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### Medieval English Nunneries

Eileen Power, best known for her posthumously published *Medieval Women*, was one of the foremost scholars of medieval economic and social history in the first half of the twentieth century. This 1922 work is a substantial study of medieval English nunneries between 1275 and 1535. Power examines in depth who entered the convents, how they were organised, their finances, activities and problems. Although medieval nunneries were significantly poorer and less well documented than the monastic houses, Power uses the available sources to build up a multifaceted picture of medieval life. Her arguments are firmly rooted in documentary evidence, but are presented in an extremely accessible and engaging style. The book reveals that convent life was not particularly ascetic or learned, and that in poorer houses the nuns had to find additional sources of income. Power's account of their methods of coping makes fascinating reading.

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# Medieval English Nunneries

*c. 1275 to 1535*

EILEEN POWER



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**CAMBRIDGE STUDIES  
IN MEDIEVAL LIFE AND THOUGHT**

Edited by G. G. COULTON, M.A.  
Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge  
and University Lecturer in English

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## PLATE I

PAGE FROM *LA SAINTE ABBAYE*

(At the top of the picture a priest with two acolytes prepares the sacrament; behind them stand the abbess, holding her staff, her chaplain and the sacristan, who rings the bell; behind them a group of four nuns, including the cellarer with her keys. At the bottom is a procession of priest, acolytes and nuns in the quire.)

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# MEDIEVAL ENGLISH NUNNERIES

C. 1275 to 1535

BY

EILEEN POWER

SOMETIME FELLOW AND LECTURER OF GIRTON COLLEGE  
CAMBRIDGE



MADAME EGLENTYNE  
(From the Ellesmere MS.)

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TO  
M. G. J.

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

## GENERAL PREFACE

THERE is only too much truth in the frequent complaint that history, as compared with the physical sciences, is neglected by the modern public. But historians have the remedy in their own hands; choosing problems of equal importance to those of the scientist, and treating them with equal accuracy, they will command equal attention. Those who insist that the proportion of accurately ascertainable facts is smaller in history, and therefore the room for speculation wider, do not thereby establish any essential distinction between truth-seeking in history and truth-seeking in chemistry. The historian, whatever be his subject, is as definitely bound as the chemist "to proclaim certainties as certain, falsehoods as false, and uncertainties as dubious." Those are the words, not of a modern scientist, but of the seventeenth century monk, Jean Mabillon; they sum up his literary profession of faith. Men will follow us in history as implicitly as they follow the chemist, if only we will form the chemist's habit of marking clearly where our facts end and our inferences begin. Then the public, so far from discouraging our speculations, will most heartily encourage them; for the most positive man of science is always grateful to anyone who, by putting forward a working theory, stimulates further discussion.

The present series, therefore, appeals directly to that craving for clearer facts which has been bred in these times of storm and stress. No care can save us altogether from error; but, for our own sake and the public's, we have elected to adopt a safeguard dictated by ordinary business common-sense. Whatever errors of fact are pointed out by reviewers or correspondents shall be publicly corrected with the least possible delay. After a year of publication, all copies shall be provided with such an erratum-slip without waiting for

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## GENERAL PREFACE

the chance of a second edition; and each fresh volume in this series shall contain a full list of the errata noted in its immediate predecessor. After the lapse of a year from the first publication of any volume, and at any time during the ensuing twelve months, any possessor of that volume who will send a stamped and addressed envelope to the Cambridge University Press, Fetter Lane, Fleet Street, London, E.C. 4, shall receive, in due course, a free copy of the *errata* in that volume. Thus, with the help of our critics, we may reasonably hope to put forward these monographs as roughly representing the most accurate information obtainable under present conditions. Our facts being thus secured, the reader will judge our inferences on their own merits; and something will have been done to dissipate that cloud of suspicion which hangs over too many important chapters in the social and religious history of the Middle Ages.

G. G. C.

*October, 1922.*

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THE monastic ideal and the development of the monastic rule and orders have been studied in many admirable books. The purpose of the present work is not to describe and analyse once again that ideal, but to give a general picture of English nunnery life during a definite period, the three centuries before the Dissolution. It is derived entirely from pre-Reformation sources, and the tainted evidence of Henry VIII's commissioners has not been used; nor has the story of the suppression of the English nunneries been told. The nunneries dealt with are drawn from all the monastic orders, except the Gilbertine order, which has been omitted, both because it differed from others in containing double houses of men and women and because it has already been the subject of an excellent monograph by Miss Rose Graham.

It remains for me to record my deep gratitude to two scholars, in whose debt students of medieval monastic history must always lie, Mr G. G. Coulton and Mr A. Hamilton Thompson. I owe more than I can say to their unflinching interest and readiness to discuss, to help and to criticise. To Mr Hamilton Thompson I am specially indebted for the loan of his transcripts and translations of Alnwick's Register, now in course of publication, for reading and criticising my manuscript and finally for undertaking the arduous work of reading my proofs. I gratefully acknowledge suggestions received at different times from Mr Hubert Hall, Miss Rose Graham and Canon Foster, and faithful criticism from my friend Miss M. G. Jones. I have also to thank Mr H. S. Bennett for kindly preparing the index, and Mr Sydney Cockerell, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, for assistance in the choice of illustrations.

EILEEN POWER.

GIRTON COLLEGE,  
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## MAP

Map showing the English Nunneries in the later middle ages AT END