

REVIEWS

Henry Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo: a Life*, Oxford: OUP, 2009, 978-0-19-956830-7, 0-19-956830-8, XX + 177 p. (Foreword by Peter Brown.)

In 1981, the erudite scholar Henry Chadwick (1920-2008) composed a draft of the life of Augustine for the *Past Masters* series of Oxford University Press, which in the end was replaced by a different, shorter text (published in 1986; and with updated bibliography in 2001 as *Augustine: a very short introduction*). This draft was discovered among the papers Chadwick left after his death, and with the help of friends and colleagues, posthumously published in 2009. Since this “new” biography of Augustine is based on material of 1981, Chadwick could obviously not rely on the scholarship produced during those 28 years in between. However, there is no doubt that, despite this handicap, he produced another gem, which deserves its place on the bookshelf of students and professors alike, next to his other, shorter version of 1986.

Biographers of Augustine find themselves in a privileged position: they have at their disposal a dazzling account of the man himself, which covers roughly the time between his physical birth and his spiritual birth through baptism. In *Confessiones* Augustine presents us with his intimate life story, deeply reflecting on the events he believed worth sharing. This material gives us the rare opportunity to render a very detailed portrait of someone who lived some 1600 years ago. In 1991, a decade after writing this draft on the life of Augustine, Chadwick would delight his readers with a superb English translation of *Confessiones*, in which he does full justice to the poetry of this prose work. Nevertheless, it is not advisable to rely too heavily on *Confessiones* alone for composing a biography, because many other important aspects of the multifaceted Augustine would otherwise be left out. Fortunately, we have the luxury that most of Augustine’s writings have come down to us, including his letters and sermons, which can shed further light on this extraordinary man who was (pre-)destined to become a saint. On top of this, Augustine reviewed the whole corpus of his writings in *Retractationes*, and this, too, cannot but be a valuable source for anyone trying to tell his life story. Add to this the *vita Augustini* his friend Possidius composed, and it is beyond doubt that no other person of Antiquity – Cicero coming far behind in second

place —, has left us with such a wealth of source material for writing a biography. The fact that Chadwick has delved into the numerous writings of Augustine, was familiar with the background and context of Augustine's life, and as always, could fall back on his exquisite mastering of the English language, makes him one of the few people capable of writing within the confines of a mere 168 pages a fresh and valuable biography of Augustine. To think that this little gem had been gathering dust for more than a quarter of a century!

Because of this abundance of source material, writing a biography of Augustine is at the same time a daunting task and a tremendous challenge. It confronts the biographer with evaluating the value of Augustine's own version of his life story and of the *vita Augustini* of Possidius. It also confronts the reader with an unbalance in the material: a detailed, if subjective and selective, account until Augustine's baptism inevitably leaves traces on any biography of Augustine. After his baptism, the material becomes less readymade.

The appeal of Chadwick's book lies first of all in his mastery of the written English word. His beautiful phrasing delights the reader in a way similar to the way in which Augustine must have appealed to, and I would venture to say, at times even bewitched, his readers and audience.

Secondly, Chadwick's renowned erudition and his ability to present Augustine's life in a different way makes his introduction to Augustine fresh, original and therefore highly recommendable. John J. O'Meara (1954), Gerald Bonner (1963), Peter Brown (1967), James J. O'Donnell (1985 and 2005), and Garry Wills (1999) had already written their version of Augustine's life before this publication, while also Serge Lancel's admirable French biography (1999) soon became available in English (2002). To make the modern day reader once more interested in the life of Augustine requires something special, and Chadwick succeeds in delivering this little extra *magna cum laude*. Although certain episodes inevitably appear in nearly every biography, whereby one wonders whether they deserve so much attention (f.i. the story of Pinianus (p. 67-68)), there still remain plenty of unique touches and anecdotes to make it enjoyable. In short, Chadwick's immaculate skill as narrator, combined with his erudition cannot but lead to literary fireworks when dealing with a challenging topic such as the life of Augustine.

