"More than all that is known":
Medievalist Credulity in the Tractarian *Lives of the English Saints*

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These facts, however, are not found in history. ("The Life of St. Bettelin")

The best-remembered sentence from *The Lives of the English Saints* does not actually appear where claimed. When John Henry Newman gave him the task of writing the history of the very legendary contemporary of King Alfred, St. Neot, James Anthony Froude is reported to have concluded his account with the words, "This is all, and perhaps more than all that is known of the life of the blessed St. Neot."[1] This sentence is itself a legend, yet it demonstrates the tension between historiography and hagiography confronting Victorians who wanted to believe in their medieval heritage.

John Henry Newman's Tract XC is the most notorious example of Tractarian medievalist historiography: by describing the beliefs of the English church as consistent with its medieval origins, Newman brought about his own exit from the Church of England. Recalling this moment in the *Apologia*, Newman acknowledged the rewriting of English history. The Anglican tradition characterized the English Reformation as a "continuation . . . of that one Church of which in old times Athanasius and Augustine were members. But" (and here Newman is thinking) "if so, the doctrine must be the same; the doctrine of the Old Church must live and speak in Anglican formularies, in the 39 Articles."[2] Whereas orthodox Anglican theologians characterized the Reformation as a return to the purity of the primitive Church, Newman attempted to erase the Reformation and to argue for the continuity of the present-day Church with its medieval form.

Less well remembered than the notorious Tract XC is Newman's editorship of the *Lives of the English Saints,* a series that he conceived between his departure from his position at Oxford University and his acceptance into the Roman Catholic Church. Devon Fisher, one of the few critics to have analyzed the project, describes it as "originally intended to focus the attention of the second generation of the Oxford Movement, men who generally had a greater sympathy for medieval Roman Catholicism than did the Movement's founders, on antiquity."[3] Newman mentions the series in a letter to Thomas Mozley in October 1842, and by March 1843, he was soliciting contributions from his enthusiastic followers.[4] Newman created a catalogue for the project based on the calendar of saints' feast days; ominously for a project conceived around the calendar, the agreement to

[1] Quoted in Ciaran Brady, *James Anthony Froude, An Intellectual Biography of a Victorian Prophet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 87.
[2] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 122.
[3] Devon Fisher, *Roman Catholic Saints and Early Victorian Literature* (London: Ashgate, 2013), 53. Subsequent references cited in text.
[4] *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman,* ed. Francis J. McGrath et al, 32 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004-2008), 9:128; 9:289. Subsequent references quoted by volume number.

publish came from Rivington's on April Fools' Day, 1843 (*Letters* 9:298). Newman must himself have known that such an undertaking was likely to be controversial, recalling medieval works such as the *Golden Legend* and individual hagiographies that the Church of England had largely disavowed. He nevertheless told J. W. Bowden, who does not seem to have contributed, that the plan was "to be historical and devotional, but not controversial. Doctrinal questions need not enter. As to miracles, I think they may be treated as matters of fact, credible according to their evidence" (9:299). What may have seemed simple in the proposal, however, was to prove immensely difficult in execution, as the hagiographers found the limits to their own medievalist credulity strained to the limits.

This essay examines the medievalist dilemma represented by *Lives of the English Saints*, which Ciaran Brady justly describes as "at once clever, ambitious, and insufficiently thought through."[5] When Newman commissioned young Oxford scholars to research and write a history of the early English church, the goal was clearly to remind their fellow countrymen of the authentic Catholic tradition represented by early Christians of the British Isles: as Arthur Wollaston Hutton notes, "its original object was to illustrate, or to attempt to illustrate, the continuity of the existing Church of England with the mediaeval Catholic Church."[6] By the 1840s, British historians were becoming familiar with the concept of "scientific" history as practiced by Leopold von Ranke and others. If the impartial historian evaluated all of his—the historian was assumed to be male—sources, he would be able to assess their credibility and come to a reasoned conclusion as to what actually occurred. "History," Ranke proclaims, "reminds us of the conditions of existence."[7] Newman's writers, however, soon discovered that the lives of the English saints as recorded in their sources, mainly chronicles and hagiographies, were so filled with miraculous actions and events that scientific-minded Victorians could hardly be expected to accept the constant breaking of the laws of nature as historical. Since the saints were inscribed in the English calendar, it seemed reasonable that they might be credited with some power to work posthumous miracles. More problematic were the miracles recorded of their lives: for example, John Walker, writing the life of St. German, feels obliged to warn his readers: "The following pages will record a series of miracles, which finished only with his death, and among which were some of the most astonishing nature."[8] The stories that follow involve many encounters with demons. The disclaimer prefixed to "St. German," which proclaims, "Those miracles which have been given without any stress upon authority and evidence, are here considered true and credible as far as testimony can make any thing credible" (3: St. German, iii), shows the writers' difficulties. While their project's goal was to create a "truer" history of the English Church

