

The Arthur of  
the English Poets  
Howard Wagnadier

# THE ARTHUR OF THE ENGLISH POETS

BY  
HOWARD MAYNADIER



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TO  
THE MEMORY OF  
MY MOTHER

## PREFACE

THIS book has grown from a course in English Literature which I planned for my students at Harvard University and Radcliffe College in the spring of 1900. I thought that there was enough interest in the Arthurian legends to warrant a course of lectures which should give an account of their origin, development, and history in our poetry, to those who, without caring to study mediæval literature extensively, desired some knowledge of its finest poetic theme. Such knowledge it was difficult to obtain, for almost the only book on the subject both accurate and readable was Mr. M. W. MacCallum's *Tennyson's Idylls and Arthurian Story*, and that dealt chiefly with the Arthurian legends from Malory to the present time. My purpose was to tell more fully of the early days of the legends, their origin and growth, and in discussing their later history, to keep more closely to English countries than Mr. MacCallum had done. Of necessity treating much of the material that he had treated, I have been indebted to his work for many valuable suggestions in preparing both my lectures and my book, though in general my methods of approaching the subject have been different from his.

Because my lectures as first given, and as repeated

two or three times, have had a reasonably favorable reception, I have tried now to make them acceptable to a larger audience than that for which they were first intended. In doing so, I decided, as in the lectures, to discuss no authors who have not written in English except those — like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troies, and Richard Wagner — who have directly or indirectly influenced the poetry of the English race. I have not sought to advance new theories regarding the origin and the development of the Arthurian legends, though here and there may be found some new suggestion. My purpose has been rather to select what seem to me the sanest of the frequently conflicting opinions on the Round Table stories which students of mediæval literature have held, and to present them clearly. Nor have I sought to mention every Arthurian author in the United Kingdom or America, but only to indicate the general tendencies of Arthurian literature in the English world from its first appearance to the present.

In preparing my book I have been helped by the advice and information of various of my colleagues and other friends, whom I now take pleasure in thanking. Especially are my thanks due, and most heartily I offer them, to Professor Wendell, Professor Kirtledge, and Mr. Bentinck-Smith.

H. M.

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS,  
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# THE ARTHUR OF THE ENGLISH POETS

## I

### THE VIGOR OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

\* \* \* "No little thing shall be  
\* \* \* \* \*  
The gentle music of the bygone years,  
Long past to us with all their hopes and fears."

WILLIAM MORRIS, *The Earthly Paradise*.<sup>1</sup>

MR. KIPLING'S three-decker has not been the only means of transportation during the last century to the Islands of the Blest, nor Mr. Kipling the only writer who has felt that something else than modern science is necessary to take us thither. His "ram-you-damn-you liner" is highly convenient in getting us to our destination quickly; and one on its decks is hardly less sensible of the wonders of this world than a mariner sailing into the unknown Atlantic with Columbus, or returning to the shores of Devon with Drake, after the first voyage of an Englishman round the world. Then, too, the scores of travellers comfortably stretched in their steamer-chairs, going thousands of miles merely for pleasure, or because their business interests may lie in what were once provinces of the Roman Empire, as well as in lands undreamt of while that empire still endured, — these travellers are almost as

<sup>1</sup> Prologue.



wonderful to contemplate as the daring explorers of the sixteenth century or the sturdy colonisers of the seventeenth. But the throb of the friendly, faithful engines, if it makes you wonder at man's mastery of various forces of nature, keeps you, nevertheless, from forgetting the millions of prosy lives spent to maintain this mastery. For the blackened, sweating stokers feeding their fires, machinery has no poetic marvels. Even at sea, where more than anywhere else you are impressed by the poetry of nature and the poetry of science, you cannot entirely forget the "counties overhung with smoke," the "snorting steam and piston stroke," the "spreading of the hideous town," from which William Morris yearned to escape. Now nothing in the last hundred years has been in stronger contrast to the smug self-satisfaction of the eighteenth century, or, at all events, the first half of it, than dissatisfaction with surrounding conditions — with prosy material prosperity — and the desire to get away from hurried, noisy, ugly conditions into the fair calm of an "earthly paradise." Among the ways of reaching this which have commended themselves to various men, none has commended itself to a larger number than seeking the ideals of beauty and repose, apparently gone from the modern world, in the simpler life of the Middle Ages. From Chatterton's time to our own, so many have done so, that mediævalism is likely to be one of the phenomena of the century just passed which will most attract the attention of historians and critics in the centuries to come.

