Medieval and post-modern biography:

The example of the Vita S. Rumwoldi

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St Matthew tells us that Christ said "By their fruits ye shall know them".[1] Whatever his own opinion in matters of religion, the historian must be guided by this advice when seeking to understand the 'mind-sets' of earlier ages. This is emphatically true of the Christian Middle Ages. One of the most remarkable 'fruits' of this period is a great corpus of literature devoted to the lives of Saints. Over 9,000 texts have survived and many more were destroyed at the time of the Reformation.[2] Despite the vast numbers of Medieval *Vitae*, later historians and biographers have been singularly unflattering about their quality, tending to dismiss the whole *genre* as mere *Hagiography*.

In the 19th century, Jacob Burckhardt (who should have known better) described the great Hagiographer Eusebius as "thoroughly dishonest … the most disgusting of all eulogists". Perhaps the most forthright critic was Edward Gibbon who asserted that traditional lives of the saints showed "a total disregard of truth and probability". Indeed the central thrust of all such criticism is that the *Vitae* were full of stories for which there was no supporting evidence and which were inherently improbable. Sermons and speeches were included which were clearly the invention of the author. Stories were

transferred from one saint to another purely upon the author's whim. There was a total disregard for chronology. The implication is clear: compilers of such nonsense do not deserve the name of historian or biographer. They stand accused of 'making things up', of disregarding the truth to further the ends of their religion. They rarely identify the sources of their information. They never include the testimony of neutral or hostile witnesses. They never express doubts. They never ask whether the events they purport to describe are *likely* to have happened. Even if there is a grain of truth in what they say, they readily resort to supernatural explanations – usually divine and sometimes diabolic interventions in human affairs – when a 'rational' or a 'scientific' explanation might be available.

It is tempting to agree with the critics – our immediate assumptions about history and biography are probably not that different to theirs. In large measure, our fundamental concept of what the historian and the biographer should do conforms to notions worked out in the 18th century. The 18th century virtually excluded God from History. We remember the lines of Alexander Pope:

> Presume not God to scan,
> The proper study of Mankind is Man.

The idea is more fully developed in Chapter XV of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in 1776. Gibbon conceded that Christianity *might* have risen to become the dominant religion in the Roman world because this was God's Will. Yet, this matter was outside the proper scope of the historian's sphere of operations – not least because the historian's techniques give him no means of ascertaining what the Will of God is. At best such

matters should be left to theologians. For the historian it was enough to ask "not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary [that is secular] causes of the rapid growth of the Christian Church". The message is clear: whatever he may believe in the rest of his life, the historian *as an historian* must proceed on the assumption that God does not exist.

Of course, in recent years, attitudes have changed somewhat. There is a growing recognition that entirely objective history or biography is impossible – historical 'fact' is bound to be influenced by the chance of the survival of information, by the bias of the source and by the interpretations placed upon evidence by the historian or biographer. But while there has been a growth of historical relativism, the actual reality of a Medieval *Vita* can still come as something of a shock. In most cases we have the impression that we are dealing with the product of minds entirely unlike our own. Upon further reflection, however, it is precisely this 'alien' quality which is most valuable, because it offers a way in to deeper understanding of the mind of the Middle Ages.

While every *Vita* has its distinctive features, as we shall see, most exhibit some common characteristics. Let us take an example, on the face of it, one of the most 'implausible' of all – the 2,340 word *Vita S Rumwoldi*, "seemingly produced at, or for, Buckingham Church".[3] The earliest surviving text was copied by two scribes, "very probably at Worcester during the third quarter of the eleventh century".[4] In other words, the most likely date is shortly after the Norman Conquest of 1066. It is striking that the eleventh century saw a flurry of 'hagiographical activity', both in Britain and on the Continent. Unless there were earlier versions of the Life of

Rumwold – and that is unlikely – the text is separated from the actual time of Rumwold (if he existed at all) by about four hundred years. The unknown author probably relied on oral tradition and, over such a long span of time, the possibilities of distortion, for embellishment and sheer invention are considerable.

