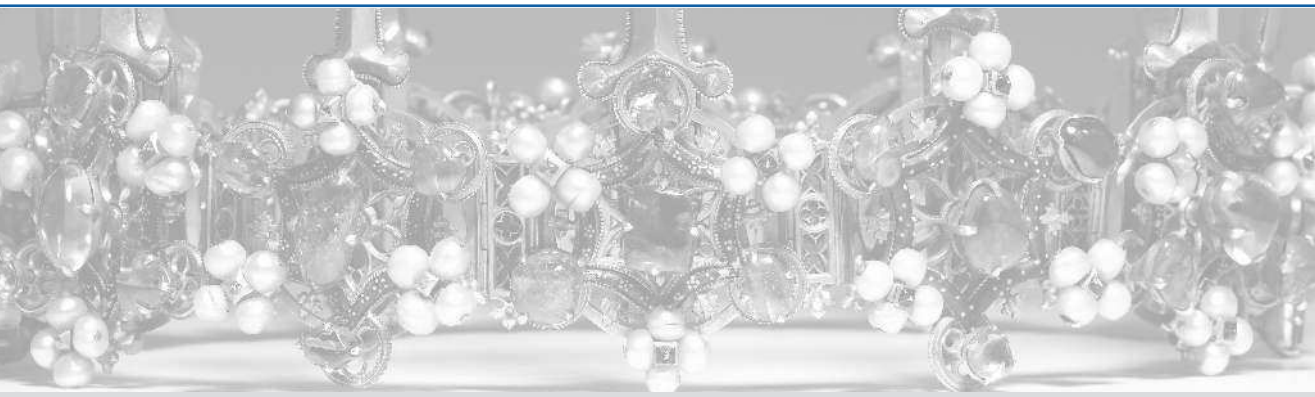


Introduction

People in Britain in the middle ages did not know they were medieval. Educated men in the twelfth century were in fact proud to be called 'modern' (Lat. *moderni*: 'the people of here and now'), a word that the century invented. Intellectuals of the day were very proud of their attainments in Latin literature, and the romance writer of the 1170s, Chrétien de Troyes, believed that in his own time French-speaking society had attained heights of civility and military culture unknown since Rome. For Chrétien, his society was rising to greatness, and it was not in a trough between waves of human attainment. 'Medieval' people of a reflective turn of mind believed their day and age were expansive and developing along the same lines as the great minds of the ancient world whom they studied and imitated with avid intelligence. The idea that they occupied a dark age of ignorance was not one they could have accepted, though it was a given for most of them that it was sinful. An idea that a decline had followed the days of the Roman Empire and continued until their own time was one that Italian grammaticists of the mid fourteenth century first smugly suggested, but when they did they were referring only to their standard of Latinity, which they claimed to have renewed to the standard Cicero had attained. It was not until the seventeenth century that people began to look back at the fifteenth century and those that preceded it as a 'middle age' between their own modern times and that of the Romans, and when they did it was to their superior, humanistic learning they were referring. It was the likes of the French philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) who latched on to priest-ridden ignorance as the characteristic of the 'middle age', a view consolidated by nineteenth-century positivist humanists into an orthodoxy that if something was 'medieval' it was dark and blighted and suppressed the human spirit. It is a usage that is still common currency amongst politicians and journalists, which they apply to any practice they think socially retrograde, in a blithe demonstration of their own ignorance.