[5] Brady, *James Anthony Froude, An Intellectual Biography of a Victorian Prophet*, 93.
[6] *Newman's Lives of the English Saints*, edited by Arthur Wollaston Hutton (London: S. T. Freemantle, 1900-01), 1:viii.
[7] See, for example, "On the Character of Historical Science," in *The Theory and Practice of History*, translated and edited by Goerg G. Iggers, Wilma A. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), 33-44. Many of Ranke's works were available to Victorian readers in English translations.
[8] John Walker, "St. German," in *Lives of the English Saints* (London: James Toovey, 1844-45), 3: St. German, 70. Cited in text by series number, Saint where appropriate, and page number.

than that believed by orthodox Anglicans, the apprentice historians constantly had to confront the problem of truths that defied even the most medievalist credulity.

Only a few years earlier, another writer had used legendary material on saints in a very different way. R. H. Barham's *Ingoldsby Legends*, published piecemeal in *Bentley's Miscellany* under the pen-name of Thomas Ingoldsby, tells many stories of the marvelous in the form of "legends"; some claim descent from the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* as translated into English by William Caxton. Two of these, "A Lay of St. Dunstan" (January 1, 1839) and "The Lay of St. Cuthbert, or, The Devil's Dinner-Party, A Legend of the North Countree" (January 1, 1842) depict figures from the English saints' calendar, although ones that Newman's group did not survive long enough to discuss. In both of these verse stories, the author's tongue is firmly in his cheek. Saint Cuthbert only appears in the "Lay" bearing his name as a *deus ex machina* to extricate the lord of Bolton Hall from an ill-advised oath, "the DEVIL MAY EAT UP THE DINNER FOR ME."[9] "St. Dunstan" assumes that readers will know about the Saxon-era patron of goldsmiths and his encounter with the devil: "Every one knows / How the story goes: / He took up the tongs and caught hold of his nose."[10] The tale that follows is a version of the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" in which Dunstan is an alchemist-cabalist and his "Lay-brother" Peter uses his master's demonic broomstick to bring large quantities of beer, resulting in his own drowning. Even the narrator recognizes inconsistencies here, noting of Dunstan's use of "Abracadabra," "it must be confess'd, for a Saint to repeat / Such language aloud is scarcely discreet."[11] The flippant tone, however, deflects possible critiques: should anyone claim the Ingoldsby account as irreverent, the semi-fictional author could claim that it was all a joke. The verses frequently step outside the historical frame to include topical references to politicians and even brands of beer, reminding readers that the medieval world is different from the present.

The Lives of the English Saints is thus significant in affecting a new earnestness towards medieval materials. The entries that were actually completed were the work of around a dozen of Newman's disciples, plus Newman himself. Newman was self-admittedly the inspirer of the *Lives of the English Saints*—indeed, the new edition published around 1900 by Arthur Wollaston Hutton calls its six volumes *Newman's Lives of the English Saints*—but relatively soon into the project he found himself under attack. In his voluminous "Life of St. Stephen Harding," J. B. Dalgairns[12] seemed from the outset to proclaim the superiority of Roman Catholicism; his opening page says of the present day,

> We have much that is amiable and domestic amongst us, but Saints, the genuine creation of the cross, with their supernatural virtues, are now to us a matter of history. Nay, we cannot give up all for Christ, if we would; and while other portions of the Church can suffer for His

[9] R. H. Barham, *The Ingoldsby Legends*, 1839-42 (London: T. Nelson, 1911), 386. Subsequent references follow this edition.
[10] Ibid., 157.
[11] Ibid., 158.
[12] John Dobrée Dalgairns (1818-1876); the "B." refers to his religious name of Bernard. He joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1845 and was ordained the following year. See Sheridan Gilley, "Dalgairns, John Dobrée (1818-1876)," article 7022, accessed 23 January 2016, www.oxforddnb.com.

