Review Essay: Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket*

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first is a thirty-page appendix summarizing a number of notable historiographical debates; the other is an extensive bibliography—some 1,433 titles, covering all aspects of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century political history.

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Thomas Becket, one of the most famous men of the Middle Ages, hardly needs an introduction. Over the centuries he has been the subject of voluminous literature and numerous controversies. Surprisingly, for one of the most popular saints in Western Christendom, there are few biographies. Out of the maelstrom of materials, Frank Barlow's new work is a beautifully written and eminently readable history of the life and death of Thomas Becket. This is a good biography and one every student of medieval history should read. Barlow sets out to explain how and why everything happened (xi), and this goal he achieves admirably. He does not, however, analyze the personality of Becket in any significant way, and Becket never really comes alive throughout the narrative. Previous biographers have had the same problem of capturing the man Becket.

For example, when Barlow discusses Becket's preparation for exile, he states that "Becket, by dramatizing situations, by foreseeing the worst and making provision for it, helped it to come about" (97). This statement implies a characteristic of Becket's personality, but Barlow fails to elaborate. How did Becket feel about exile? According to Barlow, he hoped that Henry would change his mind (127). What does this mean? Was Becket a passive figure in this event? While Barlow does a superb job in the narration of events and happenings, he merely hints at Becket's hidden depths and then moves on to the next event. In this sense, the book lacks direction because it is not clear what motivates Becket to his actions.

Barlow bases his research on the fifteen or so primary sources written by Thomas's contemporaries in the immediate years after the martyrdom (4-8). There are twelve chapters separated chronologically. The first three sections examine Thomas's early life, and the remaining nine detail his tenure as archbishop until his death at age fifty. The notes are copious and illustrations ample. Charts help to clarify the relationships between early biographers (5), the genealogy of Thomas (14), and the scene of the martyrdom (shown inside front cover). Particularly useful to readers are the general bibliographies which conveniently precede the notes of each chapter.
Barlow's narrative reflects the inherent contradictions and ambiguities of eyewitnesses. For example, regarding Thomas's tenure as archbishop and his reluctance to remain as royal chancellor to the king, Barlow declares "obviously Thomas as archbishop was in appearance much more splendid than ever before" (83). In another instance, Barlow discusses the flight of Becket from England to France, and he states that Henry always protested that Thomas had simply bolted and had not been pursued, but "intentions are seldom consistent and justifications rarely entirely true" (116). When discussing Thomas's vendetta against Jocelin of Salisbury and Gilbert Foliot, Barlow states "it may not be irrelevant that both Jocelin and Gilbert Foliot came from baronial families" (149). These cryptic statements may be the result of the source material, but Barlow fails to explain their meaning. Such ambiguous passages, however, are rare and Barlow deserves praise for this well-produced and lively work.

Barlow concludes that in many ways Henry's pilgrimage to Canterbury ends the story of Thomas's life and death, but his achievements still remain to be considered. For a London merchant's son to have become royal chancellor, archbishop of Canterbury, and a saint is a rarely equalled achievement (270). Barlow convincingly argues that after Thomas's death things were never quite the same. Becket's actions were the impetus to positive reform in the Church. He had brought the archaic English customs to the notice of the pope, cardinals, and all the canon lawyers, and had succeeded in getting them scrutinized, debated, and in part, abolished or reformed (274).

An irascible and stubborn man to the end, Becket resisted attempts from his clerks to persuade him to flee Canterbury. He still resists attempts by historians to explain his personality. The weakness of Barlow's work is not in its scholarship or execution but its inability to make Becket a three-dimensional figure. Overall, Barlow adds significantly to the scholarship on Thomas Becket because of his ability to intertwine primary archival sources with recent scholarship and present facts as objectively as possible. This makes his book a welcome and necessary addition to studies of this kind. Barlow competently narrates without much analysis the life of the monstre sacre (275) and produces an attractive and thoughtful work.

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The expressly stated purpose of the volume under review is to provide an interdisciplinary study of the relationship between literature and history,