PENGUIN CLASSICS

# BEDE

## *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*

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# ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE

ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

Bede was born in 673. He himself tells us that he became a monk at an early age and lived most of his life at Jarrow. Scholar, teacher and writer, he wrote biblical and other works. He has been described as the 'Father of English History'. His historical works include *Life of Cuthbert* and *Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, both in *The Age of Bede* (a Penguin Classic). Bede died in 735.

Leo Sherley-Price served in the Royal Navy for twenty-seven years, his last appointment being with the Royal Naval College, Greenwich. Subsequently he has been Rural Dean and parish priest in Devon. He has translated Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, Walter Hilton's *The Ladder of Perfection*, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* and a number of other historical and theological books. He is now retired and is Honorary Assistant priest at the church of St John the Evangelist, Bovey Tracey, in Newton Abbot, Devon, and he remains in active ministry.

D. H. Farmer (B.Litt. Oxon) was Reader in History at Reading University until 1988. He is author and editor of several books on ecclesiastical and monastic history such as *Benedict's Disciples* (2nd edition, 1999), *The Age of Bede* (a Penguin Classic, 1983), *St Hugh of Lincoln* (3rd edition, 2000) and *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (1978; 4th edition, 1997). This has been translated into Italian, Slovakian and Roumanian. A work on Anglo-Saxon missionaries in Europe is in preparation. He has also been principal consultant for the new twelve-volume edition of *Butler's Lives of the Saints* (1995–9).

# BEDE

## ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE

WITH

## BEDE'S LETTER TO EGBERT

AND

## CUTHBERT'S LETTER ON THE DEATH OF BEDE

The History *translated by*
*Leo Sherley-Price*
*revised by R. E. Latham*
Translation of the minor works,
new Introduction and Notes
*by D. H. Farmer*

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LIKE all previous editions of Bede's Ecclesiastical History this one depends on the pioneer work of Charles Plummer in *Baedae Opera Historica* (Oxford, 1896 and 1956). Grateful recognition is also made to the edition and notes of B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969) and to the historical commentary by J. M. Wallace Hadrill (Oxford, 1988), which have been invaluable in providing much material for this work. Among more recent writers James Campbell, first in his essay on Bede in *Latin Historians* (ed. T. A. Dorey, 1966) and then in *The Anglo-Saxons* (1982), has placed all scholars in this field in his debt. At a late stage of preparation David Howlett and Richard Sharpe (of the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*) gave generous help, especially in the preparation of the subsidiary texts and the footnotes. For any errors none of these benefactors are responsible.

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS



| | |
|---|---|
| *AB* | J. F. Webb and D. H. Farmer, *The Age of Bede* (Penguin Classics 1989) |
| *ASE* | *Anglo-Saxon England* (periodical, 1972–) |
| Campbell | J. Campbell, ed. *The Anglo-Saxons* (1982) |
| *CCSL* | *Corpus Christianorum Scriptorum Latinorum* |
| Colgrave and Mynors | B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* (Oxford 1969) |
| *EHD I* | D. Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents*, vol. I (1968) |
| *Famulus Christi* | G. Bonner, ed., *Famulus Christi* (1976) |
| Kirby | D. P. Kirby, ed., *St Wilfrid at Hexham* (Newcastle 1974) |
| *ODS* | D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford 1987) |
| *ODCC* | F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford 1974) |
| *PBA* | *Proceedings of the British Academy* |
| Plummer | C. Plummer, *Bedae Opera Historica* (Oxford 1956) |
| *WH* | J. M. Wallace Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History: a Historical Commentary* (Oxford 1988) |

# INTRODUCTION

BEDE'S *History*, the first account of Anglo-Saxon England ever written, has always been highly esteemed. Bede was a monk of Jarrow who worked on this book for several years before completing it in 731. Over the next fifty years it was copied in Northumbria and elsewhere (four eighth-century manuscripts survive), and it became widely diffused in western Europe throughout the Middle Ages. It was first printed in *c.* 1480 and nowadays it enjoys a wider distribution than ever before.*

The *History* is readable and attractive. Whether he writes of the geography of Britain (i. 1), the coming of Augustine (i. 26), the Northumbrian council concerned with the acceptance of Christianity (ii. 13) or the achievements of Abbess Hilda and the poet Caedmon (iv. 23–4), Bede's insight, empathy and concision are evident. Elsewhere his descriptions of natural phenomena such as the recovery of a horse from illness (ii. 9), the speech therapy provided for a boy (v. 2) and the supernatural experiences of the visionary Drythelm (v. 12) reveal his talent as a descriptive writer. Even more important, his power of synthesis, making a coherent whole from fragmentary elements, together with his telling use of original sources, make him a fine historian.