> sake, we must find our cross sitting still, to watch in patience the struggle which is going on about us. Yet while we wait for better days, we may comfort ourselves with the contemplation of what her sons once were (1:1).

Later, of private contemplation he observes that it "can only exist without danger in the Catholic Church, whose creed is fixed, and her faith unchangeable, while she herself is an external body, the image of her Lord" (1:98).

Francis Rivington, who reviewed the work after having agreed to publish it, wrote to Newman in protest, stating his opinion that the "tendency" of "St. Stephen Harding" is "essentially Roman Catholic" and arguing that its opening page appears "to deplore the condition of our Church as separated from Rome and to desire its union with the latter in her present corrupt state" (*Letters and Diaries* 10:22). Newman found a different publisher, James Toovey, but a year later attempted to distance himself from the project, and published a note in the *English Churchman* stating "Mr Newman is not Editor of the Series of Lives of the English Saints now in course of publication. His responsibility as Editor ceased with the first two numbers, as he expressly stated in the Advertisement prefixed to them" (10:396). Exactly what he meant by the "first two numbers" is not clear; although he seems to have planned to give up the editorial role by December 1843, in late July 1844 he mentions to Pusey that "the Lives of the Saints are coming out *monthly*," and seems to be working on them with Dalgairns (10:307). Most likely, nobody really edited most of the essays, which are highly inconsistent in editorial titles, style, and even chapter divisions. Hardly surprisingly, then, although almost all of the writers display what Fisher calls "an acute anxiety over the question of how the genre could be used to convey truth,"[13] different solutions are presented to the question of whether miracles are history.

The simplest solution was, of course, rationalizing away. For example, Frederick William Faber smooths over the story of St. Wilfrid bringing the Gospel and fish to the South Saxons. Although versions exist where Wilfrid miraculously brings rain and fish to the pagans residing near his Selsey retreat, Faber follows, and even tones down, the version in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, where timing of long-awaited rain on the day of the South Saxons' baptism is coincidental enough to be miraculous but Wilfrid teaches the people to fish: Wilfrid's catch of three hundred fish prompts "the joyous surprise of the poor natives, who perhaps thought the draught had somewhat of a miraculous nature about it" (3: St. Wilfrid, 135). Wilfrid, however, is a historical figure whose existence can be verified from a variety of sources; Bede, who writes about him, actually knew him (although he seems not to have liked him). More problematic is the cluster of early "hermit saints," about whom very little is known, and I will focus on members of this group, especially St. Neot, St. Gundleus, St. Helier, and St. Bettelin.

[13] Fisher, *Roman Catholic Saints and Early Victorian Literature*, 74.

The first strategy is simply to exercise medievalist credulity and present the stories as received. If God has the power to work miracles, as the Biblical and apostolical accounts suggest, then surely England is of sufficient importance to the divine plan to have found the true faith through the mediation of miracle workers. For example, when some robbers stole St. Neot's oxen, four stags miraculously arrived, "gracefully bending their heads over the yoke" (2: St. Neot, 108-109), and brought in the harvest until the robbers were so terrified that they returned the oxen.

