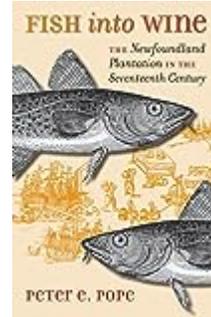


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barbara Yorke. *The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain c. 600-800.* Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006. 298 pp.

Peter E. Pope. *Fish into Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xxvi + 463 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-12-345678-6; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5576-8.



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The Peaceful Conversion: Early Medieval Christianity in Britain

The period between AD 600 and 800 was one of intense social, political, religious, and cultural change. This book charts the history of the progress of the conversion to Christianity from c. 600-800 in the countries that are now England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, and in so doing, also encompasses the dynamic political and social structures of the time. The early medieval history of Britain is exceptionally difficult and controversial. The documentary sources are patchy and notoriously difficult to interpret; they require a knowledge of several languages (Latin, Old English, Early Irish and Early Welsh), all now either dead or archaic; the coverage is uneven, both in terms of chronology and geography—one kingdom, that of the Picts, has no surviving written sources at all, and even the language spoken by the Picts is a matter of debate—and much of the evidence has to be interpreted in terms of the surviving archaeological evidence, though the archaeological evidence itself poses theoretic-

cal and methodological problems which provide fuel for some of the most heated discussions in British prehistory.

Barbara Yorke, a distinguished and experienced early medieval historian, is the ideal person to guide the reader through this documentary and scholarly minefield. Her introduction provides a measured and reasonable assessment of the surviving documentary sources, giving due weight to past and current attitudes to the source material, and including a useful overview of scholarship on the enigmatic Pictish symbol stones. Chapter 1 provides a detailed account of the four distinct peoples (British, Pictish, Irish, and Anglo-Saxon) who inhabited the territory of modern Britain between 600-800, and their changing political and social structures. Having unpacked a social and political history and given a context for Christianity in Britain, Yorke proceeds in chapter 2 with an account of the ways in which the peoples of Britain took decisions to accept or reject Christianity. Chapter 3 looks at

the structures and culture introduced by the church, and considers the way in which Christianity was absorbed into early medieval societies, while chapter 4 assesses the wider impact of the church on social life, covering such topics as death and burial, marriage and sex, concepts of sin and penance, kingship, poverty, and medicine.

Absorption and integration are the key features of the conversion of Britain to Christianity. Christianity had already been introduced to the British and Irish before the starting date of this narrative, and both Pictish and pagan Anglo-Saxon tribal leaders seem to have been open to the advantages which Christianity brought, not least improved trading with the wealthy continent, and new ecclesiastical structures which would support and bolster emerging kings and their kingdoms. With the exception of the unfortunate Donan and his monks on the island of Eigg, there were no heroic martyrdoms in Britain, and Christianity was successfully integrated into the fabric of British society with surprisingly little resistance (p. 133). By discussing this peaceful integration, Barbara Yorke is able to shed light on the organization and ethos of the early medieval societies that facilitated this transition.

What sets this book apart from many others on the subject is its determination to give equal and fair coverage to all parts of Britain. The majority of other published research has tended to have a regional focus.[1] There have been few attempts to study the process of Christianization for the whole of Britain, with the exception of Maurice Barley and Richard Hanson's edited collection.[2] What the titles of other works on the subject illustrate is that it is difficult to pinpoint the dates at which to start and end a narrative of early medieval Britain. Defining geographical boundaries is also, in some contexts, a problem, though histories of Britain benefit from the handy natural border provided by the sea. Yet the chronological and geographical boundaries which define this book pose awkward problems, setting it at odds with the book's own stated intentions. Neither early medieval social history nor the conversion to Christianity began in AD 600. The starting point for Christianity in Britain is open to debate. The date ranges appearing in other works on the topic of early British Christianity are instructive, running from 300 to 1,000 and covering dates in between.[3] For the native British, the conversion began before the departure of the Romans; for the Irish one might argue for St. Patrick (AD 493) as a useful marker.[4] For the Anglo-Saxons, the arrival of the Augustinian mission (AD 597) represents a convenient beginning, even if Christianity had already filtered into parts of Anglo-Saxon society by other means; it is also

the date at which Columba of Iona, who was probably the first to bring Christianity to the Picts, died. A starting point of c. AD 600 for this work on the conversion of Britain, then, seems Anglo-centrally late. The seventh century does mark a starting point in the Celtic church, but as a period of consolidation and divergence of pre-existing Christian structures.[5] An end date of c. AD 800 seems equally arbitrary, and is not explained.

