

Brendan Whiting *The Shroud Story*, Harbour Publishing, Strathfield, New South Wales, Australia, 2006. 55 AUS dollars

Review by Ian Wilson

Author/self-publisher Brendan Whiting claims of his book, that it presents 'all the facts impartially', as 'a much-needed update of the whole Shroud story, its history and all the latest scientific discoveries.' However welcome all this may sound, very sadly the subject of the Shroud needs this particular book like a hole in the head...

Let one authoritative-sounding sentence, from p.194, set Whiting's general tone:

'On the night of 30 July [AD 30], Joseph, Nicodemus and Lazarus visited the mother Mary for a very particular purpose – to present her with the Holy Shroud.' So has Whiting come across some riveting new historical information on the Shroud's whereabouts shortly after being left behind in the empty tomb? Could he be onto some unknown gospel fragment discovery? No. His authority here, as in many similar passages throughout the book, is what he calls 'the inspired writings of Maria Valtorta'.

Maria Valtorta, who died in 1961, was a sickly Italian woman who in 1943 began to receive 'dictations' of episodes in the lives of Jesus and his mother Mary. From her dictations a Frenchman, Jean Aulagnier, put together a detailed 'Diary of Jesus' which Whiting solemnly cites on several pages as if it carries virtual canonical authority. Whiting and his fellow Valtorta devotees quote Pope Pius XII as having said of Valtorta's writings: 'Publish this work as it is. There is no need to give an opinion on its origin ... whoever reads it will understand.' Not only is there no official Vatican support for this papal statement, they omit to point out that in 1959 Pope John XXIII ordered Valtorta's book to be listed on the Vatican's then Index of Forbidden Books. Simultaneously an article in *Osservatore Romano* condemned it as 'A Badly Fictionalized Life of Jesus.' The present Pope, Benedict XVI, when he was Cardinal Ratzinger, went on record supporting this 'bad novel' condemnation in his capacity as head of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

It is such utterly flaky data on the lives of Jesus and his mother which Brendan Whiting has mixed with what purports to be a serious presentation of the latest scientific and historical facts concerning the Shroud. I will leave it mostly to others to assess the quality of Whiting's science (and he is certainly no scientist), but history-wise, by his uncritical lumping-in of the deservedly legendary and the palpably absurd, he sets the subject back well over four decades – and frequently into utter fantasy-land.

For instance, like a rolling stone, the multi-documented Abgar legend gathered much crudely anachronistic 'moss' as one century succeeded another. One such late accumulation, long recognised as such, is the story of Protonice, purportedly wife of the Roman emperor Claudius, who travelled to Jerusalem where she discovered Jesus' tomb with three crosses inside. It is palpably the crudest of apocrypha - Claudius had two well-recorded wives, neither of them called Protonice, and the story of the crosses was clearly inspired by the rather more reliably attested story of the 4th century Emperor Constantine's mother Helena's discovery of these objects.

Whiting (pp.209-10) exhibits not the slightest awareness of such issues, blandly retelling the story, just like Valtorta's ramblings, as if it were all a perfectly legitimate element to the

Shroud's history. On p.197 he quotes the 4th century Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea as telling how the Image of Edessa, when being kept at Hierapolis, caused its image to become imprinted on a tile, a historical object subsequently known as the Keramion. Shroud-wise, one of the most salient curiosities of Bishop Eusebius' writings is that nowhere does he mention either the Image of Edessa or the Keramion.

On page 35 Whiting solemnly tells us 'Along the full length of its [the Shroud's] left side is a strip of blue cloth – a selvedge – approximately 8 centimetres wide.' This sort of bald factual statement that might pass almost unquestioned until a second reading of it makes you realise that Whiting has almost unbelievably confused three quite separate items: (1) the Shroud's 8 cm wide length-wise side-strip, which is most certainly not blue; (2) a modern blue fabric surround that the Shroud was given as a kind of frame in 1868, only to be removed during recent conservation work; and (3) the Shroud's true, original selvedge, as incorporated when it was first woven, which has only recently been fully revealed thanks to the latest conservation work. Twenty-two pages later Whiting makes clear that he believes, in all seriousness, that the Shroud was boiled in oil in 1502. He includes this same information in his short end-of-book chronology, and even quotes me as his authority for this!

