

THE “MIASMA OF MYTH”: JOHN HENRY NEWMAN,
THE OXFORD MOVEMENT, AND THE HAGIOGRAPHY
OF A ROMANTIC HERO

Robert M. Andrews

Catholic Institute of Sydney, Sydney College of Divinity, New South Wales

ABSTRACT

John Henry Newman’s life, legacy and reputation remain influenced by unrealistic perceptions of his sanctity—that is, by a hagiographic hermeneutic applied by many Roman Catholic theologians. This article explores the problem of hagiography in Newman studies by examining Newman’s Romantic misreading of the history of the Oxford Movement. Not only is it argued that this misreading is present in Newman’s own interpretation of his role in the promotion of Tractarianism during the 1830s, it is shown to be an interpretation that has been adopted uncritically by some of his most influential interpreters. Placing Newman within the context of nineteenth-century Romanticism’s exaltation of the “Romantic Hero,” this article contends that a problem with Newman studies is that they are too easily influenced, not by history, but by the “miasma of myth.” In doing this they avoid a crucial part of what had been central to Newman’s path to sanctity: namely, his humanity and its undoubted failings.

KEYWORDS

John Henry Newman, The Oxford Movement, Romanticism, High Churchmanship, hagiography, historiography