The *Vita Rumwoldi* tells us that at an unspecified time in the past there was a king called Penda, "renowned for his power and excellent in integrity".[5] Penda was a former pagan who had subsequently been baptised as a Christian.[6] He had a daughter (not named) who at an early age feared God and kept His commandments. Another King, a pagan, sought her hand in marriage. Penda agreed, but on condition that his daughter be allowed to worship as a Christian. Although the marriage took place, Penda's daughter refused to enter her new husband's bed until he too became a Christian. The husband agreed, and a child was then conceived. When the time of birth was approaching, Penda sent word to his daughter and son-in-law asking them to come to visit him. Penda's son-in-law, now identified as the King of Northumbria, and his wife duly set out, but, while they were travelling her labour began:

> … so in a pleasant field, filled with lilies and roses, the servants and soldiers eagerly spread out the camp and the tents, and soon the queen gave birth to the son longed for by many, and sanctified by God. When the baby was born, he immediately cried out with a loud voice: "I am a Christian, I am a Christian, I am a Christian!". To this Widerin and Eadwald, two priests, responded: "Thanks be to God". The child went on and said: "I worship God the three in one. I confess and adore the Father

and the Son and the Holy Spirit". The priests and parents and all who were present marvelled and began singing the 'Te Deum Laudamus'. At the end of the hymn, the child asked to be made a catechumen by the priest Widerin, to be held aloft for the preliminary rite of the faith by Eadwald, and to be named Rumwold.

The delighted parents began to plan an elaborate Baptism to be attended by neighbouring kings and rulers, but Rumwold rejected the suggestion, insisting that he follow the example of Christ who had been baptised in the waters of the Jordan by John, who was "caused to be poor among men". He required to be baptised immediately by Widerin and received by Eadwald. Rumwold then directed the two priests to a hollow stone lying in a nearby hut, instructing the servants to fetch the stone and fill it with clean water. The stone was located but proved too heavy to move. King Penda (who suddenly appears in the text) then ordered them to bring an urn or jar, filled with water for the baptism. This did not please Rumwold who insisted that only the stone would do. Now he sent Widerin and Eadwald on their own, but "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity". They found that they could move the heavy stone with ease and the Baptism proceeded, followed by a Mass. We are told that in the meadow where Rumwold was baptised, "there never ceases to be the loveliest fragrance and the grasses neither fade nor wither but remain always green and are redolent of sweet nectar." The inhabitants now call the place "Sutton", "in which also the district is situated which gives due service to the king at the decreed time".

After the Mass, Rumwold delivered a complex sermon –

apparently given verbatim in the text – revealing detailed knowledge of theology. Everyone present gave thanks to God that such power of eloquence should have been bestowed on a tiny child. But Rumwold had one more announcement to make – he was about to die:

> Behold, I am entering upon the way of all flesh, since it is not permitted for me to live in this mortal body beyond the hour of my birth.

Rumwold required that his body remain at his birth place for one year, and then at Brackley for two years and finally be taken to Buckingham where it should rest for all time. The text acknowledges that the names of these places were "not known at the time" but had since been identified and were now rich in crops and densely populated by men. Rumwold died on the third day, on the third of November. His instructions were followed to the letter. After the death of Eadwald, his body was taken to Brackley by Widerin and finally to Buckingham. The *Vita* ends:

> There and in many places, when invoked, St Rumwold bestows favours upon those who ask, giving sight to the blind, making the lame to walk, and granting deliverance to the sick weighed down by various ailments, with the consent of our Lord Jesus Christ Who, in the unity of the Trinity in the Trinity of unity, lives and is glorified as God, one with the omnipotent Father and the Holy Spirit, throughout infinite ages, AMEN.

