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Book Review: *Slaves and Warriors in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800-1200* by Dr. David Wyatt

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*Slaves and Warriors in Early Medieval
Britain and Ireland, 800-1200* by Dr. David
Wyatt

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pages

(Richard Marsden – Glasgow University)

The investigation of medieval slavery is still rooted in an approach first laid down by the likes of Adam Smith and John Millar over two hundred years ago. They conceptualised history as a series of stages through which societies moved, driven by the motor of increasing economic sophistication. In this conceptualisation, slavery was an economic institution and its decline in Britain during the eleventh and twelfth centuries was therefore the result of economic progress on the journey towards modern capitalism. Bolstered by the economic determinism of Marxist theory, this model has dominated historical understanding of medieval slavery up to the present day.

In *Slaves and Warriors in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland*, Dr. David Wyatt provides an alternate view of medieval slavery. Rather than seizing on its decline as a means of demonstrating societal progress towards the present, Wyatt takes an unflinching look at its causes and characteristics in their own right. He argues that slavery was first and foremost a cultural institution rather than an economic one. As such, it was an integral part of the social fabric of early medieval societies in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

Wyatt begins his study by mounting a perceptive survey of explanations for medieval slavery from the Scottish Enlightenment to the present day. In so doing, he shows how abolitionists in the 1700s and 1800s adopted the idea of Britain as a freedom-loving nation with an inherent abhorrence for slavery. When coupled with imperialist attitudes towards ethnicity which cast Europeans as superior to Africans, this rhetoric made the white slavery of the medieval period particularly unpalatable. The result has been a potent desire to marginalise the relevance of medieval slavery on the part of historians who are uncomfortable with this distasteful element of the British and Irish past. Wyatt shows that this desire was not only a hallmark of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but can also be found in the work of some of the leading medievalists of the later 1900s. This historiographical analysis is one of the book's greatest triumphs, although Wyatt's occasionally homogenising discussion of

the complex historical discourses of the past 250 years shows that his specialism is in the medieval rather than the modern period.

The centrepiece of the book is the connection between the institution of slavery and the functioning of societies led by warrior elites. Slavery was one aspect of a strict patriarchal hierarchy which promoted internecine competition and violence on the one hand, but powerful vertical bonds of social cohesion on the other. Wyatt depicts slave-raiding as an articulation of power by groups of young males, and a symbolic act which signified entry into manhood. Female rape and abduction, and the associated virilisation of those carrying them out, acted as initiation rites that were based on expressions of sexual dominance. Conversely, to be enslaved was to be rendered powerless and therefore emasculated and feminised. The act of enslavement was thus a means by which individuals were able to assert their masculinity and gain membership of warrior fraternities. This argument benefits from the use of anthropological parallels and also makes the important point that such practices were endemic in Anglo-Saxon England as well as 'Celtic' societies. On the other hand, the book perhaps underplays the distinctions between those 'Celtic' societies and could go further in questioning the anachronistic use of the term by medievalists

In the later stages of the book Wyatt focuses on the church reform movement of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the reactions of that movement to societies for whom social order was founded on power and virility. To Reformers, sexual activity was intimately associated with sin. One of their goals was therefore to eradicate the corruption of the secular world and move all sexual activity within the ecclesiastically controlled institution of marriage. Reformers also sought to limit the violence of secular society. These goals offered fundamental challenges to a cultural milieu in which warrior elites articulated power through forms of violence and sexual dominance that were accessed primarily via the institution of slavery. As Wyatt convincingly argues, when the Normans brought these Reform ideals with them during the conquest of England the result was a culture-clash with the pre-existing societies of Britain. A civilising dynamic consequently developed which acted as justification for acts of English political and cultural imperialism. These acts in turn contributed to the eventual decline of slave-raiding and slave-owning in Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

One of the book's strengths is that it draws not only on secondary reading from within the field of British medievalism, but also applies theoretical approaches from other disciplines. Moreover, Wyatt supports his argument with frequent reference to an impressive array of Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, Norman and continental primary sources. One criticism that could

be levelled is that the book sometimes relies heavily on literary material, which tends to present an idealised view of the society that created it without a clear anchor in the realities of medieval life. However, since much of the book is concerned with the mentalities behind slavery, this reliance is to an extent justifiable. Furthermore, given the emphasis placed on the dichotomy between slavery and freedom, the work would benefit from a deeper analysis of manumission.

Nevertheless, Wyatt successfully presents an analysis of medieval slavery in cultural terms and offers a riposte to traditional interpretations warped by the lens of anachronistic economic principles. Moreover, he uses slavery as a means of understanding how early medieval societies operated in Britain, the conceptual context in which they were located, and the ideological conflict that affected them from the eleventh century onwards. Whilst the book will be controversial amongst established medievalists, it offers a new and exciting exploration of how societies worked in Britain and Ireland during the early Middle Ages. As such, it is an essential read for anyone with serious aspirations to scholarship in that field.

The Kelvingrove Review

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