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THE  
APOSTLE  
FROM  
AFRICA

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The Life and Thought of Augustine of Hippo

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David Bentley-Taylor

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Christian Focus



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ISBN 1 85792 471 1



Published in 2002 by  
Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House,  
Fearn, Ross-shire, IV20 ITW, Scotland



[www.christianfocus.com](http://www.christianfocus.com)

Cover design by Alister MacInnes

Printed and bound by  
Cox & Wyman, Reading, Berkshire

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## Preface

Born 700 years after Plato in Athens, and dying 400 years after Jesus' crucifixion in Jerusalem, Augustine belonged to Africa. Just as Plato was outstanding among pre-Christian philosophers, so was Augustine among Christian thinkers, his mind rich as a tropical forest. All round the Mediterranean leading men hung upon his words. Yet at times his errors were deplorable, even horrifying, so that his enemies often had right on their side. Though he strongly promoted the Catholic Church, his evangelical exposition of the faith was so gripping that it inspired Luther, Calvin, and other reformers a thousand years later. So the dramatic story of his life embraces triumph along with tragedy. His insights, predominantly biblical and timeless, are badly needed in our bewildered age, in its turn disposed to neglect truth, despise virtue, and grant impunity to vice.

Around 1980 I completed two manuscripts after many years of research. The first was a biography, *Augustine Wayward Genius*, published by Hodder and Stoughton in England, by Baker Book House in the USA, and by the Word of Life Press in Korea. The second, published only in Korean translation, investigated his basic beliefs. In this new book, I have revised them, shortened them, and fused them into a concise study of both his biography and his convictions.



## The Teenager


The town of Souk Ahras in eastern Algeria, sixty miles inland from the Mediterranean, marks the site of the ancient city of Tagaste where Augustine was born. From its position, facing south on a steep hillside 2,000 feet above sea level, it commanded a panorama of wooded hills crowned by jagged pinnacles of rock. Below the city the land fell steeply to the gorge of the Medjerda River, rearing up dramatically beyond it till higher ridges closed the view. Within this wide amphitheatre, bisected by the river, were many minor hills cut by ravines, clothed with forests, beautified with cornfields. In winter a cowl of snow rested briefly on the mountains.

Nowadays the North African coast is divided between Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, but in Augustine's time the entire region lay within the Roman Empire. Eastern Algeria and western Tunisia formed the province of Numidia. The rest of Tunisia was united with Libya in the original Roman province of Africa with its capital at Carthage, now a suburb of Tunis. The annexation of these regions by the European power had taken place step by step after the destruction of Carthage at the conclusion of the Punic Wars in 146 B.C. Thousands of Romans settled in the conquered lands, augmented by colonies established by Julius Caesar and the Emperor Augustus shortly before the time of Christ. War continued with the Berber tribes of the rugged interior until the frontier of the Empire had been pushed south to the edge of the desert. Settlers intermarried




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with the original inhabitants and a large population of Romanised Berbers came into existence. Roman financiers bought up extensive tracts of country and the Emperors themselves became the greatest landowners of all. Impressive public buildings were erected, for the Romans held North Africa much longer than they held Britain and to this day it is littered with the remains of their cities, theatres, temples, churches, baths, hippodromes, amphitheatres and aqueducts. Innumerable Roman pillars still reach for the sky.



When North Africa had been part of the Roman Empire for half a millennium, a Tagaste girl named Monica married Patricius, an undistinguished youth, generous at times but hot-tempered and not faithful to his wife. Her family were Catholic Christians, but Patricius was a pagan. Yet she got on well with him and the couple were considered remarkable because they did not quarrel. Monica's friends were often so badly bullied by their husbands that their faces were scarred and bruised. They could not understand how she avoided being battered in the same way. She explained that from the time of her marriage she had regarded Patricius as her master, so she never got angry or resisted him in any way; if his behaviour had been particularly unreasonable, she would wait till he was in a calm mood and then explain herself.



Tagaste lay in the beautiful province of Numidia, mountainous and primitive, dividing the Mediterranean from the Sahara. It was no great advantage to have been born in such a remote place. As one of the settler population, a wide gulf separated Augustine from the indigenous people, apart from those whose families had long absorbed Roman language and culture. The majority of the inhabitants spoke some Berber dialect of the hinterland or else Punic, which had for centuries prevailed in coastal regions ever since the Phoenicians founded



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Carthage.

