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(Re)Framing History

A Contemporary Historiography of Bede's Historia

"To attempt to judge of Bede merely as an historian is inevitably to misjudge him. In history and in science, as well as in theology, he is before all things the Christian thinker and student."

—CAROLUS PLUMMER
EDITOR'S PREFACE TO THE 1896 *OPERA HISTORICA*

Introduction

As with scholarship on any historical figure, much has changed in how the Venerable Bede has been understood, specifically as an historian and with respect to what he was trying to accomplish in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*. This chapter will explore historiographical issues beginning with Plummer's introduction to the 1896 edition of the *Historia* and ending with more recent publications on Bede and his histories. I will show how scholars wrestled with integrating Bede's theological, exegetical, and historical works into even a quasi-coherent account throughout the twentieth century, while highlighting theoretical obstacles that caused them difficulties. Due to the extensive writing on this topic, I will have to be selective in my more detailed analysis by studying the more substantive and influential scholarship on Bede and history.

A definite trajectory can be seen in the work on Bede and history in the twentieth century, and it often mirrors developments in historical theory itself as the century progressed; for instance, earlier scholarship

frequently addressed questions of miracles and their place in a historical work. In short, authors often see Bede moving in and out of the proper practice of history because of his theological or hagiographical interests. This results in a picture of Bede in constant tension with himself and presumes history to be a simple and objective reporting of facts that can be corroborated through critical study of sources. These scholars tend to be more overtly dogmatic about the superiority of modern historical methods and assumptions in comparison to Bede. In the middle and latter parts of the century, the influence of Bede's exegesis and theological interests on Bede's *Historia* began to be investigated and discussed. A conversation ensued that continued to become more complex as the century moved forward; not only were the influences of Bede's exegetical works and theology seen as important for understanding the *Historia*, larger theoretical concerns about the discipline of history as such began to be addressed.

Setting the Stage: Carolus Plummer's 1896 Edition of the *Historia*

Plummer's English introduction to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* set the English scholarly agenda on Bede for the twentieth century.[1] Not all scholars agreed with Plummer, but his insightful summary, introduction, and scholarship on manuscripts began the major conversations regarding Bede and his works that took place over the subsequent century. While some of Plummer's work has been rightly criticized and corrected, much of Plummer's scholarship has stood the test of time. For example, his dating of Bede's birth (672/673) has become the presumed date.[2] Plummer understood that Bede primarily thought of himself as a biblical exegete and Christian theologian and that one must understand Bede's exegetical and theological works in order to understand Bede's histories. In this regard, Plummer is like many of the scholars who will follow him and who struggle to integrate Bede's exegesis and theology with the *Historia*.

Mostly sympathetic to Bede and his accomplishments, Plummer takes Bede and other authors from the eighth century at their word. To be sure, Plummer addresses modern concerns, like Bede's allegorical approach to Scripture and the miracles in the *Historia*, but I will say more about that below. The strength of Plummer's work is that he recognizes the importance

1. Bede, *Opera Historica,* ix–lxxix. See also Wallace-Hadrill's praise in "Bede and Plummer," 366–85.

2. Bede, *Opera Historica*, xi.

of Bede's monastic way of life for Bede's own scholarship,[3] and he also shows how political concerns and a declining Northumbrian culture (both monastic and secular) influence Bede's narration in the *Historia* and his commentary on Luke.[4] Plummer even takes the time to cite at length Cuthbert's description of Bede's last days that details the kind of monastic and pious life that Bede led.[5]

Plummer describes Bede's "mode of exposition" as "allegorical" and rightly notes the influence of Scripture and preceding patristic, exegetical tradition.[6] Again, showing his sympathy, Plummer states that Bede's allegorical exegesis "rests upon the belief, in itself, surely, no ignoble one, that nothing in Scripture can be devoid of significance."[7] Plummer also astutely describes Bede's use of *sacramentum* in his exegesis as "the inner and spiritual meaning of an external fact, or narrative, or name."[8] Plummer recognizes that Bede's allegorical and figural interpretation does not eclipse the literal or plain sense but seeks to transform it, exempting perhaps Bede's commentary on the Song of Songs.[9] Using Bede's own texts, Plummer rightly attempts to show that Bede's spiritual exegesis is not as arbitrary or subjective as moderns sometimes think. Bede often employed rules and standards in his allegorical method, and Plummer cites many relevant examples.[10] However, Plummer's description does not attempt to understand the theo-logic that underlies Bede's approach to allegorical exegesis in any sufficient detail. Thus, while Plummer can offer an accurate description and summary of what Bede said and how he read Scripture, Plummer does not venture to explicate the logic of what makes allegorical exegesis "work" and explain that to modern readers.

