



Domesday: A Search for the Roots of England

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In 1086 the Domesday Book, perhaps the most remarkable historical document in existence, was compiled. This tremendous survey of England and its people was made at the behest of the Norman, William the Conqueror. Michael Wood's "Domesday: A Search for the Roots of England" is a study of the ancient manuscript and an attempt to analyse the world that the Domesday Book portrayed. He uses the Domesday record to examine Norman society, and also to penetrate beyond it to the Anglo-Saxon, Roman and Iron Age cultures that preceded it. Michael Wood is also author of "In Search of the Dark Ages" and "In Search of the Trojan War".

Domesday: A Search for the Roots of England Details

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Pete daPixie says

Michael Wood turned me on to Olde English history almost 20 years ago with his excellent t.v. series 'In search of the Dark Ages'. Since then I've read his book 'In search of the Dark Ages' and 'In the footsteps of Alexander the Great'. I would recommend anything that he writes. 'A search for the roots of England' is another great piece of investigative writing. Here Wood shows that the feudal takeover of England in 1066 was just a takeover of a basic governmental system that went back before the Saxon arrival, and before the Roman administration to Iron age times. He gives many examples of Celtic, Saxon and Viking farm holders through Domesday and on into the fifteenth century. His descriptions of ancient farms and their tenants and lordships, the walks that he takes you on over ancient landscapes to reveal marks and boundaries in the land still visible today, makes the hairs on my neck stand up.

Jen says

Well-researched, but unfortunately dry as to make long sections hard to get through. The lists of towns and possessions became meaningless after awhile, especially since I'm not from that country (which would help). I liked the parts focusing on the history around that time, but since the book is about what in "Domesday" revealed what life was like then, most of the focus was on property lines, money, and who owned what. Still, a thorough glimpse into life in 1080s, before, and the centuries after.

NancyHelen says

This was written in the days before the rise of 'creative non-fiction' and as a result, it is unfortunately quite dry. Although the subject is fascinating - the author is exploring how the social and economic structure of Britain came to be formed in the centuries leading up to the creation of the Domesday Book, it just isn't written in a particularly engaging way. And there is a bit of an overuse of hyperbolic words although that, perhaps, was done in an attempt to liven up the subject matter and break up the endless talk of hides, hundreds and shires.

Richard Olney says

As far as i try to broaden my interests, i never stray far from the history of England, and the bit we used to call The Dark Ages in particular. This is my second attempt at this book, one of many Mr Wood has written on or around this period of history. While i was taught that the Dark Ages ended with the Norman conquest, most of what i've read about the Conqueror and the Conquest suggests it probably brought in an even darker age.

The search for the roots uses Domesday Book and the sources from the distant so-called Celtic past through to the coming of the English, the incursion of the Vikings, both of whom arrived and were eventually

assimilated, the Anglo-Saxons seeming to leave the deepest marks, marks we can still see and certainly hear. The book starts with a quick recap of the hostile management takeover which was the Norman Conquest, and jumps back and forwards in history as the narrative requires.

As you might expect from a book based on analysis of what was essentially a tax survey, it can be a bit dry with its lists of cottars, villeins, bordars and hides. Reading this, the past really does seem a long time ago, and absolutely foreign.

What i liked most was the conclusion chapter where he persuades me completely that while there being no such thing as an ethnic English race or woman, culturally there certainly is. I hope that's true of other nations, 20th Century history suggests it might not be.

Personal points of interest were that i learned the name of the "Celtic" tribe who lived where i now live. I walk the land that the Belgae might once have done, 2000 years. Now, that's something to know.