To say the least of it, the *Vita S Rumwoldi* does not seem a credible historical source. Apart from the confusion about the

religious affiliation of King Penda, it is surprising that Rumwold's parents are not specifically identified. Indeed if Rumwold's father was indeed King of Northumbria he was far more likely to have been a Christian than a member of the Mercian royal house. But these are technicalities – the real problems come in accepting that new born babies declare themselves Christians and then deliver sermons, that hitherto immoveable stones can suddenly be transported with ease at the mere mention of the Christian God, that it is possible to predict the names of towns and villages long before they come into existence. Some may even harbour doubts about whether an infant saint can cure blindness and other ailments. In terms of a reliable historical source, the *Vita Rumwoldi* must rank as lowly indeed. It is hard not to agree with the seventeenth century Antiquary, Thomas Fuller, who after giving a full account of the story of Rumwold, declared:

Reader, I partly guess by my own temper, how thine is affected with the reading thereof, whose soul is much divided betwixt several actions at once:

1   To *frown* at the *impudency* of the first inventors of …   ) such
2   To *smile* at the *simplicity* of believers in …   ) improbable
3   To *sigh* at the *well-intended* devotion abused by …   ) untruths
4   To *thank God* we live in times of better and brighter *knowledge*

   And yet in what is says – even in what it does not say – the story of Rumwold possesses considerable value, both in itself and in what it may tell us about the wider purpose of the *Vitae*. In the first place, we need to ask why the *Vita Rumwoldi* was written shortly after the

Norman Conquest? One possibility is that incoming Norman Churchmen were expressing incredulity about the stories associated with Saxon saints – and that the Vita *Rumwoldi* was written to counter such sentiments. The Prologue to the *Vita* suggests that doubts were being expressed – "it is thought by some, who have no goodwill, that, if any acts of outstanding note, performed in the past by God or by His Servants, are written down by contemporary men, they are spurious, or composed in a coarse style, and are therefore blasphemed with the false hissing of slander by such people, and mocked with unjust mockery". If, as seems likely, the *Vita Rumwoldi* was composed at Worcester, it may not be a coincidence that, while other Sees acquired Norman Bishops after the Conquest, Wulfstan, the Bishop of Worcester, was a Saxon. Another important point is that, in the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, England was in the process of acquiring a system of parishes based upon individual villages – the system that survives today. Before that time, however, ecclesiastical units had been rather larger centring upon 'Minsters' associated with the original process of conversion. Kings Sutton Church was one such 'Minster' and the churches of Brackley and Buckingham may have been 'Minsters' too. The rise of individual parishes with their own saints and cults threatened the powers and revenues of the original Minster Churches. The *Vita Rumwoldi*, which stresses the links between the saint and Kings Sutton, Brackley and Buckingham, could be seen as a bid to reassert the spiritual authority of these centres against newer rivals. In the years after the Norman Conquest, Buckingham faced economic decline and the mention of miracles performed there could be considered as the beginning of a moderately successful attempt to launch Buckingham as a centre of pilgrimage.

Although the 'Worcester' *Vita Rumwoldi* is the earliest, there are later versions of Rumwold's life as well as popular legends associated with him. Many of these contain references to springs or wells which flowed from the ground where the saint's body rested. Even today there are 'Rumbold's Wells' at Kings Sutton, Brackley and Buckingham. In folk tradition, it is the 'holy wells' that are linked with the story of Rumwold and were the scenes of 'his' miracles. It is striking that there is no mention at all of springs or wells in the 'Worcester' *Vita*. One must ask whether this was deliberate? However 'credulous' or 'superstitious' the story may appear to us, we must allow for the possibility that it was written to counter what was then seen as a greater superstition or even 'idolatry'. It is clear that many 'holy wells' or springs had once been the centres of pagan cults and that the early missionaries had been forced to accommodate themselves with these traditions. By the eleventh century, a time of ecclesiastical reform, the Church authorities may well have decided that the time had come to cleanse the Faith from the taint of such earlier compromises.

