

Brown, Michelle P. 2023. *Bede and the Theory of Everything*. London: Reaktion Books. Pp. 312. ISBN 9781789147889.

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Reaktion Books' biographical series focuses on medieval individuals, drawing on "political and social history, philosophy, material culture . . . and the history of science," with a view to producing portraits that are "global and wide-ranging." Responding to the current trend for concise but comprehensive introductions, this volume on Bede fits well into the genre of "accessible biography," as the publishers describe the electronic version of this book. Bede, who was born in 672 or 673 and died in 735, seems an ideal choice for a biographical study, with plenty of written materials to work from (including some 40 works securely attributed to him as author). His relatively long life of 62 years is also otherwise well documented, partly mythologised already during his lifetime and developing early on into a saint's cult, with his relics considered miracle-working by Alcuin in the 780s (13) and designated *venerabilis* by the ninth century (249). Early medieval and modern authors and visual artists have made the most of what we know about Bede's extended, tear-jerking death scene (244–48). And Bede's unchallenged status as the intellectual local hero of North East England is as much in evidence in the twentieth-century educational Jarrow theme park as in his early medieval hagiography. The mythology surrounding his enormous oeuvre seems to have started with an autobiographical passage in his work in which he summarised the texts which he authored, presented "rather like a CV," as Brown points out (9).

With her long-established expertise in the field of manuscript study and early book production, Michelle Brown seems the right person to summarise this biography and mythology, pulling together a wide range of primary texts in Latin and Old English, and copious secondary literature, not least her own publications on Bede and Northumbrian manuscript production. Particularly her publications on early medieval contacts between East and West provide this volume with its wide geographical range and globality as recommended by the series editors' brief, including her foundational background article from 2016 and also a forthcoming volume (referenced only on pp. 266–67, but not in the final bibliography). The short acknowledgements section at the end of the volume gives no background on the genesis of this biographical study of Bede, nor her long-standing personal interest in his work or persona. But the author's fascination with Bede the scholar and man is clearly felt throughout a volume which focuses on contextualising him in his post-antique but pre-Carolingian world, in church politics and a network of personal mentor- and menteeships.

Brown's discussion manages to avoid a depiction of Bede that is over-defined by later mythology, instead trying to get at his lived experience, as it became apparent to his contemporaries. An exceptionally good effort is made here to show that Bede's ideas came from somewhere, and then led to somewhere. This was not a single-origin island genius who created out of nothing; Bede "was a mongrel product of mixed cultural influences" (15). What helped create his multi-faceted abilities and interests was the pre-

modern mixture of intellectual pursuits practised at multi-disciplinary monastic institutions (the early medieval forerunner of the later *universitas*), making him a polymath almost in the manner of Renaissance man Leonardo Da Vinci or an enlightened Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, for the first time “linking computus and medical material” and working from collections of “historical, philological and computistical material” with great “interconnectivity of his thought” (83–84). “Within the confines of the extent of human knowledge in his day, his thinking encapsulated a theory of everything” (243). Brown’s argument rightly points to ancient Christian metaphors for certain cosmological processes and phenomena that do resemble those used by modern astrophysicists, while of course still lacking the scientific detail underpinning them.

The volume is subdivided into chapters on the various aspects of Bede’s personal and intellectual life, including his boyhood and family background; his roles as monk and priest, and then as scholar and scientist; his poetry; his patristic authority; his influence as a historian and reformer; his input as a scribe in producing the Ceolfrith Bibles; his links with Lindisfarne, and finally his legacy. Brown contextualises Bede in a highly politicised world which linked Monkwearmouth–Jarrow with Lindisfarne, York, Canterbury, and Rome, and the complex interactions between ecclesiastic personnel in all of these places, avoiding facile binary divisions into Roman and Celtic liturgical practices.

Even expert readers will appreciate being reminded of the enormous contrast between the parochial and international dimensions in Bede’s life. At the age of seven, he seems to have left his childhood “farmyards and timber structures,” “shadowy, smoke-blackened, fire-flickering timber and thatch interiors” (41) and moved to a monastic *familia* with world-wide intellectual connections and at least some stone buildings. “These little islands on the edge of the then known world had produced a Church Father and one of the most influential thinkers of the post-Roman world” (7). Bede “travelled only within a radius of 130 km” in his life (82), although he probably visited the world cities of York, Hexham and Lindisfarne. Unexpectedly perhaps, much of the discussion in this volume nevertheless deals with travel and wider geopolitics. Given the far-flung explorations of some of his contemporaries, such as Benedict Biscop, Theodore of Tarsus, Augustine of Canterbury, and Anglo-Irish intellectual exchanges, there clearly was a great deal of movement of both personnel and ideas. Hadrian’s Wall terminated a mere 2 km from Jarrow (37), demonstrating the span of Bede’s connections which reached from the centre to the edge of even the Roman empire.

