

Foreword

by Dr Rowan Williams

Alcuin of York was one of the most influential intellectual and spiritual presences in the Europe of Charlemagne; heir of the sophisticated scholarship of Bede and Bede's immediate pupils, he played a key role in the major doctrinal debates of his era, exercising a formative influence on the Western Church's response both to its internal troubles with theological innovation in Spain and to challenges from the unfamiliar world of Byzantine thought. While he was not an original theological mind of the stature of Augustine or Gregory, he had a genius for synthesis, and his clear and elegant summaries of the main points on which the Fathers of the Church converged made his work an indispensable tool of education for centuries. But he was also a liturgist, a poet and a grammarian of great skill. Like Bede, he was the channel through which a whole world of classical as well as patristic learning flowed on to a new generation. At the same time, he was wholly committed to the programme of Church reform that was under way in Charlemagne's empire and to the missionary endeavours that were constantly enlarging the Church's boundaries: his educational concern was to create not simply good scholars but prayerful and effective pastors and evangelists. He was a significant figure in the politics and diplomacy of Charlemagne's court and a man who formed deep and lasting friendships with colleagues. His work is an all-important bridge between the world of Boethius, Cassiodorus and Gregory the Great and that of Anselm, or indeed of Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred.

The present book fills a serious gap. We have not had an up-to-date overview of the copious research of recent decades on Alcuin and on the controversies of his day, or a guide to the way in which his theological writing helped to create a shared doctrinal idiom in Western Europe. In these pages, written in tandem with a full biographical study, Douglas Dales, who has already published distinguished studies of the Anglo-Saxon Church, offers just such a survey and guide, presenting Alcuin's thought with the greatest possible insight, sympathy and lucidity. The comprehensive character of his reading is evident in a most impressive and helpful bibliography, and he covers all the diverse areas of Alcuin's interests with a sure hand.

Alcuin deserves to be recognised – far more than has often been the case – as a key figure in the evolution of the mediaeval mind; and no one reading this book could fail to see him in this light. This is a fine and welcome tribute to one of the greatest gifts the British Church gave to the wider Catholic fellowship in the early Middle Ages.

+ *Rowan Cantuar*
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