A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLAND

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PROFILE BOOKS

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Introduction

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I HAVE ROAMED ENGLAND all my life. I have climbed Cornwall's cliffs, wandered Norfolk's marshes and walked the Pennine Way. I know England's cities and towns, churches and houses. For all that, until recently I did not really know England, for I was not aware of how it came to be. My England was a geographical stage set, a backdrop for events and characters familiar from my childhood: Alfred the Great, the Norman conquest, Magna Carta, Agincourt, Henry VIII's wives, Good Queen Bess, Cromwell, Gladstone, Disraeli, the Great War, Winston Churchill. Each stood as a magnificent moment in time, but they did not join up. They lacked a narrative.

I set out here to tell that narrative as simply as possible. I was helped by finding it exhilarating. England's history, its triumphs and disasters, must be the most consistently eventful of any nation on earth. Its origins lie in the Dark Ages, and possibly before, in the occupation of the eastern shores of the British Isles by Germanic tribes from the continent. They brought with them the name of Anglii, probably from the 'angle' of the coasts of Germany and Denmark. Their settlement on the north-east coast was named Angle-land and later England. These newcomers quickly drove the earlier inhabitants, so-called 'ancient Britons', to the west and north, to beyond Hadrian's Wall, the Welsh uplands and the Irish Sea, forming boundaries of England that have remained roughly constant ever since.

The English were themselves invaded by Vikings and by Normans. But while they had obliterated their British predecessors, they kept their Anglo-Saxon culture and language

through all subsequent incursions. They were astonishingly resilient, aided by the security of an insular geography and the seafaring enterprise often shown by island peoples. They quickly evolved a common language, common laws and a common system of government, rooted in a tension between the Saxon autonomy of 'kith and kin' and the Norman tradition of central authority. That tension is a leitmotif of my story. England was a nation forged between the hammer of kingship and the anvil of popular consent, a consent regularly withheld, not least by the Celtic half of the British Isles which came to form the first 'English empire'. The result was such conflicts as led to Magna Carta, the baronial wars of Henry III and the Peasants' Revolt, culminating in the religious and political revolutions of the Tudors and Stuarts. These revolutions resolved into a constitutional monarchy subject to a parliamentary democracy that was to prove the most stable in Europe.

The story was not always happy. Relations with France, the land of the Norman conquerors, were mostly dreadful, with conflict throughout the Middle Ages and again in the eighteenth century. Most British rulers understood the need for a defensive rather than aggressive stance towards the outside world. Yet from the Plantagenets to the elder and younger Pitts, the craving for overseas domain rarely dimmed. It led Britain to amass the largest empire the world had ever seen. It brought much glory and helped bind together the peoples of the British Isles in a 'united kingdom' of shared endeavour, whose legacy continues to this day. But the British empire came at a price and lasted barely two hundred years. In the twentieth century Britain's global dominance passed to its offspring, America, leaving behind as a tidemark the extent of spoken English. Britain then declined, to become a relic of its former greatness and something of a poseur as a world power, its sovereignty compromised by European government and by the disciplines of a global economy. I return to these themes in my epilogue.

This is specifically a book about England. I regard Wales, Scotland and Ireland as countries with their own histories. They have spent less than half their existence as components of a union of 'Great Britain and Ireland', an embrace that tends to subordinate them in conventional histories of Britain. But England is a country in its own right, different from its neighbours and with a people who call themselves English in differentiation from Scots, Welsh and Irish. Only when referring to all these collectively do I use the terms Britain and Britons. Indeed England is now part of two confederacies, of the United Kingdom and of the European Union, with separate assemblies and variable tiers of sovereignty. To be British and to be European is to be a legal member of one of those unions, and to become British is to sign a piece of paper. To be English is more a matter of self-definition, identifying with a distinctive culture and outlook as well as geography. To become English is a matter of assimilation, which can take a few years or a few generations. The genius of Englishness is that it encompasses all origins and races, but in a culture specific to the territory defined by the original Anglo-Saxon occupation.

The English have never been good at describing themselves. In the age of imperial confidence they did not feel the need. Today most of them dislike seeing themselves as Europeans, but they are no better at defining themselves as against their Celtic neighbours. They waged wars of suppression against Wales, Scotland and, with peculiar brutality, Ireland. At the start of the twenty-first century they find themselves with Ireland mostly detached and Scotland and Wales semi-detached, politically as well as culturally. The English component of the United Kingdom is thus left in a strangely anaemic limbo. It has no parliament or distinctive political institutions of its own. To refer to England and the English as distinct from Britain and the British is often treated as hostile to the cosmopolitanism implied by the union, even as racist. The English flag of St George

has acquired a tinge of chauvinism and xenophobia and been adopted by the far right. I find this absurd. England is a country entitled to define itself and take pride in doing so. I believe that definition should begin with a narrative of its history.

