

"A Capital Miracle"

C. CHRISTOPHER SMITH

In early March 1824, Ann Mattingly, sister of Washington, D.C., mayor Thomas Carbery, lay at death's door, her body racked with cancer that had started as a lump in her left breast seven years earlier and spread slowly through her vital organs, leaving her partially paralyzed. Her doctors had described her condition as "beyond the reach of medicine." That month, friends and fellow parishioners of Mrs. Mattingly, a widow and a devout Roman Catholic, were asking God for a miracle. They had joined together and were praying a novena—a

nine-day cycle of prayer—prescribed by an eccentric German priest and healer, Prince Alexander Hohenlohe. At 4 AM on the final day of the novena, March 10, 1824, Mattingly's parish priest, Rev. Stephen Dubuisson, arrived at her house to offer Mass for her, which she in her frailty could barely swallow. Once she swallowed the Host, however, the veil of her illness suddenly lifted and to the delight of her household, she sat up, praised God, then stood up and walked about the room. The cancer and all its ill effects upon her body had vanished in an instant.

This dramatic account of a healing lies at the heart of Nancy Lusignan Schultz's latest book, *Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle: The Prince, The Widow, and the Cure That Shocked Washington City*, a delightful and vibrant telling of a mysterious historical event that she delicately excavates from the sands of time. Schultz is chair of the English department at Salem State University and a scholar of 19th-century American Catholicism, having written two previous books in this area. *Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle* shows that Schultz is both a captivating storyteller and a meticulous historical researcher (who devotes a surprisingly lively several pages of her introduction describing her research methods and historiography). Although the book focuses on the cure of Ann Mattingly's cancer, and her second cure—of an infected leg swollen from foot to hip—seven years later, Schultz interweaves the life stories of Mrs. Mattingly and Prince Hohenlohe to create a rich narrative context within which these spectacular cures can be understood. Schultz is content to present her research on this story in all its complexity; particularly striking is the revelation that, despite contemporary accounts which framed Ann Mattingly's first cure in the light of Prince Hohenlohe's intercession, the reality is that the cure almost certainly occurred "without his knowledge or participation."

If Ann Mattingly's cures are the hook that draws readers into this 19th-century tale, Schultz finds in the story of the Carbery-Mattingly family a larger narrative that is "a microcosm of painful national rifts, rifts that could not be whisked away with a miracle but that were preludes to long and bloody battles." In particular, Schultz focuses on struggles involving race and religion. On the issue of race, she observes that Ann's son John distanced himself from the family after conceiving a son out of wedlock with Harriet Doyle, who would later become his wife. According to Schultz's

research, Doyle was apparently of mixed racial ancestry, which—combined with a premarital pregnancy—would explain the couple's eloping to the frontier lands of western Virginia in 1826. Although John Mattingly and his family returned to Washington around 1830, the historical record seems to indicate that he remained estranged from his aristocratic family until his death in poverty in 1839.

Ann Mattingly's Catholicism plays a vital role in this historical narrative. As Schultz notes, and as Morton Kelsey has emphasized in *Healing and Christianity*, 19th-century Protestantism was deeply rooted in rationalism, and the cessationist view of miracles was widespread. Had this sort of healing occurred within a Protestant context in that era, it might well have been received skeptically and dismissed without further notice. As it was, although Mattingly's position in the



Washington, D.C., circa 1901. "Carbery [Carbery] Mansion."

Capital City mayoral household drew a great deal of attention to her first cure, the response to her story was not uniformly positive. The ostensible involvement of Prince Hohenlohe stirred up a fair amount of anti-Catholic backlash among Protestants. At the time of the first healing, less than six months after the introduction of the Monroe Doctrine, Schultz notes, many Americans were vocally opposed to "European influence." Odd as it may seem, Prince Hohenlohe's supposed role in the healing was thus construed as yet another instance of European meddling in American affairs. This response to Ann Mattingly's first cure, Schultz suggests, anticipated the increasingly virulent nativist reaction to large-scale Catholic immigration and the corresponding shift in American Catholicism, over the course of Mattingly's life, from the sort of assimilation embodied in the establishment Catholicism of her native Maryland to an ethnically distinctive and marginalized status.

As intriguing and as well-told as the story of *Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle* is, it may nevertheless prove disappointing for some readers. Schultz steers clear—intentionally—of a number of important questions about the intersections of science, faith, medicine, and divine action that her narrative raises. Perhaps the furthest that she goes in explicitly illuminating the meaning of this story is to imply in the book's prologue that this story poses a challenge to a

rationalist worldview.

Despite her admission at the outset that Prince Hohenlohe's direct role in Ann Mattingly's first cure was probably minimal, Schultz proceeds to devote almost half the book to him. Hohenlohe was undoubtedly a bold and colorful character, and by moving back and forth between Europe and the United States, Schultz gives her narrative a pleasing structure. Still, Hohenlohe's story seems to obscure rather than clarify the meaning of Ann Mattingly's first cure (and perhaps one could argue that it also overshadows the meaning of her second cure). From the basic facts that Schultz offers here, one could see Ann Mattingly's first cure in the context of the deep and persistent caring of her family and church community, willing to search the world over for some sort of aid for her misery. To read the story in this way, although it would significantly dull the shimmer of Prince Hohenlohe's luminous healing ministry, might actually render the theological meaning of these events in terms that are clearer and more pragmatic for faith communities today.

To illustrate what seems to be missing here, it might be helpful to contrast Schultz's work with an account of another prominent 19th-century healing, Friedrich Zuendel's *The Awakening* (Plough, 1999), which recounts the story of J. C. Blumhardt's ministry in the town of Möttingen in Southern Germany in the 1840s. Zuendel's depiction of the many healings attributed to Blumhardt locates their significance in the transformation and revival, not only of Blumhardt's church and the town of Möttingen, but also of the surrounding region. Blumhardt's compassion—his willingness to enter into the deep pain and suffering of his parishioners—is clearly understood as leading not only to the healing of the ill ones in his church but also to lives and culture transformed by the Christ-like witness of Blumhardt and those who followed in his footsteps. This sort of theological reflection on the significance of the healings is absent from Schultz's book.

But neither does Schultz seek to explain away the miracle that occasioned her book in the first place. For that modesty, and for the skill and care that went into the telling of the tale, we owe her thanks. **B+C**

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