

'The Curfew's Knell': Anglo-Saxon England and the Tradition of Dissent in English Romantic Poetry

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ABSTRACT: At the turn of the nineteenth century, the growing strength of medievalism in aesthetic and cultural discourse renewed interest in England's Anglo-Saxon past. However, the tropes and motifs that came to define perceptions of pre-Norman society had a gestation period which already stretched back at least as far as the English Reformation. The Romantics, often coming from backgrounds of Protestant dissent themselves, found in these discourses many synergies with their own political and artistic projects. This article will therefore explore the representations of Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Yoke in Romantic poetry. It will do this by focusing on the work of two writers: Joseph Cottle and William Wordsworth. Though not nearly as well-known as many of his contemporaries and friends, Joseph Cottle was a key figure in early Romanticism. Moreover, his major work, *Alfred, An Epic Poem*, is one of the most substantial representations of Anglo-Saxon England in Romantic literature, combining many of the discursive elements passed down through the radical Protestant tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the aesthetic and political sensibilities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, Wordsworth similarly uses England's pre-Norman past to explore the role of religion in the continuity of national identity. However, his treatment is more ambivalent, adapting the idiom of dissenting radicals in order to defend the established church. In exploring the aspects of Anglo-Saxon history represented in this poetry, the article seeks to uncover the roots of these discourses, analyse the innovations contributed by the Romantics, and point towards the directions these discourses would take in the future.

KEYWORDS: Wordsworth; Cottle; Romanticism; Anglo-Saxons; Medievalism; Reformation



IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND one of the strongest and most distinctive cultural forces to develop in politics and aesthetics was what came to be known as medievalism. As

Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner explain, medievalism was both 'wide ranging and diverse', drawing on a broad spectrum of peoples, epochs and political agendas.¹ One consequence of this trend was a renewed interest in England's Anglo-Saxon past and its significance for contemporary society. This strain of medievalism had a particularly long gestation, stretching back at least as far as the English Reformation, and the motifs which resulted from its complex evolution would weave their way into cultural discourse throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, all the way up to medievalism's immediate 'prehistory' in the Romantic era.² For this reason, political radicals like Thomas Paine would still rail against the 'French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives', and poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge would still praise the liberty and political wisdom of the 'Northern barbarians'.³ Indeed, some the most famous lines ever written about the fate of the Anglo-Saxons come from Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe: A Romance* (1819):

Norman saw on English oak,
On English neck a Norman yoke;
Norman spoon in English dish,
And England ruled as Normans wish;
Blithe world in England never will be more,
Till England's rid of all the four.⁴

The sheer success of Scott's novel meant that it came to define many of the perceptions of the period for much of the Victorian era; according to Chris Jones, it was 'Ulrica's Death Song', not *Beowulf*, which was regarded as 'the crown of Anglo-Saxon poetry' in the early nineteenth century.⁵ Ironically, it might even have been *Ivanhoe* which first

¹ Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 1-22 (p. 3).

² David Matthews, 'The Ballad Revival and the Rise of Literary History', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. by Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 85-97 (p.86).

³ Thomas Paine, *The Thomas Paine Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 76; Jeff Strabone, *Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 217.

⁴ Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 286.

⁵ Chris Jones, *Fossil Poetry: Anglo-Saxon and Linguistic Nativism in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 39.

introduced the name Beowulf to a non-specialist audience. Thus, by the time Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, discourses of lost Saxon freedoms, the Norman Yoke and the cult of King Alfred were already firmly established.

Yet while the histories of Saxon England and the Norman conquest would continue to grow in importance as the nineteenth century drew nearer, progress in scholarship was staggered and knowledge patchy. As Sharon Turner trenchantly commented in the 1807 preface to his seminal three-volume study, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons*,

No other portion of our history has been so negligently studied. It has been the fashion to treat it as an unimportant excrescence of our general history... our most popular historians, averse to the drudgery of research, have passed over the Anglo-Saxon period with contented ignorance.⁶

What is more, although literary representations often contained a hard kernel of fact, the form the narratives had acquired throughout the culture wars of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was overdetermined. Having originated in a period of unparalleled religious conflict, these narratives had already passed through many different, historically determined permutations even before reaching the Romantic era. Then, at the cusp of the nineteenth century, '[s]upposed medieval authenticity is fused with what we identify as distinctly Romantic priorities: sublime and/or picturesque landscapes, a deeply introspective self, and the expression of an effusion of emotion and spontaneous feeling'.⁷ Having inherited the narratives as they were passed down from generations of writers and antiquarians before them, the Romantics adapted these representations of Anglo-Saxon society to meet their own creative needs. Hence, uncovering the historical roots of these narratives and tracing the channels by which they reached the Romantics is key to understanding firstly how they influenced Romantic poetry and political discourse and secondly, what unique contribution they made to the medievalism of the succeeding Victorian era.

⁶ Sharon Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1807), I, p. iv.

⁷ Parker and Wagner, p. 3.

This article will therefore explore the representations of Anglo-Saxon England, especially the portrayals of Alfred the Great and the narrative of the Norman Yoke, in Romantic poetry. It will do this by paying special attention to the points at which these representations intersect with Protestant radicalism. This is of particular importance, for as Harold Bloom once provocatively wrote: 'all the English Romantic poets [had a background] in the tradition of Protestant dissent, the kind of nonconformist vision that descended from the Left Wing of England's Puritan movement'.⁸ The article will focus on the work of two writers in particular: Joseph Cottle and William Wordsworth. Though not nearly as well-known as many of his contemporaries and friends, the former was a key figure in early Romanticism. Moreover, his major work, *Alfred, An Epic Poem*, is one of the most substantial representations of Anglo-Saxon England in Romantic literature, combining many of the discursive elements passed down through the radical Protestant tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the aesthetic and political sensibilities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The latter is, of course, far more renowned, yet far less straightforward in his commitments. Though a lifelong member of the Church of England, Wordsworth's early religious upbringing was deeply influenced by Methodist and other dissenting ideas.⁹ These influences notwithstanding, by his later years he had become increasingly attracted to High-Church teachings, and movements like the Oxford Tractarians sought to present him as their 'poetic patron'.¹⁰ Thus in *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, Wordsworth, like Cottle, uses England's pre-Norman past to explore the role of religion in the continuity of national identity. However, his treatment is more ambivalent, adapting the idiom of dissenting radicals in order to defend the established church.

