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a review of B. Sykes, *Blood of the Isles; Exploring the Genetic Roots of Our Tribal History* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), ISBN 0-593-05652-3

[This review was originally published in *Fortean Times; The World of Strange Phenomena*, 220 (2007), 63.]

A good scientist does not necessarily make a good story-teller, but Bryan Sykes is a notable exception. His usual, thoroughly entertaining style presents the findings of hardcore genetic science as easily digestible piecemeal units, dressed in accessible language and a sprinkling of anecdotes that never strike one as bumptious or facetious as the book unfolds. In this balanced manner, Sykes discloses how many years of collecting DNA samples from the population of Britain and Ireland, followed by meticulous laboratory analysis, allowed the reconstruction of two independent phylogenetic trees: the DNA extracted from the Y-chromosome reveals each person's paternal ancestry, whilst the same person's mitochondrial DNA determines his position in the family tree showing female descent.

As presented in the book, the science behind this analysis seems to rest on irreproachable logic coupled with a judicious interpretation of the hard data. Still, a far less rigorous mindset is revealed wherever Sykes and his team exceed the boundaries of their own field to link their conclusions with the information coming from other disciplines. Striving "to use genetics most effectively" (p. 2), Sykes is repeatedly seen to adjust or narrow down the array of solutions suggested by DNA analysis on the basis of palaeoclimatological or archaeological data. The most disturbing flaw by far is the bold uniformitarian assumption that the rate of genetic mutation is *constant* (see p. 106). Stepping into a similar pitfall as his 19th century precursor, Charles Lyell, this undocumented and utterly uncritical assertion then serves Sykes as an illusory means to gauge the antiquity of individual genetic lineages. This remarkably feckless aberration from the usual scientific rigour takes on rather dangerous proportions when such age estimates are subsequently used to rule out potential homelands suggested by the genetic evidence for some ancestors on the grounds that they may have been uninhabitable at the time according to palaeoclimatological studies, for example when a particular territory was covered in ice during the Ice Age (p. 106f., 162). Such conclusions may be entirely wrongheaded if mutation rates are really variable and the ancestor in case lived thousands of year earlier or later. The situation is aggravated by even more alarming 'adjustments' made in cases where the results appear to conflict with historical data (e. g., pp. 153, 163).

Disturbingly, Sykes fails to identify the genetic fingerprint of the people – often expediently called 'Celts' – who introduced early forms of the Celtic languages from Central Europe into the British Isles (p. 281). The Belgian tribes known from Roman records to have peacefully settled in Britain prior to the Roman occupation are never identified genetically and the Picts, on Sykes' analysis, are forced to relinquish their 'relic' status in Britain (p. 282). While Sykes congratulates himself with these results and the genetic data themselves are admittedly not in doubt, one cannot simply ignore the weight of the linguistic and historical evidence here. From a linguistic vantage-point, it is simply indisputable that some forms of the Celtic language somehow arrived in Britain from the 'Celtic' homeland firmly identified archaeologically with the Hallstadt- and La Tène cultures. What if the characteristic DNA

signature of these migrants has simply been misplaced in Sykes' database, making them 'unrecognisable' as belonging to the wrong time slot? Alternatively, as the Celtic and Germanic language families are closely related members of the Indo-European language group, the DNA of these Celtic forebears may be indistinguishable from that of the modern inhabitants of South Germany, so that Sykes' "ancient Wodans" detected in mid-Wales, Grampian and Tayside (p. 284) may really be the missing linear descendants of the Celts rather than surviving Picts.

Other long-standing issues receive little or no attention in Sykes' book. The vexing question why no substantial Celtic influence is found in the English language remains unresolved and, indeed, undiscussed. Apart from the single typo found in the entire book ('the the', p. 283), a number of minor criticisms deserve mention. Catastrophist explanations for the end of the Ice Age, as proposed by astronomers Victor Clube and Bill Napier, for example, are ignored (p. 15). Early settlement traditions such as the legendary arrivals of Brutus and Scota hardly qualify as "myths" in the proper sense of the word (p. 21). It is facile to state that "Caesar was well aware of the legend of common descent of both Romans and Britons from Aeneas and the Trojans" (p. 26), when the legend of Brutus has no known roots in antiquity. The name of the Picts is not "from the same root as *Pretani*" (p. 178), but is a proper Latin formation. And the name of the Scots does not have "its own, deeper origins in the mythology of Scota" (p. 183), but the latter is bound to be a fictional, eponymous creation *based* on the tribal designation.

Despite the problems touched upon here, DNA analysis will likely prove to be the most powerful key yet to all sorts of questions of descent. More satisfactory answers may be found when larger and therefore more representative segments of the population will be sampled and when errors of relative chronology will be avoided. Most crucially, it is to be hoped that the hosts of capable scientists exploring the secrets of DNA will include some talented individuals like Sykes who are able to 'translate' scientific gobbledegook into intelligible and enjoyable English.

a brilliant read, though the Celts are still elusive; rating: 9