When Augustine started at the local school he had to be forced to work, for he much preferred ball games and for this the masters beat him. His first prayers were that he might not be beaten at school but he so revelled in play that he could not escape the cane. His mother tongue was Latin and gradually he began to enjoy Latin literature, but he loathed the drudgery of learning Greek and never became proficient in it. These studies, however, opened his eyes to evils which soon affected his character and by the time he emerged from childhood he had learned sexual indulgence. Excited by what he saw in the theatre and tempted by the immoralities of the deities he read about at school, his deterioration was rapid. Yet Monica's influence was not altogether eclipsed. 'In my small thoughts upon small matters I had come to delight in the truth, I hated to be wrong, had a vigorous memory, was well trained in speech, delighted in friendship, shunned pain, meanness and ignorance.' Before he reached adolescence the tug-of-war between vice and discipline had started in his heart.

When his primary education had been completed, his parents sensed his intellectual ability and decided to give him the chance of studying in Carthage. The old Phoenician city had experienced a remarkable resurrection to become one of the largest in the Empire. To send their son to study in the capital of Roman Africa was an expense his family could ill afford and their friends much admired them for pursuing the idea. Monica was keen on it because she was anxious about his moral welfare and felt sure that study would help him to become a true Christian.

In order to get together sufficient money they were compelled to take him out of the local school when he was sixteen, so for a year he lived idly at home. This proved a disaster; intellectually he stood still, morally he ran wild. Always a sociable creature,



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his strong personality tended to make him the central figure in a group of close friends, but he was not yet able to choose friends wisely. With time on his hands and no clear convictions to restrain him, he plunged into rudderless self-indulgence. 'Love and lust boiled within me and swept my youthful immaturity over the precipice of evil desire, to leave me half-drowned in a whirlpool of abominable sins.' Patricius, influenced at last by his wife, was under instruction in the Christian Church but still only superficially moved by its message. One day he saw Augustine stripped at the public baths and went home in delighted excitement to tell Monica he thought they would soon be grandparents. But she did not want him to marry so young in case it interfered with his studies. Too late she urged him not to sin with women, for it was precisely what he had every intention of doing. Unable to distinguish 'the white light of love from the fog of lust', he let himself go. 'I burned for all the satisfactions of hell and sank to the animal in a succession of dark lusts.' Promiscuity left him wretched and restless, arrogant and depressed. His friends were no help. Ashamed to hear others boasting of exploits viler than his own, he set out to imitate them. In such company as he kept, chastity was contemptible, innocence cowardly, evil was pursued just because it was evil, and Monica was powerless to do anything about it. 'The madness of lust took complete control of me.'

When the money was ready, Augustine left Numidia for Carthage. Patricius died shortly afterwards, but he recorded the fact without emotion. However, the loss of his father posed a serious financial threat to his plans, but this was averted by the intervention of Romanianus, a wealthy citizen of Tagaste who had known him from childhood. Long afterwards Augustine revealed the full extent of his help. 'When I was a poor boy, pursuing studies that were not available in our town, you





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provided me with a home, with funds, and with something better – courage. When I was bereaved of a father, you consoled me with your friendship, roused me with your encouragement, and aided me with your resources. By your favour and friendship you made me almost as renowned and prominent a personage as yourself in our town.'

But once out of Monica's sight he was totally free to continue the vicious way of life on which he had embarked. 'A cauldron of illicit loves leaped and boiled about me.' He deliberately offered his vile deeds to devils and once committed an undefined act of sacrilege in a church. 'What wonder that I became infected with a foul disease?' His passion for the stage only added fuel to his flame. He preferred plays which radically stirred his emotions, 'yet, as if they had been fingernails, their scratching was followed by swelling and inflammation and sores with pus flowing'. In spite of this, his innate ability soon made him a leader in the school of rhetoric. And he became deeply attached to Carthage, its crowded streets, its huge public baths, its wealthy homes with their beautiful mosaic floors, its colossal amphitheatre where helpless men were pitted against professional gladiators and wild beasts, and its theatre seating twenty thousand people.

