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Thomas R. Nevin, *Thérèse of Lisieux: God's Gentle Warrior*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Xviii + 398pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-19-530721-6.

Review by Thomas Kselman, University of Notre Dame.

Thérèse Martin, a young woman who died in the Carmelite convent of Lisieux in 1897 at the age of twenty four, has become perhaps the most popular saint in Catholicism, second only to Mary. Her fame is based largely on the autobiographical work that began circulating just after her death, and became one of the great best-sellers of the twentieth century; Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face may be the most widely read French female author, with nearly two and a half million copies of her autobiography, *L'Histoire d'une âme*, in circulation by 1925, the year she was canonized.[1] Unsurprisingly "the Little Flower" (as she became known to her devotees) has been studied carefully and seriously by innumerable scholars. Thomas Nevin's new book, *Thérèse of Lisieux: God's Gentle Warrior*, is thoroughly familiar with this scholarship, which he reviews critically in his useful annotated bibliography. A professor of classical studies, Nevin exhibits deep sympathy and reverence for his subject. From the perspective of a French historian, his work is useful and informative, with sharp insights on a number of interesting questions. But it is also limited in its value as a work of history, in part because the pious concerns of Nevin lead to extended general comments on spiritual life, and in part because the social and cultural context that surrounded and shaped Thérèse, while called on periodically, never come sharply into focus. Thérèse fascinates biographers, and her spiritual reflections continue to inspire a large number of readers and commentators, not all of them Catholic.[2] But her neglect by "historiens universitaires," as noted by Claude Langlois, means that we do not yet have a study about Thérèse Martin that makes full use of the rich evidence she has left to illuminate the tensions involving religion, family, and gender that informed the lives of the French in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[3]

Nevin has not written a conventional biography. He reviews Thérèse's life in a single chapter, and devotes the rest of his time to developing particular topics, starting with the life of her mother, Zélie, and the Carmelite tradition of spiritual autobiography, expressed in obituaries that circulated among the convents following the death of a sister. Zélie combined a life of austere Catholic piety with her responsibilities as a mother and businesswoman; in addition to bearing nine children, she also ran a successful lace-making business in Alençon. Nevin's presentation of Zélie is sensitive and intelligent, but he might have emphasized even more how her story provides a valuable complement to our understanding of Catholic middle-class women, such as those studied in Bonnie Smith's path-breaking book.[4] Through his study of Carmelite obituary notices Nevin shows how many of the themes in Thérèse's writings, such as the emphasis on smallness, and an absolute confidence in God's love (rather than a concern with his justice), developed out of this biographical tradition. Nevin then turns to a close analysis of the three autobiographical texts that were compiled by her sister Pauline, who was also in the Carmelite convent of Lisieux, into the single volume that was published after Thérèse's death. In this chapter, and in the succeeding one on the poems and plays, Nevin intersperses quotations from the texts with a commentary that elaborates on her ideas and language. While these chapters include some interesting observations, such as Nevin's gloss on Thérèse's frequent reference to herself as the "little plaything" (*petit jouet*) of Jesus (pp. 183-85), readers interested in her ideas can engage them directly in the many editions of her work that are still in print.[5] In a chapter on her medical history Nevin makes good use of some of the technical literature of the day, and shows how the various treatments prescribed by her doctors, such as the raising of blisters by applying a burning hot glass to the skin of the patient,

added to the suffering Thérèse experienced as she died of tuberculosis. In a final chapter Nevin explores her religious ideas, emphasizing how love dominates her theological vision so entirely that the other two virtues most associated with a Christian life, faith and hope, recede almost completely into the background, a development Nevin sees as her major contribution to Catholic spirituality.

Nevin makes an early effort to see Thérèse as related to her time and place, for he opens with a chapter on French Catholicism after the revolutionary era. But the context established is not fin-de-siècle France, where the status of women was being analyzed and redefined in anxious public discussions. Instead, Nevin offers us brief overviews of the ideas of Chateaubriand, Lamennais, and Renan. Each of these thinkers proposed a particular way of understanding Christianity in the modern world, but the sentimentalism of Chateaubriand, the political focus of Lamennais, and the intellectualizing posture of Renan are all judged deficient in comparison with the ideas of Thérèse Martin. But such a normative stance is not the best point of departure if we are interested in what Thérèse's life and writings can tell us about French culture and society. For Nevin, historical context is drawn on to illuminate his heroine, but if we reverse the perspective, Thérèse's life can allow us to see more deeply into the world of French Catholicism at a time when the church and its views about women were being challenged by powerful political and social forces.

