

**Muriel's Convent:  
The Munteny Women at Clerkenwell Priory, London**

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When St. Mary's Priory in Clerkenwell, on the northern outskirts of London, was established as a house of nuns in the middle of the twelfth century, a man took credit as the founder of the community. But within a few years the convent's records began to tell a different story—one not only of female benefactors, but also of a female co-founder, who long remained a chief patron of the house and who drew her female and male relatives into a network of patronage for Clerkenwell's benefit. That is the story this paper will explore, using the remarkably full source material which we are fortunate to have for this house. Relatively few records of medieval nunneries survive.<sup>1</sup> For Clerkenwell, however, not only do we have a cartulary, written in the thirteenth century, but it is unusually full and specific, naming many individual nuns and even providing information about their circumstances. Moreover, the collection consists mainly of very early documents, and the twelfth-century charters are in many ways the most informative ones. All in all, it is a *feast* of documentation, and it has much to tell us about female monasticism, including the following case history of lay female patronage during the convent's first half-century.

The founding of Clerkenwell began in the mid-1140s, when—or so the story usually goes—a man named Jordan "de Briset" (probably of Bricett, in Suffolk) gave 14 acres in Clerkenwell, just outside London, to Robert, a chaplain, for the purpose of establishing either nuns or Cistercian monks there. Robert then assigned ten of those acres to the nuns who became the convent of Clerkenwell.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have usually given Jordan the credit for the founding, as the first few charters recording the gift are his alone, and King Stephen confirmed Jordan's founding donation.<sup>3</sup> The aforementioned chaplain Robert is sometimes named by scholars as Jordan's co-founder.<sup>4</sup>

But Jordan was a younger son, a man of modest means, and seems to have been outranked, as it were, by his wife Muriel, an Essex noblewoman who proudly used her Norman surname "de Munteny" throughout her life—and, indeed, passed it on to her children.<sup>5</sup> The land which *Jordan* gave for the founding of the new religious house was in fact part of Muriel's dowry.<sup>6</sup> As Sally Thompson has pointed out, Clerkenwell is one of the obvious examples of a house ostensibly founded by a man, but in which the role of his wife in that founding may be somewhat or entirely masked.<sup>7</sup> Certainly at Clerkenwell, as we shall see, the "founder's" wife and other lay women came to be very active in supporting the nuns. (In this context, we should note that Jordan had previously granted another piece of land in Clerkenwell to the Hospitallers; this male foundation may have been, or may have become, Jordan's real interest, thus leaving the field somewhat clearer for Muriel as patron of the nuns. It may also be the case that Jordan lost interest in the second foundation when it was decided that this would be a convent, not a Cistercian monastery.)

Muriel first enters the public record at Jordan's side, symbolically at least, when, about a decade after the original grant, husband and wife together confirmed that gift. In this confirmatory charter, Muriel is described as *domina donationis*, that is, the lady of the land that had been given.<sup>8</sup> No children of the marriage are mentioned in this document, but in about the same period (around the late 1150s), Muriel and Jordan together gave Clerkenwell an additional parcel of land adjacent to the nunnery, this time on condition that one of their daughters would be received as a nun there if she should so wish.<sup>9</sup> Thus within about ten years of the founding Muriel had emerged, on parchment at least, as an important partner with Jordan in the patronage of Clerkenwell.

It was only with Jordan's death, however, that Muriel became an independent actor in her relations with the convent. Dealings with the nuns continued throughout the rest of her life, a persistent theme in the midst of changing circumstances. Her gifts were not lavish or very

frequent. But at a number of major events in Muriel's life we find her apparently marking the occasion with a donation. The first such event seems to have been Jordan's death. At some point during the 1170s, and after being widowed for the first time, Muriel "gave" the nuns her tenant Wigar Kitte and the land which he held from her dowry in Stoke Newington, about three miles to the northeast of Clerkenwell.<sup>10</sup>

