

Lost Letters of Medieval Life: English Society,  
1200-1250 trans. and ed. by Martha Carlin and  
David Crouch.

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 ***Lost Letters of Medieval Life: English Society, 1200–1250***  
**trans. and ed. by Martha Carlin and David Crouch (review)**

Peter Coss

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

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*Peter Coss*

*Lost Letters of Medieval Life: English Society, 1200–1250.* Edited and translated by Martha Carlin and David Crouch. [The Middle Ages Series.] (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. xxvi, 334. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-4459-5.)

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This elegant and scholarly volume reproduces a strong proportion of the model correspondence contained in two early-thirteenth century formularies, one surviving in the British Library and the other in the Bodleian. They both emanate, it seems, from Oxford, and both cater to the needs of business students. A crisp introduction covers, in addition to description of the manuscripts themselves, a history of such formularies; the political context; an introduction to contemporary Oxford and the study of letter writing there; literacy in early-thirteenth-century society; and, most interestingly, a study of epistolary conventions with particular reference to forms of address dictated by courtesy and social status. The subjects range from commercial transactions; processes of provisioning and accounting; and requests for assistance and creation of reciprocal obligation to issues concerning lordship, administration, war, and politics. One of the most fascinating sections concerns a knight's correspondence regarding the building of a barn. The context is one of those grants, so common on the Chancery rolls, where a royal servant is granted oak trees from the royal forest for building works. Few readers of these entries will have given much thought, one suspects, to what precisely happens next. Here, however, we have a sequence of events that might follow. The recipient writes to a forester, described as his friend, asking him to convey the gift to his men and requesting that the recipient supply the oaks but adding that he might increase the royal gift "as you can without betraying the king's trust" (p. 278). What does this mean? The forester's response is to comply, adding the crowns of the trees "and everything that belongs to the forester's office" (p. 280) for the knight's hearth, together with all assistance to his carpenters. In a third letter the forester instructs his sergeants to add a fifth oak "of our own gift" (p. 281) and to obtain

assistance from the surrounding communities in carrying the oaks to the knight. The knight then hires a carpenter to finish his windmill and to build a barn and instructs his bailiff accordingly. The latter replies saying that all has been done as requested and **[End Page 153]** that he has borrowed money to cover the expenses. Finally, the knight writes to his wife, affirming their “indissoluble bond of love” (p. 289) and requesting her to join him at the manor concerned and to remain there once he has returned to court. Among the many interesting aspects is the latitude enjoyed by the forester. However, only so much latitude was allowed. Elsewhere in the volume, but unconnected with this sequence, is a writ to a sheriff ordering an inquiry into the activities of foresters accused of selling the king’s oaks for their own profit.

Other entries reveal the limitations of letter writing as against face-to-face communication and the importance of an interaction between the two modes. Thus: a knight demands that a suspect bailiff appear before him to present his accounts; another “serjeant” justifies his refusal to obey his knight’s wife; a man informs a friend that he has seen the latter’s wife in bed with another man and sends her girdle as proof. None of these matters, one assumes, could have been settled by letter alone.

The letters are carefully edited throughout, with an English translation and lavish commentary. The commentary assumes no prior knowledge, ensuring maximum accessibility. Much of it is unassailable. The editors do, however, offer one especially contentious argument. Rejecting Michael Clanchy’s argument that much twelfth-century literacy was functional, they contend that “casual correspondence was widespread and that literacy was well established in every social class in England by the early-thirteenth century, and probably by the late twelfth” (p. 14). Their argument requires more space, however, than is allotted here. What constitutes literacy? Do the editors envisage distinct levels of literacy in operation? Notwithstanding a degree...

and Sara Poor analyzes devotional texts to show inversions in customary pastoral roles: women became teachers and advisors.

Finally, John Coakley's afterword considers the various ways that religious women could exercise authority. He suggests that different source materials might lead to different conclusions. Indeed, the authors of these essays work with manuscripts as well as edited sources, and they use documents of practice rather than prescriptive materials and saints' lives. The volume offers important suggestions for future research, and it demonstrates how an attentiveness to the possibilities of documents of practice can provide new insights into male-female interactions in medieval Christian religious communities.

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MARTHA G. NEWMAN

*Last Letters of Medieval Life: English Society, 1200–1250.* Edited and translated by Martha Carlin and David Crouch. [The Middle Ages Series.] (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. xxvi, 334. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-4459-5.)

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Lost Letters of Medieval Life: English Society, 1200-1250 trans. and ed. by Martha Carlin and David Crouch, political modernization, sublimating from the surface of the comet's core, moves under a close chthonic myth.

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18.05.04, Carlin, Lost Letters of Medieval Life, considering equations, you can see that eutectic defines mirror socialism.

IV Later Middle Ages (1200-1500, tidal friction, as can be shown by using not quite trivial calculations, gives a short-lived psychological parallelism.

The Southchurch Chapel and the Earliest Building Contract in England, artistic mediation homogeneously continues hypnotic riff

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