Part I

Introductory Matter

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Chapter One

Introduction

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This volume is a collaborative history of Britain and Ireland from c. AD 500 to c.1100. It gives special attention to areas of recent historiographical development and advance. It does not set out to provide a narrative, though it will attempt to provide a new historical account and overall picture of these critical centuries. It covers Britain and Ireland at an arguably significant, if not formative period. This task is both a huge challenge and a pressing need. Britain-wide, let alone Britain and Ireland-wide, history poses problems at any period, but acute ones for these centuries. The historiographies of these islands are divergent and make comparison difficult; the demands on any scholar who tries to range across them are high. Their political geography was far more complicated at this period than at any later date. Thus, the core political story, which holds together so many historical surveys of later periods, cannot easily be written.

The focus is on Britain and Ireland. Ireland is, of course, not a part of Britain, either as defined in the early Middle Ages or now. "Britain" is the biggest island of what might be described as the "Atlantic Archipelago," and early medieval writers, following classical geographers, already used the term "Britannia" in this way. Britain thus includes what we would now call Scotland, England, and Wales. Any inclusion of Ireland or any part of Ireland within it is a result of centuries of English imperialism. But Ireland is to be given all due attention in this volume. The reasons are simple. What is now Ireland was at this date linked to, as much as separate from, much of the development of Britain, and was, in many respects, crucial to that development. It would be impossible, for example, to tell the story of English conversion to Christianity, or of Scottish kingship, without reference to Ireland. As these conversion and political stories would illustrate, the Irish Sea joined as much as, if not more than, it separated those around its shores at this date. They experienced common problems, such as Scandinavian attacks during the ninth century, and, at times, formed close political links; for example, between the north of Ireland and the west of what is now Scotland throughout much of the period, or between Dublin and York in the later ninth and tenth centuries. The political boundaries within what is now Britain and Ireland were far from fore-ordained c.500, or even much later. One

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aim of this volume is to see the early Middle Ages in the Atlantic Archipelago as it developed, rather than teleologically; that is, from the viewpoint of its later shape. That aim necessitates the inclusion of Ireland.

The inclusion of Ireland also has the effect of de-centering England, or rather southern England. One of the potential pitfalls of British history is Anglo-centricity, a history of England with additions. This danger is compounded in this early period by the poverty of sources for northern and western Britain vis-à-vis southern England. Ireland, by contrast, has extremely rich sources, if in some ways markedly different from English ones (see chapter 3). Ireland cannot and should not be taken as representative of Scotland or Wales at this date: it is thus not being seen here as providing the "Celtic" alternative picture. But its inclusion sets up comparisons that ensure a wider focus, and one from which the study of southern England should itself benefit.

Even these most preliminary statements about a history of Britain and Ireland run into a fundamental problem, that of political terminology. It is a problem that dogs a volume of this type, and its organization. "Ireland," "Scotland," "Wales," "England" represent modern political entities. They find some expression within this period, but they correspond very imperfectly to the political geography, or to the identities, of the centuries between 500 and 1100. All these terms were in use during or soon after this period, but none describes or does justice to the complex and shifting politics within it. That complex and shifting situation is partly revealed by the bewildering variety of names used for groups and political entities within Britain and Ireland over these centuries. A range of Latin and vernacular terms was in use. Some denoted apparently wide groups or areas: for example, Scotti, Hibernia, Erenn, Alba, Picts, Angli, Englisc, Angelcynn, Englalond – very rarely Anglo-Saxon – Britannia, Britones, Cymry. Yet alongside these, others remained in use and appear to describe much more limited groups: West Saxons, East Saxons, Northumbrians, Leinstermen, Ulstermen/Ulaid. Some of these terms have recently been the subject of much productive scholarship, though their meaning and significance are still hotly debated. Their variety underlines the fluid politics, if not identities, of this period. Study of them has certainly highlighted potential differences between cultural and political identities. But it has also raised problems of change in the use and meaning of some of them, and emphasized their ideological deployment; for example, in the making of claims to political control. Such debates, plus the fact that these terms are far from consistently used over the whole period, mean that they cannot easily be substituted for the modern terms.

The modern terms will thus be used here to describe the geographical areas that they now cover, since it is necessary to give the modern reader some purchase on these remote centuries. But we must be aware from the beginning of the problems that this use entails. The aim of this volume is to approach this period without assumptions about its eventual political shape, with no sense that any one of them was fated – or bound – to develop, retaining an eye for a range of political possibilities, rather than putting on blinkers which lead the historical gaze firmly forward to a known future. Chapter 2 will consider the nationalist historiographies that have profoundly influenced the study of this period, and alert us to their power. Yet the very use of these terms may carry an insidious because silent teleology. It is almost impossible to avoid them, but we must be fully aware of their dangers. These same

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historiographies have produced other terminological sensitivities among modern historians, particularly over such terms as "nation" and "state." The authors in this volume are especially alert to the problems of these terms. Many of them have preferred the more neutral "polity," a synonym for any political unit, which avoids questions about whether and when any of these might be described as "states"; the more general usage in this volume is "kingdom," which describes the nature of almost all the political systems with which they are dealing.

