



Reviews



St. Augustine, by Serge Lancel, translated by Antonia Nevill. London: SCM Press. 2002. pp, 590. £25 (paper). ISBN 2213602824

This extensive study of Augustine by the Emeritus professor of Latin Literature and Roman Civilisation in the University of Grenoble is a fine achievement. It draws on recent literary and archaeological evidence to bring the study of Augustine right up to date. Professor Lancel, who has written books on Hannibal and on Carthage, has extensive knowledge of North Africa to bring the culture and civilisation of the fifth century Latin world to life, around the complex life of its greatest ornament, Augustine.

Part I is devoted to Augustine's early life and education. The culture of his native Thagaste, the highly significant input of his mother Monica, and his school days are rehearsed in a fresh and judicious survey. The remainder of the section deals with the culture of Carthage, the influence of Cicero on the one hand and Mani on the other, and the role of his earliest friends before his departure for Rome.

Milan is the next important staging post on the saint's pilgrimage. Here Ambrose, Christian bishop and ex-proconsul, provides a challenging figure and a perfect role model. Manichaeism is exchanged for Neoplatonism, and the famous conversion in the garden – what could be a more Biblical setting? - proceeds very shortly after. Augustine the teacher becomes Augustine the writer – the *Dialogues* and the *Soliloquies*. After a brief return to Rome he returns to Thagaste. His son dies and his mother vanishes in somewhat obscure circumstances - an open verdict .

Augustine becomes in Hippo 'priest by surprise', as Lancel has it, corresponding to Ambrose's earlier elevation to 'bishop by surprise.' Never one to avoid a theological controversy if it faced him, he gets involved with the Donatist struggle which will cast a long shadow over the rest of his life. He becomes a bishop himself and is immediately

absorbed, if not in confirmations without end, at least in a heavy load of administration. He continues to write – the *Confessions*, perhaps the most widely read piece of literature apart from the Bible till modern times. His concern for the unity of the church leads to the fateful coercion of Christians with different views from his own.

In the later decades of his life he is locked in controversy, mainly with Pelagius and with Julian of Eclanum, but still manages a prodigious literary output, most significant of which is the *The Trinity* and *The City of God*. As his life comes to an end he reflects on heaven – with a robust sense that he is firmly on course there. The Vandals sack Hippo but the saint’s works are miraculously preserved.

This book is a very good read, moving along at a respectable pace. It is by no means uncritical of Augustine, but always strives to see him in the best possible light. Some readers may miss an accounting for the more problematic legacy of the great man in these pages. There is a certain sense, reassuring or troubling depending on your perspective, of ‘onward Christian soldiers’ as the drama slowly unfolds. But the end effect is certainly, as Henry Chadwick sums it up, masterly.

George Newlands,
University of Glasgow



***The Theology of Reconciliation*, ed. Colin E Gunton, 2003,
London: T & T Clark, pp. 177, £25.00. ISBN 0567088898**

Sub-titled “Essays in Biblical and Systematic Theology” this is really a collection of papers delivered at a Conference in 1999 of the Research Institute in Systematic Theology at King’s College, London. They are introduced and concluded by summary remarks from the editor, the late Colin Gunton, whose recent death has deprived academic theology of one of its most productive and influential scholars. Not surprisingly, many of the contributors are King’s College scholars, and many share the