

## Of Psalms, Battle-axes and Burnt Cakes

*Mr. Andrew Clarke*

How often, on average, does Tony Blair lie each day? Once? Twice? Every time he opens his mouth? And are many politicians much better? Imagine instead that the winner of the recent election was a political leader whose nick-name was "Truth-teller." Such was Alfred the Great.

In 410 the Roman legions abandoned Britain to defend Rome from the hordes of Goths pressing on it. The native British were left defenceless to attacks from Ireland, Scotland and the continent. The most ferocious, numerous and persistent of these attackers were the Angles, Jutes and Saxons, three Germanic tribes. By 600, the native British had been driven into Wales and Cornwall, and England was divided into seven different kingdoms, each ruled by a Saxon king. These wild tribes, however, were transformed by a conversion to Christianity, by the work of missionaries from Ireland and Rome. Bede, who wrote the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in the early eighth century, tells of the conversion of King Edwin. Having heard the gospel, Edwin considers what to make of it. One of his counsellors advised as follows:

O king, this present life of man on earth, in comparison with the time that is unknown to us, seems to me as if you were sitting at a banquet with your ealdormen and thanes in the winter time with the fire burning and the hall warmed, and outside the storms of winter rain or snow were raging; and there should come a sparrow swiftly flying through the hall, coming in one door and flying out another ... it soon returns from winter back to winter again, and is lost to sight. So this mortal life seems like a short interval; what may have gone before or what may come after, we do not know. Therefore, if this new teaching has

brought any great certainty, it seems fitting that it should be followed.<sup>1</sup>

Centres of learning sprang up, with libraries collected and preserved. In this period we find the great works of Saxon literature being written, such as the epic *Beowulf*, and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Christianity civilised Anglo-Saxon culture without sapping its vitality. However, when Alfred came to the throne in 871, all this was past. The libraries were burning, the treasures of gold looted, and all England seemed about to fall under the sway of the pagan Vikings. Only Wessex was able to offer any resistance, and that was slight. The Vikings had previously defeated the armies of Wessex several times, and Alfred was initially unable to turn the tide, and apparently outnumbered, was defeated in his first battle. His biographer, a monk in his service called Asser, wrote:

Nor should it seem extraordinary that the Christians had a small number of men in the battle: for the Saxons were virtually annihilated to a man in this single year against the Vikings ...<sup>2</sup>

For the next seven years, Alfred managed to stave off the Viking threat, partly by gold, partly by threat of force, and partly because the Vikings were occupied elsewhere. However, in 878, a Viking army broke a recently established treaty, and launched a surprise attack. It was overwhelming and Alfred had to go into hiding. It is here, desperate, in the damp marshes of Somerset, that the most famous stories about Alfred are centred - how, deep in thought, he burnt the cakes of a farmer's wife, which he was supposed to be watching, or how he dressed up as a minstrel and wandered into the Viking camp to spy it out.

For some time, Alfred waged a guerrilla campaign until he was able to rally sufficient troops to face the Vikings at Edington, where he comprehensively defeated them. Alfred saw off two more Viking invasions in his

<sup>1</sup>Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:13.

<sup>2</sup>Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 42.

reign, enlarged and strengthened his kingdom, and left it secure when he died in 899.

Alfred was much more than a warrior. His statue at Wantage, where he carries a battle-axe in one hand and scrolls in another, captures this many-sidedness to his character. Alfred believed that the problems of his kingdom went much deeper than the ravages of the Vikings. He believed that a lack of learning and spirituality had weakened the situation internally, leaving the people prey to Viking attacks. He looked back to former times when “people from abroad sought wisdom and instruction in this country; and how nowadays, if we wished to acquire these things, we would have to seek them outside.” He says that so few knew Latin, that he could not “recollect a single one south of the Thames when [he] succeed[ed] to the Kingdom.” In short, “we were Christians in name only, and very few of us possessed Christian virtues.”<sup>3</sup> Alfred decided that the only redress was to translate into English certain books, making wisdom available to all who could read, and prompting others to seek further. But first, Alfred himself had to learn Latin. Until his early thirties Alfred had never read the Bible (then only accessible in Latin). Instead, each day, it was read to him aloud by someone who could translate. Alfred began to keep a personal book in which he had copied those portions he particularly liked. According to Asser, “as soon as the first passage had been copied, he was eager to read it at once, and to translate it into English, and thereupon to admonish others.” He personally translated or directed the translation of five books – Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care*, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, Orosius’s *Histories Against The Pagans*, and the first fifty *Psalms* (he died before getting anything further).

This last was particularly interesting. Alfred probably knew most of the Psalms by heart, as he eagerly participated in the daily recital of a psalm. How could he not find a resonance in poetry of King David,

---

<sup>3</sup>The above quotations are from the Preface which Alfred wrote to Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care*.

troubled by heathen enemies, as he faced the attacks of the church-destroying, God-hating Vikings? In any case, Alfred, like others of ages earlier than our own, loved poetry. Asser tells how he hunted, commissioned treasures, and “above all learnt English poems by heart.” Alfred also set up a school, founded a navy, and reformed the legal system. Despite his less capable successors, Anglo-Saxon England endured until 1066 and the coming of the Normans.

The life of Alfred challenges us today in several ways. Firstly, this challenge comes to us as a nation. Britain today has many parallels with that of Alfred’s day. Her independence and freedoms are threatened – by violence in Northern Ireland, and from the encroachments of the European Union destroying her sovereignty everywhere. We, like England before Alfred, have witnessed a faltering civilisation. Falling educational standards, a decline in national righteousness, ignorance of God, and the curse of a weak and corrupt leadership are all testament to this truth. Secondly, we are challenged as Christians. The several reforms of Alfred were inspired in part by the knowledge that things had been better once and could be so again. His promotion of learning was built on the wisdom of the past, though applied to contemporary needs. From this common heritage, Alfred was able to forge a strong, united front against pagan attack. This should be reflected in increasing unity among Christians today. Like ninth-century England, the church is divided into various warring factions. Well might we pray, as Alfred did:

Arise, O LORD, let not man prevail: let the heathen be judged in thy sight. Put them in fear, O LORD: that the nations may know themselves to be but men. (Psalm 9:19-20)

*This article was authored by Andrew Clarke, a classics undergraduate at Cambridge University.*