In English literature, the most marked manifestation of this mediævalism is the interest in the stories about King Arthur and the knights of his Round

Table. During the last hundred and thirty years, these stories have been one of the chief sources of inspiration for poets, musicians, and painters ; they have engaged the attention of antiquarians ; and (Heaven save the mark !) they have furnished many a plodding student with material for his Doctor's thesis. Everybody of education nowadays knows something about Tristram and Iseult, and the Holy Grail, and the great King Arthur and his fair Queen, Guinevere, who was loved by his bravest knight, Sir Lancelot. Everybody knows something about them, and yet many seem to think that these people of the Round Table stories are not very distantly related to the people of the Nibelungen legends. One reason for this impression, no doubt, is that both have become known to the public in Wagner's operas, whither they seem to have come out of the barbarian dimness of northern antiquity. Another and a more surprising reason is that there exists in English no history of the Arthurian legends at once accurate, well-proportioned, and readable.<sup>1</sup>

That no such book exists is no reason why one should not exist ; the stories about Arthur are worthy of study for various reasons. For one, they were the favorite fiction of our mediæval ancestors, surpassing in popularity the native French hero-tales which clustered round Charlemagne ; the native Germanic hero-tales, of which the most famous are those of Siegfried ; and the literary tales invented in the later Middle Ages about the fictitious Amadis of Gaul, whose

<sup>1</sup> The nearest approach to such a history is Mr. W. M. MacCallum's admirable book, *Tennyson's Idylls and Arthurian Story*, Glasgow, 1894. Mr. MacCallum's plan, however, makes it necessary to subordinate the early history of the stories to their later development.

wonderful deeds fired Don Quixote to emulation. Then again, they are worthy of study because, since classical antiquity, no stories have enjoyed such continued popularity. From the early twelfth century there has not been a time when they have not interested English-speaking people more or less. Furthermore, thanks to their adaptability, to their frequent changes to suit contemporary taste, these stories only of the great mediæval cycles have survived the Renaissance. The Amadis romances are dead. The native French cycle is dead.<sup>1</sup> The old Germanic cycle, at least in Wagner's Nibelungen tetralogy, has waked recently to a new but still rather uncertain life. But the Arthurian cycle, which in the eighteenth century seemed moribund, has in the nineteenth century come out with the lusty vigor of renewed youth. In the last fifty years no English narrative poem has been so much liked as the *Idylls of the King*. Could box-office receipts be compared, they would probably show that in the same time no opera has been more popular than *Lohengrin*, the story of the Swan-Knight, sent from the Grail Castle to aid Elsa of Brabant. *Tristan und Isolde* is generally counted one of the greatest music tragedies of the world. The recent discussion of the propriety of playing *Parsifal* anywhere outside of the theatre at Bayreuth has shown again the interest in Wagner's treatment of Arthurian themes. And finally, the legend of the Holy Grail has of late given Mr.

<sup>1</sup> I refer to the French and Germanic cycles as subjects for serious literature. In a popular way they are more alive than the Arthurian cycle. Siegfried is still the hero of many a German *Volksbuch*. In Italian puppet-shows, one may still see Roland's heroic struggles against the Saracens; and even in America, in the public libraries of the large cities, Italian urchins still ask for *I Reali di Francia*.

Abbey subjects for pictures which have been widely noticed in two continents.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the Arthurian stories are very much alive to-day, at least for the English race, both in the British Empire and in the American Republic: so much alive, that there is reason for a history of them which shall try to give a reader who is in no sense a mediæval scholar some idea of their sources, and of their literary development both before and after the Renaissance.

