

What Englishness Is

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All communities tend to develop an account of their own origins. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* has this advantage, that all but twenty-two chapters at the beginning of the first book deal with matters in his own lifetime or so near it that he could collect testimonies from eyewitnesses or from those who had seen and heard them, as well as from written materials. His history has therefore held its place as a source, despite some criticism of his selection of evidence. It remained in English libraries through the critical years of the Reformation, and was printed in the seventeenth century in England as well as on the continent, in Latin and in King Alfred's and in another English version.¹ This contributed something to the Anglican view of the origin of the Church of England, in tales of conflict and reconciliation between Celtic and Roman missions. On the question of Easter Bede's details were relevant to disputes about the change in the Roman calendar in the sixteenth century. He also said that an Archbishop of Canterbury supplemented what was lacking in an ordination by bishops whose status was in doubt.²

What came to be called *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was put into shape more than a century after the death of Bede, in the days of King Alfred. It was copied and continued at Peterborough until the end of the reign of Stephen, but it did not find favour with the Norman ruling class who occupied the important positions in church and state after 1066. It was edited by antiquaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but was replaced as an account of origins by a series of *Bruts*. Of these the most influential, but not the earliest, was the *History of the Kings of Britain*³ produced by Geoffrey of Monmouth in Stephen's reign as the *Chronicle* came to an end. All the *Bruts* are attempts to develop an interesting account of what must have happened, the planting of a culture with a calendar for the cultivation of crops in the British Isles and on the northern and western coasts of continental Europe by refugees from the Mediterranean, coming by way of the Gulf Stream out of the straits of Gibraltar and round the Iberian peninsula to Brittany and Cornwall, Ireland and Wales, Cumbria and the islands of the north. The *English* who brought our language over the North Sea agreed with them in this, that they represented their royal families as descended from a boy who came ashore in a boat, clad in armour in one version,⁴ with a sheaf of corn in another,⁵ on an island off the coast of Denmark, close to the

original Angleland or England. The implication is that he brought with him, perhaps with other and older survivors of shipwreck, skills not known in the north, where wisdom comes by sea from the Mediterranean. The shipwrecked child came to be called Skyld⁶ or Scaef, who was born in Noah's ark, and so related to Biblical history, Brito, Brut or Brutus, the original Briton, was related to characters in Roman history. As Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*, was a refugee from Troy, Brutus was his grandson or great-grandson, who killed his mother at his birth and his father by accident, and so had to go into exile. This story existed before Geoffrey of Monmouth, who elaborated his adventures on the way from Alba Longa to Totnes in Devon.

Another story existing before Geoffrey of Monmouth was that of the first king of the Britons to be baptised. In what must be the earliest version of this in a *History of the Britons* ascribed to Nennius, a *papa Romanus eucharisticus* came to Lucius with a delegation from the Roman emperors.⁷ At the time assigned to this, a date recorded by different authorities under a variety of years from 137 to 190, Christianity was an illicit religion in the Roman empire. It does not follow that no Christians were employed by Roman legates in remote provinces in some capacity or other. *Papa Romanus eucharisticus* need not mean the Pope, but a minister with authority to instruct, baptise and communicate converts, coming from the centre of Roman civilisation to a remote province. When the story was told by British Christians later, Eucharisticus was identified with Evaristus or Eleutherus in the lists of early Roman popes. In this form the story reached Bede, who thought Evaristus too early, but put Eleutherus too soon, in 156.⁸

To Geoffrey of Monmouth, who had read Bede and the *History of the Britons*, Lucius was the son of Coilus, of 'old King Cole', whose relations with Rome were excellent. He was able to establish bishoprics in the twenty-eight cities of Britain, where bishops and archbishops took the place of *flamens* and *archflamens* as spiritual leaders and judges of morals in temples turned into churches. These arrangements made by the king with missionaries sent from Rome were reported to the Pope, who ratified all that was done. In this account of the foundation of the Church in England and Wales the only controversial element was the establishment of a Welsh Province at Caerleon-on-Usk, the city of the legions, as well as at London and York. That the king should establish dioceses and ask the Pope to confirm their boundaries was common form in the north and west of Europe in the early Middle Ages. Later, in and after the Reformation, the royal supremacy was seen in operation. The role of Rome was emphasized by recusants⁹ but not denied by Anglicans.¹⁰ Both believed on the testimony of Bede as well as of