Reading these chapters will take you back among the 'medieval' people of Great Britain, and, if you've not met them before, I think you'll find they were not at all what you might expect from the use of that adjective. They certainly had a high idea of the Christian religion and its promises. Their fascination with its theology and their own limited world view are not now our own in general, for the modern world has found other sources of promise in the philosophies of social economics and natural science. But medieval people also had a high idea of the rights of the political community of their various realms and an ability to articulate it from which we still benefit. They despised and resisted political corruption; sought true justice; hoped the best for their own lives and for their children, whom they loved; met the horrors of pandemic and disease with a fortitude that humbles us, their descendants; and pursued their own prosperity with enterprise, doggedness and originality. They had an aesthetic sensibility in music, colour, form and stone that still delights and, in its symbolic science of heraldry, is still widely employed. The lions of England and Scotland in red or gold were already figuring on their kings' banners and shields by 1200. The medieval sense of humour left a lot to be desired, it's true, but medieval people could deploy vast reserves of irony against a sometimes harsh world, which is a triumph of the human spirit. They liked to laugh, eat and drink, and, when all is said and done, they lived not that far away from us. If eighty years is a frequently attainable life, then six such lives, laid end to end, take us back amongst medieval people. They knew that you should let sleeping dogs lie and not expect old dogs to pick up new tricks; that still waters run deep; that you should cover your mouth when you cough; and that you should be suspicious of the French (and all foreigners, in fact). They discussed the finer points of horses, dogs, beer and wine, and were very much into organised sport as both spectators and players. For all our differences, medieval people were our ancestors in thought, aspirations and manners, as much as in our genes.

This book covers half a millennium of the history of Great Britain, the principal island of a major archipelago on the eastern Atlantic continental shelf. As is the way of things in the world of medieval historians, it had to be written either by an 'early' medievalist or by a 'late' one, which in basic terms means someone who studies the period on either side of the year 1300. My period of specialist study falls into the earlier period. This has advantages and disadvantages. The resulting book is not going to be written to prove how it was that the world of 1500 came into being, by just writing the prehistory of the things that are perceived to be the key features of fifteenth-century history. History written backwards can be trapped into teleology, and, if (for instance) a historian thinks that its political constitution was what defined medieval England, then he will (as late medievalists tend to do) begin his history in 1215, the year of Magna Carta. Anything that came before would be irrelevant and perhaps also less sophisticated and interesting, as earlier societies inevitably seem to historians of later days. But an earlier medievalist knows that Magna Carta was part of a much older process, thrown up as

one temporary solution to the basic inherent flaw of medieval monarchies, that they only worked when the personality of the king matched the expectations of the community of the magnates of his land, with whom the king had to negotiate to get anything done.

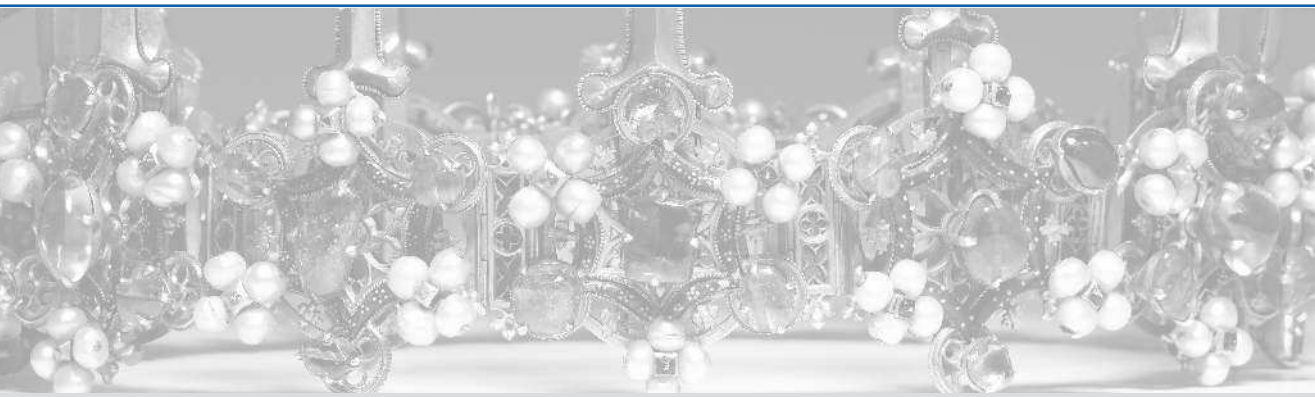
The problem of earlier medievalists writing later medieval history is the mirror image. We are prone to seize on later developments and claim our own period as having produced them. We also forget that occasionally entirely new developments arise which have little precedent in the earlier period. So for one like me the temptation is to claim Magna Carta as a central if not culminating event, the 'origin' of a British concern for social justice, the rule of law and democracy. It would give my period cachet and would make me feel good about it. Since I am aware of that temptation, the verdict you will find here is that Magna Carta was an emergency measure produced by the breakdown of what had been until the accession of King John an effective, long-term solution to the problem of kingship: government by council and consensus in which the frequently absent king took a back seat. It only accidentally became the banner for an aristocracy which saw itself as the guardian of the community against the abuses of an executive monarchy. Just like a later medievalist looking backward, my history looking forward is inevitably going to be handicapped by presuppositions.