U. Cronin says

The way this book is written is the ideal of how history should be presented. Michael Wood is an excellent writer and storyteller and his enthusiasm and imagination make medieval England leap off the pages. The book brings to life not only England 20 years after the Norman invasion and the remarkable book compiled by William the Conqueror to aid in the levying of taxes, but the Celtic and Roman societies and structures that pre-dated the Anglo-Saxon colonisation of the country in the late fifth century. We learn of how diverse England was: Celt lived cheek by jowl with Roman during Imperial times; after the fall of the Roman Empire, Celts, Romano-Celts and Germanic invaders shared the landscape; then in the eight century we had the arrival of the Vikings, who held control of a huge swathe of northern England above the line of the Danelaw; and, of course in 1066, French-speaking Normans of Viking descent decided to cross the Channel. Well into the rule of the Normans, there were pockets of Celtic-language-speaking Britons in the south of England and a strong Danish influence in terms of placenames (all the -bys e.g. Grimsby), dialect and culture in the North. What struck me reading the book was how diverse an ethnic background your average English person must have. We have a base genetic stock of Britons (who probably spoke something akin to modern Welsh and are usually described as a Celtic people) we have Romans (or more correctly Roman citizens drawn from all over the Empire), Angles, Saxons, Jutes et al., Vikings (Danes and Norse) and Normans. Each of these peoples, we are told by Michael Wood, left their mark not only on the English landscape or language but on the nature of English society and the personality of your average Englander. The fierce independence and individuality of the English and their anglophone offshoots all around the globe are linked by Wood to the unusual racial mix, farming practices and historical circumstances that gave rise to a the manorial system in which a high proportion of men were free, a relatively early (in terms of European history) shaking-off of the feudal system and the invention and widespread embracing of capitalism. Because Englishmen were freed from the tyranny of the feudal system earlier than most of their European neighbours there was e.g. no French-style revolution. Because men were free to leave the land and go to the cities, the world's first large-scale industries were seen in places like Sheffield, Leeds and Manchester. And because society was less divided than that of many continental countries, there was no socialist revolution or fascism at the start of the twentieth century. While *Domesday: A Search for . . .* is a book about change it is also a book that underlines continuity. Field systems remain unchanged since Celtic times. Motorways follow the course of Roman roads. Cities founded by the Saxons or Norse still exist. Many of the words we use are those contained in the Domesday book itself. This is one of the best books I've ever read in terms of stressing the links between the present and the past and bringing home how much of who we are we owe, not just to

the genes bestowed upon us by our ancestors, but to the ancient and sometimes invisible culture we receive. As testimony as to how well Micheal Woods writes and makes his case, I've even come away from this book with a grudging admiration for the Anglo-Saxons (their efficiency as administrators and rulers for one thing) - quite a thing to say for an Irishman!

Mhd says

History of England, all tied into the Domesday Book. Great examples, many good illustrations.

Sarah says

Great. Immediately going to read it again. Too much to digest at one go. ...and now I have skimmed through it again it's going with the reference books on the shelf. It gives a persuasive view of a great sweep of English history, connecting the detail of written records, place names and archaeology with his ideas.

Tom Smith says

Didn't make it very far. Found the prose rather stilted and the approach a little to dry for me. Perhaps it is just the wrong time in life to tackle this one. May try again when I can be more focused on it.

Nikki says

Michael Wood's Domesday Quest (as mine is titled) is a very readable but thorough account, not only of the Domesday Book, but of its context -- the processes already existing that allowed William the Conqueror to have such a task completed with the accuracy he apparently managed. Michael Wood traces the development of a national identity, and how it was impacted by those who invaded and settled in Britain.

There's lots of names, facts and figures, of course, most of which I had no head for, but Michael Wood's analysis remains crystal-clear, and I could follow all of it. The glossary at the back helps, as well.

Nathan Albright says

There is both a lot to praise and criticize about a book like this. On the one hand, this is a book that shows a great love and attention to historical information, tracing people for hundreds of years through various tax records, and showing how a work like the initially daunting Domesday Book has a genuinely human though that is not always recognized. This book was written in honor of the 900th anniversary of the writing and compilation of the Domesday Book in 1086, in the aftermath of the conquest of England by William of Normandy and the widespread expropriation of land to reward rapacious Norman conquerors, continuing a process of rapacious exploitation that had gone on several times in England's history, going back at least to

the time of the Romans if not before, and carried on by the Angles and Saxons and then by the Vikings afterwards. And it is the class-based aspect of the discussion, the tedious reminders of barely concealed Marxist ideologies about the origin of capitalism, that are the most worthy area of criticism for this book, a reminder that the worldview of many scholars regarding matters of morality and economics is deeply tainted and often self-contradictory [1].