The second is to note the "legendary" nature of these stories. Even though James Anthony Froude includes the story of the stags, he begins his contribution "A Legend of St. Neot" with the observation that, "It is not pretended that every fact in the following Legend can be supported on sound historical evidence." He then adds, "It is enough that we find them in the writings of men who were far better able to know the certainty of what they said than we can be" (3: St. Neot, 73). He claims to be unsure whether the "extreme minuteness" of some of the accounts is "the highest evidence in their favour" or evidence of the writers' "free use of their imagination to give poetic fullness to their compositions" (3:74). The Lives may not be "so much biographies as myths, edifying stories compiled from tradition." Yet still Froude wavers, pointing out that "Even ordinary history, except mere annals, is more or less fictitious" (3:74). Drawing examples from folk-tales and Romantic ideas of memory, he suggests that people feel the past must have been "something miraculous" (3:79). It becomes clear that Froude is really not committed to Newman's project when he says, "here are certain facts put before us, the truth or falsehood of which we have no means of judging" (3:81). If the plan was to base a belief system on the origins of the English church as represented by the lives of the saints, Froude's assertion that the material upon which faith should be based may be false throws the entire venture into question.

Even though the other authors of "Hermit Saints" may have been more committed to the project than Froude (who seems to have been involved because of Newman's friendship with his late brother Richard Hurrell Froude), they have a similar struggle with the problem of historical fact. In some instances, they adopt the same kind of rationalization seen in the story of St. Wilfrid. Dalgairns is apparently unable to swallow the story how after pirates had cut off his head, St. Helier picked it up and carried it to shore in his arms. When after his martyrdom Helier's master finds him, "the head was resting so tranquilly on the breast between the two hands, and its features still smiling so sweetly, that he thought that God, to preserve the body of the Saint from infidel hands, had endued the limbs with life to bear the head across to the shore" (3: St. Helier, 31-32). In the following account of how angels transported the body to its resting-place, Dalgairns shifts the point of view to the local people, who see a ship that "they took for a phantom, a vessel driving on without sail or helmsmen, its whole crew a sleeping man [Helier's disciple] and a headless body" (3:32). Dalgairns cannot help remarking, "But however this be," before noting Helier's contributions to the spread of the true faith.

"A Legend of St. Helier" shows Dalgairns struggling with his material; a little more theory as to how to approach miracles occurs in the two "Legends" where Newman is believed to have played the largest part, namely, "A Legend of St. Bettelin" and "A Legend of St. Gundleus." Newman's introductory note calls "St. Bettelin" "the work of more than one author," and he is believed to have been one of them.[14] The introduction contains a long quotation of a passage on miracles from "Bollandus" that concludes, "Suppose the very things were not done; yet greater things might have been done, and have been done at other times. Beware, then, of denying them on the ground that they could not or ought not to have been done" (2:60). The reference is to the Jesuit Jean Bolland (Johannes Bollandus) who in the sixteenth century had produced a similar *Lives of the Saints* (*Acta Sanctorum*) in an attempt to preserve the values of the Christianity of the Middle Ages. Quoting a Jesuit and thus reminding his readers that previous saints' lives were Roman Catholic endeavors hardly helped prove to English readers that this was an Anglican project.

A major problem with writing a true history of St. Bettelin is that the stories about him contradict each other; he apparently committed a great sin in youth, but whether it was having a baby with his girlfriend, both mother and child being subsequently eaten by wolves; or contemplating the murder of St. Guthlac while shaving him is not quite clear. In an odd echo of the *Ingoldsby Legends*, the story lapses into doggerel verse for the legend of how when the local prince challenged St. Bettelin to find a champion to take on his fiendish giant in single combat, St. Michael arrived on a white palfrey and sent the giant back to Hell: "The black knight had fallen beneath the glance / Of that angelic countenance" (2: St. Bettelin, 70). Returning to prose, the narrator proclaims that whatever happened, "some facts are needed to account for the honour with which St. Bettelin was held at Stafford" (2:71). The claim to have recorded "more than is known" that legend ascribes to Froude is probably a misremembering of the conclusion of the life of St. Bettelin: "And this is all that is known, and more than all,—yet nothing to what the angels know,—of the life of a servant of God, who sinned and repented, and did penance and washed out his sins, and became a Saint, and reigns with Christ in heaven" (2:72).