Another problem in writing this book is that the island of Great Britain during its period was home to three peoples, the English, Scots and Welsh (which I have taken care here to put in alphabetical order, not in order of importance). Since the nineteenth century, each of these British peoples has developed its own historical tradition as the consciousness of its national identity was tested and contested by their modern world, where history's principal purpose was to tell the national story, almost always in relation to current political concerns. It is only since the 1980s that medievalists, principally under the impulse of Sir Rees Davies, have deliberately moved to looking at how the (four) peoples of the British Isles interacted. Talents like Rees Davies's are rare ones, but it helps to be Welsh. The view of medieval England of one brought up west of Offa's Dyke in a different culture will differ from a native of, say, Warwickshire (a county that has produced a remarkable number of distinguished living late medievalists, as it happens) to whom England tends to be central. As a Welshman myself and a writer on Welsh as much as English history, I can at least claim a close acquaintance with two out of three of the peoples studied here.

There is more to the difficulty of writing a coherent British history than the juggling of national stories. At the very beginning of the period of this book, the kingdoms of England and Alba were actors in a wider northern world, dominated by the seagoing Scandinavian powers, who had periodically colonised the British Isles, and indeed in 1000 ruled large parts of them. The influence of the Atlantic and North Sea world did not finally collapse so far as England is concerned until the 1080s, and it remained a larger factor in Scottish history until the very end of this period, when Scotland under

James IV sent a military expedition to the Baltic and deployed his navy to deny the North Sea to the English. But in the meantime the events of 1066 had abruptly drawn England into the Francophone cultural and political world to the south, a fact which would dominate its history for the rest of the period of this book. It was the Francophone world that principally shaped the religion, culture, social structure and literature first of the English, then the Scots and eventually even the Welsh. It was not so much that England had been 'colonised' in the twelfth century by the French; England was a vital French-speaking part of a wide cultural and political zone that it only began edging away from at the end of the thirteenth century. The traffic was also not by any means one way, for Anglo-French culture and literature were of interest to the continental French, and Capetian kings and princes visited English courts and shrines throughout the twelfth century. In 1216 the heir to France thought it perfectly within his rights to claim the throne of England. To write the history of Britain and ignore the European context is to admire the gem without seeing the artistry of the setting.

The treatment of politics within this book is deliberately selective, focusing on those developments which span the centuries and have a broader significance for medieval life. For instance, the reader may be surprised to find the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 absent from the political (though not the economic) treatment of the fourteenth century, but in my judgement its socio-political significance was minimal, other than for Marxist historiography. Reigns which lack major social and political changes, such as those of Richard I (1189–1199) or Henry IV (1399–1413), will tend to get a cursory treatment: not that things did not happen within them that were unimportant in their own day. The turbulent reigns of John (1199–1216) and Richard II (1377–1399) get by contrast a large amount of attention in several contexts, simply because their events were so significant in the long term for all the realms of Britain. In the long view, John's reign, like that of Robert I of Scotland (1306–1329), is very much a political and cultural nexus which transformed not just their own kingdoms, but also the island of Great Britain.



