Blue nun

Lucie Skeaping is startled by a German abbess's lurid visions

Hildegard of Bingen: the Woman of Her Age
by Fiona Maddocks
332pp, Headline, £15.99
℡ £13.99 (free p&p) 0870 1557222

Picture: AKG LONDON

Hildegard of Bingen pictured in a 12th-century illuminated manuscript

Anyone whose idea of a singing nun begins and ends with Julie Andrews will find this entertaining book a revelation. Mystic, religious leader, naturalist, composer and 12th-century agony aunt, Hildegard of Bingen was, as Charlotte Allen put it in *The Woman's Quarterly*, ''one tough sister''.

It was fashionable in the Middle Ages for well-to-do families to donate their youngest daughter to a convent for life, and one of the many richly coloured illustrations here shows a 19th-century image of the eight-year-old Hildegard happily being handed over to a maternal-looking nun, as if being delivered to a smart prep school. The reality was more austere. Jutta, the anchoress (later abbess) earmarked to look after her, was only about 14 herself. It is from a biography of Jutta (recently come to light and one of the reasons for this new book) that we have the clearest account of Hildegard's early years.

The nuns shared a small hilltop monastery near the Rhine with a community of monks. Jutta describes how the two of them lived in a tiny stone cell with just a cat-flap for the necessities. This was a life of extreme struggle and self-denial. It was made all the more agonising for Hildegard because she attempted, for nearly 30 years, to keep secret her often overwhelming visions. These ''divine insights'' are documented in a series of naive and sometimes nightmarish paintings, possibly by Hildegard herself: hairy devils covered in excrement appear out of female groins, large oval shapes are surrounded by phallic-looking flames, and ecclesiastical towers tilt precariously in a cross between William Blake and Hieronymous Bosch.

At Jutta's death (she covered herself in a shroud, lay on a hair mat strewn with ashes and simply waited) Hildegard, now 38, emerged from her entombment. She published forceful diatribes against the abuses of both Church and state. This was dangerous for a nun and doubtless confirmed contemporary masculine opinion that women were, like Eve, ''rotten from head to toe''.

She addressed a prolific and opinionated correspondence to the movers and shakers of the age. And they came back for more, often entreating her to pray for them by return. St Bernard of Clairvaux and his pupil Pope Eugene III supported her, and in 1148 she decamped her troops (by now a community of about 20 nuns, unashamedly selected for their high birth) to new premises. Documents suggest that the building, in nearby Bingen, was permanently under construction, echoing to the shouts and curses of stonemasons and the hammering of carpenters, and Maddocks speculates amusingly on the hardship of trying to follow a life of quiet contemplation when you've got the builders in.

From now on nothing would stop Hildegard. She had her young charges dress as romantic brides, with flowing hair, white silk veils and jewelled crowns. She produced writings on science, medicine and Christian ethics. She pontificated about sex, dictated and interpreted her visions and composed plain-chant settings of her rich poetry.

Fiona Maddocks reflects on the music, questioning how far Hildegard can be considered its composer given that she lived in an age of collaborative music-making. But she also extracts gems from Hildegard's other writings: ''A bat, knocked senseless, tied to a person's loins and left to die will guarantee to cure jaundice.'' And some of her remarkably un-nunlike thoughts on the male orgasm: ''A boiling, pulsating pot'' that secretes a ''frothy fluid identical to milk'', which sounds more like a *caffe latte*.

In recent years, Hildegard of Bingen has become a Rorschach Test to radical feminists, New Age libertarians, early-music enthusiasts and others, who have come to see in her the personification of their pet ideologies. Maddocks will have none of this; she does, though, explain why Hildegard has become something of a cult to these people.

Maddocks leads you gently into what could be complex territory. There are maps, a useful chronological table and a list of people and places. She brings the story up to date by including an interview with a nun at Hildegard Abbey now. All that jostling for power which occurred in Hildegard's day — does it still go on? ''Yes, of course,'' answers Sister Ancilla: ''We're women!''

Wicked witch of the north

Hilary Spurling is spellbound by an irrepressible crone

Hellish Nell: Last of Britain's Witches
by Malcolm Gaskill
402pp, Fourth Estate, £15.99
℡ £13.99 (free p&p) 0870 1557222

Helen Duncan: hard-drinking

The last British witch — convicted of witchcraft at the Old Bailey in 1944 — was a tough, hard-drinking woman, a chain-smoking old trouper called Helen Duncan who specialised in making contact with dead soldiers and sailors. Mrs Duncan weighed 20 stone, swore like a fishwife and was said to put away a bottle of whisky a day.