The few known details of his life are soon told. The last chapter of the *History* (v. 24) is our principal source, and this is completed both by Bede's *Lives of the Abbots* (*AB*, pp. 185–208) and by the monk Cuthbert's account of Bede's death (see below, pp. 357–60).

Bede tells us that he was born in 673 on land owned by the

monastery of Wearmouth. He was offered to its abbot, Benedict Biscop, seven years later for his education. A few years afterwards, he moved to the new foundation of Jarrow under the care of Abbot Ceolfrith: here he remained for the rest of his life. In his early days there, as the anonymous *Life of Ceolfrith* records, a young boy and the abbot were the only two monks capable of singing the Divine Office 'with antiphons' after the plague had swept through the monastery. It seems highly probable, if not absolutely certain, that this young boy was none other than Bede himself.*

Bede was ordained as a deacon at the age of nineteen by John, Bishop of Hexham, and priest at the age of thirty. For the rest of his life he gladly took part in the Liturgy and other exercises of the community, but was particularly drawn to study, teaching and writing. The study was concerned principally with Latin and the Bible. It may well be claimed that the principal element in his formation as a scholar was the Latin Bible. This was the central element of the monks' sacred reading. Its entire text was copied with meticulous care at least three times in Ceolfrith's abbey. One of these massive one-volume Latin bibles survives complete in the Bibliotheca Laurenziana at Florence; another fragment of a few pages is in the British Library. It is possible but not certain that Bede as a young monk worked on one or more of these volumes.*

In Bede's lifetime, not only was Jarrow a centre of excellence for study, thanks to the acquisition of books from Italy and France by Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith, but the whole environment reflected a cultural standard achieved by few others at the time. The churches were built of stone and adorned with panel paintings brought back from the Continent, and it is now known, thanks to recent archaeological excavation, that there was a flourishing stained-glass workshop. In 716 the two abbeys of Wearmouth and Jarrow housed 600 monks. It is likely that Jarrow was the smaller monastery of the two: the restricted site (not yet fully excavated) would hardly be able to house 200 monks.*

Bede's teaching and writing were based on the resources of

the library. These included Latin grammars, books of computistics and chronology, history, hagiography and patristic commentaries on the Bible. Much of Bede's teaching must have been basic. Most monks, when they arrived at the monastery, would have been ignorant of Latin and may have been unable to read their native tongue. After some years of learning Latin they would advance to the other subjects already mentioned.

Bede regarded himself primarily as a biblical commentator: the number and size of these works far exceed his others. His sermons also reveal him as a contemplative scholar whose world was that of the mysteries of the Christian faith. Not being a speculative genius like Augustine or Aquinas, he might have been thought of (in patristic terms) as one who ruminated like the ox rather than one who soared like the eagle. His commentaries on nearly every book of the Bible have seemed unoriginal and derivative to many, but they at least provided admirable digests of patristic commentary to preachers in England and overseas in an age when books were very scarce and very expensive. Moreover Bede's use and skilful editing of his sources often makes his works more valuable than at first appears.

Most readers now think of Bede primarily as a historian. His *History* was the work of his mature years, completed when he was aged about sixty. His earlier works of chronology, computistics and hagiography prepared him, in different ways, for his masterpiece. The details of dating, including his personal contribution of popularizing 'AD' dating, carefully worked out in harmony with imperial 'indictions', formed an indispensable tool for his task. Indeed his professional interest in computing Easter dates is sometimes obsessively present in the text of his *History*. His previous experience in recording the lives of Cuthbert and of the Abbots of his own monastery also prepared him well for narrating the achievements of other worthies. In addition to these works, his main output of biblical commentaries was completed and continued by the *History*.