The geographical limitation of the series, excluding the modern Republic of Ireland, is also awkward for this period. It is frankly impossible to discuss the development of Christianity in Britain without incorporating a part of Britain which played such a key role in the narrative. Barbara Yorke does stray beyond the geographical and chronological limits of her title where necessary. She offers a full review of the evidence for Christian Britain preceding AD 600, including an assessment of the facts for the lives of Patrick, Kentigern, and Columba, and a careful weighing of the arguments for the identification of Finnian/Ninnian, making one wonder even more why 600 was chosen as a starting date. She insists early in the volume that "the history of Ireland does not form part of this volume" but the period is one of "considerable interaction between Ireland and Britain" (p. 50). A focus on the Irish Dal Riata, whose kingdom did, as it happens, fall within the territory of modern Britain, does not quite make up for the lack; by chapter 2, she includes a full discussion of early Irish Christianity (pp. 109-111).

The series editor's preface to this volume notes that, while the series is predominantly concerned with the interplay between the Christian religion, politics, and social organization, "other world religions" existing alongside Christianity are discussed in the final volume, and in this context, this first volume has surprising links with the last (p. vii). Barbara Yorke certainly draws out the evidence for the interplay between "secular" and Christian society in the early medieval period. Any pre-existing religion is discussed in Yorke's characteristically clear and uncomplicated style, but more perhaps could have been done. The relatively small amount of space devoted to pre-Christian religion is partly, perhaps, due to that start-date for the volume; by AD 600 the Picts, British, and Irish had all been converted, and the Anglo-Saxons were already on the path to becoming Christianized.

One of the many issues facing historians of this period is that documentary sources, always limited in scope, are now even less capable of being viewed as factual accounts of events and people than was once thought: Barbara Yorke herself demonstrated how the

early part of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has to be seen as a series of myths and stories, heavily biased to create an ancestry appropriate to the ambitions of ninth-century kings of Wessex, while the archaeological resources of the period have been gaining some ascendancy over the documentary in resolving, or adding new dimensions to, old debates. Archaeology is no longer the “handmaid” of history for this period.[6] As such, Yorke gives due attention to the ways in which sculpture, artifacts, and place-name evidence can elucidate (or contradict) the written sources. It is a small gripe, then, that this volume contains neither illustrations of the rich and informative material culture, nor a critical discussion of the archaeological evidence to match the detailed analysis of the documentary sources, leaving the reader the impression that documentary sources require careful handling, while archaeology may be dropped into the discussion without a comparable need to be aware of theoretical and methodological issues. I do not wish to exaggerate the point: Yorke handles the archaeological material with intelligence and sensitivity, but this volume emphasizes a continuing need for a modern synthesis of archaeological and documentary material for this period.

At the outset of the volume, Yorke warns the reader that “the traveller to the period c. 600-800 has to accept that not only will there be certain aspects of its history that will probably never be fully comprehended, but also that much of what can be known will be unfamiliar” (p. 2). What follows is written with such clarity, insight, and accuracy that an interested reader should feel better able, in the end, to understand the problems of this volatile period without feeling overwhelmed. Major debates are assessed and all viewpoints are carefully considered, and Yorke frequently moves the discussion forward by asserting her own judgement—she argues that the Pelagian heresy was not a defining characteristic of the British church, for example (p. 116) and counters a current tendency to use the word “minster” to describe early church foundations (p. 160). Most importantly, this book succeeds in demonstrating that a careful compari-

son of different parts of Britain, including Pictland, so desperately lacking in direct documentary sources, does lead to a deeper and more rounded picture of early medieval society in Britain as a whole. Barbara Yorke is experienced, knowledgeable, judicious, and clear in her assessment of the sources, and her book should add to any reader’s enjoyment of this fascinating and contradictory period.

Notes

[1]. Michael Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002); Colman Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650-1000* (Maynooth: Laigin Publications, 1999); Nancy Edwards and Alan Lane, eds., *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Henry Mayr-Harting, *The coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1991); John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[2]. Maurice Barley and Richard Hanson, eds., *Christianity in Britain, 300-700: Papers Presented to the Conference on Christianity in Roman and Sub-Roman Britain* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1968).

[3]. Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450-1150* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[4]. Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London: Batsford, 1981).

[5]. See, for example, Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England: 600-800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Colman Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650-1000* (Maynooth: Laigin Publications, 1999).

[6]. Barbara Yorke, “Fact or Fiction? The Written Evidence for the Fifth and Sixth Centuries AD,” *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 6 (1993): 45-50.

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