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## Some Chapters in the History of the Early English Church.

BY THE REV. ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D.

### X.—THE REVIVAL UNDER ALFRED.

TEN years ago, English History, after a lapse of exactly a thousand years, repeated itself in a remarkable way. A new century and a new reign began in the same year. In the year 901 the tenth century began, and in the year 901 the reign of an English King began. In the year 1901 the twentieth century began, and in the year 1901 the reign of an English King began. In 901 it was a King Edward that was succeeding to his parent's throne; and so it was again in 1901. Nor does the parallel end there. In 901 the parent whom King Edward succeeded was the best Sovereign, and the best beloved Sovereign, that the English nation had ever known; and so it was again in 1901.

In 901 the English nation was still young, and had not long been welded together as one nation under the terrible, but not altogether unwholesome, blows inflicted by the Danes. The English had only for a short period had the experience of living under the government of one King. But at no time had the English nation, or any division of the English nation, had a King who, in the beauty of his life, or in the excellence of his government, or in the affection and devotion with which he inspired his people, could compare with him whom we commonly speak of as "Alfred the Great." That title, admirably as it fits him, is comparatively a modern one; perhaps it is not older than the seventeenth century. It is certainly not the title which his own subjects gave him, still less is it one which he claimed for himself. He calls himself "King of the Saxons," a title which no one had used before, and which was not very common afterwards. But the title which his own subjects gave him was a nobler one than that of "Alfred the Great." He lived among them for fifty-two years, and he reigned over them for thirty; and during most of

the thirty years the name by which he was known among his own people was "England's Darling," or "The Darling of the English." He had delivered them from their cruel enemies, the Danes. He had secured them against attacks in the future. He had given them good laws. And, in spite of a painful disease which sometimes completely prostrated him with suffering, he laboured incessantly for their good ; and not merely for their material prosperity, but chiefly for the enlightenment of their minds and the health of their souls. Consequently, for centuries after his death, wherever there was a valuable institution of which the origin had been forgotten, the common explanation was that it had been founded by King Alfred. Whatever was beneficial to the nation was certain, men thought, to have come from him. And, in all this, popular legend and deliberate fiction have, in the main, been true enough to actual fact. They have done the hero whom they glorify no more than justice ; for they have attributed to him the kind of things which he actually did, and have set him before us as the kind of Prince which he actually was, the model Englishman, and the model English King. Thus Alfred realizes in history what had been told in legend respecting an idealized British King, and then himself becomes the centre of legends which, however, realize rather than idealize him. The legendary King Arthur, in character, and in exploits over the heathen, is reproduced in the historical Alfred ; and then we have a legendary Alfred, who is the historical Alfred over again. Alfred has been called by Ranke "one of the greatest figures in the history of the world," and by Freeman "the most perfect character in history." There is no need to criticize either expression.

The revival of England under Alfred the Great has been compared with that of France under Joan of Arc. But that is not the kind of revival with which we are concerned, glorious as it was in itself, and necessary for the revival with which we *are* concerned. What we have to look at is Alfred's work in restoring the churches and monasteries which had been destroyed by the Danes, in reviving religion, and, with a view

to this, in raising the intellectual level of the people, and especially of the clergy. It is about the last that we have most information.

Alfred built a house for nuns at Shaftesbury and a house for monks at Athelney, the latter being probably a thankoffering for the great services which he had been able to render the nation with the fortress at Athelney as his headquarters. And had he lived longer he would have made other foundations at Winchester and elsewhere. But, apparently, it was easier, after the ravages made by the Danes, to build religious houses than to find English people who were willing to enter on the religious life ; and Alfred had to collect monks on the Continent to fill the new or restored monasteries. Was it that the English had noticed with what special fury the Danes had pillaged monasteries and massacred monks, and that they did not care to expose themselves to anything of the kind in the uncertain future ? Or had the scandal of the sham monasteries, of which Bede tells us in his letter to Egbert, so discredited monasticism in England that no Englishmen were willing to take the places of those who had been slaughtered by the heathen invaders ? Be that as it may, this was not a field in which Alfred had conspicuous success. It was not until a little later that the monastic spirit was rekindled in England, partly through the influence of Dunstan, who himself became Abbot of Glastonbury at the early age of twenty-two.