<sup>1</sup> The pictures were painted for mural decorations in the Public Library of Boston, Massachusetts.

## II

### THE HISTORICAL ARTHUR

THE stories of Arthur, as we know them, and of his knights of the Table Round, have two main sources, one of which is easy to discover, the other, difficult; both more or less connected with the history and traditions of the Celts. The source which is easily traced, about which scholars to-day are virtually agreed, is the historical. It carries us far back of the years when the Arthurian romances first took literary shape. The other, which we may call the popular source, is traced less easily. It carries us even farther back into the past; according to some scholars, at times to immemorial Celtic antiquity. No two scholars agree about it exactly, and some eminent German and eminent French scholars have held opinions regarding it in many respects diametrically opposite.

The historical source is found in the English conquest of Britain, a conquest especially remarkable in that it was the beginning of the end for one of the great members of the Indo-European family of nations. With the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, the days of the last Celtic independence were numbered.

And yet time was when no Indo-European race was more powerful than the Celts. Spread over Europe in the days of Herodotus,<sup>1</sup> from the upper Danube to the

<sup>1</sup> Herodotus is the first Greek to use the noun Celt (Κελτός), though before him Hecataeus of Miletus, a Greek who wrote a geographical work, *Γῆς Περίοδος*, late in the sixth century B. C., spoke of

Straits of Gibraltar, these Celts, for some reason or other, came to be filled with the same spirit of unrest which later sent the Germanic tribes pouring over the Roman Empire. One result was the Celtic invasion of Italy, with the subsequent capture of Rome in 390 by the Gauls, as the Latins called the Celts. This was the culmination of Celtic power in the Italian peninsula. Had the Gauls continued to occupy Rome, they would have changed the history of the world; but they hurried off to fight the Veneti, selling their victory for Roman gold — a failure to enjoy the fruits of victory characteristic of the Celts in all ages. "Good soldiers," says Mommsen, "but bad citizens," they "have shaken all states and founded none."<sup>1</sup>

Nyrax, a Celtic city (which I believe is unknown to-day) — Νύραξ πόλις Κελτική, — and of Massilia bordering on Celtic territory — Μασσαλία πόλις τῆς Λιγυστικῆς, κατὰ τὴν Κελτικὴν. This is the earliest known mention of the Celtic peoples.

Herodotus, as is well known, was born at the time of the Persian Wars, whose historian he became. He introduces the name "Celt" in connection with the Danube, which river he says (in bk. ii, ch. 33, of his history, written about 445 B. C.) rises among the Celts — ἔκ Κελτῶν — and flows across the middle of Europe. He speaks of the Celts as living also outside of the Pillars of Hercules.

After this, Greek references to the Celts become more and more frequent. Why the Greeks gave them the name which has stuck to the race to this day, is not surely known. Probably it was the name of that tribe or branch of the Celtic race with which the Greeks first came in contact, for their first settlement in Celtic territory was at Marseilles, according to Hecataeus, as just noted, near Celtic territory, and the name of the tribe was extended to the whole race. It is certain that it was not the generic name of the Celts themselves. Confirmation of this theory as to the Greek use of "Celt" for the whole race we seem to get from Cæsar in his *Gallic War*, bk. i, ch. 1, who implies that the name Celt belonged only to the people of a definite part of southern Gaul: "qui ipsorum lingua Celtae, nostra Galli appellantur." Livy (v, 34) also speaks of the Celts as a part of the Gauls: "Celtarum quae pars Galliae tertia est . . ." For all the early history of the Celts, cf. H. d'Arbois de Jubainville, *Cours de Littérature Celtique*.

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Mommsen, *History of Rome*, bk. ii, ch. 4.