There has been a great deal of scholarship produced on this topic, both in terms of the roots of Anglo-Saxon narratives in the Reformation, and their later impact on Romanticism. This article takes as its point of departure Simon Keynes' extended article, *The Cult of King Alfred the Great* (1999), which provides a broad overview of the ways representations of the Saxon monarch have evolved throughout history and the contextual specificities which have shaped these narratives. As for in-depth explorations

⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. xvii.

⁹ Richard E. Brantley, 'Spiritual Maturity and Wordsworth's 1783 Christmas Vacation', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 14.4 (1974), 479-87.

¹⁰ Jessica Fay, *Wordsworth's Monastic Inheritance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 196.

of how the Romantics explored and integrated narratives of England's Anglo-Saxon past, texts such as Jeff Strabone's *Poetry and British Nationalisms in the Bardic Eighteenth Century* (2018) and Clare A. Simmons's *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain* (2011) have been indispensable. Yet while there has also been scholarship, such as that carried out by Jessica Fay, which explores the way in which representations of Anglo-Saxon England and religion intersect, particularly in the case of Wordsworth (less so in the case of Cottle), less attention has been paid to the ways the Romantics translated these connections into their own modes of expression and why. This article therefore seeks to address some of these gaps.

In many ways, it is unsurprising that England's Anglo-Saxon past should appeal to the Romantics. Many previous representations of pre-Norman society had portrayed the Anglo-Saxon peoples of England as living in free and equal societies, whose peaceful existence had been upheld by their singularly enlightened structures of government.¹¹ Individual rights were guaranteed by common law, which included trials by jury. Decisions were taken collectively through democratic institutions such as Witenagemots or parliaments. And the monarch's role, epitomised by the saintly Alfred the Great, was to resolve disputes, defend the Christian faith, and act as the national executive.¹² King, church and nation were at one. However, in the fateful year of 1066, the country was invaded by a foreign power and subdued by force. All native political structures were suppressed and the indigenous population was subjected to the yoke of Norman feudalism. The history of English society henceforth was the history of reclaiming those lost freedoms; Magna Carta was one such moment, the Bill of Rights

¹¹ Key sources for these kinds of representations in the period immediately preceding the Romantic era include *An Historical Essay on the English Constitution* (1771), attributed to Obadiah Hulme, and *Political Disquisitions* (1776) by James Burgh. For further studies, see Colin Kidd, *British Identities before Nationalism Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 261–279. Kidd here provides a succinct overview of some of the more salient features of political Saxonism, particularly in the decades prior to the American Revolution. In his words, '[t]he eighteenth-century colonies imported the staples of English whig historiography' (p. 265), which included many of the ideas surrounding common law, Magna Carta, and ancient English freedoms. Other studies of interest include Trevor Colbourn's *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998) and J.G.A. Pocock's *The Ancient Constitution and Feudal Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹² For a fuller discussion of the ways Alfred was incorporated into such representations, see Simon Keynes, 'The Cult of King Alfred the Great', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 28 (1999), 225–356.

another. To the citizens of the newly independent former colonies, the American Revolution was the latest of these reclamation efforts and in England the outbreak of the French Revolution suggested to many that another such moment was in the offing. In one influential study on the subject, Christopher Hill linked these representations to both the discourses of the 'noble savage' and of the Biblical fall, all of which form part of the 'Golden Age' theories, which he claims have existed in different forms in nearly all cultures.¹³ Thus by the 1790s, the Anglo-Saxons were becoming 'significant in a continuing discourse on nationalism and revolution'.¹⁴

The synergies that exist between these discursive features and many of the central concerns of Romanticism are therefore patent, and some of the first representations of the Anglo-Saxon past can be found early in the Romantic era. The very first work exhibited by William Blake at the Royal Academy, for example, was a piece called 'The Death of Earl Goodwin'. According to Simon Keynes, this watercolour was most likely one of a series of drawings made by Blake on the subject of English history but which he never completed.¹⁵ Other works produced by Blake on the theme of Old English history include 'St Augustine converting King Ethelbert of Kent' and 'The Ordeal of Queen Emma', the latter presumed to have been finished in the early 1790s. Interestingly, the death of Earl Goodwin and the trial by ordeal of Queen Emma also form the subject of a theatrical work by Ann Yearsley entitled *Earl Goodwin, An Historical Play*, first performed in 1789. What is significant about this representation of Anglo-Saxon England is that, according to Clare Simmons, the play explores 'Goodwin's role in reaffirming English law against Roman Catholic "oppression"'.¹⁶ This is noteworthy because, as Pearson highlights, Yearsley is not likely to have been well-read in Anglo-Saxon history and most probably got most of her information from Thomas Chatterton's depictions of the pre-Norman past.¹⁷ It is, therefore, evidence of a

¹³ Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution* (London: Pimlico, 2001), p. 46.

¹⁴ Jacqueline Pearson, 'Crushing the Convent and Dread Bastille: the Anglo-Saxons, Revolution and Gender in Women's Plays of the 1790s', in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 122-137 (p. 124).

