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 BY J. V. YATES & F. V. KING  
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# Saint Mary's Beacon

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**Saint Mary's Beacon.**  
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April 29-91

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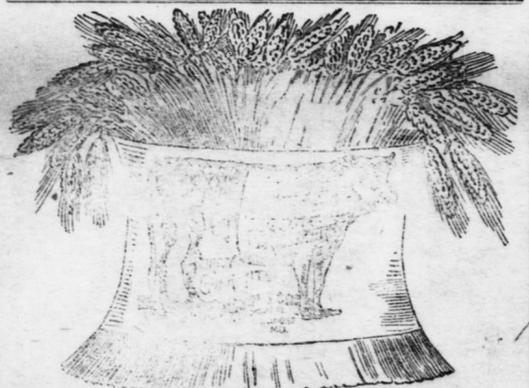
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 Jan 12, 92-y

**THE INTELLECTUAL WOMEN OF THE EARLY CHURCH**

By FRANCIS McDONNELL, D.D.

(Read before the World's Columbian Congress on Catholic History)

Woman, as the shadow of the Cross fell athwart the purple hills of Judaea, left the plain and went into the mountain. From its summit viewing her future, she became a faint, pale, spiritual and intellectual figure. Her Christianity rehabilitated her; she who before had been the slave of man's passions, honored alone for fecundity, and holding a place in the household by the capricious will of her master, now claimed for herself by the virtue of her divine birth-right her individuality. The Christian woman had sealed, by the way of the Cross, the height to which the pagan elevated man. Bound by the same moral law, she stood at his side his companion and equal, gathering in with eagerness the tidings of a doctrine that conferred upon her a dignity and sacredness hitherto unknown, and which taught her that she, too, was to be held accountable before the Most High for the talents He bestowed. It was this knowledge that gave to women of the Early Church the intellectual impetus and that sowed the seed of which to-day we garner the grain.

The intellectual history of woman has been one of repression. Viewing her through the dim twilight of ages, a mere watcher on the threshold, few of us have penetrated beyond the traditions that paint the mothers of the Christian faith merely as models of spirituality, as if the highest types of intellectuality were not those that reflect perfectly the sentiments of God. One does not see of Priscilla, Chloe, and Phoebe as women who alone sought wool and flax and held the distaff, but as women whose minds grasped the divine philosophy, and who labored in its cause.

The first two centuries following the planting of the Cross were ages of iron, and it was then that woman claimed her first right—to die for her faith, and to rival men in the stern qualities that had been conceded their monopoly—courage to endure the rack and torch. A faith for which an Agnes—a Perpetua—bore so much, became the marvel of the pagan women and no wonder they sought to know something of its truths, and thus the Christian matron and maid standing as martyrs before the Praetorium became, as it were, teachers, and the Early Church, conceiving every hope from female intelligence, refused naught that could add to its cultivation.

Amid the wrecks of time but few traces have been left to us of the intellectual labors of the women of the first ages of Christianity. A few letters, some Latin verses of an early writer, Feltona Proba, and some hymns which have been adopted in the Roman liturgy, written by Klippia, the wife of Boethius, alone remain, but these suffice to show that our earliest authors possessed great talents and wrote with ease and elegance.

In every age there appears a small number of privileged spirits who serve as guides, becoming a centre around which souls revolve, and in the fourth century Rome beheld one composed of brilliant women, whose influence has sent its glory adown Time's purple tide, and to which we owe today the greatest work of any age—St. Jerome's translations of the Holy Scriptures into Latin—The Vulgate—that revolutionized the language of the Roman world, and introduced into the Latin tongue the poetry of the Hebrew, the Philosophy of the Greek.

It was the age of transition; old faiths, old traditions were dying, but old customs remained, and old rites still lingered; though the altars of the gods were overtopped, solitude reigned within the walls of the Pantheon, and Arachne span her web o'er the doors of Minerva's temple. Pan was dead, but still there lived his worshippers. Ruin was falling on the empire. Alaric was mustering his hosts on the plains of Germany, and, drunk with

its luxury and vices, Imperial Rome saw not the gleam of their spears. Christian women, lapped in pagan splendors, were fast losing sight of their high privileges when the noble Marcella, in her palace on Mount Aventine, grouped around her the most learned of the Christian dames of the city, and commenced her work of reform. These were not women merely bound together by ties of duty and rare genius, of noble birth and highly gifted, they formed a school of Christian philosophy as well as a community dedicated to the Most High.

