



N. J. Higham, *(Re-) Reading Bede. The Ecclesiastical History in context*, Routledge: London & New York 2006. 279 pp.

A central text for anyone interested in the beginnings of Anglo-Saxon history is the *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People) by Bede of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow (d. 735). As a result many scholars have studied what Bede did and why, which is why a reader cannot help but be surprised when N. J. Higham states that his purpose in this recent volume is "to explore [Bede's] purposes in writing his longest and best-known 'historical' work and review how he expected his immediate audience to respond" (pp. 2–3). Higham argues for a rather self-evident historical way of reading Bede in the contexts of his own time, his other works, and his audience, with Higham making an implicit claim to novelty. However, despite this rather general statement of intent by Higham, his book does indeed contribute significant new insight to the contextualisation of this central work in English historiography.

Higham begins by providing a rather thorough review of what little is known about Bede, including a paragraph on his sexuality (apparently Bede could be characterised as "effectively asexual", p. 9), and examines how Bede and his *History* have been read and interpreted from the Middle Ages to modern scholarship. Higham briefly considers the audience Bede was writing to and strongly argues for an acknowledgement of the otherness of Bede and his times. This introductory part on the person and reputation of Bede has very much the appearance of a basic introduction to the discipline of history. The presentation is easy to follow, but the author at times stoops to questionable anachronisms to get his point across: we are informed that

Bede was a creationist (p. 47) which, while literally true, carries connotations that are meaningful in the post-Darwinian era only, and Bede's world-view is then characterised as one (p. 49) "comprehensible in some respects within the terms of twentieth-century communism". As right as I think Higham is in insisting on the otherness of Bede and his culture, I cannot help but feel that this manner of arguing is less than helpful for our understanding of Bede and his times.

Higham moves on to review current attempts at interpreting what Bede was doing in writing the *History*, beginning with theories of the work as an advocacy of ecclesiastical reform, finding that they only partially explain the authorial intentions behind the text. Higham next grapples with the argument put forth by Walter Goffart¹ that the *History* was written to oppose the followers of St Wilfrid in the contest for control of the see of York, and Higham then convincingly dismantles it as an explanation of the *History*. Having found these interpretations lacking, Higham begins with an analysis of Bede's preface and recapitulation to the *History*, which he argues were both written after the composition of the bulk of the work. In the preface, Bede states as his intent to provide historical examples of a Christian living for his audience. Higham suggests that the recapitulation may have been added by Bede after he had received the first comments on his finished text from the clerics at court. In short, Higham interprets this as indicating that these readers may have missed Bede's point, the provision of exemplary stories for leaders, and that they seem to have objected to certain features in Bede's portrayal of the past, chiefly the prominence of the Irish in the Christianisation of Northumbria. Higham concludes that the *History* was clearly a representation of the past, perhaps much more at odds with competing representations than is often appreciated.

Higham then attempts to deepen these observations by examining the overall structure of the *History*, and by comparing the approach of the latter with Bede's two earlier chronicles (appended to *De temporibus* and *De temporum ratione*). Higham identifies the shifts of emphasis in the representation of the role of the Irish and Scottish missionaries, observing that Bede downplayed this role in his earlier work but treated it with greater emphasis in the *History*. However, Higham suggests that Bede's image of the

¹ Most recently argued in W. Goffart, 'L'Histoire ecclésiastique et l'engagement politique de Bède', in S. Lebecq-M. Perrin-O. Szerwiniack (eds) *Bède le Vénérable entre tradition et postérité. Colloque organisé à Villeneuve d'Ascq et Amiens par le CRHEN-O, Université de Lille 3, et Textes, Images et Spiritualité (Université de Picardie-Jules Verne) du 3 au 6 juillet 2002*, CEGES-Université Charles de Gaulle-Lille 3: Lille 2005, 149-158.

past was vacillating on this issue, and reads shifts in emphasis into the recapitulation and a chapter (IV.14) added to the finished work.

Higham subsequently moves on to more closely examine what Bede wanted to say to the audience he envisioned, "the Northumbrian élite" (p. 185). Higham argues that Bede's main purpose in composing this work was to produce a set of examples of Christian behaviour from the history of this audience, and examines the methods Bede employed to this end. In an analysis of the final book of the *History*, Higham singles out two main messages: firstly, the assertion that certain Northumbrian churchmen were at the centre or forefront of the global church, and secondly, a series of instructions to rulers, modelled on *The Pastoral Care* by Pope Gregory the Great.

Having thus delineated what Bede wished to communicate, Higham turns his attention to the political context of Bede's work. He argues that the emphasis placed on the Irish (Scottish) mission and its protector, King Oswald, may reflect the dynastic interests of King Ceolwulf, to whom the *History* was dedicated. However, Higham also suggests that for the most part of the *History*, perhaps because he was unsure of Ceolwulf's ability to stay in power, Bede consequently avoided integrating the king in the text. According to Higham, Bede's shifts in emphasis regarding the dedication between the preface and the recapitulation would further reflect the shifting fortunes of the king, and the immediacy of the *History* as a text tightly bound to its historical context. Finally Higham notes that the work was severed from this context in 759 through the change of the Northumbrian ruling dynasty, and that the reception of the work was henceforth in the hands of the clerical and monastic readers, who took the well argued and ostensibly comprehensive work as an accurate history.

Overall it appears that this work by Higham would have greatly benefited from an attempt to contextualise the *History*, not only within Northumbrian politics, which is admirably done here, but also within the literary tradition of early medieval historiography. For example, Higham's argument that the *History* "should ... be read primarily as an extended form of sermon aimed to engender moral reform" (p. 208), is clearly constructed and can be surprising only against a modern conception of history, rather than a medieval one, in which didactic, politically pragmatic texts are the rule.² I also wonder to what extent the modern readers who approach Bede

² See e.g. the articles in Anton Scharer & Georg Scheibelreiter (eds), *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter* (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Geschichtsforschung 32), R. Oldenbourg Verlag: Wien-München 1994.

as a modern historian, as postulated by Higham, exist beyond the purposes of the argument of this book. Another factor that makes me wonder about the target audience concerns the presentational imbalances. For example, while the introduction to Bede and his reputation has the feel of an entry-level text, the subsequent chapters analysing Bede's work assume a working knowledge of both the *History* and contemporary Northumbrian politics. As a consequence, the introduction might be thought to appear a redundantly self-evident lecture on the methodology of history. Yet, on a more positive note, having made these observations, I must conclude that the argument of the book is well-founded and largely convincing, and certainly this work should be read by everyone working on Bede and his *History*.

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