

THE CONQUEROR'S NINTH CENTENARY.

In an age so duteous as ours in commemorating the dates of the birth and death of those who have written their names aforetime on the scroll of history, it would have been invidious to have overlooked the ninth centenary of the birth of him who bears the proud name of William the Conqueror. Accordingly during the first week of July last the little town of Falaise, in Normandy, was *en fête* to enlarge the fame of the distinguished man who came into the world as the natural son of Robert III, Duke of Normandy, by Arletta, the daughter of a tanner. M. Leygues the Minister of Marine, was present on behalf of the French government; the British government being represented by Lord Crewe, its Ambassador to France. There were many Englishmen and Americans among the spectators, and the proceedings throughout were conducted on a very handsome scale.

* * Let me pause for a moment to say that all such celebrations are idle pageantry unless they are deliberately made to serve the purpose of history. Instruction must attend them; and the ear as well as the eye be made its instrument. It has been well said by an ancient writer that history is philosophy teaching by examples, and a modern writer has reinforced this profound truth with the observation that unless history gives us some practical knowledge it is useless. We are too prone to think of it only on its noisy and more spectacular side, to hear little but "the drums and trappings" of innumerable conquests, and so forget to inform ourselves of the causes of these international upheavals and the effect of them for better or for worse upon the advancement of civilization toward its ideal. Was some particular war of conquest at all justifiable? Was it a benefit to the conquered race or nation? In what light as an exemplar does the man appear who was responsible for the success of the war of conquest? These are questions that will compel the research necessary to ascertain the related purpose of history.

* * Whether inquiries of this sort were set in motion by the proceedings which marked the celebration of the ninth centenary of the death of William the Conqueror we are unable to say, but it is interesting to ponder for a moment here the destiny of the British Islands had not favouring winds and tides, and the failure of Harold to consolidate the remnant of his army after his magnificent defeat

of Hardrada and Tostig at Stamford Bridge, less than a month before, given William the victory at Hastings. Before the conquest the English had not only a finer culture—the literary works of Caedmon, Bede, Aldhelm, Alcuin and King Alfred, and the rare craftsmanship of “Alfred’s Jewel,” now reposing in the Ashmolean museum at Oxford, testify to that—but also a better frame of social order than their Norse kinsmen across the channel. There was nothing in Normandy to compare with the administration of justice in the communal courts of the Saxon shire and hundred, imperfect though it was. The Normans brought no written system of law with them to England, while before their coming Alfred, Edward the Elder, Athelstan, Edmund, Edgar, Cnut and Edward the Confessor had each of them promulgated laws for the governance of the territory over which they respectively ruled. But what England lacked in the eleventh century was what Cnut, the Dane, was in a fair way to give her had his reign lasted twice nineteen years, namely, national unity leading to international importance. A recent writer has said of Cnut: “If he had lived till sixty instead of dying at forty, he might have left a more permanent mark on the world’s affairs. He was a great ruler of men, and he was on his way to found a Nordic empire astride of the North Sea, with Scandinavia for one pillar and England for the other. Sea-power would have been its cement and its master spirit. If he had succeeded he would have changed the history of the world.” And Cnut’s treatment of the English was the very antithesis of that of William of Normandy.

* * William’s laying waste of conquered England, his slaughter of its people as a pretext for security against revolt, and his confiscation of the estates and wealth of the leading families for distribution among the horde of adventurers who supported his invasion, constitute one of the bloodiest and meanest chapters in history. Some measure of “frightfulness” might have been condoned by posterity so far as his interests demanded its employment in the mopping up of the country immediately after Hastings; but his cruelty was extreme, even as against a people in arms, and wholly indefensible after a deputation from London, including Edgar Atheling himself, had offered him the crown. This was only two months after the great battle, and yet the scourge of robbery and violence continued for six years. So that while William swore by his coronation oath to govern according to the English laws then existing, both men and women of the conquered race soon came to learn that it was useless to seek legal protection of any kind against the greed and lust of

their conquerors. These Normans were not Frenchmen, although they had sojourned in France for a century and a half and had adopted the speech and religion of the French; they were hardly more than the grandchildren of Rollo and his pirates of the North Sea, whom Charles the Simple placated by allowing them a footing in his dominions.

* * Different indeed was the policy of Cnut after he had won the kingship of England. He dismissed the greater part of his Danish soldiers, retaining only a small body-guard of them; he placed Englishmen in the highest offices of church and state; administered the English laws of King Edgar; and caused London to become the centre of European commerce in the north. In fine, he became to all intents and purposes an Englishman, ruling the country with so much acceptance that, as one writer puts it, "for many generations people spoke of his reign with regret, and regarded it as an oasis between the arid devastations of the Viking raids and the horrors of the Norman Conquest."

It is true that the work of Cnut in consolidating the English nation and giving it importance abroad suffered some detriment in the short reigns of his two sons; and it is also true that Edward the Confessor who was half-Norman in blood, by his favouritism toward the Normans and his appointment of them to many offices of importance, did much to depress the national spirit of his realm and render possible the success of William's invasion. But, on the other hand, the fact that the English people, through the Witan, compelled Edward to repeal his sentence of outlawry against the Godwin family, of whom Harold was one, shows that the patriotism fostered by Cnut was not by any means dormant, and that it might have been made to achieve great things under the direction of a strong man living in this world and not in the next as did Edward—the only canonized saint in the long history of English kings. That Harold had the qualities both of mind and body for leadership is unquestioned. Freeman calls him "the hero and the martyr of our native freedom." He was every inch a soldier; his skill in statecraft was demonstrated by his complete control over affairs towards the end of Edward's reign; the people as a whole regarded him as a patriot and their safeguard against foreign domination. Undoubtedly if Harold had been vouchsafed the chance he would have pursued the policy of Cnut. His father had enjoyed the friendship of that monarch, and they held common views as to the administration of the affairs of the country. It is reasonable, therefore, to say that Harold, both

by virtue of his training at the hands of his father and the native bent of his mind, would have made England great without the intervention of the Normans. That would have changed the course of history, and English democracy, which had its source in the political institutions of the Saxons, would in all probability have advanced steadily on its path towards popular government as we know it to-day without being impeded for centuries by the autocracy of the crown as set up by William the Conqueror. William has his due meed of praise for unifying England and giving it a strong and effective central government; but the evil that he did in repressing the political genius of the English lived after him. There is much food for thought in the observation of one of our historians: "The question whether or not the Norman conquest was in its net result an advantage to England is one which does not admit of a conclusive answer." This much, however, is known to us, namely, that the infusion of Norman blood into the English nation was not great. It became absorbed, as the Celtic and Danish strains had previously been absorbed, in a short time, and the nation remained predominantly English.

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