BOOKS I HAVE READ: THE NORTHUMBRIANS

Posted on November 25, 2019 by Eddie

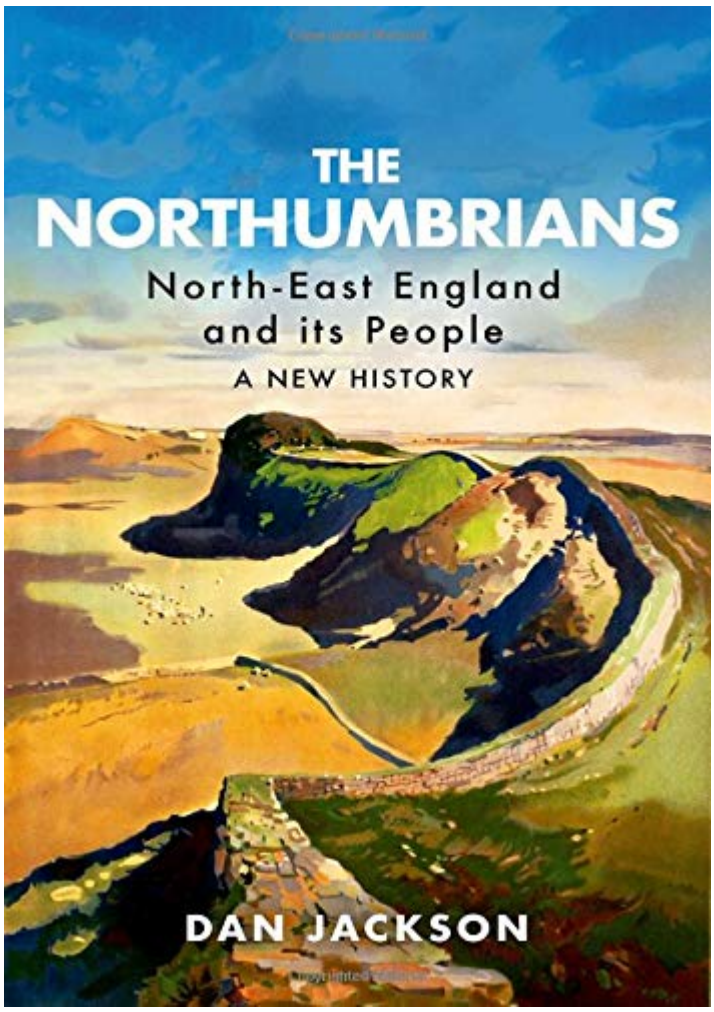
A cracking book about my favourite part of the world, but a lot more than this...
Category: Observations

As you may have noticed, I'm not doing a monthly round-up of all of the books I have read this year (I might do it again in 2020, though) and I've kept my reviews toÂ the theology/mission area. Â The Northumbrians: North-East England and Its People: A New HistoryÂ by Dan JacksonÂ is a book which doesn't fit into the normal scheme of this blog, but I wanted to draw your attention to it for a number of reasons.

First the technical stuff, it's a normal hardback format, with around 260 pages of which 30 are notes and an index. The writing style is easily accessible and the history and politics of the text is enlivened with interesting facts and amusing stories. It certainly isn't a difficult read. Currently, it will set you back about fifteen quid, slightly less for the Kindle version. Oh, and you should consider buying it.

The title of the book lets you know what you are in for, it's about that corner of England which - above anywhere else - I think of as home. It should be immediately obvious to anyone who knows me well, why I would enjoy a book like this. I might have been a nomad for most of my adult life, but I wear my affection for the North-East, its landscapes, people, history and accent, very proudly on my sleeve. I've always been very proud to call myself a Geordie - though apparently, this isn't true and I should call myself a Mackem. However, Dan Jackson points out this distinction only goes back to the 1980s (and I go back to the 1950s!). The book is full of interesting little facts like this; for instance, the oft-quoted Irish termÂ *craic*, is a neologism, derived from the Northumbrian,Â *crack*. I'd always instinctively thought this was the case, but it's nice to see it in black and white.

Anyway, it is obvious that the regional-patriotic son of a Durham miner, who was named after a Northumbrian king would enjoy a book like this, but why should anyone else read it?



Well, on one level, it's a cracking read with enough fascinating material to keep all but the most jaded impartial reader interested. You don't have to describe everything asÂ *canny* and putÂ *man* at the end of every phrase to find this book worth a read.

The North-East of England is a region apart. It's a border region and much of its history and ethnography was shaped by it being fought over by the English and Scots, while never quite belonging to either. When people talk about the North of England, they tend to focus on the M62 corridor, Leeds, Bradford, Manchester and Liverpool. Despite the famed Yorkshire, Lancashire rivalry, there is something which unites these areas and it's not just rugby league. However, the North-East has a distinct geographical and cultural history which sets it apart from what is commonly thought of as the north. Perhaps it all stems back to the fact that while the Vikings settled in Yorkshire, they only ever raided north of the Tees and never made their homes there. If nothing else, I wish people would read this book so that they would grasp the idea that there is no such thing as a monolithic view of the North.

Northumbria is a small corner of England if an especially beautiful one. It has in my, not unbiased

opinions, the two finest pieces of architecture in the country in Durham Cathedral and Hadrians Wall, some amazing beaches and some of the most run-down and depressing urban and village landscapes that you are ever likely to meet. For most of its history, this small corner has punched well above its weight, (despite being a punch-bag for the Scots and English). Bede wrote the first history of England in Jarrow, the first house to be lit by electricity was Cragside in Northumberland and it was Northumbrian coal - moved south on ships built on the Tyne and the Wear - which powered industry in London and the south of England. There are many different aspects to the heritage of Northumbria which are developed through this book, with an attention to detail and an eye to a good story. The intellectual heritage of the North-East is developed as is the military tradition, oh and beer gets one or two mentions, too. All this and more is covered in the book, anyone with an interest in cultural history will find something here. But there is more.

As a child, I remember the winter of 1963. One of my parents would pick me up from nursery school and we would take the long bus journey home. Outside Doxford's shipyard, there would be seemingly endless queues of men waiting; they would pile onto our bus, filling it beyond what would be legal, today, but without making any appreciable impact on the long lines. Our town was dominated by shipyards, we built more ships than anywhere else in the world. As I've mentioned, my dad was a miner. Every Sunday, we'd go to see my Grandma who lived in a small town five miles south of Sunderland, a town with three working coal-mines. The shipyards and the pits have all gone now. Within my lifetime a whole region has faced economic and social collapse on a massive scale. Dan Jackson tells this story, too.

In a world where transport spending per capita in the south of England far exceeds that in the North, not to mention personal income, education levels and life expectancy it is vital that people understand why certain regions of the country are the way they are. Issues like Brexit don't just emerge out of nowhere, they have long historic and cultural roots. If we are ever going to get beyond sound-bite politics and simple tropes, we have to start to understand one another. Dan Jackson does a great job of opening up one area of the country to the outside observer. OK, I'm biased because this is my corner, but I'd love to read something similar about Kent, or the East Midlands or...