

Reviews

ST AUGUSTINE by Serge Lancel, tr. by Antonia Nevill, *SCM Press*, London, 2002, Pp.xviii + 590, pbk.

All those pages make a massive volume, even in paper back; it weighs almost 2 lbs. The French original (*Librairie Artheme Fayard*, 1999), being a hard back, if I remember rightly, probably weighs almost a kilo. I say if I remember rightly, because I bought a copy in one of the Cambridge book shops for £25.00 and had the two volumes side by side on my shelf for a few days, before giving or lending the French edition to heaven knows who. In any case, the volume is addressed, as Sir Henry Chadwick says in his foreword, 'to the common educated reader'. This fortunate individual will need either a reading desk or forearms of bronze.

First, since this is the English edition under review, some words about the translation. Before that, I have a bone or two to pick with the publishers. Bone 1: on p.xiii they have a list of illustrations, three in all, of which however they fail to give the page numbers. For the benefit of that reader with the brawny arms, I provide them here: Fig.1, p.243; Fig.2, p.244; Fig.3, p.247. Bone 2: the translator had an enormous task before her, and she is not a theologian or a scholar versed in the history of late antiquity. Lancel says in a note to his Introduction, how grateful he is to his colleague Aime Gabillon for giving his text the benefit of a first reading; SCM should surely have provided Ms Nevill with similar help, to save her from at least some of the mistakes, which I must now go on to point out.

Page 6, par.1, line 5; '...who were obliged by a 'cens' – i.e. a 'census', in a slightly unusual use of that word. Page 19, line 7; from the context, without the French to refer to, I guess that 'probably no longer existed' should be 'did not exist yet'. Page 69, lines 13 and 14: 'Through [the Cappadocians] Ambrose discovered the theological tradition which followed, that of Origen' – eliminate the comma, and all is well. Page 135, line 5: 'the tunics of hide' in which Adam and Eve had clothed themselves'; but they had not, God had. Here Nevill can only have failed to translate a French reflexive as passive. Page 150, line 11: 'small settlers eked a living from a metayage system' – this purely French word means share-cropping. Page 246, par.2, line 5: 'if the number of chairs which were vacant at that time...' – sees, of course. The same mistake occurs elsewhere too. Page 392: 'the old Stoic *topos* – broadly endorsed by the vulgate of Christian theology...' – good French, but hardly possible English. I suppose we would say, 'by popular Christian theology'. Page 412, note bo: 'the word 'slave'

not found...until Noah uses it to reprove his son Shem's misdeed' – surely Lancel cannot have made that mistake? No, but he used the French spelling of these OT names, which follows the Vulgate, which spells the miscreant's name 'Cham', as indeed does the English Douai version, this of course being pronounced 'Sham', Nevill assumed it was the French for Shem.

There are, indeed, a number of others. But in a book of 590 pages it is not bad going. And again, more the publisher's fault than the translator's.

So now for the book itself. Before I go on to endorse in some detail Professor Chadwick's word for it, 'masterly', just one criticism. Interesting though the three 'illustrations' are (really just black and white 'figures'), much more useful to the reader would have been a map of Roman North Africa in Augustine's time, putting in all the places mentioned in the book. This would save the reader, would at least have saved the reviewer, from constantly getting up to consult an atlas.

For the rest, masterly indeed. Lancel in a most satisfactory manner integrates the great man's work with the story of his life. For example, as well as using the *Confessions* as a source for his early life, he also devotes a chapter to the *Confessions* as a book, after his account of how the writer was kidnapped by the people of Hippo and made a priest there, and then bishop. In this chapter he includes a splendidly enlightening digression on how the book, any book in those times, was actually written. How, in fact, it was not written by the author but dictated, and how the stenographers and copyists put it into legible writing on rolls, *volumina*, of papyrus, and then onto parchment bound together in *codices*, which we nowadays call volumes.

This coordination of the man's life and his work is also the way in which Lancel, in showing how long the greatest works were in the 'writing' – the *De Trinitate* started about 400, progressing slowly until pirated half way through Bk XII, not completed until about 425; and a similar story for the *De Doctrina Christiana* and with a shorter time span for *The City of God* – underscores the extraordinary width and depth of Augustine's grip on what he had in mind. No nonsense here about his inability to plan a work coherently; the coherent plan was there at the beginning, and still there to be completed after several lapses of time at the end.

Finally, in the chapter called 'Epilogue', we have as graphic an account of Augustine's last years and death, entwined with his writing of his *Retractationes*, as we have of his earliest years. The book ends, in fact, not with Augustine's death, but with the survival and saving of his library and his works, and the unexplained mystery, miracle indeed, of how, with Vandals whooping it up on every side, they made their way from the bishop's library in Hippo to the bishop's library in Rome. Masterly indeed, stupendously, magnificently so.

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