Yet the *Vita Rumwoldi* suggests strongly that such compromises involving elements of religious syncretism had been made at the time of the conversion. The hut and stone mentioned in the story of Rumwold's Baptism raises the possibility of pagan temple and altar. The power of the Christian God was demonstrated when the pagan altar was moved with ease. But Rumwold did not order the destruction of the stone: rather it was 'sanctified' as a font and indeed part of a stone font – supposedly the one used at Rumwold's baptism – remains in Kings Sutton Church to this day. The 'Christianization' of a 'pagan' object may well have assisted the

transition from the old religion to the new. It is striking that Kings Sutton, Brackley and Buckingham – all referred to in the Rumwold story – have churches dedicated to St Peter. The Latin for stone is Petrus and did not Christ say to his disciple "Thou art Peter and upon this rock will I build my Church".[7]

But while these are features of essentially local interest, other aspects of the *Vita Rumwoldi* link it to the wider context of the *Vitae* as a whole. For those familiar with the Bible, many of the episodes recounted in the short life of Rumwold will evoke similar episodes in the life of Christ Himself. The story of adults kneeling down before a baby is reminiscent of the Wise Men – "And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him".[8] The child preaching and showing miraculous knowledge of complex religious issues reminds us of the young Christ in the Temple – "sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and answering their questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers".[9] Again there is the request to be baptised – here Rumwold himself drew the parallel – and echoed Christ's sense of urgency – "And Jesus answering him said unto him Suffer it to be so now".[10] There are even parallels in the prediction of death. We should also note the royal dimension. The Holy family was descended from Royal David's stem from the House and lineage of Jesse. Rumwold was of the Mercian royal house. Indeed, Rumwold was not unique and St Osgyth, whose cult flourished in Aylesbury, was also a grandchild of Penda. Christ was born in Bethlehem – "royal David's city". Rumwold was also born in a place with royal connection – still commemorated in the name *Kings* Sutton. The similarities are too striking to be accidental.

Many other Medieval *Vitae* also contain parallels with the life of Christ. As in the Rumwold story, these parallels are not heavily stressed. The authors probably expected their readers to pick them up at once – it is just that we are too blinkered to notice them. If we 'cracked the code' we would see at once that most medieval religious biographies are really 'dual' biographies. Alongside the life of the subject they also contain 'hidden' lives of Christ. Jesus was the key to all biography, because he was at once true God and true Man. The key to sanctity was to resemble Christ, to live one's life in *imitatio Christi*. To put it another way, Christ's behaviour in the Gospels was the single authenticating norm for all action. It followed that for actions to be binding upon the community, they had also to be in imitation of Christ.

A Protestant response to this point would surely be that the life of Christ should not be 'hidden' as a subtext to the life of a Saint, however admirable – an attitude perhaps echoed in Fuller. Of course, it could be countered that the purpose of a *Vita* was to confirm the faith of simple people, to give it more immediacy by locating Bible stories in places known to readers or hearers. Perhaps too there was a feeling that if Christ was true God as well as true Man, He was almost too terrifying to contemplate directly. Indeed the fearsome aspect of God was constantly stressed in the Middle Ages and was supported by many passages in Scripture – "And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God".[11]

Yet the link between the Saints and God, with Christ, was bound to create problems for the authors of *Vitae*, problems which many 18th and 19th century critics of 'Hagiography' seem to have ignored.

