



Roman Catholic Saints and Early Victorian Literature: Conservatism, Liberalism, and the Emergence of Secular Culture

Devon Fisher

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Offering readings of nineteenth-century travel narratives, works by Tractarians, the early writings of Charles Kingsley, and the poetry of Alfred Tennyson, Devon Fisher examines representations of Roman Catholic saints in Victorian literature to assess both the relationship between conservative thought and liberalism and the emergence of secular culture during the period. The run-up to Victoria's coronation witnessed a series of controversial liberal reforms. While many early Victorians considered the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828), the granting of civil rights to Roman Catholics (1829), and the extension of the franchise (1832) significant advances, for others these three acts signaled a shift in English culture by which authority in matters spiritual and political was increasingly ceded to individuals. Victorians from a variety of religious perspectives appropriated the lives of Roman Catholic saints to create narratives of English identity that resisted the recent cultural shift towards private judgment. Paradoxically, conservative Victorians' handling of the saints and the saints' lives in their sheer variety represented an assertion of individual authority that ultimately led to a synthesis of liberalism and conservatism and was a key feature of an emergent secular state characterized not by disbelief but by a range of possible beliefs.

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