

## *Introduction*

St Cuthbert still commands a devotion in the north of England. Every year in the warmer months, pilgrim walkers take their shoes off to cross the tidal causeway from the mainland, south of Berwick, to Lindisfarne, following a rough path across the wet sands from post to post and passing the raised wooden refuge designed to shelter anyone caught out by the rising tides. When they arrive, they can visit the remains of the medieval priory, see a small exhibition about the monastery's Anglo-Saxon foundation and enter the parish church built from a sandstone so pockmarked by the wind and salt that it has become a sort of honeycomb. Two monumental wood sculptures of Cuthbert by the contemporary sculptor Fenwick Lawson – the saint seated in meditation, in the ruined cloister, and his coffin borne by six bearers, in the parish church – extend the experience of sanctity into the present day. Artists and devotional writers are still making marks and forming representations of the saint, just as they always have done.

Lindisfarne flourishes as an atmospherically restored preserve of Anglo-Saxon spirituality and book production. Durham Cathedral represents its history along similar lines, demarcating the area where the tomb shrine of Cuthbert stood up until the Reformation as a vicinity for prayer, and displaying the treasures of the saint in beautifully restored exhibition halls. Farne Island, on the other hand, has never really taken up the possibilities offered by Cuthbert's seclusion there.<sup>1</sup> It attracts visitors as an RSPB bird sanctuary, home to thousands of eider ducks, puffins and Arctic terns during the early summer. The medieval chapel, still relatively intact, is splashed with guano inside and out, and retains no obvious memories of the Benedictine hermits who once ministered to seafarers, oversaw healings, battled the harshness of North Sea storms and wrote contemplative poetry and meditations alluding to that struggle. It retains no obvious memories; nonetheless, the eremitic lives of Cuthbert and his successors were marked by their dealings with seabirds, alternately chiding and protecting them, and the persistence of the birds in the present day can

act as a trace for those in the know, pointing us back towards the men who once referred to them to help work out a theology of the solitary life.

The Cuthbert of these present-day sites is deeply Celtic in orientation. His pastoral qualities remain beloved, and his attentiveness to birds and animals has become a major attribute – twentieth-century stained glass and artwork stage him indeed as something of a Northumbrian St Francis. But what of the ‘historical’ figure behind this representation? Born around 635, Cuthbert entered the monastery of Melrose in northern Northumbria as a young man, later becoming its prior. Transferred to the monastery on Lindisfarne, he continued to serve as prior for several years before retreating to the smaller island of Inner Farne in 676 to pursue an eremitic vocation. In the mid-680s, apparently already known for his holiness and orthodoxy, he was recalled from seclusion to take office as the Bishop of Lindisfarne. Less than two years later, in the grip of illness, he returned to his hermitage on Farne where he died in 687. Curative miracles were soon recorded at his tomb in the monastic church on Lindisfarne, and in 698 his body was translated into a new overground shrine to facilitate his veneration.

This is the biographical point of departure. However, this book tells the story of a *changing* northern saint, from his earliest instantiations in the *vitae* of the late seventh and early eighth centuries, through what is thought of as his heyday in the twelfth century, to his late medieval appearances in Latin meditations and vernacular verse. It is a story told principally through texts and through literary modes of textual analysis; that is, it is not a historian’s account, although there is a good deal of historical coverage along the way. Methodologically, I begin from the premise that the texts produced within the context of a saint’s cult – hagiographies, miracle collections and church histories – require the application of a *literary* practice of hermeneutics in addition to historical analysis. Clearly, these texts are written with principally instrumental ends in mind: they are designed to benefit the custodial community or to mediate broader interests within the region. However, they conspicuously fail to state their aims directly, encoding them instead within narratives of the saint’s life and posthumous behaviour.<sup>2</sup> We are therefore faced with a series of stories that require sustained decoding. Although this is not a word that has been traditionally applied to hagiographies, I would propose that there is an *allegorical* thrust to many of these narratives, consciously utilizing the body of the saint to personify the aspirations and challenges faced by the custodial community or, more broadly, the northern church. Thus, when Cuthbert’s body is driven back from Ireland by bloody waves, or when he posthumously saves the house of a Flemish textile merchant from

fire, we need to probe below the narrative surface and read off the submerged meanings: the beleaguered northern church is keen to rebuff its putative Irish origins; the English saintly economy trumps the commercial economies of its continental neighbours.<sup>3</sup>

The literary tactics required to decode these encrypted narratives exist in an ongoing dialectic relation with their historical contextualization. Without understanding the various pressures experienced by the Durham community that produced these texts – their relationships with the Scottish crown and southern Benedictine shrines, the issues faced by their dependencies – we lack the tools necessary to decode these texts adequately. However, while these stories have instrumental objectives, their method of communication remains a narratological one, utilizing exemplary biography and wonder-working, and a literary hermeneutic is best placed to bring these objectives to light, and measure the difference between the narrative surface and instrumental underbelly of the text.

