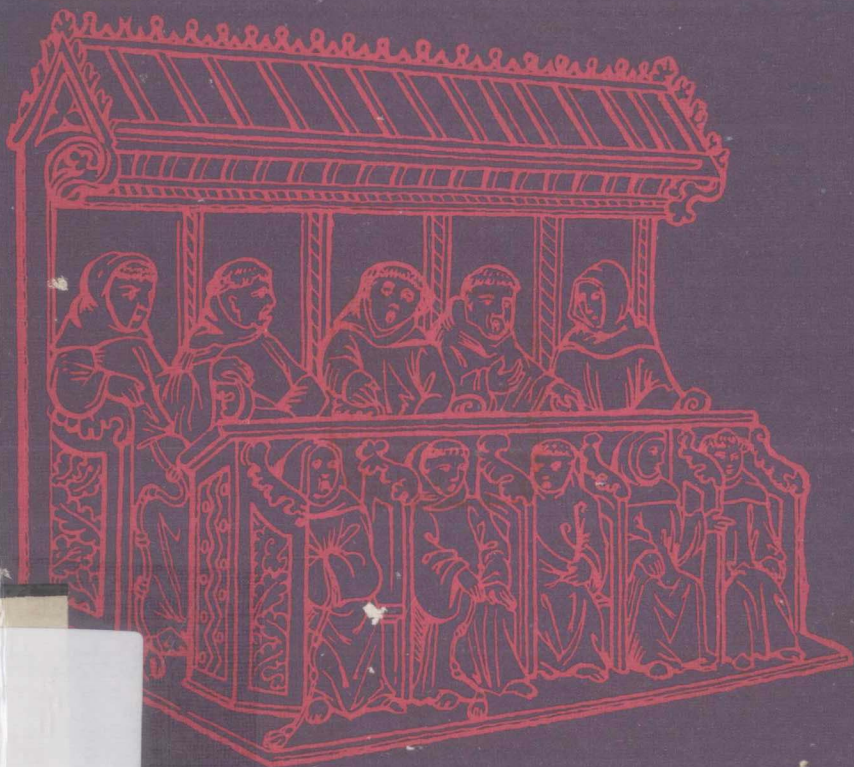


Then and There Series

# The Medieval Monastery

Marjorie Reeves



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THEN AND THERE SERIES

GENERAL EDITOR

MARJORIE REEVES, M.A., Ph.D.

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# The Medieval Monastery

MARJORIE REEVES, M.A. Ph.D

*Illustrated from contemporary sources by*

H. C. MCBEATH



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# THE MEDIEVAL MONASTERY



## To my nephew Anthony Sheppard

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## TO THE READER

MONKS and monasteries seem, perhaps, rather far away from the lives most of us live today, although there are still many people who follow the monastic life in joy and usefulness. Perhaps you know some of them. It is important to try and understand what they really think and feel about this special life of theirs. This book is about monks who lived about seven hundred years ago. They wrote much about their life and often drew pictures too. I have tried to let them speak for themselves in words and drawings, so that you can get a true idea of what it was like to live in a monastery in the twelfth century. You will find out more about these words and pictures by reading pages 81-83. You will also find a useful map on page 87.

By studying what people said in word and picture about themselves, you will come to feel at home in one 'patch' of the history of the past and really live with one group of people as they thought and worked. And gradually you will be able to fill in more patches of history.

The THEN AND THERE Series now has three books with the word MEDIEVAL in the title: THE MEDIEVAL VILLAGE, THE MEDIEVAL TOWN and THE MEDIEVAL MONASTERY. Have you yet discovered what the word *Medieval* means? It comes from two Latin words *Medium Aevum*, meaning the Middle Age. The monks, of course, wrote Latin and therefore used these words, but they did not call their own time the middle age—to them it was the latest age. But later on, historians, looking back over the centuries between about 800 and 1500, thought of them as coming between ancient times and their own modern times. So they called them the *Medium Aevum*, the Middle or Medieval Age.