On some pages basic informational errors of this kind occur at the rate of one or more per sentence. Take the first paragraph of p.231. Sentence 1: 'The discovery of the Image of Edessa caused Emperor Justinian to proclaim its holiness, and he ordered that a beautiful shrine be built to house it in Edessa.' No. Historically, neither any such proclamation, nor any such order, is recorded of Justinian's well-documented reign. Sentence 2: 'From then on the cloth became known as the Mandylion.' No, the first occurrence of the word was four centuries later, and even then this appellation was used infrequently. Sentence 3: 'The word is either derived from the Arabic mandil, meaning 'cloth' or handkerchief', or from the Latin mantlleum, meaning large cloth or 'shroud'. No. The 'either/or' are inapplicable, both words being very likely derived from the same linguistic root. Whiting's 'mantlleum' is a mis-transcription of 'mantellum', one of his innumerable similar mis-transcriptions of Latin, Greek and French words throughout his book. Nor does 'mantellum' mean 'shroud', as he so confidently asserts. In English usage 'shroud' has the specific connotation of a burial wrapping, whereas 'mantellum' was essentially one and the same as our English 'mantle'.

The Shroud is such a complex subject that it would be unfair to expect any author to produce a book on it completely devoid of errors. But for anyone professing to have acquired sufficient knowledge of the subject to write a book as wide-ranging as Whiting's, the first requisite has to be to provide the reader with a base of well-considered, broadly reliable information from which he or she can then begin to think about the subject more deeply. *The Shroud Story* does not even begin to provide any such base. Undeniably it reads with a fast pace, as if telling a good story. But the 'facts' are so flawed, and any accompanying discussion so shallow, that the overall effect is pure blarney. As for the footnotes, these are almost a joke, an embarrassing number of them being so garbled and so badly transcribed from the footnotes of other authors that they reveal all too clearly that Whiting cannot have consulted the original sources. Footnote 7 on p.254 is a classic, in it and in note 5 on p.268, the great French compiler of Greek and Latin patrological texts, J.P.Migne, whose voluminous output takes your breath away when you see it on library shelves, being consistently cited as 'Minge'. On page 222 Bishop Eulogios triply features as 'Eulogois'. Not even the photographs are reliable, a seriously large proportion, as on p.34,

p.234, pictures 1 and 2 on p.304, the three on p.309, colour plate 5, and the full length Shroud image on the bookmark, all being mirror-reversed.

Market-wise the book has had the field to itself providing that 'much-needed update of the whole Shroud story' it promises. If it had succeeded even in that aim it might have something to justify it. But the photographs are all of the Shroud's pre-2002 appearance, and the description of Mechthild Flury-Lemberg and Irene Tomedi's ground-breaking removal of the 1534 triangular patches and the 'Holland' backing cloth (with, yet more important, what that removal revealed), sketchy in the extreme. In Whiting's zeal to espouse the late Dr. Ray Rogers 're-weave' theory, which he used heavily to help publicise his book, it does not seem to have occurred to him to talk in depth to the two restorers, professional textile experts who have spent more hours in the closest contact with the Shroud than any other living person, concerning why they refute the theory. Whiting attended the 2005 Dallas Conference, at which Dr. Flury-Lemberg was one of the guest speakers, so he had every opportunity to question her in depth. So much, therefore, for his claimed 'impartial' presentation of 'all the facts'.

In Whiting's Acknowledgements he writes 'I am grateful to Ian Wilson... for his consent to use parts of his material and for correcting some of the historical inaccuracies that he found in two chapters of my manuscript.' The impression given by this, as certainly gained by reviewers such as Joanna Emery, writing in the BSTS Newsletter (no.64), is that surely I must have seen and checked the whole manuscript, and found mistakes in only two of the 28 chapters. The actuality is that after my agreeing to help him, Whiting only ever sent me two draft chapters, back in early 2006. I found numerous errors in these, corrected whatever I could, and pointed out to him there and then my concerns for the magnitude likely to lurk in the unseen rest. Whiting blithely brushed aside my concerns, and despite a written promise, never ever sent me a copy of the published book.

Then a few weeks ago the Missionaries of the Holy Face, who had hosted Whiting's Melbourne book launch, became alerted by some of the book's purchasers that it seemed to contain some serious errors. When a short list of these was sent to Whiting he sent back crushing but ill-informed rebuttals, causing me to be brought in by the Missionaries as a referee. Only upon my thereupon properly reading through a copy of the book for the first time did I become aware of just what an informational disgrace it represents among Shroud pro-authenticity literature. If this book were the best that the Shroud's supporters can produce, it would fully justify one of the sceptics' favourite taunts – that we are all just a bunch of starry-eyed Flat Earthers who will believe anything.

Such heavy criticisms I would much prefer not to direct to anyone, even less towards a fellow-Christian, a fellow-Australian, a fellow-supporter of the Shroud's authenticity, and conference president of the St. Vincent de Paul Society (an organization which I hold in the highest regard). Specifically to avoid such unpleasantness, in recent weeks I have tried hard to use gentle, private persuasion to deter Whiting from his declared ambitions to promote his book around the world as the new authority on the subject. So far these pleas have repeatedly fallen on deaf ears, so reluctantly, let these criticisms now be available for all to see.