

*Callista: A Sketch of the Third Century*, John Henry Newman, Four Faces Press, Ltd., 2002, ISBN 1-930265-02-6, 15.95\$, 236 p., Four Faces Press, Ltd., P.O. Box 834, Springfield, Virginia 22150, [www.fourfacespress.com](http://www.fourfacespress.com)

In *Faith and Reason* (2004)

*Callista*, John Henry Newman's second novel, is a captivating fictional account of third century Christians. Although Newman wrote in its introduction that it was "simple fiction from beginning to end", as a Church historian, he was able to portray accurately and skillfully the lives of Christian laity and clergy of Proconsular Africa. This part of the Roman Empire, the land of Tertulian, Cyprian, Augustine and the birthplace of Terence was close to Newman's heart. The author depicts both the splendor and decadence of this Roman paradise, and he presents with realism the sins, virtues and heroism of the Christians living during this period.

Newman's story revolves around the development of three main characters - Callista, a Greek decorator of sculptures, Agellius, a farmer of Roman descent and Caecilius Cyprianus, the persecuted Bishop of Carthage- and tells of the clash between paganism and Christianity. Callista, unsatisfied with an empty life and with the pagan culture surrounding her seeks a Personal God, while Agellius, a Christian, unsuccessfully tries to court her. A dramatic turn of events occurs when a devastating plague of locusts wreaks destruction over the city of Sicca and unleashes the violent state persecution of Christians decreed earlier by Emperor Decius. The reader is captivated by the beauty and sincerity of the heroine, and the honesty and goodness of Agellius as the tragic outcome of the plot unfolds.

*Callista* is a classical novel that draws from Greek dramas, Aristotle's *Poetics* and Terence's comedies that Newman liked so much. Alan G. Hill suggests that Aeschylus' *Persae*, a tragedy about human ambition and the fall of the Persian Empire inspired Newman's treatment of the fall of the Roman Empire<sup>1</sup>. The reader can also discern in the author's handling of historical characters in the novel the influence of Walter Scott,

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<sup>1</sup> Alan G. Hill, Introduction to *Callista: A Tale of the Third Century*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2000, xxxvii.

Newman's favorite romantic novelist. Displaying an unrestrained and rich imagination, Newman reveals in *Callista* his affection for third century Christianity.

As an Oxford Tutor, Newman had fallen under the spell of the Church Fathers. In addition to reading their works, he edited works of St. Cyprian and St. Athanasius, and wrote *The Arians of the Fourth Century*. In *Callista*, Newman tried to counter the sometimes critical tone of historians such as Edward Gibbons and Henry Hart Milman towards third century Christians in Northern Africa and in particular towards St. Cyprian.

Newman wrote three chapters of his novel in 1848, the year that he finished *Loss and Gain*, a defense of his own conversion. His work was interrupted by other major writing projects and the establishment of the Catholic University of Ireland. Charles Kingsley's publication of the novel *Hypatia* (1853), which accused the fifth century Church at Alexandria of fanaticism and corruption, incited Newman to complete *Callista*. The novel was finished during the summer of 1855.

A year earlier Cardinal Wiseman had published the novel *Fabiola or the Church of the Catacombs* and had urged Newman to write a sequel. Unlike, *Fabiola* Newman's novel did not dress up the pagan polytheism and immorality of the Roman Empire. The setting for his story is Sicca Veneria - a town named for the obscene rites of Venus – which was filled with the superstitious worship to deities from the entire Roman pantheon. *Callista* also differed from *Fabiola* in that the Oxford convert maintained that converts in Sicca would renew the Church rather than old Catholic families who had succumbed to Roman worldliness. Newman was implying that the same would happen in England.

A scathing review in *The Christian Remembrancer* (1857) asserts that this novel is a cruel satire mocking the nineteenth century English Church<sup>2</sup>. Although readers cannot fail to notice a comparison between the Roman government and British government's discrimination against Catholics, the persecution of the early Christians described in *Callista* is of a magnitude only reminiscent of the sixteenth century English martyrs. While the author does point to the moral and spiritual decadence of his time his intentions cannot be construed as satirical any more than his own conversion from

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<sup>2</sup> *The Christian Remembrancer: A Quarterly Review*, New Series, Vol. 33, January-June 1857, no. XCV, pp. 124-166.

Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism can be labeled as hypocritical. The reviewer is correct in identifying Newman's personification in the young Greek protagonist who decorated the temples (Newman tried to restore the religious architecture and art of the Anglican Churches). The heroine's yearning for truth and her doubts correspond more closely with those of the Oxford don than those of a girl of seventeen.