¹⁵ Keynes, p. 302.

¹⁶ Clare A. Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 84.

¹⁷ Pearson, pp. 125-126.

discursive link between the Anglo-Saxons and Protestantism being passed down through the literary tradition. Yet despite its clear significance in early Romantic thought, it would be another ten years before there was a major poetic portrayal of Anglo-Saxon society expressed in the language of Romanticism. What is more, when it did arrive, it would not be produced by one of the canonical Romantic poets.

That one of the first major portrayals of the Anglo-Saxons in Romantic literature should not be written by a canonical poet might actually have been an accident of circumstance. Richard Poole, a political radical who had met Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge in Bristol in 1796, had encouraged the latter to produce an epic poem on the theme of Alfred the Great. Coleridge, however, 'had other plans' and so passed the idea on to Joseph Cottle.¹⁸ Although not nearly as well-known as some of his contemporaries, Cottle is an undeniably significant figure in the history of Romanticism. Aside from being a close friend of Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge early in the poets' careers, he was also the first publisher of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Furthermore, he was present at some of the most formative experiences of the poets' lives. Like Poole, he first met Coleridge and Southey in Bristol when these young political idealists were preparing for their journey to the Susquehanna River. As a life-long religious dissenter, he would often accompany Coleridge to the Unitarian meeting halls where the poet would preach his sermons. He was even to join the budding writers on their famous trips to the Wye Valley, with Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' later being written in Cottle's parlour.¹⁹ Unlike Coleridge, he successfully completed the project first proposed by Poole and in 1800 published *Alfred; An Epic Poem*. Unfortunately for Cottle, this may well have been the only successful thing about the '13,500 dreary lines', of which Coleridge is reported to have remarked: 'it bore a lie on its title-page, for he called it *Alfred*, and it was never halfread by any human being'.²⁰ This harsh assessment may be the reason why, despite his clear significance to the artistic milieu of early Romanticism, scholarship on his work has been relatively scant. Amongst the few notable exceptions is Richard Cronin, who makes the case that Cottle's role went beyond that of mere witness to the more canonical writers, but that he had

¹⁸ Keynes, p. 329.

¹⁹ Basil Cottle, *Joseph Cottle of Bristol* (Bristol: Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, 1987), p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10; *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. by E. J. Morley, 3 vols (London, 1938) II, p. 663.

in fact cultivated artistic ambitions which influenced his contemporaries in ways seldom acknowledged.²¹ Lynda Pratt attempts a similar rehabilitation, comparing Cottle's epic poem with that of the then poet laureate, Henry James Pye, whose own effort of the same name was first published the year after Cottle's. Pratt notes that, 'if we return to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a very different picture emerges. In 1800-1802, both poems were widely reviewed and accorded a status and significance that more recent criticism has overlooked'.²² However, the neglect continues, with Cottle featuring as little more than a footnote to the first generation of Romantics. This oversight should be rectified as, notwithstanding its artistic and commercial failures, the poem is a prime example of how previous representations of the Anglo-Saxon past were incorporated and subordinated to the exigencies of Romantic ideals.

Book I begins *in media res* with Ivar, the poem's antagonist, preparing to set out for England. Before he leaves Denmark, however, he must travel to consult the oracle. The descriptions of this journey feature precisely the fusing of the mediaeval with the Romantic that Parker and Wagner claim define these writers' treatment of the Anglo-Saxon past. As Ivar crosses the ocean towards the black mountain, the narrator describes how 'Thick darkness veil'd the sky, the tempest howl'd' as

The waves, like heaving mountains, held their heads
Suspended in the clouds, to aid the still
And petrifying silence: then, again,
Descended in loud cataracts; the winds
Burst on resistless, and together join'd
Ocean and air t'augment the fearful scene,
Unspeakable.²³ (108-113)

²¹ Richard Cronin, 'Joseph Cottle and West-Country Romanticism', *The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge* 28 (2006), 1-12.

²² Lynda Pratt, 'Anglo-Saxon Attitudes?: Alfred the Great and the Romantic National Epic', in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 138-156 (p. 138).

²³ Joseph Cottle, *Alfred, An Heroic Poem in Twenty-Four Books* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1850), p. 12.

These images are clearly heavily indebted to *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, which demonstrates representations of pre-Norman England being subordinated to the aesthetic demands of the Romantic era. The darkness of the setting alludes to Burke's idea that '[to] make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary', while the choice of location recalls the passage of Burke's tract in which he writes that 'the ocean is no small terror... terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime'.²⁴ The analogy of the waves being 'like heaving mountains' finds its parallel in Section VII, where Burke states that '[a] perpendicular has more force in forming the sublime, than an inclined plane; and the effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth'.²⁵ The brief hiatus in the ocean's roar can also be explained by Burke's assertion that '[a] sudden beginning or sudden cessation of sound of any considerable force, has the name power [...] we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it'.²⁶ Finally, the cacophony of loud cataracts and bursting winds is an echo of Section XVII: 'Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul [...] The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind'.²⁷ The descriptions continue in this key as Ivar is guided into the witch's abode and is exposed to all manner of horrors which inhabit the inner recesses of the earth. He is eventually led back to the surface with instructions that his three sisters are to weave a standard bearing the emblem of a raven to protect him in his crusades against the Saxons.