The Italian movement was only one form of the Celtic migrations. For some time, in this same fourth century before Christ, the Celts threatened northwestern Greece. Then, after the division of the Macedonian Empire, which followed the death of Alexander the Great, the Celts, now called *Galatae* by the Greeks, swept down on the Grecian states, pushing thence across the Ægean Sea to establish themselves permanently in a province of Asia Minor, which from them received its name, Galatia.<sup>1</sup>

The Celts were now stretched across the world from Asia Minor to Ireland; but the "bad citizens" could not hold what the "good soldiers" had won. In the year 225 B. C., the Gauls, who had been menacing Rome more or less ever since their capture of the city, suffered an overwhelming defeat in Etruria. Two years later the Romans, crossing the Po, for the first time gained a victory over the Gauls in their own territory. From then till now the history of the Celtic nations may be summed up in that quotation from Ossian which Arnold saw fit to put at the head of his *Essay on the Study of Celtic Literature*,—"They went forth to the war, but they always fell."

The details of this shrinking of Celtic power are not known. In the East it seems to have waned gradually, disappearing last in Galatia in the third or fourth century of the Christian era. Of the conquest of the Western Celts we know more, thanks to the Roman historians; but even of this we have no

<sup>1</sup> Neither the origin of the later Greek name, *Γαλάται*, nor of the Roman name for the Celts, "Galli," is known. Possibly each is connected with an old Irish word, "Galdæ," meaning "brave." In time both "Gallus" and "Γαλάτης" came to be restricted in use, as are their derivatives to-day—"Gaul" and "Galatian."

full account prior to Cæsar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*. Through these, every schoolboy knows something of the conquest of Gaul, and of the first tentative expeditions of the Romans into Britain. Yet they made no permanent settlement there till 43 A. D., in which year, in the reign of Tiberius Claudius, began the Roman occupation, which was to last for three centuries and a half. This we must consider with some care; for in the events of its last years we find the historical root of the Arthurian romances.

It took the Romans long to pacify Britain. There were several revolts — the most famous, that of Queen Boadicea, who, after causing the death of thousands of Romans, was defeated, and took poison rather than fall into the hands of her conquerors. Conditions remained disturbed till the proconsulship of Agricola, from 78 to 85. He carried the Roman armies to the north of Scotland; he built a chain of forts between the Clyde and the Forth; he even stood with his legions at the southwestern extremity of Scotland, looking over to the misty Irish hills and meditating a descent on Ireland, which he never made. But Agricola was more than a good general; he was also a man of tact and kindness — qualities which seem to have accomplished more than his generalship in pacifying the British. Through his efforts, many of the young chieftains of the island lived in companionship with the Romans, learned the Latin language, and put on the Roman toga. Yet the Romans did not remain in secure possession of all the territory which Agricola had conquered. The Wall of Hadrian, built about the year 120, from the Tyne to the Solway, marks the limit



of their settlement. North of this, the land up to the Forth, though owing allegiance to Rome, was much overrun by the Picts. South of the Wall, Britain was a fairly peaceful province, as Roman remains in all parts of the country show. Still it was never entirely peaceful; and towards the end of the fourth century, as the disruption of the empire approached, the condition of the province became turbulent.

About 383 the Roman general, Maximus, then commanding in the island, mutinied, and with an army, probably of both Romans and Britons, crossed into Gaul and thence into Italy, where he maintained himself in imperial state till he was put to death in 388 by the Emperor Theodosius, who had come from Constantinople to the rescue of the Western Empire. After this there were more revolts in Britain, which the few Roman legions now left there had difficulty in quelling. Then in 410 came the final separation of Britain from the Empire. In that year the Goths sacked Rome and plundered Gaul. Some historians believe that the Britons took advantage of the weakness of the empire to expel the last remnant of the Roman Legions: others believe that the weak Emperor Honorius recalled the Roman troops from Britain in order to oppose them to the invading Goths. At any rate, there is little doubt that in the year 410 he wrote a letter to the Britons, telling them to be their own guards against their plundering neighbors, the Picts and the Scots. The wording of the letter is such that it may have been either an exhortation to the Britons to hold out till the Romans could help them again, or a warning that henceforth the Britons must protect themselves without help from