

A Review of 'Dwelling in the Wilderness: Modern Monks in the American West'

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Jason M. Brown, *Dwelling in the Wilderness: Modern Monks in the American West* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2024), 169 pp., \$18.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-59534-979-8.

One might expect to find a book on contemporary monasticism written by a scholar trained in religion, religious studies, or theology. And one might expect to read a book on landscapes and topography created by a writer with expertise in earth studies or geology. In Jason Brown, we find the two delightfully drawn together: a scholar and environmental activist trained in forestry, ecology, and theology with considerable study in monastic spirituality and religious symbolism. The confluence of the two – frequently separated in the academy – has created a thoughtful journey into the role of topography and landscape in monastic spirituality. In Brown’s writing, respect for two fields of study come together in an enlightened manner, drawing the reader to reflect on the ways in which contemporary monastic practices offer considerable promise for the sustainable care of land and water sources amid the contemporary climate crisis.

In the Introduction to this book, Brown offers a helpful understanding of the role of landscapes in the human imagination by first quoting Christian Norberg-Schulz, the distinguished Norwegian philosopher of architecture: ‘To dwell means to belong to a given place’ (p. 1). In a society marked by high mobility, toxic individualism, a thirst for unsustainable economic growth, and overdevelopment which obliterates natural ecology, the call to consider one’s given place is rarely heard much less engaged. For drawing attention to one’s local ecology, we have Brown to thank. At the same time, the Introduction offers a primer on Christian monastic spirituality for readers unfamiliar with this form of life that has existed for close to 1700 years and continues to thrive throughout the world. One of the gifts of this book is the author’s invitation to join him in a personal journey as he lived in monastic communities and learned why and how monastics were drawn to their distinctive landscapes.

Having set the framework for this journey into monastic life and land, Brown leads us to four communities, each with its own distinctive terrain: New Camaldoli Hermitage in the rugged hills of Big Sur, overlooking the Pacific Ocean; New Clairvaux Abbey with its orchard and vineyards in the Central Valley of California; Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey nestled within a savannah of oak trees in Oregon’s fertile Willamette Valley; and Christ in the Desert Abbey located between New Mexico’s Chama River and a series of burnt orange rock mesas. Each monastic community is considered in its own chapter as Brown narrates his own experience of the land, the monastic schedule of common prayer and common labor, and the ways in which the landscape influences the common life of the monks.

Here, we encounter praise if not awe for the land. ‘Each season has its own beauty’, noted Brother Remigio of New Clairvaux, ‘and that’s very much a part of the spirituality of farming’ (p. 60). ‘My whole soul was really formed by the woods’, declared Brother Berengar of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Saint Bernard says, ‘Beeches and oak trees ... have taught me more about God than any book’ (p. 87). Brown quotes the sweet but occasionally cantankerous Brother Berach of Christ in the Desert, frustrated

with intellectual speculation about the land, who said, ‘There has to be a point where we’re just in silence before God and also in silence before the beauty that he’s created without trying to put things on it’ (p. 117). Brown evokes the manner in which monks, vowed to stability, to living in one place for their entire lives, recognize a relationship between the ancient Psalms they pray daily—lyrical texts filled with nature imagery—and the natural world they inhabit in the present.

At the same time, the reader will find regret, fear, and a sense of loss in these pages. Commenting on his love for the Oregon woods, Brother Jorge of Guadalupe Abbey said, ‘If you look at creation, creation is also cruel. There’s war, the trees are fighting each other, are killing each other for air and space and light’ (p. 117). Father Robert Hale, former prior of New Camaldoli, wrote that the monks live in a ‘shake and bake world’, his reference to the earthquakes and forest fires that erupt seemingly out of nowhere in Big Sur and other parts of the Golden State. With remarkable beauty, there is also terrible loss. Against a sentimental or optimistic view of the natural landscape, Brown invites the reader to consider why natural calamities and the injuries of human experience cannot be overlooked.

Of particularly great value is the chapter in which Brown discusses the ways in which the many of us who are not monastics might cultivate a monastic regard for our local ecologies, welcoming and adapting monastic practices that can serve as the spiritual foundation of one’s care and advocacy for the earth and its many endangered species. Attention to one’s distinctive ecology, to its health as well as threats to its wellbeing. Learning from one’s landscape in mutual conversation, a way of respectful living known well by indigenous and monastic communities. Questioning the desire to conserve only ‘wilderness’ regions while overlooking one’s local ecology. The need for silence and stillness in a culture often overwhelmed by the demand for growth and frequently harmful activity. A warning that attention to one’s landscape can become parochial and prompt a peculiar xenophobia directed at visitors and strangers. Here, Brown has distilled his experience of living in monastic communities but also presented the wisdom of contemporary ecologists and spiritual guides.

The author wonderfully blends conversations, observations of land and people, quotations from ancient and contemporary monastic writers, and theories of environmental perception into a luminous and engaging narrative that draws the reader into the text. One wants to keep reading. Indeed, for the thoughtful reader who can hold ecological and spiritual discourse together, there is much fine gold to be had in his intimate journey among the monks of the American West.

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