Though these images borrow from Norse mythology, they have far more in common with the likes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Matthew Gregory Lewis than they do with *Beowulf*.²⁸ Indeed, as many academics have noted, Cottle's poem was

²⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 53-54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁸ It is difficult not to hear *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in lines such as, 'Not a word | Answered the mariner, and as the prince | Look'd with dread expectation,' while the description of the underworld as 'a ravine, deep, | O'er which his foot half hung, and in the gulf | Conflicting torrents, such as when some whale | Or ocean monster lashes the great deep' echoes the descriptions of the Sierra Morena in the climatic final moments of the *The Monk*. Cottle, pp. 13, 22.

deeply influenced by Southey's *Joan of Arc*.²⁹ As for the poem's eponymous protagonist, Lynda Pratt has gone so far as to describe Cottle's Alfred as a 'proto-Romantic poet':

A sensitive appreciator of nature and of the natural world, a man that wanders round the countryside talking to rural folk and listening to their tales 'of misery', and who is as likely to address poems to the moon as to make high-sounding speeches urging his army into battle.³⁰

This aspect of the Saxon monarch's character is clearest in Books III, IV and V, where the defeated Alfred is often portrayed at his most Wordsworthian:

At evening hour,
In the warm summer months, while yet a boy,
Oft would he wander by the slow brook's side,
And mark its gentle noise, serving to break
Th' intensity of silence which oppressed
His listening sense, and gave to all around
New and obscure solemnity.³¹ (19-25)

Yet this penchant for ruminating on the natural world is not the only characteristic that Alfred shares with the writers of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Twenty-two books in, Alfred meets his guardian angel and in what is far and away the epic's longest stretch of exposition, Cottle has the angel deliver the poem's religious manifesto. What is striking about this covert sermon is the extent to which its teachings align not with pre-Norman Christianity but with the reformed, and specifically dissenting, tradition of Cottle's own time.

From the opening lines of Book XXIII, it is clear that the poem is rejecting High-Church interpretations of faith and religion: 'Whilst, on his couch, Alfred, at midnight,

²⁹ Cronin, p. 5.

³⁰ Lynda Pratt, 'Anglo-Saxon Attitudes?: Alfred the Great and the Romantic National Epic', in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 138-156 (p. 153).

³¹ Cottle, pp. 62-63.

slept, | He saw, or thought he saw, a Spirit, tall' (1-2).³² Rather than appearing to the Saxon monarch in a miraculously incarnate form, Cottle presents the angel as communicating with Alfred through oneiric visions. This is an implicitly materialistic presentation of divine phenomena and is in stark contrast to Book I, where Ivar physically enters the supernatural environs of the witch's cave. Indeed, Alfred rejects this kind of superstition in Book X:

tho' strange it seem,
 Truth lies beneath - Thou hast much lore to learn,
 And much to unlearn, ere thou wilt be wise.
 Thine are the idle, weak and wandering dreams,
 Which, hearing, we might smile at, not deride,
 But for their baneful influence on man's heart.³³ (100-105)

This sceptical attitude towards supernatural phenomena is, of course, closely associated with the more radical forms of Protestantism. The angel goes on to instruct Alfred 'in truths, needful to know | In [his] high station' (44-45), all of which bear a distinctly Protestant colouring.³⁴ He restates, for example, the cliché that 'Protestantism' is the 'doers' religion: 'if they seek a treasure in the skies, | They must be up and doing, and become, | While yet they may, their own sweet almoners' (132-135).³⁵ However, the angel also repudiates the traditional Catholic belief that 'works' have inherent worth and affirms the Protestant doctrine that inner conviction is source of godliness: 'Not in th' Eternal's all-pervading eye | Is the same deed by different men perform'd: | Motives and principles to him appear, | Clear, tho' conceal'd from human scrutiny' (253-256).³⁶ The angel continues by emphasising the purity of the early church and restating the various '*solae*' of Protestantism: 'Like ancestors revered, you worship God | As conscience dictates: read the sacred page; | Practise its precepts; trust its promises; | And prize the Saviour' (707-710).³⁷

³² Ibid., p. 341.

³³ Ibid., p. 148.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 342.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 345.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 348.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 361.

Although Cottle is certainly writing anachronistically, conflating the religious beliefs of pre-Norman England with later Protestant interpretations of Christianity, this discourse had pervaded interpretations of Anglo-Saxon society since the mid-sixteenth century. In fact, it was the attempt to provide a historical foundation for the English Reformation which first stimulated interest in the Anglo-Saxon past. When Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1558, the country had just come out of a period of violent counter-reformation. With sedition at home and the threat of invasion from abroad, the English ruling elite knew that it would have to move quickly to consolidate its power. The result was the Elizabethan Religious Settlement: a theological compromise which was uneasy yet sufficiently stable to secure the realm. This, together with the siege mentality which came to define much of Elizabeth's reign, produced a flurry of patriotic mythmaking which revolved around the state church and the monarch as its head.³⁸ Yet while contemporary theologians were keen to emphasise the break with Rome, the new regime would now have to consolidate its legitimacy. It is in this context that we find renewed interest in England's past beyond Edward the Confessor. Fittingly, it was also Matthew Parker, Elizabeth's first Archbishop of Canterbury and one of the chief architects of the new religious settlement, who began to amass and publish ancient texts which he thought 'might help to encourage the study of the early English language and to deepen understanding of early English history, and which might help thereby to provide a firm basis for the newly established "Ecclesia Anglicana"'.³⁹

The work of men like Archbishop Parker was thus 'centered on the establishment of a Protestantized antiquity, an ancient precedent for the institutionalization of the English church under Elizabeth'.⁴⁰ In practice, this also meant uncovering (and inventing) a 'pure primitive church' whose 'ecclesiastical corruption could be dated from the invasion of 1066, which the Pope had blessed'.⁴¹ Much was made of the fact that, like the reformers of their own day, the Anglo-Saxons had translated the Bible into the common vernacular. There was also evidence of clerical marriage and communion

³⁸ For more on the Elizabethan Religious Settlement and the cultural discourses this produced, see Patrick Collinson, *This is England: Essays on the English Commonwealth and Nation in the Sixteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

³⁹ Keynes, p. 240.

