Walter Hilton (whose advice to recluses lies behind [25]) spent time as a solitary himself before settling down as a canon of the Augustinian order.

Changes within the vocations, 1215–1550

The outline and character of the anchoritic life were more or less established by the point at which this book begins. Enclosure was by now expected to be strict and irrevocable. The role of the bishop in approving and supervising the vocation had been asserted and passed into usual practice, and was underlined by the prominent part he took in the process of enclosure [2]–[5]. Aelred of Rievaulx had written his 'rule' for anchorites, *De Institutione inclusarum* (or 'Rule of Life for a Recluse'). Composed by the Cistercian abbot for his sister in the early

²² See my 'O Sely Ankir' in *Medieval Anchorites in Their Communities* edited by Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017), pp. 13–34.

1160s, it served as a model and a source for many later works of guidance for both anchorites and hermits [18], [19], [54]. Most importantly, it provides a framework and a significant amount of material for the early Middle English *Ancrene Wisse* ('Guide for anchoresses'), written in the 1220s, and the most complete and enduring of English anchoritic rules. It is divided between an 'outer rule', which focuses on prayers and other observances and the practicalities of daily life, and an 'inner rule' that addresses the anchorite's moral and spiritual life, including discussions of sin, temptations, penance and love for God. The proportions of the work, however, give much greater weight to the inner life of the spirit than to the externals that are the main focus of the texts collected in this volume. *Ancrene Wisse* continued to be read throughout the Middle Ages, and it would make an ideal comparative volume to this one.

The principal evolution in the character of the anchoritic life during this period is really no more than a footnote to the biggest change affecting society as a whole: the growth of towns and an urban economy, and the migration of a significant proportion of the population from country to city. It is possible to overstate the case: the anchoritic life was popular across the country throughout the period, and anchorites could be found in rural parishes as well as urban centres, but, as in demographics more generally, there was a steady drift towards the towns as the Middle Ages went on, and by the sixteenth century urban anchorites were in the majority. As a case in point, medieval England's most celebrated anchorite, Julian of Norwich, comes across in her writings as the most serenely other-worldly of English mystics. It can be a surprise, then, to learn that her cell was located in Norwich's bustling quarter of Conisford, among the merchants' warehouses near the wharf on the River Wensum, in one of late medieval England's biggest and busiest cities.²³

Demographic changes are also an important factor in the development of the hermit's vocation during the late Middle Ages. The differences between a typical twelfth-century hermit and his fifteenth-century counterpart are more striking than the corresponding differences between central and late medieval anchorites. In the twelfth century, hermits frequently had monastic connections, and were generally to be found in rural locations, often involved in clearing marginal land

23 Felicity Riddy, 'Julian of Norwich and Self-textualization' in *Editing Women* edited by Ann M. Hutchison (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), pp. 101–24.

(such as marsh or forest) for cultivation. There were hermit saints (such as Godric of Finchale or Robert of Knaresborough), while other prominent hermits were involved in the monastic reform movement described above. In the period covered by this book, however, hermits were humbler in origin and ambition. Most were involved in what we would think of as public works, especially in connection with the emerging world of mobility and communication, and often around the urban fringes: building roads, maintaining causeways, keeping bridges. In the first half of our period they seem to have enjoyed popular and official patronage and support, but things changed markedly after the Black Death of 1348–9. The labour shortages and social upheaval that were the legacy of the plague led to considerable tensions around labour, begging, and social and geographical mobility, and hermits found themselves caught up in an increasingly strident discourse of vagrancy and ‘sturdy beggars’ [36]. This is the context for a suite of measures that seem to have been designed to put the hermit vocation on a secure canonical foundation, to match that already in place for anchorites. The examination of candidates and testing of their vocations, profession ceremonies, and rules or guides for living – all of which already existed for anchorites in 1215 – started to be provided for hermits around the beginning of the fifteenth century. (For more on this, see Chapter VI.)

And so to the events of the 1530s. There is no evidence of a decline in vocations to the solitary life, nor of a falling away of patronage and support, in the years preceding the break with Rome. How hermits and anchorites fit into the process of the dissolution of the monasteries and chantries has yet to be determined by modern scholarship, and indeed the issue seems to have been uncertain for contemporaries [67a]. The material collected in this section suggests that there is a question to be addressed, and that there may be a degree of nuance in the answer. But quite clearly the vocations were out of tune with Protestant belief and practice and, though a few individuals continued some form of solitary life beyond 1540, by the reign of Queen Mary (if John Foxe is to be believed) only the unfortunate Thomas Parkinson remained [74], the last solitary of medieval England.

The texts and translations

The volume comprises 76 entries, some of them subdivided. They are distributed among eight chapters: Chapters I to IV focus on anchorites, Chapters V to VII on hermits (with an exception for the Lollard anchoress Amy Palmer [61] who belongs logically with the hermit William Swinderby [60]), before the final chapter brings the vocations together again for a discussion of the Dissolution and the end of the solitary lives in England. A few entries are divided into two or more closely related sub-entries, and these are distinguished by lower-case letters (a) (b), etc. Where an entry or sub-entry comprises a sequence of similar excerpts or references that all refer to the same heading or sub-heading, these are numbered in roman (i) (ii), etc.

Almost all the translations are my own, and in most cases this is the first published translation of the source. More than twenty entries or sub-entries are translated from sources that have never before been available in print. The texts are drawn from a wide range of sources: administrative records, wills, liturgy, rules or guidance texts, literary works. The original language is in most cases Latin, though a number of the later texts are in English, and there are a few examples in French. The language of the original document is indicated in the headnote. I have varied the idiom of the translations according to that of the originals. Thus a legal treatise [2] will be rendered in language more formal than is usual for the guidance texts, and liturgy [5], [49] will be more rigid and archaic than a meditation [30]. In the case of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English sources, I have wherever possible chosen simply to modernise the language, since this gives a better feel for the original language than a full translation.

A few decisions require further comment. The Latin honorific *Dom* (for *Dominus*), which sometimes appears in English sources as *Dan*, usually designates a priest. I have followed the customary practice of rendering it as ‘Sir’. In lists (for example, of the bequests in a will) the Latin *Item* is used as a preface for each new clause. Rather than translating it as ‘Again’, or merely substituting perhaps the nearest modern equivalent, a bullet-point, I have left it as *Item*. More consequentially, there was some fluidity in the medieval English terminology for the solitary vocations. My ‘hermit’ invariably represents Latin *heremita* or *eremita*, or Middle English *heremyte* or similar, in the original. The lexis of enclosure is less straightforward. I have generally used the gender-neutral term *anchorite*, reflecting the Latin *anchorita* or *anachorita*.

Latin sources also use *inclusus* (masculine) or *inclusa* (feminine), or (less commonly) *reclusus*/*-a*, ‘enclosed person’, apparently without any distinction in meaning. French records tend to use *recluse*, which is also borrowed by Middle English for use alongside the native pair *ancer* or *anker* (for men) and *ancress* or *ankress* for women. The modern English *anchoress* derives from this last. There are arguments against this term, both linguistic (it is a back-formation from *anchorite*, rather than a genuine Middle English word) and political (like ‘authoress’ it marks the female as a deviation from a male norm), but it is in common parlance, and I have occasionally made use of it.

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