

Peter Brown, *Journeys of the Mind: A Life in History*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023, 713 p., ISBN 9780691242286.

Peter Brown's book represents a journey the author describes with nostalgia, a fascinating sojourn through his own life, that of a distinguished scholar. When, as researchers, we hear of the publication of such a memoir, we are caught between two unknowns: on the one hand, we would like nothing more than to peruse it and discover fascinating details of the life's journey of someone we admire, whose works we have studied as fundamental landmarks to our understanding, elaboration and refinement of our scientific thinking and our perspective on the history of complex religious phenomena. On the other hand, we approach such a book with the emotion and fear that we might also find accounts of difficult situations arising at various moments in every scholar's life, the dilemmas they encountered and decisions they took, the sacrifices they made in the name of research, painfully having to choose between family and their research – all things that often, and understandably, frighten any researcher.

Of course, it is almost impossible for anyone to review this book, as it represents the life of a man, a scholar, who influenced and shaped the very way we regard and relate to Christian Antiquity. Thus, the most accessible way to pen this review would be to offer the reader a few well-chosen examples from the multitude of information and stories the eminent author wove into this splendid narrative of his life.

The book is divided into six main parts and a postscript, with each part devoted to a particular stage in the author's scholarly career. The preface to the volume sees the author clearly explaining how the monograph combines two frameworks, and should be approached by the reader as such. On the one hand, it is a story of the author's life as it unfolded, evolved and was imbued with deep devotion and commitment to the study of a particular field of history, namely Late Antiquity: "It is not a conventional autobiography; nor is it an impersonal history of the field of late antiquity. It is somewhere in between: the story of my life as a scholar; of the intellectual world in which I moved; of

the institutions where I have studied and taught in England and America; and of the many scholars whom I have known and admired” (p. ix).

Part I. Ireland to Shrewsbury (pp. 1–132)

In beginning his tale with an account of his Protestant Irish origin, Peter Brown highlights the ways in which his confessional background and the societal context in which he grew up would later on open new affinities and priorities in his study of Late Antiquity. In his own words: “To write well, to spread knowledge, and to widen sympathies by the use of the pen has always been a top priority for me” (p. 5). The context in which Brown grew up in the midst of his Protestant Irish family, with their attitudes of loyalist apartheid to the British Empire but also their identity understood as rather Irish than British, constitutes yet another facet that would imprint itself on Brown’s imagination, his life story assimilating comparative cases from the ancient Roman world he would later go on to study, such as the status of the Roman Empire’s frontier provinces (Africa, Illyria) exhibiting a marked “polarity between ‘home’ and ‘abroad’” (p. 8).

Other interesting tales from Peter Brown’s childhood follow, with the reader learning about Peter the child, internalizing his memories of how he came into contact with Sudan (where his father worked in Atbara), how he was cared for by an Ethiopian refugee named Marha who was his nanny while there, and how, during the War, he did not see his father for five years (between 1940–1945), as he remained behind while Peter and his mother took refuge in Ireland (pp. 43–54). Accounts follow about his “low performance in mathematical exams,” his astronomical hobbies (p. 76), and how he chose to study Greek instead of hard science at Shrewsbury School (p. 85). This would pave the way for his later study of history; in his own words: “My commitment to history would grow higher and higher like a mesa, leaving sheer precipices of ignorance on every side – no science, no economics, very little English” (p. 86). Also of interest is Brown’s testimony that it was his teacher at Shrewsbury, Laurence LeQuerne, who whetted his appetite for “an acute sense of the past,” and that the medieval buildings of Shrewsbury and Oxford were part of the context that spurred his desire to study “distant periods of history” (p. 102) ever onward.