Following his treatment of Bede's allegorical approach to Scripture, Plummer addresses "another point which may strike the modern reader unfavourably . . ."[11] This potentially unfavorable point is the miraculous ele-

3. Ibid., xxx–xxxiii.
4. Ibid., xxxiii–xxxv.
5. Ibid., lxxii–lxxviii.
6. Ibid., lvi.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., lvii.
9. Ibid., lvii–lix.
10. Ibid., lix *nn.* 6–8.
11. Ibid., lxiv. "Another," in this context, may refer either to Bede's strict orthodoxy or allegorical interpretation. It is unclear. Nonetheless, my point and argument will remain intact regardless of which one Plummer might have had in mind. Of course, it is entirely conceivable that "another" simply means "in addition to" both Bede's allegorical exegesis and adherence to orthodox theology.

ment found in Bede's histories. Plummer somewhat subtly voices suspicion regarding Bede's narration of miracles. For example, he says it was "natural" for Bede and his "religious spirit" to find the supernatural everywhere.[12] A footnote on that sentence states, "There are ages when belief is so utterly uncritical that it does seem as if they could not under any circumstances afford us satisfactory evidence of miraculous occurrences."[13] Moreover, Plummer says that "the large majority of them [medieval miracles] may be set aside at once, as being quite deficient in anything like contemporary evidence."[14] Thus, Plummer dismisses the miracles for numerous reasons. First, they can be condemned on internal evidence (e.g., "being silly" or even immoral).[15] Second, many of the recounted miracles mirror biblical miracles thereby showing their derivative nature. Third, some are classical myths or folklore disguised in Christian garb. And finally, some can be explained simply as coincidences that could have taken place naturally.[16] Plummer does allow, however, for a "residuum" of truth that cannot be so easily explained, albeit rather indecisively: "But, after all these deductions have been made, the question remains, whether there is not a residuum which cannot be explained away."[17] Plummer leaves the topic of miracles at this point and goes on to describe Bede's piety and good sense when it came to monastic discipline (e.g., if one were sick, one could break one's fast for the sake of health) before summarizing Cuthbert's recounting of Bede's death.[18]

After the sympathetic interpretation of Bede's allegorical exegesis, Plummer curiously moves to a more skeptical position with regard to miracles. I find this interesting, but most importantly it reveals how Plummer treated his historical task. It is worth noting that Plummer takes the time to assure his reader that Bede was not a subjective reader of texts, especially Scripture, even though Bede favored figural interpretation. Plummer provides examples or evidence of Bede's interpretive method. This actually fits well with Plummer's later description of Bede's good sense that includes how Bede reads some of Scripture's more difficult exhortations.[19] However, Plummer then quickly

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., n2. Plummer approvingly cites Charles Gore's 1891 Bampton Lectures at Oxford.

14. Ibid., lxiv.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., lxiv–lxv.

17. Ibid., lxv.

18. Ibid., lxv–lxxviii.

19. For example, Plummer notes that Bede read 1 Thess 5:17 and Eph 6:18, which encourages Christians to pray always or without ceasing, does not mean that Christians should always be literally on their knees in explicit prayer. See Bede, *Opera Historica*, lxix..

sets aside miracles for lack of evidence. I find this curious because in one paragraph Plummer uses Bede's texts as evidence (and even defense) for the spiritual interpretation of Scripture based upon the noble belief in Scripture's inspired significance, then a few paragraphs later textual evidence is suddenly insufficient, despite Bede's professed care to check sources.[20] If Plummer wants to hold the belief in the fecund status of Scripture, which is certainly a physical object in the natural world, at least in some sense, then why are miracles not given the same sympathetic treatment?