In addition to exploring the dialectic between literary close reading and historical contextualization in relation to the Cuthbertine corpus, I have adopted a diachronic approach, charting the changing character of this dialectic within a capacious time frame stretching from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries. This approach enables us to observe the changes in the way a saint's *vita* and *miracula* communicate over time; at one point in time, a particular story may be brought to the fore; at another point, another story; or, the same story may reappear with an alternative meaning. When narratives from distinct time periods are compiled into composite forms in the late Middle Ages, their implications shift yet again, while, when a saint's life is told from the southern perspective rather than a northern, or from a Scottish Cistercian perspective rather than a Durham Benedictine one, it yields palpably different values. A theme such as Cuthbertine asceticism can be traced expansively for its differing values in different centuries, while religio-historical contexts help account for those differences. Is there anything of permanence amidst this temporal flux? The body of the saint, of course, is designed as a guarantor of durability, although even that is not quite so straightforward as it might appear. And in textual terms, Bede's Prose *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* remains at the heart of the cult throughout its 800-year duration, albeit occasionally translated into vernacular epitomes or visual media.

This book tells the story of a changing northern saint. It is a story that has already been worked on in parts, and I am indebted to a significant corpus of interpretive material on eighth-century representations of Cuthbert, most importantly, the landmark volume of essays, *St Cuthbert*,

*His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, and the first section of the volume that follows in its footsteps, *Saints of North-East England, 600–1500*.<sup>4</sup> The political and religious history of twelfth-century Durham and its textual production have also been the focus of recent attention, notably within the essay collection, *Anglo-Norman Durham, 1093–1193*, and David Rollason's magisterial editorial work on Symeon of Durham.<sup>5</sup> These are areas that have been expertly mapped, where my task has been primarily the presentation of familiar material from a particular perspective within a broader frame of reference. But there is much within the textual tradition that is less well known. The twelfth-century *vitae* of the hermits who revived Cuthbert's ascetic vocation have barely been mentioned beyond Dominic Alexander's ecological study, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*;<sup>6</sup> the maverick 'Irish' *vita* of Cuthbert has incited only small-scale controversies upon its sources and provenance; the fourteenth-century *Meditaciones*, penned by a Cuthbertine hermit on Farne, has lain dormant since the mid-twentieth-century work of W. A. Pantin and David Farmer;<sup>7</sup> while the encyclopedic fifteenth-century Metrical *Life* of the saint remains untouched by modern scholarship.<sup>8</sup>

These texts, in the company of others, are assembled, analysed and defined as integral elements in a large-scale Cuthbertine lineage of writings, spanning eight centuries, for the first time here. Covering such an expansive timescale, this book makes an important contribution to the emerging corpus of hagiographic studies that acknowledge the value of adopting a diachronic approach to an Anglo-Saxon cult,<sup>9</sup> as well as adding a specific regional perspective to ongoing work emphasizing the continuities between pre- and post-Conquest writing.<sup>10</sup> With the exception of Susan Wilson's *The Life and After-Life of St John of Beverley*, this book is the first to apply such an ambitious methodology to a major cult from the north of England.<sup>11</sup> As a result, it is in a unique position to offer new insights into the changing interests of the northern church and counties over several centuries, insofar as these are focalized through the persistently pliant body and activities of their patron saint.

This is the story of a saint told through his texts and, despite the new findings and overlooked material, it is also of necessity selective and partial. I have not attended to every continuation compiled in the aftermath of Symeon of Durham's *Libellus de exordio*, nor have I had space to examine the more minor Latin metrical *vitae* of Cuthbert. An account of the hymns and offices composed in Cuthbert's honour would have granted insight into his liturgical representation, but also have entailed musicological discussions beyond the scope of this study. As stated above, this book

focuses on textual materials that lend themselves to literary forms of analysis: individual *vitae* assembled by selecting pre-existent hagiographical elements; miracle stories encoding partialities for or against various social groups; *vitae* in legendaries where the process of compression enforces a consideration of the compiler's priorities; history-writing where the symbolic content of certain episodes has not always been granted the recognition it deserves, and meditations where the rhetorical qualities of the meditating voice are inseparable from the devotional content.

