

Rowan Williams  
**Why Study the Past?**  
***The Quest for the Historical Church***  
ISBN 0 2325 2549 8 or 978 0 2325 2549 6  
*D.L.T., 2005, £8.95*

Though fairly short (114 pp), this book is rich fare, demanding slow, attentive reading, but the effort demanded of the reader certainly proves worthwhile. Early on, Archbishop Rowan suggests two reasons why people might not bother sufficiently with church history, ways in which they can 'miss the point'; either that they don't expect to be surprised by the past (a traditionalist viewpoint), or that they don't expect to be interested in or questioned by it (a progressive one, common in our contemporary culture). Throughout the book he challenges these expectations and enlarges our perspective.

The book is expanded from the series of Sarum Theological Lectures given by the author in May 2003. Focussing in particular on the early Church and the Reformation period, Williams helps us to experience the tension between difference and continuity - the sense in which we are part of the same coherent story as our forebears, grounded in the self-consistency of the God to whom we relate, contrasted with the important recognition that the past is not just 'the present in fancy dress'. Good history is about a real engagement with the strangeness of the past which nevertheless helps us to understand more subtly who and where we are now, and how we have been formed.

I was stimulated by the explosion of one or two myths along the way - the myth of the "Undivided Church" of the first five centuries; various misunderstandings of Luther's thought - but above all in this book we are urged to discover church history as a spiritual discipline rather than just a scientific one, which means it will be a way of decentring the arrogant assumptions of the ego. We learn that humility is the key to bringing the insights of a historical perspective to bear on the complex issues that concern us in the Church today. 'Whether we use the past as an inflexible standard of correctness or neglect it as a record of premodern error, we isolate ourselves from the real life of the past. And when the past in question is that of the Church, that real life is in its ultimate depth the life of Christ.'

***Desmond Alban SSF***