To some, history is a matter of chance, to others it is fashioned by heroes and villains, and to others it is buried in geography, economics, even anthropology. There are many ways of a telling a nation's story, with a current fashion for the personal and controversial. There are histories social, cultural, 'popular' and, in England's case, imperial. But a short history can only be selective, and the selection will be mostly devoted to politics. A nation is a political entity and its birth and development form a narrative of those who deployed power within it, be they monarchs, soldiers, politicians, the mob in the street or, more recently, the mass of voters. I regard history as more than a straight chronology but as links in a chain of cause and effect. It is this chain that holds the secret of how England came to be where it is today.

Saxon Dawn

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410 – 600

IN THE YEAR 410 a letter was sent from the embattled Roman emperor, Honorius, to colonists in his province of Britannia. They had already lost the protection of the legions, withdrawn from Britannia during the past half century to defend the empire, and had written pleading for help against Saxon raids from across the North Sea. The emperor was beset by Visigoths, and a distant colony at the extremity of the known world was strategically unimportant. The civilisations of the Mediterranean, supreme for a millennium, were in retreat. Honorius cursorily advised the colonists to 'take steps to defend yourselves'.

The fifth and sixth centuries in the British Isles were truly dark ages. Iron Age Celts, so-called ancient Britons, had migrated from the continent between a thousand and six hundred years BC, and had intermarried with Roman invaders in the three centuries after the birth of Christ. But the retreat of the legions left them too weak to defend themselves or their legacy of Roman villas, temples and theatres. They lay vulnerable to the raiders against whom they had pleaded for help.

From where did these new invaders come? Historians seeking 'the birth of England' are soon enveloped in controversy. Two theories are advanced for what happened at this time in the eastern half of the British Isles. One is that Germanic tribes moving south towards France were balked by the Franks under Emperor Clovis and diverted across the North Sea. Their

invasion, perhaps assisted by Roman mercenaries already resident in Britain, was essentially genocidal. They massacred or wholly subjugated the indigenous British tribes of eastern England, such as the Iceni and Trinovantes, and obliterated their culture.

This thesis is supported by the few witnesses who survived the period. The only contemporary source, a sixth-century Welsh (or west country) monk named Gildas, graphically laments the fiery invasion of 'impious men … that did not cease after it had been kindled, until it burnt nearly the whole surface of the island, and licked the western ocean with its red and savage tongue'. He quoted a fifth-century document, the Groan of the British, telling of a Britain bereft of Roman protection: 'The barbarians drive us to the sea and the sea throws us back on the barbarians.' By the late seventh century the 'Father of English History', the Venerable Bede, took the genocide thesis as given in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. He wrote of the Anglii invading in such force as to leave their Germanic settlements deserted. Little or no trace of any preceding British culture remained. The British, or Brythonic, language and Romano-Christian religion disappeared. So-called Romano-British villas and towns fell into decay or were burned.

Another theory is that there was no external invasion, rather an internal expansion, since the eastern parts of Britain had long been settled by Germanic and Belgic peoples, trading and raiding the shores of the North Sea. Recent DNA archaeology reinforces a view of the sea round the British Isles as navigable 'territory', while interior land forms a less permeable barrier. Thus the culture of the British Isles at the time of the Roman retreat was divided between the North Sea coast, settled over the centuries by Germanic tribes, and the Irish Sea and Atlantic coasts, which were Celtic in language and culture. The theory suggests that there were few 'ancient Britons', or Celts, in eastern parts and therefore none to eradicate. This explains the

paucity of Brythonic language traces and place names, though it does not explain the references to an overseas invasion and the overwhelming Celtic belief in one. The possible resolution of these divergent theories is that both were true in part, with new waves of Germanic settlers arriving after the Romans left, adding to longer-standing Germanic enclaves.

Either way it seems clear that over the course of the fifth and sixth centuries a people whose language and society derived from the continent of Europe moved aggressively westward across Roman Britannia, overwhelming the indigenous British. According to Bede this movement comprised Jutes, Frisians, Angles and Saxons. 'Saeson', 'Sassenach' and 'Sawsnek' are the old Welsh, Gaelic and Cornish words for the English. In *c*.450 Jutes under the brothers Hengist and Horsa, possibly once hired as mercenaries by a Romano-British ruler, Vortigern, landed in Kent and spread as far as the Isle of Wight. At the same time Angles arrived from the 'angle' of Germany in Schleswig-Holstein, lending their name to East Anglia and eventually to England itself. Saxons from north Germany settled along the south coast and penetrated the Thames basin, forming territories known to this day as Essex (east Saxon), Middlesex, Wessex and Sussex. These peoples are referred to as Saxons and their language as Anglo-Saxon. A strong argument deployed by the invasion theorists is that all trace of Roman Christianity appears to have been eradicated from land occupied by the pagan Saxons. In contrast, Wales at this time was seeing a fervently Christian 'age of saints'. Dozens of Welsh churches date from the sixth and even fifth centuries and the oldest cathedral in Britain was begun by Deiniol in Bangor in 525. At much the same time St Petroc was preaching in Cornwall, and St Columba was travelling from Ireland to the Scottish island of Iona, founding a monastery there in *c*.563.