Literature, it has been said, is but the expression of society. This was the age of fierce polemics, and profound study of the Scriptures was the one that absorbed the learned doctors of the Church and their disciples. Many women who had played and were still to play a prominent part in spreading the Gospel became earnest students, and the school for the study of Holy Writ established on Mt. Aventine became the nucleus of those seats of learning that have given to the world so many geniuses in all branches of science. It is from the letters of St. Jerome, who was induced after much persuasion to give lectures to Marcella and her pupils, that we are indebted for an account of these brilliant women, whose talents lighten up this dark period of woman's intellectual history. Marcella had for her early tutors the priests of Alexandria; and thoroughly conversant with the profane literature of the Greece and of Rome, she devoted her attention to profound studies of the Bible. Not content with the explanation of the holy books given by St. Jerome during his public lectures in her school, she sought to him in writing her own commentaries, and we learn from his letter to Principia that after he, the great authority on Biblical lore, left Rome, it was Marcella that the scholars of the city consulted upon the obscure passages of the Bible. The vanity of man appears in those days to have been easily alarmed as it is now, and we cannot refrain a smile as St. Jerome praises the rare tact she displayed in answering these masculine seekers of knowledge at her shrine.

"While she taught she feigned to be a pupil, and was most careful not to appear to know more than man"—a trait of character that shows Marcella was also a student of human nature. Never has there been a more beautiful tribute in any language paid to the genius of woman than that from the pen of St. Jerome, when in a letter to Paula, speaking of Marcella, he says: "Superare sexum, oblivisci hominis, et voluminum divinorum tympano concorporante Rubrum hujus sacculi pelagus transfretari."—"Superior to her sex, forgetting she is a woman, the tympanum of Holy Scriptures in her hand, she has crossed the Red Sea of the century," and he adds, "When I was at Rome she never saw me that she did not question me on the Scriptures, and contrary to the custom of the Pythagorians, she did not accept as infallible all I said. She examined everything, debated with wisdom, and I felt I had in her less of a disciple than a judge." Unfortunately there exist no letters of this remarkable woman, whose genius, dropping its plummet down the ages of civilization yet to come, sounded their depths, and seeing the vital necessity for a complete translation of the Scriptures, never ceased to urge upon the illustrious Cenobite the undertaking of such a task.

If we owe to Marcella the inception of this great work, it is to Paula we must render thanks for its correctness and completeness. The most illustrious of the cultured women who had left the downy couch and performed bath to follow Marcella in her pilgrimage across the Mare Rubrum, Paula forms the central figure of the group. A descendant of the Scipios, a daughter of the kingly line of Agamemnon; conspicuous among the patrician matrons for her station and

wealth, she united the gifts of genius and beauty. Married at fifteen, the mother of four daughters, she had but reached the zenith of glorious womanhood when she became the friend and disciple of St. Jerome, and devoted her brilliant intellect to study. Modern historians seem to have lost sight of the superior intellectual qualities of Paula; they tell us of her life of prayer, the works of charity she performed, and the monastery she founded, but it is to the letters of St. Jerome we again must turn to discover the depth of scholarship and inner nature of a woman who united with the old Roman spirit the charm and versatility of the Greek—traits which, blended with the highest Christian virtues, formed in her a rare combination of character. Her accomplishments and those of her daughters put to shame those possessed by a majority of the woman of this age of intellectual triumphs. Besides the holy books which were her first studies, both Grecian and Latin literature were familiar to her, and St. Jerome writes in his sublime eulogy upon her: "I am about to say a thing that will seem incredible, but which is nevertheless true. The Hebrew language, which to learn the little I know of it cost me so much labor in my youth, and at which I labor diligently still every day, least were I to forsake it it should forsake me, that Hebrew tongue Paula undertook to learn, and learned it so perfectly that she always recited the psalms in Hebrew, and spoke the language fluently, as did her daughter, Eustochia. In that age, as now, there were not wanting those who, agreeing with the laws of Manou, which declare: "Women have long hair but narrow minds," opposed any steps for their advancement, and St. Jerome, the giant of theology, did not escape a severe criticism for becoming their teacher. A storm arose, and abandoning Rome he sought refuge in his hermitage at Bethlehem. In the autumn of Anno Domini 383, burning with a desire to see the land hallowed by the life and crimsoned by the blood of the Man God, Paula, accompanied by her daughter, Eustochia, sat out on a pilgrimage, visiting Syria, the Holy Land, and extending her travels into Egypt, where she remained some time studying, and attending the lectures of the celebrated theologians of Alexandria, and afterwards penetrated into Nitria that she might gather wisdom from the lips of its holy anchorites, "The Columns of the Desert."