This was entitled, very precisely, *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. It was a Church history, not a political,

economic or social history. Inevitably, however, some of these elements were included in the story of the progress and development of the Christian Church. Also it concerned the English people, that is, the Germanic peoples who settled in England and who are generally known as the Anglo-Saxons (see i. 15, v. 9 and notes). The Church in Anglo-Saxon England, rather than the Church in Ireland, Scotland or Wales, was Bede's subject. Bede wrote in Latin like all scholars of his time and this ensured that his work would be read in western Europe as well as in England. He dedicated the work to Ceolwulf, King of Northumbria, who presumably knew enough Latin to understand it. The style was simple, the content attractive. Clerical readers would be much more numerous than lay ones. Bede, fine Latin scholar though he was, also understood and provided for laypeople's needs by translating prayers and the Scriptures (see pp. 340, 358–9). He also emphasized the importance of Caedmon and vernacular poetry in the spread of Christianity in his day (iv. 24). This was an integral part of the progress of the Church and so it deserved mention beside the other fine contemporary achievements. Bede completed his *History* in 731. His *Letter to Egbert* shows more clearly its enduring difficulties and limitations. This was written in 734, the year before he died. Cuthbert's moving account of his death (pp. 355–60) was written soon afterwards.

Sir Frank Stenton wrote of the *History* over fifty years ago:

> The essential quality of Bede's History carries it into the small class of books which transcend all but the most fundamental conditions of time and place . . . the quality which makes his work great is not his scholarship nor the faculty of narrative which Bede shared with many contemporaries, but his astonishing power of co-ordinating the fragments of information which came to him through tradition, the relation of friends, or documentary evidence. In an age when little was attempted beyond the registration of fact, he had reached the conception of history.*

In most ways this judgement still stands, though Bedan studies have moved fast in recent years. His text has been rightly subjected to much critical scrutiny. His motives, his limitations and his omissions have all been examined in detail. More clearly than formerly have his regional bias, his academic partisanship and the paucity of his sources been revealed.

There has also been enrichment from other directions. Archaeologists have made and are still making important discoveries. Sometimes these seem to contradict Bede's statements; often they simply complete them. Recent studies of Christianity in Ireland and Wales throw further light on realities adjacent to, rather than in the centre of, Bede's outlook.* Bede did not know everything, nor did he always tell us all that he knew: sometimes he oversimplified complex realities, sometimes he concentrated on the didactic value (as he saw it) in a particular narrative.

Another valuable insight which has developed since Stenton's time is that Anglo-Saxon society is now seen to resemble Frankish society far more closely than was previously thought. The roles of the kings and the military aristocracy as well as the laws were similar on both sides of the English channel. The Frankish Church had a notable share in the development of the Church in Anglo-Saxon England. Gregory of Tours, its historian, was a bishop much involved with the Merovingian court. He explicitly narrated in considerable detail the frequent violence which took place there. Bede's treatment of court life (which he probably never experienced) gives the impression of far greater tranquillity. Was this because the realities were different, or because each writer reflected his own life-style in his narrative? It is not always easy to say, but it seems certain that Anglo-Saxon society was more violent than Bede makes out.*

Yet a further growth point is the increasing realization of the importance of Bede's biblical works as a key to understanding the *History*. These throw light on Bede's purpose in writing and help us to understand him better as a person and a scholar. Sometimes they shed light on his miracle stories, his ideas of

kingship and his concept of history in terms of the realization of the divine plan for mankind.*

In the realization of his task Bede had to use the few sources available and was often at a considerable chronological distance from the events he related. It is easy to forget that he was 130 years distant from the coming of Augustine and 300 from the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in England. Hence Bede's first book has been criticized more than the others. Here he inevitably depended heavily on Gildas, whose *Liber querulus de excidione Britanniae* is more of a homily than a history. Explicitly dependent on the biblical account of Jeremiah, it saw the downfall of the British in terms of Israel's fall to the Assyrians. It had little good to say about the rulers of this people, and Bede shared the belief that the invaders, although pagan, were instruments of God's punishment of an unworthy people.* Later, unknown to Bede, Gildas emerged as an important abbot and teacher who helped to link the churches of Ireland and Wales.

