

SCATTERGOOD, John 2010: *Occasions for Writing: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature, Politics and Society*. Dublin, Four Courts Press. 272 pp. ISBN 978-1-84682-179-0. 55€.

John Scattergood, now retired from teaching English at Trinity College Dublin, has since the 1970s published many books. Though one cannot claim distinction for them (let alone any startling discovery), they are always clearly written, being free from jargon and pretentiousness. This volume adheres to the accustomed pattern by offering twelve papers, three of them on 'movements' and nine on 'incidents', as follows.

We start with 'Redeeming English', which takes the fashionable subject of English and Englishness in the late middle ages, but differs from treatments by Thorlac Turville-Petre and others through consideration of the English language in Ireland, where by the fifteenth century it seemed to be in permanent retreat before a linguistic *reconquista* by Irish. After words and nationalism come words and love, as presented in the twelfth century by Andreas Capellanus and in the fifteenth by women's love letters from the Paston circle. Implications for class and gender are here to the fore. 'Writing the Clock' turns to medieval people and time. It discusses a famous hate-poem by Dafydd ap Gwilym, where the Welsh poet abused a timepiece that disturbed his slumbers. Professor Scattergood here includes the absurd translation of *hwyaid* as 'ducks' (p. 81), even though this reviewer pointed out in his *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997), p. 121, that the correct rendering is 'foliot', an oscillating horizontal bar which regulated such mechanisms until the Dutch invented the clock pendulum in about 1650. Professor Scattergood may think that medieval clocks had ducks inside them, but we should be foolish to believe him.

The remainder of the book offers varied fare on medieval and early Tudor matters. Analysis of the Hiberno-English poem *Piers of Bermingham* of 1308 brings out the confusion of critics and Irish historians as to whether it is eulogy or satire. The author offers a persuasive revisionist case for the latter (though without mention of an important paper on the poem by Professor Yoko Wada of Kansai University). After that are William Langland, Robin Hood, and outlaws; then money, medieval cities, and Chaucer's last poem, a complaint to his empty purse. Chapter seven turns to the perilous subjects of Oldcastle's rebellion and Lollardy, ably setting

out the literary and political manipulation of Oldcastle's memory from his own day until that of Shakespeare. Two more papers on the fifteenth century comment on the new concept of England demonstrated by *The Libelle of Englysche Polycye*, and the absence of contemporary attention to a French naval defeat off Yorkshire in 1451. (An essay on the *The Libelle of Englysche Polycye* might have mentioned that Sir John Paston possessed a copy of it, as this reviewer pointed out in 2001, though Professor Scattergood seems unaware of this.) We end with three papers on the age of Henry VIII. Skelton's *Magnyfycence* is mined for comment on corruption at the king's court; Thomas Wyatt provides occasion for analysis of satire in Henry's last years, when political life was as dangerous as ever; and English patriotism returns with John Leland's *Itineraries*, where this antiquary's notes on ruined monasteries chart the brutal effects of Henry's policies for English landscape, religion, and society.

John Scattergood is not an incompetent researcher, but he is an imperfect one, who will irritate scholars more careful and comprehensive than himself by the selective nature of his work. Nevertheless, his essays have the merit of focussing on actual texts. Though *Pieces for Occasion* is hardly a mainstream book, it has much of interest. It should certainly be consulted by specialists working on the texts that it deals with. If there is one thing about it that calls for whole-hearted praise, it is not the author's workaday and somewhat self-regarding prose, but the volume's elegant presentation: something we expect from that admirable embodiment of Irish enlightenment and effectiveness, Four Courts Press of Dublin.

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