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Book Review: British Battles 493-937: Mount Badon to Brunanburh by Andrew Breeze

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Andrew Breeze, *British Battles 493-937: Mount Badon to Brunanburh* (London: Anthem Press, 2021), ISBN: 978-1-83998-070-1.

Bringing together ten chapters based on previously published papers (numbers 1, 3-4, 6-8, 10-13) and three new contributions (numbers 2, 5, 9), this collection focuses on thirteen battles from an onomastic perspective. Readers may consult several of the previously published papers underlying these chapters in *Northern History*, 39:1 (2002), 41:2 (2004), 44:2 (2007), 50:1 (2013), 51:1 (2014), 52:1 (2015), 53:1 (2016), along with two further papers about Arthurian battles on which some of the arguments depend in *Northern History*, 52:2 (2015) and 53:2 (2016). If this whets their appetite, they may then find this collection a convenient single place to follow up on arguments developed in a variety of other publications – the *Journal of Literary Onomastics*, *Neophilologus*, and two edited volumes – as well as for its new contributions. The battles range from early conflicts between Britons and Anglo-Saxons or Picts whose historicity is debateable – *Mons Badonicus* (?493), *Camlan* (?537), *Arfderydd* (?573) and *Gwen Ystrad* – to more securely-attested encounters involving Britons, Picts, Anglo-Saxons, and Vikings, such as *Degsastan* (603), *Chester* (613), *Hatfield* (633), *Hefenfeld* (634), *Maserfelth* (642), *Uinued* (655), *Alutthèlia* (844) and *Buttington* (893), culminating with the iconic battle of *Brunanburh* (937). Most of the chapters propose an identification of the place of the battle. Some chapters seek to defend an existing suggestion as preferable to others: for *Camlan* Breeze favours Roman *Camboglanna*, probably Castlesteads (Cumbria); *Arfderydd* is recognised as Arthuret (Cumbria), but Breeze suggests a more precise locus at the farm of Carwinley; *Gwen Ystrad*, Breeze confirms, should be associated with the River Winster (Cumbria); *Buttington*, Breeze argues, refers to the Buttington in Powys. Other chapters propose a new solution: *Mons Badonicus* as the Iron Age hillfort of Ringsbury above Braydon Forest (Wiltshire); *Degsastan* as Wester Dawyck

(Borders); *Maserfelth* as in the parishes of Berriw and Forden (Montgomeryshire); *Uinued* as on the River Went (South Yorkshire); *Alutthèlia* as Bishop Auckland (Durham); and *Brunanburh* as Lanchester (Durham). Still other chapters, however, are concerned with different onomastic issues – whether an obscure *Cetula*, who supposedly fell at the Battle of Chester, might be Cadwal of Rhos; or whether a British-Latin place-name, *Caelestis campus*, ‘plain of Caelestis (personal name)’, inspired the Old English place-name *Hefenfeld*, as opposed to being a Latin translation of that Old English name; or what was meant by the Brittonic term *Meiceren*, apparently applied to the battle of Hatfield, and whether it could be appropriate to the identification with Hatfield Chase (South Yorkshire/ North Lincolnshire).

Each of the chapters has a similar format, beginning with a long review of existing scholarship surrounding the battle, its protagonists, its name, and its location. This tends not to rehearse all the evidence or arguments, but instead to note significant outcomes and where there are disagreements. This provides a handy quarry to be mined for a range of existing publications which will need to be sought out and analysed in detail by anyone wishing to test the arguments set out here. Depending on their disciplinary background, readers will probably feel more or less qualified to judge the logic of the arguments in individual instances. Beginning from an historian’s perspective, for instance, I felt more qualified to think about whether an argument concerning a battle based on sources first copied or composed centuries after its supposed date – an issue for the cases of *Camlan* (?537), *Arfderydd* (?573) and *Gwen Ystrad* – was as secure as one relating to battles recorded in more near-contemporary sources. Equally, I felt equipped to make a judgement on certainty in cases where other historical evidence provided a broad region within which a battle should be located (*Uinued*, *Alutthèlia*); or where the methodology involved rejecting the recorded version of name for a hypothetical alternative (*Mons Badonicus*, *Degsastan*); or, in the absence of an attested name, where it involved the search for a topography that would fit the

name's meaning (the equation of *Cocboy* or *Maes Cogwy* with a conical hill two miles east of the farm of *Dyffryn*, where there is no recorded name including the relevant element). Yet I felt ill-equipped to make judgements on the technical linguistic arguments, for which I would want to turn to an expert for advice. This was thrown into relief by comparing Paul Cavill's careful elucidation of the etymological evidence for the roots of *Brunanburh* and its likely equation with Bromborough on Wirral, in a number of publications, revisited recently in *Northern History*, 59:2 (2022), with the arguments set out here.

At the outset Breeze suggests that the identifications might be used in three main ways. First, to acquire a better historical understanding of the battles. Second, to seek archaeological traces of the battles. Third, to offer an onomastic methodology for use in other instances. Focusing on onomastic analysis – which is necessary and justifiable in itself – the book does not seek to consider the historical or archaeological contexts or implications, leaving that for others. Potential purchasers might keep this in mind when they read on the cover that it 'is one of the most revolutionary books ever published on war in Britain' or in its opening sentence that 'This book is about war, and specifically about early battlefields in Britain'. Rather, it is about the etymology of names, the links between names and places, and the identification of the places at which battles occurred.

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