Part II. Oxford to All Souls (pp. 133–244)

After some preparation, Peter Brown started his Oxford studies in 1953 as an undergraduate at New College, a three-year experience wherein he was

“allowed to study only history” (p. 135), attending fascinating lectures such as C.S. Lewis’ famous address on Milton, or the Byzantine scholar Steven Runciman’s delivery of the Waynflete Lectures on the Eastern Schism “in the great dining hall of Magdalen College” (p. 151) in 1954. For Brown, Oxford was also a place for forging friendships while studying; and one of these was with Jan Safranek, a young Parisian who introduced Peter Brown to modern historiography, through works such as Fernand Braudel’s *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, which were a good fit with the methodologies of history teaching in place at Oxford during that time. This friendship network greatly aided Brown in his application for the prestigious All Souls Fellowship (“seven years of total freedom in a singularly comfortable college, whose members were among the leading lights of Oxford,” p. 198), for example, in penning the single-word essay – “Islands,” where he relied on Braudel (p. 200). Around this time, theological works begin to make their way into his reading list, as Brown dedicated a significant portion of 1955 studying the age of Augustine for his final examinations. This stage marked his first foray into what would later become one of his main fields of inquiry; Brown himself opines that “My work for the Augustine Special Subject marked the beginning of my life as a student of Late Antiquity. Unlike the other subjects that I studied at Oxford, what I read for the Augustine Special Subject has become part of my work from that time onwards. Texts that I first met in 1955 are the ones that I still study” (p. 172). His successful application to the prestigious All Souls Fellowship was a stroke of good fortune that propelled his later career. Though Brown was working with Arnaldo Momigliano in London at that time, he needed further scholarly interaction to provide feedback and deliver him from anxiety in the long-run. Consequently, he became a tutor for undergraduates from other colleges. At the same time, he began taking part in editorial projects, contributing to such works as *The Concise Encyclopedia of World History* (edited by John Bowle) chapters on, for example, “Palestine and the Making of Christianity.” Brown also spent brief terms at British School at Rome and elsewhere (p. 215). Returning to Oxford, he became a Common University Fund lecturer and later also presented a successful paper to the Stubbs Society in early 1960, which he delivered in the common room of Christ Church on the topic of “The Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy” (p. 228–231), which was also his first individually published article in the field of History, appearing in the *Journal of the Historical Association* (p. 234–244).

Part III. Augustine to the Holy Man (pp. 245–364)

A new phase dawning for Peter Brown's research focus saw him engaging with the established scholarship on Saint Augustine of Hippo, going so far as to write a biography of this eminent clergyman and Father of the Church between 1962–1966. This was not an easy task, as Brown was neither a “theologian nor a classical scholar” and, as he himself points out, he “lacked the abstract cast of mind of the one, and the training in handling difficult texts of the other” (p. 250) Not long afterward, the Fourth International Oxford Conference on Patristics met between September 16th – 20th, 1963), which was a major event taking place just one year after the Second Vatican Council. At the time, Augustine was central to Patristic concerns, which would prove a fortunate situation for Peter Brown. Among the lectures that impressed the young scholar was an address by the Latin ecumenist and Cardinal Jean Daniélou (1905–1974), or the discussion chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury that concluded the conference proceedings (p. 264). One of the most notable scholars attending the conference, who greatly influenced Brown in his approach to the concept of Late Antiquity and with whom would maintain infrequent contact was Henri-Irénée Marrou (1904–1977). For Brown, “It was only later that I realized that the notion of Late Antiquity, as a distinctive and creative epoch in the history of the ancient world, had a very specific meaning for him. For Marrou, Late Antiquity was, above all, the age of the Fathers of the Church. The Christians who were his heroes – such as Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine – had ensured, through their daring dialogue with ancient culture, that the period between 200 and 600 was a time of unusual creativity” (p. 269). Another few fortunate opportunities emerged after publishing his volume on Augustine of Hippo and the 1967 Fifth International Oxford Conference on Patristic Studies. Peter Brown would pursue the path of teaching and lecturing, primarily tackling Late Antique Byzantium and Persia which were “no longer treated as a marginal topic, but as a fully recognized subject in the Modern History School of Oxford” (p. 293). This transition was part of a broader general trend in the study of Late Antiquity to commit greater focus to Oriental material and the languages of the Christian East and Islam (p. 303). Now, Brown began to publish on a greater variety of subjects ranging West to East, with the notable mentions of an article detailing “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity” (*Journal of Roman Studies*, 1971), and the volume *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (1971) (p. 319). Additionally, P. Brown turned to the study of monasticism and hagiography, following in the footsteps of scholars such as

Norman Baynes or Derwas Chitty, and contesting the perspectives of others such as and André-Jean Festugière (pp. 354–358), reinforcing the thesis that holy men possessed a genuine power shared between “dissociation” and their re-entry into society “as the perfect arbitrator” (p. 362).