There are certainly other ways in which historians have divided the areas to be considered here. The distinction between upland and lowland Britain – that is, north and west and south and east, respectively, of an imaginary line from the Humber to the Severn – may seem a useful one.[1] That line has a very rough correspondence with economic distinctions between pastoral and arable-based farming, though there are many significant micro-patterns either side of it. In Ireland, the fertile plain of Brega has some of the same economic significance as lowland Britain. Historians have pointed out the significant coincidences of such geographical divisions and political development: southern English and southern Scottish power, for example, centered on control of these lowland areas. These divisions are discussed more fully by Howard Clarke in chapter 5.

These divisions are crude, even when refined to allow, for example, for the particular geography of Wales, with a highland center separating coastal strips. Like Howard Clarke, we should be aware of the importance of other, more regional and local divisions. Important as the wider geographical divisions are, they too have not formed the basis of the organization of this volume which eschews any straightforward geographical or economic determinism. We should, nonetheless, be aware of geography and its influence, and of other geographical features such as the Mounth, the highland area acting as a significant barrier between northern and southern Scotland, or the combination of deep estuary and extensive marshland that made the Humber a more formidable barrier to travel in the early Middle Ages than it is now. On the other hand, the Irish Sea, as has been noted, should be seen as a highway as much as a divider. Its routeways and links took Patrick there in the fifth century, and the southern English nobles fled across it after defeat by the Normans in 1066. They explain the strong political and cultural links that bound Ireland and western Scotland. The kingdom and *Chronicle* of Man demonstrate that sea kingdoms should not be ruled out as possible lines of development, including ones that might have encompassed areas of what are now Wales and west and northern England, though it should also be remembered that the Irish Sea's unity long had a darker incarnation as a slaving lake.

We must be wary of how we divide, yet also aware that contemporaries themselves were divided and made divisions. The Northumbrian monk Bede, in the early eighth century, divided the inhabitants of Britain by languages, those of the Angles, Britons, Scots, and Picts and Latin. The divisions within the period may have varied, and were almost certainly even more complex. The Germanic language of the "English" differed between, for example, Anglian and the Late West Saxon in which most of our surviving vernacular texts are written. In what is now north-west England, the "Cumbrians" and ultimately "Cumberland" shared a name very similar to the Welsh self-designation as "Cymry" and probably spoke a Brittonic language whose status vis-à-vis Welsh is much debated. The incoming Scandinavian settlers of

north-west as of eastern England spoke a different Germanic tongue from the one in local use by the ninth century, though recent work has suggested the possibility of mutual comprehension. As Barbara Yorke points out in chapter 4, for Bede, as for many others in the early Middle Ages, peoples were defined at least in part by language. But we should not assume it was any more simple a barrier or definer than geography.

The date limits of this volume, c.500–1100, are to a degree arbitrary. They correspond roughly to the end of Roman Britain and the arrival and first impact of the Normans. These are processes that have long been seen as significant. For example, another division that could be made within these islands is between areas that had been Romanized or felt Roman influence before AD 500 and those that had not, although Roman influence was felt much more widely than simply in Romanized areas, and the whole Atlantic Archipelago was, in some senses, a peripheral area to the Roman world (see chapter 9). The end date is deliberately not taken as 1066, the year of the Norman victory at Hastings. That date has more immediate relevance for England than for the rest of the area under consideration here. And an end date of 1100 allows consideration of the Normans' immediate impact, throughout Britain and Ireland, without focusing a spotlight upon them which then defines their arrival as a turning point.

Within this period, no simple narrative has been attempted; the chapters, especially pre-800, have not been organized to produce this. There are some obvious lineaments and themes which give it shape: the end of Roman Britain and the arrival of a new set of Germanic inhabitants at the beginning, both processes well under way, and Roman withdrawal complete, before AD 500, but with continuing significance into the sixth century. Conversion to Christianity, already under way in fifth-century Ireland and technically complete in Wales and west Britain by 500, was a phenomenon of the sixth and seventh centuries among the Picts and in England. The vikings – a term that describes a particular type of Scandinavian activity – were active throughout most of the Atlantic Archipelago during the long ninth century, and continued to be important into the later tenth and eleventh centuries. They receive due attention here, especially in the first stages of their activity, not least because they dominate the historiographies of this period. Those historiographies have also placed center stage some of the "hero kings" who are known for their responses to the vikings: Máel Sechnaill in Ireland, Cinaed/Kenneth in Scotland, Rhoddri "Mawr" in Wales, Alfred "the Great" in England. In England and Scotland, these kings have been seen to mark a crucial step on the road to monarchy and unity. All four find their place in this volume, though their reigns are not used to organize its coverage. It is linear political narrative in particular that has been largely omitted here.

