

**THE VENERABLE BEDE** by **Benedicta Ward**. *Geoffrey Chapman*, London, 1990. Pp xii + 148

This clear and elegant short book gives us Bede in the round. Bede himself sketched a number of autobiographical details, both indirectly and in the form of a booklist of his works, and these are convincingly set in the context of the contemporary monastic life which suited him so well, and in which his delight and contentment is evoked in the opening chapter on 'Bede and his times'. This setting of all Bede did and thought and wrote in strongly in evidence throughout the book. We are told about what he learnt and what he read and for whom he wrote. The chapter on Bede the teacher illuminates the difficulties of the task as Bede was obliged to pursue it among a population with minds which needed to be awakened to the satisfactions of learning.

There is a substantial chapter on Bede and the Bible. The study of Scripture was central to all that Bede did, and its implications are fully explored here. The way in which the Fathers were used; the naturalness of Bede's use of figurative interpretation; the pioneering work he did in furnishing commentaries for books where he had no source-commentary to turn to; the strengths and weaknesses of the method of verse-by-verse treatment; the particular value for Bede's own development as exegete and theologian of the difficulties of treating Old Testament books whose spiritual meanings and reference to the New Testament events had to be sought out; all these are discussed with illustrations from the texts of Bede's commentaries. Bede wanted to make preachers of his readers, and by practical application of his work on natural science and computation and of his study of the Fathers he teaches a method of Bible-study which would not only provide spiritual food for monks and nuns, but also give the clergy material for use in their missionary endeavour.

Bede is also important in the development of the early mediaeval hagiographical tradition in the West. In a chapter on Bede and the saints, Dr. Ward's scholarship in the field is especially apparent. Bede's achievement and his purposes are placed in their 'direct continuity with the tradition he found in the Bible and the early Church' (p. 89). The *Ecclesiastical History* is treated in a chapter on Bede and the English, which places his work as a historian in the setting both of a grand eschatological vision and of Bede's intimate concern with the story of his own people as they become a Church of Christ in the land. The concluding chapter considers the growth of the cult of Bede and his intellectual influence.

Nothing is overstated here; Bede was a hardworking, essentially pedestrian scholar, but not without vision, and certainly not without the ambition to tackle enterprises on a grand scale. He is a quite extraordinary phenomenon in what he achieved from so modest a base and with such comparatively limited resources and scholarly contacts. In this compact volume Bede is drawn in his own place, with love, and with a clear eye.

G.R. EVANS