

**AELFRIC: A NEW
STUDY OF HIS LIFE
AND WRITINGS**

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Aelfric: a new study of his life and writings by Caroline Louisa White

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CAROLINE LOUISA WHITE

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AND WRITINGS**

L. K. Shook.

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II

ÆLFRIC

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AND WRITINGS

BY

CAROLINE LOUISA WHITE, Ph. D.



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'We have a deep concern in preserving from destruction the thoughts of the past, the leading conceptions of all remarkable forms of civilization; the achievements of genius, of virtue, and of high faith.' 'Though these things may be individually forgotten, collectively they survive, and are in action still.' James Martineau.

Covington, 1896.

By CAROLINE L. WHITE.

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PREFACE.

The repeated efforts of scholars for the past three hundred years to discover the identity of Ælfrie, show the significant place that his writings hold; no history of English culture would be complete that left out of account the century that preceded the Norman Conquest, and in that century Ælfrie's writings are more important than those of any other man. Transliterated copies of his homilies made in the Middle English period show that their practical use had not ceased at a time when men could no longer read the language in which they were first written.

These writings are valuable, first, in reference to the history of English literature and English culture; secondly, in reference to the history and development of the English language; thirdly, as theological writings which throw light upon the beliefs of the church in the Old English period.

It was this third value of Ælfrie's works that, in the sixteenth century, gave the first impulse to the modern study of Old English.

The attempts made by such scholars as Wharton and Mores to identify Ælfrie, succeeded in bringing together a body of facts which finally proved useful in deciding the question. The modern author who has done most to illuminate this subject is Edward Dietrich, late professor at the University of Marburg, who in 1855 and 1856 published the results of his investigations in Niedner's *Zeitschrift für Historische Theologie*. His papers considered, first, Ælfrie's writings; secondly, the teachings of the Old English Church according to Ælfrie's writings; thirdly, Ælfrie's education and character; fourthly, Ælfrie's life.

Of these studies, Dietrich writes thus: 'The great ignorance as to Ælfrie's life and personality which has pre-

vailed in church histories up to the present time has led to the following investigations. They were preceded by several years' study of Ælfric's writings, and of the earlier and later Old English literature, and a long stay in England gave opportunity to study at the British Museum and at Oxford his yet unpublished works.'

The chief results of Dietrich's investigations have been accepted as authoritative by German students of Old English, and are fundamental in all subsequent German Ælfrician studies. But although almost half a century has passed since he wrote, his work is rarely noticed by English writers. Those who have studied at German universities are well acquainted with it, and perhaps many others. But in such works as the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and the *Dictionary of National Biography* which gives references to the most important authorities on each subject treated, Dietrich's work is entirely ignored. Cockayne, whose discussion of the subject of Ælfric's identity is probably the most thorough and satisfactory of anything originally written upon it in English, makes no reference to Dietrich. Yet it is hardly to be doubted that he was indebted to him, although it may be indirectly.

This study is based upon Dietrich's work in so far as that accords with the results of more recent investigations. Wherever equally advantageous, his words are simply translated. Chapters five and six are chiefly translation. Such also is chapter seven, but with various additions, omissions and modifications, in order to bring the treatment of the subject up to the present day.

In preparing the descriptions of Ælfric's works I have rewritten as far as possible Dietrich's different divisions, omitting some things, adding others, and treating the subjects with much freedom.

The uncertainty which has been felt up to the present time as to who Ælfric was, and where he lived, and his frequent identifications with others of the same name, make it very de-

sirable, now that the main outline of his life is known, to take him away completely from the false surroundings in which he has been placed, and, as it were, to create his identity anew. Hence the attempt has here been made to show his true relation to his age, and to embody in a connected whole the known facts of his life. As a complete biography the result is of course inadequate. Some of the data are uncertain, but the degree of uncertainty is indicated. This account of Ælfric's life incorporates the chief facts established by Dietrich, but is not a translation. In some few cases a result different from his has been reached. For instance, the view here given is that Ælfric remained at Cernel from the time he left Winchester, in, or soon after 987, until he became abbot in 1005. Dietrich's view that he returned to Winchester, and perhaps went elsewhere, is accounted for, in that he recognized no relationship between the two noblemen who were Ælfric's patrons, and considered it necessary for him to return to Winchester in order to make the acquaintance of Æthelweard. The chapter on the monastic revival is added in order to explain Ælfric's literary activity, and is not at all derived from Dietrich.

No attempt has been made to give Dietrich's account of the views of the Old English Church according to Ælfric's writings. The spirit in which he treats that subject is characteristic of all his work, and explains why the results of his studies are of permanent value. He says of the above subject: "Whether it is Protestant or Catholic does not now concern me. I wish to ascertain from his collected expressions upon it, and through comparison of these, what that teaching is in itself, and what it is in comparison with that of the times just before and just after it."

In the last chapter are printed the prefaces of Ælfric's writings. They afford material, not only for deciding various questions of fact in respect to his life, but when studied either separately or in comparison, they reveal much that is of interest in the character of Ælfric, the Christian man and the

teacher of his people. These prefaces are complete in all cases except that of *Genesis* and the English preface of *Catholic Homilies I*. In those, the parts which are not of a personal nature are omitted. Also the autobiographical portions of the work *On the Old and New Testaments* are given, and an extract from the charter of Eynsham Abbey.

The bibliography is as complete as circumstances allow. It can hardly have failed to omit some things which should find a place in it, since its subject is an author whose voluminous works have often been printed, and about whom much has been said by many writers.

The original purpose of the present study was to render the most important parts of Dietrich's work accessible to English readers. The endeavor to fulfil that purpose showed the advisability of adding to these some of the results which have been reached by other scholars during the years which have elapsed since he published his papers. In those years nearly all of Ælfric's writings which were before unpublished have been printed, and the authenticity of some hitherto doubtful ones has been conclusively established. It should be added that the many recent studies of Ælfric's works have only rendered clearer and more certain the chief results obtained by Dietrich. In most cases where he can be shown to have been mistaken, the later judgments are derived from facts not easily accessible at the time when he wrote.

I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness to the various scholars whose works are referred to or quoted in the following pages. To Professor Albert S. Cook I am grateful, not only for criticism and suggestion, but still more for encouragement and inspiration in this endeavor to render a little more distinct the life and work of an English scholar of the past.

New Haven, May, 1898.

C. L. W.

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