

# A MASTERPIECE BEYOND CLASSIFICATION

"AUGUSTINE'S *Confessions* will always rank among the great masterpieces of Western literature," writes Professor Chadwick. But what sort of masterpiece? When Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, took up his pen over eleven years after his conversion to write his *Confessions*, he gave us what is really rather an odd work and one which certainly defies classification. It is a gripping autobiography, of a man born in North Africa in 354 AD, from infancy to a dramatic conversion to Christianity at the age of 32. But it is also an emotional and, moving confession of praise and of sin addressed to God; a learned philosophical work which tackles such questions as the nature of beauty, evil, the soul, time and creation; a theological, apologetic work, dealing with the fall, the incarnation, the Church, sacraments and mystical prayer; an overwhelmingly beautiful work of prose poetry by a converted rhetor; a profound psychological analysis of the human will and its motivations;

and a work of social, religious and cultural history.

Professor Chadwick's new translation is the first one for 30 years in English, and will soon take the place of the two which are commonly available today: the (aptly-named) Pine-Coffin translation in Penguin Classics, and F. J. Sheed's very fine but now grievously mutilated translation. Sheed and Ward have for some reason seen fit to lop off books 10-13 and to provide us with only the strictly biographical sections (1-9).

The unity of the *Confessions* is indeed a point much debated by scholars. Why, after nine books recounting his path to conversion, should Augustine suddenly turn, in book 10, to trace a Neoplatonic ascent to God through the mind, followed by an analysis of the various temptations which hinder that ascent; and then in book 11 begin a commentary on Genesis which fast becomes a treatise

Henry Chadwick, translator

SAINT AUGUSTINE:  
CONFESSIONS

OUP £17.50

CAROL HARRISON

on the nature of time and eternity (what we mean by "In the beginning"), followed by book 12 on the doctrine of creation and book 13 on how Genesis I can be interpreted? Augustine obviously saw no problem in this arrangement when he reviewed the *Confessions* in his *Retractions*, and Professor Chadwick does not seem to regard it as especially problematical either. He suggests that the theme of conversion unifies the work: the conversion of man wandering in the "region of dissimilarity" and, in the final books,

creation as conversion — of chaos into form. Augustine's account of his own conversion is "a microcosm of what is true, on the grand scale, of the whole creation", which is examined in books 10-13. This is a Neoplatonic theme and Professor Chadwick is keen to emphasise Augustine's debt to Neoplatonic philosophy throughout the work: a large number of the footnotes are references to Plotinus or Porphyry, and although they are illuminating they cannot but be misleading for the general reader who is not acquainted with scholarly debate as to how much of the Neoplatonists Augustine had read.

Augustine's polemic against the Manichees, a sect he had belonged to for nine years, and whose influence he was often accused of not having left completely behind, is also a unifying factor in the *Confessions*, both in his intellectual engagement with them in the earlier books (especially over the

question of evil) and also in books 11-13 in his exposition of Genesis 1, a work whose authority the Manichees dismissed. This polemic is also one of the two factors Professor Chadwick mentions as being an immediate stimulus for the writing of the *Confessions*. There were those — even Augustine's ecclesiastical superiors — who were suspicious of him: the woman-chasing Manichee, the local lad, Monnica and Patrick's son, returned from abroad to become a bishop. The *Confessions*, Professor Chadwick suggests, would answer them — and also the more well-intentioned request which Paulinus of Nola had addressed to Augustine's good friend, Alypius, for an autobiography. Augustine wrote his own and included a long section on Alypius too (in book 6).

Professor Chadwick's 18-page introduction is a miracle of conciseness, and tells us almost everything we need to know while still finding space for an extended discussion of Christian marriage and Augustine's (often misunderstood) attitudes to sex and women. The notes are illuminating (especially on classical sources and Roman customs and society) and sometimes amusing.

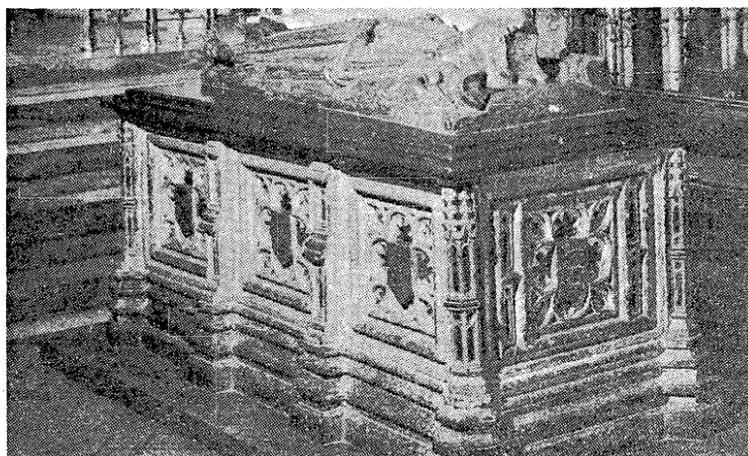
The great church historian, Baron Hans von Campenhausen, wrote: "Much misunderstanding and dislike of the *Confessions* is due to the reading of translations. The text cannot be translated." Professor Chadwick has essayed an impossible task. He has not sacrificed accuracy, and he can hardly be blamed if it is only occasionally that his prose matches Augustine's sustained and intoxicating brilliance.