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## AILRED COMES TO RIEVAULX

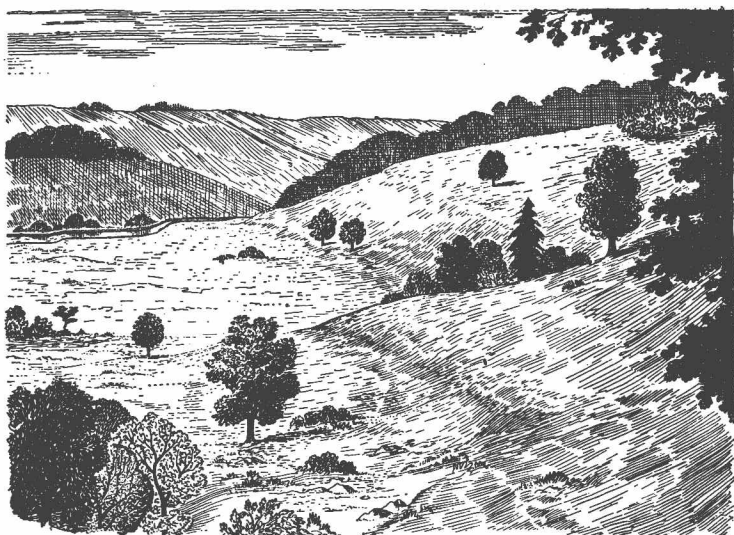
THE court of King David of Scotland about eight hundred years ago was an exciting place for a young man. There were knights and huntsmen, grave *counsellors*<sup>1</sup> and churchmen; there were messengers and strangers coming and going; there was fighting to be done and, when fighting was over, there was feasting. The young man Ailred was a favourite with the king and with all his courtiers, for he was sweet-tempered and sweet-tongued, doing no man any wrong and serving his king faithfully. King David made him chief *steward*, and so, when the great hall was filled with folk ready to eat and drink their fill, he would stand beside the king serving the dishes. Then the king would notice how, in the midst of the noise, he would sometimes stand in a dream, dividing the food to others but eating none himself. His thoughts were far away—beyond the crackle and blaze of the great fire, beyond the bustle and clatter of dishes, beyond the merry talk and the harpist's song. In his mind's eye he saw another world of holiness and stillness, where men served God first of all, and this was the world in which he longed to be. But he told no one.

One day in the year 1134 Ailred rode south from Scotland on the great road to York. Here he heard about 'the White Monks'. He was told that these monks had come to England two years before and settled like a flock of white seagulls by a lonely stream. He was told that these holy men of God shone like snow in their purity. When he heard this, he exclaimed: "Where, oh where is the way to

<sup>1</sup> You will find words printed like *this* in the glossary on pages 88-90.



these angelic men?" "They are close at hand," was the reply, "You can see them before the sun sets." So Ailred jumped on his horse again and rode on until he found the monks at a place called Rievaulx.<sup>1</sup> He came to the edge of a hill and there below him saw this green valley with steep hills on either side:



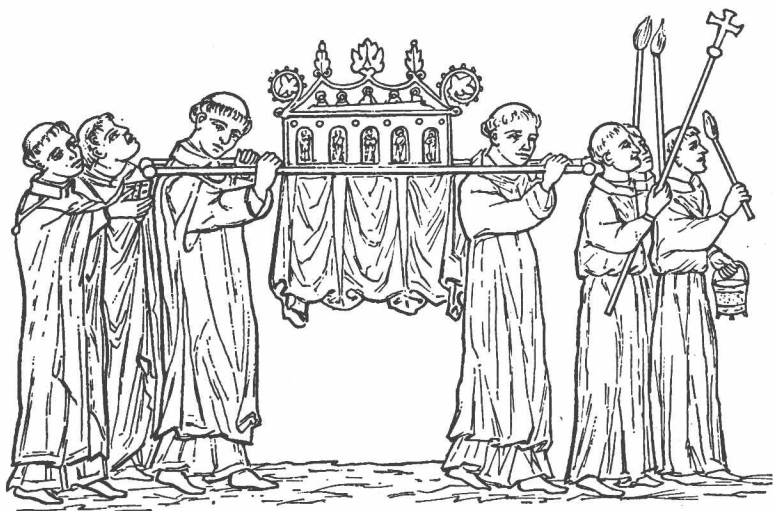
The River Rie rushed and tumbled down it with a gentle murmur of soft sound, while all around the trees rustled and sang together. As Ailred rode quietly through the valley he seemed to hear music all round him. He came to some rough huts which the monks had built for themselves. At the gate Ailred was met by the gatekeeper and two other monks. They talked to him of holy things, and as they talked he wept for his sins and longed to stay there.

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced 'Reevo'; it means the valley of the River Rie.

But that night he went away to a nearby castle belonging to a knight named Walter Espec. Perhaps Ailred and Walter talked about which was best—the knight's life of fighting or the monk's life of praying.

