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Britain in the First Millennium

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John Hines

A new series under the general editorship of Keith Robbins, with the laudable aim of locating British history firmly within its European context, has been launched at what it regards as the beginning - not with Britain moving out of primitive isolation to become part of Europe, but rather with Britain emerging gradually from prehistory. One starts to read a book that attempts to discuss Britain in the whole first millennium AD with something of a sense of wonder that such a thing should be done at all, for the skills demanded by starting in the late Iron Age, crossing the entire Roman Period, and then covering most of the Anglo-Saxon Period, are many and diverse. In fact, as one might surmise from looking at the other titles in preparation for this series, which suggest that neither the 11th century nor, bizarrely, the 1780's are going to get a look in, there is an underlying assumption that the date-ranges are to be treated as approximations - not a difficult exercise for the archaeologist, but hardly a familiar attitude amongst historians. Edward James's book is actually about the Roman and Anglo-Saxon Periods, AD 43-1066, not the period from AD 1-1000. The reign of Edward the Confessor is treated very briefly at the end of the book, although James does not seem consciously to be hinting that we could date the Norman Period in England from 1042.

This is a history book with many good things in it and about it. It was a pleasure to read, and is a book one can recommend without hesitation to anyone looking for a serious but readily comprehensible account and discussion of early-medieval Britain and its Roman-period/late Iron-age background. It is written clearly, built upon an interest in and wide-ranging knowledge of the subject that are conveyed with a careful lightness of touch, which in turn implies a deep-seated enthusiasm for communicating an appreciation of this

history to a wide audience. The contents of the book are well balanced, not only across its wide chronological range but also in respect of the many different facets of the past, which are generally treated with sensitivity and with a concern to remember those who are often squeezed into or even beyond the margins of standard history - happily without exaggeratedly trying to even the score on their behalf and writing from silence. True to the series' aim, and true indeed to the author's own research history, the study sets the history of Britain in this period squarely and substantially in its Continental context, showing the persistent significance of extensive political ambitions and alliances, trade, and trans-regional ideological developments.

While it has been written as a critical summary, not as the mouthpiece for some radically new perspective, I found many points in this book where facts or ideas came across with some detail or emphasis that was new to me, and which thus cast fresh light on what might otherwise have been all too familiar ground. A selection of examples that I noted includes the contextualization of Thomas Charles-Edwards's wide-ranging surveys of the system of hidation within a view of the basic principles of Anglo-Saxon landholding (v. p 125), and the similarly compact but comprehensive overview of coinage and commerce (pp 194-6). A discussion of the anglicization of sub-Roman kingdoms with particular reference to the British Church and Anglo-Saxon episcopal organisation came across as a striking revelation (v. pp 134-5), as did James's explanation of the importance of education in the early Irish Church (pp 169-70). Different readers will of course learn different things from this book, but altogether points such as these testify to the subtle integration of specific detail into a broad comparative picture that is a distinct strength that it has.

If the study has any particular interpretative line to promote, it is precisely the virtue of inclusivity - of not taking too selective a view of the past either by neglecting detail or by excluding certain themes or areas from consideration. Not (thankfully) that the author has thus composed himself as some monstrous paragon of reason and impeccable objectivity. Most idiosyncratic, although hardly unconventional in British Academia, are the Guardianesque comments that intermittently add top notes of earnest pink to the brew of facts and interpretation. It is thus difficult, James writes, after coolly quoting Terry Pratchett, "in a post-colonial world with a post-fascist consciousness" to admire the Roman army rather than the Celtic warriors (p 19); and the political division between Northumbria and the rest of England shades over into a reference to William the Conqueror's brutal harrying of the North in 1069 (so unlike his behaviour anywhere else?) and then seamlessly on to "northern resentment at a southern-based government" that has remained in England to the present day.

If there is a topic on which James's attitude lies open to criticism for being more significantly inappropriate, it is that of Christianity and the Church, which he regards with an antipathy reminiscent of Edward Gibbon. Although Christianity is identified as the "most insidious ... aspect of Romanisation" while Roman imperialism is also generally regarded with distaste (pp 38-41), James nonetheless slips into the same inconsistency as Gibbon was guilty of, in then unfavourably contrasting Christian intolerance and mysticism (superstition) with Roman eclecticism and reason (p 66ff). The general lack of authorial sympathy in this area leads to some real misunderstandings, such as quite unnecessary vagueness about the origins and early history of Christianity, a failure to include any recognition of the rise of Islam on Judaeo-Christian roots as a related phenomenon, and a final, dismissive assumption that "for most people religion is about crisis management" (pp 71-5). It is not going to help any thoughtful reader to analyse and evaluate the cultural and political strategies, disguises and consequences of the history of Christianity - or of any other very successful religion, for that matter - by putting a case that is both partial and inaccurate.

