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### Title

Thomas A. Prendergast, *Poetical Dust: Poets' Corner and the Making of Britain*. (Hanley Foundation Series.) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. xiv, 235; 19 black-and-white figures. \$59.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-4750-3.

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Review

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literature, too, in particular Archie Duncan's analysis of the Great Cause. As it stands, there remains a need for a fresh account of Robert I that brings together recent research on a sounder footing.

DAUVIT BROUN, University of Glasgow

THOMAS A. PRENDERGAST, *Poetical Dust: Poets' Corner and the Making of Britain*. (Hanley Foundation Series.) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. xiv, 235; 19 black-and-white figures. \$59.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-4750-3. doi:10.1086/692036

This book tempted everyone who noticed the cover and title to pull it from my hands to read about their favorite author or their memory of Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, nowadays a must-see tourist highlight. Part cultural archaeology, part guidebook, *Poetical Dust: Poets' Corner and the Making of Britain* enacts its own thesis. Just as Poets' Corner itself depends upon monuments, most of them empty, to make a claim about a literary culture that is its own monument, Thomas Prendergast's book chronicles the often accidental history and inconsistent agenda of what has become Poets' Corner. Lucidly employing some difficult theoretical concepts, *Poetical Dust* is as much about cultural amnesia, absence, and mourning as it is about a particular place. *Poetical Dust* thus is indebted to the project initiated by Pierre Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire* but also contributes to what E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger in the British context called *The Invention of Tradition*. At the same time, Prendergast is an exacting bibliographer, and he employs skills normally associated with editorial scholarship to track the various corrections, erasures, and misreadings that produced Poets' Corner, culminating in his extensive list of monuments at the end of the book.

Even the relics of figures familiar to readers of this journal, Edward the Confessor and Geoffrey Chaucer, turn out to have been an unstable foundation for the development of the abbey as a national memorial, even before the establishment of Poets' Corner. Edward's remains never became the focus of a religious cult, but that meant that the abbey could be associated with the long history of English kingship and become the official site for coronations. Chaucer eventually became the focus of Poets' Corner, but he was initially buried elsewhere in the abbey, probably as a royal official but possibly as a debtor seeking sanctuary from his creditors, as Prendergast has considered in his earlier book, *Chaucer's Dead Body: From Corpse to Corpus*. Chaucer's anticlerical satire had earned him a place as a proto-Protestant writer, but when his remains were reburied in what would become Poet's Corner, it was during the reign of Mary and was meant to reestablish the Middle Ages as a Catholic era. Prendergast associates Chaucer's original burial with an earlier crisis in sanctuary, when the squire Robert Hawley was murdered within the abbey. It would be Edmund Spenser's internment in the abbey that made the Middle Ages safe for Protestantism. At the same time, both the long tradition that poetry itself was a sufficient and longer memorial and a Reformation suspicion of tombs and relics complicated the idea of a Poets' Corner, an ambivalence expressed by Ben Jonson. The melancholia generated by monuments, which lament the loss they cannot fully replace, became an essential affective aspect of what was rapidly becoming the Poets' Corner we know today.

While accounting for the institutionalization of Poets' Corner in the eighteenth century (Pope played a role similar to Jonson, dismissing the concept while supporting worthy honorees), Prendergast also offers a view of a rich, forgotten vein of literary history. Some of his most interesting anecdotes are about poets on the margins of the canon—C. Day-Lewis, Fulke Greville, Mary Eleanor Bowes, and others—and about the disappointment, for instance, of Queen Emma Kalanikaumaka'amano Kaleleōnālani Na'ea Rooke, that

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Coleridge was not buried in the abbey. Debates about, and especially poetry about, Poets' Corner offer a complex meditation on the relationship between literature and fame. Exhumations and ghostly backlit photographs haunt the apparent permanence of the memorials. Later funerals for famous actors, such as Garrick and Olivier, called Shakespeare up to life again. In the nineteenth century, proposals for a separate national monument emphasize the always already obsolescence of Poets' Corner, while in the twentieth century, its relevance was tested by the absence of women writers. When Ted Hughes's stone was installed, Seamus Heaney offered a eulogy that borders on an elegy for language and nation, as if echoing the tone of his famous translation of *Beowulf*.

*Poetical Dust* is a fascinating and rewarding book, unusual in its subject and its approach, and deserves its place in the same series as Stephanie Trigg's *Shame and Honor: A Vulgar History of the Garter*. Prendergast achieves a rare synthesis of cultural critique, theoretical speculation, archival documentation, and literary history, balancing as many competing interests as his subject.

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ELLEN K. RENTZ, *Imagining the Parish in Late Medieval England*. (Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture.) Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii, 183; 9 color plates and 11 black-and-white figures. \$62.95. ISBN: 978-0-8142-1275-2. doi:10.1086/692271

Studies of religious writing in Middle English have often emphasized the individual over the communal, perhaps partly to defend the period against scholars of early modern literature touting the supposed invention of selfhood. Ellen K. Rentz's *Imagining the Parish in Late Medieval England* is therefore a welcome examination of the community of the parish as "a central site and subject of Middle English literature" (2). Rentz proceeds through close readings of texts that were successful in their time but are not widely studied today, such as the *Northern Homily Cycle*, *Handlyng Synne*, and the *Prick of Conscience*, together with objects such as fonts, church paintings, and manuscript illuminations. This evidence is placed in dialogue with one canonical text, *Piers Plowman*. Rentz demonstrates that readings of communal devotion in literature need not be dull or monotonous. She discusses exclusion as well as inclusion and explores potential parochial tensions over, for example, the proper venues for confession or burial. This is a productive and stimulating book.

The first chapter argues for the importance of church fabric, especially the font and the churchyard, in forming parochial identity. Depictions of the power of parochial spaces and objects in John Mirk and Robert Mannyng are juxtaposed with Will's anxiety over proper burial in passus 11 of the B text of *Piers Plowman*. Rentz finds in Mirk and Mannyng an ideal representation of the parochial community, which is echoed more ambivalently in the early reception of Langland.

Chapter 2 is a pleasing account of the sacrament of penance, which has in the past often served arguments about individuality. Here instead penance is placed in a parochial, communal framework, drawing on such texts as the *Lay Folks Mass Book* and, again, *Handlyng Synne*. Rentz examines depictions of both the reconciliation of the penitent and the rejection of the impenitent before discussing the more vulnerable penitential parochial community portrayed in antifraternal satire within *Piers Plowman*.

The role of walking in communal worship is the subject of chapter 3, which argues that procession is imagined in sermons as a synecdoche of the process of salvation. Rentz proposes that Langland's pilgrimage and map images uncouple walking from the idea of continuous salvific activity: on this point, she presents readers with a Langland who withdraws from existing communal models, with mixed success.

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