Gildas told not only of the misery inflicted by the Saxons on the British but of resistance. In the 540s he wrote of living

in what appears to have been the Severn valley in a period of peace, the Saxon advance having stalled in the west country. He attributed this to a British leader who defeated the Saxons at the turn of the sixth century at a place called Mount Badon, possibly near the fort of South Cadbury in Somerset. The only commander he mentions by name was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a Romano-Briton born in the late fifth century who 'won some battles and lost others'. His nickname may have been 'Bear', the skin of his military tunic. Bear is *artos* in Celtic.

This glint of light in the darkness is the nearest history gets to 'Arthur'. On it was based a giant edifice of legend. From Gildas was derived the Arthur of the ninth-century propagandist Nennius, and of the twelfth-century fantasist Geoffrey of Monmouth, responsible for much of the imagery of north European chivalric culture. This led to the bestseller by Thomas Malory in the fifteenth century, *Morte d'Arthur*. Following Malory came Tennyson, the pre-Raphaelites, Hollywood and the 'Holy Grail', conjecturing a mystic pre-Saxon paradise called Camelot, with a wizard called Merlin, and many a knightly deed, heartbreak and tragedy. Britons, Saxons, Normans and Tudors were all to claim Arthur as their own, as if driven by some desperate magnetism towards a pure and noble past.

If Gildas's period of peace existed, it did not last. Towards the end of the sixth century Saxons had settled along the length of the River Severn, where a Welsh saint, Beuno, reported on 'strange-tongued men whose voices I heard across the river'. He feared that one day they would 'obtain possession of this place and it will be theirs'. Yet while Saxons occupied the great valleys draining into the North Sea, Britons were left in occupation of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Cumbria and the Hen Ogledd ('Old North' in Welsh) of the Scottish borders. The Celtic tongue had by now divided into two groups, Goedelic (Irish and Scots Gaelic and Manx) and Brythonic (Cumbric, Welsh and Cornish). At this time or earlier a migration took

place from Cornwall across the Channel to Armorica in France. Here Roman Britannia was recreated as Brittany, and the language as Breton, distantly related to modern Welsh.

By the end of the seventh century, the Saxons were combining into larger groupings under early kings. The first to emerge with any distinction was Ethelbert of Kent, who reigned from *c.*580 until his death in 616, a pagan who cemented an alliance with the cross-Channel Franks by marrying Bertha, granddaughter of King Clovis of France, subject to the condition that she retain her Christian faith. She brought her own chaplain and is said to have worshipped at the old Roman church of St Martin in Canterbury. It was probably for this reason that Pope Gregory was later to send his first Christian missionaries to Kent under St Augustine.

At the same time in the north, Northumbria was cohering under a great warrior, Ethelfrith, king of Bernicia (593–616), who was to entrench the boundaries of Saxon settlement against British resistance. The north-British Gododdin tribe, possibly based on the rock of Edinburgh, had their deeds recorded by a bard named Aneurin in *The Gododdin*, the first great work of British (as opposed to English) literature. His saga tells how an army of 300 warriors marched south under their leader Mynyddog, sometime about 600, meeting Ethelfrith near Catterick in Yorkshire. Of one British soldier Aneurin wrote:

> In might a man, a youth in years,
> Of boisterous valour …
> Quicker to a field of blood
> Than to a wedding
> Quicker to the ravens' feast
> Than to a burial.

Yet the Gododdin were wiped out, with only Aneurin escaping to tell the tale. His poem is known in a transcription

into medieval Welsh, but scholars believe the original to have been in the Cumbric language of the north British tribes and similar to Welsh (in which case present-day signs at Edinburgh airport in Gaelic should be in Welsh).

Worse was to follow for the British. In 603 a Scots-Irish army from Dalriada, a kingdom stretching across the Irish Sea from Argyll to Antrim, met the same Ethelfrith in battle at Degsastan, believed to be near Roxburgh. The Northumbrians were again victorious. They then carried their supremacy south along the west coast to confront the Welsh. In *c.*615 Ethelfrith encountered 1,200 Welsh Christian monks near the old Roman town of Chester, and slaughtered them 'for opposing him with their prayers'. He went on to defeat the main Welsh army and bring his domain to the banks of the Dee. To the Anglo-Saxon Bede, writing a century later, Ethelfrith was the true founder of Northumbria, who 'ravaged the Britons more than all the great men of the English, insomuch that he might be compared to Saul, once king of the Israelites, excepting only this, that he was ignorant of the true religion'.

The area of Saxon England was beginning to take shape, south of Hadrian's wall and east of the Severn and the Devon border. Pockets of ancient Britain appear to have survived in the Pennine uplands and in places such as Elmet in west Yorkshire (which was overrun in 627). But the surrounding England was in no sense a nation. No authority, king or church had replaced the Romans. People were ruled, if at all, by Saxon warlords regarded by the Christian Celts in the west as marauding, illiterate pagans. Saxons were people of lowland rather than upland, accustomed to fight and farm across the great plains of northern Europe. They could fell trees and use ploughs that cut deep into alluvial soil, but they stopped when they reached higher land. Here the country was less fertile and the Britons perhaps less easy to overcome. The zest for conquest seemed to evaporate as it moved west.