



Charles Phythian-Adams. *Land of the Cumbrians: A Study in British Provincial Origins, A.D. 400-1120.* Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate, 1996. xvi + 207 pp. \$68.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85928-327-1.

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The part of Britain sometimes called Cumbria, eventually divided between Scotland and England, has been remote from the concerns of most historians of the early Middle Ages, even British historians, and the sources for its early history are scarce. It has, consequently, been little studied; and as a result, according to Charles Phythian-Adams, a number of unexamined assumptions and outright misconceptions about its early history have been allowed to pass unquestioned. "This work," he says, "is then one of revisionism; revisionism in the face of my own previous thinking as much as an attempt to revise the thinking of others" (p. xii). He intends to demonstrate the inadequacy of many received ideas and to replace them with more or less tentative theses about what may actually have happened: "Even if the findings of this work fail to convince ..., it is hoped that the serious weaknesses inherent in the conventional view may nevertheless be seen for what they are. To propose an alternative interpretation for discussion, however, seems to be a more constructive, and hopefully [*sic*] a more interesting and more relevant, a [*sic*] course of action than [*sic*] to be harpingly negative. What is at issue here, after all, is nothing less than an understanding of how, and to what extent, early British identity was absorbed into an 'English' identity" (p. 21). (Parenthetically, I should add right here that--as the repeated use of "*sic*" in the last quotation indicates--this book badly needed but apparently

did not receive copyediting. In quoting, I have not even attempted to indicate errors of punctuation, but I have done my best to ensure that the punctuation as quoted is exactly as it is in the book. More about all this later.)

Even the geographical area under discussion--which might be very roughly described as a zone defined by lines running about thirty miles north and south of the western third of Hadrian's Wall (stopping just east of Birdoswald), with its single most important center at Carlisle--has been misconstrued, for "the modern administrative area now known as 'Cumbria' represents what can only be regarded as either a politically arrogant or an historically ignorant misappropriation by the English of a term that, on the one hand formerly included extensive regions along the northern Scottish side of the Solway Firth; and, on the other hand unambiguously excluded ... areas [in England] ... which are currently embraced by it" (p. 3). The focus of the book is "what became, after partition, the English share of historic Cumbria: i.e. Cumberland together with what must be unambiguously distinguished hereinafter from the later county [of Cumberland] as the original Westmoringa land ('the land of the people west of the moors'). Clearly, however, both English Cumbria and its territorial predecessors were always inseparable from the wider culture and society of the Solway region as a whole.... The work remains, nevertheless, quite explicitly an explo-

ration of how (apart from the later special case of Monmouthshire) the last area of Britain to be incorporated specifically into the territory of England was thereby reduced to provincial status as a distant outlier of the Anglo-Norman state, albeit still with a distinctive ethnic identity. In these senses then this is intended to be simultaneously a contribution to both Scottish history and academic English Local History" (pp. 3, 5).

Over the course of centuries, this area suffered invasion and penetration by many peoples: Britons, Romans, Angles from Northumbria, Vikings (especially those who came via the Hebrides and Ireland), Scots (themselves relatively recently arrived Gaels from Ireland) and, finally, Normans. The broken topography of the region--hilly uplands divided by many rivers and bordered by a narrow coastal strip--divided it into many small areas: "it is possible to identify at least fifteen broadly demarcated 'societies' scattered across the region and variously contained on at least two or three sides within the barriers of sea, river, mountain or moor" (p. 170). As a result, the area--or even portions of it--could be united only in moments of strong, personal leadership, which rarely lasted even when indigenous to the region and barely existed on the part of non-natives.

Phythian-Adams begins his story after the Romans left, in the fifth century. Despite the Romans' departure, "it may be that we underestimate the surviving Romanitas of this period in this region at our peril" (p. 166). Most of the early post-Roman centers of power were of Roman origin. The first major power to emerge was the kingdom of Rheged, which was especially powerful under Urien. Although Rheged's power declined after his death, his successors played an important part in the conversion of Northumbria, according to Phythian-Adams, a role that was entirely ignored by Bede and has therefore not been noticed in most recountings of the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons (pp. 56-60). Moreover, a line of de-

scendants of King Ecgfrith of Northumbria which was fictionally linked to the marriage of Ecgfrith's father Oswiu to Riemmelth of Rheged, Urien's great-granddaughter, functioned as sub-kings of much of Cumbria under Northumbrian overlordship "until almost the ninth century" and probably later (p. 64; see pp. 60-65 for this family). As a result, for five centuries and more after the withdrawal of the Romans and despite "piecemeal" immigration of Northumbrian Angles into the coastal regions of Cumbria in the seventh century (p. 167), the "sovereignty over the Solway region will have remained largely within the area" (p. 171).

