



Britain Begins

Barry W. Cunliffe

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The last Ice Age, which came to an end about 12,000 years ago, swept the bands of hunter gatherers from the face of the land that was to become Britain and Ireland, but as the ice sheets retreated and the climate improved so human groups spread slowly northwards, re-colonizing the land that had been laid waste. From that time onwards Britain and Ireland have been continuously inhabited and the resident population has increased from a few hundreds to more than 60 million.

Britain Begins is nothing less than the story of the origins of the British and the Irish peoples, from around 10,000BC to the eve of the Norman Conquest. Using the most up to date archaeological evidence together with new work on DNA and other scientific techniques which help us to trace the origins and movements of these early settlers, Barry Cunliffe offers a rich narrative account of the first islanders - who they were, where they came from, and how they interacted one with

another. Underlying this narrative throughout is the story of the sea, which allowed the islanders and their continental neighbours to be in constant contact.

The story told by the archaeological evidence, in later periods augmented by historical texts, satisfies our need to know who we are and where we come from. But before the development of the discipline of archaeology, people used what scraps there were, gleaned from Biblical and classical texts, to create a largely mythological origin for the British. Britain Begins also explores the development of these early myths, which show our ancestors attempting to understand their origins.

And, as Cunliffe shows, today's archaeologists are driven by the same desire to understand the past - the only real difference is that we have vastly more evidence to work with.

Britain Begins Details

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From Reader Review Britain Begins for online ebook

Paula says

Cunliffe's book gives us a cutting edge view of the latest findings in the archeology of Britain and northwestern Europe. Archeology is a field that is presently expanding its scope through creating a science out of what was once mere speculation. Tracing the origins of the metal or stone used to create a tool shows that trade routes were in place between Europe and Britain continuously from Paleolithic times to the present. Newest findings show that men began to settle into communities long before the dawn of Neolithic agriculture. The DNA evidence confirms the artifact findings. Both show that the people of Britain were part of an overall migration pattern that took them from the heart of the Fertile Crescent, across the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, up the Atlantic coast of Europe and across the English Channel. This blows away dated theories about land migration from north of the Black Sea into eastern Europe, and then into the western part of Europe.

The author has skillfully presented the latest findings, in an easy to read and enjoyable style that kept me turning pages. There are plenty of maps, diagrams and pictures of artifacts to supplement Cunliffe's narrative, giving the reader a clear understanding of a highly complex subject matter. It has left me eager to learn more about this delightful, evolving field of study.

Carlton says

An extremely readable overview of the history of Britain for the general reader who wants a rigorous introduction, without getting bogged down in footnotes and citations. It has relevant illustrations and useful maps setting out sites of particular interest mentioned in the text.

To use Barry Cunliffe's words:

This book attempts to do two things: first, to give an account of how past writers have tried to understand the peoples of these islands and where they have come from, and then to offer a narrative of the first 12,000 years or so of the British and Irish based on current understandings. Any such narrative must, of course, be highly selective. This is not an archaeology of early Britain and Ireland.

Around 12,000 years ago, as the ice-sheets receded and temperatures began to rise, bands of hunter-gatherers started to populate the lands later to become the British Isles. The narrative outlined in the book has stressed the innate mobility of humankind, a mobility that is inherent in our genetic make-up.

Mobility may be motivated largely by instinct, but it is controlled within a social structure designed to encourage and reward it. Mobility may also be forced by demographic pressure. A community that has reached the holding capacity of its territory will encourage migration, usually by a section of its young. In more extreme cases populations may be driven from their lands by marauding neighbours or by environmental factors.

Cunliffe has an excellent prose style, so this is an easy read. He also has knowledge and experience, lightly worn, to know when to provide detailed examples and when to "pull back" and provide an interpretation of the *longue duree*.

I found the brief process of noting past generations interpretation of the archaeological records before setting out the details and basis of current understanding to be very useful. Occasionally Cunliffe will take a larger European view, but this is always relevant to subsequent developments in Britain. There are also three "interlude" chapters where Cunliffe examines issues outside of the chronological framework the chapters

otherwise follow.

Cunliffe also peppers his narrative with interesting and humorous facts, retaining your interest by varying his delivery.

There is also an excellent guide to further reading at the end, as good books lead to others.

I read this book in two sessions, reading the first four chapters, which made me read more widely, in particular *The Making of the Middle Sea* about the populating of the Mediterranean and books about the Celts to tie in with an exhibition at the British Museum, before completing the book.

Robert Bear says

Barry Cunliffe is the authority on the British Iron Age, and he has written many books on British pre-history. Compared to the others, this book is also very readable. You don't need to be an archeologist to understand it. His research and scholarship are impeccable. He paints a broad panoply of Britain from the dawn of pre-history through the Norman conquest.

Michael says

Truly only a book for a person interested in British history. But if you are then this book will serve as great overview from prehistory till after the Roman period.