At this point in Muriel's life, after the loss of her first husband, we get our first glimpse of her relationships with her family of origin. Muriel's brother Robert de Munteny was drawn into the convent's affairs about now, perhaps because Muriel turned him for emotional support after Jordan's death. In her charter making a gift to Clerkenwell for the sake of Jordan's departed soul, she also mentions the health of her brother Robert's soul along with her own, and Robert witnessed this charter.<sup>11</sup>

In the same period, Robert made the nuns a gift of land at Mountnessing in memory of his wife Matilda, perhaps because Muriel had now brought Clerkenwell to his attention.<sup>12</sup> He also joined with some neighbors in giving the nuns a two-shilling rent.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the 1170s several more significant things had happened in Muriel's family: both her brother Robert and his and Muriel's mother had died, and Muriel and Jordan's daughter Rose had entered Clerkenwell as a nun. Muriel marked all three developments with a further grant to the convent, made in memory of Robert and her mother among others: the gift was five shillings' rent in alms, specifically to pay for Rose's clothing; the nuns were to retain the rent after Rose's death.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Muriel did not mention Jordan's soul in this document—perhaps because she had by now remarried—on which, more in a moment.<sup>15</sup>

In the meantime, a new generation of Munteny women was beginning to participate in the patronage of Clerkenwell. These were Muriel and Jordan's lay daughters, the sisters of Rose the nun. The one who took the lead in generosity to Clerkenwell was Emma ((and you can see these

daughters in the family tree on your handout)). She and her husband, Reginald "de Ginges" (who came from Mountnessing, *Muriel's* Essex family seat)<sup>16</sup> began to patronize the nuns in in the 1170s. Emma gave them five acres of her own, next to land they already held through a gift from her parents.<sup>17</sup> In addition, she and Reginald gave, on one occasion, two acres in the vill of Steeple, in Essex;<sup>18</sup> on another, eight acres of land adjacent to the nuns' existing garden;<sup>19</sup> and on another, a garden and messuages in the neighborhood of Clerkenwell.<sup>20</sup> (In addition, the cartulary includes a number of confirmations by Emma and Reginald of gifts from other parties.<sup>21</sup>)

Muriel's daughter Lecia de Munteny and her husband Henry Foliot also appear frequently in the convent's records, but in the 1170s and -80s their only actions on its behalf were confirmations of gifts given by their various relatives and tenants.<sup>22</sup> Not until the 1190s, apparently, did they make a gift of their own, giving three acres in Clerkenwell which were later to be exchanged for two acres in Farncroft.<sup>23</sup> When one glances through the cartulary, Lecia seems to be everywhere, confirming, witnessing, wheeling and dealing,<sup>24</sup>—and often doing these things in connection with her mother Muriel<sup>25</sup>—but almost never does Lecia appear as a benefactor.

In another way, however, it was Lecia and Henry who followed most closely in Muriel and Jordan's footsteps, by giving a daughter—in fact, a daughter named Rose—to be a nun at Clerkenwell. This second Rose de Munteny, Muriel's granddaughter, probably entered the religious life sometime in the 1190s; her parents endowed her with a piece of family land in the neighborhood of Clerkenwell. In addition, Lecia and her husband, on the occasion of their daughter's entrance, specified that Lecia herself might one day enter the convent too, joining her daughter there, if she so chose.<sup>26</sup> I'd like to think that Lecia did become a nun, because it would make the statistics on the Clerkenwell nuns more complete, but I'm actually fairly certain she did not. We know that her husband, Henry Foliot, became a monk while his wife was still living. But

Lecia did *not* enter the convent at the same time that her husband took his vows; we find her acting as a laywoman later, even after his death.<sup>27</sup> I think this indicates that she found she preferred to remain a lay patroness, maybe bossing the nuns around, rather than become one of them herself. Of this couple, Henry seems to have been the one with noticeably religious feelings, while Lecia's recorded activities—even those recorded in a monastic context—reveal a woman with mainly secular interests. But Lecia did demonstrate family feeling. One of her few recorded acts of charity was to give a whole set of tenements to her sister Rose, the nun, to clothe herself for the duration of her lifetime.<sup>28</sup> In this, too, Lecia imitated Muriel's earlier action, though Lecia's lands, unlike Muriel's, were to revert to her after Rose's death. Still, with not one but *two* grants to pay for her clothing, and one of them quite extensive, the elder Rose de Munteny must have been the best-dressed nun in the convent.