The Ford Lecturer of 1901, who chose for his subject "The Life and Times of Alfred the Great" (Oxford Press, 1902), says that of synods or special ecclesiastical legislation under Alfred he can find no trace. More than one episcopal see had been extinguished by the Danes. In what way were they revived, and when were they revived ? We know something about the two Archbishops of Canterbury in Alfred's reign, Ethelred and Plegmund, but very little about any other Bishops or any other leading Churchmen. We have the names of some, but we do not know what they did. "Beyond the broad fact of the ruin caused by the ravages of the Danes, the whole history of the

Church under Alfred is most obscure. . . . A letter from Archbishop Fulk of Rheims to Plegmund shows that clerical and episcopal marriages were common in England at that time, and there are traces of something like hereditary succession to ecclesiastical lands. There is no evidence that Alfred attempted to alter this state of things ; there is some evidence that he disapproved it. In the 'Soliloquies of St. Augustine,' the Anglo-Saxon translation of which is almost certainly by Alfred, there is a passage in which Augustine declares that he has no desire to marry. This, which in the original is purely personal to Augustine, is by the translator extended to all clergy: 'I say, however, that it is better for priests not to marry than to marry.'"<sup>1</sup> It appears also from one of the numerous letters of the ambitious and energetic Pope John VIII. (872-882), which is addressed to the Archbishops (Ethelred of Canterbury and Wulfhere of York) and Bishops of the English Church, that the clergy generally had adopted the dress of laymen. This probably meant that they lived as laymen, and the Pope desired that clerical dress should be resumed. We know that a large number of priests had been murdered by the Danes, and that the schools for the education of the clergy had been for the time destroyed, and this, no doubt, had resulted in the admission of a low type of men to the ministry, men who had married before they were admitted to the priesthood, and who refused to adopt a stricter mode of life after their ordination. Archbishop Fulk of Rheims wrote to Archbishop Plegmund of Canterbury in much the same strain as that in which John VIII. had written to his predecessor. The English clergy were in much need of reformation. But, beyond Alfred's efforts to raise the level of religion and education in England generally, we do not know much about the means which he took to reform the clergy.

About these efforts, however, we know a good deal, and

<sup>1</sup> Yet Archbishop Parker was of opinion that it was because the clergy were allowed to marry that the English prospered so much at this period ; *monachorum loco succedebant presbyteri, qui in conjugio legitimo pie vivebant. Tunc vero Deus Opt. Max. praeiuit se magis mitem atque placabilem erga Anglicanam gentem* : a remark which excites Lingard's scorn ("Anglo-Saxon Church," ii., p. 259).

there is hardly any part of his great work on which the student dwells with greater pleasure. We may well believe that there was no part of his work which gave more delight and satisfaction to Alfred himself. His own craving for learning of the best kind made him sympathetic respecting the needs of others. The pretty story of his mother tempting him to learn to read when he was a child, by promising him a beautifully illuminated book as soon as he could read it, perhaps means no more than that he learnt the not very voluminous contents by heart by hearing them read to him. He does not seem to have known how to read until much later in life, and perhaps he never was able to write with ease. Much of his learning was no doubt acquired by getting other people to read to him, and, although the free character of his translations from Latin works can often be attributed to deliberate modification of the original work, in order to make it more edifying to his people, yet some of it, no doubt, was due to imperfect knowledge of Latin.

In improving the condition of education in England, the difficulty was to find teachers. Learning had been declining since the death of Bede, and the Danes had destroyed many of such educated men as still existed, together with libraries and schools. But the west of Britain had suffered less severely than the east. From Wales Alfred got Asser of Menevia, who is perhaps the author of the main portion of the "Life of Alfred," which is commonly quoted by his name; and from the west of Mercia he got Werferth, who had the courage to accept the See of Worcester, and Plegmund, who eventually became Archbishop of Canterbury, together with Ethelstan and Werewulf, two clerics whom Alfred made his chaplains. These five, however, did not suffice, and Alfred sent to the Continent for others.<sup>1</sup> He obtained Grimbald, a priest and monk of the Abbey of St. Bertin in Flanders, and John the Old Saxon, a monk of Corvey, whom Alfred placed at the head of the

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that this introduction of foreigners into the kingdom, and giving them promotion, does not seem to have excited the jealousy of Alfred's subjects. It is not remembered against him as a blemish, as it is against some English Kings.

monastery which he founded at Athelney. These two foreign teachers have suffered in a strange way at the hands of historians. One of them has been doubled; the other has been made into one with a different person. Mabillon has made two Grimbalds, who both came to England under Alfred.<sup>1</sup> William of Malmesbury has identified John the Old Saxon with John Scotus Erigena, an identification which is commonly rejected by scholars, but which still finds support. Dean Hook says that there was a "tradition that the archbishopric was offered to Grimbold" before it was offered to Plegmund, and says that "the language of the Chronicle seems to confirm the tradition."<sup>2</sup> We can judge for ourselves as to the language of the Chronicle, but no authority is given for the existence of the tradition. It is very improbable that Alfred ever thought of appointing a foreigner to Canterbury. What the Chronicle says is that in 890 "Plegmund was chosen of God and of all the people to be Archbishop of Canterbury."