The answer to the question lies in why Plummer shows more sympathy to allegorical exegesis than to miracles in history, and the answer reveals not only epistemological issues but also ontological ones. While Plummer attempts to read Bede with sympathy and charity, their different philosophical and theological commitments are quickly made manifest. Plummer defends the non-arbitrary nature of allegorical exegesis based on its *method*; it has "fixed laws and rules."[21] Plummer then approvingly cites many examples of Bede's exegesis that demonstrate Bede's insight into the spiritual realm or fair harmony of things.[22] In other words, the application of fixed methodological laws and principles guards against arbitrary human subjectivity thereby preventing figural exegesis from lapsing into arbitrary moments. It is hard to find a more nineteenth-century philosophical view than the one Plummer finds in Bede in order to keep Bede's figural exegesis intelligible and somewhat persuasive for modern readers.

When it comes to miracles in Bede, similar types of epistemological criteria cannot be found to Plummer's (and many others') satisfaction because the laws of nature are just that, immutable laws.[23] Hence, miracles are easier to dismiss, since they would be clear violations of what we know with near certainty does not happen. Plummer might object that words used for figural exegesis and historical events are quite different—true enough. However, they are both "things" (*res*), in that they exist, giving them some shared natural and ontological status, and both are certainly involved in causal and natural relationships; unless, of course, one holds to a Cartesian or Kantian anthropology where the self doing the figural exegesis is

20. See, for example, the preface to the *Life of Cuthbert* where Bede discusses giving his text to the local priest who knew Cuthbert to check for accuracy and similarly the preface to the *Historia* submitted to King Ceolwulf prior to its publication.

21. Ibid., lix.

22 Ibid., lxi; see *Historia* 4.23 (214).

23. In fairness, Plummer wrote before Einstein and operated with a more determinist and Newtonian view of nature and reality. Thus, what passed for scientific knowledge for Plummer is quite different than what does for us in light of relativity theory and quantum mechanics.

cordoned off from the causal and natural world into the noumenal realm, which would be far from Bede's theological and Augustinian anthropology and semiotics.[24] Plummer's sympathy with figural exegesis and skepticism toward miracles are therefore in tension, at least as far as Bede would see it. To which side of the scale sympathy for Bede tips depends on many factors, and my point here is not to argue that the miracles in the *Historia* actually happened. Instead, I am showing how Bede's exegesis and history get framed in light of philosophical and theological commitments. This tension will continue throughout the twentieth century as scholars reflect and study Bede's exegesis and history.

Scholarship on Bede's *Historia* in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

The next major works to treat Bede shared similar titles: George F. Browne's *The Venerable Bede: His Life and Writings*[25] and a collection of essays entitled, *Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings: Essays in Commemoration of the Twelfth Centenary of His Death*.[26] Browne calls the *Historia* "Bede's greatest work," though he never explicitly says why or offers the criteria by which he has made such a judgment.[27] The closest Browne comes to offering a rationale for the *Historia* being Bede's greatest work is his calculation of the amount of time it must have taken Bede to write the *Historia* (over 1,800 hours). The fact that Browne structures his entire book around Bede's historical writings is more telling. He begins to treat Bede's oeuvre not in chronological order but with the *Historia*. He gives separate and entire chapters to the *History of the Abbots*, the *Life of St. Cuthbert*, and *Letter to Egbert*, while combining all of Bede's exegesis and homilies into a single chapter of twenty-four pages.[28] Since Bede saw his primary vocation as commenting on the sacred page of Scripture, it is doubtful that he would have thought of the *Historia* as his "greatest" work, and he certainly would not appreciate how little time Browne spends on his biblical exegesis.[29]

24. I am not saying that Plummer is necessarily presuming a Kantian or Cartesian anthropology. My point is simply that exegeting a text is not categorically different from the occurrence of miracles insofar as both occur in the "natural" realm without any obvious and salient differences, thereby making Plummer's hypothetical objection problematic.

