

Introduction

This book examines the life and career of Alcuin in England and on the continent; it also considers his legacy as a churchman and a leading political figure. His intellectual legacy as a theologian, teacher and poet is considered in detail elsewhere in *Alcuin – His Theology*, but it has to be borne in mind if his historical significance is to be fully appreciated. The first thing to establish therefore is the context in which he grew up and his Christian cultural inheritance.

Alcuin was a conscious heir to the rich traditions of the English Church, which had been created among the Anglo-Saxons in the century and half before his birth in around 740. The father of this church was Pope Gregory I, known as Gregory the Great, the 'apostle of the English'; and all that Alcuin set out to accomplish was consistent with the pastoral and evangelistic approach as outlined by Bede which had governed the pope's mission, led by Augustine of Canterbury and Paulinus of York, to the Anglo-Saxons in the seventh century. As a Northumbrian, born probably near York and certainly educated there, Alcuin modelled his learning and teaching upon the memory of Bede, who had died in 735 just around the time that he was born. Bede's study of the Bible, and his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* which explains how the early Anglo-Saxon church had been created, provided the framework for much of Alcuin's own thinking. Bede and Alcuin were both disciples of Gregory and their own work in expounding the Bible and Christian theology flowed from his example and legacy and complemented it.

From Gregory's teaching there also sprang the sustained partnership between evangelism and education that was the hall-mark of the early Anglo-Saxon church, and of its missionary activities on the Continent. The Pope's own approach to the rulers of his day, recorded in his many letters, guided the way in which Alcuin addressed the political and ecclesiastical leaders with whom he had regular contact at the height of his powers. The memory of the missionary initiative of the Roman Church kindled a deep devotion to the See of St Peter in Alcuin's mind, as it had done in Bede's, and this is particularly apparent in some of his letters. At the same time, like Bede, he was interested in scientific matters, notably the calculation of sacred time; and also in Latin language and poetry, of which he was a great master. Both men were committed teachers and showed a deep devotion to their pupils

that was reciprocated. Like Gregory, Alcuin is best approached through his many letters: for both were masters of the epistolary art; and in each case their letters were carefully recorded for the benefit of contemporaries and later generations. This means that Alcuin is one of the most accessible of early medieval Christians; and like Anselm of Canterbury later, one of the most attractive and interesting of people.

Although Alcuin remained a Northumbrian Christian at heart, the part of his life about which most is known was spent on the Continent, when he was attached for some time to the peripatetic court of Charlemagne, then at Aachen, and finally, towards the end of his life, as Abbot of the monastery of St Martin at Tours, where he died in 804. Here he produced most of the written work that now remains, distilling long years of experience as a teacher and scholar. He never lost contact with his homeland, however, nor with the church of his education at York, and many of his letters were directed to friends and contacts in England and Ireland. But his most significant and lasting work was evidently accomplished on the Continent and his influence on the early medieval Western Church was an abiding one.

In this work he followed in the footsteps of his kinsman Willibrord, whose *Life* he composed in prose and in verse; and also of Boniface, the great missionary to the Germans and the Frisians, who died a martyr's death in 754. English disciples of these two pioneers remained active in both Francia and Germany throughout the period of Alcuin's formation at York and during his own time on the Continent. The nature and work of these English missionaries is vital background to what Alcuin was able to achieve when he was invited by Charlemagne to join the growing circle of scholars which the King was attracting by his patronage and prestige. So it was that Alcuin became associated with what has come to be described as 'the Carolingian renaissance'. With the King's support he was enabled to play a crucial and very distinctive role along with others in the revival of Christian learning and education within Charlemagne's domain. Alcuin saw this as his personal vocation as a Christian, a voluntary though not always contented exile from his homeland.

Alcuin's letters and many of his poems reveal a person hungry for friendship and human affection: for Alcuin was a born communicator, reaching out continually to those whom he valued, though not always sure whether they reciprocated his affection. The difficulties of communication at that time emerge frequently throughout his letters, aggravating his feelings of isolation and anxiety on some occasions. He retained the loyalty and affection of many of his pupils throughout his life and after his death. Yet despite this galaxy of contacts and associates, Alcuin emerges from his letters as someone very sensitive and in some ways insecure. For him, friendship was one of the distinctive hallmarks of Christianity, a preparation and foretaste of life in heaven, where none of the vicissitudes of this present life

would obscure the communion of friends in Christ. It is this deep affection, swayed sometimes by vulnerability, which makes Alcuin so interesting and unusual. Occasionally he bent the established forms of letter-writing, and Latin itself, to communicate something of his own inner feelings, hopes and fears. It is sad that no letters remain from his friends in response to his.

Alcuin was a person of deep Christian faith, tenacious in his loyalty to orthodox Catholic theology, being rooted in the Bible and steeped in the liturgy of the Church. It is his skill as a poet of prayer as well as an educator that marks Alcuin out as a seminal influence upon his own generation and those that came after him. The fact that it is sometimes difficult to disentangle what was in fact his own writing from those of others moulded by his teaching and example, who wrote in the ninth century after his death, reflects his deep and creative influence. His love of God and his grasp of Christian theology were rendered original in their creative impact by his gifts as a teacher and poet. In his hands, the very traditional theology that he inherited, and to which he felt bound, took new wings. But always there is the tremulous under-current of compunction and uncertainty as to his personal worthiness. This reaches out even now to the sympathetic and attentive reader, cloaked as it is in mellifluous Latin.

His originality therefore lay more in how he said things than in what he said, for he was ever the studious servant of tradition as well as a subtle mediator and communicator of the theology of Augustine. Yet like Anselm, there is a gleam of creative genius running through his desire to communicate the richness of Christian theology, clearly and with fervour, more often than not with particular persons in mind whom he valued as his friends. To read his letters and his eloquent poetry is to be included within a loving heart and addressed by a keen mind. The abundance and quality of his writing, and the clarity of his Latin, indicate the scope and richness of the material attributed to him, or associated with him, as well as the remarkable range of his own reading. For Alcuin must rank with Bede, Boniface, and Dunstan as one of the most notable and influential of Anglo-Saxon Christians, uniting English and continental Christianity in a unique manner, which left a lasting legacy within the Catholic Church of Western Europe.