In the morning Ailred had still not made up his mind. He started home for Scotland, but as he rode along the edge of the hill above the *monastery*, he came to a path leading down to it. He stopped and asked one of his servants: "Shall we go down again and see this holy place?" If the servant had answered 'No,' he would have ridden on home; but the servant said 'Yes,' so they went down the path. A crowd of monks flocked out to meet them. Once again Ailred felt a fierce longing to join them. And now his mind was made up. He would never go back to King David and his court in Scotland; he would stay and be a monk at Rievaulx!

Here is a procession of monks such as Ailred might have seen:



## ST. BENEDICT AND HIS RULE FOR MONKS

MANY hundreds of years before Ailred, there had lived another man who longed to get away from the noise of many people. His name was Benedict and he lived in Italy. It was a time of wars and sudden alarms. Tribes of fierce men were invading Italy. They had overthrown the Roman Emperor and set up their own kings, but no one could guess what would happen next and no one felt safe.

Benedict was sent to school in Rome, but there he was horrified at the evil way men lived. So he ran away into the mountains and there he found a new way to escape

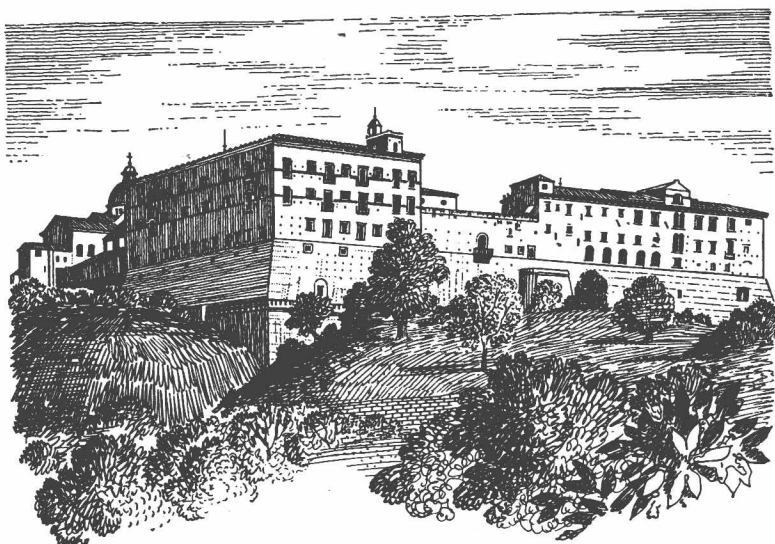
from fear and evil. His way was to forget about danger and live in some quiet place where he would try to please God alone. If the fierce invaders came, he would not try to fight them with spears and swords, but instead would try to make them live at peace under God. For some time Benedict lived in a cave high up on the mountain of Subiaco, thinking out his plan. Then friends and followers gathered round him and built the first house or monastery of the monks of Benedict. Soon many others were wanting to join and more



St. Benedict praying outside  
his cave

monasteries (or *abbeys*) were built, especially in lonely places.

Here is a much later picture of the most famous of the Benedictine abbeys—Monte Cassino, where St. Benedict finally went to live, and where he died in the year 543:



It stands on the top of a mountain. Far down below, Benedict must often have seen armies marching to cruel battle or burning towns, but they never harmed the holy men of God. So Benedict's monasteries became little islands of peace in the midst of war. Indeed, one wild and fierce king named Totila, who came to visit Benedict, listened without getting angry while the saint commanded him not to be so cruel.

St. Benedict wrote a set of rules for his monks. He called it a very little rule for beginners, because he wanted his monasteries to be schools for the service of God, and

so the rules must not be too difficult at the beginning. We now call it St. Benedict's Rule (with a capital R).

He said the monks must learn to serve God in three ways. First, they were to sing His praises and pray in the chapel at least eight times a day, starting so early that it was still dark, and finishing just before they went to bed. So at intervals all through the day the Work of God, as they called it, went on—praise and homage to the real King of the monastery.

The second kind of service was what we should call ordinary work. Part of it was work with the hands—digging in the fields, baking and cooking, washing and cleaning. Part of it was reading the Bible and thinking about the Word of God.

The third way in which the monks served God was by self-discipline, that is, by being ready to give up doing what they wanted, if it was against the Rule. St. Benedict allowed his monks only one or two meals a day and no meat at any meal; he made them get up and go to bed at set times, and he made very strict rules about silence. But he did see that his monks had enough to eat and drink, enough time to sleep, and some times when they could talk to each other. So the discipline was not too hard. Perhaps the hardest things to learn were to obey cheerfully and not to quarrel with the other monks.