25. Browne, *Venerable Bede.*

26. Thompson, *Bede.*

27. Browne, *Venerable Bede*, 96.

28. Ibid., 231ff.

29. See Bede, *Histoire Ecclésiastique du Peuple Anglais*, 5.24 where Bede says he applied all of himself and his work to the study of Scripture ("omnem meditandis

The *Historia* is magnificent and worthy of adulation, but Browne goes too far in his evaluation showing his modern preferences for brute facts over theology and the bible.[30] When specifically addressing the *Historia ecclesiastica*, Browne continues to reveal his perspective spending most of his time deciphering Bede's sources and simply summarizing the *Historia*, a necessary and worthwhile task, to be sure. However, he fails to see the connections between the *Historia* and Scripture that Bede intended, making Browne's summary read like a modern history book neglecting faith elements that pervade Bede's own text. Even when Browne does summarize something Bede would have understood to be theological, Browne responds condescendingly and with sarcasm: "There were mines of copper, iron, lead, and silver, with plenty of jet, bright and sparkling, of which Bede remarks that when rubbed it holds fast anything to which it is applied as amber does. He [Bede] adds that when heated it drives away serpents. Probably it does, when it is hot enough."[31] Furthermore, Browne later characterizes Bede's figural interpretations as "somewhat far-fetched" indulgences of his imagination.[32] Through his neglect of biblical elements and themes throughout the *Historia*, his misunderstanding of figural exegesis, and his snide remark regarding the miraculous power of jet, Browne makes clear that his primary interest in Bede is not so much to understand him but to read him as a small step forward in the progress toward the modern discipline of history that Browne practices and holds in high esteem. The teleological rendering of Bede's practice of history that finds its consummation in contemporary historical practice is common in the early twentieth century, as I will continue to show.

Wilhelm Levison's "Bede as Historian" shares many characteristics with Browne's analysis.[33] In fact, the compilation of essays in which Levison's piece appears has a chapter that immediately follows Levison's entitled, "Bede as Exegete and Theologian" by Claude Jenkins, implying that Bede's works should be read in separate disciplinary ways or perhaps dividing his more explicitly religious works from his historical ones.[34] Moreover, the

scripturis operam dedi"). All subsequent Latin citations of the *Historia* will be from *Histoire Ecclésiastique du Peuple Anglais* and will be abbreviated, *HE*. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are from *Ecclesiastica History of the English People* and will be abbreviated, *EH*.

30. Browne, *Venerable Bede*, 98–111.

31. Ibid., 108.

32. Ibid., 251.

33. Levison, "Bede as Historian," 111–51.

34. While I do not want to make too much out of this, even Brown's recent book, *Companion to Bede*, organizes his introduction to Bede with such disciplinary distinctions.

chapter after Jenkins's by Colgrave has the specific task of dealing with the miracles in Bede's works, presuming some level of unfittingness for miracles to be in a history, properly speaking.[35] Too much can be read into the separation of the disciplines in these titles, but I will show that these discussions of Bede frame his work in problematic ways.

Levison makes a valiant attempt at offering a sympathetic treatment of Bede's historical works, but, despite these efforts, he cannot help but compare and evaluate Bede in light of modern historical practices. Levison rightly notes that any reader who neglects the last five chapters of *De tempore ratione*, which discuss the world ages, "gets only an imperfect knowledge of Bede's mind."[36] Likewise, Levison understands that eschatology is a "constituent part of his [Bede's] historical conception."[37] While properly observing the importance that theology plays in Bede's understanding, Levison states that eschatology "does not belong to history in the modern sense."[38] This seemingly innocuous and obviously true statement about modern history, however, must be understood in light of other descriptions that Levison makes about Bede's historical work.

From his early chronologies through his hagiographies and *History of the Abbots*, Levison traces Bede's progress toward "the province of real history" that finds its culmination in the *Ecclesiastical History*.[39] Levison calls the *Historia* "Bede's masterpiece, to which he owes his glorious name of historian . . ."[40] Bede's attention to detail and particularity helps him earn the title of a real historian, according to Levison. Unlike his predecessors (e.g., Eusebius and Rufinus), Bede was concerned both with the universal church and a particular church, the British and Anglo-Saxon people. "It was Bede's intention to add [to Eusebius and Rufinus] a British and Anglo-Saxon supplement to the older work, and he thus produced the first special ecclesiastical history of an occidental people . . . So Bede, in spite of his consciousness of the universality of the Church and his desire for unity with Rome, manifests a kind of national feeling."[41] Furthermore, Bede also "endeavored to obtain documentary evidence, that is, letters and synodical proceedings," which make appearances in their entirety inside the pages of

35. Colgrave, "Bede's Miracle Stories," 201–29. See also Colgrave's introduction to his translation, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

36. Levison, "Bede as Historian," 122.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 131.

40. Ibid., 132.

41. Ibid., 133.

the *Historia*.[42] Beyond collecting written sources, Bede "sought also to learn the oral traditions of the different parts of England."[43]