The fourth of Muriel and Jordan's daughters, Matilda de Munteny, appears twice in the cartulary, once being mentioned as the donor of an unspecified gift to Clerkenwell and once witnessing a charter of her mother Muriel's.<sup>29</sup> Thus all four daughters had some dealings with the nuns, though their individual involvement varied greatly.

Having borne Jordan four daughters and survived him, Muriel was nowhere near ready for retirement. Her second marriage was to Maurice of Totham, and again this milestone in Muriel's life seems to have been marked by a gift to Clerkenwell, in this case a grant of parochial rights in conjunction with Maurice.<sup>30</sup> More profitable for the convent was the advent of Maurice as a benefactor on his own; it was probably after marrying Muriel that he became a good friend to the nuns, giving them on various occasions the church and advowson of Totham in Essex,<sup>31</sup> fifteen acres of land in the same vill,<sup>32</sup> and a rent in Great Totham with the prospect (apparently never realized) of a thirty-acre gift.<sup>33</sup>

W.O. Hassall, the editor of the Clerkenwell cartulary, asserted that Muriel and Maurice had six sons, conflating and attributing to this marriage a large number of men variously called "de Munteny" and "son of Maurice."<sup>34</sup> But if Muriel was of usual marrying age for the twelfth-century English baronage—say, eighteen<sup>35</sup>—when she married Jordan of Briset, in time for him to give away part of her dowry in the mid-to-late 1140s, she would have been at least in her late forties when she married Maurice of Totham in the late 1170s, and for her to have borne Maurice six sons who lived to adulthood stretches the limits of imagination as well as female fertility. Nor is there any real argument for Hassall's claim. Instead, the evidence strongly suggests that when he married Muriel, Maurice of Totham already had three sons—Roger, John, and Richard—from a previous marriage.<sup>36</sup> These young men are all found witnessing charters as their friends and relations made gifts to Clerkenwell, but none of them became a donor himself. If Muriel managed to bring her second husband into the nuns' network of patrons, her stepsons remained outside her influence.

There is no reason to believe Muriel and Maurice had any children of their own at all. Their marriage lasted a decade or two, until Maurice's death sometime in the 1190s. Muriel, now advanced in years, had become a widow for the second time. Her final recorded benefaction to Clerkenwell clearly shows the concerns of an older woman in this position. Identifying herself as "Muriel de Munteny, widow," she gives the nuns a piece of her dower lands, including a well and a stream flowing right to the walls of the convent. She also reminds the nuns that they "ought to observe my anniversary every year after my death." For this sombre occasion, the witnesses are a somewhat more august collection than was usual for Muriel's donations, including as they do both the bishop and the mayor of London.<sup>37</sup> Appropriately enough, this is Muriel's last appearance in the records, as she looks ahead to the end of her life. We do not know when she died.

