

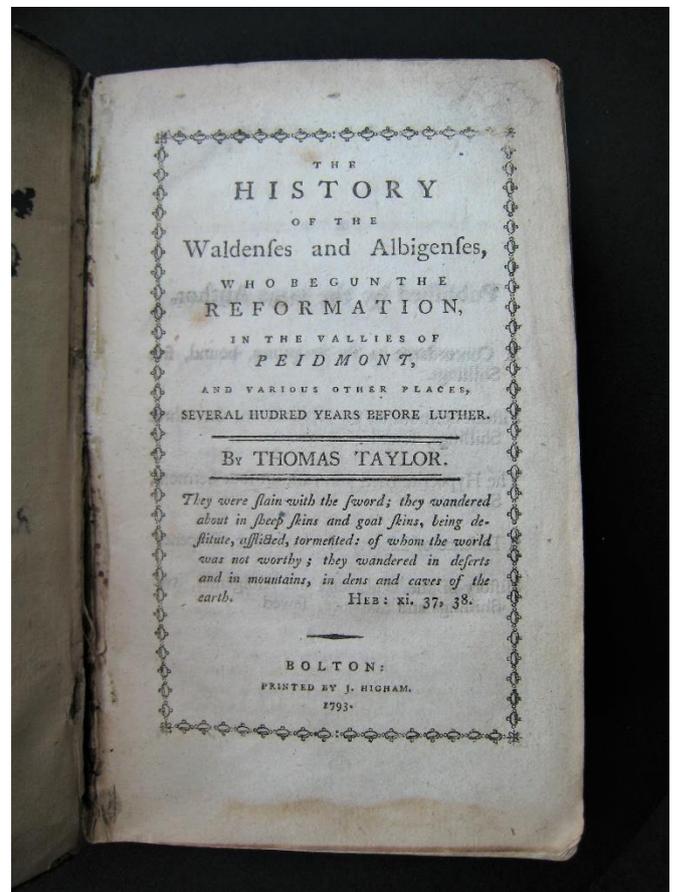
## “THE POOR MEN OF LYON”

A display prepared for the [URC History Society Conference at Westminster College in June 2019](#) looked at some of the books about the Waldensians in the URCHS collections.

In the 1170s, ‘Peter’ Waldo or Valdès (c.1140-c.1205) gave away all his possessions and formed the Poor Men of Lyon. Known by his name in the Provençal, Italian, or Latin forms, his followers were later known as the Vaudois, the Valdese, and the Waldenses or Waldensians – but they referred to themselves as the Poor Men of Lyon, or the Brothers.

A movement which was characterised by voluntary poverty, lay preaching, and literal interpretation of the Bible (which they translated into the vernacular), the Poor Men soon came into conflict with the Catholic Church, and were declared to be heretical in 1215. As they were persecuted in France, they moved deeper into the high Alpine valleys between France and Italy, into Piedmont.

One of the earliest statements of faith for the movement is a Provençal poem dating from c.1200, entitled “[La Nobla Leyczon](#)” – in English, [The Noble Lesson](#). During the Reformation, the Poor were hailed as early and faithful proponents of Protestant ideas – the poet John Milton (1608-1674), [writing a sonnet about the Piedmont Easter](#) massacre in 1655, refers to them as ‘them who kept thy truth so pure of old’.