Bede's historical sense is made apparent when he took "the history of the English Church as a united whole and, with regard for synchronism, did not separate simultaneous happenings."[44] According to Levison, "only in this way could he [Bede] present a *real* picture of the progress of the Christian mission, its vicissitudes and dependence on political events, ending with a survey of the contemporary English bishops."[45] In other words, by taking care to keep events in mostly chronological order and indicating contemporaneously occurring events, Bede shows himself to be a true historian. When Bede occasionally deviates from this synchronization it is the fault of Bede the theologian. In book 5 of the *Historia* Bede discusses Abbot Adamnan, his acceptance of the true dating and celebration of Easter, and Adamnan's own work on the Holy Places, which Bede adapts and includes lengthy quotations. Levison calls Bede's insertion of these quotes "really out of place" because it takes away from the chronology and synchronization. Thus, when Bede explains he included the quotes for the edification of the readers, Levison implies that Bede loses his historical sense because, in the quotations and his reasons for including them, "Bede the theologian is therein manifested."[46]

Finally, "[t]he principle of sincerity and [v]eracity thus marks [Bede] as a real historian, within the limits of his times."[47] Real historians write sentences that correspond to or describe reality according to chronology, in other words. Moreover, "he is a child of his times . . . in his predilection for the miraculous, and the importance he attaches to the paschal question."[48] The interesting phrase here is "within the limits of his times." Every human is limited to and influenced by a specific time in history, but Levison exceeds his task when he implicitly assumes that contemporary historians are better historians as such when compared to Bede. In this, he begs the question and fails to actually attend to the fact that perhaps what is in question is the discipline of history itself. While Levison certainly understands that there are differences between modern and medieval conceptions of history, he continuously assumes the superiority of the modern discipline without argument. The fore-

42. Ibid., 138.
43. Ibid., 140.
44. Ibid., 143.
45. Ibid., emphasis added.
46. Ibid., 144.
47. Ibid., 147.
48. Ibid., 146.

going analysis demonstrates that for Levison any time theology enters into Bede's history, Bede's historical works automatically become less history and more theology. While Levison recognizes Bede had no problem with history being theological, it is obviously true that we moderns are better historians, according to the proper practice of history, when theology is kept out of history. This, of course, is a perfectly legitimate position, but it is one that needs arguing, not presumption. Until one engages Bede at the theological level of history, that argument is not being had, and one will not fully understand how Bede conceives of history and its task. In this regard, Levison fails at his task to describe and understand Bede as an historian.

While Claude Jenkins's treatment of Bede as an exegete and theologian offers some salient descriptions of Bede for my purposes,[49] the more germane article addresses the miracle stories in Bede's works.[50] I want to reiterate that my attention to miracles in Bede's historical works and modern Bedean scholarship is not concerned with the ontological question of the possibility of miracles; instead, it is largely historiographical. I am simply drawing attention to how Bede's historical works get framed by modern interpreters and how this impacts their ability, or lack thereof, to understand Bede's theological conception of history.

Colgrave quickly sets up the problem in the opening sentences:

> It probably comes as a shock to the reader unacquainted with medieval literature who approaches Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* for the first time, to find that a miracle occurs on almost every page. What reliance can be placed on the historian who tells us in his very first chapter that "scrapings of leaves of books that had been brought out of Ireland being put into water have cured persons bitten by serpents," who goes on to deal with the life of Alban and to describe how the river dries up to allow the holy man the more rapidly to receive his martyr's crown, while the executioner's eyes drop out at the same moment as the martyr's head drops off[?][51]

Acknowledging Bede's own belief in the occurrence of these miracles, Colgrave points out that when compared to other contemporary literature Bede's *Historia* is surprising insofar as Bede does not recount *more* miracles.[52] Quickly, however, Colgrave shows his modern condescension, albeit with a putative historical sympathy. After commenting that moderns cannot

49. Jenkins, "Bede as Exegete and Theologian," 152–200.
50. Colgrave, "Bede's Miracle Stories," 201–29.
51. Ibid., 201.
52. Ibid.

