

Penny Mawdsley reviews
Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People
An Introduction and Selection
by Rowan Williams and Benedicta Ward

Bloomsbury, (London 2012) Hbk. 200 pages. £15.29

I'm not convinced that this slim volume dedicated to the late Donald Allchin, champion of ecumenism, adds much to the huge canon of literature relating to Bede's remarkably prolific output of theological, hagiographic and historical work undertaken over a long life for the period (673 - 735 CE). It consists of a distillation of the five books that make up the *Ecclesiastical History*, translated from Bede's clear and unembellished Latin into clear, modern and unacademic English by Benedicta Ward, an Anglican Carmelite nun, Reader in the History of Christian Spirituality at the University of Oxford. Nothing of Sister Benedicta's personality, let alone her passion for Bede's writing, emerges from the text, as, arguably, it should not if Bede is to communicate directly to a twenty-first century readership. However, to a reader naturally suspicious of taking biased interpretation for straightforward translation, this omission is somewhat unsatisfactory.

On the plus side, Ward and Williams have made a good 'chapter' selection. Favourite stories remembered from primary school days, such as Caedmon singing to Abbess Hilda of Whitby and the description of the swallow flying through the king's hall as metaphor for the transience of life are included – as is an 'extra' prologue in the poignant description of Bede's own death as related by Deacon Cuthbert. There are no footnotes, only endnotes following the introduction, a list of suggested further reading and a final index.

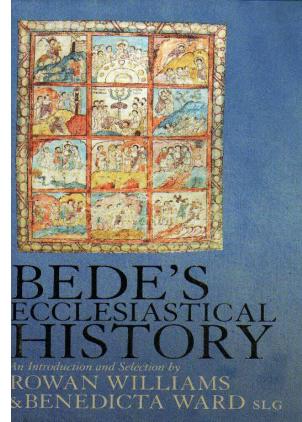
Rowan Williams provides a helpful introduction to the context in which and for which the history is written. Williams reveals something here of his own ecumenical concerns and his love of the English Church, as she has evolved distinctively from pre-Reformation times. As one-time Archbishop of Wales and a man proud of his Welsh roots, Williams demonstrates a clear sympathy for the struggling residual British church, with which Bede himself had little patience. He clarifies the difference between the vibrant Irish church of the fifth century, whose missionaries energetically evangelised the Northumbrian Saxons in the sixth and early seventh centuries and the self-involved, petty-minded and corrupt British (Cumbrian and Welsh) Church of the period 'who have lost their way'. It is clear that Bede believed passionately that *gens Anglorum* had a pre-ordained destiny as people chosen by God (cf the Israelites) to complete God's purpose and bring forward the

Second Coming.

Bede understood that the common 'folk' from their various Germanic kinship groups, who lived in rural communities under one of the seven kings of the then Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy 'at the utmost end of the earth', needed encouragement and support fully to convert from paganism and live godly lives. This would bring about God's Kingdom and it was to this end that Bede's life's work was dedicated. He fervently believed that there should be unity of liturgy and wider Christian practice and this would only come about if all English Christians followed Papal decrees in all aspects of their Christian life, from the design of monastic tonsures to the date on which Easter was to be celebrated.

Bede had both the aptitude and good-fortune to be immersed from the age of seven in the vibrant and intellectually stimulating environment of the newly-founded twin monasteries of Wearmouth (674 CE) and adjacent Jarrow (681/2). The founding Abbot, Benedict Biscop, into whose care the young Bede was sent, had become an exceptionally wealthy and cultivated individual who had enthusiastically collected one of the best libraries in Europe on his travels.

Bede continued to flourish in his Northumbrian setting, finding sufficient inspiration and satisfaction to remain there for an astonishing lifetime of literary productivity. He apparently did not feel cut off, and somehow managed to correspond regularly by letter on theological matters with scholarly churchmen all over Europe. He produced in the *Codex Amiatinus* what was generally regarded as the best translation of St Jerome's Vulgate Bible until 1963 (a precious copy of this he sent as a gift to the Pope) and recognised, generally ahead of his time, the importance of making available key items of the Faith in the vernacular for the common people. He translated the *Pater Noster* and the *Credo* into Anglo-Saxon and was busy translating St John's Gospel likewise up to the day he died. Bede was far more than 'Father of English History'. He fully deserved his belated academic recognition in 1899 when Leo XIII made him a Doctor of the Church, the only native of Great Britain to achieve this designation.*



*Anselm of Canterbury, also a Doctor of the Church, was originally from Italy.

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