

“Mythography and Diaspora: The Waldensians of North Carolina and their Books”

(Slide 1) This brief paper represents something of a side project that has splintered off from my dissertation research and is something that I hope to continue to develop over the next few months hopefully for an article and a fuller presentation. In fact, as my title suggests, this project will be looking at one of the key theoretical components that I am working with in my larger project; that of memory and myth-making. This short presentation will mostly be an overview and an outline of the research to come as, unfortunately, the helpful but overburdened librarian and archivist in the small Waldensian library was unable to have me come down ahead of this conference. In my remaining time, however, I hope to give a brief sketch of why I am interested in researching the collection content, collection policies, and founding documents of the library of the Waldensian Heritage Museum in Valdese, N.C.; especially considering that my area of research is in Medieval and Early Modern European history. Through this research I am seeking to understand the connections to the European (primarily French and Italian) and South American (primarily Argentinian) Waldensian churches and I am looking to understand if the collection of the American Waldensian library reflects the mythography—that is the representation or creation and packaging of myth— of a persecuted medieval and early modern church as some of the subjects that I work with, such as Cromwell, Milton, and Andrew Marvell see in their support of this continental protestant group? Or does it rely on a new-world narrative reflecting the global reach and diaspora of the modern Waldensians. In other words, what can the collection and founding materials tell us about the founders themselves?

I used this approach in another study that I published on the founding missions and collections of some east coast American and industrial centre British mechanics' institutes with some success. In that research I found ample evidence of a self-improvement scheme being one

of the primary foci of the libraries. The actual education of the workforce, the original intent of the libraries, faded as 19th century self-help, self-reliance, and associated ideas of social Darwinism, temperance, and poor relief replaced early industrial motives in adult education.

(Slide 2) A little background on the Waldensians. The Waldensians actually go by a few different names, all of which stem from the founding religious thinker, (Slide 3) Peter Waldo or Valdo. As such The Waldensians are also known as Les Valdois, I Valdesi, the Waldensess, and other slight variants all of which locate them as followers of Waldo and, as his teachings indicate, as the “Poor of Lyon.” Waldo and his followers fit into what Giles Constable refers to as the “Reformation of the 12th Century” as Waldo, like many other religious thinkers of the time, preached against what they saw as abuses of the Church and sought to return to a more pure and primitive form of worship.¹ Like others, Waldo emphasized charity, rejection of the excess of the Church, lay preaching, voluntary poverty, denial of transubstantiation, and an emphasis on the written vernacular Bible as cornerstones of faith. Waldo was not alone in these beliefs and various other 12th century figures held combinations of these beliefs to varying levels of success. Francis of Assisi, for example held many of the same beliefs with important differences. Francis did not deny transubstantiation and while he did emphasis lay preaching, voluntary poverty, and preached against excess, he did not deny the authority of the Church. This is an over simplification, but key differences in the messaging of 12th century reformers led to various outcomes.

This is a long and complicated history and not one easily summed up in six minutes, so I will move rather quickly. (Slide 4) Waldo was excommunicated and later Waldensians seen as

¹ Constable, Giles. *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

heretics and worse. As such, they were forced into exile in and around the Alps around what is now the boarder of France, Italy, and Switzerland. There they continued to live as a community despite multiple attacks from the Duke of Savoy's forces. (Slide 5) One of the most vivid accounts of these atrocities comes from Samuel Moreland, an envoy of Oliver Cromwell, who was sent to bring back information regarding the 1655 Piedmont Easter massacre (Slide 6). There had been other sweeps of Waldensian communities previous to this including the Led Zeppelin-song sounding Massacre of Merindol in 1545 (Slide 7), but it is the 1655 massacre that brought the attention of Dutch and Swiss Calvinist support as well as English support from Cromwell. (Slide 8) In fact the Milton sonnet "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," is a direct appeal against the Duke of Savoy. The Waldensians survived through the middle ages and remained a small, but important community resurging around the Reformation as evident by the Calvinist and CoE supporters (Slide 9). The Reformation Waldensians were different from their medieval counterparts, but we do not have time for the more intricate details. (Slide 10) One important artifact from this time, however, was the Olivetan bible, a vernacular French bible often referred to as the Waldensian Bible.

(Slide 11) So, it is the unified Protestant support that is of most interest to me (Slide 12). (Slide 13) Around the late 1650s following the Piedmont Easter, some Waldensians were able to emigrate to Delaware and other colonies, but many remained behind. Skipping ahead a bit, another wave of immigration to the US in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. These immigrants (and this is not the full story, just a sketch) made their way to Burke Co. N.C. and established a Waldensian congregation there and named the town Valdese after Valdo, the original 12th c founder of their order. Valdese is fiercely proud of their Waldensian heritage and to this day celebrate their Italian and French heritage as well as practice the Waldensian-Presbyterian

religion. The Presbyterian aspects is important, but not something I can address here. As evident by the centennial publication titled *What Mean These Stones: A Celebration of Valdese* (which was fully incorporated in 1920), there is a definite mythologizing about this group. That is what I am interested in understanding. The sources used in this publication hint at what I am hoping to find when I make it down to Valdese in that they lean hard on the Protestant-martyrdom story which mixes well with the immigration and American ideal narrative. What I am interested in understanding is what did the founders of the library think would be most important to their users? What do the collection tell us about their philosophies? In other words, are they more interested in the American story or the European? Collections are not neutral, as we all know, and the choices about what material we keep, buy, and retain, tell a story. This is especially true in small libraries such as the Waldensians museum library. Some of these stories reflect the history as well as the historians. Within the history of the Waldensians, few unbiased works have emerged and most reflect their time almost more than they reflect the historical actors. The Risorgimento in Italy, narratives of immigration, and Protestant mythography all convey a specific story. What story did the founding librarians wish to tell?

Wrap-up with some of the newspaper slides and discuss the idea of memory and myth making

I would like to explore the foundations and collections of these libraries -- likely at least the one in NC

<http://www.waldensian.org/4-resources/>

<http://www.waldensianheritagemuseum.org/>

<https://www.visitvaldese.com/>

<https://www.waldensianpresbyterian.org/about/our-museum> NC

<https://www.history.pcusa.org/collections/research-tools/guides-archival-collections/rg-487> PA - Archive containing records about the American Waldensian Society