

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PARLIAMENT

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649256068

A short history of the English Parliament by Andrew Bisset

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Cover @ 2017

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ANDREW BISSET

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OF THE ENGLISH
PARLIAMENT**

THE
ENGLISH PARLIAMENT

LONDON: PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET

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OF THE
ENGLISH PARLIAMENT

BY
ANDREW BISSET



WILLIAMS AND NORGATE
14 HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON
AND 20 SOUTH FREDERICK STREET, EDINBURGH
1882

1784

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

THERE was a time—or rather there were times, for Thucydides, as well as later writers, records the fact—when the business of a robber, by land or sea, was reckoned an honourable calling; when, in the words of a writer older than Thucydides, 'the tabernacles of robbers prospered.' The head robber or pirate captain was usually a man of 'royal strain,' or 'royal siege.' It had been from the beginning of time, at least from the earliest records or traditions that have come to us, the received opinion that the only worshipful person was the man of rapine and blood, and that quiet industry was the mark of a coward and slave. In short, the robber or pirate was a gentleman—a gentleman rover, and his captain a sea-king—the merchant a pedlar, the labourer a serf or villain.

It is only in this sense that we can understand the meaning of a popular writer, who describes a man for whom has been claimed descent from a Scandinavian pirate, as a man 'sprung from an ancient and illustrious race.' Give the title king, whether sea-king or land-king, to a robber and

murderer, and in the eyes of those who see through a certain telescope, the blood-stained robber becomes 'illustrious.' A certain sea robber described by Sir Walter Scott was also, like Hastings, a sea-king, and 'came of a regal strain;' but the writer who introduces us to Count Witikind does not leave him quite so much in the odour of 'illustrious' sanctity as sea-king Hastings is left in the passage above quoted. The passage introducing Count Witikind is edifying as conveying in a few words the title of a pirate to be styled 'illustrious':—

Count Witikind came of a regal strain,
 And roved with his Norsemen the land and the main,
 Woe to the realms which he coasted! for there
 Was shedding of blood, and rending of hair,
 Rape of maiden, and slaughter of priest,
 Gathering of ravens and wolves to the feast:
 When he hoisted his standard black,
 Before him was battle, behind him wrack,
 And he burn'd the churches, that heathen Dane,
 To light his band to their barks again.

The noble baron who has designated Hastings as 'sprung from an ancient and illustrious race,' on the ground of his descent from the Scandinavian pirate, has also dilated on the dignity of being descended from the lords of Daylesford; and after having introduced him as sprung from a Scandinavian pirate, leaves him in the character of an English country gentleman. We are happily enabled to form a conception of the transformation from pirate to country gentleman by Scott's description of the transformation of Count Witikind.

We are informed that in process of time Count Witikind grew old, and submitted to be thus addressed by Saint Cuthbert's bishop:—

'Thou hast murder'd, robb'd, and spoil'd,
 Time it is thy poor soul were assoil'd.'

The result was the following offer on the part of the old pirate:—