A Companion to Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167)

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Editor: Marsha L. Dutton

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The life and writings of Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–67) provide some of the most important material for the study of Cistercian monasticism in 12th-century England, Cistercian teachings and beliefs, and the relationship of the order with other ecclesiastical and secular bodies. To date, the corpus of surviving works attributed to Aelred includes almost 200 sermons, 13 treatises and seven historical and hagiographical works. Among modern audiences, Aelred is regarded as one of the foremost thinkers of 12th-century England, at times on par with the great Bernard of Clairvaux, with whom Aelred is known to have had regular contact and with whom Aelred's biographer; a link which inspired Knowles' now famous description of Aelred as the 'Bernard of the North'.⁽¹⁾

Aelred provides the subject for the latest addition to the Brill *Companions to the Christian Tradition* series. This is a book which easily fulfils Brill's brief to produce 'full balanced accounts at an advanced level' and 'synthesis of debate and the state of scholarship', with particularly notable strengths in the latter.⁽²⁾ This collection has been curated by Marsha Dutton who, as Professor Emerita at Ohio State University, Executive Editor of Cistercian Publications, editor of several of Aelred's works, and author of numerous studies on Aelred's life and themes within his writings, needs little introduction to Aelred specialists.⁽³⁾ Dutton is author of two chapters, with the remaining eight authors drawn from the ranks of the established academic field of Aelred and Cistercian studies. This companion makes a worthy and timely addition to Brill's series, focusing on one of the most important thinkers in 12th-century English theology and spirituality, and drawing on a number of recent new editions of Aelred's works, many of which have been produced by Dutton.

Dutton's introduction is carefully planned, introducing the reader to Aelred's life and works in just enough detail so as to provide sufficient coverage, but without too much content so as to confuse the novice. Dutton expertly outlines the case for Aelred as a subject for attention, describing his treatises on spiritualism as his 'greatest contribution to Western thought', and portraying Aelred as a 'significant contributor' to his three main fields of writing, noted here as spiritual thought; history-writing, and discourse on English conquests abroad, which is here termed 'paracolonialism' (p. 1). Dutton's summary of Aelredian scholarship reflects on the major trends in Aelred studies from Dumont and Squire to more recent developments, recognising debts owed to modern Cistercian scholars, before setting out the agenda for the rest of the volume.

Appended to the final section of the introduction is a chronology of Aelred's life in tabular form, which, although sensibly located adjacent to Dutton's biography of Aelred in chapter one, might have been better located for reference purposes if placed at the beginning or end of the book.

The constituent chapters of the volume begin with two studies of Aelred's life, beginning first with Dutton on Aelred as 'Abbot, Teacher and Author', followed by Daniel M. La Corte's chapter on Aelred's 'Abbatial Responsibilities'. Dutton summarises the main phases of Aelred's life, from his youth and family background onwards, incorporating his conversion to monastic life while in the service of King David of Scotland and a consideration of Aelred's role as teacher and abbot at Rievaulx. Also included in this discussion, is an introduction to the sources for Aelred's life, a chronologically-arranged summary of his writings and sources used, and an acknowledgement of the essentially unanswerable debate on Aelred's sexuality. This section is essential reading for those new to Aelred, ending with some reflections on the significance of Aelred's role in his own time and the present day, and lays out a picture of Aelred which is reinforced throughout the remainder of the volume, of Aelred as 'loving shepherd to his community', both inside and outside of the cloister (p. 47).

La Corte explores Aelred's perceptions of his role as abbot, which stems from his assertion that previous discussions on the subject have been over-reliant on Walter Daniel's *Vita Aelredi*, and concerned to 'confirm Walter Daniel's gentle portrait rather than to discover a more balanced and accurate picture' (p. 50). La Corte takes the opposite approach, building his picture of Aelred as abbot almost exclusively from various sermons and the *Pastoral Prayer*, and quoting extensively from these sources and emphasising the multiple dimensions of the role, including those of teacher, father, mother, physician, servant and steward.

Following these two biographical studies, are nine further chapters, divided into two sections: 'Part 1: Aelred's Works' and 'Part 2: Aelred's Teachings'. This division effectively separates these studies into 1) introductions to Aelred's writings and 2) introductions to some of the themes featured within them. 'Aelred's Works', begins with a survey of Aelred's sermons by Domenico Pezzini, who is currently preparing a collection of 25 of the liturgical sermons, and whose chapter draws on recent progress in the identification and editing of the material by Raciti. Summarising the content and character of nearly 200 extant Aelred sermons is a tall order, but by dividing the sermons into three main subject themes (Feasts of our Lord, Feats of Saints and Public Occasions) and commenting on multiple characteristics of Aelred's Latin style, Pezzini offers valuable insight into some of Aelred's own thoughts on the theory and practice of sermon-writing. Following this is John R. Sommerfeldt's chapter on 'Anthropology and cosmology: the foundational principles of Aelred's spirituality'. The relation to Pezzini's chapter is clear, as Sommerfeldt draws heavily on Aelred's sermons in order to provide a commentary on the Aelred doctrine on the nature of sin, and the journey towards redemption.

