

Stories in the cellar

Katherine Harvey reads a reflection on places and forms of sanctuary

Sanctuary: Ways of telling, ways of dwelling
Marina Warner
William Collins £22
(978-0-00-834754-3)
Church Times Bookshop
£19.80



IN THE summer of 1943, the German literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki and his wife, Teofila, escaped the pogrom in the Warsaw Ghetto. Soon afterwards, they found refuge with Bolek, a Protestant typesetter, who agreed to conceal the persecuted pair in his cellar if they earned their keep by rolling thousands of cigarettes.

Thanks to both food shortages and the constant fear of betrayal, this arrangement proved extremely stressful for all concerned. But then, one evening, Marcel offered to entertain Bolek and his wife, Genia, with a story.

Years later, in his memoir *The Author of Himself*, he described how, every night for months afterwards, he wove tales “of girls in love, young princes and old kings, winter’s tales

and midsummer night’s dreams”. For the cultural historian Marina Warner, Marcel’s recollections prove the power of storytelling: by forging bonds between the two couples, these tales kept the Reich-Ranickis safe until they were freed by the Russian army in September 1944. Indeed, she argues, stories provided this embattled quartet with a form of sanctuary — a concept that has today largely lost its significance (being mostly associated with wellness and luxury), but that once offered real protection to some of the most vulnerable members of society.

In the classical world, Warner explains, sanctuaries welcomed fugitives from injustice, such as the athlete-turned-rebel Cylon, who sheltered at the Acropolis of Athens in the seventh century BCE. A similar system operated in medieval Europe, where the law allowed criminals who were both penitent and unarmed to take refuge in a church for up to 40 days.

Over time, however, sanctuary rights came to be seen as a threat to both justice and royal authority; come the Reformation, they were mostly eradicated. But perhaps, Warner suggests, a revival of this ancient concept could help to tackle one of today’s most pressing problems: the migrant crisis.

As one might expect of a scholar who has spent decades arguing for the relevance of ancient stories to modern lives, Warner offers neither a practical plan nor a straightforward history of a concept. Instead, *Sanctuary* provides a freewheeling exploration of a theme, centred on a series of erudite but digressive essays about stories of migration, memory, and home. Some, such as the chapter on the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt, have obvious relevance to her central thesis. But elsewhere, the links feel more

tenuous — as, for example, when Warner describes the miraculous transportation of the Santa Casa from the Holy Land to Loreto as “a very thoughtful expression of the deep longing to take your home with you”.

Having explored what we can learn from these traditional narratives, Warner turns her attention to the modern world, asking how the ancient notion of sanctuary can be applied to the contemporary refugee crisis, and how stories might help to forge connections between migrants and their often reluctant hosts. Narrative, she argues, plays an important part in the lives of displaced peoples — who are obliged to relate their personal histories in order to cross borders or claim asylum, but can also maintain links with their lost homelands, as well as find new communities, by spending time in “the country of words”.

Though Warner makes a thoughtful and compassionate case for the importance of “intangible artefacts” such as stories and songs (which are now protected by the United Nations’ 2016 ruling that cultural heritage is a human right), many readers will surely be left wondering how all this applies in the real world.

In a moving coda, Warner describes her own work with the Palermo-based Stories in Transit project, which offers sanctuary to young migrants by giving them space and resources to create and perform their own stories. Such efforts can only ever, she admits, make a tiny contribution to a global problem. And yet, like the stories that Marcel Reich-Ranicki told in a Warsaw cellar, they offer a glimmer of hope in our increasingly unsettled world.

Dr Katherine Harvey is Research Fellow in the Department of History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck, University of London.

Taizé’s founder on the world stage

Christopher Hill reviews journals of ecumenical life in the early 1970s

Journals of Brother Roger of Taizé: Volume 3: 1972-1976
Brother Roger of Taizé
Cascade Books £16
(979-8-3852-1058-9)
Church Times Bookshop £14.40



THIS is the third volume of Brother Roger’s journals (Books, 14 April 2022 and 21 July 2023). From the first beginnings of Taizé, during the Second World War, Brother Roger founded the community against a backdrop of the divisions of Europe and suspicion from both his family and the Reformed Church; and the Community in Burgundy experienced the poverty of the region.

In the late 1960s, Taizé became a place of pilgrimage and prayer for youth, despite its alienation from the established Churches. *Volume 3* now gives us a personal glimpse into Brother Roger’s and the Community’s spiritual journey from 1972 to 1976.

By this time, Taizé was well known internationally and ecumenically. Many friendships had been made with the Roman Catholic Church, while Brother Roger and Brother Max Thurian were Observers at the Second Vatican Council. Now he meets again Fr Pedro Arrupe, the Jesuit Superior General, as well as Dom Helder Camara and Pope Paul VI. The visit of Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, to Taizé in 1973 is also noted.

Discussions and correspondence

with young people are frequently referred to, and the dynamics of “struggle and contemplation” are explored. Brother Roger also echoes Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the loss of “moral memory” in Europe. And then there was the Council of Youth in 1974, the largest gathering yet at Taizé.

Brother Roger is the recipient of the Templeton Prize for Religion, the money of which was distributed to causes in Britain and Ireland related to the reconciliation of communities. He is against proselytism or the creation of new churches and suspicious of the Holy Office in the Vatican.

Pondering on his ministry as Prior (not a term that he liked), he wrestles with the problem of the ego and self-fulfilment as he experiences the need for the “pastoral services of one person” in any community, noting that some leaders seek to dominate. He is moved by the presence of young Muslims at Taizé, and then visits Austria to talk to young people and for discussion with Cardinal König of Vienna, another hero of the Second Vatican Council. In Geneva, Brother Roger recalls fleeing from Taizé in 1945 after a Gestapo raid.