The curriculum required him to study a book on philosophy by Cicero. 'The one thing that delighted me in Cicero's exhortation was that I should love, seek and embrace not this or that philosophical school but Wisdom itself, whatever it might be. The book excited and inflamed me. In my ardour the only thing I found lacking was that the name of Christ was not there. For with my mother's milk my infant heart had drunk in, and still held deep down in it, that name – and whatever lacked that name, no matter how learned and excellently written and true, could not win me wholly.' This experience drove him to study



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the Bible for the first time. He had no idea what books it contained but when he began to read them he was repelled by their simplicity. 'They seemed to me unworthy to be compared with the majesty of Cicero.' So he soon gave up.

As a result he had no anchorage for his mind when at the age of eighteen he came across the Manichees, a religious group originating in the previous century in Persia, which combined philosophical speculation and primitive superstition with ideas derived from Judaism and Christianity. 'They declared they would lay aside all authority and by pure and simple reason would bring to God those who were willing to listen to them. What else compelled me to spurn the religion implanted in me as a boy by my parents and to follow these men but that they said we were overawed by superstition and were told to believe rather than to reason, whereas they pressed no one to believe until the truth had been discussed and elucidated? Who would not be enticed by these promises, especially if he were an adolescent with a mind eager for truth but made proud and garrulous by the disputes of learned men at school? Such they found me then, scorning what I took to be old wives' fables and desirous of holding the open and sincere truth which they promised.'

Since Manicheism taught that from the beginning there had been two eternal Principles opposed to one another, God and Satan, it had a ready answer to the problem of evil, feeling no necessity to reconcile its existence with the character of God. Upon this fundamental dualism was grafted a fantastic mythology in which the sun and the moon played their part in the liberation of elements of the kingdom of light imprisoned in the kingdom of darkness. Manicheism was implacably opposed to the Old Testament's representation of God and equally convinced that the text of the New Testament had been corrupted on every page, so it saw no need to defend the Bible against its critics.



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From its more devoted adherents it demanded an ascetic way of life, including celibacy, but all its disciplines were inextricably entangled in a jungle of myths. Before long Augustine came to believe in a weird assortment of fantasies: in the Five Elements striving with the Five Dens of Darkness; in God as a kind of material resplendence; and in the ability of Manichean saints to digest figs and then, with groaning and prayer, breathe them out as particles of the Godhead. In later life his verdict was 'I let myself be taken in by fools' and he bitterly regretted that for the next nine years 'I lay tossing in the mud of that deep pit'.

At this point Monica moved back into his life. Now a widow without younger children to care for, she came to Carthage, so dismayed at his adoption of Manichean beliefs that at first she refused to eat with him. She was no match for him in argument but that did not stop her praying, dreaming dreams and enlisting the aid of better-educated people. As she prayed she wept, pressing her face right down on to the ground. In one of her dreams a radiant youth assured her that one day her son would join her, but Augustine was not impressed when she told him about it. He interpreted the dream to mean that she would join him, but she would have none of it. 'No, for it was not said to me "Where he is, you are", but "Where you are, he is"', and he never quite forgot that. Fortunately, this dream encouraged her to have meals with him again. Then she asked a bishop she knew to talk with the boy and set him on the right path. To her regret he refused, feeling it was useless while Augustine was so enamoured with his new ideas. 'Let him alone', he said, 'only pray to the Lord for him. He will himself discover by reading what his error is.' Then the bishop revealed that he had been brought up as a Manichee but eventually found his own way out of the sect. This only made Monica more sure he was the man to help her. To his dismay she burst into tears and he rather



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lost patience. 'It is impossible that the son of these tears should perish', he said. She could not persuade him, but she took his words as God's answer to her.

For the moment the outlook was unpromising. Proud of his attainments, already a teacher of rhetoric applauded for his poetry, obsessed with the theatre, eager to make money, carrying food to the Manichean elect so that 'in the factory of their stomachs they should turn it into angels and deities', and given over to untempered lusts, he was a constant distress to her. Then all of a sudden his sexual promiscuity ceased. 'In those years I took one woman, not joined to me in lawful marriage, but one whom wandering lust and no particular judgment brought my way. Yet I had but that one woman and I was faithful to her. And with her I learnt by my own experience what a gulf there is between the restraint of the marriage covenant entered into for the sake of children and the mere bargain of a lustful love, where if children come they come unwanted – though when they are born they compel our love.' For a child did come, a boy, whom they called Adeodatus. Augustine never even mentioned the woman's name. She was his sin, not his wife. But he no longer ran wild.