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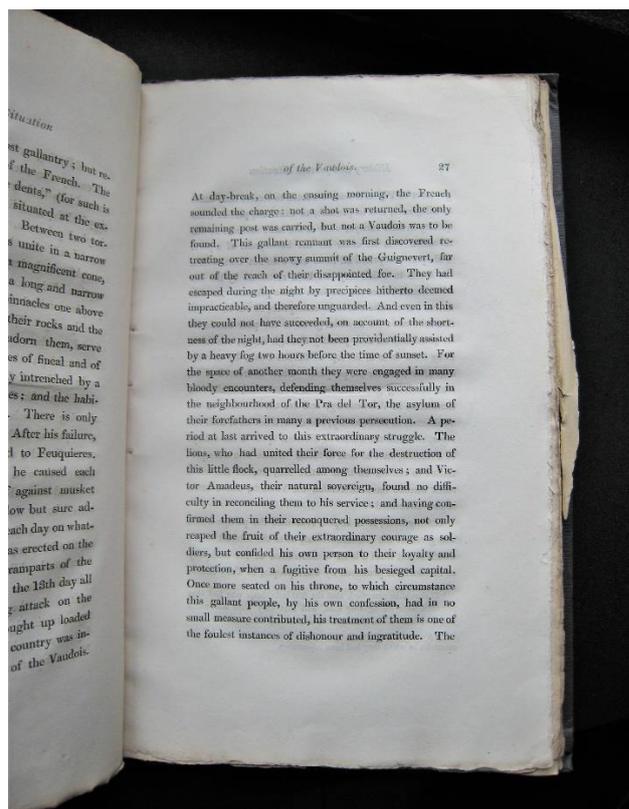
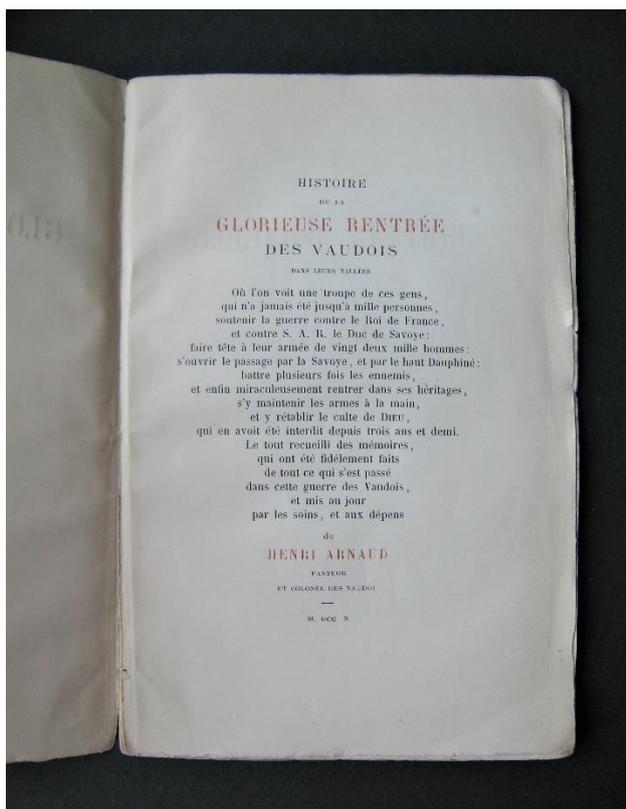
map from ‘[Narrative of an Excursion into the Mountains of Piemont](#)’, by [William Gilly](#) (1825) (left)  
This map of 1825 shows the area of Savoy from which the Vaudois moved into Piedmont, in Northern Italy, and the three key valleys of Lucerna, San Martino, and Perosa.

‘[The History of the Waldenses and Albigenses](#)’, by [Thomas Taylor](#) (1793) (right)  
Here, Thomas Taylor describes them as the peoples “who began the Reformation in the Vallies of Peidmont, and various other places, several hundred years before Luther”.

Even more severe oppression in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the massacres in the Luberon in 1545, in Calabria in the 1560s – culminated in the ‘Piedmont Easter’ of 1655, a massacre so extensive and so brutal that other Protestant countries were outraged, and leaders (including Oliver

Cromwell) offered sanctuary to Waldensians. Following the 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes by King Louis XIV – which had allowed French Protestants the right to worship – the Waldensians were told to convert to Catholicism or leave. But after years of persecution by the French King and the Duke of Savoy, and exile in Germany and Switzerland (and Waldensian guerrilla raids by the ‘Invincibles’), in 1689, under the leadership of [Henri Arnaud](#), the Waldensians had begun their ‘Glorious Return’ to their homeland.

Here, Acland’s book (right) describes how, after heavy losses, and vastly outnumbered, 300 Waldensians were cornered by French troops in the high mountains in 1690 – but in the morning, when the French prepared to begin their final attack, the Waldensians, “providentially assisted by a heavy fog”, had made a daring (and terrifying) midnight escape “down precipices hitherto deemed to be impracticable, and therefore unguarded.”