So far I have sketched a rather simple story of a woman whose patronage speaks of limited resources but straightforward gifts linked to major occasions in her own life, and of some of her relatives following her example in gift-giving. But the story of Muriel's and her family's patronage is not just a simple one of gifts piously given in free alms. Some gifts were of more limited value than they might appear. For instance, when a tenant donated land, the lord might confirm the gift but reserve some or all of the rent, as Muriel did in one case.<sup>38</sup> Gifts need not be permanent, as we saw in the case of the gift which was to revert to giver, Lecia, after her sister Rose's death.<sup>39</sup> On the receiving end, Clerkenwell Priory, like any religious house, could reciprocate in ways other than the obvious spiritual ones. For example, the nuns kept safe (and later copied into their cartulary) numerous documents recording business deals in which the convent played no part; we find such charters describing private transactions by Muriel, Jordan, and Lecia.<sup>40</sup> This innocuous practice, akin to the later enrollment of private charters in royal rolls, hardly detracted from the gifts of lay donors. But other common practices do lessen the impression of piety and generosity. Most striking is the frequent payment by the nuns of a *gersuma* or fee to the benefactor who is making a gift or, more often, confirming someone else's gift. When we look at such fees in the Clerkenwell records, very clear patterns emerge, and they confirm the individual impressions already created by the benefactions of the various Munteny women. Muriel herself, for example, never took a *gersuma* from the nuns when she was acting on her own, but did share in a fee of eight marks when she, her daughter Lecia, and Lecia's husband Henry granted a general confirmation.<sup>41</sup> Lecia, who as we have seen was quite close-fisted with the nuns in terms of gifts, was the *gersuma* queen, collecting them for almost every one of the numerous charters in she alone, or she and her husband, confirmed other people's gifts.<sup>42</sup> Lecia's sister Emma and her husband Reginald, for all the gifts and confirmations they made, never took any *gersumae* at all.<sup>43</sup>

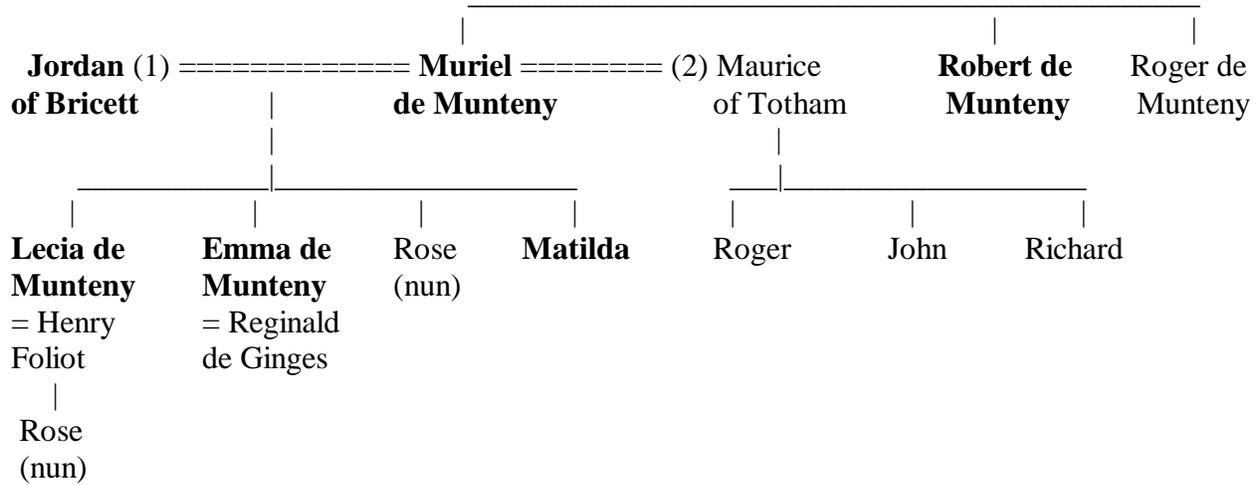
None of this should lead us to discount the pious and spiritual aspects of the relationship between donor and beneficiary. While Lecia de Munteny may have come out materially ahead in her dealings with Clerkenwell, we can hardly doubt the religious sincerity of her husband Henry, who eventually became a monk. Emma de Munteny was apparently a model of disinterested piety. Muriel herself seems to have been, for the most part, genuinely determined to do the best she could for the nuns and for her soul and those of her loved ones, and the link between her mundane and spiritual worlds was evident in the way she marked the milestones of her life with benefactions.