The final chapter of part one is Elizabeth Freeman's lengthy exploration of 'Aelred as a historian among historians'. Freeman outlines the contents the seven works on past events written by Aelred and gives dates for the composition. This wide-ranging corpus of works is organised into three sub-categories of 'contemporary, localised histories'; 'histories of broader place and time' and 'saintly histories of broader place and time', but Freeman argues persuasively for reading all seven of Aelred's histories within the entire landscape of Aelred's treatises, sermons and homilies rather than employing an artificial distinction between 'historical' and 'theological' works. Aelred's motivations for writing are summarised by Freeman as a desire to use history as a mirror for princes and a vehicle for the promotion of Northumbrian saints, offering welcome commentary on the ways in which events in Aelred's life and education (pre- and post-conversion) contributed to his historical and hagiographical writings. This chapter offers a highly insightful introduction to Aelred's historical works, the various contexts in which they were produced, the sources and experiences which shaped their composition, and their reception among both later medieval and modern readerships. Freeman's suggestion that more work is required on both the re-editing and dating of Aelred's histories, is welcomed, and it is hoped that her overview might stimulate such a future project.

'Part 2: Aelred's Teachings', comprises six studies which reflect on some of the dominant theological and

doctrinal themes of Aelred's works, including love, friendship and community, and which together, show a consistent focus on creation and salvation. This begins with Marie Anne Mayeski's exploration of Aelred's teachings on the Virgin Mary in his work *On the Formation of Anchoresses*, plus eight sermons known to have been written before 1147, while Aelred was abbot at Revesbury. A defining feature of Cistercian monasticism, Aelred's focus on the Virgin Mary is shown to have provided ample fuel for his early writings, in which, she argues, Aelred developed a three-part conceptualisation of Mary's varying roles: 1) Mary as Israel, and the fulfilment of human salvation; 2) she who brought the Divine Word into its human form, and 3) as the permanent reminder of Christ in human form, and in doing so sheds valuable light on the development of Aelred's thought and writings in his early years. Damien Boquet follows this with analysis of how Aelred conceptualised and used the concept of affection (*affectus*) and various forms of love, in his spiritual writings. This chapter (translated by Martha F. Krieg) is a masterclass in systematic, analytical theology, which should rouse the interests of more advanced readers of Aelred's works, given the continuing debates surrounding the interpretation of the term acknowledged in Dutton's introduction (p. 11).

Part two continues with Pierre-André Burton's chapter, which portrays Aelred as a 'master of spiritual teaching'. In conversation with Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred claimed that he was too 'ignorant in the art of writing' to write the *Mirror of Charity* which Bernard had then asked of him (quoted by Burton, p. 197). Burton explains this as Aelred commenting on his lack of a formalised education at a leading centre such as Paris, before building on the argument made by Walter Daniel, that Aelred's intellectual abilities were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and offering a series of examples to suggest that Aelred aspired to this self-acquired knowledge. Burton then tests the question through a reading of Aelred's sermon for the *Purification of the Virgin*, in which he identifies Aelred's use of five levels of reading scripture, demonstrates the emergence of Aelred's imagery and spirituality within the text, and concludes by recognising Aelred's 'genius'; on the one hand showing an 'apparent simplicity' of writing, which, on the other hand, reveals its 'extreme complexity' and 'doctrinal richness' on further reading and understanding (p. 216). Following Burton is Pezzini's second chapter in the volume, which provides a detailed and precise commentary on Aelred's doctrine on charity and friendship; the twin defining characteristics of Cistercian monasticism. Focusing on Aelred's *Mirror of Charity* (his earliest known work) and *Spiritual Friendship* (one of his last) and engaging with the discussion of *affectus* featured in Bouquet's chapter, Burton establishes Aelred's belief that charity and friendship were twin summits of love, made possible by God, highlighting the permanence of these concepts throughout Aelred's career.

In the penultimate chapter of part two, Dutton explains Aelred's conceptualisation of community, which was a key component of his duties as abbot at Rievaulx, and a recurrent theme in his writings. Dutton's central argument suggests that while previous studies are correct to emphasise the Christocentric nature of Aelred on friendship and community, Aelred himself in fact believed that the community of God was open to all, whether Christian or not. On a related theme, the final main chapter, by Katherine TePas Yohe, provides a markedly clear and stimulating exploration of Aelred's ideas on the role of the laity in the world. Drawing on Aelred's historical works as well as his sermons, Yohe demonstrates Aelred's belief that lay persons could achieve virtue through discipline and order, and that these were naturally grown through manual labour and fulfilling family relationships. Returning to themes discussed by Freeman in chapter three, Yohe also summarises Aelred's understanding of kingship, and in particular a king's duty to serve his people by offering peace and protection to lay and ecclesiastical communities.