Bede's famous account of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, however, reflected the political realities of his own time rather than the archaeological realities to which he had no access. It is now recognized that the Anglo-Saxon invasions were a long, gradual settlement lasting about 200 years, that the invaders were much more mixed in the same areas than Bede supposed, that the kingdoms were 'made in England' and that the native population survived, especially in the West, in a stronger and more coherent state than was previously supposed. However, by the time Augustine arrived (and Columba of Iona died) in 597, the invaders were in firm political control of most of what is now England. Their settlements were numerous and were usually outside the decayed old Roman towns. Their living standards were reflected by the wealth of Sutton Hoo and the grandeur of the poem *Beowulf* at royal level, but also by ground-house settlements at Sutton Courtenay and elsewhere at a peasant level.*

These considerations are largely supplementary to Bede's own information. What did this consist of? What sources were available to him? What was he trying to do? Bede gives us most

of the answers in his Preface, which was addressed to the literate King Ceolwulf, who subsequently abdicated and became a monk at Lindisfarne.

Bede listed his contemporary sources not his ancient ones. The latter had included Orosius, Pliny and Solinus as well as Gildas and the *Life of Germanus* by Constantius. In the Preface Bede was concerned with more recent and regional correspondents. These came from different areas of Anglo-Saxon England, but none were from Celtic Britain.* Abbot Albinus of Canterbury, who ruled there from 709 to 732, was not only the principal source for Kent, but also the animator of the whole project. His scholarly assistant, the London priest Nothelm, researched the papal archives at Rome for letters of Gregory the Great and later popes relating to England. These letters were inserted by Bede, it seems, into a narrative already begun. Bede may have lived long enough to learn of Nothelm's promotion to the See of Canterbury in 735; he died in 739. Other correspondents included Daniel, Bishop of Winchester (who also wrote to St Boniface), the monks of Lastingham (who provided information about Chad, Cedd and the Mercian apostolate), the otherwise unknown Esi the abbot (who covered East Anglian affairs) and above all 'countless faithful witnesses' from Northumbria. These must have included members of his own community as well as that of Lindisfarne, where Bede was well known since he had written his *Life of Cuthbert* at their request in 721. Information concerning Columba, Aidan and the final reconciliation came from Iona. Other written sources included Eddius' *Life of Wilfrid* and the anonymous lives of Gregory, Cuthbert and possibly Ceolfrith. Bede was the most eminent writer in eighth-century Northumbria, but by no means the only one.

The Preface tells us not only about sources, but also about why Bede was writing. The modern reader cannot fail to notice Bede's explicit moral purpose. Glossing Tacitus, he wrote: 'if history records good things of good men, the thoughtful reader is encouraged to imitate what is good; if it records evil of wicked men, the devout reader is encouraged to avoid all that is sinful

and perverse.' Hence King Ceolwulf wanted Bede's *History* to be diffused for the good of the people over whom he ruled. The *History*, however, is not just a gallery of good and bad examples, but a coherent narrative in which these examples are introduced within the context of a fuller story. The examination both of Bede's models and of his limitations should throw further light on this topic.*

At first sight Bede had no models: his was a pioneering work without any exact precedent. In fact he owed much to earlier historians. The most important of these was Eusebius, the fourth-century Bishop of Caesarea, whose *Ecclesiastical History* recounted the story of the Christian Church from Pentecost until his own times: how it spread through the Roman Empire in spite of numerous persecutions, how the bishops succeeded one another and how they resisted the evil influence of heretics. Bede, who knew Eusebius in Rufinus' Latin translation, tried to do for the Church in Anglo-Saxon England what Eusebius had done for the Church as a whole. For each the history of the Church was simply a development of the story of the *Acts of the Apostles*. Just as Christ's apostles had worked, preached and suffered to establish the Church in obedience to Christ, so did their successors in whatever time or place. Bede wrote his commentary on *Acts* during part of the time when he was also writing the *History*. If persecution and martyrdom were lacking in the account of the Christianization of England, there was no lack of signs or miracles. Both Eusebius and Bede expected these to accompany the pioneering spread of the Gospel. Contrary to previous opinions, it is clear that both sophisticated Romans and uncultured barbarians expected religion to be accompanied by miracles of one kind or another.*

In view of this, it is unsurprising that Bede's *History* contains miracle stories. Not all have the same explanation: some were probably the result of natural forces, psychological factors or apparent coincidence. But all contained some marvellous element (*mirum*) which revealed God's power and care. Some of the stories reveal significant detail of interest to the historian. Although many of them seem to be a stumbling block to the

modern reader, their absence would have been an even greater difficulty to Bede's contemporaries.