Geoffrey of Monmouth, that Britain was substantially a Christian country before the persecution of Diocletian at the end of the third century. Both did their best to find Christians in England before King Lucius, citing evidence of the presence of persons named in Scripture, of Peter, Paul, Timothy and Joseph of Arimathea. But by the beginning of the seventeenth century a better knowledge of the history of Roman rule in Britain, and of the diffusion and persecution of Christianity, made the extent of the kingdom of Lucius questionable, and the history of the Church in Britain before the mission of St Augustine of Canterbury speculative.¹¹ Nevertheless an impression remained that the Church of England is older than the nation.

In Shakespeare the British history as told in the *Bruts* and elaborated by Geoffrey of Monmouth was still acceptable to the audience, who saw King Lear and Cymbeline as historical characters on a level with Julius Caesar and Macbeth. But Milton came to the conclusion that King Arthur was not a suitable subject for an epic poem. He turned to the Bible for inspired history. In the *First Book of the Kings* otherwise called *I Samuel*, Saul and David are successively anointed at the Lord's command, but the monarchy is represented as rebellion against God's reign.¹² So in the seventeenth century, the first great age of Bible reading and of sermons from texts known to the congregation, the Royalists saw the royal supremacy as ordained by God in continuation of powers held by kings before the Reformation, by Lucius, Ethelbert of Kent and Edwin and Oswald in Northumbria, who did so much to establish the Church in England, as David did for the Tabernacle and Solomon for the Temple. Parallels were seen in the patronage of the Most Christian king of France and of the Catholic kings of Spain and Portugal. But the Parliamentary party held that the supremacy belonged to the King in Parliament. It had been and would be again an instrument of Reformation in Church and State. The meaning of this was the supremacy of the King's peace and of the common law of the land over all immunities, feudal and clerical.

All the justices of the king's peace took the oath of supremacy. They rightly regarded their role on the bench of magistrates as more important than the surviving immunities of their own manorial courts. They resented the exercise of such immunities by lords of the manor who were recusants, and by bishops and archdeacons who accepted the royal supremacy, but still sought to preserve some canonical authority. They also resented the interference of the prerogative courts, of the Star Chamber, the Council of Wales and the Council of the North, with the ordinary exercise of local government by justices in the shire and the hundred.

The political objection to the toleration of two religions in England,

as in Germany after the Peace of Augsburg (1555) and in France under the Edict of Nantes (1598), was that it would increase the independent power of recusant lords of the manor. By a paradox the Long Parliament in abolishing the prerogative courts in 1641 before the Civil War, took away from the crown effective checks on this in the northland on the Welsh border, that could be used without invoking the penal laws against Popery. These had been enacted at the demand of politicians in Parliament, who insisted that more should be done, but their severity made them difficult to enforce where sympathy with recusancy was strong. The recusants who stayed away from church were rigorists. Those who attended church included 'church papists' who might also be at Mass if opportunity offered. These did not make their communion, but many who did and many of the clergy were not properly Protestant. Their ideas of the whole duty of man were not compatible with justification by faith alone.

'No popery' was originally a negative plank in a positive programme. Archbishop Laud and his friends were accused of 'innovations in religion', but these were dangerous because of their appeal to those whose religion needed reformation. Puritans believed that if the penal laws were enforced and the pulpits filled with preachers who had the power to exercise discipline, the whole nation could be converted, because so many had fallen away into idolatry, as in the old Israel.