⁴⁰ Benedict Scott Robinson, "'Darke Speech": Matthew Parker and the Reforming of History', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 29.4 (1998), 1061–1083 (p. 1062).

⁴¹ Hill, p. 55.

under both kinds without the distinctions made in the Catholic ceremony.⁴² Parker further attempted to demonstrate that there were Anglo-Saxon precedents for the Church of England's position on the eucharist, while the antiquarian William Lambarde discussed how the Anglo-Saxon church had been tainted by the introduction of:

the vain titles of Romane arrogancie... Monkes, Friars, Priestes, Nonnes... the whole rablement of [Satan's] religious armie, for the holding of simple soules in wonted obedience, and the upholding of his usurped Empire.⁴³

The cumulative effect of this was to create the idea that Anglo-Saxon England was an organic, proto-Protestant community of the godly. The 'inseparability of religious reform and national identity' continued into the period of political radicalisation during the early- and mid-seventeenth century, when Parliamentary factions (often themselves religious reformers and radicals) began to develop theories about the Anglo-Saxon legacy which were in open conflict with the interests of the monarchy.⁴⁴ This was motivated in part by the anxiety that church policy was being manipulated by foreign, Catholic agents at court. By the start of the revolutionary 1640s, the Saxons and the 'Norman Yoke' had taken centre-stage in parliamentary rhetoric. Those on the moderate wing of the parliamentary faction tended to favour the version of the narrative which emphasised the continuity of common law and the inherited 'rights of Englishmen'. The political radicals, on the other hand, increasingly viewed the Norman Conquest as a usurpation not because it deprived the Anglo-Saxons of an older constitution but rather because it deprived the people of England of their God-given, 'natural' rights. While these differences between the moderates and radicals would eventually contribute to the splitting of the common front, at the beginning of the English Revolution the two wings were united in their opposition to the perceived Catholic innovations in church and the foreign influence in state.

⁴² In the Catholic mass during the medieval period, it was common for the aristocracy and clergy to receive both the eucharistic wafer and the sacramental wine, while the lower orders were offered only the former. This hierarchical distinction was later rejected by many reformers, and there was a theological debate about whether the mass had to be administered 'in both kinds' or whether one was sufficient.

⁴³ William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent* (London: Adams and Dart, 1970), p. 71.

⁴⁴ Scott Robinson, p. 1064.

It is for this reason that Cottle's subsequent philippic against the Church of Rome, though anachronistic, is fully in line with the radicals' interpretations of the Saxon past. Moreover, in the revolutionary ferment of the late eighteenth century, the syzygy between biblical millennialism and Enlightenment utopianism was at its strongest, as both 'looked forward to the universal establishment of peace, freedom, morality, and truth in the ruins of political tyranny and religious superstition'.⁴⁵ In the eyes of many like Cottle, the Saxons' battle to preserve their ancient freedoms, the dissenters' war on episcopal tyranny, and the radicals' struggle for political liberty all formed part of the same chiliastic history. Hence the angel warns Alfred about the threat a Catholic 'fifth column' could pose to the future of his kingdom:

'Britain, beware! There is a leaven at work!
 Priestcraft, with nightly vigils, broods unseen!
 It heaves the social system, and, alone,
 (Whate'er they say of alter'd purposes)
 Needs but the power to light the faggot pile
 To scatter round them vengeance,— God to please!
 (That God a god of mercy!) who again
 Would forge the chain⁴⁶ (786-791)

Then, for some three hundred lines in the middle of Book XXIII, the angel inveighs against 'idolatry', 'indulgences', 'superstition' and a host of other heresies associated with the Catholic faith:

... thou striv'st
 To shroud this lamp of truth—so, to enforce
 Thine own vain fancies, precepts, doctrines, lies.
 Thou giv'st to hungry souls the frothy food,
 The tinkling bell! the incense rising high!
 The flaming tapers! Relics false, (if true,
 Worthless as weeds that perish in the sun)

⁴⁵ Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought 1750-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 187.

⁴⁶ Cottle, p. 364.

And pouring tawdry garments on the sight!
 Wonder is none, that thou should'st interdict,
 And shroud this hostile Book, so to enforce
 Thy senseless bendings, vain observances,
 Mock'ry of sacred things!⁴⁷ (954-965)

In his presentation of Alfred and Anglo-Saxon society, Cottle here echoes both the preoccupations and the language of his sixteenth and seventeenth-century precursors. From the paranoia surrounding Catholicism's potential to infect the body politic and 'forge the chain' anew, to his savage criticism of relics, vestments and ornate ceremony, the writer takes many of the same anxieties which had animated the Elizabethan antiquarians and expresses them in the new idiom of the Romantic era.

Yet Cottle was by no means alone in these kinds of representation. Some twenty years after the first publication of *Alfred; An Epic Poem*, another collection of poems was published which contained much of the same imagery, not to mention animus, as Cottle's earlier efforts:

The tapers burn; the odorous incense feeds
 A greedy flame; the pompous mass proceeds;
 The Priest bestows the appointed consecration;
 And, while the Host is raised, its elevation
 An awe and supernatural horror breeds,
 And all the People bow their heads like reeds,
 To a soft breeze, in lowly adoration.⁴⁸ (2-8)

These lines come from the poem *VI. Transubstantiation*, a sonnet published in Part II of Wordsworth's collection, *Ecclesiastical Sketches*. The similarities between Wordsworth's sonnet and the lines from the middle of Book XXIII of Cottle's epic are striking. In the first instance, they both criticise the grandiloquence of the ceremony, be that the 'tawdry garments' or the 'pompous mass'. They both attack the notion of idolatry, directed at relics in the former poem and communion bread in the latter. Both lament the ritualistic use of genuflexion, considering it an outward show of subjection to the

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 369.