The problem involved ideas of chronology, even concepts of time itself, far more complex than that required in merely 'factual' biography. Saints like Rumwold who lived after apostolic times could not have been on earth at the same time as Christ – so that the links between the two subjects cannot be strictly temporal. As Rumwold stressed, he was mortal, yet Christ is eternal – "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever".[12] Of course, Saints have a particularly close relationship with Christ. St Matthew records Jesus as saying, "For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister and mother".[13] Jesus is clearly not just referring to those physically present, but also to who would do His Father's will in future ages. Thus, although God works through time, because He is omnipotent, He must transcend time. Even in their own life times, Saints like Rumwold really lived on two time frames – in their outward body they lived in time, but in their souls they were already on an eternal plane. Thus conventional notions of time were not strictly relevant. Sometimes through the power of God, that eternal appeared on Earth. In reality an eleventh century writer was unlikely to be any more ready than a modern man to accept that an *ordinary child* would preach sermons. But Rumwold was *not* an ordinary child. Indeed, in a sense, Rumwold was not a child at all: the 'eternal' Rumwold was already talking. It is not sufficient to dismiss such an approach as mere credulity – it is just a different way of looking at things.

Although we know nothing of the author of the *Vita Rumwoldi*, it is clear that the work has much in common with other lives of Saints produced in the Middle Ages. Here it is important to appreciate that the *Vitae* generally exemplify a sophisticated theoretical model as to

the nature, scope and purpose of 'Christian Biography'. Indeed it would be quite wrong to suppose that biographical theory is an exclusively modern phenomenon. The most important theoretical model is to be found in the works of a man who stands between the Classical and Medieval worlds – Gregory of Tours, 538-594. It is Gregory's *Liber Vitae Patrum* (Book of the Lives of the Fathers) composed in 588 which sets the agenda for later Christian biography. We do not know if the author of the *Vita Rumwoldi* had direct access to Gregory's writing – he probably did not. It is more likely that he was unconsciously following in a tradition established by Gregory; even so, however, the parallels are striking.

Gregory insisted that the biographer must always remember his readers. Indeed the real existence of the biography will not be on paper but in the minds of his readers – it will exist as a kind of synthesis between his mind and theirs. His work will be read on several different levels depending upon backgrounds and educations. Thus, while the biographer may 'lead' his readers to certain conclusions, he must not impose himself too heavily upon them. He must accept and welcome the fact that others will see things in his text which have escaped him. Thus the *Vita Rumwoldi* takes the form of a simple narrative and the reader is left largely free to draw his own inferences and conclusions.

Gregory also insists that the biographer should not 'show off'. It might be just as well if he remained anonymous – although we may note that while Gregory did not observe his own precept, the author of the *Vita Rumwoldi* did. Not only must his work be shared with his readers, but also with God. Indeed in one sense the author himself was almost irrelevant. He was simply God's instrument to further

the divine plan – or, as the *Vita Rumwoldi* puts it "We are taught that to expound the great works of Christ which have by heavenly assent gloriously shone forth in the saints, and to divulge the distinguished merits of those same saints, is nothing other than to preach that Christ is the sole King". It followed that bravura displays of flowery writing, displaying feats of elegant rhetoric were out. The Latin of the *Vita Rumwoldi* is generally straightforward and modest – although there are a few 'Grecisms' such as 'apocripha', 'schema' and 'didascalos' to be found in the Prologue. There are places in the Prologue where the meaning is not entirely clear – but according to Gregory, if it is essential to his meaning and the delivery of truth, an author should be willing to break conventional rules of grammar – humbly accepting that ill disposed persons might criticize him on these grounds.

In his own works, Gregory often uses the singular 'Vita' or 'life" where the grammatical sense requires Vitae or lives. Inevitably, some later scholars suggested that Gregory did not know his singulars from his plurals.[14] Although Gregory sometimes lamented his lack of grammar, at least in this case, his use of the singular was quite deliberate – although he was writing about a number of saints, he wished to stress that the saints share collectively in the life of Christ: sanctity is derived from the sacred which is emphatically singular.