The Civil War destroyed the structure of traditional institutions in Church and State, but did not replace them. The Solemn League and Covenant had committed the Parliamentary Party to the Scottish model of Presbyterian church government, and this was embodied in Ordinances of Parliament including conditions of belief necessary for admission to holy communion, and an enumeration of sins requiring the exercise of discipline. These were not repealed before the Restoration but were never put into force except in a few places where Presbyterians were strong. Neither the Royalists nor the sectarians, Independents, Baptists and Quakers would accept them, and the army purged Parliament of Presbyterians, but the ministers intruded into parishes in and after the Civil War could not command the allegiance of their parishioners. There was no agreement between them on the conditions for communion and discipline, but in one respect liberty increased: that no one was prosecuted for recusancy in the sense of not coming to church. There were penalties for attending Mass and for using the *Book of Common Prayer* in any place, but some Catholics had hopes of toleration on terms that the Royalist gentry and the religious orders could not accept.¹³ Cromwell knew that what was granted to some would be

taken by all, and conceded to all by the next government. He had no illusions about the future of his dictatorship, and many of his supporters feared reprisals after his death.

In the controversies that followed the Restoration the Royalists were called Tories after Irish Catholic outlaws. The Presbyterians came to be called Whigs, after Whiggamores, Scottish Presbyterian extremists, but they no longer sought to impose presbyterian discipline on parishes. Ministers who refused to accept episcopal government on the ground that the right of appeal to the bishop made penance ineffective, continued to minister communion and discipline to their own followers at illicit conventicles, but the political leaders of the Whigs, who were large landlords with business connections in London and elsewhere, conformed, with a few exceptions, to the established Church of England, where they favoured latitude in matters of ritual and toleration for Protestant Nonconformists, but not for Catholics. Many of the Nonconformists were departing from strict Calvinism under the influence of the new philosophy and science, which also affected clergy in the Church of England, and some Catholics. The Nonconformist ministers had played an active part under the Commonwealth and the number of their followers was known. Catholic strength was more difficult to calculate. Anxieties about popery were accentuated by the situation in Scotland and Ireland, where established Episcopal Churches had minimal support, and by divisions in the royal family.

Tories who voted against Whig bills to exclude James, Duke of York, the Catholic brother of Charles II, from the succession to the throne, were prepared to contemplate the toleration of Catholic and Protestant Nonconformists under a Catholic king and his successors. They did not expect James II to reign for long; neither did he. His blunders were those of an old man in a hurry. If he could have agreed with the opposition over the terms of new laws for liberty of conscience in his first Parliament, the Catholics would have been in a stronger position than the Protestant Nonconformists, in England as well as in Ireland, too strong to be reversed by a Whig government under a Protestant heir. In 1686, and until the summer of 1688, the heiress was the Princess Mary, married to Prince William of Orange, who reigned with her after the Revolution of 1689. She and her husband had every motive to continue a toleration on conditions, but King James probably feared to grant securities that might be extended to the disadvantage of Catholics. He preferred to use the royal prerogative to put them into key positions in the army and the universities, and so alienated the Tories, 'the men of the Church of England', that in the crisis of the Revolution most of them practised 'passive obedience'; they neither supported the

Whigs nor opposed them in arms. In this way they kept a share of political power under William and Mary, and gained more in the reign of Queen Anne, but the first two Hanoverian kings doubted Tory loyalty to the Protestant succession, and kept the Whigs in power for fifty years after 1714.

If James the III and VIII had succeeded his father in the ordinary way, or come to the throne as he might well have done in consequence of the complicated negotiations between the European powers before and after the war of the Spanish (and English) succession between 1701 and 1713, the Tories would have been in power at the beginning of the agricultural and industrial revolutions. Whigs and Tories shared a common distrust of the interference of the central government with local administration in the hundred and in the shire, but the Tories who were in the majority on magistrates' benches in most of the counties where industrial change began, might have defended traditional regulations against innovations, especially in apprenticeships, with the more zeal when the offenders were Presbyterians or some other kind of Protestant Dissenters.¹⁴ The Whigs, who could not easily employ Dissenters in the public service, favoured their private enterprise and the multiplication of their Meetinghouses. They did nothing to encourage change in the boundaries of parishes as the balance of population moved from the south and east to the north-west. The Tories, who had plans for new churches in the suburbs of London in the reign of Queen Anne,¹⁵ and who in 1708 divided the parish of Birmingham, would have done more if they had been in power in the middle of the eighteenth century. Under a Stuart king, whatever his personal religion, they would also have licensed Mass centres. These multiplied in the new industrial areas, but were still illegal and therefore had to be unobtrusive, because of the Jacobite problem. Catholic Squires could collect their tenants for Mass in their own houses without much fear of molestation, but they did not encourage intruders from the new centres of industry near at hand in Lancashire, Staffordshire, Northumberland, Durham or Yorkshire.