⁴⁸ William Wordsworth, *Collected Reading Texts from The Cornell Wordsworth Series*, 3 vols (California: Cornell University Press, 2009), III: *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, p. 388.

episcopacy. And both use the language of the sublime, either to give a sense of God's greatness or to produce a sense of terror at the superstitious rites of the Catholic mass.

Ecclesiastical Sketches was published in 1822 and, as pointed out by Jessica Fay, one of Wordsworth's key motivations was his own opposition to Catholic Emancipation.⁴⁹ The collection itself is divided into three sections (Part I: 'From the Introduction of Christianity into Britain, to the Consummation of the Papal Dominion'; Part II: 'To the Close of the Troubles in the Reign of Charles I'; and Part III: 'From the Restoration, to the Present Times'), the first of which explores the Anglo-Saxons at length.⁵⁰ Indeed, Fay writes that the collection as a whole is deeply indebted to the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (c. 731) and attempts 'to remind British citizens of the protection they receive from an established Church in which the excesses and subversive impulses of popery are tempered'.⁵¹ Though not as widely-read as many other works by Wordsworth, much has been written about the *Sketches'* religious politics, most significantly by Tim Fulford and Jessica Fay, as well as by Michael Tomko, Regina Hewitt, and others.⁵² Clare A. Simmons has also briefly touched upon the relationship between Wordsworth's religious politics and his use of the Saxon past in *Ecclesiastical Sketches*.⁵³ Less explicit attention, however, has been paid to the links between the religious politics on the one hand, the representations of the Anglo-Saxon past on the other, and how Wordsworth's evolution out of the radical tradition inflects both. Despite being written two decades after *Alfred; An Epic Poem*, and Wordsworth's gravitation towards more High-Church positions, the poems share many similarities of diction with Cottle's work. In the introductory poem, for example, Wordsworth identifies himself as 'I, who essayed the nobler Stream to trace | Of Liberty' (5-6) and lays out his intention to 'seek upon the heights of Time the source | Of a holy

⁴⁹ Fay, p. 175.

⁵⁰ Wordsworth, pp. 368, 387, 401.

⁵¹ Fay, pp. 174, 176.

⁵² Tim Fulford, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815-1845* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), eBook [subsequent references given by chapter in the absence of pagination]; Michael Tomko, 'Superstition, the National Imaginary, and Religious Politics in Wordsworth's "Ecclesiastical Sketches"', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 39.1/2 (2008), 16–19; Regina Hewitt, 'Church Building as Political Strategy in Wordsworth's "Ecclesiastical Sonnets"', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 25.3 (1992) 31–46.

⁵³ Clare A. Simmons, 'Medievalism in "The Excursion"', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 45.2 (2014), 131–37.

River' (9-10).⁵⁴ The rhetoric of 'Liberty' was, of course, a common trope of the revolutionary era; yet in the specifically anglophone context, be that the English Revolution of the 1640s, the Glorious Revolution of 1680s or the American Revolution of the 1770s, the spread of liberty was inseparable from the spread of Protestantism.⁵⁵ Wordsworth thus assumes the role of a Prophet of the Reformed (albeit established) church to show the nation how Protestantism runs through its genetic make-up.

The first ten sonnets of the collection depict the original introduction of Christianity into Britain. However, Wordsworth takes great care not to apportion to Rome too much of the credit for the advent of Christianity. In one striking image from *III. Trepidation of the Druids*, Wordsworth compares Rome's role in the spread of Christianity into Britain with the lance that pierced Christ's side on the cross: 'the Julian spear | A way first open'd; and, with Roman chains, | The tidings come of Jesus crucified'.⁵⁶ The violence perpetrated by the Roman conquest, like the violence perpetrated by the Roman soldier Longinus, might have served to confirm and spread the knowledge of Christ's sacrifice to the world but it invests the perpetrator with no further theological authority. In sonnet *VIII. Temptations from Roman Refinements*, Wordsworth further warns against indulging in the excesses of Rome:

Watch, and be firm! for, soul-subduing vice,
Heart-killing luxury, on your steps await.
Fair houses, baths, and banquets delicate,
And temples flashing, bright as polar ice,
Their radiance through the woods—may yet suffice
To sap your hardy virtue, and abate
Your love of Him upon whose forehead sate
The crown of thorns⁵⁷ (1-8)

Throughout the subsequent sonnets, Wordsworth describes the vicissitudes of early Christianity, including the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons themselves, which ushers in 'a

⁵⁴ Wordsworth, p. 368.

⁵⁵ Bloch, p. 194.

⁵⁶ Wordsworth, p. 369.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

second and a darker shade | Of Pagan night'.⁵⁸ That is, until *XVII. Conversion*, when 'Woden falls—and Thor | Is overturned' and the Saxons are converted en masse.⁵⁹

