

*Saint Augustine*, by Garry Wills

reviewed by [James Patout Burns](#) in the [February 2, 2000](#) issue

Peter Brown is credited with discovering Augustine the old man. Gary Wills should be recognized for discovering Augustine the young man. Though Wills devotes only 40 percent of his book to the first 45 of Augustine's 76 years, that scale is disproportionately large in terms of the comparatively meager documentation available for the first part of Augustine's life. A contribution to the Penguin Lives series, Wills's book is a departure both from his usual focus on American political figures and from the Penguin series' frequent focus on the modern period. The book does, however, thoroughly address modern concerns.

Wills is most creative in reconstructing Augustine's social and sexual relations from the time he was 15 through his decision to give up his academic career and governmental ambitions. He argues that Augustine must have formed a stable relationship with the mother of his son during the year he spent at home in Tagaste before he went to Carthage to undertake advanced studies. Thus Augustine would have entered Carthage, which he later characterized as a hissing cauldron of illicit loves, not as a young libertine but as a head of household with a domestic partner to whom he was committed and a son with whom he was fascinated. His closest friends were not the street rowdies whom he claims to have cultivated at home but Manicheans who were seriously interested in both religion and literary culture.

Wills shows that modern perceptions that Augustine had homosexual relationships with these and other male friends are without basis in Augustine's texts. In his own move beyond the texts, Wills proposes that, in the *Confessions*, Augustine's silence about the mother of his son after their painful parting in Milan might well have been out of respect for her position as a middle-aged widow at the church at Tagaste, where his friend Alypius was bishop. Finally, he shows that Augustine's fascination with his son's emotions and learning of language shape his criticism of his own education and his analysis of the moral state of infants. In these sections, Wills breaks new and welcome ground by introducing to us an ambitious, serious young man who had established a socially approved domestic life.

Wills helps readers to understand the Manichean, Donatist and Pelagian controversies that Augustine confronted, but he focuses on aspects of the conflicts that are of interest to the modern reader. He draws amply on contemporary scholarship on Augustine, particularly James O'Donnell's commentary on the *Confessions*, and the standard biography and subsequent work by Brown. But his emphasis is different from theirs. Augustine's influence in the shaping of Western Christian and secular culture seems to invite a contemporary reading, particularly of his *Testimonies* (the translation Wills prefers to the transliteration of *Confessiones*), but also of his political theory in *The City of God*.

At the outset, Wills considers Augustine's account of his own father's joy in his son's sexual maturation, which gave him hope of grandchildren. By illustrating the layers of meaning which Augustine achieved through language heavy with scriptural and ritual allusions, Wills demonstrates that popular modern psychological interpretations completely misunderstand both the facts reported and Augustine's intention in recounting the incident. Wills demonstrates that, for all his modern aspects, Augustine's cultural context is far removed from our own.

For example, it was a rejection of lying, particularly in religious contexts, rather than an appreciation of individual self-determination that led Augustine to oppose state coercion to achieve religious uniformity. When he later supported the state's suppression of Donatist intimidation and violence, Augustine argued against the death penalty because it deprived criminals of the opportunity for reconsideration and repentance which other forms of punishment might provide. Wills explains the complexity of Augustine's theory of the state and the factors which led him to reject the opportunity to identify the church with Roman civilization. He illustrates these issues by detailing Augustine's dealings with Marcellinus, the tribune who handled the controversy with the Donatists, and with Boniface, the count responsible for defending the empire against nomadic raiders and Vandal invaders. Augustine's notion of the worldly role of the state is sharply contrasted with the modern secular state, which relies on procedural means to achieve toleration and cooperation among citizens.

Wills gives considerable attention to the latter stages of the Pelagian controversy in which Augustine engaged Julian of Eclanum over sexuality. Julian succeeded in drawing Augustine away from the more balanced understanding of sexuality he had achieved in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* and *The City of God*. The modern portrait of an Augustine obsessed with bodily control and the disorder of sexual

desire is grounded in these late works, whose agenda was controlled by his adversary.

Wills provides a fresh look at Augustine not only by the themes he emphasizes but by his proposal to give names to two otherwise anonymous characters. He chooses Una (One) as a name for the mother of Adeodatus (Godsend), Augustine's son, and Amicus (Friend) for his companion in Tagaste whose death brought him such grief. The translations of Augustine's texts that pepper the book capture many of the resonances and word plays of the original Latin.

So short a volume cannot provide a survey of Augustine's life and work adequate to satisfy the scholarly researcher, but even the specialist will profit from the sections on Augustine's early life. Wills, who has written on a wide range of topics in American political culture, has once again shown himself to be one of the nation's best public intellectuals.