Nevin is right to observe that the world of French politics in the early Third Republic, when anticlericalism was a principal political issue, does not show up in Thérèse's writings. From within the cloister of Lisieux, Thérèse was nonetheless a participant in the culture wars of that era, offering a model of Catholic womanhood that challenged the emergent secular values. Thérèse advocated a life of virtue that could be heroic even in the accomplishment of small and mundane tasks, if these were done as self-conscious acts of love performed as part of an intimate relationship with Jesus. I would propose Colette rather than Chateaubriand, Lamennais, and Renan, as the more appropriate foil for considering the achievement and significance of Thérèse Martin. Born in the same year, 1873, Colette like Thérèse became a best-selling woman author in the first years of the twentieth century. But the character of Claudine in Colette's autobiographical novels is unashamedly self-indulgent, rebellious, and erotic, "a pagan whose life and appetites were Olympian in their vitality," according to her biographer Judith Thurman.[6] It would be interesting to know how many of those who read the Little Flower's *Story of a Soul* also followed Claudine's career as she moved from a small town in Burgundy to Paris, and from being a flirtatious adolescent to a sexually active wife whose frankness shocked and titillated the French public.

On the surface Colette and Thérèse appear at opposite ends of the spectrum covering the behavior of young women in France around 1900, but there are also surprising similarities. Thérèse, like Colette (and Claudine) showed herself to be stubborn and willful at times, most famously when she disobeyed her clerical adviser and openly appealed to Pope Leo XIII for a special dispensation to enter the Carmelite convent as a young teenager. In their writings both Thérèse and Colette reveal themselves as highly self-conscious and astute observers of the minutiae of daily life and intimate relationships, which are pored over and analyzed in a sentimental vocabulary that suggests both innocence and a certain hard-headedness. Both were actresses on the stage, although there is certainly a difference between the convent plays of Thérèse and the music-hall performances of Colette. Neither engaged at all in the fight for women's rights; Thérèse appears oblivious to the issue, while Colette thought that the suffragettes deserved "the whip and the harem." [7] Both managed to live their lives on their own terms, freeing themselves from positions of subservience to men.

Such comparisons can reinforce our growing sense of the complicated struggles over the relationships between men and women in the early twentieth century.[8] But it would be unfair to both Thérèse and Colette to emphasize their common concerns and styles without referring as well to their opposed value systems. Thérèse is famous among Catholics for her "little way," a spiritual attitude that emphasized quiet and loving acceptance of the daily annoyances that come from living with other people, such as

some of the grumpy old nuns who annoyed Thérèse in the Lisieux convent. Developed originally by Thérèse to help train the novices put in her charge, the “little way” subsequently became a model for self-sacrifice for countless readers, both women and men, for soldiers at the front in World War I were particularly drawn to her. Thérèse combined this spiritual insight with a traditional Catholic denigration of the body. Although she could quote exuberant passages from the “Song of Songs” to describe her relationship with Jesus, Thérèse was fearful of and even repulsed by human sexuality. Self-denial and sexual chastity would not count at all among the values affirmed by Colette, but they were still powerfully appealing, to judge by the success of Thérèse’s autobiography.

Although Nevin does not refer to the recent scholarship on French Catholic sisters, his study of Thérèse could be read as contributing to our knowledge of this important group of women. We are learning more about the work sisters did in schools, hospitals, and overseas missions, and the ways in which they both accepted and manipulated male clerical authority. But it is easier to observe these women at work, teaching and healing, than it is to see into their inner lives, and we know more about the active congregations than we do about cloistered communities, such as the Carmelites.[9] Thérèse Martin’s spirituality opens up a fascinating dimension on the lives of sisters. Not everyone has been drawn to her “little way,” however, and some have criticized Thérèse for a literary and spiritual style that can seem cloying, with its pink and blue flowers and birds “as nauseating as a surfeit of marshmallows.”[10] More recent commentators, including Nevin, have pointed out, however, that Thérèse’s spirituality contained a powerful dark side, for as she approached death Thérèse at times doubted the existence of heaven, a fear she overcame by surrendering to the love of Jesus regardless of any hope for a reward in the afterlife. Perhaps the appeal of Thérèse Martin flows as much from her frank acknowledgement of religious struggle as it does from her sentimental piety. Understood in this sense, her writings illuminate tensions in the heart of a Catholic culture that was straining to adjust to a world in which the values of Colette were both shocking and seductive.