Gregory believed that the biographer's commitment should be to truth, that is the higher truth of Christian doctrine rather than to the lower truth of 'factual detail'. The example of the *Vita Rumwoldi* may suggest a concept of truth rather alien to modern notions, but it is broadly in conformity with Gregory's and that of his namesake,

Pope Gregory the Great, the same Pope who sent Augustine to England and who advised him not to insist on the destruction of pagan temples. As Von Harnack noted, it was Pope Gregory's authority which sponsored the incorporation of many popular beliefs and superstitions into the official teaching of the Western Church.[15] For Gregory of Tours, and indeed for the author of the *Vita Rumwoldi*, it was quite legitimate to incorporate oral traditions preserved by the faithful.

Gregory of Tours had no doubt that the biographer's purpose should be essentially didactic – it was to confirm and strengthen the faith of believers and to confute heresy and unbelief. This position is stoutly maintained in the Prologue to the *Vita Rumwoldi*. Gregory did not believe that biographers should burden their texts with difficult doctrine recognising that the deeds of the saints which encapsulated these doctrines could be effective pointers to the truth. Here, it must be acknowledged that the *Vita Rumwoldi* does not conform to the overall pattern, in that Rumwold's sermon does make considerable intellectual demands on the reader, especially in the section concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. This may suggest that the *Vita Rumwoldi* was intended for a rather more sophisticated readership than some of the other *Vitae* – a point reinforced by the absence of references to 'Holy Wells' – but there may be a more prosaic explanation. It could be that the Sermon was necessary to 'pad out' what would have otherwise been the unavoidably brief life of a saint whose earthly life lasted only three days.

Despite this 'deviation', it will be seen that in most respects, the *Vita Rumwoldi* does conform closely to the ideas of Christian biography advanced by Gregory of Tours. But we must proceed to

a wider question. Should the *Vita Rumwoldi* and others of its kind be regarded as mere historical curiosities or do they have some relevance for modern – or rather post-modern – biographers?

In general, biographers of the 19th and 20th centuries have taken a fairly authoritarian view of their readers – readers must accept their accounts – because they are experts. They provide the definitive product and it is not for readers either to question it or to put their own interpretations upon it. The Post-Modern biographer's position would be much closer to that of the Medieval biographer – recognising that it is possible to view things in different ways, even going to the extent of writing parallel and different lives of the same person to register different perspectives – it is up to the reader to decide which he prefers or indeed to develop his own. Again as regards to 'leading' readers, the Modern biographer leads his readers by the nose. Sometimes this will not be obvious. He may claim that he simply wishes to let 'the facts speak for themselves'. People who say things like that must always be treated with suspicion. Consciously or unconsciously they tend to 'arrange' facts in a particular way so that the reader has virtually no alternative but to come to the conclusion they want him to. Post-Modern biographers may deliberately 'jumble' their facts precisely in order to give their readers greater freedom. In this they are again at one with their Medieval predecessors.

Some 'modern' biographers are great show offs as far as rhetorical devices are concerned. Post-Modern biographers, again like the Medieval ones, are willing to flout conventional rules of grammar – if not for religious purposes – at least to achieve particular effects. Attitudes to language reflect attitudes to the

human condition. In some ways, the medieval writers were highly pessimistic about this. They believed that Man was a fallen creature, whose Sin had corrupted everything, including language itself. Although a gift from God, human language had become corrupted. Whatever the intricacies of grammar and stylistic convention, the inherent defects of 'fallen language' meant that people could never say *exactly* what they meant. It was as if the story of Babel had been taken further. Not only was there a confusion between tongues but a confusion within tongues. Under the circumstances it was pointless to observe 'rules' which were so imperfect. It was rather like saying that the Christian dispensation to ignore the letter of the Judaic Law had been extended to the linguistic field. Although the Christian biographers wrote in Latin, they were aware that Latin and its grammatical structure had its origins in pagan culture. Christians were as free of its rules as they were of the Jewish prohibition on eating pork.