expect Bede to know about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century advances in science that show how the universe is "ruled by unchanging laws,"[53] he describes Bede's age as "primitive in its outlook, it was naturally credulous, and the nature of evidence was but vaguely understood. All around them men saw inexplicable phenomena, and the most marvelous explanation was always the easiest and the most readily accepted."[54] Interestingly, Colgrave even goes on to describe the sources of this primitive outlook in the paganism that preceded Christianity.[55] Colgrave eventually states his purposes for his essay where he will "endeavor to see how he [Bede] is influenced by the hagiographical interests of his age."[56] In short, Colgrave rightly wants to place Bede's miracle stories in the wider context of the Latin hagiographical tradition that begins with Evagrius of Antioch's translation of Athanasius's *Life of St. Antony*, and Bede makes Colgrave's analysis relatively easy, since Bede almost always named his sources. For my purposes, the important part of Colgrave's study centers on how he handles these miracle stories and how he thinks the hagiographical context impinges on Bede's narratives.

First, Colgrave observes the similarity of many of Bede's miracle stories from the *Historia* to Scripture:[57] a river drying up,[58] blind people being healed,[59] a mute's healing,[60] storms being calmed,[61] and water springing from a rock.[62] One example will suffice to show the striking similarity between Bede's stories and Scripture that Colgrave rightly notices: the calming of the sea by Germanus in book one of the *Historia*.[63] In the midst of the Pelagian heresy being spread by Agricola, the English called on the bishops from Gaul, Germanus and Lupus, for doctrinal help in refuting the subtleties of the heretics. The bishops quickly agreed to come to the aid of the Britons and their fledgling faith. However, they encountered a storm crossing the channel. Germanus, the leading bishop and champion of the group, had gone below deck to rest. The storm became so violent that all

53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 202.
55. Ibid., 202–4.
56. Ibid., 205.
57. Ibid., 207–8.
58. See Colgrave, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* 1.7.
59. Ibid., 1.18, 2.2.
60. Ibid., 5.2.
61. Ibid., 1.17, 3.15, 5.1.
62. Ibid., 1.7.
63. Ibid., 1.17. Colgrave misreads the story saying Lupus calmed the storm when it was actually Germanus who sprinkled holy water on the sea and invoked the name of Christ and the Trinity. However, all were actively praying when the storm calmed.

onboard believed they were going to sink, so they woke up Germanus who subsequently invoked the name of Christ and the Trinity while sprinkling water on the raging sea. Then, as a group, they all prayed and God answered by calming the waters allowing them safe passage to England to refute the Pelagian heresy. The resemblance between this story and Jesus' calming of the sea in Matthew 8 and Mark 4, where a sleeping Jesus is awakened by his panicking disciples to a raging storm, is obvious. Jesus commands the turbulent waters to be still, and they obey.

Colgrave then relates Bede's miracle stories to the "legends" of the saints in preceding hagiographical traditions. "These scriptural miracles found in the legends naturally become standardized and usually preserved certain features of the biblical miracles on which they are based."[64] While he never explicitly mentions it, Colgrave assumes that these "imitations" of miracles in the hagiographical tradition and in Bede are fraudulent because of the fact that they are imitations and could have been influenced by other classical sources. In other words, since the miracle stories lack originality and have precedence, they must be constructions based on the Scriptural text and therefore are not accurate or true.[65]

Colgrave tips his hand, relaying a narrative from book II of the *Historia* where Edwin renounces his pagan religion, receives baptism, and becomes a Christian, along with his followers. Colgrave remarks, "All this seems natural and has the appearance of strict history. But meanwhile Bede interpolates somewhat awkwardly a long account of a vision which Edwin had had when he was in exile . . . and in great danger."[66] Bede adds this story, Colgrave speculates, because "[p]erhaps he felt that the conversion of his own land to Christianity was an event of such importance that it could hardly have happened without an accompanying sign from heaven: more probably it was a piece of popular tradition which was well known in Northrumbria . . ."[67] Thus, Bede repeats these stories in his *Historia* because he was using his authorities and sources. Colgrave thinks that Bede probably thought them to be true because he believed these sources to be trustworthy and most likely eyewitness accounts or based on such accounts: "It is clear then that when Bede produces his witnesses, he is acting in accordance with the hagiographical tradition of his times. [. . .] The stories had been written