The Anglo-Saxon legacy was a thorny issue for antiquarians attempting to prove the original, pre-Roman-Catholic purity of the Church of England. As has already been highlighted, sixteenth-century defenders of the Elizabethan Religious Settlement had been quick to deploy any evidence of similarities in Anglo-Saxon religious practices. Yet Anglo-Saxon Christianity was tainted by an original sin; they had been converted to Christianity by Saint Augustine on the orders of Pope Benedict. In the eyes of many, the original, pristine Christianity from which the Church of England had descended was in fact that of the Britons. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxons had admitted the corrupting influence of 'popery' into the islands and persecuted those original Christians. Be that as it may, as Strabone points out, 'the elevation of the ancient Welsh was not a simple zero-sum gain at the Saxons' expense'.⁶⁰ Any evidence unearthed by antiquarians which suggested affinities with Protestantism was put to use regardless. Indeed, it was here that the Anglo-Saxons enjoyed an advantage. In spite of its supposed purity, the ancient British past was 'vague and sketchy'.⁶¹ The Anglo-Saxons, on the other hand, could boast written precedents which, in the words of Colin Kidd, meant that 'the Saxon phase of English church history came to play a more significant role in its identity than was warranted by confessional correctness'.⁶² Wordsworth appears to adopt a similarly pragmatic approach in *XIX. Primitive Saxon Clergy*, where he repeats the trope of Anglo-Saxon Christianity being a proto-Protestant faith, describing its priests in terms reminiscent of puritan ascetics: 'outwardly as bare | As winter trees, yield no fallacious sign | That the firm soul is clothed with fruit divine!' (3-5).⁶³ In the following sonnet, Wordsworth reflects on how grief, which 'ill can brook more rational relief' (7), helped produce those superstitions which would ultimately lead to the oppression of the Catholic Church: 'prayers are shaped amiss, and dirges sung | For those whose doom is fix'd! The way is smooth | For Power that travels with the human heart' (8-10).⁶⁴ The

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 372-173.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

⁶⁰ Strabone, p. 150.

⁶¹ Kidd, p. 107

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶³ Wordsworth, p. 377.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

juxtaposition that the enjambement creates between the 'misshapen' prayers in line eight with the idea of a 'fixed doom' in line nine serves to foreground the vanity of such rituals in the face of God's predestination. He therefore warns the clergy: 'Of your own mighty instruments beware!' (14).

From sonnet *XXI. Seclusion* through to *XXVIII. Influence Abused*, Wordsworth discusses the spread of Christianity throughout Saxon England, including a portrait of Alfred in which he describes the monarch as 'a Pupil of the Monkish gown, | The pious Alfred, King to Justice dear' (*XXVI. Alfred*, 1-2).⁶⁵ Here, Wordsworth once again indulges the idea that the Saxons tied nation, law and religion together into one pious state. Even the two poems which discuss Viking raids and settlement focus on Christianity as a catalyst for integrating disparate national identities. In *XXIX. Danish Conquests*, he describes how 'widely spreads once more a Pagan sway; | But Gospel-Truth is potent to allay | Fierceness and rage; and soon the cruel Dane | Feels, thro' the influence of her gentle reign, | His native superstitions melt away' (4-8).⁶⁶ Similarly in *XXX. Canute*, as the Danish monarch is passing Ely Abbey, he hears the 'pleasant music' floating along the mere: 'quoth the mighty King, "draw near, | "That we the sweet song of the Monks may hear!" | He listen'd (all past conquests and all schemes Of future vanishing like empty dreams)' (3-7).⁶⁷ As Fulford explains, in the context of the public debate on Catholic Emancipation, Wordsworth's intention is to demonstrate 'the Anglican Church's central place as the historical institution binding the English together as a cohesive, Protestant nation'.⁶⁸ Thus, just as in Cottle's poem, the purpose of these 'sketches' is to illustrate the evolution of the English nation through the continuity of English Christianity.

One of the clearest examples of this continuity is to be found in the last sonnet of the collection to address England's Saxon past, entitled *XXXI. The Norman Conquest*. Here, Wordsworth broaches the subject of the 'Norman Yoke' and describes how, despite the imposition of a new regime, religion ultimately perdures. The poem also marks an interesting point in Wordsworth's transition from youthful Jacobin and to middle-aged Tory, as the language deployed in the poem is reminiscent of the kinds

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 380.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 381.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 382.

⁶⁸ Fulford, ch. 7.

of 'Norman Yoke' narratives previously favoured by political and religious radicals. The narrative itself is that part of Saxonist discourse which focuses on the suppression of native English institutions by the invading Normans. What is especially curious about that part of the discourse is its apparent novelty, as there is very little documented evidence of its existence before the wave of antiquarian scholarship in the late Tudor period. This is not to say that the narrative is entirely an invention of the sixteenth century, for as Christopher Hill notes, opposition to the 'Norman Yoke' would most likely have been strongest amongst the illiterate and therefore part of the 'underground of largely-unrecorded thinking'.⁶⁹ However, the core elements were beaten into their canonical form by the radicals in the tumultuous period of the English Revolution, where it began to be articulated in terms which suggest 'a rudimentary class theory'.⁷⁰

Traces of this can be found in Wordsworth's sonnet. After announcing the 'evanescence of the Saxon line' (2) in the sonnet's opening octave, the narrator declares: 'Hark! 'tis the Curfew's knell! the stars may shine; | But of the lights that cherish household cares | And festive gladness, burns not one that dares | To twinkle after that dull stroke of thine' (3-6).⁷¹ Wordsworth employs many of those motifs related to idealised representations of Anglo-Saxon England. The reference to 'festive gladness' evokes the typical 'Golden Age' notion of 'merry England', while the reference to 'household cares' suggests a more Protestant interpretation of domesticity, much like Cottle's representations of Alfred in Books II and III of his epic. Yet Wordsworth's choice to refer to the invasion metonymically as the 'curfew' is revealing, as the same reference was famously used by the radical pamphleteer Thomas Paine in his tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*: 'Though not a courtier will talk of the curfew-bell, not a village in England has forgotten it [...] The conqueror considered the conquered, not as his prisoner, but his property'.⁷² To the radicals, the curfew represented the oppression inflicted on the Anglo-Saxon community by the stratification of society into feudalism. Wordsworth continues with the metaphor of the curfew, evoking an apocalyptic night falling on Anglo-Saxon England:

⁶⁹ Hill, p. 54.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 53.

