

Book Reviews

Aelred of Rievaulx: An Existential and Spiritual Biography

Pierre-André Burton OCSO

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I write this at home in North Yorkshire looking out of my window onto the ancient village churchyard, a mile or so from the site of the Battle of the Standard (1138) about which Aelred wrote, and at which he may even have been present, not so far from Rievaulx. It is likely that some of those who fought then are buried here. In reviewing this book by Father Pierre, I think that Merton would have grasped how we are linked by our writings in a chain — Bernard, Aelred, Merton, Father Pierre and myself. Aelred might have grasped this too.

This is a skilful and insightful view of Aelred, written not just from exterior events but from an interior perception, an analysis of the person and his spirituality in his place and time. What emerges is both an engaging sense of his character and a breathtaking view of history with a Christ-centred focus.

The book charts his life, from his birth in 1110 until he entered Rievaulx in 1134, his life in the service of the monastic community, taking an increasing role in guiding his fellow monks on the monastic path, and his growing influence in civil and ecclesiastical society, until his death in 1167. It reveals how Aelred's social and political engagement and his pastoral care were rooted in his own life experiences through significant changes, initially the replacement of married clergy in 1114 by celibate clergy, which resulted in his father, a priest of Hexham, losing his family's hereditary tenure of the parish, Aelred's move in 1124 to the Scottish

court, his entering Rievaulx, and the accession of Henry II to English throne in 1154.

In these shifts in time, Fr. Pierre unfolds the consistent way Aelred dealt with issues, particularly the opportunities to build a new society in both the cloister and beyond. He delineates three parts to this text: *The Life of Aelred* written by his secretary Walter Daniel, the 19th and 20th century efforts to portray a less saint-like, more human, portrait of Aelred, and the process of his own analysis. Integral to this is Walter Daniel's text which enables us to move from the exterior acts into Aelred's interior life, in which Daniel reveals Aelred's adherence to the Bernardian reform and his exemplary life.

This volume seeks to portray Aelred's human, spiritual and monastic aspects by focusing on the inner recesses of his heart. However, accessing this is of itself a skilled immersive exercise and requires close reading of his writings and those of others, primarily Walter Daniel's. Most notable here are the transitions made from Aelred's friendships with Waldef and Henry at the Scottish court, to his conversion in 1134 from the impurity of youth, with its Augustinian echoes, to his first responsibilities. We are guided through Aelred's instructions and initial work as monk and teacher of the monastic way of life (1134-1143), from his duties as novice master to abbot of Revesby, returning as abbot to Rievaulx. Here Fr. Pierre notes two significantly painful events, the death of Aelred's father Eilaf and the Battle of the Standard 1138 where Aelred had friends on both sides of the field.

Fr Pierre recognizes how, in writing *The Mirror of Charity*, Aelred was given the task of the historical justification of Cistercian monasticism directly by St. Bernard, legitimating the Cistercian reform via three aspects, anthropological, spiritual and theological. From his writings, particularly *The Mirror of Charity* and *Pastoral Prayer*, we can grasp what makes the Cistercian burden so difficult: long vigils, heavy manual labour, bad food, rough clothing, restrictive obedience, longing for the world's emotional pleasures (p.191). In this Aelred is in the holy company of Bernard and other fathers of Cîteaux whose inner lives reveal Cistercian spirituality in both its psychological and theological aspects (p.215). Aelred is particularly regarded for his understanding of friendship. Here Fr. Pierre emphasizes that God is not friendship but the most perfect form of charity (pp.246, 247).

He finds two guiding principles in Aelred's thought: the monastic framework of living and the cosmological roots which appear somewhat Teilhardian before their time. In this Fr Pierre indicates how Aelred was

guided by a moral requirement for all of his actions in which two threads are combined, that of his personal life and of his involvement in the temporal affairs of church and society. This leads through Aelred's personal life and friendship to a vision of the monastic life as a microcosm of the church, leading from the city of confusion to the city of peace. In this there are a number of tensions, between the human world and God's eternity, anthropology and theology, intimacy and universality.

This book concludes with a section, 'Towards a mystical theology of history', exploring Aelred's significance as an icon, with an emphasis on the path to inner unification, the Christian monastic life gradually conforming the monk to Christ, in which the unified being coheres in God through charity (p.540). This presents us with a paradigm of ever increasing circles of inclusion, in creation and the communion of saints, where Christ is the end of human history (p.185) in which friendship is the principle of cosmic harmony (pp.249ff). Here Fr. Pierre notes how in Aelred's writing, *The Mirror of Charity*, the concept of a stoic universe is viewed through the Cistercian lens of charity. This leads appropriately to something like a final restoration in which all things, humankind and history, the transitions of life's variable circumstances, move toward the fulfilment of all things in Christ.

This is a very readable text on Aelred from an engaging and scholarly perspective, with timely guidance and hope for our present circumstances.

Notes

On January 12, 1949, Merton recorded in his journal: 'It is the anniversary of Aelred's death when he went to heaven singing "Christ . . . Christ" in English because he liked it in English.'

In a letter to Dom Gabriel Sortais in March 1953, Merton wrote that he had signed a contract with his editor, Robert Giroux, for a life of Saint Aelred. The book was never published. An extended essay by Merton, 'St Aelred of Rievaulx and the Cistercians', written in the mid-fifties, was published in five parts from 1985 to 1989 in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, edited by Patrick Hart. It was also published as a set of five separate pamphlets (nla).

Kenneth Carveley is a Methodist presbyter, a church historian and liturgist. As a Cistercian scholar he has taught and researched widely in the Cistercian tradition and in Merton's life and work. He recently contributed to *Methodism and Monasticism* (ed. D.Reed. Oxford Centre for Methodism & Church History. 2021). His *Monastic Footprint in Post-Reformation Movements : The Cloister of the Soul* is forthcoming from Routledge.