Following the conclusion of part two, a series of resources have been included in the companion, in order to help further the development of Aelred studies. This begins, most notably, with Burton's second supplement to the *Bibliotheca aelrediana secunda*, which offers an encyclopaedic bibliography of studies relating to Aelred published down to 2015 organised by particular themes within his life and works, and which serves as an essential starting-point for future scholarship on Aelred.⁽⁴⁾ A comprehensive bibliography and index follow this. The bibliography follows the previous Brill *Companions to the Christian Tradition* format, arranging multiple entries by the same author in alphabetical, rather than chronological order, which may frustrate readers.

This is a companion volume which offers much to please students and scholars working within the existing fields of Aelred and Cistercian studies. Throughout the featured chapters, there is a consistent focus on the dominant themes of previous studies, including Aelred's doctrine on love, friendship, community, charity, creation and salvation-history. The collection as a whole is heavily focused on these more spiritual dimensions of Aelred's oeuvre, and is firmly grounded in the field of Cistercian theology and monasticism. The general historian might wish to know a little more about additional subjects such as the manuscript evidence and dissemination of Aelred's works (references on p. 2, note 8 but not explored in detail), the history and archaeology of Rievaulx and Revesby during Aelred's lifetime, and perhaps also more on Aelred's life, journeys and relationships with various external contacts. There is much to be written on these topics, and many sources through which these subject may be explored, perhaps here in dialogue with the chronological table produced by Dutton (pp. 15–16). Maps are a notable omission, which, had they been included, might have done much to address these more biographical questions.

That being said, this companion, and especially Dutton's introduction and the initial chapters featured in part one, makes essential reading for students and scholars seeking to explore Aelred for the first time. Once readers have mastered the *trivium* of studies presented in part one, they might then be considered ready to pursue the sextet of commentaries featured in part two. For Aelred's biography, this companion does not replace Hallier, Squire, Burton the recent study by Truax, and Walter Daniel's original *Vita Ailredi* (5) while students of Aelred's spiritual and theological writings should still turn to the recent monographs of Nouzille, Sommerfeldt, and Boquet.(6) Nevertheless, the chapters collected in this companion should do much to encourage and assist the development of new approaches to the life and works of Aelred of Rievaulx, whose reputation as one of the foremost thinkers of 12th-century England, and whose accessibility to new students, is only enhanced by the discussions featured within this companion.

Notes

1. David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge, 1941), p. 240.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. <<http://www.brill.com/publications/brills-companions-christian-tradition> [2]> [accessed 13 August 2017].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Marsha L. Dutton, 'Christ our mother: Aelred's iconography for contemplative union', *Goad and Nail: Studies in Medieval Cistercian History*, 10, ed. Rozanne Elder, Cistercian Studies, 84 (Kalamazoo, 1985), pp. 21–45 and 'The Cistercian source: Aelred, Bonaventure and Ignatius' in *ibid.*, pp. 151–78; Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Lives of the Northern Saints*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton and trans. Jane Patricia Freeman, Cistercian Fathers Series, 71 (Kalamazoo, 2006); Aelred of Rievaulx, *For Your Own People: Aelred of Rievaulx's Pastoral Prayer*, ed. Marsha Dutton, trans. Mark DeCogliano, Cistercian Fathers Series, 73 (Kalamazoo, 2008); Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, Cistercian Fathers Series, 5 (Kalamazoo, 2010). For a summary of Dutton's publications, see: *A Companion to Aelred of Rievaulx*, ed. Marsha Dutton, Companions to the Christian Tradition, 76 (Leiden, 2017), (hereafter CAR), pp. 334–5.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. This is intended as a supplement to: Anselm Hoste, *Bibliotheca Aelrediana: A Survey of the Manuscripts, Old Catalogues, Editions and Studies Concerning St. Aelred of Rievaulx* (Steenbrugge, 1962); Pierre-André Burton, *Bibliotheca Aelrediana Secunda: Une Bibliographie Cumulative (1962–1996)*, Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, Textes et Études du Moyen Âge, 7 (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1997).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Amédée Hallier, *Un Éducateur Monastique: Aelred de Rievaulx* (Paris, 1959); Aelred Squire, *Aelred of Rievaulx: a Study*, (London, 1969); Pierre-André Burton, *Aelred de Rievaulx (1110–1167): Essai de Biographie Existentielle et Spirituelle* (Paris, 2010); Jean A. Traux, *Aelred the Peacemaker: the Public Life of a Cistercian Abbot*, Cistercian Studies Series, 251 (Collegeville, 2017); Walter Daniel, *Vita Ailredi Abbatis Rievall/the Life of Ailred of Rievaulx*, ed. and trans. M. Powicke (London, 1950).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Philippe Nouzille, *Expérience de Dieu et théologie monastique au XIIe siècle. Étude sue les sermons d'Aelred de Rievaulx*

(Paris, 1999); John R. Sommerfeldt, *Aelred of Rievaulx: Pursuing Perfect Happiness* (New York, NY, 2005); Sommerfeldt, *Aelred of Rievaulx: On Love and Order in the World and the Church* (New York, NY, 2006); Damien Bouquet, *L'ordre et l'affect du Moyen Âge: Autour de l'anthropologie affective d'Aelred de Rievaulx* (Caen, 2005). [Back to \(6\)](#)

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