
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

really more an experiment than a conviction. It was impossible for me to cease criticizing, even after I had gone inside. But

> "God moves in a mysterious way
> His wonders to perform,"

and, looking back on it all now, after an interval of over thirty years, I feel sure that though "perverse and foolish oft I strayed, still in love He sought me," as, indeed, He continues to search for each one of us.

(*To be continued.*)

Some Chapters in the History of the Early English Church.

By the Rev. ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D.

I.—The Sources; Historians.

THE very earliest date at which we can place the birth of the English Church is the landing of Augustine, A.D. 597. There had, of course, been Christians in Britain long before that, but they were not English Christians. When the Gospel was preached first in these islands we do not know, but Bishops went from Britain to the Council of Arles in 314, and to the Council of Rimini in 359. These Bishops, however, were not English, but British; not Teutons, but Kelts. The Teutonic English had not yet reached these shores. The ancestors of English Churchmen were at that time heathen tribes on the Continent. When they did come and settle in Britain, the British Christians made no attempt to convert them, and the heathen invaders almost destroyed Christianity in the eastern half of the island. Bede tells us that down to his own day (673-735) British Christians still treated English Christians as pagans, so strong was the race-hatred towards them.

We omit all mention of the writers from whom we derive information respecting the history of Christianity in the British

Isles prior to the coming of Augustine, and begin at once with the "Ecclesiastical History" of the Venerable Bede. It is the earliest that we possess of really first-rate importance for our national history, and it is not easy to overestimate its value. It was finished in the year 731, just four years before Bede's death; and it was written when he was in his prime—not yet sixty years of age. It consists of five books, of which the first takes us from the landing of Julius Cæsar, 55 B.C., to the landing of Augustine, A.D. 597. The opening portion is mainly a compilation from Orosius, Eutropius, Gildas, and others, although Bede, according to the custom of his time, does not, as a rule, mention the name of the writer whose words he is adopting. The second book takes us from the arrival of Augustine in 597 to the arrival of Paulinus in 633. This brings us within forty years of Bede's own time, and it is the three remaining books, treating of the century between the coming of Paulinus and the completion of Bede's "Ecclesiastical History" (633-731), which are of such priceless value. These three books tell us of what rests upon Bede's own personal knowledge, or on that of the previous generation with which he conversed. It is in the fullest sense contemporary history, and contemporary history written with great care by a conscientious and competent scholar.

Let us see what this means; and probably many of those who read this paper could illustrate it out of their own experience or that of their friends.

There are plenty of people still living, of whom the present writer is one, who have talked with people that had taken part in the French Revolution of 1789.

In his interesting recollections, J. G. Keene, C.I.E., who is still living to give pleasure to his friends, tells us that in 1846 he sat at luncheon next to an old lady who told him that he reminded her of Goldsmith, the author of "The Vicar of Wakefield," who died April 4, 1774. This lady was Mrs. Gwatkin, better known to students of the eighteenth century as Offy Palmer, the younger niece of Sir Joshua Reynolds. She kept house for the famous portrait-painter after he moved to the house in Leicester Fields,

and has been immortalized in his picture of "The Strawberry Girl." Sir Joshua's house was the rendezvous of many of the literary lights of the eighteenth century, and Mrs. Gwatkin could give personal recollections of a number of them.

Another instance is still more remarkable. A Mr. Fraser, who was alive in January, 1907 (letter in *The Times*, January 11, 1907), and may be living still, had as a boy known a Mrs. Butler in Edinburgh who had witnessed the entry of Prince Charles Edward into Holyrood after the Battle of Prestonpans, September 21, 1745, and had afterwards seen him ride up and down the Canongate. And yet another person (letter in *The Times*, January 26, 1907) had known a lady at Redbourne, near St. Albans, who had seen the Duke of Cumberland marching with the Foot Guards through Redbourne, in November, 1745, to fight the Pretender. So that well within the twentieth century we have two persons who had heard from eyewitnesses what took place in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Let us apply these illustrations to the case of Bede. He was born in 672 or 673. As a boy he may easily have talked to people who were born before 600. It would have been just possible for him to have known a person who had seen St. Columba, who died in 597, and very easy for him to have known one that had talked with St. Columban, who died in 615. Bede probably had seen Adamnan, Abbot of Iona, who wrote the "Life of St. Columba" ("H., E." iii. 4; v. 15). He may have talked to persons who had seen Pope Gregory the Great, and, still more possibly, to persons who had seen some of Gregory's successors—Boniface IV., Boniface V., Honorius I. In short, Bede and the generation which he knew cover the whole of the seventh century and the first third of the eighth. The three last books, therefore, of his chief work are history at first hand.

