

H-France Review Vol. 9 (February 2009), No. 31

Louisa A. Burnham, *So Great a Light, So Great a Smoke: The Beguin Heretics of Languedoc*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008. xvi + 217pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4131-8.

Review by John H. Arnold, Birkbeck College, University of London.

On Monday, 21 March 1328, a notary from Montpellier called Johan Holanie recorded a most unusual event. It took place in a field, outside the city itself, near the local Franciscan convent. His client was Sibillia Cazelas, a widow from the village of Gignac, and the principal witnesses were three Franciscan friars. There were two transactions: a large cash gift—£300 to Sibillia, given by Lady Gaucelina of Teyran, who had ridden to the field accompanied by her eldest son Jacme – and (presumably facilitating the former) the sale of some family land by Lady Gaucelina and Jacme to a certain glassblower.

Notarial registers do not usually indicate precise motives and purposes, and so what exactly was going on that day will necessarily remain mysterious. But as Louisa Burnham persuasively argues, through reconstructing some of the other circumstances we can make a reasonable guess. A couple of years earlier, Sibillia Cazelas had been interrogated by inquisitors for her involvement with that heretical offshoot of the Franciscan order known as the “Beguins.” She had confessed that she had heard the radical visions of Na Prous Boneta (a Beguin mystic); she had made a pilgrimage to the grave of Peter Olivi (died 1298, whose radical idea of spiritual poverty can be seen as the beginning of Beguism); and she believed that those Beguins earlier executed were “holy and glorious martyrs.” In November 1328 Sibillia and various others were sentenced by the inquisitors. Na Prous Boneta was executed at the stake. Twelve people were imprisoned, others made to wear yellow crosses marking them out for their heretical transgression. And Sibillia? She was sent only on minor pilgrimage and spared the yellow crosses. Interpreting the grounds upon which penances were awarded is an inexact science, as inquisitors were enjoined to make the punishment fit both the crime and the nature of the person sentenced. But Sibillia’s fate seems remarkably light. Perhaps the quality of inquisitorial mercy was refined by the application of a suitable...donation? Was Lady Gaucelina’s gift, to put it more bluntly, used as a large bribe?

I begin my review with this little narrative because Burnham’s monograph tempts one almost irresistibly in the direction of historical storytelling. This is a very well-written, clever, humane, and insightful piece of history; calling it “a delight” may seem gauche, given the often rather terrible subject matter, but nonetheless it does delight, enthrall, and impress throughout. Since one of the approving backcover blurbs is given by an historical novelist, this reaction may not stray too far from the author’s intentions for her readers. But that is not to say that *So Great a Light, So Great a Smoke* is “pop history” in the lowest-common-denominator sense. It is, rather, a very successful adaptation of a seriously scholarly Ph.D. thesis, written with considerable verve and imagination, based upon a thorough, insightful, and diligent interrogation of a variety of unpublished archival sources.

The Beguins of southern France—who are not to be confused with those northern European “Beguines” of similar and later date—have been somewhat under-represented in academic study (notwithstanding the important work of David Burr, whose scholarship casts a benign shadow over this book).[1] If we’re

in medieval Languedoc, the first bunch of radicals everyone thinks about are the Cathars. However, as Burnham notes, in the first decades of the fourteenth century, those dualist heretics were but a minor concern. The people who really worried the papacy and the inquisitors were those Spiritual Franciscans or Beguins who, following Olivi, had adopted a doctrine of spiritual poverty, and embraced an apocalyptic vision of coming radical change. More than one hundred men and women were burnt for their involvement in the Beguin heresy in Languedoc between 1318 and 1330 (listed in an appendix by Burnham). More were sentenced in lesser ways. This is a dark index of notable concern and repression, and it is clear that the Beguins should not be eclipsed by other, more famous and tourist-friendly, heretical groups.

In reconstructing this movement and its unfortunate fate, Burnham has worked with inquisitorial sources, principally volumes 27 and 28 of the Collection Doat in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and the sentences of Bernard Gui. Her approach to these complex sources (complex in terms of one's methodology, epistemology, and ethical position as an historian) is discussed clearly and insightfully (pp. 57-59), and she emphasises that her key desire is to present events from the viewpoint of the individual Beguins themselves. This she does extremely well, paying close attention to the month-by-month chronology of events and their potential effects upon the persecuted radicals. The book is extremely good at getting one to see *with* the Beguin communities—to think, for example, about the effect of hearing about the execution of others from their movement, the potential difference between hearing of the deaths of “famous” but distant Beguins, and hearing that people *you have actually met* have been condemned to the stake. The principal effect of persecution, Burnham suggests, was not to radicalise the groups – they had already adopted a pretty radical theological agenda. Rather, the effects of inquisitorial pursuit and repression were read through the pre-existing lens of apocalyptic theology, turning execution into martyrdom and Revelation. “Persecution was not merely unjust, it was also necessary” (p. 80) because it confirmed the spiritual position of the persecuted within the coming end times.

The Beguins already had a degree of organisation and lines of communication; persecution turned these into essential facets of resistance, with some remarkably successful “weapons of the truly weak” deployed against inquisitorial pursuit. And it is here in particular that Burnham moves beyond inquisitors' archives to other sources, principally notarial registers from Montpellier. It is from these materials that the story at the beginning of this review is drawn, and much else besides. Burnham is able to use the registers not only to contextualise people she has already encountered in an inquisitorial context; she is also able to demonstrate that a network of support for Beguins spread wider into the populace, including people—such as Lady Gaucelina—otherwise unknown to inquisitors (or, at any rate, unknown in the surviving inquisitorial registers). Issues of motive, the nature of involvement, and so forth remain frustratingly opaque, but by drawing upon this wider realm of materials, Burnham provides a rich sense of the social setting of heresy and its support.

The author's stated aim for the book is to make the heretics “come to life” (p. 4), and this she most surely achieves. The story of the notary in the field is related initially in an imaginative (and only slightly embellished) reconstruction, and throughout the text Burnham looks for ways of enlivening our perceptions, with details and parallels that prod us into empathetic engagement with these past lives. Just occasionally this can tip over (for this English reader, at any rate) into something a little mawkish or clunky, as when the relatively new city of Montpellier itself is described as “almost a Horatio Alger hero of the south” (p. 95) or the fugitive Beguin Peire Trencavel is likened extensively to the Scarlet Pimpernel (p. 162). And just occasionally the author's very considerable sympathy for and with her subjects perhaps leads her to read her sources a little too directly, as when recounting without comment some Beguin witnesses' pious memories of the “stalwart” behaviour of their martyred comrades (p. 77). But for the very most part, this is a book which wonderfully balances the scholarly and the imaginative, and makes us vividly aware of the human texture of history. I salute the author for her craft and her flair.

NOTE

[1] David Burr, *Olivi and Franciscan Poverty* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989); David Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

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ISSN 1553-9172