Although *Callista* is not a fictionalized autobiography as is Newman's earlier novel *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert*, the reader can draw several parallels to Newman's life. Like many authors, Newman constructs his characters by adding fictional elements to real persons. Agellius' sincere desire for a deeper knowledge of God may represent Newman's life as a youth. Agellius' life-threatening fever prior to his spiritual conversion is reminiscent of Newman's serious illness in Sicily just before the start of the Oxford Movement. Like the character Agellius, the author was taunted by family and friends for his Christian orthodoxy. Juba, Agellius' agnostic brother, may partially mirror Newman's brother Francis, and clearly embodies the religious liberalism, skepticism and rationalism characteristic of the Oriel Noetics<sup>3</sup>.

Like his earlier novel *Loss and Gain*, this nineteenth century novel is a work about conversion to Catholicism. In the words of Ian Ker: "Evidently, Newman's interest was not purely academic or historical: he was concerned with the question of how modern unbelievers can be converted"<sup>4</sup>. Newman deals at length with the subject of conversion. He considers the motives that influence people, the doubts and hardships that they endure, and God's grace that all the while leads them on. The Oxford apologist argues for the existence of God employing four of his favorite arguments from creation, eschatology, personal witness and conscience – all themes which he developed in a number of works and especially in his sermons and *The Grammar of Assent*.

Through the female protagonist, Newman gives voice to his own thoughts around the time of his conversion: "She had long given up any belief in the religion of her country. As to philosophy, it dwelt only on conjecture and opinion; whereas the very essence of religion was, as she felt, a recognition on the part of the Object of it" (p. 180<sup>5</sup>).

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<sup>3</sup> Alan G. Hill, Introduction to *Callista: A Tale of the Third Century*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2000, xxix.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Ker, Introduction to *Callista: A Tale of the third Century*, Four Faces Press, 2002, xii.

<sup>5</sup> This page number and the ones that follow correspond to the edition of *Callista* by Four Faces Press.

That Object is a Being who speaks to man, who loves man. He establishes Himself as an “intimate Divine Presence in the heart” who calls for man’s worship; and who alone can give man hope (*ibid*). This Being is not only Creator of heaven and earth; He became Incarnate for love of mankind.

In the heat, darkness and stench of a Roman prison, Callista begins to read for the first time the scroll of St. Luke’s Gospel. An unseen world opens up before her eyes, and she is unable to put the scroll down. She feels herself in, “the presence of One who was simply distinct and removed from anything that she had, in her most imaginative moments, ever depicted to her mind as ideal perfection” (p. 199). This Person that speaks to her conscience is a “real individual” whose Voice she can hear. It is not the impersonal god of nature of Polemo, a Greek philosopher who visits her in prison to convince her to save herself by worshiping to the deities.

In a central conversation with Caecilius, the heroine states her major obstacle to Christian doctrine, the teaching on eternal punishment, the equivalent of the Greek *Tartarus*. As we know, this was one of the underlying points of contention of the *Tractarians* with the Established Church. The bishop describes *Tartarus* in terms of selfish loneliness, ‘being with a God whom you hate’, and ‘a gnawing hunger and thirst’ (p. 137). The remedy to eternal unhappiness is the answer to one’s desires, namely God, the Object each one needs. That Object on which man should fix his mind is a Person; it is God who is Love, in romantic words - a Lover of souls. Christ comes to fulfill man’s deepest longings for eternal happiness. Callista protests that, as a Greek, she cannot leave behind her love for the intellect, pride and sinful pleasure (p. 139). At this the bishop confesses that he too had been a lover of pleasure, a man of letters and a statesman; he had been a proud and stern Roman.

This novel appeals to contemporary men and women for a number of reasons, foremost because of its main themes: A Personal God who speaks to the conscience, man’s process of conversion, and the role eternity plays in shaping man’s earthly existence. The dramatic *dénouement* of the plot and the heroism displayed by the protagonists, as well as Newman’s expressive characterization, are also compelling to readers - so much so that over the last few years *Callista* has been re-edited twice in English and translated once more into French; and for the first time into Spanish.

The inexpensive paperback edition published by Four Faces Press renders *Callista* easily available to English readers and provides them with a fine introduction by Ian Kerr, a noted Newman biographer and scholar. This edition comes with a colorful cover and an interesting map of ancient North Africa.

*Callista* is a powerful novel about third century Christians living in a pagan society. Through *Callista*, Newman still challenges many of today's cultural mores and religious beliefs.

Fr. Juan R. Vélez G.  
Princeton, N.J.