A different problem is the difficulty of dealing with technical data across the full range of cultural evidence, as illustrated particularly by the inclusion of language history, where unfortunate errors are rather too frequent. Irish *Cruithin/Cruithne* [sic] is not derived from P-Celtic **Pritani*; indeed it is the *p*- in the root that is the innovation from Indo-European **k*w- (p 7). In terms of the origins of Welsh and Cornish place names, it is pushing it to say that *llan* means 'enclosure'; and it should have been noted that Greek *kyriakon* was borrowed as the word for 'church' into West and later North Germanic generally, not just in Old English (p 83). We are not in a position to quantify the differences between or mutual intelligibility of various branches of Germanic in the Roman Period (p 88), while Old English in the Migration Period was the most

dynamically innovative of the Germanic languages, not, with Frisian, a conservative relict insulated from changes elsewhere in "Continental Germanic" (p 109). Forms are cited incorrectly, e.g. Old English *Cantwara* for *Cantware* (p 111), *-sæten* for *-sæte* or *-sætan* (p 143), or the Old Norse which is extensively garbled on page 237. On page 127 *sum geong cyninges þegn* is at best ambiguously translated as 'a young king's thegn' rather than 'a young thegn of the king', while on page 234 it does seem important that the quoted entry from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 877, *hit gedeldon sum*, clearly means that the Viking army divided *some* of the territory of Mercia up amongst themselves. On literary sources, it is not "generally agreed" that the reference to Arthur in the B-text of Y *Gododdin* post-dates the *Historia Brittonum* (p 101), nor is it correct that the heroic ideal of the warrior choosing death with his lord is not expressed "one single time" during the nine centuries between Tacitus' *Germania* and *The Battle of Maldon*. James has evidently forgotten the familiar Cynewulf and Cyneheard story in the Chronicle.

Lapses of this kind in respect of basic material are worryingly familiar in studies that attempt to bring together a diversity of evidence to write a truly cultural history of the past. We cannot say it doesn't matter to make mistakes, even if, as here, there may be no major consequences in any specific case. "Facts are chiels that winna ding, an' downa be disput," as Burns would have told you. Despite his potentially subversive reference to the idea that "what the historian must do is to establish what happened" as a "trap" (p 14), James leaves his reader in no doubt that one must work with secure facts where right and wrong are not merely a matter of opinion. But does the difficulty of writing to equally high standards in more than one branch of scholarship effectively make substantial interdisciplinary scholarship impossible? The solution cannot lie in interdisciplinary work being produced collaboratively, because if something cannot be produced by a single mind one cannot expect it to be understood by any single individual. The situation is not hopeless, however, and the essential answers to the problem are straightforward and practical ones. Firstly, interdisciplinary cultural history must be preceded by multidisciplinary training - something that modular schemes of study are making increasingly possible at university level, although admittedly not to very advanced stages of skill and experience. Pragmatically, meanwhile, the call must be for rigorous checking of material for publication, a responsibility that falls upon authors, editors and publishers alike. This has resource implications only in terms of time and patience - which, of course, are in short supply in the modern academic system. But if one should wish to adopt a serious political and ethical stance through the Humanities, it would not be too pretentious to champion the general virtues of the determined pursuit of precision and quality, and to fight for the principle that second best should not do.

Edward James's *Britain in the First Millennium* is, in the end, a history book informed by archaeology and philology, not a work in some new scholarly genre of interdisciplinary writing. Its disciplinary niche is confirmed by the sparsity of illustrations (six maps, plus the Kingston brooch on the cover), and a system of endnotes and bibliographical details apparently designed to minimise ease and speed of reference. Above all, though, it inspires me with the thought that there is now another, methodologically different book to be written both alongside and around this historical framework - one to boldly go where none has gone before and to break the mould of conventional periodization by considering the first millennium strictly defined, from AD 1-1000. This would surely force us to confront the history of this huge period in startlingly different terms, compelling us to look at states of affairs, not to start comfortably with a beginning and end comfortably with an end; to compare late Iron-age Britain with the Britain of a few generations before the Norman Conquest, when England was plagued by Danish attacks but able to produce huge amounts of Danegeld; when a kingdom of Scotland was growing in size, strength and coherency; and when nothing terribly unusual was happening in Wales (as usual). Just how much real change had the millennium seen, one could ask, when we look at population densities, quality of life and life expectancies, the economic and technical conditions and the agricultural regime? How much essential difference was there between the societies governed principally according to the interests of their particular warrior and religious elites at either end of the period? To adopt such an approach, which such a simple shift in the time-frame so powerfully promotes, is self-evidently to adopt a far more archaeological perspective on the first millennium, refocusing on long-term processes of cultural history and their material conditions. This would not so much bear the disconcerting implication that even such dramatic and disruptive events as the Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Christian and Viking conquests do not really seem to have mattered all that much in this

regard, as to show just how richly complementary a really interdisciplinary view can be.

Any serious scholarly author who is not insufferably sure of what, why and how he is going about his work will be visited by doubts in the course of a major book: "Should I really be doing this?". Edward James can be proud of the skilful and sensible job he has made of the unusual challenge of writing a summary of the history of Britain from the Roman invasion to the eve of the Norman Period. His book rightly provides a basis for a debate about what else could or should be done in terms of long-term perspectives on this period, and - perhaps most importantly in practical terms - for a critical evaluation of more focused, shorter term, histories. The merits and success of James's book are a vindication of the choices he has made, and he has no further need to explain or justify why he did things the way he did. Knowing that Edward James will now have the opportunity to respond to these observations, I should be especially interested to learn about his thoughts about the project with the benefit of hindsight, and to read any suggestions he might now make about where this should lead in the immediate future.

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