

Oswald Whiteblade: Northumbria's 'Irish' king.
Max Adams

King Oswald was the seventh-century warlord who, in founding Lindisfarne, launched a Golden Age in Northumbrian history whose finest outpouring, the marvellous Gospels on show in Durham this summer, is just one of his legacies. He ensured the survival of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms as Christian states by introducing a simple, unaffected form of monasticism and backing it with all the dynastic patronage at his disposal. In death he became a martyr and hero: his body parts were famous for their curative properties and a cult, invoking his virtues as a hybrid holy-tribal totem, spread across Europe. His purple and gold banner was the model for Northumberland's flag. Today, his shattered skull lies with the relics of Saint Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral but he continues to be invoked as an archetypal Christian prince: a prototype for the chivalrous knight of the Middle Ages.

Oswald is an obscure figure. He ruled for just eight years and his youth was spent in exile. It is only Bede's stirring, if brief, account of his victories, achievements and personality which allows us to glimpse his central role in the Heroic Age: he may have been the inspiration for the epic literary figure Beowulf and such is his place in the pantheon of Dark Age warriors that JRR Tolkien used him as the model for his prodigal prince, Aragorn, in the *Lord of the Rings*.

Oswald comes into sharper relief when we understand the experiences which propelled him towards his destiny, and place him in the landscape to which he returned triumphant in the fateful year of 634. His father, Æthelfrith Iding, was the consummate pagan tribal chieftain, conquering or subjugating the northern lands in a twenty-four year reign which united Bernicia – roughly today's Northumberland, with the kingdom of Deira – East Yorkshire and Durham. Æthelfrith met his destiny in a manner absolutely typical of the age: he was killed in battle by his brother-in law, Edwin Yffing of Deira, in 616. His widow Acha, Edwin's sister, fearing her brother's wrath, fled north with her six sons and a daughter (Æbbe, later the founder of monasteries at Ebchester and St Abb's Head) to Argyll on the West coast of Scotland. Here they remained in exile for sixteen years at the court of the kings of Dál Riata, a colony of Irish Christian clans from across the water. Their great holy man was Saint Columba, or Colm Cille, the Irish noble who founded the famous monastery on Iona in about 565. Colm Cille was a gigantic personality of the period: powerful, well-connected, a brilliant diplomat and charismatic advocate of his brand of monasticism. The tribal Irish Christianity championed by Colm Cille was intense, personal, and rural, very much invested in the patronage system of clan, kin and chief. A very different model had been imported into Kent in 597 by Saint Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury: that was an orthodox Roman church, of central authority under the rule of Pope and bishop; above all it was urban. The Irish abbot owed no allegiance except to his god: his ideal life was that of the exile for Christ, the pilgrim and hermit; and the perfect place to serve and contemplate God was an island in the sea.

When Oswald and his family came to Dál Riata some twenty years after Colm Cille's death the boys were baptised on Iona and its abbots recognised in these young princelings from Saxonland the ideal protégés. Here was an opportunity to expand the influence of Iona: to create an English satellite dependent on and reflecting the prestige of their founding saint. In Oswald they saw a young, charismatic prince who might, with proper training, become *their* Northumbrian king. In Lindisfarne, a place of mystery and legendary power, they saw the chance to create an 'Iona in the East'.

During the long exile of the Iding princes, which they spent fighting in the wars of their hosts and in being groomed by their spiritual mentors, Oswald's uncle Edwin was busy creating, or recreating, an idea of the lost glories of Rome. He had been converted, reluctantly, by the twin influences of his queen, a Christian Kentish princess, and a Roman priest, Paulinus, who famously baptised the Northumbrian nobility in the rivers Swale (at Catterick in North Yorkshire) and Glen at Yeavinger. Here, in the shadow of the Cheviot Hills, the remains of Edwin's magnificent palace were brilliantly excavated by Brian Hope-Taylor in the 1950s and 1960s. Here were mead halls of great architectural splendour; feasting kitchens and totem poles where beasts, the surplus of the bounteous land, were sacrificed to the pagan deities of the Germanic spirit world. Here too Edwin built the unique Romanesque grandstand which has now been reconstructed at Bede's World in Jarrow. Edwin's Christianity was skin deep: his ambitions were earthly and imperial (or what he thought of as imperial). He had pretensions to rule a land in which a mother of a newborn baby might walk from coast to coast without fear of harm; a land in which bronze cups were set up beside springs on his highways to relieve thirsty travellers; in which the king's dignity was announced by standard-bearers walking before him. But his kingdom, like all tribal kingship, was fragile. With his death in battle in 632 at the hands of a Welsh king, Cadwallon, and an ambitious Mercian warlord, Penda, Edwin's Christian state collapsed. A year of rampage followed; Northumbria lapsed into paganism.

