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REVIEW

Journeys of The Mind: A Life in History by Peter Brown, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2023, pp. xv+713, £38.00, hbk

'Late Antiquity' is so familiar to us as a historical period that it is difficult to imagine how marginal it was when Peter Brown began to study it in the 1950s. The orthodoxy at that time still bowed to Gibbon's 'decline and fall' vision, echoed as recently as E. R. Dodds's influential *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (1965), in which the third century is described as intellectually impoverished, materially insecure, and filled with fear and hatred.

In this wonderful book, Brown relives the gradual but relentless confirmation of his early hunch that this view had to be fundamentally mistaken. With characteristic generosity, he tells us that Dodds himself had taught him more than anyone else that human beings are complex creatures who do not react to their circumstances in such predictable ways; but Brown's hunch was much more the product of his upbringing. Growing up as a Protestant in Dublin, with frequent trips to the Sudan where his father worked, had taught him that religion, despite the negative effects of sectarianism, could hardly be ignored. As he put it in *The Making of Late Antiquity* (1978): 'The religious historian, just because he is a religious historian, must be "concrete and fastidious." … Compared with the flesh and blood that the religious historian demands, much of the conventional and administrative history … is an airy wraith'.

This was not the best frame of mind with which to confront Oxford in 1952, when Brown won an Exhibition to read Modern History at New College. As taught in Oxford, History was little more than a training ground for future lawyers, civil servants and colonial administrators. 'It amounted', writes Brown, 'to the study of power by future wielders of power, largely limited to England alone'. Even the much-praised tutorial system was often harnessed to the need to satisfy examiners, thus reducing the topics of study to those that were sure to 'come up'. As a result, the syllabus was 'at once philistine and Eurocentric', leading to 'a fatal drift towards the lowest common denominator of political and institutional history', often smugly labelled 'grown-up history', in opposition to 'the wider field of the history of religion and ideas'.

'Thank God!', exclaims Brown, that 'this was not all that there was to Oxford'. The very beauty of the place had already made him determined to become a mediaevalist, and 'the virtual gravity-free existence of an Oxford undergraduate … brought on, at the headlong speed of which only young persons are capable, a series of religious and imaginative earthquakes'. In 1953, Brown attended a meeting of the Socratic Club, where he heard a young Peter Geach mischievously demolish, one by one, the rational proofs for the existence of God. The Club was dedicated to debate between Christians and unbelievers. Its faculty sponsor and president was none other than C. S. Lewis, to whom Brown was so devoted that he considered *The Screwtape Letters* a

perfect companion to Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. 'Both books', he writes, 'grew, ultimately, from the same deep root of Augustinian interiority that I would later come to know'.

In his search for kindred spirits, Brown turned to the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union and even went to the Harringay Arena to hear Billy Graham in the Spring of 1954. At an intellectual level, he had been more persuaded by a group of Catholic friends, but it was, ironically, the atheists who made him interested in exploring the Catholic faith. 'For them, the only Christianity worth either fighting or adopting was Catholicism'. In Karl Adam's *The Spirit of Catholicism*, Brown saw that the Church was not static: 'It contained … an immense capacity for growth, for adjustment, for the further development of its original doctrines that made it seem as fertile as the teeming earth, and as irresistible as the surge of an evolutionary process. … Read by a nineteen-year-old, … these were intoxicating words'. Yet, somehow, they did not chime with the history of the church as he had come to know it through his study of the Middle Ages. It struck Brown that there was something parochial in Adam's insistence that the Church's 'majestic growth' was limited to the Church of Rome. What about the East? In the process, he drifted away from the Christian present into the Christian past, a past to be approached as a historian and not as a believer. When, some decades later, Brown returned to Christian worship, it was no longer the lure of Catholicism but, characteristically, the example of Muslims in Iran that convinced him about the inescapable reality to which only religious practice was appropriate.

Brown got the top first in his year, swiftly followed by a Harmsworth Fellowship at Merton College, where he was to undertake research on Cardinal John Morton (c. 1420–1500). This was an odd choice of subject when we consider that Brown's Special Subject in his final year had been 'St Augustine and his Age', a topic that had allowed him to explore the late Roman World in depth, not only with the use of primary sources but with the help of a vast secondary literature which he devoured in practically every western European language. It came as a relief to discover in early November, barely two months after starting at Merton, that, together with the philosopher Charles Taylor, he had been elected to a Prize Fellowship at All Souls. The post lasted for seven years, after which it was possible to be re-elected as a full Research Fellow.

Such welcome financial independence and freedom immediately sent Brown back to the late Roman World: his proposed topic of research was 'The Social and Economic Position of the Roman Aristocracy in Italy in the Sixth Century AD'. Shortly afterwards, none other than Arnaldo Momigliano, then at University College, London, offered to take Brown on as a research student. Needless to say, the relationship that developed was one of collegiate friendship which, combined with the relaxed and supportive atmosphere of All Souls, allowed Brown to explore the neglected themes of continuity between the late Roman world and the early Middle Ages. The obvious topic was a comprehensive study of the life and work of a phenomenally influential bishop of Hippo, a dauntingly ambitious project which saw the light in 1967 as *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* and which immediately acquired the status of a classic.

One would expect such a remarkable triumph by a relatively young scholar to have been followed by a life of privileged learned leisure at All Souls. But Brown's disillusionment with the Oxford History syllabus continued to nag him. His research interests

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turned decidedly eastwards, not only to Byzantium but also to Islam. Between 1975 and 1978 he was Professor and Head of History at Royal Holloway, London. It was there, after being offered a post at Berkeley, that he received a letter from Caroline Walker Bynum in which, Brown admits, his dilemma was perceptively explained. She thought that he needed 'to pull back a little …, work a little more on method with some first-rate students and then write a lot again in five years. I suspect that, under the stimulus of undergrad teaching, your beautiful prose begins to propel your ideas—with grad students the reverse would happen. Yes, yes, yes, you should take it!'.

Brown's astonishingly productive career since he read this letter has given Bynum's words an air of prophecy. Every one of his works is here revisited and beautifully contextualised, allowing the reader to appreciate an enormously rich and generous intellectual life. The book is packed with wonderful highlights of many remarkable friendships and intellectual influences, from 'the delightful Gervase Mathew OP' to Mary Douglas and Michel Foucault. Written with Brown's characteristic elegance and wit, it is, to boot, a marvellously entertaining travel book: a treat in every sense of the word.

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