Girolamo Savonarola. *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*. Konrad Eisenbichler, trans. and ed. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies Publications, 2003. Pp. 243.

The name Girolamo Savonarola immediately conjures up a brooding image of the severe-looking reactionary Dominican friar who epitomizes the anti-Renaissance through his famous “Bonfire of the Vanities.” Scholars of the Renaissance tend to see him as a crackpot fanatic, whose arrogant showmanship and political meddling finally led to his grisly demise: first hanged, then consumed in flames in the main piazza of Florence in 1498. Scholars of the Reformation see him more as a visionary prophet, a man before his time, who prefigured Martin Luther, and who died a tragic martyr’s death for his just criticism of the corrupt Renaissance Church and papacy. In a sense both these views of Savonarola are accurate because Savonarola did indeed use his gift for oratory to sway many of the citizens of Florence away from the decadence and luxuries associated with the Medici regime towards a greater piety—making powerful enemies in the process. What is lacking in either of these views of Savonarola, though, is a sense of the real man, and this is what Konrad Eisenbichler’s interesting new compilation and translation of Savonarola’s works provides.

Former English translations of Savonarola’s works have tended to concentrate heavily on his treatises on topics ranging from worldly governments to the truth of the Christian faith. But only a few of his letters, and only one of his sermons, have ever been translated into English. Eisenbichler has chosen a variety of the Dominican’s writings hitherto unavailable to English scholars, thereby making available texts which contribute to our understanding of the charismatic preacher’s character and motivation. The selection includes personal letters, religious poems, sermons and pastoral works, all of which help to reveal Savonarola as a complex but compassionate and very human figure, who, through his own struggles, was able to inspire and advise others seeking the path to righteousness. While all of these documents will be of value to scholars of varying disciplines, two sets of documents will be particularly interesting to instructors and students of Renaissance and Reformation studies: his personal letters and his advice manuals, especially the one addressed specifically to widows.

Girolamo Savonarola was born in Ferrara in 1452, the son of Niccolò Savonarola, a middle-class businessman. His father gave him a classical humanist education designed to prepare him for a lucrative secular career, but the young Girolamo ran away from home in 1475 at the age of twenty-two and entered a Dominican convent in Bologna. In his letter dated 25 April 1475, he explains to Niccolò his reasons for this secretive desertion. Realizing the hurt he has caused, he attempts to console his father by appealing to his rationality and understanding. Despite the fact that Girolamo vehemently rejected Italian humanism and its reverence of the classics, his letter actually demonstrates his rhetorical skill, as he expounds on the necessity of his flight from the wickedness of worldly Italian people. Surely his father would rather he shunned wickedness rather than

partake in it? How could his father condemn him for praying for Divine guidance, especially as God had called him to be his “Knight Militant”? There is a hint of superiority in the tone of the letter, as Girolamo is supremely confident in his belief that he must obey God. This meant that just as the biblical prophets had left their families, he too must leave his family and former life and follow the call.

In another letter, dated 25 January 1490, this time addressed to his mother, a more mature Girolamo also alludes to himself as a prophet. Once again he stresses that his path is not the same as that of his family, for he must live a nomadic life, preaching and saving souls. He cannot remain in Ferrara, for, like Jesus and the prophets before him, he would not be accepted as a prophet in his own country. Nevertheless, despite this unwillingness to remain involved in the daily lives of his family, he kept a watchful eye on their spiritual and moral needs. On the death of his uncle, he wrote comforting words to his mother, consoling her for the loss of her brother. In 1496, when his sister Beatrice entered a convent (apparently reluctantly), he attempted to console her for not marrying. He counseled her that as a chaste nun she would have a better chance of salvation than if she had taken a husband; Beatrice’s response to this advice is not recorded!

Other letters in the collection show another aspect of Savonarola’s life and career. They are addressed mainly to gentlewomen who have sought his advice. These women include cloistered nuns who, it seems, were overly demanding of his time, as well as famous and influential figures such as Caterina Sforza, Duchess of Imola and Forlì. Caterina had written to him for spiritual comfort and guidance to help her through a particularly difficult stage in her turbulent life. Savonarola was well aware that not all women could retire to a convent; some had other destinies. Therefore, he did not waste time on impracticalities when dealing with such a politically active figure: she should confess regularly, carry out charitable works, and rule justly.

Girolamo’s grandfather was a famous and eminent physician who had been responsible for the primary education of his grandson. Whereas Michele Savonarola had written a vernacular advice book for wives attempting to get pregnant, Girolamo wrote spiritual advice books for those attempting to live righteously, be they fellow monks, laypersons or widows. His advice to widows, entitled “On the Life of the Widow,” published in 1491, particularly shows his understanding of the diverse situations of his flock. He discusses the various degrees of widowhood, differentiating between “true” widows—those who having lost their husbands seek salvation through living quietly and modestly and performing good works—and false widows, that is, those who still seek worldly pleasure. Yet this very distinction between young widows, who, he says, should remarry and those content to live a tranquil life concentrating on spiritual matters, shows a practical and understanding side of Savonarola’s nature. He condemns neither those widows who are too poor to remain single, nor those who are heavily involved with raising and caring for their grandchildren, although he has some scathing words for those merry widows who seek the company of younger men!

Konrad Eisenbichler provides an interesting and informative introduction as well as delightful woodcuts from the period. This collection will be of great interest to those scholars and students seeking to avoid stereotypical depictions of Savonarola.

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Philip Benedict. *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. Pp. xxvi, 670.

Impressively thorough, well-documented, and wide-ranging, Philip Benedict's social history of Calvinism covers the history of Reformed Protestantism in Europe from its origins until 1700. As Benedict points out, the last work to attempt this was John T. McNeill's *The History and Character of Calvinism* in 1954, so a new book on the subject is very welcome, especially one that takes account of "the actions and aspirations of ordinary men and women into a tale that long privileged the role of elite actors" (p. xviii). Dozens of informative and interesting illustrations as well as tables, charts, and maps provide an illuminating supplement throughout the work, and over 100 pages of notes reflect the depth of scholarship entailed in the writing of this book.

Benedict begins with the origins of the Reformed tradition in Wittenberg, Zurich, and Geneva (Part I), traces the expansion of this tradition in national churches throughout Europe (Part II), then discusses the transformations of this tradition in the seventeenth century (Part III), and finally questions the extent to which these traditions actually changed the lives of the men and women who practiced them (Part IV). Throughout this survey of the Reformed tradition, Benedict has four major objectives: (1) to provide a narrative of the origins and growth of Calvinism while accounting for the connection between the Reformed generation and this second generation reformer whose name it bears; (2) to revisit classic theories about the importance of Calvinism in the broader development of Western society; (3) to emphasize the importance of the struggles of church institutions in the history of the Reformed tradition; (4) to look at the emergence of Reformed modes of piety.

Benedict skillfully traces the Reformed tradition from its initial objections to Luther through its most influential proponents, most notably Zwingli, Bullinger, a Lasco, and finally Calvin. Although this work does discuss the main points of Calvin's governmental theories and his theology (especially with regard to the Eucharistic controversy and predestination), there is comparatively less material about Calvin than there is about Zwingli, for instance. This balance can be explained by the focus of the book; Benedict states, "The Reformed tradition broadly understood, not Calvinism in any of the narrower senses of that word, is this book's precise subject" (p. xxiii). Benedict's point that the Reformed tradi-