



The King in the North: The Life and Times of Oswald of Northumbria

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Oswald Whiteblade lived one of the most influential and colourful lives in early English history. Before his death in battle against the pagans of Mercia cut short his reign as king of Northumbria (634-42), he remodelled his northeastern English homeland as a Christian kingdom, founded the monastery of Lindisfarne, introduced a culture of learning which influenced all Europe, and became the most powerful ruler in Britain.

Max Adams's thrilling account rescues Oswald from Dark Age obscurity to reveal an unjustly forgotten English hero - a king whose return from exile to reclaim his birthright was the inspiration for J. R. R. Tolkien's Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*. But *The King in the North* is more than just a biography of the first great English monarch; it is a stunningly researched, wide-ranging, beautifully written and revelatory portrait of early medieval England in all its aspects.

The King in the North: The Life and Times of Oswald of Northumbria Details

Date : Published August 29th 2013 by Head of Zeus (first published June 9th 2005)

ISBN :

Author : Max Adams

Format : Kindle Edition 448 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Biography, Medieval History, Historical, Medieval

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From Reader Review *The King in the North: The Life and Times of Oswald of Northumbria* for online ebook

Kieran says

Something I should make clear from the outset; I have an MA in Medieval History, and 'specialised' in the early Middle Ages. So, it was with some trepidation that I approached this book. Generally, if it's a book on the early medieval period which you can actually buy in a bookshop, you need to be cautious, as it tends to be either Arthurian weird, Saxon weird, Viking weird, or just plain wrong.

I'm happy to say this book was none of the above. The author brilliantly catapults the reader into the life and times of Oswald, the Anglo-Saxon king-martyr who emerges from his youthful exile at Iona to seize the throne(s) of Northumbria, rules for eight successful years, dominating the British Isles, before being slain in battle against Penda, one of the last pagan Anglo-Saxon kings. The author clearly knows the sources inside out, both the written and the archaeological. He is also not afraid to state when we simply don't know enough to fill the gaps, and to offer his own ideas to fill the silences which often prevail in early medieval Britain.

For me personally, this book was perfect; the right pitch between a narrative and an analysis, interesting enough for someone with a lot of background knowledge, but also just right for those with no idea what they've let themselves in for. Max Adams manages to bring alive this world which is at once so alien, yet so very familiar.

Mark says

I saw this book whilst visiting the Northumbrian coast last year at Bamburgh and Lindisfarne. I'm glad I picked it up. A well written account of the life and times of King Oswald, its really well rooted in the geography and history of the area and took me back to my visit. The author sometimes goes into heavier detail than a casual reader may like, but I enjoyed it throughout.

Jorg says

What we actually know about Oswald would fill several pages, at best, so Adams has to take a much wider aim--and he succeeds brilliantly. The life and legacy of Oswald is placed in the context of the changing Anglo-Saxon society of the 7th century, with asides on its periphery, social structures, religious developments, general tribal politics and emergence of nations--all written with clear erudition and love of both the subject and the landscape. Choices made by Oswald and his immediate successors set up patterns that played a major part in later events of Northumbrian and general English history, from Viking raids all the way to the Dissolution. This is how history books should be written: embedded in a wider weave, details placed in context and clearly described as part of a pattern. Good stuff on a fascinating and still little-known subject.

Matt Brady says

Oswald Whiteblade was an early King of Northumbria in northern England during the Dark Ages who apparently served as the inspiration for Tolkien's Aragorn, and was also a focus of the Venerable Bede's most famous work, the *Ecclesiastical History*. He also became a Saint of the early English church, and his cult had an enduring and wide ranging power, spreading to the Continent as far away as Germany and Switzerland.

The problem with any look at the Dark Ages is the scarcity of sources. Max Adams is forced to rely almost entirely on Bede, as well as a handful of Annals and Chronicles, some contemporary, some not, and as a result there are a massive amount of "what-ifs". Adams does a good job of reconstructing a plausible timeline of events though, using a lot of archaeological research, but he's inevitably forced to do a lot of speculating and guesswork. Overall. it's a fairly interesting look at early Anglo-Saxon England and the birth of the English Church.