The contents of this book are generally topically and chronologically organized, and filled with gorgeous photos and insightful maps that demonstrate patterns of deep continuity as well as frequent change, showing the persistence of some habits and some occupations in some areas for many centuries and mobility and rootlessness in other areas persisting over centuries, with changes being made at the elite level while the same basic exploitation of the same population of commonfolk continues generation after generation, sometimes increasing in pace but often showing the same patterns over and over again. The book is divided into three parts and sixteen chapters (as well as a preface, introduction, and epilogue) that total slightly more than 200 pages of core material along with a glossary, bibliography, photo credits, and index. The first part of the book looks at the Saxon and Celtic past that is still embedded within the Domesday Book, starting with a look at the 'Great Survey' of 1086, then looking at the ancient landscape of parts of England, the Roman Past, the transition to Anglo-Saxon England, and the coming of the English. The second part of the book takes on the subject of the English state before the Domesday Book, looking at the beginnings of English government, the origins of the English state in the face of the Viking invasions of the late 9th century, the Anglo Saxon empire and its developments regarding war, land, and taxation, the roots of the Domesday Book in the impact of the Viking invasions, the relationship of money and tax through the Old English coinage, and the workforce of England on the eve of the Norman conquest. The third part of the book looks at the Domesday Book and after through the Norman conquest, a look at the riddle of the freeborn English of East Anglia's fens, an examination of the English individualism of the Midlands, a brief glance at the highland zone, and the legacy of Domesday on the Midland peasant, along with an epilogue that reminds readers about the way that England has been deeply shaped by its past in ways that are hard to understand and often are unexamined.

Even if the author can be faulted for having too strong a belief in Marxist views of class, this book does give plenty of food for thought for those who are students of medieval history, especially with regards to the Norman conquest [2]. For one, the development of writing and records, of the sort of data that social historians and contemporary business managers and executives are so fond of using in their analyses is often connected to a desire for control. The Domesday Book is a forceful reminder that knowledge is power, and that effective taxation and administration depends on an accurate knowledge of conditions, and that the desire to understand others and their conditions is often motivated in large part by a desire to exploit what one knows for one's own advantages. The book is also a reminder that the more things change, the more they remain the same in that patterns of behavior in certain areas are often enduring and spring from distant patterns that became embedded in a given area, showing the immense persistence of cultural traits, both good and bad. It is hard to overcome habits on a generational point of view, not least when those habits are enforced and exploited by those in power.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

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[2] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

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<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

Joshua says

For me it was very insightful, easy to digest for as much detail is crammed into it..!

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in October 2001.

Produced as part of the nine hundredth anniversary of the production of the Domesday Book, this is the least accessible and least individual book which Wood has written. This is mainly because of the subject matter; to most amateur historians, Domesday is mainly of interest for local history of by the fact of its existence (being the earliest nationwide survey of land ownership and obligations of any European nation). Much of its true significance is seen by detailed and technical analysis, looking at the entries either statistically or in relation to whatever other information is available about a locality (Anglo-Saxon charters, for example).

Wood's book is actually not principally about Domesday itself. It is an account of the manorial system recorded there, about how it developed from Roman and early Anglo-Saxon farming practices until its decline in the later Middle Ages (the crisis being the plague of the 1340s). Since comparatively little is recorded about the lives of ordinary people in this period, much of the account is inferred from what evidence there is, which makes the book Wood's most academic. Considerable interest in history is required, but for the right reader there is much to enjoy.

Jules says

Can't See the Wood for the Trees Once I made up my mind to finish this book, I found it easier to read. That doesn't really make any sense, I know but I think I was just getting so hung up on the detail that I wasn't enjoying it. It's well written but kind of dry compared to today's standards of pop history. However, I did eventually get lost in the fascinating worlds of Dark Age and Early Medieval history even if I found Michael Wood's conclusions about pre-Domesday society hard to follow. There was a lot of conjecture which was all backed up by detailed scraps of transliterated original documents but this is where I got lost because most read like lists. I would read this again but for now it only gets 3 stars.

Graham says

A history book that takes a different approach to English history than most others. Usually books follow the doings of various kings and queens, charting events and life through their actions, but Wood approaches our heritage from the landscape itself - by exploring the role of farmers and farming throughout the ages. He begins in Celtic times, tracing the beginning of field systems, before looking at the changes brought about by the Roman invasion, then the Anglo-Saxon, and finally the Norman Conquest.

Admittedly, the book is a little dry, so it's only recommended for those with a genuine enthusiasm for this sort of stuff. But Wood gets to grips with his subject like no other. He explores plenty of primary evidence, usually charters and the like dealing with land ownership. Of course, the Domesday Book itself is explored in depth. Additionally, he takes the reader on a tour of a number of historical settlements using contemporary eye witness accounts which really bring to life the 'lie of the land' in earlier times.

What I liked best were the segments detailing an individual or family line, explaining what they achieved, what they farmed, what they owned. The section on Grim, a Dane who settled in Leicestershire, was particularly fascinating and useful to this reader.

Libby Chapman says

This book was much more dry than current popular history books, and was not easy to read. However, it was very well researched and therefore deserves the four star rating.