We must not suppose from its title of "Historia *Ecclesiastica*" that it is what we should call *Church* history nowadays. It contains a great deal of purely secular history as well as information respecting ecclesiastical matters. In those days the Church was the centre of history. Very often the ministers

and rulers of the Church were the ablest men of affairs, as well as the most learned scholars. The chief statesmen and the chief legislators were frequently ecclesiastics. Hence the history of any period was of necessity (to a large extent) ecclesiastical history—not merely because the persons who had culture enough to *write* history were monks or clerics, but because so many of the people who *made* history were ecclesiastics. When Bede calls his History of the English Nation "Ecclesiastical History," he does not so much mean that the field which he is going to describe is limited in any particular way as assure us that what he has to tell is of supreme interest. He is going to work at the centre of things, and explain the chief influences and their working. "Ecclesiastical" is opposed, not to "secular," but to "trivial." He desires to tell us all that is best worth remembering about the land which was his birth-place and his home, down to his own day.

We cannot many of us study original sources of history. Most of us must be content to take our history at second or third hand. This is specially the case in the later periods, about which the sources are so bewilderingly abundant. But every educated English person who aspires to a knowledge of the early history of England and of the English Church might endeavour not only to know something of Bede, but to read him for themselves. In these days of popular editions of classical authors, a shilling edition of one of the translations of Bede's "Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation" is a thing very much to be desired, and such a venture would probably be a financial success.

Next to Bede in importance must be placed what is sometimes called the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, but should rather be called the Saxon or the English Chronicles, for there are several of them. We probably owe them to the wise patriotism of Alfred the Great. There had been local chronicles before his time, but he seems to have had the grand idea of a National Chronicle, and to have caused it to be executed. He himself may have contributed some of the entries respecting his

own wars. And, just as he sent copies of his own translation of Gregory's "Pastoral Care" to all the Bishops, to assist them in what Pope Gregory himself called "the art of arts, the care of souls," so he appears to have sent copies of his National Chronicle to different religious houses, to be preserved and kept up to date. The chief home of the Chronicle was Winchester, but there were other places, and at each the Chronicle would be likely to develop in a different way.

These English Chronicles have no equal in literature. Great as is their value as sources of historical information, they are perhaps even more valuable as a unique monument of our language, exhibiting the changes through which it passed from what is called Anglo-Saxon to what is known as Early English. Their general truthfulness is proved by the evidence of names and of archæological remains, and they represent the varying tastes of many generations, from the crudest ideas of history to something which, if still simple in form and expression, is nevertheless worthy of the name of literature.

With the exception of the Chronicles, we have not much that can be called historical literature respecting the Church of England for nearly four centuries after the death of Bede. This long interval is somewhat sparsely filled with the productions of inferior writers, mostly biographies of eminent persons, especially saints, some of which will be noticed in another paper. Passing over Henry of Huntingdon, who is remarkable as a secular cleric compiling history at a time when such writing was almost entirely the work of monks, and Simeon of Durham, who is valuable chiefly for what he can tell about Northumbria in the tenth century, and also the writer who is never tired of letting us know that his full name is Radulfus de Diceto (the meaning of which we can still only guess), we come at last to a writer who may be regarded as a genuine historian and a worthy successor of Bede. William of Malmesbury was born 1095 and died 1148: he was therefore contemporary with the writers just mentioned, outliving Henry of Huntingdon and outlived by Simeon of Durham. William was Norman on his father's side and English on his mother's.

He seems to have thought that this would make him impartial in criticizing the ruling race, but his sympathies are plainly with the Normans. Both in his "Gesta Regum Anglorum" (A.D. 449-1128) and in his "Gesta Pontificum Anglorum" (a history of English Bishops and monasteries from Augustine to A.D. 1123) he relies upon writers most of whom are known to us, Bede and the Chronicles being the chief. Alcuin, Ethelwerd, Eadmer, and William of Poitiers were also used, with others, both English and foreign. "In short, there was no available source of information of which he did not make ample use" (James Gairdner, "Early Chroniclers," p. 80). He was no mere chronicler, but, like Bede, an historian. He groups events, and tries to account for them.

