The British Pope: The story of Adrian IV

British popes and native-English speaking Popes are not common in the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout history, most popes have been from Italy. Popes like Pius X and XI were from Austrian-controlled Lombardy-Venetia (1. Rogers, S.). There are also a good portion of Popes that come from France. The first Pope in history: St Peter of Galilea from the bible (1. Rogers, S.).

What if I told you that in the middle ages, there was a British Pope? Before the rise of the Church of England, England was a Catholic country like many countries in Western Europe at the time.

The story begins in Hertfordshire, England in Abbot’s Langley (2. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.). His road to become the pope would begin in the town of St Ruf near Avignon where he started as a canon (2. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.).

In 1150, Pope Eugenius III would have him sent to Albano, Italy where he would take on the role of cardinal bishop (2. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.). In 1154 he would become the first British pope following a successful mission in Scandinavia (2. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.).

While certainly an accomplishment, his reign was short lived, as on September 1st, 1159, he died (2. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.). Two theories have emerged that could explain Adrian’s death which were either from an infection or from choking (4. Schiffer, K.)

Before he died, he did live an interesting life. A conflict with Emperor Fredrick involving Papal policy involving the Normans would lay the ground work for conflict between Pope Alexander III and Fredrick (2. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.). In a controversial move, Adrian did give Ireland to the English (2. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

While Adrian may have been a controversial Pope and a man of bad press, it does go to show that a man from the Anglosphere can become pope.

Citations

1. Rogers, S. (2013, February 13). Every pope ever: The full list. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/feb/13/popes-full-list>
2. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Adrian IV." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 28, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Adrian-IV>.
3. Brain, J. (2023, November 22). Nicholas Breakspear, pope Adrian IV. Historic UK. <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Nicholas-Breakspear-Pope-Adrian-IV/>
4. Schiffer, K. (2023a, September 1). Remembering pope Adrian IV, the only English pope in history. NCR. https://www.ncregister.com/blog/pope-adrian-iv-only-english-pope-in-history