Book Review:
Francis Pryor, *Britain AD: A Quest for Arthur, England and the Anglo-Saxons*
(Harper Collins, Great Britain, 2004)

Howard M. Wiseman
School of Science, Griffith University, Australia

This book was a great disappointment. Pryor is a part-time archaeologist who has a bee in his bonnet about the way archaeology has, in the past, played second fiddle to the study of written sources for post-Roman Britain. In the two centuries after the end of Roman rule in 410 the written record in Britain almost dries up, so archaeology is of course immensely valuable. This was the time that an historical Arthur may have lived, and the time during which the Anglo-Saxons came to dominate most of England, hence Pryor's title.

Drawing on his experience of archaeological studies of prehistoric cultural change, Pryor advocates applying the same methodology to this period. That is, he ignores the written records and tries to reconstruct post-Roman history from the archaeological record alone. The results are ludicrous. Based largely on evidence for continuity in farm use, Pryor concludes that there was never an Anglo-Saxon invasion of (or even peaceful migration to) Britain. He explains the change, from a literate, Christian, Brittonic- and Latin-speaking society with coinage, masonry, and manufactured goods, to an illiterate, pagan, Old-English speaking society with none of these, as a deliberate cultural choice. He says in all seriousness that the people in eastern Britain changed "for their own reasons, which we *must* allow them to have … presumably they admired the way things were done across the North Sea." (p. 214).

Pryor says that he has "chosen to set the literary accounts aside … to redress a historical imbalance" (p. 215). One would think from this that Pryor has read the literary accounts before setting them aside, but this is evidently not the case. First, he seems to think that Gildas'*On the Ruin of Britain* (*ca.* 540) is the only contemporary source to mention fighting against Saxon invaders of Britain. Thus he tries to discredit Gildas, but fails miserably. Just to take one example of many, Pryor says that Gildas "greatly exaggerated the severity of Anglo-Saxon piracy" (p. 143) when in fact Gildas never mentions Saxon pirates or sea-raiders at all. It is also apparent that Pryor has not read Bede, despite referring to him several times. For example, Pryor assumes (p. 174) that the British clergy that met St. Augustine in 603 were from the south-east, when obviously they were from the west because Augustine travelled to the Severn to meet them.

The other contemporary sources for Saxon invaders in Britain, which Pryor completely ignores, are continental: the Gallic chronicles and the Life of St. Germanus. But this ignorance pales in comparison to Pryor's disregard for a huge body of Roman history when he states that "the very idea of a 'Migration Period' is absurd. Why should people suddenly decide to move around in this peculiar and hyperactive fashion?" (p. 176) It seems Pryor cannot believe that riches, power, and a better climate were incentives enough for Germanic armies and their hangers-on to invade the Roman Empire.

Presumably he believes that all over the Empire citizens suddenly decided they liked "the way things were done" on the other side of the Rhine or Danube, became Germans, and started pillaging their own cities (while never moving home of course). Laughably, he asks "why should the social disruption brought about by the end of the Western Roman Empire cause people to wander aimlessly about?" (p. 148), when it was the invasions (which were far from aimless) that were the immediate *cause* of the end of the Empire.

Returning to Britain, Pryor contrasts his views with the long-discredited idea that the Anglo-Saxon invaders drove out all the Britons from eastern Britain, or swamped them by their numbers. It is now generally thought that the Anglo-Saxon invaders numbered in the tens of thousands at most, and formed a military elite. In this scenario, it is not surprising that farms continued to be used as before. It can even be imagined that some of the cultural change in post-Roman Britain was a reversion to pre-Roman practices, as Pryor argues. Most of the peasants would have stayed put, and indeed would have chosen (over the course of some generations) to identify themselves as Anglo-Saxons in order to improve their social prospects. But even in this scenario, they changed *because there was an Anglo-Saxon invasion*. Pryor in fact shoots himself in the foot by explaining the spread of Anglo-Saxon culture in Britain by analogy with the spread of the Spanish language and religion in Peru, where the native population always far outnumbered the Spanish. But to imply that the process whereby the conquistadors destroyed the Inca Empire and massacred tens of thousands of its citizens is a model for "acculturation" (p. 240) is simply insulting.

Britain AD is published with a "Post-Script" including an interview with the author. In it, he is asked how he starts to writes a book. He replies: "With an outline which I agree [sic.] with my agent and publisher at great length; I then abandon it when I start to write." Unfortunately *Britain AD* reads exactly as if had been written in this way. It comes across as a collection of arguments the author wants to get off his chest, interspersed with anecdotes about the profession of archaeology and rural life in the Fens. The material in each chapter flows to some extent, but does not seem to be focussed on anything in particular. For example, the chapter "Arthurian Britain" begins with a discussion of Roman towns in general, concentrates for some time on Wroxeter, then moves to towns in the Anglo-Saxon east, to Christianity and continental trade there, to continental trade in the south-west and finally, to inscribed stones and the Age of Saints. Let me finish, however, on a positive note by saying that it is plentifully illustrated with colour plates, and the maps and diagrams are first-rate.