Other earlier historians to whom he owed a debt include Gregory of Tours, whose *History of the Franks* is very different, but from it Bede took the idea of a final autobiographical survey. The task which Bede set himself was extraordinarily difficult. Pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon society had virtually no documents and no books. Laws and property transactions were promulgated by the king's word. There was however a lively oral tradition of poetry. Even after the coming of Christianity, written records of all kinds were very few. Bede made the best of what there was: papal letters, episcopal lists, conciliar documents as well as the sources mentioned above. It was Bede's skill which made coherent a number of disparate and scrappy elements.

The main theme of the *History* was the progression from diversity to unity. This was an idea worked out by Gregory the Great, whom Bede admired so much both as a teacher and as the apostle of the English. Both aspects are incorporated in his admirable panegyric (ii. 1). Bede began his work with a geographical and racial survey of Britain (i. 1). He saw Christianity as the unifying force which brought together Picts, Irish, Angles, Saxons, Jutes and, hopefully, Britons. A principal sign of this unity was the common celebration by all on the same day of the principal Christian mystery, that of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. That was why any deviation or schism caused by rival calculations of Easter was so unacceptable. Bede's concern, almost obsession, with this issue shows itself repeatedly in his judgements on Welsh and Irish Christians, even St Aidan (iii. 17). It also explains the great length of his account of the Synod of Whitby, the dramatic centre-piece of the whole work (iv. 25). The technical details of the 'Roman' calculation of the Easter date are explained at great length in Ceolfrith's letter to Nectan (v. 21). This is immediately followed by the account of Iona's conformity to this reckoning in 716. The remainder of Book V is interesting summary material, added after the main point has been made.

Whitby was an important turning point, but Bede's full treatment still left much unsaid. Bede nowhere says clearly that the bulk of the Church in Ireland had already accepted the 'Roman' calculation long before. The point which affected England was that Iona and its dependencies had not initially done so; hence the divergence in Northumbria which Bede deplored. The account in Eddius' *Life of Wilfrid* is much shorter, but substantially identical. It reports the speeches of the main protagonists, Colman and Wilfrid, at considerably less length than Bede. Bede no doubt used the historical convention, deriving from Thucydides, of 'composing' speeches to suit the convictions of the characters, but there is no need to suppose that he seriously distorted either.

A point often noted in Bede's account was that both King Oswy, the convoker, and Abbess Hilda, the hostess of the assembly, had initially favoured the Iona case. Eddius' account depicts the king accepting the decision of the Synod in favour of Rome, manifested by a choral recitation of the 'Thou art Peter' text from St Matthew's Gospel, but 'with a smile'. Some have asked if the smile was one of relief that he had warded off imminent political danger from his son Alcfrith, the patron of Wilfrid. Bede said nothing of this dimension: he rightly stressed that the Whitby decision was one for universalism against localism. This was the principal point of Wilfrid's speech rather than the pseudo-historical arguments (advanced by both sides) about the supposed apostolic origins of their own calculations of Easter.

The consequences of Whitby were important and permanent. Although it was called primarily to solve Northumbria's problems, delegates came from other kingdoms too. The dispute about the date of Easter, it must be stressed, was not one of doctrine but of discipline. Neither side was heretical, but feeling ran high on both sides. In the event, many good ecclesiastics like Cuthbert, who had been trained in the Iona-Lindisfarne tradition, changed sides and accepted the decision. In the longer term the thirty years' ascendancy of Lindisfarne was replaced by

Canterbury. The decision was made obligatory for all in England by the next Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore; he was neither English nor Irish, Italian nor Frankish, but Greek and appointed by the papacy. This was an inspired but unexpected choice. Theodore was a monk and sixty-six years old; his long tenure of office and his numerous reforming policies made him the most important Archbishop of Canterbury between Augustine and Dunstan. Theodore was one of Bede's heroes: monk, teacher and reorganizer of the Church.

He had no contemporary biographer, but some of his theological works have recently been discovered.* His work of training the clergy through his schools at Canterbury and his policy of dividing large dioceses met with Bede's full approval (see below, pp. 214, 339–43). In the wider context of the missions of Anglo-Saxons to Frisia and Germany, Theodore's well-organized and educated Church provided the model for both Willibrord and Boniface. Like Canterbury, both Utrecht and Mainz became metropolitan Sees, which reflected and increased papal influence in the Western Church.