And what does the picture of the Muntenys at Clerkenwell suggest about female patronage in a wider sense? Although they were outnumbered by its male benefactors, twelfth-century Clerkenwell did have other active and prominent female patrons. For example, Thomas Becket's sister Agnes gave the nuns a two-shilling rent. Possibly through Agnes's agency, one of the saint's vestments came to be a relic at Clerkenwell, and King Henry II gave the convent the church at Sittingbourne in Kent, a stop on the Canterbury pilgrimage.<sup>44</sup> Such unrecorded actions can be speculated about in the case of a donor who was a minor celebrity, but may go unguessed-at for other women who, like Agnes, appear in only one or two charters.

When one compares the Clerkenwell documents with those from other, mostly male, religious houses, the general impression is that lay women here, and especially the Muntenys, were far more active than elsewhere, not only in benefactions and confirmations, but also in *witnessing* the recorded gifts of both women and men, both within and outside of their own families. Was this pattern unique to Clerkenwell? Were the Munteny women extraordinary in the annals of monastic patronage? I believe such patterns may be typical of other convents, whose records are largely lost. One factor in this situation is that lay men, like Jordan of Bricett, may have left the field clearer for female patrons where the objects of patronage were nuns rather than

monks; in this connection we may note the well-known poverty of nunneries in comparison with male monasteries. Moreover, in the world of the convent, women's spirituality was taken seriously and monastic women wielded authority. Their lay sisters, mothers, and cousins may well have felt a greater connection with religious women and a greater confidence in their own ability to help them. What the Clerkenwell records show is that in such a setting even women of modest rank and resources could choose to be active and valued patrons, like Muriel and Emma, achieving mainly spiritual and emotional benefits. Or, like Lecia de Munteny, they could keep their real focus on this world and even gain materially from their dealings with the convent. In either case, lay and religious women were able to interact to their mutual benefit.

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**Rough Chronology:**

	<i>Family events:</i>	<i>Clerkenwell events:</i>
1140s	Muriel marries Jordan	Jordan makes founding gift
1150s		Muriel & Jordan confirm founding gift Muriel & Jordan provide for daughter to be nun
1160s		
1170s	Jordan dies Muriel marries Maurice Robert & mother die	Muriel & Maurice give parochial rights Rose enters convent? Muriel gives rent for Rose's clothing
1180s		
1190s	Maurice dies	Muriel makes final gift

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford, 1991), chapter 1. I would like to thank S.J. Allen for her comments and questions on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 40 (1144x8), 42 (c. 1145). A fifteenth-century list of prioresses attaches the date 1144 to Prioress Christina; *Cartulary*, pp. xv, 270, 281.

<sup>3</sup> *Cartulary*, vii-viii, no. 1; David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales* (Harlow, 1971), 281; Christopher N.L. Brooke and Gillian Keir, *London 800-1216: The Shaping of a City* (London, 1975), 332-3; Sharon K. Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England* (Chapel Hill and London, 1988), 65-6.

<sup>4</sup> And Clerkenwell has been cited as an example of lay-clerical cooperation in the establishment of a religious house, an important trend for the expansion of female monasticism in the High Middle Ages; Thompson, 189, 203n.; Elkins, 65-8.

<sup>5</sup> Her family name comes from Montigny or Montenay in Normandy; the family seat in England was at Mountnessing (Essex), to which they gave their name. See *Cartulary*, no. 108.

<sup>6</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, 177, 189-90.

<sup>8</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 43, dated 1152x62.

<sup>9</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 74, dated 1156x62.

<sup>10</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 84, dated 1173x9. Hassall dates this charter after no. 90, but it must be before it, given the various references to Muriel's mother and her brother Robert, both alive in no. 84 and deceased in no. 90.

<sup>11</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 84, dated 1173x9. Similarly, Jordan's brother Brian FitzRalph had also become a modest benefactor of Clerkenwell, giving twelve acres in Steeple, Essex; *Cartulary*, no. 76

<sup>12</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 75, dated c. 1175. He also witnessed a number of charters for patrons of Clerkenwell, among them probably nos. 49 for Maurice de Totham, 52 for Muriel and Maurice, 55 for Emma and Reginald, 99 for Reginald, 113 for Geoffrey Capra, 289 for William Capra (probably to be dated much earlier than 1190x6 as per Hassall), 302 (along with his wife Matilda) for Michael Capra.

