

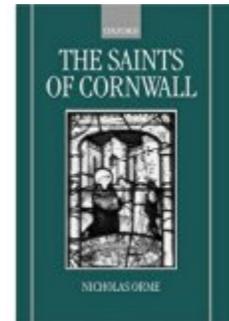
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nicholas Orme. *The Saints of Cornwall*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. vii +302 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820765-8.

Reviewed by Katherine French (Department of History, State University of New York, New Paltz, New York)

Published on H-Albion (February, 2001)



Local Saints and Local Culture

Local Saints and Local Culture

Nicholas Orme's most recent work *The Saints of Cornwall* is not so much a discussion of Cornish hagiography or the cult of the saints in the county of Cornwall, but rather a two-hundred page dictionary of Cornish saints. This dictionary "attempts to produce a complete inventory of all known religious cults, dedicated to the Deity or to another named person in . . . the county of Cornwall" (p. ix). To build this dictionary, Orme has looked at the usual sources such as wills, bishop's registers, and saints' lives, as well as place names and antiquarian studies. The dictionary includes not only variations on the saint's name but sources where the saint appears, a brief outline of the saint's life, and a discussion of where the veneration was centered, and what images survive. The dictionary is preceded by a series of detailed maps that show parish boundaries and the distribution of religious houses and the locations of Breton, Welsh, and Cornish cults. This book is a useful guide for those studying various facets of hagiography. It will be a helpful reference work that local historians, literary scholars, and a host of other interested students will consult for quite some time.

To justify this endeavor, Orme has written a succinct introduction that outlines the goals of this book. It does not provide extensive discussion for how saints were venerated, how to interpret the various surviving images of the saints, or the history of religious foundations. His excellent bibliography and notes, however,

will guide readers to those studies that do.

The introduction has five sections that outline in turn: 1) the history of Cornwall in the early middle ages when most local cults seem to have originated, 2) the evidence for saint cults, both local and international, 3) what this evidence can tell us about Cornish history before the Norman Conquest, 4) the history of saint cults in Cornwall from the Conquest to the Reformation, and 5) the impact of the Reformation on the veneration of saints. Orme's introduction makes several important points, while laying out the chronology of the veneration of saints in Cornwall. He points out that while most saints' lives discuss a clash between Christian and pagan practices, there is no evidence in the early histories of the area to back this up. By the time the first Cornish saints are documented, Christianity seems to be fairly well established.

He argues that the bulk of local Cornish saints are Brittonic, meaning they arrived in Cornwall from either Wales, Brittany or else they were native to the county. The larger Celtic associations that have accreted to them are late medieval additions. During the English conquest of Cornwall, Cornish saints were respected. They fared less well during the Norman Conquest, when many religious foundations dedicated to local saints were despoiled. After the twelfth century, however, Cornish saints rebounded in popularity and continued to be locally important up through and beyond the Reformation. While the Reformation certainly put an end to many

practices of venerating saints, it did not change place names, or abolish the folklore of many areas that explained local geography in terms of the actions of saints. Thus the tradition of honoring saints, and seeing them in the landscape, did not come to an end with the Reformation.

Orme's introduction, however, does more than simply provide a useful context for his dictionary. He also raises some important issues for future scholarship. Orme's hope is that others will use his work as a model and produce similar reference works for the other counties or diocese of England. His desire, although ambitious, nevertheless, focuses on the question of local culture, and whether Cornwall, or indeed any other part of England, is particularly special or just different from other parts. Does medieval Cornwall possess a sense of local identity and culture that makes it unique in England? Orme does not so much explicitly answer this

question as provide a mountain of empirical data to argue the point. The range of local saints makes Cornwall's cult of the saints unusual in England, yet Orme is reluctant to side conclusively with one position or the other. This reluctance has more to do with his stated desire for similar studies of other parts of England. Only then will it be clear whether Cornwall's differences amount to anything more than local variation. This would seem to be an important issue for a variety of scholars, especially literary ones who work in East Anglia where the literary survival is so strong that there is the temptation to assert that region's intellectual uniqueness, rather than consider that much of what survives there might have been lost for the rest of England.

Copyright (c) 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Katherine French. Review of Orme, Nicholas, *The Saints of Cornwall*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4930>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.