Dwayne Coleman says

A mass of archaeological data to process, but it makes a convincing argument to reassess what we know (or think we know) about the settlement of Britain, the origins of Celtic cultures, and post-Roman Britain, and the Anglo-Saxon migration. The last chapter, on the coming of the Norsemen, is fascinating as well. It is a "must read" for anyone deeply interested in the history of the British Isles.

Alex says

I can't hide my disappointment. Barry Cunliffe has been my archaeological "hero" all throughout my undergraduate degree and I loved his previous books, especially *Facing the Ocean*. However, I was deeply disappointed by *Britain Begins*. It gives an overly simplified picture that is at best misleading - at worst erroneous. Cunliffe attempts to draw Ireland into the picture that he is painting and his summary includes many mistakes and misrepresentations of the archaeology of the island. Why not just focus on Britain? Words such as "mysterious" past abound and induce a lot of eye-rolling. I never thought I would write such a review about a book by an author whose research I admire and respect deeply, but this was just disappointing.

Alex Telander says

The settling of the islands that would one day come to be known as Great Britain is one of the most fascinating times of history, as so much of what would become Western Europe was shaped and formed by these early periods and yet it is also one of the lesser known periods of history. But thanks to numerous advancements and discoveries made in the fields of archaeology and genetics, Barry Cunliffe brings readers the new definitive text on the founding of a nation, people and culture.

Cunliffe is a renowned British professor who has specialized in archaeology and is known for his excellent history books on early Britain and Europe, including *The Ancient Celts*, *Facing the Ocean* and *Between the Oceans*. In *Britain Begins*, he takes readers far back, starting with the myths and ancestors of Britain and then leading into shortly after the end of the last ice age, when the freezing waters retreated and Britain became an island once again. He then takes the reader down a detailed and fascinating history road addressing who the ancient Britons were, the settling of the Celts, on through the Roman invasion and ruling period, up to the Anglo-Saxon and then Norman invasions.

It is rare to see a book that ends with the battle of Hastings and William the Conqueror, but this is not just any history book. Scholars and fans of the history will both delight in owning *Britain Begins* with its detailed text, numerous photos and illustrations lending visual proof and answers to a period that up until now has remained relatively unknown.

Originally written on March 24, 2014 ©Alex C. Telander.

For more reviews, check out the BookBanter site.

Richard Lee says

Excellent - Barry Cunliffe really brings the pre-history of Britain to life. It's refreshing that he's not afraid to speculate within the realms of the archaeological and scientific evidence about how our ancestors lived and thought.

Unfortunately the Kobo version isn't properly formatted and the illustrations are poor, at least on my basic Kobo device.

Renée says

A very readable fascinating book especially the parts dealing with the period BC, I thought the period AD was written somewhat less motivated somehow (hardly paying attention to the influence of Christianity for example). Cunliffe is an excellent archaeologist but I am afraid he sometimes makes rather bold and oversimplified conclusions when it comes down to historical linguistics (e.g. he still sees the difference between P/Q Celtic languages as a major divide). His Tartassian theory set up with Koch is very interesting though. Throughout the book it is not entirely clear whether he also wants to include Irish prehistory, he sort of touches it now and then but also ignoring huge bits. Recommended read!

George Siehl says

Cunliffe has been a practicing archaeologist for many years in the British Isles. Here, he draws upon his work among the artefacts and monuments to create an account of the people who have populated the islands for over a half-million years. He supplements his own discipline with a fine appreciation of the other fields of study that contribute to the story of man's place on the land over time: geography, geology, genetics (including the exciting new explorations through DNA analysis), linguistics, and the use of such tools as dendrochronology to fix the place of evidence in time.

His account of the sequential movements of peoples from the European continent thousands of years BC, and the active cross-water trade that developed between many points of the continent and the islands is awesome. The motive of curiosity and the urge for mobility feature continually in his narrative, as does the economics and sociology of trade. He ends his tale about the time many reader may start to feel comfortable with the history involved: the end of the Scandinavian incursions of conquest around 1100AD.

There are many instances where Cunliffe's narrative flows engagingly. However, there are more than a few places where the wealth of detail seems excessive. Nonetheless, overall, the book is a rewarding read for those who are curious about the progression of civilization, government, trade, and transnational community on the Northwest edge of Europe from deep prehistory to the Viking era.

Claudia Putnam says

Somewhere between 3 and 4 stars. I don't know, what's with the Brits, do they refuse to use CE? Are they especially religious? What's the problem?

Annoyed me throughout.

I found the idea that Celtic might "always" (at least super-anciently, as in, not worth bothering about prior to any other timeline) have been the language of Western Europe intriguing, but feel skeptical. I don't think using DNA to track migration patterns really works--you always end up with truncated timelines. For ex, the DNA suggest that Native Americans arrived more recently than the archaeological evidence is starting (or scholars are beginning to admit, finally) to show. Linguistics is tricky. You can create a set of proto words for objects that didn't exist (like peanut, in proto-Bantu, or wheel proto-I-E. I'm not ready to accept that Celtic is as ancient as that, but I'm willing to stay open about it.

