

CATHOLIC JOURNAL | ROBERT P. LOCKWOOD

# Princely miracle story

*The tale of a prince/priest, a 39-year-old widow and her cure, and its connection to anti-Catholicism*



It was a miracle. Or it wasn't. It all depended on your perspective. Or your prejudices.

That's the intriguing topic of a new book, "Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle: The Prince, the Widow, and the Cure that Shocked Washington City" (Yale University Press, \$30), by Nancy Lusignan Schultz.

The story centers on the small Catholic population in Washington, D.C., on March 9, 1824. Ann Mattingly — the widow — was dying of cancer at age 39. But in a matter of moments after struggling to receive holy Communion, she was completely cured.

The cure was attributed to the prayers of a 30-year-old German priest who was also a prince: Alexander Leopold Hohenlohe. He had begun a ministry of miraculous healing that had caught fire in Europe, England and Ireland. Mattingly's alleged cure brought his story to the young United States.

Schultz is a professor of English at Salem State University in Massachusetts, and a historian of 19th-century American Catholicism. She has also written "Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834," investigating the causes, personalities and issues surrounding the destruction of an Ursuline convent by an angry Boston mob.

Which makes Schultz my newest bestest friend. She has resurrected important aspects of Catholic life in the history of the United States for a new generation.

Mattingly was part of the Maryland Catholic tradition, descended from the first Catholic families in the only colony that had openly tolerated Catholics. These families were, if you will, more genteel and practiced a quieter — if certainly devout — form of public Catholicism reminiscent of the faith as lived in England since the 17th century.

They held positions of re-

spect in colonial and post-Revolution America, as long as they kept their Catholicism in low profile. It is argued that they represented an "Americanized" Catholicism that would have been tolerated benignly, but died when the pugnacious immigrant Church overwhelmed them.

All of which is debatable. I think it is a simplistic theory that fails to account for the strength of the rabid and elitist anti-Catholicism that dominated American culture and existed well before the Catholic migration.

Anti-Catholicism is part of America's cultural DNA, arriving hale and hearty with the pilgrims at Plymouth, and no Maryland inheritance could have changed that. The very catholicity of the Maryland tradition would have eventually made them a target.

As seen in the response to Mattingly's miracle. It brought out every bit of lurking, seminal anti-Catholicism in the wider culture. It was derided as a clerical, Jesuitical plot to undermine American Protestantism, American freedom, and American separation of church and state. It was called a medieval throwback to an age where an inquisitorial Church held reason at bay. Kind of how The New York Times responds to all things Catholic today.

Schultz covers this and more in her book. She is wonderfully neutral on the miracle itself. She neither endorses the reality of the cure as miraculous, nor dismisses it. Which brought some heat from today's critics.

Mattingly would live another 30 years, and claim a second miraculous cure in 1831.

The priest who allegedly cured her remained a controversial figure until his death in 1849. To this day, debates swirl about whether he was a saint or a charlatan. Schultz is once again neutral.

I lean toward the prince as a generally good man who suffered from the defects of original sin.

As do we all.

*Robert P. Lockwood writes from Pennsylvania.*