⁷¹ Wordsworth, p. 382.

⁷² Paine, p. 271.

... as the terrors of the lordly bell,
That quench, from hut to palace, lamps and fire
Touch not the tapers of the sacred quires;
Even so a thralldom, studious to expel
Old laws, and ancient customs to derange,
Brings to Religion no injurious change.⁷³ (10-14)

What is significant in Wordsworth's presentation is that while the change to the national culture is all encompassing, wreaking havoc on the Saxon constitution and society, the Protestant soul of the nation escapes the invasion unscathed. Yet it is evident that in the case of this maturing former-Jacobin, it is no longer the throwing off of feudal oppression which animates his writing but the defence of the established church order. For Wordsworth, it is England's Protestant faith which binds the modern nation to its ancestors, while its ancestors provide models for the modern nation to emulate. Like Cottle, he uses many of the tropes and ideas about Anglo-Saxon history that had been passed down from those antiquarians and political radicals who had first renewed interest in the pre-Norman past and imbues the discourse with the spirit of his own age. This in turn would help lay the foundations for the representations of Anglo-Saxon England in the era that followed.

In their literary portrayals of Anglo-Saxon England, both Cottle and Wordsworth employ many of the same tropes and motifs that had first emerged during the tumultuous period of the English Reformation and the Civil War. These portrayals often included the idea of an egalitarian indigenous community, protected by an enlightened justice system, and united by a 'purer' form of Christianity not unlike the contemporary Protestantism. The poets inherited these discursive elements through the traditions of religious and political dissent, of which they themselves were a part. What is more, just as the original discourses of Saxon England were galvanised by the revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so the representations of pre-Norman England in the work of the Romantics were shocked into life by the French Revolution. Though it might seem paradoxical that a revolution precipitated by the founding of a secular state should, alongside an intense political radicalism, also awaken deep religious

⁷³ Wordsworth, p. 382.

enthusiasm, in the Anglophone context these two things were not necessarily mutually exclusive. As Bloch explains:

In the mid-1790s... both biblical millennialism and radical Enlightenment utopianism saw the French Revolution as a key agent in this glorious transformation. They shared the fervent expectation that France would deliver a mortal blow to European monarchism and Roman Catholicism, thereby opening the way to freedom and truth.⁷⁴

This is perhaps clearest in Book XXIII of Cottle's epic, where Alfred's guardian angel sermonises like a reformed preacher and leaves the reader in no doubt of the poet's political and religious sympathies: 'Man, prone to error, in ten thousand ways | Diverges from the Truth. This Book alone, | Instructs, alike, the mighty and the mean, | Age, youth' (608-611).⁷⁵ These lines, repeating the Protestant injunction of *sola scriptura* whilst also affirming the belief in the equality before God, are as much the effusions of a political radical as they are a dissenting Christian. Wordsworth's handling of the source material in *Ecclesiastical Sketches* is more ambivalent. As Fulford writes, 'the sequence neither debates the poet's own struggles of faith nor dramatizes the religious crises that fundamentally shaped the church; it glosses over the theological arguments of the Reformation and almost entirely omits the Civil War and Commonwealth'.⁷⁶ Notwithstanding this, Wordsworth uses episodes from England's Anglo-Saxon past to explore the relationship between national identity, politics and religion. He deploys much of the same language and imagery favoured by the radicals, only here it is to argue in favour of an established church rather than the kind of emancipation he favoured in his youth. Yet what is common to both writers is the rendering of older discourses into the idiom of their day, expressing the past with the modern aesthetic values of the sublime.

Naturally, the narrative's evolution did not end with the Romantics. In the words of Simon Keynes: 'It was during the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) that Alfred achieved his apotheosis'.⁷⁷ In this period, the figure of the Saxon monarch was

⁷⁴ Bloch, p. 200.

⁷⁵ Cottle, pp. 358-359.

⁷⁶ Fulford, ch. 7.

⁷⁷ Keynes, p. 333.

definitively purged of its radical content and became the subject matter for much of the artwork and poetry of imperial Britain. Indeed, Keynes believes that Cottle had his part to play in this process, as the epic represents 'a stage in Alfred's transition from the politicized legend of the eighteenth century into the more (but not exclusively) romanticized legend of the nineteenth'.⁷⁸ Meanwhile the 'Norman Yoke', shorn of its ethnic ties, found its way into the discourse of the various working-class movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century. The structure of its argument can be seen in the discourses of the Chartists, radical publications like *The Black Dwarf*, and in early socialist ideas. However, these movements now framed the narrative in terms of the democratic and economic rights which were being withheld from the masses by a ruling minority. A poem by William Hick, published in *The Northern Star* in 1841 is illustrative:

Oh, where is the justice of old?
 The spirit of Alfred the Great?
 'Ere the throne was debas'd by corruption and gold,
 When the people were one with the state?
 'Tis gone with our freedom to vote.⁷⁹

The remnants of the 'Norman Yoke' and lost Saxon freedoms are still visible here in both the politics and the poetry. Yet it is no longer the feudal invader exerting his power over a dispossessed native; it is political and economic injustices which deprive the people of democratic rights. Like the biblical narrative of the fall and the myth of the noble savage, Anglo-Saxon England would become part of the sunken foundations of political discourse and continue to influence culture long after its origins were forgotten.



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⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 331.

⁷⁹ William Hick, 'The Presentation of the National Petition', *The Northern Star*, 5 June 1841 [qtd. in Hill, p. 46].

the English Romantic poets. He has also carried out research on the political ramifications of the domestic sphere in the work of John Milton, and is interested in the use of the sublime to break ideological structures in the poetry of William Blake and P. B. Shelley.

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