The narrative of the evolving representation of Cuthbert within his texts could have chosen many different emphases. I have opted to focus on two that drive to the heart of the distinctive character of this cult: place and ascetic tradition. To begin with place: this book foregrounds the varieties of spatial jurisdiction made visible by Cuthbertine texts and the ways that they co-ordinate or jostle against one another.<sup>12</sup> It is worth pausing here to offer a systematic account of the most major of these jurisdictions, although the chapters that follow will integrate them within more multi-faceted discussions. First, we consider the ancient kingdom of Northumbria, which remains a potent, solely *textual* space for many centuries after its physical demise. Cuthbertine writing continues to bear the trace of this ancient jurisdiction, embodied within Cuthbert, long after the kingdom itself has disappeared, and I will argue that the saint's body and life are utilized as a way of retaining the *memory* of this utopian regnal space. The boundaries of seventh-century Northumbria extended up to the Firth of Forth through Lothian, meaning that after the Anglo-Scottish border had become established in its present form from the early thirteenth century, and after the Scottish wars of the fourteenth century, Cuthbert's body became a challenge to present politics, bearing within itself the idea of a contestive, anterior jurisdiction.

Second, Cuthbert is made correlative with the 'community of Cuthbert', a much more localized and labile jurisdiction, originating on Lindisfarne, undergoing a peripatetic phase focalized on the group surrounding Cuthbert's coffin, briefly identifying itself with Chester-le-Street, then Durham, and eventually stabilizing into an exclusively monastic space with a penumbra of extensive landholdings. Requiring greater intervention on the part of the saint, Cuthbert aggressively protects the boundaries of this communal space against other saintly jurisdictions and forms of external and ethnic pressure. Third, and relatedly, this book explores diocesan space, emanating from the spiritual hub of the shrine in Durham Cathedral to its river boundary at the Tees. The interests of the diocese may overlap with those of the monastery but are not necessarily identical, and Cuthbertine

stories are sometimes used to justify proposed segregations of monastic and episcopal landholdings, and separated spheres of operation.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the diocese is persistently pitched against the English crown as a space of financial and judicial exemption, building upon Cuthbert's famous expulsion of Norman tax collectors in the 1060s. Depicting Cuthbert as an independent spiritual lord, whose rights supersede those of the crown within his diocesan territories, Durham charters and ecclesiastical histories remain particularly committed to this spatial account of their saint until the late fifteenth century.

Fourth, working in a more unfocused relation to diocesan space, Cuthbert is sometimes called into action to represent 'regionality' or 'northernness', particularly from a southern perspective, where his equation with northern England can also signify geographical blankness and marginality. This reductive use needs to be set against Durham's fifteenth-century efforts to extend Cuthbertine veneration westward and south into the dioceses of Carlisle and York, effectively establishing Cuthbert as the spiritual patron of the north. Working in contradistinction to the judicial independence of the diocese, and the cross-border connotations of his 'Northumbrian' alignment, Cuthbert's fifth jurisdictional affiliation ambitiously encompasses the entire English nation. This is hinted at in Bede and Aelfric and eleventh-century stories describing Cuthbert's posthumous collaboration with King Alfred to oust the Danes and establish an English royal dynasty, and resuscitated again in late medieval imperial contexts in which Cuthbert's banner is mobilized to support English military campaigns against Scotland.<sup>14</sup>

While Cuthbert's embodiment of obsolete kingdoms, monastic territory, diocesan lands and, on occasion, the English nation, showcases his more material and defensive aspects, his attitude towards his eremitic living space on Farne Island brings a very different set of spatial sensitivities into relief. The spatial dimensions of medieval English asceticism have been well served in recent years, and I am indebted in particular to the work of Liz Herbert McAvoy, E. A. Jones and Tom Licence in mapping the hermitage and anchorhold.<sup>15</sup> There is something to be said though for thinking about the distinctive traits of the *small-island* asceticism performed by Cuthbert, a more unusual phenomenon with clear Irish inflections, where enclosure is reinforced by the encircling sea, and the work of mortification enhanced by the hostility of the elements. Indeed, because the hermitage sits on a small, otherwise uninhabited island, it is the island itself that becomes the main metonym for Cuthbert's ascesis. Within its boundaries, nature looms large: adjacent islands are located, distinctive

rock features are described, the plumage and nesting habits of the resident bird colonies are outlined, and Cuthbert's sanctity is defined through his relationship with the seabirds and seals.<sup>16</sup> The small-island space of asceticism, then, offers an unexpected window on to natural history writing within a broader textual surround with very different generic aims. Ascetic space blends with the natural order; however, it is also often over-determined towards the supernatural sphere. Angels and devils make themselves present, suggesting the site as an otherworld, while birds display tameness and human speech, extending the natural above and beyond its normative boundaries. Pressed in this direction, ascetic space takes on Edenic overtones, constituting itself as a nature sanctuary.