However, some minor criticisms need to be made as well. Sometimes, small errors have crept into the story: twice Augustine is said to have died on the 30th of August (p. 3 and p. 87), while it should be the 28th. Nebridius is said to be one of the friends present

at Cassiciacum (p. 33), but this surely must be wrong: Augustine regrets in *Confessiones* that Nebridius in the end decided not to go along with the small group to Cassiciacum (*Conf.* ix. iv(7)), while his letters written from Cassiciacum to his friend are further evidence of this absence. Even the mentioning of the plural "other friends" is misleading here, since there were no friends present besides Alypius: the rest of the group consisted of family members, two students, and some scribes and other personnel. Again, the idea that Nebridius went along with Augustine to Africa, fell sick, and went back to his family home near Carthage where he soon died (p. 43) cannot, as far as I am aware, be substantiated by conclusive evidence. For all we know, Nebridius may have left Milan at a later time, probably after Verecundus died, since he was helping him with teaching grammar. He then went back to his home, I believe, in Carthage, and fell ill somewhat later. On p. 12 Chadwick minimizes Augustine's adherence to Astrology when he writes: "As a guide for life's decisions he turned for a few years to astrology". According to *Confessiones*, Augustine must have believed in astrology for almost as long as he did in Manichaeism, i.e. some nine years, if not longer. Furthermore, one should not underestimate the influence astrology exerted on Augustine's thinking: it cannot be a coincidence that the twin argument used to demonstrate the falsity of astrology would at the same time support Augustine's controversial ideas on freely given grace (the Biblical twins Jacob and Esau).

This leads us to a second point of criticism: the absence of bibliographical references in this more extended version of Augustine's life is highly regrettable. As no other, Chadwick provides the reader with an unusual – and often delightful – small detail in his narrative, but the reader has no idea where this detail comes from. This lack of bibliographical references makes one – probably unnecessary – to be on one's guard concerning the facts recounted. One has at times the feeling that suppositions and speculations have too easily become solid facts. Though this helps the flow of the story – to be constantly confronted with the obligatory *caveat* and cautious hesitation can become very tedious reading indeed –, from a scholar's perspective, demonstrating an (over)confident hand makes one apprehensive.

Nevertheless, despite these hick-ups, Chadwick has woven a superb account of Augustine's life, with plenty of little anecdotes to make a new generation of readers interested in the bishop, and to confront them with an age so far removed from ours, and yet with a person so much like us. Indeed, Chadwick regularly makes us aware

that Augustine lived in quite a different age to ours, which is very important, since *Confessiones* brings this Late Antique saint at the same time so close to us.

What is perhaps most rewarding about this book are the deep overall insights, epigrammatically written down, which can stimulate the reader to study Augustine more in depth. Let me give just one example. On p. 91, Chadwick writes: "The central theme of the *Confessions* is the alienation of man from his true self". This in itself opens up a profound psychological dimension of this work, which is worth exploring further. If we bring in two other citations: "Augustine's story of his quest is all his own, and yet is simultaneously (and evidently consciously) intended to be a portrait of Everyman" (p. 92), and "Augustine is hurt by personal attacks but unmoved by the theological assault, confident that his estimate of sexuality is based securely on universal, and not on his own private, experience" (p. 161), then I believe that Chadwick has pointed the way towards a very important issue: Augustine has much to say about the universal human condition, and therefore also about us, relying on the evaluation of his own particular life experience, and how well he could penetrate into the minds and souls of other people. Consequently, the success of his theology-philosophy-psychology may well depend on how successful he ultimately was in analyzing his own condition. This is reflected in the strong link he himself makes between self-knowledge and knowledge of God. It has been recognized that the struggle between Augustine and Julian roughly boils down to opposing views on mankind's condition here on earth. Peter Brown is probably right that Augustine was the better psychologist of the two. But being the better psychologist does not necessarily mean that his view on man's condition was flawless, and we can agree with Chadwick: "Augustine's diagnosis of the human condition is somber" (p. 152). Chadwick has detected at least one of the weaknesses in his psychology: "Augustine has failed to distinguish the desire from the disorder of the affections" (p. 164).

To conclude this review with an epigrammatic phrase: Chadwick's biography of Augustine can be regarded as an honorary salute to a great man, both in view of its subject matter as in view of its author.

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