Henry Gee says

Nothing might seem more obscure than an account of the life and times of King Oswald of Northumbria (604-642). Yet this lively account of Britain in the Dark Ages is unashamed in its contemporary hooks. The very title is a phrase used repeatedly in *A Game of Thrones*; and the map in the frontispiece is a blatant rip-off of the style used by Christopher Tolkien in his maps of his father's own Middle-Earth. No matter. It's a great book - and ends with a stinging message about the balance of rights and responsibilities that make you think about the rise and fall of societies right down to our own times.

Daniel Wright says

St Oswald's story is a remarkable romance. He was a exiled rightful heir who returned to claim his crown; he was a Christian warrior-saint who died in battle against the heathen. Adams tells this story both with an engaging style and with historical rigour.

Learnin Curve says

Christ almighty that was dry, for the next half an hour where I can remember all the names I'm going to feel very smart.

Get the book version if you only have an e-book. The photographs and family trees are right at the back and you need it open on a tablet as well or you are going to have a very bad time.

Michelle Styles says

This book has a lot going for it. The time period is thoroughly interesting and the personages involved fascinating, but it lacked a clear narrative. It was not so much about St Oswald but the formation of the

Northumbrian state from say 600 up to 793 AD. Adams does put forth an interesting supposition for why the Vikings struck -- namely the lack of military men and warriors caused the proclivity of Northumbrian kings to gift land to the church. In other words because the Northmen knew the area from their various voyages, they were able to take advantage of the situation. Most of the research I have read has concentrated on the why the Northmen might raid, not why Lindisfarne might have been chosen and was there any inherent weakness in the political situation in the Northumbrian hierarchy. But I digress.

Adams does give a comprehensive account of Northumbria and various personages involved. Personally I think Oswy, the only 7th century king to die in his bed and defacto high king of Britain a more interesting character than his brother St Oswald. I thought Elanfleed, his queen, thoroughly intriguing.

The book has made me determine to walk both St Oswald's Way and St Cuthbert's plus visit Yeltholm.

M.J. says

So, I wasn't too sure about this when I started reading it because it wasn't quite as scholarly as I was expecting. That said, it kept me reading so it must have had something going for it!

Initially the author's modern descriptions of the places mentioned annoyed me, but then, I know many of the places so didn't need the extra information. To those who've never visited Bamburgh etc, they'll probably enjoy the little extras.

Also, the title is a little misleading, as it's not just about Oswald. Perhaps a better description would have been Northumbria in the Seventh Century.

For all that, this is an engaging book, well told, and it works hard to produce a comprehensive account of the Kings of Northumbria and to make them appear personable. What I enjoyed most was it's acceptance that during this time, Northumbria didn't necessarily look to the South of England but to Scotland and Ireland. The use of Scottish and Irish sources was a welcome addition to the normal Bede and Nennian sources. Well done author and thanks!

The Idle Woman says

An excellent and very readable history of 7th-century Anglo-Saxon England, focusing on Oswald, king of Northumbria - hero of Bede's Ecclesiastical History, founder of Lindisfarne and inspiration for J.R.R. Tolkien's Aragorn. Setting him in the context of his time, the book explores the dynamic between the pagan traditions of the warrior king and the new themes of eternal salvation being introduced by Christian missionaries and the Irish monastic tradition. Blending archaeological evidence with material from Bede's Ecclesiastical History, Adams creates a plausible and absorbing narrative of a young man's journey from exile to kingship and beyond, from martyrdom to the status of one of the most revered saints of medieval Europe. It's not a short book, but it's gripping stuff. A hard copy is recommended rather than the Kindle version I read, if only because you will need access to the family tree in order to keep track! A super introduction to Anglo-Saxon England and the culture of this time when the country teetered on the brink between its pagan history and its (largely) Christian future.

For a longer review, please see my blog (I welcome comments):

<http://theidlewoman.blogspot.co.uk/20...>

Rachel says

I enjoyed this very much and learnt a very great deal! I read it through, but will also return to parts of it again to remind myself of various events and details. I will recommend it to various friends who are interested in history, theology, Anglo-Saxons, the North East of England.

Terry says

3.5 stars

My first attempt at reading this book was a failure. While I found much of it to be both interesting and well-written I ended up being defeated by other elements that I found much less interesting (namely the author's digressions into archaeological and topographical details of the areas he describes). Now, given that the author is an archaeologist I can't fault him for these details and I in no way wish to impugn the value of archaeology in shedding significant light onto the past, especially in cases where we have little or no literary evidence to go on...I just personally find archaeology (especially when described in detail) to be kind of, well, boring quite frankly and thus these sections hampered my progress into the book. I've recently been bitten by an interest in the Anglo-Saxon period of British history, however, and thus kept thinking about coming back to the book given its other virtues. After reading Niccola Griffith's *Hild* (to which this book acts as an excellent companion esp. the earlier chapters that cover Edwin's rise and reign) I decided that I should give *The King in the North* another try and I'm glad I did.