(I did read an article recently that argued the opposite... that the Celts were simply another wave of Germans that came over just a few hundred years prior.)

So... the old, old stuff was the most interesting part of this book. I hated all the assumptions... Men were always in charge. Wives were being traded. Etc. No way to know this. I also question the assumption that ancient societies organized themselves the way we do... nobility, lords... that grave goods denote what we would understand as power in our society today. In a shamanistic society things might be different. In a potlatch-type organization it might be QUITE different.

So I felt his contemporary-male-Brit-class-based outlook was showing quite a bit.

Nevertheless, there was much here to fire the imagination and I do recommend the book.

Sharon says

A lot of good information on what is known about early Britain but the writing style was a bit tedious at times and repetitious in places.

Zaiga says

Chock full of archaeology, which makes for slow reading, and lots of place names are tossed out in a way that the author seems to assume his reader will know where they are or what their importance might be. But it was super interesting to learn about the populations and cultures that have moved into and out of the British Isles since the last ice age, mixing and marrying along the way. It reminds us that there is no such thing as a "pure" blood line. The author also reviews the various theories and ideas scholars have historically had about early Britain and Ireland, and how those evolved. The book ends with the Norman Conquest.

Sam Worby says

Good introduction to British prehistory. Beautiful illustrations.

Toby says

A very good introduction to, and summary of, archaeology in the Twenty First Century. It's not all trowels and artifacts now. DNA analysis plays as big a part as traditional investigation. Cunliffe is a very engaging author and the photos and maps are beautiful as well as being an aid to understanding.

Jeremy says

An excellent treatment of the history of the British Isles up to the Norman invasion. Profoundly informative and well-grounded in evidence. Many non-specialist readers will find the level of archeological detail in the text overwhelming, but it all contributes to building a strong and grounded understanding of the different phases of British and regional history. Brilliant insights emerge from all that evidence, so I found it well worth some sections that felt like a bit of a slog. Highly recommended.

Peter says

Perhaps the best introduction to pre-historic Britain around, written by undoubtedly the best qualified person to write it. Despite the coffee table format, it's not a light read. However, Cunliffe's handling of the technical side of archaeology and the academic analysis of what it tells us makes it highly accessible to the non-specialist.

J.S. Dunn says

This title from the eminent and likable professor arrived surprisingly soon after *Celtic From The West* (2010), and earlier works. Cunliffe's latest synthesis of research offers his familiar accessible style in a user-friendly format loaded with maps.

There is a tendency to use academic-speak phrases, such as "It is surely no coincidence..." when a more definite statement, or a conclusion, is warranted. No need to sound like one is defending a dissertation, nor being squeamish about verified data. Certain topics should have received a more emphatic tone, but it may be that at this stage in an august career Cunliffe leaves that to younger voices.

Commendable in particular are his assessment of: changes at 1500 BCE (see p 235 et seq), the origin of the Gaelic language, the probable evolution of the Gaelic calendar away from early solstice/equinox , and his comments on religion (p 344 et seq).

The question arises, why that title for this work? Using Britain to label all the Isles can only further confuse many Yanks, who are fuzzy on how the various national entities of the Isles fit together. A more inclusive term for the Isles than Britain would have been a wiser choice, never mind that may reflect an anglicized version of a tribal name in prehistory. It does also seem that through the entire text, differences between Ireland's archaeology and genetics and contributions are glossed over; eg, the age and unique features of the Boyne complex [compared with Maes Howe and the later Stonehenge]. After a few hundred pages, it is difficult to convince oneself that the disproportionate emphasis on the larger island, that the natives probably called Big East (Innis Mor East), is accidental.

By the final pages, a tilt or bias toward the classical era is evident. But a recent dig showed that Iron Age Britain already had many "Roman" features in settlement layout and trade goods. Did the Romans add anything beyond their system to strip the Isles of wealth, ie, taxation?

David Gardner says

Brilliant! A scholarly work that moves beyond the traditional but misguided interpretations of our beginnings

Liam Guilar says

Cunliffe never loses site of the limitation of the methodology or the evidence he is using. Which cannot be said of all modern Archeologists. He's particularly good on the strengths and weaknesses of the modern vogue for DNA 'Evidence'. I bought this because I wanted to read a sane and up to date summary of what's

currently thought about the Germanic migrations into Britain, and he provides it. But I found myself reading the whole book. Beautifully illustrated, with many maps and diagrams, and surprisingly readable for a book that doesn't flinch from the necessity of making the details evident, or the processes required to get at them, or for admitting that there are times when the History just cannot be known.
