Thesis.

England Under Alfred the Great

by

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To those who are descended from the hardy race of the Saxon, in whose veins the English blood flows, the early ages of our country's history furnish a topic of absorbing interest. Enthusiastic historians have studied carefully, and searched every source from which light could be drawn, and have written and rewritten their results, with a care and ability which have left nothing to desire.

Of all the early history of England, the reign of Alfred is without doubt, the most interesting, as well as the most important period. A thousand years have passed since Alfred was struggling with the mighty work before him, and in order to form a just conception of this "King among Kings", what he did for England, how he did it, and what portion of it remains to this day, we will enter upon our subject by a brief glance at the royal family and the condition of England at the time of Alfred's accession.

Alfred was the grandson of Ethelred that strong able ruler who was the first to unite the different Saxon kingdoms into one under the name of the Saxon Heptarchy. 876 A.D. He was the first king of
England, although that title was not assumed until several years later.

During his reign England began to be troubled by attacks from pirates inhabiting the Scandinavian kingdoms, Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

It was however, the Danes principally, who ravaged England. They made their first appearance in 787 A.D. but it was not until the latter part of Egbert's reign, that they began regular and systematic attacks upon England.

While the stormclouds of Danish invasion were rising over England, Egbert died (836 A.D.) and was succeeded by Ethelwulf who had neither the ability nor vigor of Egbert, and was better fitted for a monk than a monarch. The Danes made incursions nearly every year and kept England continually in a state of alarm. Ethelwulf died in 858 and his sons Ethelbald, Ethelbert and Ethelred in turn came to the throne. The interest of their reign centers around the Danes who by this time had penetrated into the very heart of the country. Ethelred fought several pitched battles with the Danes and fell mortally wounded in a battle with them in 871 A.D.
On the death of Ethelred by the common consent of all, his younger brother Alfred ascended the throne of the West Saxons. He was 23 years old at the time of his accession and had previously distinguished himself for bravery in Ethelred's battles against the Danes.

The condition of England was now critical in the extreme. Many important places were in the hands of the Danes. The country had been devastated for plunder and the number of fighting men diminished by numerous battles. It seemed as though the tide of civilization which had begun to flow in after the Saxon conquest was about to be submerged and swept away by the wave of barbarian Danes. But "Great crises produce great men," and at this critical juncture appeared one who was perfectly adequate to the occasion, and was destined to be like Washington the "Father of his Country."

Alfred took the field at once, but with his small army was easily defeated by the enemy who kept continually increasing, and Alfred felt himself obliged to make peace with them on condition of their leaving Exeter at once. They wintered (872) in the neighborhood of London and remained comparatively quiet until 874.
In that year however they descend upon Mercia led by the three kings Guthrum, Osgythul, and Assmund. The Mercians under their weak and inefficient king Peohred surrender without a show.

Alfred matched these movements, and observed their swollen numbers with gloomy forebodings, knowing that no treaty would deter them from attempting to settle out the same fate to him when their time came. He observes that the Danes have one great advantage by reason of their command of the sea, and resolves to meet them on their own ground. He fits out a fleet with what means he can command and in the summer of 876 meets the Danes in a naval engagement in which he was successful.

In 876 the Danes collect all their forces, put to sea and land at Wareham, where they began at once to throw up earthworks and fortifications. Alfred is soon there, but he sees the fort is too strong to risk an encounter, so he attempts to make another treaty. Satisfactory arrangements are made and Alfred relaxes his watch, but the Danes prove treacherous, surprise him by night and defeat him, then push their way further.
west and get possession of Essex.

The campaigns of 875-7 are looked upon as diversions to the Saxons, but one thing is evident; the Danes are beginning to show a wholesome fear of Alfred and when he approaches they draw back into their entrenchments, instead of seeking an opportunity for a skirmish. If Alfred could have gathered together a large army, he could soon have overcome them, but the long strain of the war was telling sadly on the resources of the nation.

At the beginning of the year 878 the Danes receive large reinforcements and Guthrum and Hubba plan a joint attack upon West Saxow territory. They cross the Arno in thirty warships and take Chippenham. Wiltsire is now in the hands of the enemy. The Saxons seem to be paralyzed, not able to do anything in defense, and Alfred with a scanty band of followers disappears into Selwood Forest. It is wonderful to see him in the midst of his worst trying reverses, his strong heart and trust in God never fail him. They remain here for sometime, planning for the future, gathering together more followers and training them.
The place was known as Athelney (field of the peoples). Towards Easter news came of the defeat of Cylla by the brave Odda, abbot of Gere. This greatly encouraged Alfred, and he began to feel that the time was coming for more than mere skirmishes.

A story is prevalent that Alfred in order to learn the numbers and strength of Guthrum's army, which was strongly entrenched at Ethandune, disguised himself as a gleeman or minstrel and visited his camp, remaining several days and gaining valuable information.

In May 878 he left the camp at Athelney, joined Odda and the men from the neighboring counties, and concentrated their forces for an attack upon Ethandune. They were victorious and the Danes were killed in great numbers. This was the last stronghold of the Danes and Guthrum humbly sued for peace, offering as many hostages as Alfred might desire, to leave Wessex for good, and above all to adopt the Christian religion.

Alfred accepts these terms, and gives them East Anglia for a residence.

The treaty of peace is known as the "Treaty of Wedmore." Although free from the barbarian invaders, England lies prostrate...
and exhausted, and a greater work than has yet been accomplished is in store for Alfred to bring order from chaos, to reconquise and develop the great resources of his kingdom, and lay the foundations of the English nation.