In these counties and in parts of others near them the proportion of Catholics was not inconsiderable before the Civil War. In the war it increased as Catholics and others took refuge from Parliament behind the Royalist lines. Part of the attraction in Lancashire and Staffordshire lay in large parishes with woods and moorland where the churchwardens could not know everyone, and absence from church did not necessarily point to recusancy or dissent. There are signs that a changed distribution of population preceded the industrial revolution and promoted it by making subsidiary occupations important where arable land was not sufficient. The Catholic role in this arose from their isolation in a society in which

the social life of a country parish revolved round the church. In industrial towns and villages they could hope to meet other Catholics at prayers and Masses supplied at intervals from such centres at Warrington and Wolverhampton.

In the Whig view of history Catholics were a dwindling minority, survivors from an age of ecclesiastical and feudal immunity. The Church of England too was on its way out, a legacy from the Tudors and Stuarts. No procedure existed for making a new parish without a private Act of Parliament until 1818, when the fall of Napoleon gave some opportunity to pay attention to home affairs. Protestant Nonconformists multiplied Meetinghouses, but these appealed chiefly to the successful, who paid for their pews. Those excluded from the crowded parish churches and proprietary chapels, where most of the seats were occupied by established families, might find consolation among the Methodists or, when in crisis, with their Catholic neighbours, who saw in charity to the poor and needy a path to salvation. Those in trouble found them more approachable than the Evangelicals, Anglican and Methodist, who had their own alternative assurances, but most Catholic priests were chaplains to the gentry. Only a few could move about freely, and their activities were sparingly advertised. Catholic meetings for worship were illicit until 1791.

At the end of the eighteenth century Catholic relief was easier to contemplate than Catholic emancipation. The Catholic nobility and gentry wanted access to offices of state, but George III held that if Catholics became magistrates the legitimist Stuart heir, the Cardinal Duke of York, had a right to the throne. There was not the same objection to putting Catholics in the same position as Protestant Nonconformists, but the first steps in that direction aroused alarms in London and the north at the number of papists in back streets. These anxieties were no doubt exaggerated, but they did prompt the gentry to insist that their community was declining as Catholic landed families conformed to the Church of England,¹⁶ but there was and is evidence that it was gaining ground in industrial areas.¹⁷ Neither the Anglican nor the Catholic gentry conceived the possibility of a democracy where the votes of the working classes would be important. The repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, which came before Catholic emancipation in 1828, did more for the Protestant Dissenters than for Catholics who worked for them, for these had no political pretensions.

In the Victorian age the middle classes believed that the English constitution was the seedbed of progress. It had allowed the agricultural and industrial revolutions to happen without undue interference, and with them the expansion of overseas trade and the conquests of the East India

Company. The American and French Revolutions were influenced by the Glorious Revolution of 1689, and this sprang from the Great Rebellion. More revolutions came in Italy, Hungary and Spain, and more were yet to come. Not until the closing decades of the nineteenth century did the condition of the labouring poor put a question mark against progress.