After two years of wandering Paula turned her steps again to Palestine and there, close to St. Jerome's cell, erected two monasteries, one for nuns, over whom she presided, and the other for monks, over whom St. Jerome ruled, and it was here he completed his life-work, assisted by Paula and her daughters, who, while they labored among the poor, performing the lowest household offices, found time to devote hours to studies requiring the profoundest thoughts, day after day comparing St. Jerome's Latin translations with the originals in Hebrew and Greek, and correcting any error they discovered. It was in this monastery that was first commenced the practice of copying manuscripts for fear of the original ones being lost. Paula exacted of her spiritual daughters that they should copy the Psalter, translated by St. Jerome, and they found this a work of no little labor. Great exactness was requisite, for the originals through neglect were injured and obliterated, and transcribing became one of the routine duties of their daily lives. Thus we are indebted to Paula for much that is of untold value to Christianity. From St. Jerome's letters we learn that a constant correspondence must have taken place between Paula and her friends in Rome, yet there has been preserved to us but one letter written by her—a charming epistle to Marcella entreating her to visit her at Bethlehem. It is filled with enthusiasm for the holy places, and while exhibiting a thorough knowledge of Scripture,

there is a purity of style and graceful tenderness that places the writer among the most charming of female correspondents. It was to satisfy Paula's passion for Biblical knowledge that the Vulgate was completed, its saintly author declaring in its preface that to her and her daughters was owing the existence of the work. "You are," he said, "competent judges in controversies as in texts upon the original Hebrew—compare it with my translation and see if I have risked a single word," and he pays a glowing tribute to their attainments, when in a reply to an outburst of criticism that such a work should be dedicated to females he adds: "As if these women were not more capable of forming a judgment upon the work than most men who know as little of the Bible as they do of Greek and Roman history. Hilda prophesied when men were silent, Deborah overcame the enemies of Israel when Barak trembled, Judith and Esther saved the people of God—so much for the Hebrews. As for the Greeks, Plato listened to Aspasia, Sappho held the lyre, Thermista was one of the philosophers. Among the Romans it would take up whole books to relate all the greatness of the Roman women."

The fourth century was the Augustan age of renowned Christian women, and among its many names there are none more illustrious than that of Monica, the mother of Augustine, the model of patience and prayer. It is as the supplicant standing at the foot of the cross ever entreating for the conversion of her unbelieving son that we picture the mother of the great Bishop of Hippo. Few think of her, her heavy cross laid down, as sitting on the smooth sward in the shadow of the gray olive boughs flecked with the sunlight of an Italian sky, her gifted son by her, surrounded by his friends and pupils sharing their philosophic discussions. St. Augustine, in his great work, "De Ordine," in reply to her question, "If women were ever numbered among the philosophers?" answers, "The earnest seekers for truth will not take it amiss that I have associated you, mother, with myself in philosophic disputes."

In that philosophic idyl, "De Beata Vita," a dialogue in which she bore a part, we find her awarded the palm for arriving at the highest truth in advancing the proposition that the soul has no natural aliment, but science, no intelligence but truth.

While Paula bent over manuscripts within the convent walls of Bethlehem, and Monica disputed with philosophers in Italy, Catherine of Alexandria illumined her native city by her vast learning, which was such as to entitle her to be chosen in the school the patron and model of Christian philosophers.

All students of ancient history are familiar with the life of Pulcherrina, the granddaughter and sole inheritor of the genius and courage of Theodosius the Great. Skilled in Greek and Latin, having an intimate knowledge of all branches of science, the patroness of arts, her letters attest the brilliancy of the woman who dared from her imperial throne hurl defiance to Attila, the scourge of God.

Under the Merovingians we find Radekund, the Queen of Clotaire, extending her sceptre over learning and receiving at Poitiers many celebrated scholars, among them one of the last of the Roman poets, Venentius Fortunatus, to whom she entrusted the literary education of her nuns, one of whom, Blandiniva, wrote the life of her royal mistress in pure and classical Latin. Radekund was herself a poetess; there exists a poem said to be dictated by her to Fortunatus which breathes an impassioned recollection of her childhood days in her Thuringian home, the captive's wail sweeps through each verse, and it is no longer the voice of Radekund, the queen, or the prayer of Radekund, the abbess, we listen to, but the cry from the heart of an

(Continued on 4th page.)