Part I
The Empire of Britain

TIMELINE: 1000–1217

	England	Alba/Scotland	Wales
979	Æthelred II, king		
1002	Æthelred marries Emma of Normandy		
1005		Máel Coluim II mac Coinneach, king of Alba	
1008	English raid on Normandy		
1014	Swein of Denmark invades England		
1016	Battle of Assandun. Death of King Edmund. Cnut becomes king		
1031		Cnut's great northern expedition	
1035	Death of Cnut, succession of Harold I		
1039			Gruffudd ap Llywelyn defeats Mercian earls

	England	Alba/Scotland	Wales
1040		Death of Máel Coluim II. Donnchadh king of Alba	
1042	Edward the Confessor, king		
1050	Exile of Earl Godwine of Wessex		
1055			Gruffudd ap Llywelyn dominant in Wales
1058		English expedition to Alba. Máel Coluim III Ceann Mòr, king	
1063			Earl Harold overthrows Gruffudd ap Llywelyn
1064	Earl Harold in Normandy		
1066	Battle of Hastings (14 October)		
1068		Edgar atheling flees to Scotland	
1069	Battle of Stafford. Danish invasion of the North		Welsh kings invade Mercia
1071			Caradog ap Gruffudd, dominant king in Wales
1072		William I's expedition to Scotland	
1075			William Rufus raids South Wales
1081			Death of Caradog ap Gruffudd. William I's expedition to Deheubarth
1086	Domesday Survey		
1087	William II Rufus, king of England. Robert II, duke of Normandy		

	England	Alba/Scotland	Wales
1091		William II Rufus's expedition to Scotland. Annexation of Cumbria	
1093		Death of Máel Coluim III in Northumberland	Conquest of Deheubarth and Gwynedd by marcher earls
1095	Rebellion against William II Rufus		
1100	Henry I king of England		
1106	Battle of Tinchebray		
1109	First known meeting of the Exchequer of England		
1113		David of Scotland made earl of Huntingdon	
1124		David I, king of Scotland	
1128	Oath to support Matilda's succession		
1134			Death of Duke Robert at Cardiff
1135	Death of Henry I		
1136		David I declares support for Matilda and invades. Treaty of Durham	Rising of the Welsh and revival of kingdoms of Deheubarth and Glamorgan
1137	King Stephen in Normandy		Death of Gruffudd ap Cynan of Gwynedd
1138	Rebellion of Earl Robert of Gloucester	Scottish invasion. Battle of the Standard near Northallerton	
1139	Empress Matilda in England	King David cedes Northumberland	

	England	Alba/Scotland	Wales
1141	First Battle of Lincoln. Stephen captured		
1147	Death of Robert of Gloucester		
1148	Matilda resigns her claim to her son Henry of Anjou		
1153	Peace settlement between King Stephen and Henry	Death of King David I. Succeeded by his grandson, Máel Coluim IV	
1154	Death of King Stephen		
1155			Rhys ap Gruffudd, king of Deheubarth
1157			Defeat of Henry II by Welsh at Ewloe
1158		Henry II reclaims Northumberland and Cumbria from Scots	
1162	Thomas Becket archbishop of Canterbury		
1164	Council of Clarendon. Becket in exile		
1165		Death of Máel Coluim IV. William the Lion, king. David II of Scotland, earl of Huntingdon	Henry II defied by Owain ap Gruffudd of Gwynedd, in alliance with other princes
1169			Anglo-Welsh invasion of Leinster
1170	Assassination of Becket		
1172			Rhys of Deheubarth made justiciar of the Welsh March
1173	Rebellion against Henry II		

	England	Alba/Scotland	Wales
1174		Capture of King William the Lion at Alnwick by English army	
1175		King William swears homage to Henry II on his release	
1189	Death of Henry II		
1190	Richard I on crusade		
1193	Rebellion of John of Mortain, the king's brother		
1197			Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, dominant prince in Gwynedd
1199	Death of King Richard		
1200			
1203	King John driven out of Normandy		
1204	Fall of Rouen to King Philip II of France		Llywelyn marries Joan, daughter of King John
1208	Interdict laid on England		
1211			John invades Gwynedd and defeats Llywelyn
1214	Interdict ends. Battle of Bouvines	Death of King William	
1215	Magna Carta		
1216	Invasion by Louis of France. Death of King John. Reissue of Magna Carta		
1217	Regency of William Marshal for King Henry III. Second Battle of Lincoln		