


BOOK REVIEW

W. Trent Foley. *Bede and the Beginnings of English Racism*

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The provocative title of this volume might encourage a reader to initially assume that it has something to say about the controversies of recent years concerning the links between the study of Anglo-Saxon England and white supremacy. But the connection is implicit, rather than center-stage. Foley's focus here is on the depiction of different racial/ethnic groupings of early medieval Britain and Ireland within Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. In an unexpected move, however, Foley is clear that he does not seek to reconstruct Bede's thought on these groups, much less to use the *Historia* to tell us anything about actual inter-ethnic relations in the early medieval period; rather, Foley wants "to discern within the contours of the text the system or patterns of moral convictions that it impressed upon its later readers" (200). In other words, the question is whether a reader of the *Historia* would reasonably have come away with the kind of racist views about the relative status of the "English race" and its Celtic neighbors so common in Victorian readings of Bede (outlined in chapter 1).

The body of the monograph looks at three races in turn: the Britons, the English, and the Irish. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 constitute patient and detailed close readings of the "council type-scenes" through which Bede depicted these peoples' engagement with universal orthodox Christianity. In the episode of Augustine's Oak (*Historia* 2.2), Foley's imagined reader would see the Britons reject "correct" Christianity from Rome, revealing themselves, consequently, as a perfidious, close-minded people—but they would also come to view Augustine of Canterbury as an ambivalent and problematic agent of orthodoxy. In the famous account of Edwin of Northumbria's conversion (*Historia* 2.9–14), the reader is confronted with an oddly protracted narrative of an undependable king's journey toward Christianity, before finding that the Northumbrians enter the universal Church via a theologically naïve but genuinely consensual discussion. Finally, reading Bede's account of the Synod of Whitby (*Historia* 3.25) would leave the reader certain that the traditional Easter of the Irish monks of Iona did not have an intellectual leg to stand on, but equally convinced that those monks embodied a kind of Christian holiness that Northumbria was the poorer for having lost. The result of all of this, Foley concludes, is that we might reasonably conclude that a reader of the *Historia* could have picked up racist ideas (the Britons were bad, the English good, and the Irish well-intentioned, if wrong) from Bede, but in part only because Bede did not give enough prominence to the elements within his own narrative that push back against such racist views.

Much of Foley's conclusion is unlikely to surprise those who come to the book with a good understanding of Bede's writings or familiarity with the scholarship on his views of the Britons or Irish. The book as a whole strongly highlights the universalist Christian ideology that underpins the *Historia*; against this backdrop, the Irish, English, and Britons function in Bede's narrative as ideal types, at least in part, showing the reader different ways ethnic

groups could engage with the universal Church. All this should hardly surprise anyone who has seriously studied Bede in recent generations. Foley adds to this general view two particular insights of great worth, I think. First, he notes that the *Historia* consistently, if subtly, links Christian universalism to a repeated valorization of consensus, harmony, and community, contrasting it with selfishness and squabbling. In other words, although Foley does not bring it out in these terms, Bede seems to have made the case for universalism as a social, as well as a theological, virtue. Second, the lens of “race” that Foley brings to the investigation enables him to recognize that Bede was open to acknowledging the moral ambivalence and human contradictions of his English characters in a way that he struggled to do for his British or Irish characters. This was, Foley posits, because Bede was blind to Englishness in much the way that white supremacy is blind to whiteness—the monk of Jarrow simply did not present members of the *gens Anglorum* in the same racialized way as he depicted Britons.

The focus on “race” does not always work this well: trying to understand Bede’s presentation of Christian universalism in terms of a “Latin race,” as chapter 2 does, strikes me as unhelpful. More significantly, I feel that Foley could have got so much more from his excellent close readings of the *Historia* if he had not limited the book to being a somewhat odd thought experiment designed to determine whether Bede was partially responsible for nineteenth-century English racism. At the end of the day, as a medieval historian, I do not think that is a very important, or even interesting, question to ask. But Foley makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the *Historia* in his conclusion by pointing out the co-existence of two voices in Bede’s most famous work, “the more esoteric [of which] does not merely tone down the dominant voice’s racism: it actually works to undercut it” (203). Perhaps more persuasively in a footnote he speaks of “a thoroughly ambivalent voice” in the *Historia* (202). As Foley himself recognizes, this argument opens up fascinating and important questions about Bede’s purposes in writing the *Historia*, his audience, his context, and possibly even the values he lived by.

Foley’s thought-provoking book provides triumphant proof of the virtues of close, sympathetic reading of an early medieval text, but it also suggests that if we really want to understand Bede’s role in the beginnings of English racism then we need to study him in context.