

The Cult of Thomas Becket: History and Historiography through Eight Centuries

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Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury (1120–70) is one of the iconic figures in British history – a man who most people have not only heard of, but also have an opinion on. Yet, despite the brutality of his murder, such opinions are not always positive. In fact, this medieval archbishop is an unusually divisive figure, and always has been. In the 12th century, he was both revered as a saint and dismissed (by his fellow bishop Gilbert Foliot) with the famous line ‘[he] always was a fool and always will be’. More recently, he has been included in lists of both the greatest and the worst Britons of all time. Notably, in 2005, he was runner-up to Jack the Ripper in a BBC History Magazine poll – above King John and Oswald Mosley. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the strength of feeling he is capable of provoking, he has also been the subject of vast quantities of writing in the eight centuries since his death.

Several recent historians, including Anne Duggan and Nicholas Vincent, have produced surveys of this substantial body of literature, but Kay Brainerd Slocum’s *The Cult of Thomas Becket: History and Hagiography through Eight Centuries* is the first book-length study to focus solely on the myth rather than the man.^[1] [2] Her emphasis is on strictly historical texts, and cultural representations (such as T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*) are dealt with in a few brief pages. The strange history of people who have compared themselves to Becket is similarly addressed only in passing – although former FBI director James Comey does earn a mention. Slocum approaches her subject chronologically, beginning with Becket’s murder and continuing through to the present day.

Thus the opening section of the book, ‘Saint and cult’, covers the copious hagiographical, liturgical and iconographical material which was produced in the three centuries after Becket’s murder. Chapter one (‘The creation of St Thomas of Canterbury’) provides brief summaries of the early Becket lives: more than a dozen such biographies were produced between 1171 and 1213, and it is on these writings that most subsequent work about Becket has been based. Chapter two (‘Thirteenth-century translations’) explores slightly later attempts to spread Becket’s cult by translating these biographies into the vernacular, and by stressing aspects of the archbishop’s life which gave him wider appeal – for example, his close relationship with his mother, and his great concern for the poor. The growth of the cult is further examined in chapter three (‘Holy blissful

martir: the development of the Becket cult'), which begins with the earliest recorded miracles. Many of these involved the 'water of St Thomas' (a mix of water and the martyr's blood which could be drunk by the sufferer), which was potent, but also controversial, since it echoed the Eucharist a little too closely for comfort. Nevertheless, devotion to the dead archbishop spread rapidly across Europe, aided by the continental marriages of Henry II's daughters and the efforts of Cistercian monks. Slocum highlights how, even at this early stage, people were prone to find what they needed in the Becket story. He was, for example, particularly appealing to bishops facing their own church-state battles, in countries as far apart as Poland and Iceland.

Chapter four ('Liturgies, sermons and the translation of 1220') focuses on the author's particular speciality: the medieval liturgies dedicated to Thomas Becket, of which over 300 survive.^[ii] [3] Drawing heavily on the existing lives, these texts were designed to further develop Becket's sanctity, by highlighting his key roles: he was a pastor, a defender of the church, a martyr, and an intercessor. Slocum identifies a gradual shift in tone (the earliest liturgies contained more violence, whereas those written for and after the 1220 translation emphasised reconciliation), and argues for the importance of liturgy in spreading the cult. Sermons were also important, allowing oral dissemination of Becket's saintly and episcopal virtues. Chapter five ('Becket and iconography') highlights the wealth of material remains (manuscript illumination, Limoges reliquaries, pilgrim badges and ampullae, seals, and stained glass), and draws attention to recent interdisciplinary studies which draw on these sources.^[iii] [4]

Becket's cult thrived for three centuries after his death. Then came the Reformation, the impact of which is unravelled in chapters six ('Henry VIII and the spectre of Becket') and seven ('Becket as a symbol for the Catholic opposition'). Inevitably, there had been some pre-Reformation criticism of Becket's cult, notably from 15th-century Lollards. In the early years of the 16th century Erasmus commented unfavourably on the immense wealth of the shrine, and William Tyndale made unfavourable comparisons between Becket and his namesake Cardinal Wolsey. By the 1530s, the archbishop had developed into a major problem for the Henrician Reformation, since he was not only a saint but also a symbol of effective ecclesiastical resistance against the crown. Consequently, destroying the Canterbury shrine and burning Becket's bones was not enough: the archbishop had to be transformed from saint to traitor, and this was achieved in part by rewriting the story of his death. In this new version of events, Becket was a troublemaker, justly killed after a jurisdictional dispute between Canterbury and York led to a riot. Despite efforts to revive his cult during the brief reign of Mary I (1553–8), the Tudor Becket was (to quote John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*) 'not a Martyr, but a stubborn man against his King.'

For Protestants like Foxe, Becket's popish tendencies and opposition to Henry II made him a traitor, but for early modern English Catholics these were positive attributes. Devotion to the saint survived in recusant communities throughout the period, and he was often linked to more recent martyrs such as Thomas More and Edmund Campion. His experiences as an exile and his willingness to die for his faith enhanced his appeal to Catholic exiles from Reformation England, and in particular to priests trained for missionary work at the English Catholic colleges on the continent. In these institutions, Becket was the subject of artwork, plays, and spiritual exercises, and an inspiration for seminarians who believed that their destiny was to follow in the footsteps of this English martyr.

18th-century interpretations of Becket were less focused on religion, as Slocum outlines in chapter eight ('Rationalism and the Canterbury martyr'). Most Enlightenment historians saw Henry II as an effective monarch striving to establish good government in an age of superstition, and his actions during the Becket dispute as necessary attempts to maintain order in his kingdom. The archbishop, on the other hand, was a man with many flaws, not least overweening ambition. David Hume (1711–76) wrote disapprovingly of Becket's 'violent spirit', and claimed that his triumphant final return to Canterbury was effectively a declaration of war. In this version of events, the murder in the cathedral was not a martyrdom, but a necessary step towards English freedom from superstition and foreign rule.