<sup>13</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 189, with Michael Capra and Rose his wife.

<sup>14</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 90, dated 1173x9. The charter does not mention Jordan's soul, but it does make it clear that Muriel's father, mother, and brother Robert are deceased, and both Robert and Muriel's mother had still been alive at the writing of charter no. 90, in which Jordan is deceased.

<sup>15</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 52, a gift from Muriel and her second husband, dated 1173x79.

<sup>16</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 75, 108.

<sup>17</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 39, 43, 74.

<sup>18</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 55, dated before 1179.

<sup>19</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 79, dated before 1186.

<sup>20</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 88, dated 1176x89.

<sup>21</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 54, 95, 97, 99, 110.

<sup>22</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 39 (dated 1176x86), 62 (1193x96), 63 (1193x6), 80 (1181x9), 82 (1193x6), 87 (1181x9), 98 (before c. 1182).

<sup>23</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 61 (dated before 1198). In 1193x96, Henry by himself granted the nuns the service of one of his tenants in exchange for a payment of eight marks; *Cartulary*, no. 56.

<sup>24</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 45 (dated c.1178x98), 65 (1193x96), 81 (before 1198).

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<sup>25</sup> Was this because she was closest to Muriel? Or because she may have inherited more of Muriel's lands than her sisters did?

<sup>26</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 72.

<sup>27</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 44, 83 (dated c. 1197). Hassall dates no. 44, which mentions that Henry has become a monk, to c. 1178, but this cannot be right; in nos. 56, 62, and 82, Henry is still active as a layperson in the 1190s.

<sup>28</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 83 (a confirmation by Lecia, dated c. 1197), 86 (witnessing for Muriel, 1163x76).

<sup>30</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 52, dated 1176x9.

<sup>31</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 48. This grant, witnessed by Muriel as Maurice's wife, was certainly made after their marriage.

<sup>32</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 49

<sup>33</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 50.

<sup>34</sup> W.O. Hassall, "The Family of Jordan de Briset," *The Genealogists' Magazine* 9:15 (1945), 21-3.

<sup>35</sup> In work I have done on the *Rotuli de Dominabus* of 1185, I have found that the average age of a woman when she gave birth to her eldest son who survived infancy was twenty-one.

<sup>36</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 48, 49, 50, 51. There is no reason to think that the "Roger de Munteny" who witnessed alongside Robert de Munteny and Maurice of Totham in nos. 113 and 289 was the same person at all; indeed, the evidence of no. 302 suggests that he was a younger brother of Muriel and Robert de Munteny. Since this "Roger de Munteny" witnesses alongside Jordan "fitzRalph" (i.e., of Briset) in no. 302, he cannot be a son of Jordan's wife's subsequent marriage. The other supposed "sons"—Michael de Munteny, William de Munteny, and another Robert de Munteny—were three brothers related somehow to Muriel, but not her own brothers, since this second Robert is shown in no. 90 to be distinct from her brother Robert; *Cartulary*, nos. 39, 50, 52, 80, 85, 87, 90. Finally, there is also a Fulk de Munteny who witnesses no. 78.

<sup>37</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 109, dated 1193x6.

<sup>38</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 86.

<sup>39</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 44.

<sup>40</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 45, 73, 91, 107.

<sup>41</sup> *Cartulary*, no. 82.

<sup>42</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 39 (ten marks to Lecia & Henry), 79 (23 marks to Lecia & Henry), 82 (eight marks to Lecia, Henry, and Muriel), 83 (ten marks to Lecia), 98 (two marks to Henry and one to Lecia).

<sup>43</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 54, 55, 78, 79, 88, 97, 99, 110.

<sup>44</sup> *Cartulary*, nos. 257; Hassall, "The Kent Properties of the Nunnery of St. Mary, Clerkenwell," *Archaeologia Cantiana* lxiv (1951), 86.