In 1886 as in 1641 the Whigs and Liberals divided over Ireland. The Civil War broke out over the Irish rebellion, because the majority party in the Long Parliament could not trust the King to put down the Irish Catholics. Again the Whig families and their Birmingham business friends could not trust Gladstone to maintain the Protestant ascendancy. They were the Liberal Unionists, and the Conservatives shared their fears. They remembered that Gladstone was a High Churchman, and had been the rising hope of the stern and unbending Tories.¹⁸ He was no more Catholic than Charles I, but not very much less. He saw in the papacy what was left of the Roman empire, a simplification rather than an error, and that all empires, including the British, must end. He could not stand up for the Bulgarians and Armenians against the Turks without taking account of the Irish. The Gladstonian Liberals were also aware of the Irish vote in England and Scotland and with this of an organised element in the urban working class. The urban Catholics were not all Irish, but their priests were in opposition to the landed establishment and the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland. They had an international perspective on British industrialism like the Marxists, whose influence was only beginning, they saw it as a bourgeois revolution, the emergence of a new ruling class. Unlike the Marxists, they did not see it as a step towards a revolution of their own but as a break from tradition.

The economic interpretation of history has called attention to much that has been neglected but it does not explain the expansion of European power in economic failure, as in Spanish America and the Far East. There the Dutch and then the British exploited needs which the Spaniards could not meet for their own missionaries and settlers, but they did not create an interest in Christian ideas or a demand for European goods. In England we need to look again at our whole involvement in this, to understand archaeologically and historically what the *Bruts* put into stories, how we came to be European, Greek and Christian. Every age understands origins according its needs. The old and new stone ages, the bronze and the iron age, are epochs created by our own concern for technical change, for the invention and export of manufactured goods. But we were a nation before the industrial revolution, and nations arise from declining empires, as Gladstone saw in the resurrection of Greece and Serbia, Bulgaria, Ireland and Poland. The antithesis is not, as is sometime supposed, between little England and Europe, but between

England and the British empire, which has obscured her identity.

Roman Britain, south of Hadrian's wall, was less Roman than Gaul or Spain, but received influences from the Mediterranean before and after the Roman occupation. English became a literary language under Celtic and Latin influences in Northumbria and Wessex before the Norman conquest, and after a brief eclipse revived under French and Italian influences in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when 'the matter of Britain' was celebrated all over Europe in the new vernacular languages. In this the principal hero was King Arthur, who fought the Saxons as King Alfred resisted the Danes. The Anglo-Saxon emphasis in English origins comes partly from Bede but largely from the discovery of old English manuscripts by Anglican clergymen and students of English law in the Inns of Court who were interested in the history of the shire, the hundred and the wapentake before the Norman conquest, and in the role of kings, earls and bishops in church and state. Our present concern is with relations between the nations in the British Isles and in the rest of Europe, and so with our role as an outpost of Mediterranean civilisation in the north and over the seas.

- 1 By Thomas Stapleton, a recusant priest, in Antwerp 1574. The edition by Abraham Wheloc (London and Cambridge, 1643–4) contains King Alfred's version.
- 2 IV, c. 2.
- 3 Translated by Lewis Thorpe (Penguin, 1966)
- 4 In Ethelwerd's Latin version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, III, c. 2.
- 5 William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum* II, 116
- 6 His ship-burial, with an account of his coming, begins Beowulf.
- 7 Chapter 22.
- 8 *Ecclesiastical History* I, c. 4.
- 9 Robert Parsons S.J. *Three Conversions of England* (1603), pp 76–80.
- 10 Francis Godwin, Bishop of Hereford, *A Catalogue of English Bishops* (1615) pp. 19–35.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp.36–7 12. Chapter 8.
- 13 John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* (London, 1975) pp 62–7.
- 14 See Harold Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London, 1969) pp 187–9 on dismantling regulations.
- 15 See my *High Church Party, 1688–718* (London, 1956) p 135.
- 16 See Joseph Berington, *The State and Behaviour of English Catholics from the Reformation to the year 1780* (London, 1780) especially pp 116-17.
- 17 see Bossy, op. cit., pp.295–322, and my articles on 'John Gother and Laborious Christians' in *Heythrop Journal* xxxiii, 1, 1982, on Walsall in *Recusant History*, 19, 3, May 1989 and *New Blackfriars* 70, October 1989 on 'Origins of England's Urban Catholicism'.
- 18 Macaulay reviewing Gladstone on Church and State in *Edinburgh Review* (April, 1839)