

THE PAGEANT OF ENGLAND

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Conquerors

THOMAS B. COSTAIN







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Introduction

history of England unless it can be given popular appeal.

History, on which people depended once for enlightenment and entertainment in reading, is now little read except in classrooms, and this is due to the stern limits which historians have set for themselves. Thomas Babington Macaulay, one of the very greatest of them but a rebel in the matter of the traditions of the craft, had this to say in his definition: "The writers of history seem

T MUST be said at the outset that there is no need for another

to entertain an aristocratical contempt for the writers of memoirs. . . The most characteristic and interesting circumstances are omitted, or softened down, because, we are told, they are too trivial for the majesty of history." He quarreled with the theory which brushed aside biography and the technique of biographers, and which sternly decreed that history must remain within narrow bounds. He was not content that the annals of mankind should deal with public affairs so much and with life so little. And, of course, he was right. If the high ideals and conceptions which Macaulay laid down could be followed, history would regain some at least of its lost position.

To evolve a popular record of the period covered in this volume is not an easy task. The chronicles of the century and a half which followed the Norman Conquest were written by monks who toiled in cloistered withdrawal and depended on hearsay evidence. Much of what they produced is legend and fable on the face of it; still more is, at least, suspect. Industrious historians have found in the scant records room for much divergent theory. A single speech often has been translated in a dozen forms. It is hard, therefore, to keep the pen from wandering off into imaginative bypaths when dealing with material into which fancy has already entered so largely. But the greatest difficulty lies in the fact that the plodding fingers of the monks wrote with one-dimensional brevity.

How, then, may a history of the period be written which will have drama, color, and visual substance? I have always been convinced that it could be done and that various methods are available

for the writer who undertakes the task.

First, there is the additional material which may readily be obtained by carrying research into unusual channels, ransacking old and forgotten histories, searching through memoirs and diaries and church documents and the proceedings of local historical societies, above everything else by reading what is available on such subjects as currency, minting, monastic life, sheep raising, weaving, heraldry, architecture, archery. In this way great quantities of fresh fact may be secured; enough, certainly, to clothe quite amply the loose-jointed frame of monkish chronicle.

Even more important is to act upon the suggestion of Macaulay and turn to biography. History, which has dealt with kings and statesmen and soldiers, may be broadened profitably by dealing adequately with the men and women of lesser stature who deserve so much of memory and are accorded so little, the monk and the schoolmaster, the architect and the builder, the thinker and the

inventor, the poet and the painter.

There is need for something more, however, if history is to be made up, not of dry bones and locks of hair which crumble at a touch, but of blood and muscle and flesh with the tint of life. Obviously no stories may be invented, no speech may be put into the mouth of a historic character which cannot be authenticated. If the main actors have few scenes to play and brief lines to speak, how may a full-bodied drama be achieved? The answer is, by giving more scope to the players of minor roles (rewarding fellows, they always prove themselves) and by being lavish with scenery and sound effects and by having brisk drummers in the orchestra pit. It is my belief, as it has been that of many historians, that dramatization of certain non-essentials is within the right of the recorder of

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history. For instance, when it is known that Henry II met Thomas à Becket for the first time at Westminster on Christmas, it is surely not wrong to picture the holiday revelry in the royal palace that day, nor to say that Henry indulged his habit of sticking his thumbs in his belt when confronting the man who would become his chancellor and archbishop and would die under the axes of his knights. When it is known that Good Queen Mold introduced the fashion of letting the hair hang free, is it not permissible to depict her as wearing her golden locks down her back on the occasion when she rode to Lambeth Palace? This method I have adopted, but without invention of fact or incident or the putting of fictional speech in any mouth, believing it to be the only way of making the story of the period live for the casual reader. If this is a crime against the sacred code, then I must plead guilty. In that case, however, I must plead also that the time has come to amend the code.

The picture which emerges is, in my opinion, an honest and complete one. There has been no distortion of events to prove a point, and a sincere attempt has been made to study the men and women of those distant days through the mists which cloud them and to present them as human beings.

I have not weighted the saddle of every page with the lead of footnotes, and old Ibid., that ubiquitous Man Friday of the historian, has not been allowed to stick his long nose in once. The reader, I am sure, will welcome the omission of credit notes and

the departure from historical precedent.

The present volume, complete in itself because of the rounding out of the period of the Conquest and its results, is offered with some hesitation, being my first venture into this field. It is my desire and hope, however, to go on with the story of the men and women who have played parts in the pageant of England, the noteworthy, the fantastic, the brave, the too often forgotten great people who made the island empire great. In succeeding volumes, which will deal with periods where the records are more full, it will be easier to accomplish the purpose with which I have begun.

THOMAS B. COSTAIN

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Three Strong Men

T was late in September, the year was 1066, and that section of the great north highway which crosses the Aire and the Wharfe and rolls on to the city of York was black with marching soldiers. In the van were the Thingmen, the trained troops who formed the King's bodyguard, proudly carrying the Standard of the Fighting Man, the personal flag of Harold. The King marched with them, this great son of Earl Godwine who had been elected by the Witanagemot to succeed Edward the Confessor, the first man of the people to wear a crown. His presence lent strength to stiffening muscles and persuaded the racing squadrons to pour forth from not too melodious throats the battle songs of Assanduan in full confidence that victory lay ahead of them.