Given his status as an archaic, patristic figure of authority after whom modern schools are named, it is easy to forget how experimental and cutting-edge some of his work must have been in his day. “When Bede entered Monkwearmouth monastery it was just over fifty years since Christianity had been introduced into Anglo-Saxon Northumbria” (57). Even grand masonry buildings were a new phenomenon, aiming to rebuild Rome in Northumbria, with imported masons and glaziers from Gaul (18–22). Only a patristic mind like Bede’s would spot Old Testament parallels in all this innovation, when “Solomon had employed gentile craftsmen—foreigners—in the building of the Temple” (24). Brown suggests that “Bede’s concern with social stability, justice and ethics mark him out as a reformer,” whose “horizons were wider” than those of his home institution (61). Bede can in any case be regarded as an innovator in terms of his characteristic referencing system and its ability to indicate the status of textual passages and source texts by providing footnotes and marginal annotations (99–100,

156–57). Modern readers will also be wondering at how he crafted his enormous erudition from the sheer fragility of a book-based early medieval education system where information could be very hard to come by: the highlight of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow's publishing output was the production and circulation of three huge pandects (volumes containing all books of the Bible), each the size of a small washing-machine, made from some 1500 calfskins each and emanating from a library thought to have contained some 300 hundred volumes (30), with some 600 monks in attendance by 716 (22). If these figures were thought to be impressive in the Western world, some readers may wish to suggest that there can be no comparison with early libraries in Alexandria or Baghdad. Younger readers in particular will want to place the Northumbrian contribution into a global context, a context which does not always paint a flattering picture of the Insular world, no matter how sympathetic or enthusiastic the description.

The field of Anglo-Saxon studies is hardly taught any more from the literary and historical canon which Bede once headed and represented, so it could be argued that particularly accessible introductions have become necessary for figures who would otherwise have featured in early teaching because of the centrality of their written output. Care is usually taken in this volume to point younger students in the right direction to avoid misunderstandings, for example in handling the question of Bede's "wife" whom he mentions in two texts (56), with allegorical explanations offered. But some further modern signposting and cautioning might have been useful, for example, regarding the detective work with which Brown assesses Bede's potential contribution to the Codex Amiatinus (203–14), where Bede's "handwriting" might be misunderstood to refer to a personal and characteristic written expression of self, rather than a form of prescribed uncial and minuscule script which has more to do with standardised calligraphy, even as a product of his own hand. Another potential source for misunderstandings arises from Bede's purported written English translation of St. John's Gospel, which modern readers might misinterpret as a free-standing text in wider circulation outside Bede's sphere (141–51, with plates), when the reality might point more to glossing as a study tool underpinning live class-room teaching and study of Latin, with subsequent transmission of such glosses among many other layers of glosses with various points of origin. This was generally how glosses were composed and transmitted, and not just in Northumbria, so perhaps the special aspect of what is reported for Bede is that he seems to have died in an environment where *his* glossing seems to have been regarded more highly than those of his Jarrow colleagues, with him still supplying them with further material on his deathbed. On the difficult distinction between translation and gloss, readers may like to consult Blom (2017), and with reference to Bede's final activities, see also Rauer (2021). The wide range of modern academic voices are not always served well by the format of these accessible briefer introductions ("some scholars would argue," (56), without further references), and this also affects groundwork like that of Rosalind Love on Bede's library, or the work of Immo Warntjes and Sihong Lin who have similarly tried to put Bede into a wider Irish or Eastern context, but who receive little or no mention here, despite generally good coverage of Irish or Eastern matters throughout the volume.

The handling of primary texts is sometimes similarly unrepresentative of more recent work, with the *Historia ecclesiastica* quoted from A. M. Sellar's translation of 1907 (257) (perhaps for copyright reasons?). Exemplary, however, is the policy of allowing Bede and his contemporaries to speak in their own voices, in long excerpts from translated primary text passages laid out as text boxes shaded in grey. Also superb are

the 50 high-quality illustrations in the volume, 45 of them in colour, which are just fascinating to look at, even if the links between points made in the discussion and the visual evidence for them is not always clearly signposted. Non-expert readers may not always be sure which images they are meant to examine, regarding a certain point, because of missing cross-references. Signposting of other features is less than helpful, for example in the case of Bede's "CV" which is helpfully reproduced in translation on pages 257–64, but could have been announced to the reader at the beginning of the volume, for example in an introduction explaining the genesis, aim and format of the volume. The same is true for the highly selective index, although it would be fair to say that the book's electronic version of course facilitates more detailed searches than any printed index could manage. A tabulated timeline of important events in Bede's life and the larger world would similarly have underscored and abbreviated the many chronological references in the discussion.

The book cites from the Vercelli version of *The Dream of the Rood* (141), and the Exeter Book onion riddle (113), whose compositions are clearly at some remove from Bede's world; citations from the Ruthwell Cross and Aldhelm's or Tatwine's *enigmata* would have proved less anachronistic for stylistic comparison. On the other hand, the book excels at precisely this kind of unexpected wider contextualisation, a stylistic and aesthetic environment which younger generations will precisely be interested in. The volume is in that sense timely, providing access to an important author who is in danger of fading from modern consciousness, and linking him to other aspects of Anglo-Saxon studies which are very much en vogue in modern academia and which can be linked with Bede's work, as Michelle Brown manages to demonstrate. In that sense, this volume is accessible in a different way, compared to the recent companion genre of anthologised introductory articles. It certainly manages to fill a considerable cognitive gap, elucidating early Northumbrian matters for readers who would otherwise not become familiar with some of the most central reading in the field.

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