When Adams is talking about 'pure' history (as opposed to archaeology) he weaves a compelling story indeed. He has an obvious deep interest in (and one might even say an affection for) these characters and his attempts to trace the rise of Northumbria as both a unified kingdom, and ultimately a central power in early Anglo-Saxon England, is compelling. It is also quite impressive given the sparsity of historical details that we have from primary sources, and while he certainly points out areas in which his proposed narrative does not rest on certainty he does not seem as leery as many other academics when putting forward his own interpretation of possible events, a fact which I found quite refreshing.

The book covers the main political and historical events that revolve around the kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira (later to be unified as Northumbria) roughly from the reign of Aethelfrith (in the early 600s) to that of Aldfrith (in the 680's) with the discussion moving sometimes earlier than the former or later than the latter when required. Special emphasis is given to the kings Edwin, Oswald (naturally given the book's title), and Oswiu during whose reigns the real consolidation of 'Northumbrian' power occurred.

In addition to the lives of these kings and their families (and enemies) Adams also pays close attention to the Christian monastic (and non-monastic) establishments to which these leaders had strong connections, seeing in their reigns the beginning of the strong link between church and state that was to characterize the British political arena until Henry VIII decided he wanted it all for himself centuries later (and which really just carried on the unity in a different way, albeit one wherein the distinction between church and monarch became all but indistinguishable). In a related area Adams also sees this era as the point in time in which the concept of an English state that could survive beyond the lifetime of the king, one held together by more than his strength of personality and whose gains were ultimately lost at his death to be begun again by his successor, was born. In essence by uniting itself with the newly nascent, and increasingly powerful, Church the monarchy of the Anglo-Saxons was able to have a form of institutional continuance beyond the person of

the king. Of course this union was to have other, unforeseen, consequences for the burgeoning English monarchy as time wore on.

Ultimately, archaeological 'digressions' aside, I would have to say that this was one of the more compelling history books I have read and its strong narrative structure makes it a fairly easy and enjoyable read. It certainly deepened my appreciation for the history of the era and the many complexities of the tangled political, religious, and personal relationships that were bound up in the ultimate birth of what would eventually become known (several hundred years after the main events portrayed in this book) as the kingdom of England. Recommended.

Edoardo Albert says

Not surprisingly, Max Adams' book finds an appreciative reader in me: it's all about Northumbria! Although ostensibly a biography of Oswald, in fact it tells the story of the great age of the kingdom, starting with its emergence into history under the 'Twister' Aethelfrith, through my favourite, Edwin, to Oswald, Oswiu and Ecgfrith, with an afterword about the golden cultural age of the eighth century. Adams is never less than fascinating, he brings to light all sorts of nuggets of information and parallels - I particularly liked the comparison between Oswald and Thomas Cochrane, the premier frigate commander of the Napoleonic Wars and a man of such daring his exploits would appear ridiculous in a film - and his book brims with a life-long love of the subject. In fact, the only other book on Northumbria I'd recommend as highly is my own, and Adams beats me into a cocked hat with the absolutely superb double page map on the inside front cover, which shows Northumbria and the other kingdoms of northern Britain in the style of the map in 'The Lord of the Rings', all hand-drawn hills and sketched forests. Superb, and on its own responsible for an extra, fifth star! Well done, Mr Cartographer.

Adrian Buck says

A surprisingly compelling story of how the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria emerged from Warlordism to become an institutionalised monarchy, mainly through its adoption of first Celtic and then Roman christianity.

There simply aren't sufficient documentary resources to support a historical narrative, and Adams presents each chapter as if it were an episode of Timeteam, with contributions from archeology, landscape studies, history, and even literary criticism. The latter comes in form of Adams' critical reading of Bede's Ecclesiastical History: he argues that Bede needed to create a compelling narrative of God's providence to his one church, and selected his evidence accordingly.