The 'modern biographer', on the other hand is optimistic about language. It is virtually perfect and can be used to express precisely what is intended to be said. Therefore its rules must be obeyed. But the Post-Modern biographer is linguistically pessimistic – again as in the Middle Ages. Now the key concept is not the Fall but Alienation – though these ideas are very similar. Alienated people are utterly alone and their alienation finds its ultimate expression in their inability to communicate with others. Language becomes a barrier to genuine communication rather than the vehicle for it. Thus, why obey all the rules of language?

There is also the question of the role of the writer. As we saw earlier, in Medieval biography, the writer was almost irrelevant – in a

sense a mere conduit for a biography that was really 'dictated' to him by God or by the saint himself. Of course, Post-Modern views do not involve dictation by God. But they do tend to regard the author's life as unimportant. The emphasis is on the *text* alone – this is really the essence of Structuralism. The Medieval position is similar, arguably even more extreme – in that the Text becomes a holy thing, almost an icon in itself. In some instances, extracts from *Vitae* were subsequently incorporated into liturgies, thus further establishing their 'holy status'. While there is no surviving liturgy concerning Rumwold in England, he does, very curiously, appear in late Medieval Swedish liturgy.

As we saw, Christian biographers may have treated fact with what seems to be excessive freedom. 'Modern' biographers set much store by truth and fact – either a thing happened or it did not happen. If it did happen then it happened at a particular time and not at some other time. Intellectual pessimism about language goes hand in hand with intellectual pessimism about facts. If language itself can never be entirely clear, how can facts which are communicated through that language be any clearer? Again Medieval and Post-Modern writers seem to share the same pessimism – though for rather different reasons.

The story of the fall of Man and the corruption and distortion of everything has its counterpart in Classical philosophy, particularly in the works of Plato – a very influential figure on the early Church. The physical world is doomed to change and ultimate decay and destruction; it cannot be unchanging, it can never be eternal. As such it is foolish to bother too much about it. As Christ said: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon Earth where moth and rust

doth corrupt and thieves break in and steal. Lay up for yourselves treasure in Heaven".[16]   At best, the physical world presents a dim reflection of the *Metaphysical* world – that is, 'above matter'. Here things do not change – they are truly eternal. They are Ideals which possess a hyper-reality precisely because they do not have a physical form. These are the things that are truly worth bothering about.

  Although there may be a few 'Platonists' among 'Post-Modernists', most approach the issue of fact and truth in a different, though still sceptical fashion. Perhaps their real Patron is Pontius Pilate, the man who framed the central question of "What is truth?".[17]   We know that, even with contemporary events, eye witnesses may give fundamentally different accounts – no doubt believing in all sincerity that they are telling the truth.   Think for a moment of a riot. Accounts of that riot by a rioter and by a policeman, even if they agree on some details, often differ on really important matters. With the past it is worse. The past is the past – and in a sense is gone for ever.   We only know of it at all because of documents or artefacts existing *in the present* which we believe to have been written or made at or near the time under investigation. Of course some accounts or artefacts will have been lost and what has survived may not be a representative sample. Nor can we summon from the dead those who produced the documents or made the artefacts to cross-question them about their motives, their values, their prejudices, their overall world view. We can only *infer* these things from what they have left behind and when we do so we bring our own motives, values, prejudices and world view to bear. 'Truth' is therefore subject to a triple distortion – that of the original witness, that of the chance of survival, and that of the historian himself. With

these constraints, the search for absolute truth becomes absurd. The past does not really exist at all; all that exists is a fantasy in the mind of the historian and his readers. We might well say why bother – there is no meaningful distinction to be made between History and fiction. History is simply a kind of fiction produced by lesser minds who cannot produce fantasies of their own without indulging in a kind of intellectual grave robbing. So, what is truth? If we cannot say what it is, is there any point in being over-preoccupied about it? Better to summon up an ethos or mood – which may or may not be true (we have no means of knowing) but is at least interesting and helps us to forget the tedium and horrors of life.