NOTES

[1] For the numbers see Barbara Corrado Pope, “A Heroine without Heroics: The Little Flower of Jesus and Her Times,” *Church History* 57 (1988): 46-60; numbers on 50. For her popularity see Stephen Wilson, “Cults of Saints in the Churches of Central Paris,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980): 548-75.

[2] Guy Gaucher, *Histoire d'une vie: Thérèse Martin* (Paris: Cerf, 1997); Ida F. Gorres, *The Hidden Face: A Study of Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York: Pantheon, 1959); Jean-Francois Six, *Vie de Thérèse de Lisieux* (Paris: Seuil, 1975); Kathryn Harrison, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York: Penguin, 2003). Nevin comments on these and other studies in his bibliography (pp. 371-90). Of the biographers, Six is most attentive to context, but his focus is nonetheless trained primarily on Thérèse.

[3] Claude Langlois, *Le poème de septembre: Lecture du Manuscrit B de Thérèse de Lisieux* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), p. 11. Langlois’s work is an obvious exception to his own point, but is a careful textual study rather than a full exploration of Thérèse’s significance as a historical figure.

[4] Bonnie Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981). On the activity of Catholic women see also Sarah Curtis, “Charitable Ladies: Gender, Class and Religion in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *Past and Present* 177 (2002): 121-56.

[5] There are several French and English editions of Thérèse's autobiography, many of them based on the editing work of her sister Pauline, who oversaw the first publication of *Histoire d'une âme* (*The Story of a Soul*) in 1898. For a critical edition of all her writings see Thérèse de Lisieux, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Cerf, 2002). Guy Gaucher has studied the process of how the autobiography was published in *L'Histoire d'une âme de Thérèse de Lisieux* (Paris: Cerf, 2000), a work which he argues created "a spiritual revolution in the history of Christianity" (p. 13).

[6] Colette, *The Complete Claudine* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), Introduction by Judith Thurman, pp. vii-xviii, quotation from p. vii; Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

[7] Judith Thurman, "Introduction" to *The Complete Claudine*, p. viii.

[8] Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[9] Sarah Curtis, *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Schooling, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); idem, "Emilie de Vialar and the Religious Reconquest of Algeria," *French Historical Studies* 29 (2006): 261-92; Rebecca Rogers, "Retrograde or Modern? Unveiling the Teaching Nun in Nineteenth-Century France," *Social History* 23 (1998): 146-64; idem, *From the Salon to the Schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois Girls in Nineteenth-Century France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), covers lay teachers as well as sisters; Judith Stone, "Anticlericals and Bonnes Soeurs: The Rhetoric of the 1901 Law of Associations," *French Historical Studies* 23 (2000): 103-28; Caroline Ford, "Religion and the Politics of Cultural Change in Provincial France: The Resistance of 1902 in Lower Brittany," *Journal of Modern History* 62 (1990): 1-33. For insight into the spiritual concerns of sisters see Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in a Secular Age* (New York: Viking, 1999), pp. 210-87; Thérèse Taylor, *Bernadette of Lourdes: Her Life, Death, and Visions* (New York: Burns and Oates, 2003), provides a fascinating view of convent life. Caroline Ford uses conflicts involving convents to explore the shifting social status of women in *Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005). All of this research builds on the work of Claude Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin: Les congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1984). The spiritual lives of men are also beginning to receive some attention; see Carol Harrison, "Zouave Stories: Gender, Catholic Spirituality, and French Responses to the Roman Question," *Journal of Modern History* 79 (2007): 274-305; Thomas Kselman, "The Perraud Affair: Clergy, Church, and Sexual Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France," *Journal of Modern History* 70 (1998): 602-3.

[10] Vita Sackville West, quoted in Richard D. E. Burton, *Holy Tears, Holy Blood: Women, Catholicism, and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1840-1970* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 22. Burton's chapter on Thérèse (pp. 20-61) provides an excellent introduction to her life and work, and contrasts her "little way" with the harsher expiatory practices that were also part of French Catholic culture. Thérèse, for example, was not attracted to the cult of the Sacred Heart, which is explored by Raymond Jonas in *The Tragic Tale of Claire Ferchaud and the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), and *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

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