After 900, new forces began to dominate. Phythian-Adams perceives "renewed royal activity in the Carlisle area first by 'Cumbrian' sub-kings, probably chosen by Scots, and later by Scots themselves.... It is thus time that due recognition was accorded to the impact of the Scots which has been underestimated by historians because of the interest in the more obvious 'Scandinavian' presences which was itself gaelicized ..." (p. 169). This was also the time when the large and small lordships that can be perceived in later documents were probably created. Moreover, when William Rufus took possession of the area in 1092, it was probably by agreement, for there is no sign of a conquest. As a result, most of the territorial arrangements that existed in the mid-eleventh century were perpetuated after 1092, albeit often in different hands.

Here analysis of two documents becomes all important to Phythian-Adams' reconstruction of what was going on. The later of these is the charter by which Ranulf le Meschin, the Norman who had come to dominate much of English Cumbria by the early twelfth century, founded the monastery of Wetheral, probably sometime between 1106 and 1112, though possibly earlier. "The crucial significance of the Wetheral charter has hitherto been ignored by historians" (p. 177). In contrast, the earlier document, the writ of

Gospatric, issued some time in the middle of the eleventh century, has long been utilized in studies of the region, for it is the first surviving document directly to address both the distribution and the nature of power in the area. Gospatric's writ is so important to Phythian-Adams' argument that both appendices to the book concern it: Appendix I is a translation of the writ in its entirety; Appendix II is an argument for a date approximately ten years later than the conventionally accepted date of between 1038 and 1055. By narrowing the gap between the two documents, Phythian-Adams is able to argue that those mentioned in them represent two generations of the same group of landlords and thereby indicate, even at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the continuity of arrangements on the ground in Cumbria.

Throughout, Phythian-Adams stresses the persistent Britishness of Cumbria: "The complexity of the landscape ensured that the area was socially homogeneous only in so far as it adhered to customs and controls that were effectively British in origin" (p. 170). Thus, there was no need for the entirely hypothetical reintroduction of British elements from Strathclyde into Cumbria in the tenth century that has become part of the received wisdom about the area, for the British element in the area had never been eliminated or even seriously weakened (pp. 77-87). Indeed, rather than Cumbria's being a dependency of Strathclyde at that time, Strathclyde was the weaker partner (p. 113). Moreover, the Scandinavian element in the population, like the Anglian, was merely an addition to the native stock, not a replacement of it; and Scandinavian penetration, like Anglian, was primarily by agreement—in the case of the Scandinavians, by purchase of Coupland, at least in part (pp. 124-26, 170)—rather than by conquest. Even the Normans largely adapted their arrangements to the prevailing British customs: "Even after 1092, southern Cumbria as part of middle Britain long lay beyond the reach, let alone the direct influence, of 'England.' Administratively it belonged outside both the shiring system and the system of

frankpledge. Fiscally it was situated beyond the limits both at which geld was paid originally and of those counties that belonged 'as of ancient right' to the English king.... Ecclesiastically ... [it was] north of territories subject to the expansion of Wessex which paid Peter's Pence to Rome. In a very real sense for most of our period, therefore, the region ... remained situated in realms that were still predominantly 'Celtic'" (p. 171).

Sources for studying the early history of Cumbria are scarce. Before Gospatric's writ—and again after it—written sources directly about Cumbria are virtually non-existent. Therefore, the argument of this book is based almost entirely on scattered references in written sources primarily concerned with other matters and sometimes of considerably later date, on place-names, on geography, and on archeology, undeveloped though the last is for the post-Roman period. "[G]eology, drainage, topography, Roman road patterns, pagan burial sites, [and] the distribution of early Christian cemetery furniture" are among the types of evidence put to use (p. 19). The presentation of the argument may well be called dense. (At moments, this reader would be tempted to prefer the term impenetrable.) This is definitely a book addressed to experts, though I wonder whether there is anyone else in the world who has the background to understand it as well as the author does.

Part of the difficulty is technical. The extraordinarily detailed geographical analysis of the region into which the historical analysis is set is necessary to the argument; but it is wearing on the reader, and the problem is compounded by the maps, which are not clear enough or large enough in scale or numerous enough to enable a reader easily to follow the argument. Similarly, too much familiarity with figures of regional importance is assumed: they are not always formally introduced on first mention; they are sometimes referred to by allusion or nickname; and the index is so incomplete that a puzzling reference of-

ten cannot be found by using it. (More on this, too, later.) Little attempt, in short, is made to make the work accessible to the non-specialist, despite the author's recognition of the many fields of historical study to which developments in Cumbria are relevant and in which they are cited: "the sub-Roman history of northern Britain; the perdurance of 'Celtic' language, customs and structures; the establishment of a greater Northumbria ...; [and] as an expression of the Scandinavian colonization of the Irish Sea province especially in terms of sculpture and place-names; as a dependency or offshoot of a re-emergent 'Strathclyde'; as an outpost of Scottish rule, and therefore one arena amongst others in which Anglo-Scottish relations were played out; as a 'problem' of the English 'North'; as a focus for the ultimate stage in the Norman Conquest of 'England' and thus the historic establishment of a border between Scotland and England; and even as a characteristic part of a general English region identifiable apparently as 'the Northern Counties'" (p. 16). The natural inference is that the book, especially given its revisionist theses, should play a role in reevaluating various aspects of these and other subjects. The way those theses are presented, however, will make their assimilation into wider fields harder than it might have been. It would be regrettable were they to be ignored.