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## HOMAGE TO MONK BISHOP

THIS IS the first biography of St Wulfstan since the 12th century. Wulfstan was a remarkable Bishop of Worcester who was a bishop for 32 years. He was born during the reign of Ethelred the Unready and died in the eighth year of the reign of William I. His local significance to Worcester is very considerable. He built the great Norman cathedral and was Prior of the monastery before becoming Bishop.

During his time the monastery became one of great significance. He developed devotion to his great predecessor St Oswald, who died in 992 and made Worcester a centre of pilgrimage. But his national significance is even greater, spanning the Norman Conquest: he was no "Vicar of Bray", yet he managed to sustain the English traditions well into the Norman period. Miss Mason is at her most interesting when she suggests that he may have kept some sort of English underground network going after the Conquest. He gained the respect of the Norman kings and was clearly a very skilful politician. Much of his time was spent in wrangles over property rights, not least in relation to the archbishopric of York, which was often combined with the see of Worcester: the wealth of Worcester provided necessary income for the Archbishop.



The tomb of King John, a devotee of St Wulfstan, in Worcester Cathedral.

Emma Mason  
ST WULFSTAN OF WORCESTER  
c1008-1095

Blackwell £49

ROBERT JEFFERY

Wulfstan's main earlier biographer, William of Malmesbury, clearly was concerned to write a hagiography. Miss Mason, while giving detailed background information and illuminating the hagiographic passages, follows much that her predecessor has written.

Wulfstan was a holy, not to say severe, man who spent much time in prayer and visited every church he passed. His humanity comes through especially in his campaign to stop the sale of slaves from Ireland. He was thus a very early campaigner in this cause. St Wulfstan might make a very

good patron saint of the Green Party. He was abstemious, a vegetarian, with deep human compassion, but someone who obviously knew how to handle power politics.

The attempts to canonise St Wulfstan began almost before he died, and continued for some time. His shrine became a second cause of pilgrimage to Worcester; it was King John's devotion to him (owed to the fact that he had not been appointed Bishop by the Pope) which led to John's desire to be buried in Worcester Cathedral.

It is a pity that we do not know where St Wulfstan's shrine in Worcester Cathedral was, and Miss Mason can give us no new light on the matter. We would like somehow to acknowledge his great contribution to Worcester. The biography gives us much material to help us plan for the ninth centenary of his death in 1995. *Robert Jeffery is Dean of Worcester.*

## BACK TO BASICS

Norman R.C. Dockeray

THE POWER OF MIRACLE

Book Guild £12.50

PETER FORSTER

WHAT IS a miracle? Norman Dockeray, a retired civil servant with a mathematical background, assumes that it is any action on a closed, determinate system, from outside that system, which is not subject to the laws of that system. He regards the world of space-time, i.e. matter, as a determinate system, and believes that human beings are distinguished from all other forms of life in having an immortal soul. The soul has a faculty, the will, through which it acts upon the material body with which it is united. Each such action is a miracle.

The concept of miracle defended here thus rests on a modern reworking of Cartesian dualism, and besides constituting the very basis of personality it is applied to various stages of evolution. The miracles here range from the early implantation of life into appropriately complex living organisms, to the action of the human will on the reproductive cells in such a way as to give rise to mutations whereby the next generation will have characteristics more nearly in accordance with the will's objectives.

It is from this broad affirmation of miracle within everyday occurrence in the world that Dockeray proceeds to defend the existence of miracles in the more commonly accepted sense of the word. Here individuals are used by God as channels of his supernatural and overriding power. Because the ability to perform them does not rely upon an innate property of the soul, but rather upon a divine power external to the soul, these miracles are comparatively rare. Modern scepticism about the supernatural has further inhibited them, by causing modern human beings to ignore their latent potential to catalyse the release of divine power in this type of miracle.

This is an extraordinary book. The author constructs a powerful argument, but ignores many critical questions which the trained philosopher, theologian or scientist would present. Parts of the book are reminiscent of Teilhard de Chardin's belief in consciousness as a fundamental constituent of all reality. In retrospect, Teilhard's enormous popular appeal rested less on the debatable details of his work than on the broad vision of a reality which transcended materialism. The value of Dockeray's book is also likely to rest more on the broad contour of his spiritual vision than on the details of his argument.

*Peter Forster is Senior Tutor at St John's College, Durham.*

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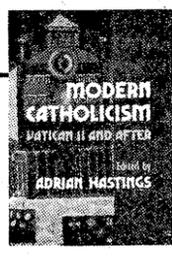
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