Opposition to foreign rule also played an important role in the histories considered in chapter nine

(‘Victorian biographers and antiquarians’). During the 19th century, a growing interest in national histories led to a new focus on the question of Becket’s identity: was he a Saxon or a Norman? Some Victorian historians went so far as to reconfigure the Becket dispute as a conflict between an oppressive Norman king and a Saxon priest who wanted only to preserve the rights of the native people. Others argued that Becket must have been on the side of the oppressors, since his penitential practices (particularly his penchant for hair undergarments) were decidedly un-English. Once again, the Protestant-Catholic divide reared its head, as Becket was adopted as one of the figureheads of the Oxford Movement, whilst historians concerned by the rise of Anglo-Catholicism produced strident attacks on the saint. Of the latter group, James Froude (1818–94) was one of the most forthright: his Becket was ‘overbearing, violent, ambitious [and] unscrupulous’, and the church which he defended was ‘saturated with venality’. A less dramatic, but perhaps ultimately more significant, Becket-related enterprise of this period was the production of new editions of the key texts, including the seven-volume Rolls Series edition of the lives and letters.

In the final section of the book, Slocum focuses on ‘Becket in the modern and postmodern world’, and begins by turning her attention to ‘Becket in legal and intellectual history’ (chapter 10). In the late 19th century, the reign of Henry II began to be seen as a key period in English legal history, and consequently the Becket dispute began to be studied in legal terms. This approach survived well into the 20th century, favoured by historians including Z. N. Brooke, C. R. Cheney and Charles Duggan- who reached very different conclusions about whose legal case was stronger. At around the same time, historians such as Beryl Smalley^[iv] [5] and Benedicta Ward^[v] [6] placed the archbishop in his intellectual context, the former by looking at the influence of the Schools and the latter by focusing on medieval understandings of the miracles.

Recent decades have also seen the publication of numerous biographies of Becket, and Slocum surveys these in chapter 11 (‘Biographies of the Canterbury martyr in the twentieth and twenty-first century’). In broad terms, she sees the first half of the 20th century as a period of continuing nationalism, when Becket was either an English Christian hero, or a vain and ambitious man who overreacted in the face of Henry II’s moderate demands. Since the 1950s, there has been a turn towards ‘psychological interpretation’, with biographers such as David Knowles, Anne Duggan and John Guy paying increasing attention to Becket’s personality and its impact on the dispute. The last few decades have seen yet more new approaches, as summarised in chapter 12 (‘Becket scholarship in the postmodern world and beyond’): contemporary historians have approached the man and the dispute through prisms including gender and sexuality, anger and conflict studies, friendship, and medievalism. In doing so, they have addressed topics ranging from Becket’s sex life (or lack thereof) to his horses.

Ultimately, the Becket who emerges from these pages is, in Slocum’s words, ‘a kaleidoscopic personality’, a man who has been constantly reconfigured into new shapes to suit the beliefs and agendas of those who have written about him. Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of this book is that it highlights just how malleable a figure Becket is, and how it is possible to project almost anything onto him- a quality which both explains the enduring interest in his story, and raises interesting questions about the ways medieval history has been used for modern purposes. For those who are familiar with the medieval Becket, but who know little about the ways in which his story has subsequently been adapted and exploited, this is an eye-opening read.

The other enigma in this volume is the author: what Slocum thinks about this material, and the questions it raises, is not entirely clear. Which of the interpretations she describes does she find credible, and/or worth further investigation? If all (or at least most) of these theories have emerged from the same set of 12th-century biographies, what does that tell us about that original set of texts? She shows that the medieval cult of Becket was Europe-wide, but also states that (prominent exceptions such as Raymonde Foreville notwithstanding) the historiography is primarily in English: if interest in Becket was so widespread in the middle ages, when and why did it shrink? And where will Becket studies go next? Even allowing for the fact that this is a historiographical survey, it would be useful to have a stronger sense of why Slocum thinks this material matters, perhaps in a more substantial conclusion.

Overall, however, this a clear and wide-ranging survey of a vast number of texts. With a study of this kind, it is perhaps inevitable that some readers will wish that there had been room for other things: a summary of the non-English historiography, perhaps, or more detailed consideration of the work of a particular author. Nevertheless, this is a valuable addition to the ever-growing literature on Thomas Becket, and a very useful introduction to that literature. With the 850th anniversary of his martyrdom coming up in 2020, there will undoubtedly be a further flurry of publications about Becket in the next few years, and it will be interesting to see what new forms the martyr takes. Based on what Slocum tells us about past histories, one thing seems certain: these new interpretations will tell us as much about twenty-first century priorities and interests as they do about the man himself.

[i] [7] Anne Duggan, *Thomas Becket* (London, 2004), pp. 224-52; Nicholas Vincent, 'Thomas Becket' in G. Atkins (ed.), *Making and Remaking Saints in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester, 2011), pp. 92-111

[ii] [8] See Kay Brainerd Slocum, *Liturgies in Honour of Thomas Becket* (Toronto, 2004).

[iii] [9] Especially Paul Binski, *Becket's Crown: Art and Imagination in Gothic England, 1170-1300* (New Haven, CT, 2004) and the work of Rachel Koopmans, including her *Wonderful to Relate: Miracles Stories and Miracle Collecting in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011).

[iv] [10] Beryl Smalley, *The Becket Conflict and the Schools: A Study of Intellectuals in Politics* (Oxford, 1973)

[v] [11] Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1000-1215* (Philadelphia, PA, 1982), pp. 89-109

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