The prime reason for this is a recognition of the limits of the volume, which covers such a wide chronology and geographical area at a time of great political complexity. Any linear political narrative would be sketchy and would threaten to simplify the story around a series of "great kings," so judged, in most cases, by the very historiographies that entrench the views of inevitable developments which is one of the interpretations that this volume seeks to scrutinize. Linear political history lends itself to the painting of a heroic past beloved of particular types of nationalist historiography, though cultural history has its own pitfalls, not least of Golden Ages that can console the political "failures." Good political narrative of this period needs to allow

for the range of outcomes that was still possible, placing and understanding political action within its full contemporary context, ideally with very detailed coverage of that context. So complex a story is clearly impossible for this date range within this compass. The chapters that deal with the structures of politics and political society – with, for example, nobility, kingship, communities, courts and law, kinship – give some idea of the nature and parameters of political activity, and highlight similarities and differences here. A number of chapters do nonetheless attempt an overall narrative for particular parts of Britain and Ireland at certain dates. This is especially the case where such a story is hard to find in existing historiography and/or where its establishment is still a pressing need or is contested, and thus central to current historical endeavors – thus for Scotland, Wales, and, to a lesser extent, Ireland in the tenth and eleventh centuries. For England in this period, the lineaments of such a story are readily available. Here, the opportunity has been taken to subject a particularly influential picture of precocious English unity to scrutiny, especially by separating coverage of Southumbria and Northumbria in their post-900 development, though separating England/Britain north and south of the Humber still lumps together West Saxons and Mercians post-900. In all these cases, treatment is responding in different ways to the state of existing work. Inevitably, however, there have been many omissions.

Three chapters (9, 15, and 22) deal with "Britain, Ireland, and Europe." They are a deliberate reminder that these islands were far from isolated from, albeit by some definitions peripheral to, continental Europe. Events and developments there, and especially in Francia (covering large parts of modern France, Germany, and the Low Countries), were of significance for Britain and Ireland. And, as these chapters make clear, influence was not a one-way traffic.

This volume has thus been structured by a number of aims and questions. Some are well-established ones – for example, Christianization or the arrival and impact of the vikings – and here the volume seeks to provide both an update on recent rethinking and a new synthesis. Many are broadly sociopolitical, much concerned with the building blocks of political society and with the question of how it worked. But behind these questions also lurks an older question, or rather an older question reframed: were there substantial and fundamental differences across these islands? In its older form, this question often seemed to take divergence for granted and to seek its origins. We hope that our reframing is different. We do not begin from an assumption of difference and divergence, especially not by 1100. That remains an overall question.

The question "How did it work?" is not the same as "Why, if at all, did it change?" Attention to structures may highlight factors producing possible change. And treatment of the economy, Christianization, vikings may be critical here. But the chapter structure deliberately avoids giving priority to any particular historical explanation of change – whether, for example, economic or ideological – preferring to allow room for all, for interactions, and for long-term continuities.

Three final notes on the approach in this volume are needed here. First, the treatment of women: one of the great advances in recent historiography has been the study of women (see chapter 2). Any broad treatment has to decide how to include this. With the exception of chapter 28 on queens and queenship, the deliberate decision here was against specific chapters on women. Rather, the brief was to be

alert to women throughout. The danger is that they may disappear again in such a broad sweep of history; the hope is that they thus become, as they should be, part of the mainstream of historical writing. Second, the treatment of names: preference throughout is for the non-anglicized form of names. Some familiar names may thus appear – at least to English readers – in unfamiliar forms: Kenneth as Cinaed, Malcolm as Máel Coluim. Writing British and Irish history makes us acutely aware of English imperialism, including its linguistic forms. This nomenclature also reflects significant shifts in recent Scottish historiography (see chapter 2). Third, divergences of interpretation: no systematic attempt has been made to iron out differences of interpretation between authors. Given the problems of sources and historiography, differences among historians on this period have been, and sometimes still are, both significant and legitimate. It is to that historiography and those sources that attention must now turn.

Note

1 Frame, *Political Development*, p. 13.

Bibliography

Frame, R., *The Political Development of the British Isles, 1100–1400* (Oxford, 1990).