Part IV. From the world of Late Antiquity to Iran (pp. 365–444)

At the invitation of Geoffrey Barraclough from the University of California at San Diego, P. Brown composed a booklet on Late Antiquity we briefly mentioned above, in which he argued that this work would substantively differ from Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, “for the period of Late Antiquity was only a catalyst; not the demise of a civilization, but instead its transformation into new and adventurous forms, which would directly influence all subsequent centuries” (p. 370). Among Brown’s interests arising around this time was interaction and frontier between the Eastern Roman and Persian Empires, the Syriac culture of Syria and Mesopotamia and their transformation during the Islamic period. Not all reviewers of his book, *The World of Late Antiquity* were enthusiastic, and not all shared his perspectives. Cambridge’s Moses Finley (1912–1986) considered that, through “embracing the civilization of Persia,” Brown “manages to overlook the core of classical civilization” (p. 390). However, Averil Cameron, more receptive to Brown’s thesis, raises the question of its generalization, or, phrased more specifically: “how much our glimpses of individual people in the past could bear the weight of generalization that we place upon them. How much can a person be a type?” (p. 390). Peter Brown justified his approach by the fact that, as a medievalist regularly working with a broad range of sources, he succeeded in utilizing the thesis “that one example – if well chosen – would be corroborated by many others” (p. 391) for the context of Late Antiquity.

In 1975, a visiting professor at Berkeley, Brown lectured on “The Mediterranean and Its Neighbors,” both topics that he had also approached earlier in attempting “to do justice to the magnificent perspectives opened up by Fernand Braudel” (p. 409). However, what Brown succeeded in further than Braudel was in extension of perspective towards Persia, where “two different styles of empire faced each other, each linked to a different geography” (p. 409), an expansion of perspective without which our current knowledge of the Ancient Middle East would have been much more fragmented. This approach is itself broadly supported by what we read in Brown’s accounts about his travels to Iran in 1974, and of his other connections to this region (pp. 416–444).

Part V: Berkeley 1975 to Cairo (pp. 445–534)

In 1974, Peter Brown moved from Oxford to London, beginning his stint as a Professor at the University of London's Royal Holloway College (1975–1978), and simultaneously as a Visiting Professor of the History Department at the University of California at Berkeley (in the spring of 1975). This was an opportunity to return to the Greek authors and Church Fathers from before Constantinian era (p. 449), and study them with greater enthusiasm and intensity. While at London's Royal Holloway College, Peter Brown authored important publications, among them *The Making of Late Antiquity* and *The Cult of the Saints*, branching his scientific inquiries out into other fields of history (p. 459), as well as giving a number of lectures on the history of political thought ("Theories of History and Society from the Enlightenment to Karl Marx"). During this time, Brown also approached the cultural history of Islamic world with greater emphasis (p.468). Further opportunities would emerge in the spring of 1976, when Brown gave a lecture at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York whereupon he met Bob Silvers, "the already-legendary editor of the *New York Review of Books*" (p. 474), as well as Yale University's Glen Bowersock, whom he admired for initiating him in "the way to ever-wider worlds, by moving from the Mediterranean to the Middle East" (p. 475). The next station on Brown's scholarly sojourn was to soon thereafter find himself, in his words, "among the elephants" at Harvard University, where in 1976 he gave the Jackson Lectures on "The Making of Late Antiquity." "At Harvard, I had, indeed, found myself among a mighty herd of elephants-scholars of all ages and interests" (p. 476). In that same year, he expanded his intellectual and geographical horizons with study trips to Iran and Afghanistan, occasioning marvelous modern interactions as well as historical reflections on religious sources. He would give many more lectures from 1977 onwards, at the recently-established Center for Early Christian Humanism of the Catholic University of America in Washington, as well as at the University of Toronto, in the Department of Comparative Religion (p. 505). Brown's extensive interaction with American universities determined him to accept an offer from the University of California and move from London to Berkeley, a move which he viewed as little different to his initial departure from Oxford: "to move to Berkeley was to move to another London" (p. 517). During this time, Peter Brown gained a greater interest in the cultural world of Islam, as he himself confesses: "To do this I would travel once again to the Middle East, but no longer to the thrilling landscapes of Iran. There, in Iran, I had discovered Islam almost by accident. Now I would seek it out, by learning Arabic and by rooting

myself in the heart of the greatest city in the Muslim Middle East. I would go to Cairo” (p. 526). His visit to Cairo would be followed by a move to Oakland, Berkeley and, with it, his experience of “the culture shock” (p. 537).

