

## CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – The History of the English Church and People

**Reviewer name:** David Kenvyn

**Book title:** The History of the English Church and People

**Author name:** The Venerable Bede

**Genre:** History

**Overall Rating:** Excellent

**Brief summary:** It is not usual to write a review of a book some 1,300 years after it was written. I should explain. I was looking for something to read during this period of lockdown caused by Coronavirus, and I found on my bookshelves a beautiful Folio Society edition of The History of the English Church and People which I had bought ten years ago. Reading it again seemed like the natural thing to do. I am not a student of Anglo-Saxon history and have not had to be so since I took my history degree in 1971. I bought this book because it is beautiful and for no other reason than that. Reading it again has, however, prompted some thoughts which I think are worth recording, simply because this is an extraordinary book which has defined our historical thought not just about the period but about the country in which we live. The introduction tells us that Bede, from the age of seven, was brought up in the monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth, and that the furthest that he travelled was to Lindisfarne and York. It is therefore obvious that he may not have had much in the way of access to written sources from which he could write such a history. The three monasteries were all new foundations, following from the invitation by King Oswald of Northumbria to the Abbot of Lindisfarne to send missionaries to convert his people to Christianity. Although the three monasteries had famous libraries, they could not have been very big – possibly a few hundred books. Also, copies of some of these books, such as the Gospels, would have been held in all three libraries. There would also have been a library at York as part of the legacy of Bishop Paulinus. Bede had very few written resources at his disposal. The oral resources, and Bede says repeatedly, that he has relied on people's memories and the stories that they have told him, are notoriously inaccurate. Even taking into account that people who did not write, such as the Northumbrians, had to rely on their memories and the stories passed down to them. They were quite capable of remembering Beowulf or the Song of Caedmon. The problem was that the Northumbrians, being Anglo-Saxon, were invaders. They killed, dispossessed and drove out, or enslaved the Romano-Britons. There would have been some intermarriage and concubinage, but no access to the oral traditions of the original inhabitants. Bede mentions Gildas as a source, but he wrote in Latin. There is no mention of Y Gododdin, which Aneirin composed in what is now southern Scotland, in the century prior to Bede's writing. It appears that Bede did not have access to sources in Welsh, either because he did not read it (quite likely) or because he did not travel to places where those sources would be available. This may explain the striking inaccuracies about this building of the two Roman Walls. He is entirely accurate about the location of Hadrian's Wall, which is not surprising given that it stretches from Jarrow, where he lived, to Carlisle, but he ascribes its building to the Emperor Septimius Severus, who was responsible for major repair work, but not its building. That, of course, was the Emperor Hadrian. The likelihood, however, is that in Bede's time it was called the Roman Wall Again, with the Antonine Wall, the location is correct from Abercorn to Dumbarton, but Bede claims that it was built after the withdrawal of the Romans. The Antonine Wall was, of course, built by the Emperor Antonine, Hadrian's successor, and was an earthwork nor a stone wall. It was abandoned very quickly. Bede gets the sequence of building and the locations right, but the dates of construction are wrong. It is reasonable to assume that his sources were unreliable and also that he had no

reason to doubt them. This leads me on to a second area where I have concerns about the accuracy of Bede's account. Bede states time and again that the Welsh clergy made no effort to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity and he blames this on their intransigence. In this he compares them unfavourably with the Irish, Gaelic-speaking, monks of Iona who did send missionaries, upon the receipt of a royal request from King Oswald of Northumbria. Oswald, according to Bede, had spent his childhood and youth on Iona, in exile and hiding from his murderous relatives. It was there that he accepted the Christian faith, and so when he finally fought his way to the throne of Northumbria, it was natural that he should send for monks to begin the conversion of his new subjects. Thus, began the ministry of Aidan. My point, however, is that there was a royal invitation. There was no such invitation to the Welsh monks. Indeed, it is likely that the Romano-British clergy were treated by the invading Anglo-Saxons in the same way that the Anglo-Saxon clergy were treated by the invading Vikings. It is likely they were killed or fled and that their churches were burned. We know this, amongst other reasons because Bede tells us that when Augustine arrived in Kent that Queen Bertha, the Frankish Christian wife of King Ethelbert, used to pray in an old church dedicated to St. Martin, and when the King converted, the monks began to "build and restore churches everywhere". Bede gives a much more graphic illustration of this Anglo-Saxon hostility to British Christianity. Ethelfrid, the pagan King of Northumbria, gave an order when in battle against the British to massacre the monks who had come to pray for their side's victory. The first thing that is extraordinary about Bede's account is that he refers to "a great slaughter of the faithless Britons". They clearly were not faithless as they were accompanied to the battle by some 1,000 monks. It was Ethelfrid and his Northumbrians who were the pagans, the idolaters, the faithless, or rather should have been regarded as such by Bede. He then recounts the words of King Ethelfrid: "If they are crying to their God against us, they are fighting against us even if they do not bear arms." Bede then says that King Ethelfrid ordered that the first attack should be unleashed on the monks. Normally, you would expect a monkish historian to condemn such an attack on monks. Bede does not. He looks for an excuse in that the Welsh Bishops had rejected the authority of Augustine, and that this was their punishment. I do not think we have to look any further for reasons why the Welsh were unwilling to try to convert the English. Unlike the monks of Iona, they were not invited in and did not have royal protection. What they faced was royal enmity. Bede chooses not to acknowledge that. There is another peculiarity. The founder of the Royal House of Wessex, according to the genealogies, bore the name of Cerdic. The only Cerdic mentioned by Bede is a British King who gave shelter to Hereric, the father of St Hilda, when he was forced into banishment. Bede does say that Hereric died of poison whilst under the protection of King Cerdic. There is, of course, no proof that this Cerdic and King Cerdic of Wessex were the same man. But it does raise an interesting question: why did the first King of Wessex have a Welsh name? This is reinforced because the next King of Wessex mentioned by Bede is Cadwalla, the father of King Ine, who abdicated in 688AD in favour of his son and went on a pilgrimage to Rome. Cadwalla is definitely a Welsh name. Bede mentions on several occasions, Cadwalla, King of the Britons, who fought against and killed King Ethelfrid, and fought against King Edwin and King Oswald. We therefore have two early Wessex kings with Welsh names. We also know from the laws of Ine that there were Welsh living in Wessex because the wergild (fine) for killing a Welshman was less than the wergild for killing a Saxon. Bede did not travel further south than York. He would have heard about the affairs of the Kingdoms of Kent and the East Saxons, through his knowledge of Bishop Paulinus and his contacts with Bishop Wilfrid and other missionaries from those kingdoms. He would have had no direct contact and little knowledge of the Kingdom of Wessex. I am left wondering if he made any effort to find out. One final thing: Bede was very concerned about the dating of Easter and the refusal of Celtic Christians to accept the dating used by the Roman Church (and therefore their refusal, by inference, to accept Papal authority). Bede's obvious

admiration for Aidan is tempered by his adherence to a different method of dating Easter to that of the Roman Church. This, of course, led to the refusal of the Welsh Bishops to accept Augustine's authority over them, and they regarded him as arrogant and authoritarian. What we have is a book that was written by a Northumbrian patriot, and a controversialist arguing for the Roman position on the dating of Easter. It affects the way that he writes, and the way in which he interprets history. It is still a remarkable book.

**What you liked:** Despite my criticisms, it is the founding work of English History

**Anything you didn't like:** It is written by a Northumbrian patriot and is dismissive of Mercia, and especially of the Welsh

**Who should read this book?:** People who are curious about the history of the British Isles.