

# ‘A Cornucopia of Delight’

MARLENE CHAN reports on a digitization project that will preserve and share the incomparable collection of the Durham Priory Library.

“A CORNUCOPIA of delight”—this is how Giles Gasper of the Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies at Durham University, England, describes the unique collection of the Priory Library of Durham Cathedral.

The description is justifiable, too, for the library traces its origins to the monastery that St. Aidan founded on Lindisfarne, now known as Holy Island, in AD 635. Viking raids recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and certain letters from Alcuin—from which this society takes its name—are believed to have forced the community to flee Lindisfarne in 875, taking with them the relics of St. Cuthbert and an unknown quantity of books, likely including the now famous Lindisfarne Gospels.

The community continued to acquire books and moved to Durham in 995. The monastic community built the White Church that was the precursor of Durham Cathedral in 1017. In 1093, the prince-bishop of Durham, William of Calais, established a Benedictine priory to replace the community that served the White Church and the shrine of St. Cuthbert. Construction of the priory in the dramatic setting above Woodlands and Riverbanks on the Durham peninsula took about 40 years to complete.

The priory was part of the cathedral, which in turn served as a palace for the prince-bishop, both a religious and secular ruler in this rugged frontier wilderness. Almost nine centuries later, in 1986, the cathedral, and the castle enclosing it, were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The priory had gradually amassed a substantial library, but at the dissolution of the monastery in 1540, some of its contents were dispersed and some materials were lost. Today, however, plans are afoot to digitize the library’s internationally renowned collection of approximately 480 manuscript volumes dating from the sixth century and 110 printed books dating from before 1540 and unite them with digital copies

of the lost volumes. Durham Priory Library Recreated, a joint project of the University of Durham and the Durham Cathedral, is an initiative to make these works of art available globally for research, learning and teaching using 21st-century technology. Equally important, the digital presentation will allow researchers to access the library of the priory as a unified whole, restoring what existed prior to the Reformation.

The Durham Cathedral Priory Library state-of-the-art online resource aims to:

- re-unite the whole collection online, providing scholars with a unique opportunity to explore the concept of the medieval library and the life of a Benedictine priory, and enabling them to unlock significant research potential that could lead to notable publications, conferences and exhibitions;
- benefit the manuscripts and books themselves through expert conservation and reduced handling, so preserving them for future generations;
- provide digital material to support education and outreach work at partner institutions;
- contribute to the cultural heritage and economy of the North East, and raise the profile of Durham’s UNESCO World Heritage Site.<sup>1</sup>

Remarkably, the medieval collection of the ancient priory is largely intact, despite its tumultuous history. According to Faith Wallis, a history professor at McGill University specializing in medieval Europe who was awarded a Slater Fellowship at Durham University in spring 2015, few libraries such as this remained after Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries between 1536 and 1541.

Durham’s library cannot be compared to any other collection in the world. The broad chronology and geographical spread of the items is outstanding: many of the manuscript books

dating from the sixth to the 16th century were written in France, Germany and Italy, as well as England, and have been well catalogued. The digitization project will encourage researchers to examine in new and creative ways a collection that includes masterpieces of calligraphy and illumination spanning a millennium of European culture.

By reuniting the entire collection for the first time since its dispersal, Durham University and Durham Cathedral hope the project will encourage a surge of related academic research and activity, leading both to a better understanding of the life of Durham's priory and to fresh insights into the evolution of intellectual, religious and artistic trends through the centuries.

1. Durham Cathedral, "Durham Priory Library Recreated: Recreating a Medieval Monastic Library for the 21st Century" (2016), <http://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/heritage/collections/digitisation>.

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~ Marlene Chan is an ex officio board member of the Alcuin Society.

#### LETTERS OF THE LINDISFARNE GOSPELS

In celebration of the legacy of the Lindisfarne Gospels and its 40th anniversary in 2016, the Fairbank Calligraphy Society in Victoria, B.C., hosted a workshop by the gifted contemporary calligrapher Ewan Clayton on April 7–11, 2016, entitled *The Letters of the Lindisfarne Gospels*. Clayton was awarded the prestigious Prince of Wales Craft Guild Award in 2013 for his lifetime achievement in the field of calligraphy.

The Lindisfarne Gospels original is now housed in the British Library and a facsimile is on display in the Durham Cathedral Treasury. The two most important books on the Lindisfarne Gospels were published by the distinguished medieval scholar Michelle P. Brown, Professor Emerita, University of London, London Rare Books School: *The Lindisfarne Gospels and the Early Medieval World* and *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality, and the Scribe*.

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#### BOOK REVIEW

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### *The Greek Classics*

BY ALDUS MANUTIUS. EDITED &  
TRANSLATED BY N.G. WILSON  
(HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016,  
US\$29.95)

FIVE HUNDRED AND one years after the death of the great Venetian publisher and printer Aldus Manutius, Harvard University Press has made available, for the very first time, the 47 prefaces Aldus wrote for his editions of the Greek classics. Previously, these texts were available only to readers of Italian, in the two-volume work *Aldo Manuzio editore: dediche, prefazioni, note ai testi* (Milan: Il polifilo, [1975]), long out of print.

This book, the 70th volume in the I Tatti Renaissance Library, presents on one page the prefaces as Aldus prepared them for the press in their original Latin, with frequent interjections in Greek; the facing page offers an English translation by editor N.G. Wilson. Aldus opens each preface with a greeting. These dedications address a variety of notable figures: patricians of Venice, princes and dukes, fellow scholars, authors and learned friends as far away as Germany and Hungary. But above all, the prefaces address students and readers. These brief notes in themselves tell us a lot about Aldus's network of supporters.

The prefaces range from single paragraphs to short essays and are clearly intended to provide context for students of Greek literature and to ease their way into the classical texts. Aldus's frequent comments refer to the difficulties of printing and publishing in the context of early-16th-century Venice. Also included are 10 appendices that the editor rightly thought added to the context of the prefaces. This book is mainly of interest to the specialist and will be wanted by every university library. A nice-looking octavo of 395 pages, the book is good value at US\$29.95.

~ REVIEWED BY RALPH STANTON