

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN, 1098–1179, A VISIONARY LIFE by Sabina Flanagan, *Routledge* 1989. £25.00. Pb. £8.99.

Books on Hildegard of Bingen are beginning to multiply. At a moment when there is growing interest in the spiritual writers of the middle ages it is inevitable that attention should be drawn towards her. For a variety of reasons, not least the surprising range of topics on which she wrote, there is something particularly compelling about her. One doesn't have to subscribe to all the enthusiasms of Matthew Fox to feel a certain fascination in someone for whom the concept of *viriditas*, greenness, is so clearly important.

The present book seeks to give a general introduction to Hildegard's life and writings. The work of a scholar teaching in Australia, it must be confessed that it has something of the feel of a thesis about it. While it contains much that is useful and informative, it fails in the end to give a satisfying picture of Hildegard and her work, taken as a whole. If the writer had stood back from her subject a little more she might have been able to see it in a larger perspective and to have given a clearer picture of its major outlines. For through all the varying aspects of Hildegard's work there seems to be a unifying vision, centred upon her faith in the redemption of all things in Christ, and of the role of humanity in that process of redemption. 'O man, look to man. For man has the heavens and the earth and other created things within him. He is one and all things are hidden within him.'

As it is we must be grateful for a book which in its central chapters gives us a fuller account of Hildegard's writings than is otherwise easily available in English. We discover here something of the work of the visionary theologian, of the poet and musician, of the authority on physical and psychological medicine, the letter writer who is giving advice to a surprising variety of correspondents. The papal recognition of the prophetic nature of Hildegard's mission made it possible for her to exercise a public ministry of an exceptional kind for a woman in her century. It was possible, but never easy. We feel at times in Hildegard's writings the strain and tension in which she lived.

In her concluding chapter Sabina Flanagan takes up and develops Charles Singer's suggestion that Hildegard's visionary experiences had their origins in a particular kind of migraine. There may well be something in such a hypothesis, but the parallels with the vision of an artist such as Blake would surely be more illuminating. Here was a woman of great imaginative and intellectual power, who could excel in a variety of art forms, and whose works, enigmatic and unequal though they often are, deserve to be much better known.

The value of this book as an introduction to the subject would have been greatly enhanced if the author had referred more explicitly to the two outstanding studies already available in English, Peter Dronke's extended essay in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, and Barbara Newman's work on Hildegard's theology, *Sister of Wisdom*. Where there is so much that is still uncertain it seems important to build on the work that has been already done.

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