All these authorities, whether histories, or chronicles, or biographies, show us by direct quotations and in other ways that there was a great deal of material which was known to the producers of these writings, but which has not come down to us. And while we rejoice at having received so much, and in a few cases so much that is excellent, it is impossible not to lament that so much has perished. And perhaps it may have been the case that the popularity of some of the writings which have been named caused other writings, which were more valuable though less popular, to fall into neglect, and then to perish. Popularity does not always depend upon excellence, still less upon historical accuracy, as is shown by the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was contemporary with William of Malmesbury, and whose audacious romances spread all over Europe, and came to be accepted as history. But in one case, at any rate, popularity and historical excellence did go hand in hand—viz., in that of the "Ecclesiastical History" of Bede; and it is possible that, by its conspicuous superiority, it may have driven other writings of inferior but real merit out of the field. If this surmise is correct, the case is very similar to that of the Canonical Gospels. What would we not give now for a few of those many narratives of doings of our Lord which were known to St. Luke as existing in his time? (Luke i. 1, 2). It is,

perhaps, not impossible that a few fragments of them may still survive, buried in the literature-saving sands of Egypt; but, so far as our present possessions go, they have long since been driven into oblivion by the excellence of the Canonical Gospels, acting through the inexorable law of the survival of the fittest.

In marked contrast to Bede and the English Chronicles may be mentioned the writings of Nennius and of Geoffrey of Monmouth. The "Historia Britonum" of Nennius seems to have existed in several editions, the chief of which was written about A.D. 796. Nothing is known of the writer—and, indeed, we are not certain that his name was Nennius, but (for convenience) we continue to call him Nennius. His "History of the Britons" is mainly confined to Wales, and, though it was written after Bede, it does not reach even to A.D. 700. It contains some valuable quotations from a much earlier writer, who described the struggles between the English and the Britons in Wales between A.D. 547 and 679 (Nennius lvii.-lxv., "The Genealogies of the Kings"). It is in this portion that the name of King Arthur is found: "Then did Arthur fight against the Saxons along with the chiefs of the Britons, but he himself was leader of the wars." This may be a quotation from "The Genealogies of the Kings," or it may be the remark of Nennius himself. In Nennius's own work tales about enchanters and dragons are given as serious history, and the chronology is absurd. The birth of our Lord is placed at A.D. 183. Is King Arthur to be swept into the region of fable, along with the dragons and enchanters and the impossible chronology? You must settle that question with Nennius, for there is no earlier authority for Arthur's existence. The later writers who tell us so much about Arthur had no other source of information than Nennius, and they enlarged and embellished what he states about the King just as they pleased. On the whole, it is probable that there was such a King as Arthur, and that he was a brave and able leader in war.

It is to Geoffrey of Monmouth that the popularity of the legends about King Arthur and of many other legends is mainly due. He lived between A.D. 1100 and 1154, and was

probably a Benedictine monk. A Benedictine would be likely to possess his love of literature and his literary skill. He was over fifty years of age when he was ordained priest (February 16, 1152). Eight days later he was consecrated Bishop of St. Asaph, but he died in 1154, without having visited his diocese. His influence as a writer has been immense, but his "Historia Britonum" is important not so much as a source of historical truth as one of historical romance. It consists mainly of fiction, and is based upon Nennius and a book of Breton legends which is no longer extant; and it has had two great results—one literary, and the other political and (perhaps we may add) religious. The literary result was that in less than fifty years the romances of King Arthur and the Round Table, the Holy Grail, Sir Lancelot, etc., partly based upon Geoffrey, became current; and Geoffrey's stories of Merlin and King Arthur spread, not only to England and France, but to Germany and Italy. His writings had an enormous circulation, and the later chroniclers, down to Holinshed, treated Geoffrey as an historical authority. From him the medieval *poets* also drew very much of their material.

The political result of his romances was a very happy one. Fictions in our own time have sometimes done much towards exciting race-hatred and class-hatred in various quarters. The fictions of Geoffrey of Monmouth did a great deal towards softening the bitterness of race-hatred between the British, English, and Norman elements in the population of this island. All three of them, according to Geoffrey's stories, had a common ancestry: they were descended from Trojan fugitives, who had taken refuge in Britain after the destruction of Troy by the Greeks. There was not one word of truth in this legend, but, thanks to Geoffrey, the legend became widely known, and was accepted as history; and political events, as we all know, depend, not upon what is true, but upon what is believed. Who would wish to quarrel with a romantic tale which did much to hasten the unification of the people of England, and thereby to help the consolidation of the English Church?