

Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain

Oswald

Feast day: August 5



King of Northumbria and Martyr.

Born, probably, 605; died 5 Aug., 642.

The second of seven brothers, sons of Ethelfrid, who was grandson of Ida, founder of the Kingdom of Northumbria in 547. Oswald's mother was Acha, daughter of Ella or Alla, who, after Ida's death, had seized Deira and thus separated it from the Northern Bernicia...

The years of Oswald's youth were spent at home, as long as his father reigned, but when, in 617, Ethelfrid was slain in battle by Redwald, King of the East Angles, Oswald with his brothers fled for protection from Edwin, their uncle, Acha's brother, to the land of the Scots and were cared for at Columba's Monastery at Hii, or Iona. There they remained until Edwin's death in the battle of Heathfield (633). Eanfrid, his elder brother, then returned to accept the Kingdom of Deira, whilst Osric, cousin of Edwin, received Bernicia. The kingdom was thus again divided and both parts relapsed into paganism. In the following year Osric was slain in battle, and Eanfrid treacherously murdered by the British king, Cadwalla.

Oswald thereupon came down from the North, and in 635 a small but resolute band gathered round him near the Roman Wall at a spot seven miles north of Hexham, afterwards known as Hevenfelt, or Heaven's Field. Here, encouraged by a vision and promise of victory from [St. Columba](#), who shrouded with his mantle all his camp, Oswald set up a cross of wood as his standard -- the first Christian symbol ever raised in Bernicia -- and gave battle to the Britons, who were led, probably, by Cadwalla. The Britons were completely routed, and thenceforth could only act on the defensive.

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Oswald was thoroughly grounded in the principles of the Christian religion, and, though but twelve nobles with whom he returned from exile were Christians, far from abandoning his faith, his first care was to spread it among the Bernicians, thus confirming the political union effected by Edwin with a religious union unknown before. Edwin, it is true, had himself received the Faith in 627, through the influence of his wife Ethelburga, sister of the Kentish King, who had brought St. Paulinus to the North, but his example was followed only by the people of Deira.

Oswald, brought up in Columba's monastery at Iona, naturally looked the North for missionaries. The first preacher who set forth soon returned, having found the Northumbrian people too barbarous and stubborn. Then Aidan was sent, "a man of singular meekness, piety and moderation", who established his episcopal see at Lindisfarne, in 635.

Oswald's zealous co-operation with the monk-bishop soon filled the land with churches and monasteries, and the church at York, begun by Edwin, was completed. Moreover, his wonderful humility in the midst of success, his charity, and his piety soon had their effect in turning his subjects from Woden to Christ. We are told that the king in his Court acted as the interpreter of the Irish missionaries who knew not the language of his thanes.

It was Oswald's work to add to the warlike glory of his father Ethelfrid and the wise administration of his uncle Edwin the moral power of Christianity, and to build up a great kingdom. Edwin had gathered the whole English race into one political body and was overlord of every English kingdom save that of Kent.

The [Venerable Bede](#) (III, 6) says that Oswald had a greater dominion than any of his ancestors, and that "he brought under his sway all the nations and provinces of Britain, which are divided into four languages, namely the Britons, the Picts, the Scots, and the English". He had great power in the North-West, as far south as Chester and Lancashire, and was probably owned as overlord by the Welsh Kingdom of Strath Clyde, as well as by the Picts and Scots of Dalriada. In the East he was supreme in Lindsey, and the words of Bede seem to imply that he was overlord of Mercia, which was still ruled by Penda; but this could have been scarcely more than nominal. The West Saxons in the South, influenced by the fear of Penda, readily acknowledged Oswald, their allegiance being strengthened, in 635, by the conversion of King Cynegils, of Wessex, at whose baptism Oswald stood sponsor, and whose daughter he married. Both sovereigns then established Bishop Birinus at Dorchester.

This vast supremacy, extending from north to south, and broken only by Penda's kingdom in Mid-Britain and that of the East Angles, led Adamnan of Hii to call Oswald "The Emperor of the whole of Britain". Christianity seemed to be forming a network round the pagan Penda of Mercia. The kingdom of the East Angles, which was still Christian, but acknowledged Penda as overlord, was necessary to Oswald to maintain the connection between his dominions in the north and the south. War was therefore inevitable.

At the battle of Maserfeld, said to be seven miles from Shrewsbury, "on the border of Wales, near Offa's dyke", Oswald was slain on 5 Aug., 642, and thus perished "the most powerful and most Christian King" in the eighth year of his reign and in the flower of his age.

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His last words were for the spiritual welfare of his soldiers, whence the proverb: "God have mercy on their souls, as said Oswald when he fell." His body was mutilated by Penda, and his limbs set up on stakes, where they remained a full year, until they were taken away by Oswy and given to the monks at Bardney in Lindsey. In the tenth century some of the bones were carried off by Ethelred and Ethelfleda of Mercia to St. Peter's, Gloucester. His head was taken from the battlefield to the church of St. Peter in the royal fortress at Bamborough, and was afterwards translated to Lindisfarne, where, for fear of the Danes, it was placed in 875 in the coffin of St. Cuthbert, which found its resting place at Durham in 998. It was in the coffin at the translation of St. Cuthbert in 1104, and was thought to be there when the tomb was opened in 1828. His arm and hand (or hands) were taken to Bamborough and perhaps afterwards removed to Peterborough, and were still incorrupt in the time of Symeon of Durham, early in the twelfth century.

Reginald gives an account of his personal appearance: arms of great length and power, eyes bright blue, hair yellow, face long and beard thin, and his small lips wearing a kindly smile.

Oswald laboured to bring order and law to his kingdom. He won great reverence for his kingly virtues as well as his virtually monastic life of prayer and devotion. He was famous for his care for the poor. A beautiful story preserved by Saint Bede tells that Oswald was sitting at dinner one Easter day, Saint Aidan at his side, when he was told a great crowd of poor people were seeking alms at the gate. Taking a massive silver dish, he loaded it with meat from his own table and ordered it distributed amongst the poor, and ordered the silver dish to be broken in fragments, and those too distributed to them. Aidan, Bede says, took hold of the king's right hand, saying "Let this hand never decay!" His blessing was fulfilled. After Oswald's death his incorrupt right arm was preserved as a sacred relic.