The stage was set for Oswald's return. He had already acquired a martial reputation: his Irish nickname, *Lamnguin*, means something like White-blade. In 634, at a battle near Hexham named after the stream called Denisesburn where his enemy, Cadwallon, was slaughtered with his army, Oswald's small band of Columba-inspired warriors triumphantly re-conquered and reunited the two Northumbrian kingdoms. At Heavenfield on Hadrian's Wall, where they had camped the night before battle and where a vision of Colm Cille had inspired Oswald's victory, the returning king had raised a cross, a sign that his kingdom would embrace the church. Within a year he sent to Iona for a bishop and Aidan, a towering figure in the early English church, founded his modest but highly significant church on Lindisfarne. Such was Oswald's authority as a warrior and Christian king that most of the English kingdoms recognised him as their overlord and followed his royal example by converting. Oswald's attachment to the Christian god and his bishop was absolutely genuine and thoroughly Irish in spirit. Oswald sat at the Bishop's side translating his Gaelic prayers into English; there was no suggestion of Aidan bathing in regal glory, and when a later king gave him a horse he promptly donated it to a poor man he met on his travels.

The geography of Oswald's kingdom survives in essence. The ancestral fortress of Bamburgh lay at the heart of a great royal estate whose boundaries and landscape substantially survive as Bamburghshire. At Yeavinger, the tribal totems of the Idings were pulled down and a church built next to the royal mead hall. The lands which the king gave to Lindisfarne so that the church might be independently sustained in perpetuity (in part so that they could pray for the king's everlasting salvation) are those of Islandshire and Norhamshire between Lindisfarne and the Tweed.

The surplus of these lands was 'taxed' on the quarter days of the old British festivals adopted by a pragmatic church; and so the one-tenth render of agricultural surplus – honey, ale, grain, timber and especially cattle – owed to the king by his thegns became the tithe which supported the church. In the Breamish Valley (*Bromic* in Oswald's day) the monks seem to have taken to rearing calves so that they might write their illuminated gospel books. This early form of capital investment fostered a sort of industrial revolution in masonry, agriculture, the artistic crafts, scholarship and, above all, the book. In transferring lands from the royal portfolio which might otherwise have been given for a mere life's interest to veteran warriors, Oswald was in the short-term guaranteeing the stability of the church and the legitimacy of his rule, if inadvertently weakening the monarchy in the long term by 'selling off the family silver'.

Oswald's greatest achievement, in a short reign which ended in bloody dismemberment on the Welsh marches in 642 at a place which came to be called, in bitter irony, Oswald's tree or Oswestry, was to leave a state which might survive him. His canny younger brother Oswiu, who succeeded him as king, maintained the Idings' patronage of the church and expanded it, so that by the end of his twenty-eight year reign there were dozens of churches and monasteries in the North. Stable, powerful and wealthy, Northumbria fostered a rational, expansionist, literate Anglo-Irish church which, in the next hundred years, sent missionaries across the pagan Germanic lands of northern Europe and in turn came to influence the church of Rome. If the Gospels are the most visible manifestation of that Golden Age, its most influential product was the scholar whom Oswald's legacy produced. Bede was pre-eminent in the Europe of his day and remains one of the great intellects who shaped the moral and cultural emergence of England from its dark centuries. Oswald's obscurity cannot mask his profound significance for the founding of the medieval British state.