

**THE WRITINGS OF
KING
ALFRED, D. 901**

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The writings of King Alfred, d. 901 by Frederic Harrison

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BY

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*(An Address delivered at Harvard College, Mass.,
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The Writings of King Alfred

(Died 901)

IN the great days of antique culture, when the citizen of Athens, coming from the Academus or the Stoa, found himself in the Museum of Alexandria, or in the schools of Syracuse, Magna Græcia, Asia Minor, or Tyre, he felt that he was still in his own country, both intellectually and morally, whatever might be the state or nation to which he had travelled. He and his guests spoke but one language, shared the same civilisation, and had in common the same immortal literature.

And now, a son of Oxford or Cambridge in the old island feels himself at home, amongst his own people and fellow-students, when he is welcomed at Harvard of the new continent. We all have but one language, the tongue now spoken by 130,000,000 of civilised men; and we have the same literature, the noblest literature of the modern world. And so, when I was honoured with the invitation to address you, I be-thought me I would speak to you of the rise of that literature which is our common heritage, which more than race, or institutions, or manners and habits, makes us all *one*—which is far the richest, the most con-

tinuous, the most virile evolution of human genius in the records of Christendom.

I call to mind also that this year is the millenary or thousandth anniversary of the death, in 901, of Alfred the West Saxon King,¹ who is undoubtedly the founder of a regular prose literature, as of so many other English institutions and ways. Could there be a fitter theme for an English man of letters in an American seat of learning? There was nothing insular about Alfred; he was not British; he was not feudal; his memory is not stained by any crime done in the struggles of nation, politics, or religion. He lived ages before "Great Britain" was invented, mainly, I believe, in order to humour our Scotch brother-citizens; ages before Protestantism divided Christendom; ages before kingship ceased to be useful and republics began to be normal. Alfred was never King of England: he lived and died King of the West Saxons, the ancestral head of a Saxon clan. He and his people were just as much your ancestors as they were mine, for all we can say is, that the 130,000,000 who speak our Anglo-Saxon tongue have all a fairly equal claim to look on him as the heroic leader of our remote forefathers.²

¹ The year 901 is accepted by historians as the date of Alfred's death. Recent research by competent paleographers has made it more probable that he died in 899 or 900. See articles and letters in the *English Historical Review*, *Atbenæum*, etc. The Millenary Commemoration Committee decided not to enter on the debated problem, but to adhere to the date generally recognised when the committee was formed.

² A large representative committee, of which the Queen is patron, was formed in 1898 to commemorate the thousandth anniversary of Alfred's death. A grand colou-

But I wish now to speak of Alfred not as our father in blood, or in nation, but as the real father of native prose, that common inheritance of us all, which, after a thousand years of fertility, has lost none of its vigour, its purity, and its wealth. The thousandth anniversary of his death has aroused new attention to his work, and has produced some important books to which I will direct your notice. Of Alfred the man, the warrior, the statesman, the hero, the saint, I will not now speak. In each of these characters he was perfect, — the purest, grandest, most heroic soul that ever sprang from our race. It is only of Alfred the writer of books, the creator of Saxon prose, that I wish to speak. He was indeed one of those rare rulers of men who trust to the book as much as to the sword, who value the school more than the court, who believe in no force but the force of thought and of truth.

In that noble and pathetic preface to his *Pastoral Care*, Alfred himself has told us how and why he carried through the restoration of learning in his church and people. When the first long struggle with the Danes was over, he found his kingdom desolate, and ignorance universal. There was not one, he says, on this side of Humber who could understand their mass-book or put a letter from Latin into Eng-

sal statue by Mr. Hamo Thorneycroft, R. A., is now being raised at Winchester, where he lived and died, by British and American subscribers. The Hon. Secretary of the English committee is Mr. Alfred Bowker, Mayor of Winchester. The Hon. Treasurer is Lord Avebury, of Roberts, Lubbock & Co., Lombard Street, London.

lish. He groaned to think how learning had flourished before the great invasion. He wondered how the good and wise men of old had omitted to translate their Latin books into English, so that the people might read them and hear them read. He supposes they could not believe that learning would die down so utterly. And so the great King set himself to work with all the fire of one who was both hero and genius to the twofold task, first, to restore learning and found a national education, and secondly to put the great books of the world into the mother-tongue of his people. For the first, he gathered round him scholars from all parts, without distinction of country or race, Welsh, Celts, Mercians, Flemings, Westphalians, as well as men of Wessex and Kent. The second task he undertook himself. Having mastered Latin late in manhood after strenuous toil, he became the first of translators, and in so doing he founded a prose literature.

As a boy, Alfred had shown his zest for study. He had been taken to Rome and to the Court of the Frank King.¹ But from the age of eighteen he was occupied for twenty years with desperate wars and the reorganisation of his kingdom. It was not until he had been king sixteen years, and was thirty-eight years old, that he found himself free for literary work. That he did all this, as he tells us with stately

¹ I incline to think that when Ethelwulf sent the boy to Rome at the age of four, Alfred remained there for perhaps over two years till his father brought him back; and, though he did not learn to read, his childish mind was filled with what he there heard of antiquity and of the Christian world.

pathos, "in the various and manifold worldly cares that oft troubled him both in mind and in body," is to me one of the most mysterious tales of intellectual passion in the history of human thought. It places him in the rare rank of those warriors and rulers who, amidst all the battle of their lives, have left the world imperishable works of their own composition, such as did David, Julius Cæsar, and Marcus Aurelius.¹

The works of Alfred are numerous, important, and admirably chosen.² His *Handbook* — a sort of anthology or golden treasury of fine thoughts which he collected whilst Asser was reading to him and teaching him to translate — has utterly perished, though William of Malmesbury, two centuries later, used and cited it. Ah! how many libraries of volumes would we willingly lose to-day if time would give up to us from its Lethean maw that well-thumbed book, "about the size of a Psalter," that the holy king was wont to keep in his bosom: the book wherein from day to day he noted down in English some great thought that had impressed him in his studies.

¹ See Pauli. *Life of Alfred the Great*, 1851, translated by B. Thorpe, Bohn's Ecclesiastical Library, 1857, with text and translation of the *Orosius*; also the Jubilee Edition of *Alfred's Works*, 1852-1853. The latest account of Alfred's career as king, warrior, lawgiver, scholar, and author is to be found in the volume published by the Alfred Commemoration Committee. *Alfred the Great* (Adam and Charles Black), London, 1899. 8vo.

² For the writings of King Alfred, consult the work just referred to and the essays therein of the Bishop of Bristol, and Rev. Professor Earle; also see Mr. Stopford Brooke's *English Literature to the Norman Conquest*. Macmillan & Co., 1898. 8vo. Chapter xiv, and R. P. Wülker's *Grundriss zur Geschichte der Angelsächsischen Literatur*.