Medieval biographers faced the problem of time frames in a most acute form. 'Modern' biographers ignored it – because they claimed they were dealing with only one time plane, the life time of the individual they were writing about. As so often, they over-simplified. Biography and history in general must always involve at least two time planes – that of the subject and that of the writer. There may be a third – the time plane of subsequent generations of readers of that biography.

It is in the relationship with Jesus that the similarity between Medieval and 'Post-Modern' biography appears to break down – in that while this consideration is paramount in Medieval biography it is unlikely to concern either Modern or Post-Modern biography. But in a way it does – particularly for the Post-Moderns. At the most simple level, if one's subject *believed* that they had a close relationship with God, then any biography of them is incomplete if their perception of that relationship is excluded. But it goes further. In contemporary terms, the Medieval preoccupation with Jesus

could be considered as involving a comparison with a particular psychological type – in that case with psychological perfection. But does not much Post-Modern biography also involve comparison with psychological types of one kind or another? These psychological types, if not eternal, are seen as inherent in the human condition and are thus not strictly temporal. And are psychological types entirely the result of historical factors and historical conditions? They are probably not – they may have as much to do with genetics and with body chemistry. Thus character types may recur and 'echo' throughout time. We seem to be straying far from Gibbon's Secondary Causes – and if we substitute Psychological Type for God, we are back with Primary Causation.

All in all therefore, it seems that there are significant points of congruence between Medieval and Post-Modern biography. Of course, we must not take things too far. Post-Modern biography is not identical to Medieval biography - God plays a much smaller part and doubts about the attainability of absolute accuracy cannot totally ignore the achievements of 19th century 'Scientific History' in the tradition of Von Ranke. Perhaps it would be closer to the truth to see things in terms of an Hegelian dialectic with Medieval biography as the Thesis, Modern biography as the Anti-thesis and Post-Modern biography as the Synthesis.

Finally there is the question of the medium which may indeed be as important as the message. We should remember that Medieval biographies appeared as Manuscripts. The change from that Medium to the printed one – in which virtually all Modern biographies appeared – was considerable. It made the text 'rigid' in the sense that it could not be altered. A biography which circulated

in manuscript form could be altered from one copy to the next to take account of the copyist's own views and insights. It might be regarded as 'holy' and in a way 'fixed' yet in reality it evolved – perhaps becoming more 'holy' in the process. Although the first Post-Modern biographies have appeared in print, that is unlikely to remain the case for long. Post-Modern biographies will soon be appearing on electronic Media – on computer screens. That opens the way to the interactive biography – and that in some senses is precisely the same as the *Vitae*.

[1] Matthew vii. 20.

[2] For a complete list, see the *Bollandists' Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina*, 2 vols (Brussels, 1899-1901) with a Supplementum by H. Fos (Brussels, 1986).

[3] Rosalind C Love *Three Eleventh Century Anglo-Saxon Saints' Lives: Vita S. Birini, Vita et Miracula S. Kenelmi and Vita S. Rumwoldi* (Oxford Medieval Texts: Oxford, 1996) p. xii. Love thinks it more likely that the Vita Rumwoldi was composed for Buckingham Church, perhaps at Worcester.

[4] Love op.cit. p. clxxiv.

[5] Penda was King of Mercia from 632-55.

[6] In most accounts, derived from Bede, Penda is described as a notorious pagan, although it seems that he did not object to Christian missionaries working in his kingdom.

[7] Matthew xvi. 18.

[8] Matthew ii. 11.

[9] Luke iv. 46, 47.

[10] Matthew iv. 15.

[11] Exodus iii. 6.

[12] Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews xiii. 8.

[13] Matthew xii. 50.

[14] For example M Bonnet *Le Latin de Grégoire de Tours* (Paris, 1890), p. 86.

[15] A von Harnack *Dogmengeschichte*, iii, pp. 257ff. (6th edition, Thuingen, 1902).

[16] Matthew vi. 19, 20.

[17] Quoted by Francis Bacon in *Essays* (1625) p. 1.