In his acknowledged contribution to the Hermit Saints, "A Legend of St. Gundleus," Newman looks for a theory of miracles. He explains that the "divinely illuminated mind" will meditate on truth, "whether in matters of sacred doctrine or of sacred history" (2: St. Gundleus, 1-2). When the sincere historian "attempts to contemplate persons and events of time past, and to bring them before him as actually existing, and occurring, it is plain, he is at a loss about the details" (2:2). The historian must be a like a painter, who allows "his imagination to assist his facts" (2:3). Hence "holy men have before now put dialogues into the mouths of sacred persons, not wishing to intrude into things unknown, not thinking to deceive others into a belief of their own mental creations, but to impress upon themselves and upon their brethren, as by a seal or mark, the substantiveness and reality of what Scripture has adumbrated by one or two bold and severe lines" (2:3). The conclusion drawn

[14] See, for example, Arthur Wollaston Hutton's table of attributions (6:399).

from this example, "Hence it is, that so much has been said and believed of a number of Saints with so little historical foundation," seems very questionable logic. That the modern-day biographers might include speculative details about the early saints is not unreasonable: Dalgairns, for example, repeatedly uses the phrase "must have" as he fills in the historical background for his saints, and while the effect is wordy, it brings the history into the realm of humanity. It is one thing to guess what a Saint must have had for breakfast, however, and another to depict him raising the dead. Nevertheless, Newman concludes, an early Saint's life "developes its small portion of true knowledge into something which is like the very truth though it be not it, and which stands for the truth when it is but like it. Its evidence is a legend; its facts are a symbol; its history is a representation; its drift is a moral" (2:3). This seemingly does not even convince Newman himself, as he goes on to insist: "It is but collateral and parallel to the truth" (2:4); or even, "It is the picture of a saint who did other miracles, if not these" (2:4-5); and finally, "At the best it is a true record of a divine life; but at the worst it is not less than the pious thoughts of religious minds" (2:6). Here Newman is in deep trouble. If history is a "representation," then the entire claim of the *Lives of the English Saints* to show the true origins of English church practice and belief does not work.

Neither does the account of St. Gundleus that follows help the case, since it mentions a miraculous spring of water during the saint's life; and dire consequences for pirates and robbers who tried to plunder his tomb. The short piece concludes, "Whether St. Gundleus led this very life, and wrought these very miracles, I do not know; but I do know that they are Saints whom the Church so accounts, and I believe that, though this account of him cannot be proved, it is a symbol of what he did and what he was, a picture of his saintliness, and a specimen of his power" (2:8). Such a statement privileges institutional, and to some extent folk, tradition over individual interpretation, and it is tempting to connect Newman's theory of miracles in "St. Gundleus" with the directly contemporary development of folklore as an area of scholarly study.[15]

Yet even if the reader is able to find in medieval faith an allegorical truth that transcends the limits of both the Victorian sciences of history and of nature, the conclusion of the "Legend of St. Gundleus" seems to surrender Newman's original historical purpose of demonstrating to English readers the continuity of the English Church. Rather than showing the early medieval English church and its representatives as connected to the present day, the stories largely serve to show the difference between medieval thinking and that of the Victorian present. Newman's theory of historical continuity did not just fail to convince the readers of the *Lives of the English Saints*, but also failed to convince its authors. Within a few years, most had moved away from the High Church of England. William Lockhart abandoned his part of the project and joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1842, while Thomas Meyrick caused a scandal at Corpus Christi College by joining in May 1845. At least seven more—Dalgairns, Faber, Frederick Oakley, Richard Ornsby, Thomas Mozley,

[15] The English word Folk-Lore was coined by William Thoms in 1846; see *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 1999), 9-14.

John Walker, and Richard Coffin—joined the Roman Catholic Church around the same time as Newman or a little later in late 1845. Others, including Mark Pattison, John Barrow, and R.W. Church, stayed within the Church of England fold but seem to have moved away from ritualistic beliefs and to have focused more on the academic life of Oxford. Finally, James Anthony Froude abandoned conventional Christian belief entirely.[16] Far from uniting the English church through history, *The Lives of the English Saints* helped fragment it.

[16] For the processes of Froude's disillusionment, which Brady only partly attributes to the *Lives of the Saints*, see Brady, *James Anthony Froude, An Intellectual Biography of a Victorian Prophet*, 86-111.