

**BOOK REVIEW: New Llanthony Abbey: Father Ignatius's Monastery at Capel-y-ffin by Hugh Allen (Peterscourt Press, 2016, pp. xx + 509, £18.50; also available from Amazon)**

Joseph Leycester Lyne, Father Ignatius, OSB, (1837-1908), founder of New Llanthony Abbey at Capel-y-ffin, has been the subject of three biographies. The first, by Baroness de Bertouch, appeared in 1904, three years or so before his death, and is described by Hugh Allen, as 'a fantastic web of myth and miracle, all 599 pages of it in the deepest purple of purple prose.' (p. xiv). This was followed in 1931 by a briefer and more sober life by Donald Attwater, and in 1962 by Arthur Calder-Marshall's more critical work, *The Enthusiast*.

In this detailed new work Hugh Allen concentrates on the story of the community from the early 1860s to its demise shortly after that of its founder, bringing the story up to date with the subsequent uses given to the monastic buildings, including their use by the sculptor and engraver Eric Gill and his collective of Catholic artists and craftsmen between 1924 and 1928, and the more recent history of pilgrimages, with which Hugh Allen himself, as a member of the Father Ignatius Memorial Trust, has been involved.

Much meticulous research has gone into this substantial book, particularly in the detailed investigation of the biographies of those many young men and boys who were erstwhile members of Ignatius's Community. This is now possible in a way that it could not be to earlier historians of the community through access to census returns and newspaper reports on the internet. But Hugh Allen has also utilised a wide range of archives relating to Ignatius himself and the community and its associates across the whole chequered history of its existence. There is no doubt that Ignatius had a charismatic personality, capable of drawing young men into his romantic understanding of monasticism. Yet he was supremely lacking in spiritual wisdom. As Hugh Allen puts it: "At the age of twenty-four he clothed himself in the habit, and as he later put it 'So I became a Benedictine' – complete and ready-made, impatient to launch himself and his idea on the world. And because of his semi-detached relationship with his own community he expected those who joined it to make their own way much as he had done, coming down on them like a ton of bricks when they got it wrong, but rarely at their side to direct and encourage them." (p. xii) Time and again he was absent from Llanthony for extended periods, giving mission addresses as a monk-evangelist, leaving the community to fend for itself. Because of the author's focus on the community it is regrettable that we are not given any sense of Ignatius' preaching, which had so much of the revivalist about it, and J.V. Smedley, who edited Ignatius' *Mission Sermons and Addresses delivered at Westminster Town Hall* in the late 1880s does not appear in the extensive index of names and places. He described himself as a 'monkevangelist' and yet his frequent itinerancy, necessary also for fund-raising, was in clear tension with the *stabilitas*, which was and is an essential element of the Benedictine life. It is not surprising that so many passed through rather than grew into his community; and that time and again we find amongst those who did some unstable characters who are noted as having later convictions for theft, or who became part of the ecclesiastical under-world of *episcopi vagantes* – as indeed did Ignatius himself through his ordination to the priesthood in July 1898, along with Brother Iltud, by Joseph René Vilatte (Mar Timotheus).

Hugh Allen's book traces the history of the Llanthony Community from its beginnings at Claydon near Ipswich, to its time at Elm Hill, Norwich, where Ignatius assumed the title of Abbot and was addressed as 'Father' rather than 'Brother'. (He had been ordained deacon and served a (brief) curacy with George Rundle Prynne in Plymouth, where he had known Priscilla Lydia Sellon and the Devonport sisters.) He was reported as introducing 'a most slavish kind of homage, enjoining his associates of the order never to speak to him unless they went down on their knees, and never to pass him without making a prostration.' (pp. 42-43). This was later to be echoed in the harsh penances imposed at Llanthony, and the rigorous devotional timetable to which Ignatius himself, even when present in the monastery, appeared to have sat lightly. After the collapse of the Elm Hill community, a visit abroad to Italy, and an experience of conversion or transfiguration on an Isle of Wight beach, there was a re-launch of the community at St Bartholomew, Moor Lane, in the City in 18678, where his preaching there and at lunch-time services at St Edmund the King, Lombard Street, attracted significant congregations. Thence via Laleham, the community came to Capel-y-ffin.

Allen provides a detailed record of the establishment of the community, the erection of the first monastic buildings, and then the abbey church, as well as accounts of members of the community, including the monastery boys, the associates, and the small number of sisters who eventually joined them. John Henry Docking, who had been taken into the community when they were at Elm Hill, as an Infant Oblate, having been handed over at the age of two and three-quarters, by his abandoned mother and dedicated on the altar of the Chapel, was part of the community until 1876 when it was noted that Brother Ignatius, as he was known, 'at fourteen no vocation, so I have apprenticed him to sea.' An appendix reveals that in later life in America, Docking wrote an account of his life inventing a fictitious adoptive family without any reference to Ignatius and his monastery. Full accounts from the original records are given of the Llanthony Apparitions, of the miraculous monstrence, and of our Lady, in 1880 and 1881. There are fascinating illustrations of community life and the monastic buildings both at Elm Hill and at Capel-y-ffin.

All in all this book is a fascinating compendium of information about a bizarre and ambiguous monastic experiment, shaped by the enthusiasm of Ignatius himself, capable of attracting a sequence of others to a romantic expression of the monastic life but without the wisdom needed to shape, form and sustain it. As a result of Hugh Allen's researches we now know much more of the details of the community's life and the identities of those who for a longer or shorter period made it up. One is tempted to say, as James Anthony Froude is reputed to have done, having completed the life of St Neot for Newman's *Lives of the Saints*, "And this is all, and rather more than all, that is known of the life of the Blessed St Neot!"

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