How did Bede succeed in his self-appointed task? In most ways remarkably well. This however does not mean that he had no limitations. Like all people of his time he had strong regional sympathies. This was inevitable in an age before there was a single king or government of all England, which came two centuries after Bede's death. Even then, regionalism was far from dead. Bede had a Northumbrian viewpoint and Northumbrian events figure more prominently than those of other regions. He did however try to transcend this limitation. He had a knowledge of both East Anglia and the Isle of Wight which must have been unique for a Northumbrian monk; thanks to his correspondents, he also knew much detail about Kent and Sussex. It is in his attitudes to the two larger kingdoms, Mercia and Wessex, that his regionalism shows. Mercia, with its king Penda, had in Bede's view been the aggressive pagan force whose alliance with Christian Gwynedd had resulted in the death in battle of Edwin, the first Christian king of Northumbria, which was followed by a year of persecution and slaughter

that the chroniclers erased from the annals. His successor Oswald also died by Mercian hands. Later, after the conversion of Mercia, Bede noted with anxiety its growing power; by the time he was writing the *History* Northumbria's exceptional political predominance was on the wane.

With regard to Wessex the problem was somewhat different. Bede's sources were slight, and his omissions significant. He had little to say about King Ina and his justly famous law-code and nothing at all about Boniface, whose missionary achievements far surpassed those of any Northumbrian evangelist. From Ina and from the Boniface correspondence, to say nothing of the interesting but turgid writings of Aldhelm, we can deduce the existence of a confident and developed Christian life with flourishing monasteries, which could not be suspected from Bede's text.*

Bede's ambivalent attitude to Celtic Christians has often been noted. He admired the Irish bishops and abbots, whom he regarded as personifying the simplicity and poverty that had apparently become rare by 731. His repeated reservation about them was their attachment to an Easter calculation which seemed to him wrong. The warmth of his appreciation of Aidan and Columba was not matched by appreciation of any comparable Welsh bishop or monk. For Bede the difference was that the Welsh had persistently refused to evangelize the Anglo-Saxons from the time of Augustine and earlier. Moreover they had joined with pagan Penda of Mercia in the invasion of Northumbria and in the atrocities which had followed (ii. 20). Bede could not forget these events.

His personal sympathy for Irish apostles in Northumbria should be compared with his deeper loyalty to Rome. For him Gregory, rather than either Augustine or Aidan, was the apostle of the English (ii. 1); his own abbots, Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith, had repeatedly visited Rome and brought back books, relics and paintings; Bede also attested with approval to the growing practice of pilgrimage to Rome by kings, bishops, monks and others (v. 7, v. 19, etc.). Bede was an outstanding

writer of Latin and a staunch supporter of the 'Roman' calculation of Easter. In contrast, his reserved attitude to Bishop Wilfrid has often been noted (see Kirby, pp. 35–59 and *AB*, Introduction). His selective treatment was due probably to Bede's unwillingness to disturb his main message of the progress to unity from diversity. Wilfrid's controversial career, although it included elements like the Easter controversy and the introduction of the Rule of St Benedict as well as Roman music with which Bede sympathized, was also divisive. Wilfrid's Merovingian life-style as bishop, shared by a number of his successors, was unsympathetic to Bede (see below, pp. 339–43). Bede's semi-official obituary of Wilfrid (v. 19), which completes valuable information given elsewhere (iv. 13, 16, 20) may best be interpreted as an attempt to formulate an agreed statement which would be acceptable to both sides in a controversy which had been quietened by Wilfrid's death twenty years earlier. None the less, Roman order and seriousness deeply appealed to Bede, and, like most of his scholarly contemporaries, he was conscious of the duty to preserve for posterity all that was best in the old world. At the outer edge of civilization as it was then known, and himself a member of a barbarian race, Bede brought to his own primitive age much of what was best in the old world of Roman culture, both classical and Christian. The very existence of this volume is one indication of how well he had succeeded.