They marched on foot, these space-devouring Anglo-Saxons, battle-ax on shoulder and kite-shaped shield on arm, their knee-length tunics gray with dust, their legs bare (only the leaders wore the bracco or cross-gartering), their gauntlet-topped buskins cut to ribbons of leather. They were of medium height and inclined to a squareness of build. Under their caps, which curved to hornlike points, they had bristling manes of fair hair. Their faces were broad and stolid in expression. But look at them well, these dusty warriors who have marched from London in less than five days. In spite of their cloddish appearance and their obvious lack of learning, these men and their fathers before them had been groping toward an understanding of two great principles; first, that kings are the

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servants and not the masters of men, and, second, that in all things the will of the majority expressed through a properly constituted assemblage must prevail.

They did not know it, but it was to defend these beliefs that the soldiers of England were marching on sore and blistered feet up the

great north highway.

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Three strong men were fighting for the crown of England: Harold, the choice of the people; Duke William of Normandy, who pretended to have a claim based on a promise of the deceased King, and Harold Hardrada, ruler of Norway, whose only claim lay in his

heavy two-handed sword.

The succession had become involved when Edward, called the Confessor, took the crown. Edward was the sole surviving son of Ethelred the Unready, that incapable monarch who earned the hatred of the people to such a degree that they welcomed the Danish invaders who chased him from the throne. His mother was Emma, a beautiful Norman woman of gentle birth and fiercely acquisitive instincts. She later married Canute, the leader of the Danes, and so became Queen of England a second time. She loved Canute devotedly and gave little thought to her son Edward, who had fled the country and was living in Normandy. After the death of Canute and his sons, Edward was summoned back to England by the Witanagemot. His choice had been brought about by the influence of Godwine, Earl of the South and West. A speaker of persuasive eloquence, Godwine was able to win men over to his way of thinking, and his sagacity was such that he should rank with the greatest of the kingmakers who have played parts in English history.

Edward came to the throne with a reputation for saintliness which flickered during his reign but steadied into a strong flame after his death; which grew and grew, in fact, into a legend nothing could shake. It must be said, however, that if he had been left to rule by himself he would almost certainly have been as great a failure as his weak father. That would have been a sorry thing indeed for the country. Fortunately the pious Edward had Godwine to direct him and later the earl's son, Harold, who was quite as able as his father

and less devious.

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Edward was a strange individual. He had white hair and a long white beard and a pinkish complexion which made him look almost albino. His hands were long and thin and white to the point of transparency. He had a curious way of staring and he was given to sudden fits of unexplained speech and laughter. He won his reputation for piety by spending hours each day at his devotions. After emerging from his oratory, however, he would go off on hunting orgies during which he slaughtered the poor beasts of the forest with singular bloodthirstiness. When trouble arose in any part of the kingdom, it was Edward's first thought to send troops with orders to burn and slay; and only the influence of Harold kept him from acting on his sanguinary impulses. After his death people compared the peacefulness of his reign with the terrible years which followed and began to think of him as a saint; a tendency strengthened by the fact that miracles were reported at his tomb.

But the blame for the terrible years, nearly two centuries of cruelty and oppression, can be laid squarely on the doorstep of this second unready King. Although married to Edytha, the beautiful daughter of Godwine, he showed no inclination to beget an heir. In addition he brought Normans over in droves and made bishops of them and earls and court stallers, and he gave lands and great wealth to them; and so created in Norman minds the belief that England was a rich plum for Norman plucking. What is more, when William of Normandy paid him a visit, he promised that intensely ambitious man (or so William swore) the throne of England.

The throne of England was not a prize to be scrambled for by ambitious men or disposed of by weak kings. It was an office which the people conferred through the Witanagemot, the first ancestor of the modern Parliament. Although sons generally followed their fathers, it was understood that this was by the will of the people and not because of any divine right to succeed. The people could dethrone a bad king, and sometimes (but not often enough) they did. If ascetic Edward made such a promise to Norman William, it could not be considered a valid claim.

But William ruled over a land where the people had no rights at all. From that day forward he regarded himself as Edward's legal successor. He was, however, a longheaded and farseeing man and he took every precaution. When Harold was shipwrecked on the coast of Normandy, William had him brought before a chest covered with

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a cloth of gold thread on which a missal had been placed. He then demanded that his involuntary guest swear to support his claim. Harold, having no alternative, swore to do so, and the Norman barons, who had been summoned to hear, repeated sonorously, May God be thy Help! The cloth was then whisked off, and it was seen that the chest was filled with the bones and relics of saints. Norman chroniclers say that Harold turned pale when he thus realized the profundity of the oath he had sworn. This was the first evidence that England had of the deep craft of Duke William, but proofs of it would multiply over the years.