64. Colgrave, "Bede's Miracle Stories," 208.
65. Ibid., 208–10, 213, 215–16.
66. Ibid., 216.
67. Ibid.

down and it is too much to expect of a historian of his age that he should have refused to give them credence."[68]

Colgrave does try to hear Bede on his own terms by quoting Bede's preface to the *Historia*: "Bede has in fact done no less than he claimed to do, namely to 'labour to commit to writing with sincerity such things as we have gathered from common report, which is the true law of history.'"[69] Ultimately, therefore, Colgrave condescends less than his predecessors but nonetheless finds himself distinguishing different Bedes to make sense of what Bede was doing. "Perhaps we ought to recognize three men in Bede, the theologian, the hagiographer, and the historian . . . in writing the writing of the *Ecclesiastical History* both Bede the hagiographer and Bede the historian took part . . . Bede the hagiographer was only a little in advance of his times. Bede the historian was far in advance of them."[70]

To summarize up to this point, some sensitivity to Bede's own views and what he even purported to be doing has been shown by Colgrave (and to a lesser extent Levison), despite his clear empiricist philosophical perspective, foreign to Bede.[71] However, Plummer's point and analysis that stated that Bede remained above all a Christian thinker are now fading into the background in favor of a more putatively complex reading of Bede that sees conflicting disciplines weighing on the saint's mind, or at least in tension, throughout his writings. Once Bede is shown to be in such conflicted tension, his insights as a real historian can come to the surface and be shown to be "far in advance" of his own time, thereby reading Bede as a precursor to modern historical methods and their emphasis on source criticism and accurate and descriptive renderings of the past. However, "accurate" can now be understood in a sense different from what Bede himself would have likely thought since it has been separated from his theology and exegesis. An investigation into how Bede understood his historical task will have to wait until a later chapter, but for now it suffices to say that it differs from the aforementioned scholars.

While many of his scholarly predecessors wrestled with Bede's *Historia*, Charles Jones provides the first erudite and detailed discussion of what Bede meant by *historia* and its differences from modern conceptions of history.[72] Jones's analysis is focused in one chapter, but the rest of his

68. Ibid., 224–25; quote from 225.

69. Ibid., 226.

70. Ibid., 228–29.

71. Ibid., 229. See Colgrave's concluding paragraph where he revealingly distinguishes between the "external world" and the "human mind," not to mention the "rapid advance of knowledge" in Colgrave's time.

72. Jones, *Saints Lives and Chronicles in Early England*.

text also gives shape to his reading of Bede's *Historia*. Borrowing from and eventually correcting Colgrave, Jones reads the *Historia* as blend of history and hagiography.[73] Jones rightly says that these two genres are not necessarily in tension for Bede. Scholars often think they are, but that is because they operate in a "realist" mindset and methodology while others, in what he calls the Romanesque period, like Bede operate from a "romance" perspective.[74] Jones defines these via Lafcadio Hearn: "Realism is a truthful depiction of nature, especially human nature; romanticism is an elevation beyond the range of the familiar into aspiration. Aspiration, elevation, exaltation, edification are all words used to describe the purpose of Romance."[75] The common feature of both romance and realism is convention.

> If literature is to forsake the natural world it must provide a substitute, and that substitute is a man-created [*sic*] convention . . . Though realistic writers, too, employ conventions, these serve them only as means to ends beyond. The romanticist enjoys the conventional for its own sake . . . for it has the power of lifting men [*sic*] above or outside nature into their own created world . . . The driving force of medieval romance is intellectual acceptance of abstraction as reality and the pleasure which the mind receives from the infinite adaptation of set pieces.[76]
>
> Romance attracts two types of mind—the credulous and the intelligently skeptical. These two approaches operate concurrently, even in the same reader or listener. No one can estimate how much of either approach any audience takes toward a romance . . . It must be remembered that authors seldom write about the essentials of their art. A true convention in any age is accepted without comment.[77]

Since these conventions are presupposed, Jones seeks to find them within the hagiographical tradition in which Bede stood and wrote. In other words, Jones wants to find the common structures in Bede's genres and use them to help properly understand Bede, particularly his *Historia*. The difficulty is finding these conventions; how does one see them? Jones answers by looking at the texts "as strangers would."[78]

73. Ibid., 57, for his criticism of Colgrave.
74. Ibid., 51–52.
75. Ibid., 52.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., 53.
78. Ibid.