While the Cuthbertine space of asceticism retains a long-distance relation to the monastic jurisdiction (a torch flare on a cliff-top informs the monks that the hermit is dead), other jurisdictions sit notably askew. The ascetic landscape is given a particularly antithetical relation to the diocese, and the hermitage sometimes operates to criticize episcopal actions or halt episcopal predation in its tracks.<sup>17</sup> This would perhaps not seem especially challenging were we only talking about Farne, but in fact ascetic space can also be figuratively transferred elsewhere: to other hermitages, to the shrine at Durham Cathedral and to parish churches and cemeteries, when they begin to mimic the regimes of the Edenic sanctuary. Cuthbertine asceticism thus works to offset and question many of his other spatial associations.

The ascetic space of Farne is also constituted very differently from the other types of jurisdiction Cuthbert is called upon to embody. While those others take his enshrined body as their starting point, Farne is notable for its failure to retain a saintly corpse.<sup>18</sup> In the place of such a corpse, we are provided with a singular genealogy of hermits who re-enact Cuthbert's ascetic lifestyle in its originary location from the early eighth century until the Reformation (there is a sizeable break in this eremitic genealogy between the ninth and late eleventh centuries), replicating his cheerfulness, psalmody and close contact with spirits, and developing his Edenic relations with the natural order. An ongoing *modus vivendi* replaces the incorrupt body as the primary determinant of this alternative spatial jurisdiction. This wholly distinct way of identifying saintly space gives the dimension of time and change far greater prominence, meaning that, while the enactment of Cuthbertine ascetic behaviour is intended as an ongoing constant, it can also be given different emphases at different points. In the early eighth century, Bede uses the natural arena of Farne to inscribe Cuthbert's asceticism as lordly and individualistic, while, in the twelfth century, it is activated to promote a community oriented definition



of Benedictine eremitism. By the fourteenth century, its conceptual parameters have shifted back towards individualism, this time of a contemplative and erudite brand, compensating for the island's emptiness by repopulating it with a cast of passionately invoked biblical figures.

The prioritization of the island as the place in which asceticism is performed from one century to the next gives it a heightened value. At times, indeed, it seems as though it is the island that exudes power and works miracles rather than the individual hermits who inhabit it: hence, one miracle collection is titled *De mirabilibus Dei . . . in Farne insula declaratis*.<sup>19</sup> The cumulative energy of all these men renewing the same ascetic lifestyle over several hundred years is perceived to have a transformative effect upon place. This transformative power, giving the island a thaumaturgical potential in its own right, creates a very different sense of its situation. Located within the North Sea, from where Cuthbert and his successors minister to mariners from several nations, Farne Island occupies a liminal space beyond the peripheries of other kinds of jurisdiction. This liminality is captured even more evocatively in the late twelfth-century 'Irish' *Vita* in which Cuthbert's anchorhold is transposed imaginatively on to the bed of the Irish Sea. It is not only a space *between* national boundaries (England and Scandinavia, England and Ireland), countering Cuthbert's obsession elsewhere with maintaining the integrity of territorial boundaries; it is also a *submerged* space. We remain relatively unacquainted with the trope of submersion in hagiographical discourse. Here, drawing together the various texts that treat eremitism, it seems to connote psychic states of dream, otherworldliness and vision: at times, a space of prophecy and futurity, at others, a space where biblical stories can come to life. Perhaps, of all the places embodied by Cuthbert throughout his 800-year textual history, we can claim that it is ascetic place that provokes the most *literary* forms of textuality.

The chapters in this book foreground questions of place and asceticism, together with additional topics of concern, in accordance with the preoccupations of the texts they analyse. Chapter 1, designed as an introductory sketch of the seventh-century history of Northumbria and the earliest texts of the cult, examines the Anonymous *Vita Cuthberti* and Bede's initial constructions of Cuthbert in relation to Roman and Irish traditions of sanctity, placing particular emphasis upon his eremitic representations. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the reconstruction of the saint within the histories generated by the 'community of St Cuthbert' during the tenth and eleventh centuries, a prolonged period of transition. During this period, the cult centre shifted from Lindisfarne to Chester-le-Street to Durham, interspersed



with peripatetic interludes, while the cult was forced to confront successive threats from Danes, Scots and Normans, culminating in the Norman imposition of Benedictine monks to control the shrine. In these histories, Cuthbert's zealous protection of landholdings and aggression towards ethnic 'outsiders' is brought to the fore, and his asceticism disappears from view.