Part VI: Berkeley to Princeton (pp. 535–686)

Concurrent with this change, P. Brown himself migrated towards other points of research interest, focusing the issue of “power and moral authority in the later Roman Empire” (p. 538), preserving further learning of Arabic and Qur’ānic reading among his utmost scholarly pursuits. His great concern, as well as focal point of his Berkeley seminars, was not only focused on history, but on Classics as well. One landmark event that occurred within this period was the publication of a series of volumes on *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* that Brown and John Dillon had proposed in 1979 following discussions with Doris Kretschmer, the Acquisitions Editor for Classics at the University of California Press (p. 573). Between 1980 and 1981, Brown spent time studying on “virginity and society in Late Antiquity” (p. 591), while in 1982 he gave four lectures at the Collège de France at the invitation of Paul Veyne and Michel Foucault, thereafter remaining in contact with the Institut d’Études Augustiniennes (pp. 611–612). One of Brown’s contacts in Paris was Pierre Hadot, a Professor of Ancient Philosophy and an old acquaintance of his from the Oxford Patristics Conference of 1967. In his account of a visit to Paris in June 1982, Brown recalls having met Hadot again and sharing an interesting cultural conversation, but one in which they greatly disagreed primarily owing to the following opposite perception “After a long and happy lunch, he turned to me and said, ‘You know, Professor Brown, the more I study the ancient philosophers, the less Christianity means to me.’ My answer was the exact opposite: ‘No, as for me: the more I study ancient paganism, the more I have come to respect traditional religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam” (p. 621). In 1983, Brown would give his last lecture at Berkeley on “Augustine and Sexuality” and then move to Princeton, where his wife had received a tenured position in the Department of Art History (p. 631). For Peter Brown, this move had also constituted a shift in scholarly orientation (in terms of academic American geography), with Princeton lying in the midst of a new, “northeast corridor, which stretched (in academic terms) from Harvard and Boston in the north to Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Center and Washington, DC, in the south” (p. 633). As part of his MacArthur Fellowship, Brown engaged in teaching at the History Department of the University of Princeton, simply transferring his course material from Berkeley yet with a

renewed focus on the period spanning from Late Antiquity to early Islam. One important moment at Princeton was the 1987 publication of the book *Body and Society*, which generated many favourable reviews worldwide, with Brown considering the greatest praise as having come from the review penned by Margaret Mac Curtain of University College Dublin and published in the *Irish Times*: “That ‘persistent sense of salutary vertigo’ which for the author accompanied the writing of *The Body and Society* likewise affects the reader, for whom, as promised, it opens many doors” (p. 660).

Postscript (pp. 687–700)

The Princeton academic pulse would continue to flow through Peter Brown’s veins for more than 35 years, his considerable teaching and research experience valorized in many other books such as *Power and Persuasion* (1992); *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* (1996); *Poverty and Leadership* (2002); *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (2012); *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (2015) and *Treasure in Heaven: The Holy Poor in Early Christianity* (2016). Following his account of a truly prolific journey in the study of Antiquity, Peter Brown concludes his memoir with a remark that the study of Late Antiquity does not stop here, with him, but has much more to reveal yet: “There is room, in Late Antiquity, for many more such journeys of the mind” (p. 699). This volume, authored by Peter Brown, is, perhaps, one of the most representative memoirs of the last decade, produced by an author deeply and intimately concerned with the history of the first Christian millennium. Through his entire life’s work dedicated to the study of Late Antiquity, Peter Brown remains a magisterial scholar and author, a claim which any to have ever studied his hundreds of articles and dozens of books can attest. Those who have not, yet, can still peruse this memorial volume alone – presented as a sum of historical facts, events and stages in the life of a man deeply admired by all dedicated to the study of the history of ancient Christianity – and arrive to the same conclusion: that this seminal scholar has profoundly left his mark for future generations that shall ponder the question of how one might study and come to understand “the world of Late Antiquity – a period of history that seemed, at first sight, to be going nowhere, but which would prove, on closer inspection, to be the making of both Europe and the Middle East” (p. 7).

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