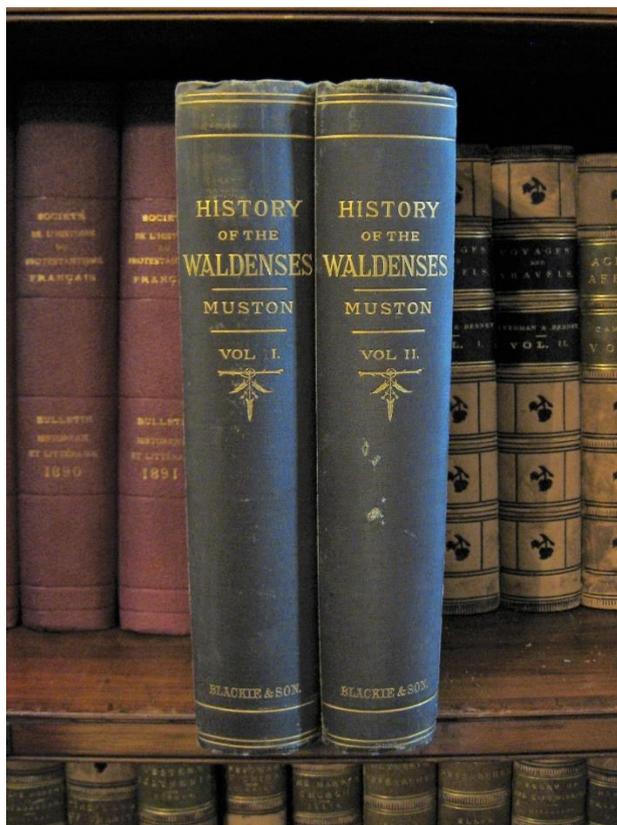
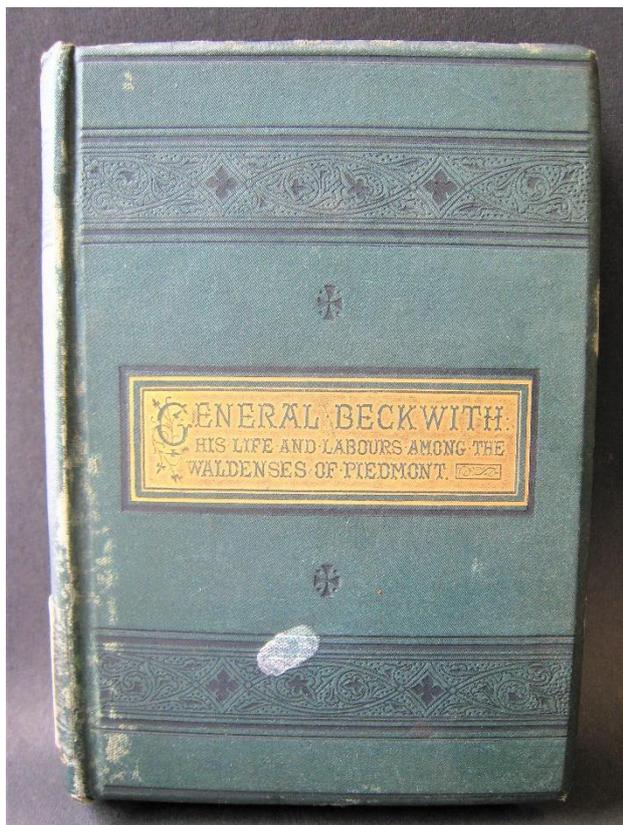
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*'Histoire de la Glorieuse Rentree des Vaudois', by Henri Arnaud (1710/1880) (left)*  
 This account by Henri Arnaud, 'pasteur et colonel des Vaudois', was originally published in 1710 and dedicated to Queen Anne, 'protectrice de la foi'; this is an 1880 reprint.

*from 'A Brief Sketch of the History and Present Situation of the Valdenses in Piedmont, commonly called Vaudois', by Hugh Dyke Acland (1825) (right)*  
 Acland's account of the escape of the Vaudois - whom he describes as "objects of persecution, unexampled both in severity and protraction" - from the French army.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, life for the Waldensians was still one of hardship, but they had re-established themselves in their alpine valleys. [General Charles Beckwith](#), an English officer who fought at Waterloo, read Gilly's 1825 book *Narrative of an Excursion into the Mountains of Piedmont*, shortly after it was published, and became interested in them. He moved to Torre Pellice, the main town in the heart of the Waldensian communities, where he worked with them to build schools, churches and a hospital, to increase literacy levels, and to reignite their missionary activities.

The French 1848 Edict of Emancipation granted the Waldensians French citizenship and the right to political freedom; but given their heartland was in Piedmont, in Italy, at Beckwith's urging, the Waldensians also learned Italian and became Italian citizens.



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**'General Beckwith: his Life and Labours among the Waldenses of Piedmont', by J P Meille (1873)**  
*This biography of Beckwith was written by the pastor of the Waldensian church at Turin. The Preface to the book records how even in the nineteenth century, association with the Poor Men was still dangerous: Meille says Beckwith "scrupulously destroyed all manuscripts which could have revealed the secret of his prodigious activity".*

**'Israel of the Alps: A History of the Waldenses', by Alexis Muston (1875)**  
*In a similar vein, [Rev. Alexis Muston](#) wrote a thesis about the Waldensians – and was taken to court, before having to leave his home near Turin and move to France. He continued to write about them.*

The Waldensians remain in Italy today – and more took their beliefs with them as they emigrated across the Atlantic to Uruguay and Argentina, and on to the USA. In 2015, [Pope Francis visited the Waldensian church](#) in Turin – the first time a Pope had ever done so – and asked the Waldensians for their forgiveness of the historical actions of the Catholic Church against them.

The URCHS special collections are catalogued on [iDiscover](#), the Cambridge University Library catalogue.

### **Bibliography and Further Reading**

'A History of the Waldensians', online at

<https://www.museeprotestant.org/en/notice/a-history-of-the-waldensians/>

'Waldensian History: A Brief Sketch', by Ronald F Malan, online at

<http://www.waldensian.info/History.htm>

'History and Beliefs of the Waldensians: Mediaeval Forerunners of the Protestant Reformation', by Mary Fairchild, online at

<https://www.learnreligions.com/waldensians-history-beliefs-4588324>