St. Benedict's Rule says what is to happen when a man knocks at the gate of the monastery asking to become a monk. They must not let him in too easily. The monks must keep him waiting four or five days to see if he can be patient. After that he can become a *novice* or learner. The teacher of the novices must tell him all about the monk's life and after two months must read the whole Rule to him and say: "See the law under which you wish

to live. If you can keep it, enter upon the life; if you cannot, you are free to go." If the novice says the Rule is not too hard and he wants to stay, he must go on learning for a whole year. Then he is made a proper monk.

All the monks meet together and in front of them the novice makes his promises (or *vows*) to keep the Rule and be obedient. Then he gives to the monastery all his money and other possessions, even his clothes. From now on he will have nothing of his own but will share in all that the monastery has.



He now puts on the special dress of the monks, which is called a *habit*. The picture above shows a new monk receiving the habit. St. Benedict said the habit must be made of coarse, hard-wearing stuff, and, as it was usually dark in colour, his monks came to be called the Black Monks. This picture shows you what their habit was like.

The head of the whole monastery was called the *Abbot*. St. Benedict said that he was to be the father of all the monks. Like a shepherd



A Benedictine Abbot

guarding his sheep, he was to watch over his flock. It was the monks' duty to obey him, and it was the Abbot's duty not to command anything wrong or too difficult. If a monk disobeyed, the Abbot must rebuke him. If he went on disobeying he must be punished; but, said St. Benedict, the Abbot must try all ways to make him good before he punished him severely. Every day the Abbot called all the monks together in a council or *chapter*, as it was called, to settle all the business of the monastery. When the Abbot died, the monks met together in their chapter to choose the wisest of them all to be their new abbot.

St. Benedict wanted each of his monasteries to be a real family of monks, a good family in which all the members helped each other. He told them to speak politely to each other and never take sides in quarrels. One small way in which he told them they could help each other was in getting up punctually in the morning. It was dark and often cold when they had to arise, and St. Benedict said that the good risers should stir up the sleepy-heads who liked to lie in bed. Would this be a good idea in your family?

## THE WHITE MONKS

MANY people wanted to become Black Monks and join one of St. Benedict's families. So Benedictine monasteries were built in many places in Italy, Germany and France. They came to England and built splendid monasteries here too. Find out, if you can, if there is a Benedictine monastery anywhere near your home or school.

But, as time went on, Benedictine monks began to get lazy and rich. They did not keep the Rule so well and lived too comfortably. So several men who wanted to serve God by living a stricter life started new companies of monks who went back to St. Benedict's first Rule. One small company started in the woods in a lonely part of Burgundy (in France). They chose the place because the bushes all round were so thick that visitors could not get through to disturb them. They made their habits out of grey-white sheep's wool, so they were called White Monks. This is what they looked like.

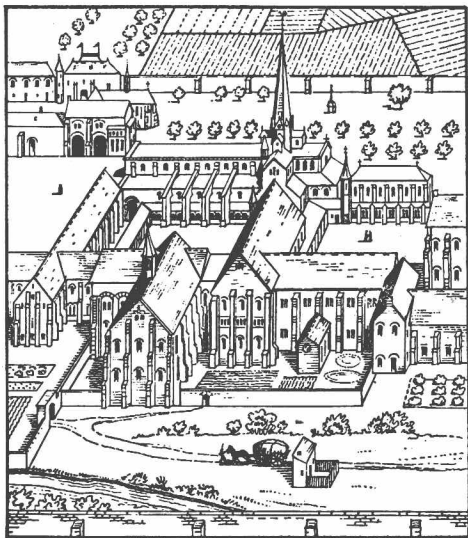
Their life was so strict and hard that not many people could stand it. The little company got smaller and smaller and was nearly giving up altogether





when one day, in front of the monastery gate, there stood a splendid young man with rosy cheeks and fair hair, knocking and asking to become a White Monk. And with him were thirty other young men!

This young man was called Bernard. He was well-born, rich and handsome, but he counted the service of God more precious than anything else. He had a wonderful way of making everyone around him enthusiastic—as if he carried a lighted candle in his hand from which he could light up everyone he met. So when he rode off to be a monk all these other young men were eager to do the same. Bernard and his friends all joined the White Monks at their monastery at Citeaux.<sup>1</sup>



Citeaux with many later buildings.

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced 'Seeto'.