

## ***Abelard: A Medieval Life* by MT Clanchy**

### **Reviewed by Brian Creese**

Peter Abelard was one of the most extraordinary figures of the twelfth century. Most of you will know him as half of the medieval love story of Abelard and Heloise, the tragic tale of love between an Abbot and an Abbess. Rather fewer, I suspect will know him as the foremost logician of the twelfth century, the most acclaimed 'Master' of Paris and possibly the first genuine theologian; his book 'Sic Et Non' is one of the most influential books of intellectual enquiry into religion ever written. His friends and disciples included many of the great names of the time (most notably Peter the Venerable and, from a parochial point of view, John of Salisbury) but in St Bernard of Clairvaux he also acquired the very highest calibre of enemy. He was declared a heretic not once but twice yet still ended his life as the most famous and influential scholar at Notre Dame and his banned works were freely available in most monasteries and Cathedrals across Western Europe. And we cannot avoid the fact that following his discovery as Heloise's lover, Abelard was famously castrated leading him to seek refuge as a monk while forcibly ensuring Heloise took the veil.

This is a tremendous story by any standards and at any time, but Michael Clanchy uses Abelard's multi-dimensional history to paint a complex portrait of the period. He assesses Abelard's career through a series of lenses, examining his life as a Master and logician, knight and lover, as a monk and a heretic.

Any biography of Abelard has to include the life of Heloise. Clanchy regards Heloise to be the better writer, the better grammarian and the more creative philosopher. She arrives in the story as a 'young girl' not a religious and yet already 'renowned' for her erudition and knowledge. After their enforced retreat to the religious life, Abelard struggles to at least appear devoted to God, but Heloise simply refuses. What is God if He has taken away her lover? She uses classical imagery and allegory in a highly provocative manner, scandalously quoting from a classical author (Lucan) as she gave her vows.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its academic credentials, Abelard is always very readable. In the sections on Abelard's philosophy Clanchy carefully imparts an understanding of the impact the rediscovery of Aristotelian thought was having on the Church, and how Abelard used it in his own attempts to define theology. His explanations of the familial forces which go to war over Abelard and Heloise after their discovered affair is as lucid as his account of the character of St Bernard, and the complex politics between the French religious houses. Clanchy's knowledge is prodigious, but he is never unnecessarily difficult, simply helping his reader to understand the complex tale he is telling. If at the end of the book Peter Abelard remains an enigmatic and frustrating figure, at least the reader has learned a depth of context about this intellectually vibrant place and time.

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<sup>1</sup> O greatest of husbands, I am unworthy of your bed!