SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Astonishingly, and uniquely for any medieval subject, no fewer than fourteen Lives of Thomas Becket were produced within twenty years of his death. One, by a woman, seems now, alas, definitively lost. The rest, including as much of another now-lost Life as has survived incorporated in a fourteenth-century Icelandic saga, are the subject-matter of Michael Staunton's book in the Manchester Medieval Sources series. Given Becket's historical interest, and hence the Lives' importance as evidence of a life that has often baffled medieval as well as modern commentators, the lack of modern translations of most of these texts has long been regretted. Michael Staunton's book fills the gap admirably. With lucid translations, he supplies an introduction and commentary that will make these works, not easy, for they are, as he rightly insists, 'sophisticated and complex', but accessible to thoughtful and attentive readers. Appropriately, since Becket caused so much contention in life, this book also contains some contemporary critical views of Becket. Such inclusivity is timely: modern judgements on Becket are – at last – ceasing to be polarised between hagiography and exposé. Michael Staunton provides the wherewithal to stimulate and support new readings and richer understandings of the man and his context: a twelfth century that, for good as well as ill, contributed a very great deal to the making of Europe.

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