Chapters 4 and 5 study some of the major texts generated by the cult during its heyday in the long twelfth century. Chapter 4 examines two sets of contemporary miracle collections, noting the expanded reach of the cult into southern Scotland and the North Sea, Cuthbert's amended relations with women (he was noted for his misogyny), his ministry to the natural order and the reinvigoration of his hermitage as a secondary cult centre on Farne Island. Chapter 5 expands on the re-emergence of Cuthbert's ascetic sanctity by exploring his foundational influence on the *vitae* of Durham's two twelfth-century hermit saints, Godric of Finchale and Bartholomew of Farne. In addition, it examines a new 'Irish' *Vita* of St Cuthbert composed in the late twelfth century, possibly in southern Scotland, which again emphasizes Cuthbert's ascetic life and invents a birthplace for the saint in Ireland.

Chapter 6 turns to two important but almost wholly neglected texts composed in Cuthbert's restored hermitage on Farne Island by anonymous Benedictine monks reliving his eremitic vocation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The more major of these: the *Meditaciones* of the Monk of Farne, is subjected to a close reading, noting how Cuthbert is constructed in the seventh, unfinished meditation; how Cuthbertine spirituality is given a biblical and affective turn, and how sanctity itself is significantly redefined as a martyrdom of love.

Chapter 7 turns finally to vernacularizations of Cuthbert's life, returning us to a series of more institutional readings of the saint. It examines the epitomization of Cuthbert in legendaries from the midlands and south, and his construction there as a nominal representative of northern sanctity. Conversely, it studies the encyclopedic approach taken towards his life by the Durham Benedictines in the fifteenth century, paying particular attention to their interest in compiling and assimilating the pre-existing textual tradition, and their resort to Cuthbert to defend both the principles of their order and specific monastic possessions. An epilogue explores Cuthbert's vernacular representation in new media by Augustinian canons at Carlisle at the end of the fifteenth century.

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Probably the most famous medieval literary reference to St Cuthbert occurs in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, in which the student John, who comes from 'fer in the north; I kan nat telle where', cheerfully swears by St Cuthbert as he accepts the miller's invitation to spend the night at his home after his horses have run away: "Now, Symond," seyde John, "by Seint Cutberd, / Ay is thou myrie, and this is faire answerd."<sup>20</sup> As we all know, John and his fellow student Alan, also from the north, dissipate their scholarly intelligence attempting to outwit the miller and then take revenge on him through his women. Cuthbert is invoked as spiritual patron for the two Cambridge students in a context in which northernness is perceived to lack identifying characteristics ('fer in the north; I kan nat telle where'). The Reeve (or perhaps Chaucer) has little interest in, or knowledge about, the north and its saints. Worse still, Cuthbert is called into action by a pair of young ne'er-do-wells bent on shenanigans entirely at odds with his moral and ecclesiastical authority back home.

Is Cuthbert a fish out of water in a Cambridgeshire town and the unruly world of fabliaux, invoked nominally and incongruously by morally bankrupt northerners as they exact retribution for their stolen corn by raping the miller's women? Conceivably, the Reeve's throwaway reference tells us something about the disdain in which northern saints were held by Londoners, and the poor knowledge that they had of them, at the end of the fourteenth century. However, it is also possible to suggest that Chaucer may have been on to something here. At various points in his afterlife, Cuthbert exacted devastating vengeance on anyone who appropriated crops, goods or land from his community. He was equally uncompromising towards women, killing or driving mad unfortunates who strayed on to the forbidden soil surrounding his shrine and churches. And yet, in his Bedan construction, he was also known for his cheerfulness and hospitality to visitors, just like Simkin the miller, in John's somewhat sarcastic rejoinder here. In invoking Cuthbert to oversee a scene of small-scale hospitality degenerating into retribution, violence and female oppression, within a story-telling context in which the pilgrims are off to venerate Thomas of Canterbury, Cuthbert's southern nemesis, Chaucer cleverly assembles and distorts a number of elements from Cuthbert's thaumaturgical tradition, showing both a competent knowledge of the saint's reputation despite claims to the contrary ('I kan nat telle where'), and almost no respect for his spiritual power. It looks as though we may need to add Cuthbert's 'quiting' of Thomas to the many other social 'quittings' of the First Fragment of *The Canterbury Tales*. Perhaps we ought also to add the *Reeve's Tale* to our inventory of Cuthbertine representations from the late