South America remains central to this period of Taizé’s life. Brother Roger visits Chile and is refused access to prisoners, because he declines to meet its dictator, Pinochet, who bans a “Committee for Peace”. Roger is much engaged with Cardinal Silva of Santiago and opposition to Pinochet. He pleads for the life of a young priest “resister” in Paraguay. Further visits to Finland, Rome, and Paris continue to be concerned with the marginalised and dispossessed, including Eastern Europe and the Lebanon. At this time, he is involved in a very large global correspondence.

In 1976, there are visits to Calcutta and Bangladesh, where he met and worked with Mother Teresa, who supplies a simple wooden tabernacle for the Reserved Sacrament in the home of the poor family who offer Taizé hospitality. Throughout his diaries, there are regular references to his deep sacramental life as central to Taizé spirituality and contemplation. Here, Brother Roger and Mother Teresa draft a letter with young people. It emphasises the importance of not trying to import Western solutions.

Pilgrims to Taizé from the UK will already highly value the spirituality of Taizé, its prayerful liturgy, and its sacramental life. But this volume illustrates that Taizé does not offer a pietistic escape from the world’s dark places. It indeed records “struggle” as well as “contemplation”.

The Rt Revd Christopher Hill is a former Bishop of Guildford.

ANDREW MARTIN’s engaging **To the Sea by Train: The golden age of railway travel** (Profile Books, £18.99 (£17.10); 978-1-80522-155-5) tells of the creation of lines to the British seaside, coastal lines, and stories of the towns and resorts that they served and even made, with a section of charming plates of rail posters. **GP**

new titles just published

The Gospel Beyond the Grave: Toward a Black theology of hope by Lewis Brogdon (Cascade Books, £17 (£15.30); 979-8-3852-3276-5).

The Spirit of Polyphony: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's musical pneumatology by Joanna Tarassenko (T & T Clark, £28.99 (£26.09); 978-0-567-71394-0). *New in paperback*

Divine Windows: Seeing God through the lens of science by David Gregory (BRF, £12.99 (£11.69); 978-1-80039-331-8).

Selected by Frank Nugent, of the Church House Bookshop, which operates the Church Times Bookshop.

Church Times Bookshop

Books that have a Church Times Bookshop price can be ordered from Church House Bookshop in any of the following ways (please mention “Church Times Bookshop price”):

Website: www.chbookshop.co.uk
Quote CT408 in “voucher code” box when checking out. Discount price may vary slightly online.

Orders: phone 01603 785918 (Monday-Friday 8.30 a.m.-4.30 p.m.)

Enquiries: 020 7799 4064 (Monday-Friday 10 a.m.-4 p.m.)

Email: bookshop@chbookshop.co.uk

Post: Church House Bookshop, 31 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BN

Pay by any major credit card (not American Express) or Switch/Maestro, or by cheque payable to “Church House Bookshop”.

Please add postage: UK orders up to £19.99, postage is £2.95; £20-£99.99, postage is £5.00; orders of £100 and above are postage free.

Overseas orders and postage will be quoted for individually. CT Bookshop prices are valid for two months after publication date. E&OE

History coming out on top

The anecdotes are the main thing here, says Richard Greatrex

To the Eel Island: An evening journey
Charles Moseley
Merlin Unwin Books
£16.99
(978-1-913159-83-2)
Church Times Bookshop £15.29



HERE is another East Anglian collection of reflections on rootedness, locality, and vanishing countryside skills. Acclamations gracing the covers suggest a new rural classic, along the lines of George Ewart Evans, Ronald Blythe, or Robert Ashton — a little precipitously, perhaps.

Charles Moseley has taught literature in Cambridge for decades while living in the little fenland village of Reach. Now, however, the time has come to “downsize” and to relocate to an ancient cottage owned

by his wife in the centre of Ely. Facing the challenges of leaving a beloved place where you are deeply rooted, where you know the stories behind road names and the genesis of marks etched into the stones of your house, to make a new start in a fresh environment is a rite of passage all too familiar to an ageing population. But this central theme or “evening journey” recounted in Moseley’s memoir is, sadly, never fully realised.

Being in the casually privileged position of owning two houses concurrently may have something to do with it: the author’s relocation is rather less displacement and more a gradual transition, which significantly undercuts his moments of perception. Moreover, while Moseley can be an entertaining and informed companion, his tendency to dive eagerly into historical cul-de-sacs overwhelms and dilutes any focus on the dislocation experienced by such a big move.

That said, the book is best when he traverses the streets of Ely, drawing out its past, the reasons for its layout, and its place in the politics and history of England. Above

looms the ever-present shadow of the cathedral, which pulls him regularly into its rhythms and traditions. We accompany him as he enthusiastically unfolds stories of St Etheldreda and Oliver Cromwell, allowing them cosily to rub shoulders with memories of ordinary citizens who provided colour and character in more recent years. Here, the relationship of past to present and the rich diversity of life and history to be found packed tightly in every city, no matter how small or provincial, come tantalisingly alive.

While there is much to hold a reader’s interest, then, the book never quite fulfils the promise that its cover text offers. Hampered by weak editing and poor proofing (surprisingly, from one whose biography describes him as having been both a printer and a publisher), its avowed exploration of the vicissitudes of shifting your home base late in life fades into the background behind a maze of historical anecdotes.

The Revd Richard Greatrex is Rector of the Chew Valley East Benefice, in Somerset.