She came from Callander, on the edge of the Scottish Highlands, where to this day the county council declines to display a presentation bust of its most famous daughter. Her father was a roofer. Her husband, who had been invalided out of the army, remained ever afterwards unemployed, so Helen started married life by working in the bleach fields to raise their growing family. She was indomitable, like her mother-in-law, who had been a herring-gutter.

One of Helen's early triumphs was to foretell the end of this unsympathetic mother-in-law by conjuring up a disembodied hand, which tapped at the window of the room where she and her young husband lay in bed. They recognised the hand from the line of scars notched across its palm by the herring-gutting knife. The mother-in-law died the next day.

Not that Helen's magic was generally malevolent. Quicker, sharper and more sensitive than her contemporaries, she had earned her nickname, Hellish Nell, by competing as a small girl on equal terms with the boldest boys. She looked closer, saw further and had a clearer grasp of actuality than most people. In August 1914, the 16-year-old Helen made her father laugh by predicting that the war would last another three or four years. She also foresaw the invention of the tank ("horseless war-machines, which moved on their bellies and smashed through houses").

Her career as a medium grew more or less by accident from her ability to transmit messages from missing fathers, husbands, sons and sweethearts. To start with, at any rate, she didn't so much exploit as assuage the fears and cravings of a society traumatised by grief and loss in the aftermath of the First World War.

Soon she began livening up her seances with severed hands and heads, followed by streams of ectoplasm that flowed from her mouth, nostrils, nipples and navel, or spurted up from between her legs, to snake across the floor in a billowing white mass that shaped itself into a procession of spectral visitors. Her spirit guide was a sardonic and dependable Scot named Albert Stewart, frequently accompanied by a rackety young sidekick known as Peggy, who sang, danced and swung from the curtain rails.

> She livened up seances with severed heads and streams of ectoplasm

Seances took place in a dim red light against a background of black curtains, with Albert marshalling the many guests like an otherworldly chatshow host. Proceedings were backed up behind the scenes by a repertoire of rubber gloves, masks, strings, rods and yards of muslin veiling, which emerged smelling strongly of the various recesses about the medium's ample person in which it had been secreted. Photographs show Albert looking like nothing so much as a length of cheesecloth dangling from a backbone made of Mrs Duncan's raised arm and fist. When a pack of sceptics pounced on Peggy, she dematerialised, leaving them clutching a cotton vest.

As Mrs Duncan's fame spread, and her theatrical effects grew more ambitious, she embarked on a duel with the Society for Psychical Research. Before each session, investigators stripped her naked, inspected her stockings, shook out her knickers, searched her orifices, taped her legs and blindfolded her eyes before bundling her into a black satin sack which was fastened round her neck with seals or padlocks. Her bodily secretions were regularly analysed, and her stomach X-rayed.

But nothing could inhibit her performance or dampen the enthusiasm of clients whose faith was, if anything, confirmed by traps and ambushes. Their fervour reached fever pitch when the police burst in with whistles, torches and truncheons. "She is an unmitigated humbug and pest," said the Chief Constable of Portsmouth, whose force arrested her in January 1944. Mrs Duncan had already announced the sinking of a warship well before the War Office had, and it was not prepared to risk another of her revelations in the run-up to the D-Day landings. But Helen was irrepressible. She served 10 months for witchcraft, and promptly went back to conjuring up the dead in a round of seances that ended only with her own death in 1956.

"It takes a flimflammer to catch a flimflammer," said Harry Houdini, and never in the whole history of flimflam was there a finer artist in the genre than Helen Duncan. Malcolm Gaskill's book is long, full, admirably researched, and so cranky in parts that it reads as if it had been dictated from the other world. I only hope it persuades Callander County Council to find a site at last for the bust of Hellish Nell.

