Review


The ‘Men of the North’—*Gwŷr y Gogledd* in Welsh—was a term used to describe the North Britons, whose kingdoms had flourished in what is now northern England and southern Scotland following the withdrawal of the Roman Empire in c. 400. In medieval Welsh literature they were remembered as heroic ancestors *par excellence* who had offered valiant resistance to the Anglo-Saxon advance—it was never forgotten that the Britons had once had sovereignty over whole of the island, and the *Gwŷr y Gogledd* were among the most potent symbols of that lost glory. The North Britons’ place in the history of Scotland is a less celebrated affair, and it is right that Clarkson’s book should attempt to remedy this.

The period in focus spans the late Roman period to the Norman Conquest, six hundred years which saw the gradual demise of the North British kingdoms in the face of increasing pressure from Anglian Northumbria and, latterly, the fledgling kingdom of Alba and the Vikings. This is the best introduction published thus far on this most elusive of subjects, for while the ‘Men of the North’ loom large in Welsh verse, they are much harder to pin down in historical and archaeological terms. *The Men of the North* lays out what we currently know (and what we think we know) in clear and accessible terms. We are introduced to all the major issues of the era, including Brittonic identity and the fragmented political landscape, the Roman inheritance and the emergence of Christianity, and the rise of Anglian Northumbria. Many of
the kingdoms Clarkson explores—in particular Gododdin and Rheged, which disappeared in the seventh century—will be unfamiliar to his wider audience. Also discussed is the kingdom of Strathclyde, initially based on Dumbarton Rock, which lingered on into the eleventh century and can be anchored much more firmly in the historical landscape.

Clarkson does a fine job of guiding us through the various sources, which include Latin annals from Ireland, Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and (more controversially) Welsh poetry asserting early northern provenance. Separating the history of the North Britons from the legendary framework in which it is preserved is a complex task; to an extent this difficulty is disguised by the author, perhaps with undergraduate readers in mind. There are a few other things which may trouble experts; some of the accounts of military campaigns are overly elaborate, given the nature of the evidence, and the ‘landscape of power’ is depicted in far more detail than the current climate of ‘militant agnosticism’ would allow. In an academic field where most of the debate is centred on what qualifies as evidence, however, it is probably for the best that a book of this sort sacrifices some caution for the sake of narrative. Finally, there is also a shortage of references to recent advances in archaeology, which have brought the North British political elite into much sharper focus.

None of these criticisms should be allowed to detract from the significance of Clarkson’s book, however. Until the publication of *The Men of the North* there had never been a text-book for the North British kingdoms—its appearance should be welcomed by undergraduates, teachers, and the general public alike.

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