

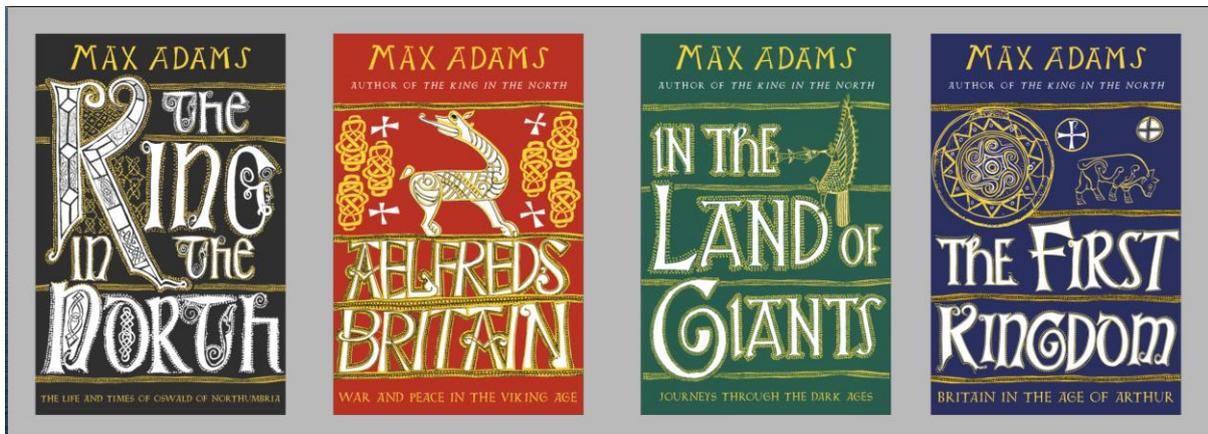
The First Kingdom: Britain in the Age of Arthur

It seems like a long time since I started on this project. It was the logical prequel to *The King in the North* and sets up what is now a sequence of four Early Medieval narratives, ending (at the moment) with *Ælfred's Britain*. People, especially my fellow academics, get very worked up about the term 'Dark Ages'. But the period from about 400, when the Roman Empire and *Britannia* went their separate ways, is certainly the most obscure in our history. Even Bede could only summon a few lines to describe events during the hundred or so years after about 440 – and he was, frankly, winging it. So, here is my take on the period 400 to 600, the two centuries during which the first medieval kingdoms emerged in the British Isles. Those readers hoping for the 'truth' about Arthur will be disappointed: for reasons that I explain in the book, he doesn't help much with working out what on earth was happening during those generations. But I think I have found a way of shining a small light on this enigmatic age of warriors and mead cups and, as usual, I have been looking for clues in the landscape, as well as reassembling the apparently contradictory evidence for migration, political upheaval, plague, fire and mayhem that many of us were taught at school. I hope readers will enjoy the ride; but they'll have to wait a bit longer, because Covid-19 has set the launch date back to February 2021. It's frustrating; but it has meant that I've had extra time to polish the script, draw my own plans of some special sites; take a few more photographs to illustrate it and tweak a few things that didn't quite sound right.



Other book news

Head of Zeus tell me they're planning to reissue all four Early Medieval books in a unified cover design. I quite often argue with my publishing colleagues about covers (I was a book designer in another, fantasy existence) but I think these look great. With *Ælfred*, they nailed it. My other favourite cover is the paperback of *The Wisdom of Trees*: minimal, stylish and unsentimental.



Meanwhile, *Unquiet Women* is going to appear, finally, as a paperback in November 2020. And I'm told that *Trees of Life* has been taken up by Princeton University Press in the US, which is rather gratifying. It, too, is coming out in paperback, in Spring 2021.

Talks and Events

Looking at my diary for 2010 it's clear that something has gone badly wrong: every single appearance, talk, or teaching engagement cancelled from March onwards. It's a great shame – I like doing 'live' work, chatting to readers and telling the stories of the books in different ways, hopefully fresh every time. There's no question that social distancing is going to affect authors badly over the coming months, even though there's no doubt that readers are still reading. I have thought about setting up some online talks and I may get around to it but...

The Wood Age

... as one book project ends, another starts – or rather, takes over. By the time the manuscript for *The First Kingdom* had been sent off to my editor for first comments (back in March) I was already reading and making notes for the next project – a book I have been looking forward to writing for a while. Some readers have told me that they are surprised by what seems like a separate, parallel strand to my writing: trees and woods. Deep down, in truth, I actually consider myself to be a novelist, even a poet, as well as a professional archaeologist and woodsman. To me, all these things are interconnected, aspects of the same passionate interest in humans' relations with their environment. *The Wood Age* will be an exploration of our practical relations with trees and the materials they produce: from the dawn of human ancestry in Africa, five million years ago, to the middle of the 18th century when iron displaced wood as our primary technological material. I'll be exploring the origins of the wheel; trying to understand the inspiration behind some of our simplest but most effective technologies. I'll be rooting around ancient wooden buildings (so far as travel restrictions allow) and talking to craftspeople about their place in the age old mastery of their trade.

Reading

Mostly, these days, I have so much reading to do for the current project that I don't get to enjoy enough literature for its own sake. I have chewed my way through David Anthony's *The Horse, the Wheel and Language* over the summer and thoroughly enjoyed his thesis about the emergence of Bronze Age Steppe nomads. I have also re-read Richard Leakey's spirited account of our arrival on the planet in *Origins Reconsidered* – a terrific read. I have enjoyed poet Kathleen Jamie's *Surfacing*, a series of sketches and stories about communities and landscapes in far flung places. Right now I'm embarking on Robert Musil's epic trilogy *The Man without qualities*, one of those great 20th-century European novels that I feel I should have read ages ago.

Thistle Wood

Thistle Wood now has its own blog, which you can read on a tab on the **Thistle Wood** page on this site. Suffice it to say that trees have kept me busy this summer. But I'm also working on another tree-related project, which I've set up with two old college friends. *Woods for the Trees* is a sort of dating agency, aiming to match spare bits of land with people who'd like to grow trees but don't have anywhere to do it. Check it out here: www.woodsforthetrees.org.