It is possible that, when Alfred first learnt Latin and made translations from Latin into English, he was thinking of his own improvement by increase of knowledge rather than of preparing himself for the education of his people; but it was this latter use to which he put the learning and skill which he acquired. He knew that it was in Latin that all the learning of the world, as it was then known in the West, was written. And he knew, also, that to read Latin had become a rare accomplishment in England. "Therefore," he says, "it seems to me best, if you agree, that we should translate some books—those, namely, which are most necessary for all men to know—into the language which we all understand."

These words come from the frequently quoted Preface to Alfred's translation of Pope Gregory's "Pastoral Care," and they are strong evidence that this was the earliest of his translations, and that subsequent translations of useful books are contemplated. The argument that in this translation he keeps closest to the

<sup>1</sup> "Ford Lectures," 1901, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> "Lives of the Archbishops of Canterbury," i., p. 323.

original, because he had not yet acquired skill in making variations, is precarious. It is quite as likely that he did not wish to make very many changes. He omits very little, and inserts only brief notes. There has been much discussion as to whether Alfred's translation of Bede, or his translation of Orosius should be placed next. A good case can be made out for either arrangement, and the question is not of great importance. Of more interest are some of the numerous insertions which Alfred makes in Orosius. Among these is the well-known saying, attributed by Suetonius to Titus, that the day was a lost one on which he had done no good to anyone. Such an utterance would be sure to commend itself to such a man as Alfred, and we can well understand his desire to make it known to his people. With regard to the translation of Bede, doubts, which seem to be hypercritical, have been raised as to whether it is the work of Alfred himself. Perhaps all that the criticisms tend to show is that some of the MSS. contain signs of revision by a different hand.

But more interesting than even these three examples of Alfred's aims and methods (as illustrating his own character and his care for the well-being of his people) is his translation of one of the most famous works in medieval literature, that on the "Consolation of Philosophy" by Boëthius, the Roman Consul who was put to death by Theodoric, King of the East Goths. There is no doubt that, as in the other cases, Alfred believed that here also he was translating the work of a Christian. Whether Boëthius was a Christian is still a matter for discussion. But in the ninth century he was believed to have been a saint, martyred for his orthodoxy by the Arian Theodoric; and this belief, as well as the contents of the book itself, commended it to Alfred, as to many of his own and subsequent generations. No one has ever found anything distinctly Christian in the "De Consolatione" of Boëthius, but the translation, as Alfred published it, is very definitely Christian. It does not much matter how many of the insertions which he makes come from previous commentators or from the suggestions of Alfred's helpers; the fact that he inserted them shows that he approved them, and they are, therefore,



rightly cited as evidence of his tone of thought. The Christian philosopher knows that he is a free agent (otherwise there would be no difference between wickedness and holiness), and that it is a moral God, and not blind fate, that rules the world.

Legislation was another instrument of the revival under Alfred. His laws have been called "ecclesiastical," an epithet which is misleading. Of ecclesiastic legislation in his reign we know nothing. But his laws are rightly called "intensely religious in character." His placing the Decalogue, with the Apostolic Letter of Acts XV., as an introduction to his laws, shows that he means them to be regarded as having a religious basis, or at least as having been carefully brought into harmony with what is laid down in the Old and New Testaments. As in the cases already mentioned, he translates, even from the Vulgate, with freedom. He adapts the wording to the end which he has in view. But it is, perhaps, a mere slip when he makes the fifth commandment run, "Honour thy father and thy mother, *whom* the Lord gave thee," as if the mother, and not the land, was God's special gift. In the Apostolic Letter (*v.* 29), he has the interesting interpolation (found in D, Sah. Æth, and some Latin texts), "that which ye would not that other men should do to you, do not ye to other men."<sup>1</sup> This is not an insertion made by Alfred, as some have thought, but the comment *is* his own: "By this law anyone may know how he ought to judge another; he needs no other law-book."<sup>2</sup>

We, perhaps, cannot rightly include Alfred's great work in turning the local annals of the Church of Winchester into the National Chronicles of the English people among the efforts which he made to raise his subjects from the low conditions, both material and moral, in which he found them. And yet, in the course of ages, this step may have done a great deal towards inspiring patriotism and moulding national character, and we still reap the benefit of it in the possession of a unique national treasure.

<sup>1</sup> There are considerable variations in the wording of this insertion in the texts which contain it, but the sense is the same.

<sup>2</sup> "Ford Lectures," pp. 123 *et seq.*