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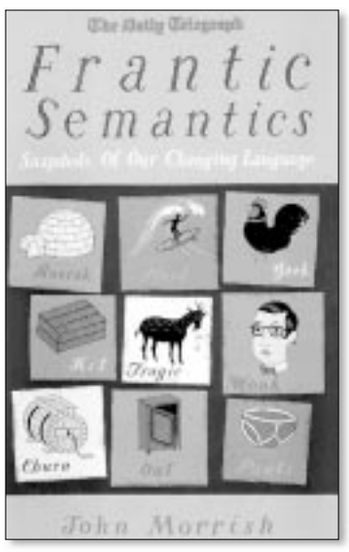

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Obsessed with the volcano

Kathryn Hughes on the fiery passion of the man whom Nelson cuckolded

Fields of Fire: a Life of Sir William Hamilton
by David Constantine
324pp, Weidenfeld, £20
℡ £17 (free p&p) 0870 1557222

To a casual onlooker, William Hamilton appeared something of a weak joke. Born in 1730, his attempts to carve out a career, first in the army and then in the diplomatic service, never quite got off the ground. Although he regularly pushed for big postings, he never managed to rise above Envoy Extraordinary (later Plenipotentiary) to the small court of Naples.

His private life seemed even lamer. Following a tepid marriage to a suitable woman, he took up with the distinctly déclassé Emma Hart, a fatly pretty demi-prostitute whose Lancashire accent didn't matter so much away from home. Emma shrewdly pressed for marriage and the fun of being Lady Hamilton, before making off with Admiral Nelson, who had turned up in the Bay of Naples following his huge success in the Battle of the Nile. For the last five years of his life, Hamilton was forced to play elderly gooseberry as Emma and Nelson paraded their cloying love to all and sundry. Even when they produced a baby, christened Horatia, Hamilton apparently failed to twig what was going on and seemed to go to his grave believing that Emma was a devoted wife and Nelson a damned fine fellow.

David Constantine persuades us that there was much more to Sir William Hamilton than the archetype of a complacent old cuckold. He brings an informed and subtle understanding to the available material, which includes Hamilton's unpublished notebooks.

Like so many gentleman-scholars of the late 18th century, Hamilton identified with the culture and philosophy of the Ancient Greeks. While to outsiders (and certainly to posterity) his limp career and humiliating private life made him look a fool, as far as he was concerned he was practising the accepting serenity of the true stoic.

Not that this made him vapid. Hamilton was a man of two fierce passions — vases and volcanoes — and Naples was the perfect place to pursue both. Vesuvius was spluttering and hissing throughout the 40-odd years he spent in its shadow, and the Envoy Extraordinary became an expert on its various signs and wonders. No visit to the official residence (shared for 20 years with Catherine, the first Lady Hamilton) was complete without a hike up the lava streams to get as close as possible to the source of the eruption. Yet Hamilton was always more than a slack-mouthed tourist: his meticulous observation of the volcano's repertoire of moods was to earn him a Fellowship of the Royal Society.

The eruption of Vesuvius in 1779, by Pietro Fabris

Hamilton collected vases, along with other ancient bits and pieces. Untroubled by issues of provenance and cultural theft, he put together an extraordinary collection of artefacts from Herculaneum, Pompeii and Sicily. Much of this he planned to sell on his occasional trips home to London, but he also had a scholar's interest in his subject. His several-volumed *Etruscan Vases* became a standard work (even though, as he later discovered, the pots were actually Greek) and the one from which Josiah Wedgwood cadged designs for the mass-market versions.

Emma Hamilton liked the vases too, but mostly because her hobby was copying the figures around their circumference. Her party piece was to strike a dramatic attitude and wait for the assembled company to applaud. Usually they did, but not without remarking to themselves that Lady Hamilton was a little too fat to pass herself off as a dancing girl and that, given her suspect vowels, it was probably all to the good that she stuck to mime. Hamilton, though, seems genuinely to have loved the girl whom visiting English secretly described as a ''whapper''. And she, in her pragmatic way, loved him back, smothering him with the particular brand of sexual yet motherly attention that went down so well with men of that era (the Prince Regent had exactly the same sensibilities).

Emma's abrupt change of tack to Nelson came as a surprise to no one except her husband. Clearly she adored the little admiral with the kind of passion she never managed to muster for Hamilton. Still, enough of Hamilton's stoicism had rubbed off to make her determined to find a way in which they could all live together. Eventually they settled down in south Wimbledon.

David Constantine's immaculate study of Sir William Hamilton shows what wonders can be done with an unpromising subject. His biography does not depend on slight and over-hyped ''revelations'', nor on forced parallels with contemporary figures. Instead, he uses nothing more sensational than deep scholarship, humane understanding and fairy-light writing to produce a model of that slightly unfashionable sub-genre, the ''life and times''.