When the thin hands of the weak old King had been folded on his breast and his body had been laid away in the great church he had built at Westminster (his one real personal achievement), the Witanagemot faced a problem. England needed a strong man at the head of the state and there was no prince of the blood left with enough resolution to administer a knight's fee. Harold had not a drop of royal blood in his veins but he had governed England for Edward with wisdom, firmness, and a degree of forbearance which was most unusual in those cruel days. He was, moreover, a general of proven skill and the only man capable of defending the kingdom against the designs of that great schemer across the Channel. Finally, Edward on his deathbed had seen the accession in the right light and had voiced his preference for Harold.

So Harold was chosen. Counting his oath to William wiped out by the nation's need of him, and considering it invalid because given under duress, he accepted. He was anointed with the holy oil, the Veni, Creator Spiritus was sung over him, he placed the crown of England on his own head, and the country rejoiced at the prospect of a continuation of enlightened rule.

The day after his coronation Harold began to prepare for the blow he knew was coming.

He might perhaps have beaten the forces of William if the issue had been confined to them, but it developed that he had two invading armies to fight. Sometime before the death of the Confessor, Harold had acquiesced in the deposing and banishment of his brother Tostig because of the oppressive way the latter ruled his earldom of Northumberland. Tostig, burning with rage and spite, had since been plotting against Harold. He had been in Normandy, urging William (who needed no urging at all) to assert his right to



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the throne. From there he went to Denmark and asked King Sweyn for aid against his brother. Meeting refusal here, he went finally to Norway and found a ready listener in Harold, called Hardrada, the

King of that country.

A word about this viking King, the third of our three strong men. Harold Hardrada was a blond giant, Thor come down to earth in the guise of a man. He had spent his life in search of adventure, and legends had gathered about him. He was called sometimes Harold the Varanger, sometimes Harold the Lionslayer. He was supposed to have led a small personal crusade against the Saracens (an unsuccessful one, needless to state). He had sailed haughtily through the Bosporus, breaking the chain across it with the prow of his flagship and laughing at Eastern might. He had put out the eyes of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Monomachos and had enjoyed (but not exclusively) the passionate favors of the Empress Zoë. Strange wild songs came into his head when he went into battle, and he sang them exultantly as he hacked his opponents to pieces. No living man had ever been able to stand against him. His fame was even putting the memory of the truly great Olaf Tryggvisson into temporary shade, and such lesser heroes as Thorkill the Tall and Swen Forkbeard were being forgotten.

So much for legend. This much is certain: Harold Hardrada was a hard-bitten champion who was never happy without his sword in his hand and the head of a foeman to cleave. He was not wise enough to perceive the weaknesses in the proposition Tostig brought him. He listened to that glum traitor and decided he would like to

steal the throne of England for himself.

English Harold had been King for a few months only when he learned of the double danger facing him. Harold Hardrada and Tostig had sailed up the Humber River with a large army of invasion. They landed at Riccall and defeated an English force commanded by Edwin and Morkar, earls of the north.

Knowing that he must beat off the Norsemen before the Normans landed, English Harold collected his army and led it on its break-

neck march up the north highway.

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Harold Hardrada had come to stay. He had sailed from Norway with a fleet of extraordinary size and a large army. Some reports have

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it that he took a thousand ships to transport his troops. However, the remnants of the invading force returned to Norway in twenty-three ships, so it may safely be assumed that the chroniclers have been guilty in this instance of one of the gross exaggerations in which all early annals abound. But the gigantic Norseman had brought his wife, a Russian princess to whom he seems to have been much attached, some at least of his many mistresses, a drove of his children, an ingot of gold so large that twelve men were needed to get it on board, his household goods, his wardrobe, all his shining armor and his prized weapons and his bewinged helmets. He intended to remain and to rule over England.

After beating the English earls at Fulford, he established his headquarters near the village of Aldby in what had once been the home of the kings of Northumberland. This, no doubt, he considered the fit habitation for a conqueror. By settling himself here, he allowed his vanity to get the better of his strategic sense. His army had to be assembled loosely nearby along the banks of the Derwent. It was

flat country and offered no advantages at all to defenders.

The truth of the matter is that the powerful Norseman had not expected his English namesake so soon. He would have disposed his troops with greater care had he thought he would be attacked here. It is recorded that he was a much surprised man when he saw a cloud of dust on the road from York and realized that the English were coming to Stamfordbridge. He must have known a moment of panic when it came home to him that a large part of his army was with the ships at Riccall and that still more were encamped on the other side of the river. Harold Hardrada sent off messengers to summon the absent troops and then drew up what forces he had in battle array.

In spite of the poor position of the invaders, they looked formidable enough to the tired English as they crossed the river. The viking King had formed his men in the traditional shield wall which made a complete circle. Little was to be seen save the fierce eyes of the Norsemen above the interlocked shields and the dread flag of the King, his standard, the Land-waster, curling and uncurling in the wind above them. Harold Hardrada rode out to inspect his forces, looking very handsome and martial on his huge black horse. It may have been that the weight in the saddle was too much for even so strong a mount. The black steed stumbled, at any rate, and the King

pitched forward to the ground.