The first thing evidently to be done was to put the country in a state of defense; restore the fortifications, rebuild ruined cities. England never had been well fortified. During the war Alfred observed that the Danes far surpassed the English, in the erection and use of fortifications. He determined to profit by this, and how well he succeeded is attested by the fact that when the Danes invaded the country again, they could not capture any town or stronghold. The most skilful masons from the continent were sent for, and stone began to be used in place of woodwork. With patient, persevering work, by the most judicious use of the means at hand, there was finally established a line of forts across the southern border, and the royal residences and larger towns were sufficiently protected.

London, now the pride and wonder of the world, with its millions of inhabitants, was then in a miserable condition. The best part of it
was in ruins, and the most respectable part of the population had desert
ed the city. The rebuilding and resettling of London may be regarded
as the crowning act of Alfred's work in this direction and show to good
advantage his powers of organization. The protection of England was furth-
er secured by the permanent organization of the army and navy. Previous
to the reign of Alfred the military system was very incomplete. Service was
voluntary to a great extent, consequently there was never an army that
could always be depended upon to meet the national exigencies. In the
reign of Alfred, the whole fighting force of the kingdom was divided into
three companies. These were called out by turns, and guarded the country
night and day for one month. So he always had one third of his forces ready
to fight at a moment's notice, and the burdens of military service were dis-
tributed.

The navy was carefully revised and improved. Alfred was especially
anxious about the navy, as he saw that England could be most effectually
defended from the Northmen by this means.

All this work was most opportune, for in 885 we find that
Suthrum Athelstan, thirsting for his old life of plunder, breaks his pledge, the "Treaty of Wedmore," and joining a pirate chief, they set forth on a career of devastation and destruction. Alfred easily defeats them and proves the strength and efficiency of his works.

Once more in 878 the Danes, under their great pirate chief Hasting, cross over to England, and once more England's faithful king prepares to defend his kingdom. The war continues for three years. It is needless to follow out the weary details of the struggle. Suffice to say that the successes of the Saxons, and the strength of the kingdom resulting from the judicious management of Alfred, finally discouraged the Danes, and in the year 879 Hasting breaks up his last camp and leaves England. From this time on Alfred had no more trouble with the Danes.

Having completed the work of fortification, Alfred now turns his attention to the internal affairs of the state. Tradition loves to surround Alfred's name with a halo of glory and trace situations to especially praise worthy in the English government as having its origin with Alfred. "Trial by Jury," for example. Examining the subject carefully and can-
dally. Alfred's work in this direction seems to have been principally in revising the codes of Law and Offa and adding some of the Old Testament commands. His great merit lay not so much in the new laws he established as in a rigid enforcement of those already existing.

One especial characteristic of the English man today is his reverence for law. Little was seen of this at the close of the Danish wars. Long fighting had demoralized the people and Alfred was particularly careful that lawlessness should be punished and strict justice administered. His labor was abundantly rewarded and at the end of the reign we find a peaceable, law-abiding nation.

The church was in a very low condition at the close of the Danish wars. The cathedrals and monasteries had been burned and destroyed. The services and discipline of the church had been neglected and the monks and priests were degenerated in morals and learning. Alfred gave one half his revenue for religious purposes, and used it in rebuilding the monasteries and abbeys. He took great care that they should be filled with pious and learned churchmen, and gradually the church was elevated and
enrolled.

As we might infer from the ignorance of the priests and monks, education was at a very low ebb. The "State of Learning" in England may be best ascertained from an account given by Alfred himself in his preface to the Anglo-Saxon version of Gregory's Pastoral Care. "So slow was learning now fallen off amongst the English race that there were few if any on this side of the Humber who were able to understand their service in English, or to turn a written letter from Latin into English. And I think that there were not many beyond the Humber. So few were they of them that I cannot think of even one on the south of the Thames when I took the kingdom." Alfred invited the most celebrated scholars from all over the kingdom, and provided that all freeholders possessing two hides of land or more, should send their children to school. He was so enthusiastic in this work, that the foundation of the University of Oxford has been ascribed to him; but this cannot be clearly proved.

English literature may be said to have been created during his
Before Alfred England possessed in her own tongue only one great poem, that of Cædmon, a few ballads and war songs. Prose, there was none. Alfred determined to give to his people at large in their own language, the knowledge which had hitherto been locked up in Latin, and confined to the clergy. He took the books as he found them, and translated them into English, translating them not merely word by word, but in such a manner as to render their meaning perfectly intelligible to the people, and sometimes adding opinions of his own. His writings left most lasting traces upon England, and for his works, the Anglo-Saxon as spoken in the 7th century might now have come down to us.

Manufacture, commerce and navigation were encouraged. In whatever department any improvement could be made Alfred was always ready to promote and protect it.

His indefatigable industry, and unflagging efforts to raise and elevate England began to tell upon his constitution, and in 901 A.D., aged 66, in the vigor and prime of his manhood, he died.
After following carefully the course of English history during Alfred's 80 years reign, and observing what grand results were brought about by him, we may be pardoned if we linger a little over the figure of the king, who is justly called Alfred the Great, the "Founder of the English Monarchy." He compares favorably with any of the great names that adorn the pages of history. We search in vain for a ruler united to so many virtues with so little alloy. As a ruler, prince, saint, scholar, statesman and patriot, he forms a most perfect character in history, and we may say of him, as of Washington, "He was first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."