Some of the difficulty of the book has to do with adequate exposition of elements of the argument. Most important, perhaps, although the terminal date of the study is given in its title as 1120, hardly any attention is paid to the period after William Rufus' acquisition of English Cumbria in 1092. As a result, the book does not address why—or, indeed, if—Norman overlordship was stronger and more lasting than earlier attempts by outside powers to dominate the area. Minor mysteries abound. Why, for example, does "the extraordinary shape of old Appleby parish strongly impl[y] that probably all the townships between it and the diocesan/county boundary running up the Pennine scarp to the east were once one unit" (p.

97)? From the associated map (p. 94), it is not even clear what the boundaries of old Appleby parish are, unless they are indicated by a solid line, which is the one element whose meaning is not explicated in the legend. Why, again, is Kirby Thore "suggestively named" (p. 97)? What exactly is the "yet another unwarranted assumption about the region to which most of us, including the author, have been prone" on p. 150? Failure of clarity at points like these makes the book much more difficult to understand than it need have been.

And then there are the real technicalities. As already noted, the book needed much more copy-editing than it received. Mispunctuations, minor misspellings, and infelicities of style are a constant annoyance. Sometimes they are enough to interfere with the author's meaning. More serious problems also occur. For example, the paragraph which begins on p. 77 and ends (after a map) on p. 79 is largely incomprehensible as it stands. So is the sentence at n. 19 on p. 85. The wives of Malcolm Canmore are so placed in the genealogy on pp. 134-35 that there is no more reason to take them as Malcolm's wives than as Donald Ban's; and the two eldest of Malcolm's children by St. Margaret, Edward and Edmund (for whom see pp. 156-57), are not charted. Were Riemmelth of Rheged and Eanflaed of Deira the first and second wives of Oswiu of Bernicia, as on p. 98; or was he first married to an Irish princess, so that Riemmelth and Eanflaed were his second and third wives, respectively (pp. 58, 60)? Was Ingibiorg the mother of Donald Ban (p. 157) or the wife of his brother (pp. 134, 156)? Was Octreda, who married Duncan II, the daughter of "Waltheof son of Gospatric I" (p. 157) or of Gospatric himself (pp. 134-35)?

As for the index, it is so incomplete both in what it includes and in the references under the items it does include that it cannot serve its function as a tool for the reader. Of names in the two preceding paragraphs, Kirby Thore, Donald Ban,

Edward, Edmund, Ingibiorg and Octreda are not indexed at all; and the entry for Appleby does not include p. 97. To test more systematically, I took one paragraph full of geographical names and counted: of the twenty-nine names in the paragraph that begins on p. 7 and ends (after three pages of maps) on p. 11, seven are in the index with a reference to one of these pages, thirteen are in the index but there is no reference to the page at issue, and nine are not in the index at all. Moricambe Bay is in the index (though not with a reference to the relevant page), but Morecambe Bay is not. Of rivers, the Eden is in the index with a reference to the page; the Eamont, Irthing, Caldew, and Waver are in the index but not for the page; and the Petteril is not in the index at all. Other important sites do not appear. The place known variously as Glannoventa, Ravenglass, and Muncaster is one, though there are entries for "Muncaster, bath house" (three of which are actually to Muncaster) and "Muncaster Fell." St. Bees does not occur as such, though "S. Bees Head" does. It says something about how the index was compiled that "William II, king of England," gets one reference in the index, "Rufus" (not further identified) gets three (one to the same page as William II), and there is no cross-index between the two. Ranulf le Meschin is in the index under "Ranulf de Bricquessart, vicomte of Bayeux (le Meschin)" although he appears first in the book simply as "Meschin" (p. 25) and is usually called "Ranulf le Meschin" or, to confuse matters even further, "Ranulf Meschin." There is no entry for "Meschin" to refer the bewildered reader to Ranulf de Bricquessart; and there is no entry in any form for William Meschin, his brother and the holder of Coupland (pp. 31, 34). Gospatric, son of Maldred and earl of Northumbria, who Phythian-Adams thinks is the author of the writ, is in the index; but no other Gospatric is, not even Gospatric son of Earl Uhtred, who has previously been thought the author, or the implied Gospatric II of p. 157, who is in the genealogical table on p. 134. I could go on, but enough! A good-meaning thor-

ough and careful-index would have been a great help to the reader, especially since cross-references in the text and the notes are few. An index this bad, however, is no help at all.

All in all, the effort that this book represents is great; its aspirations are admirable; its conclusions are controversial but will need to be considered by subsequent historians of Cumbria itself and of the many subjects to which Cumbrian developments are relevant; but those conclusions are much less easily accessible than they might have been, and that is a great pity.

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