It may be useful, especially for the first-time reader, to add a short summary of the work. Book One is concerned with Christianity in Roman Britain, leading up to the arrival of Augustine from Rome as the evangelist of the Anglo-Saxons. Book Two continues the story from the death of Gregory the Great up to the first evangelization in Northumbria: it continues the story of the Church in Kent, including the abortive meetings with the Welsh. It ends with apparent failure, insofar as Northumbria's powerful Christian King Edwin was killed by Penda's army and Bishop Paulinus retired to Kent. Book Three relates how the previous disaster was offset by the return of the

Christian King Oswald to rule in his stead. As he had been converted in Iona, he introduced Aidan from Iona to be bishop of Lindisfarne. But Oswald after only eight years was also killed in battle, to be succeeded by Oswy. In reading these two books it is important to note that there were two ruling houses in Northumbria, those of Bernicia (roughly Northumberland and Durham) and of Deira (roughly modern Yorkshire). Initially divided, Northumbria emerged as a single kingdom first under Deiran Edwin and then under Bernician Oswald and Oswy. Deiran Oswini, with whom Bede had much sympathy, was assassinated at Oswy's instigation. The Church however grew stronger, especially after disparate elements were reconciled at Whitby. The die-hard Irish opposition left Northumbria with Colman.

Book Four opens with the story of the consecration of Theodore as Archbishop of Canterbury and spells out the consequences of his visitation. During this episcopate the Church in England comes of age, is more closely united to the rest of the Church in Europe and produces examples of holiness such as Etheldreda, Hilda and Cuthbert. Meanwhile the last pagan kingdom, Sussex, is evangelized by Wilfrid.

In Book Five the succession of Northumbrian holiness is represented by Ethelwald and by John of Hexham, the important missionary work in Frisia is pioneered by Willibrord and others, while Northumbrian influences penetrate also to Pictland and Iona, whose acceptance of the Roman Easter marks the end of disunity. Not only holiness but also mystical experiences (v. 19) and pilgrimage (v. 7) were additional signs of the maturity of the Church.

In the face of solid achievement there was also an element of foreboding. This concerned the decline of Northumbria and the ominous threat of the Saracens in western Europe. Bede then added a survey of the Church and a personal conclusion.

The *Letter to Egbert* throws further light on Bede's anxieties. It was a personal and pastoral text, whereas the *History* was public and even official. Because of this difference in character, it

should not be thought of as simply an extra book of the *History*. Nevertheless it tells of a Church somewhat in decline. Bede's attack on the pseudo-monasteries explains his remark in the *History* (v. 23) that many Northumbrians 'have laid aside their weapons, preferring to receive the tonsure and take monastic vows rather than study the arts of war. What the result of this will be the future will show.' But not all was gloom and despondency in 734. There was genuine monastic life at Jarrow, Lindisfarne, Whitby and elsewhere; there was a vigorous effort to evangelize the tribes whence the Anglo-Saxons had sprung; the conversion of England was officially complete, even though there was plenty of scope for deepening the Christian life. Painting and poetry helped to communicate the content of vernacular preaching to the laity, many of whom Bede thought could receive the Eucharist daily. Fine libraries at Wearmouth, Canterbury and York, together with good teachers, augured well for the future of clerical life, as did the raising of York to metropolitan status in 735. It may be usefully recalled that in every age of the Church (including the apostolic age) there has been sin and imperfection by clergy as well as laity, and that in all probability there has never been in reality such a thing as a 'golden age' in the Church, although many have been so overcome with nostalgia that they have appeared to believe in it. It usually was considered to have occurred fifty to a hundred years before the 'present' day. Bede himself probably believed in a lost 'golden age'; he held up examples of seventh-century heroes as both encouragement and reproach to clergy of the eighth century.

Is it possible to paint a pen-portrait of Bede? I believe that it can be done, but that only assiduous reading of all his works will provide it. The following remarks are offered as only a rough sketch of a man who died over 750 years ago.

Bede, born in Northumbria not far from present-day Sunderland, was brought up in a monastery from a very tender age. Many human experiences were thus denied him. He ruefully admitted in a commentary on Saul's two wives: 'How can I

*'With God's help, I, Bede ... have assembled these facts about the history of the Church in Britain ... from the traditions of our forebears, and from my own personal knowledge'*

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Translated by LEO SHERLEY-PRICE
Edited with an introduction and notes by D. H. FARMER

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Cover: Detail from a manuscript by the Benedictine monk and scholar, the Venerable Bede (8th century) (photo: © David Reed/Corbis)

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