

# Miracles at the Jesus Oak, by Craig Harline

reviewed by [Ken Sawyer](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

How will Maria nurse her starving baby? How will a burned son be healed? Will the former prostitute Aldegonde break loose from the watchful sisters with whom she has been placed? Should a search party try to retrieve the stolen communion wafer tossed in the privy? Craig Harline's engaging essays, drawn from archival sources of miracle stories from the middle decades of the 17th-century Spanish Netherlands, present women and men trying to answer such questions in negotiation with sometimes dubious doctors and occasionally conniving clergy.

Harline's subjects live in the contested terrain between the medieval world and the modern, between the sacred and the secular and between the Protestant and Catholic divides of the Counter-Reformation. The faithful and the gullible face a withering array of choices as the "new" orders (Capuchins, Theatines, Jesuits) compete daily with Dominicans, Franciscans and Benedictines for the loyalty and support of the people, while bishops, lawyers and doctors present new roles with changing rules.

The not-so-private lives of early-modern women and men are shown through their difficult choices. Who has the authority to explain what is miraculous and what is superstition? Which is more effective, confession at an "established" pilgrimage site or at an increasingly popular but unsanctioned site? Can a doctor really tell the difference between the natural and the supernatural? And will the doctors lose authority if they acknowledge mystery or the supernatural? When should saints be invoked, and when are more earthly remedies preferred? Should the bishop intervene in a jurisdiction dispute? In a world filled with dangers and Protestants, who is to be entrusted with people's faith, hopes, fears and ambitions?

Harline, who teaches at Brigham Young University, is the author of several well-received works, most focusing on the Catholic Reformation, including *A Bishop's Tale* (coauthored with Eddy Put) and *The Burdens of Sister Margaret*. What Harline's

friend Anthony Grafton does for the intellectual elite, Harline does for the unlearned, unrefined and often unheard. He should be grouped with others devoted to revealing secrets hidden in early-modern shadows: Steven Ozment (*Three Beheim Boys*), Natalie Zemon Davies (*The Return of Martin Guerre*) and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (*Montaillou*). Harline's style is lively, his sources reputable and his interpretations trustworthy.

The endnotes and "further readings" section are memorable and by themselves worth the book's price. Harline has not thrown out the new in search of the old but has drawn on current critical discussions while listening for the voices of the past. If he occasionally yields to the temptation to tell us what particular people were (not might be) feeling or thinking, readers will forgive him for taking a half-step beyond his sources.

A different complaint attends Harline's portrayal of Protestants. Perhaps he intended to reinforce contemporary Catholic polemics against Protestants as nameless, placeless and feckless, but many of Harline's sources knew individual Protestants or were in families divided by Reformation teachings. Also, with the exception of the drawn maps, readers will do well to ignore the illustrations, which lack the care shown in the text and the endnotes.

After years of careful searching and sifting, of intensive research and interpretation, and of collaboration with Belgian colleagues, Harline "happened upon" these sources, he tells us. This work shows the grace and insight obtained only by years of painstaking research. He presents moving portraits of people making difficult decisions about life, love and death, in which miracles of any pedigree are most appreciated.