The biggest loser in this was the indigenous Church which had hung on in Britain after the departure of the legions. For Bede the failure of the British Church to convert the incoming Anglo-Saxons (and its rejection of Augustine's mission) made them more perfidious than the incoming pagans. So the significance of the British contribution to the formation of the English church is down-played in favour of the proselytizing Irish and Roman Churches. A early victim of this is cautious Edwin - in fact - the first christian king of Northumbria, albeit one who was converted by the British while in exile in Anglesey, and later ally of the British King of Gwynedd.

Which highlights another position that Adams takes against Bede's narrative - that there was no hard distinction between Briton and German; Britannia's dark age leaders were equal opportunity warlords, equally likely to ally or attack across ethnic and religious boundaries. This was explicable I suppose because Adams also believes there was no mass immigration of Britain by Anglo-Saxons - the genetic and landscape evidence does support this traditional historical account. We had instead an exchange of elites, rather like the one that happened after the Norman conquest, albeit in a more ragged fashion. NB this view still has to account for the disappearance of the British language across most of Britain.

Edwin's nephews, however, were raised on Iona in the Irish monastery there, and when Oswald became king he invited his Irish mentor Aidan to found a similar monastery on Lindisfarne. The Irish church with its enthusiasm for asceticism and missionary work was much more to Bede's liking. And we can perhaps argue that it is of more importance to the institutional development of the Church of England, because it had a tradition of anointing those it recognised as king. Anyhow, the king supported the monasteries and the monasteries supported the king, which made both kingdom much more stable than it had been when legitimacy was conveyed purely by military success. So much so, that Oswiu, Oswald's brother became the first Northumbrian King to die in his bed.

In the most interesting part of the book, Adams goes on to argue that the monastic movement was too successful. It created a Northumbria that was economically successful and politically unassailable, but one that became militarily weak and ultimately susceptible to external attack. Those rich monasteries became the first targets of the Vikings, less than 200 hundred years after their foundation.

Adams proposes the following mechanism for this. Previously the King gifted land in exchange for military service, when a particular warrior was killed in battle, the land came back into the king's hands to be allocated to a new warrior. So the kingdom's strength and wealth were kept in sync. When the King gifted land to a monastery, it no longer came back into the king's hands, and it no longer contributed to the military strength of the kingdom. The monasteries were able to plough their surpluses back into their lands, this investment further augmented the wealth of the monasteries. Eventually for the nobility, sending your son into a monastery became much more attractive than sending him into battle. When St Wilfrid, bishop of Northumbria died he was possibly the richest man in Europe.

What I find so interesting about this mechanism, how the adoption of Christianity upset the balance struck between blood and treasure, is its potential to be applied to other places and other times. Certainly, was it not the reason Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Pictish pirates flocked into Britannia after the legions left? But could it not also explain the general collapse of the Roman Empire? And should it not be a warning to Europe today, surrounded by warlordism to the south and east, and dependent on its American overlord for its military protection?

Liam Guilar says

Given how little is known about Oswald, four of five pages on his life in the paperback edition of Bede, with more about his posthumous miracles than his life, this book is a lot more about his 'times' than his 'life'. But it's well written and thorough, dealing evenly with the problems of the few sources, and it brings aspects of the 7th century to life by asking the kind of questions that are often glossed over in historical discussions of the technicalities of early medieval land tenure or kingship.

The book is a history of 7th century Northumbria focussed through its Kings: Edwin and Oswiu receive almost equal coverage to Oswald, whose reign was very brief and whose early life is 'obscure'. There simply isn't enough evidence to construct a modern biography and the world these people lived in was so very different to ours that assuming what they were thinking is a dubious activity. Adams avoids this, but at the same time manages to suggest how different that world was. Words like kings and kingdoms have connotations that are inapplicable here. And it does leave you wondering who'd want to be king of Northumbria given that only one King in the 7th century died in his bed.

When the Kings are centre stage, there is a strong narrative element which holds together the general discussions about other aspects of the age, but there is a definite sense the book starts trailing off towards the end. So did Northumbria, but what had been narrative history seems to dissipate in a series of linked essays.

Having said that it's hard to imagine a better introduction to the Seventh century.

A minor grumble, who cares if Tolkien is supposed to have based a character on Oswald? That doesn't reveal anything about Oswald. And why does the publisher have to put a quote referencing 'Game of Thrones' on the cover? I know they are trying to sell copy, but Adams' carefully referenced history is about real people and the problems arising from the alienation of royal lands to monastic institutions. Can't we have medieval history without reference to fantasy?
