

**SOMERSET
HISTORICAL
ESSAYS**

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Somerset Historical Essays by J. Armitage Robinson

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J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON

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By

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PREFACE

THE writer of these pages makes no claim to be a historian, but he is concerned with the materials which go to the construction of true history. Occasionally he is led to revise the verdicts of historians on the ground of a renewed investigation of some isolated problem, or in the light of fuller information which has but lately become available. He hopes that he has done this with sufficient modesty. As a rule he has avoided direct controversy and has preferred a positive presentation of the revised position. He is well aware that when offered thus silently the corrections he desires to make are less likely to attract immediate attention than if he directly challenged fallacies which shelter under honoured names. But he writes from mere love of the subjects to which he has been drawn by the circumstances of his position and by local patriotism; and he has experienced more than once the temporary blindness produced by the dust of conflict. On the other hand he asks for criticism, conscious as he is of his own limitations and desirous of help from the wider knowledge and more practised judgement of professed students of the very varied matters with which he has had to deal.

Two of the Essays are of much more than local interest. William of Malmesbury's *Enquiry into the Antiquity of the Church of Glastonbury* is a byword among the historians. The great Homer is found nodding: his critical instinct has been charmed into slumber by the amenities of the house which has made him welcome: moreover, his work has been falsified by succeeding generations of monks; so that what is given us under his name is on all accounts a negligible quantity. The application of the ordinary tests of criticism leads to a very different verdict. The accretions can be cleared away with tolerable certainty; and the book, reduced indeed in bulk, becomes a striking witness to the pains which its author bestowed on the investigation of the muniments of the abbey. Students of the Arthurian legend will find some of their difficulties removed by the negative results of this discussion. Arthur and Avalon, Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail belong exclusively to the later recensions of the book.

The Essay on Peter of Blois originated in an attempt to straighten out the chronology of the Somerset archdeacons. All who have handled twelfth-century charters know how often their dates must be tested by the years of office of such officials. Peter's tenure of the archdeaconry of Bath is wrongly given by all the modern authorities to whom enquirers naturally turn. But there is more here than a correction of dates. For the Letters of Peter of Blois are, if genuine, of high value for the illustration of his time. Unfortunately a cloud of suspicion has so discredited them that the historian of to-day will not so much as look at them. The latest monograph on K. Henry II does not contain Peter's name in the index, notwithstanding his once famous portrait of the king with whom he claimed to have been on most intimate terms. The late Mr. W. G. Searle, of Queens' College, Cambridge, never published the elaborate dissertation in which he distinguished 'the Epistolary Peter', as he called him, from 'the Historical Peter'; but in the last years of his life, when he found that the present writer had been working at the same subject and had reached a like conclusion to his own in regard to the chief dates of Peter's career, he most generously expressed a wish that the whole of his materials, which he was giving to the University Library, should be placed at the disposal of one who was directly antagonistic to his own particular theory; and his wish has received the most indulgent interpretation on the part of the Syndics of the Library. A plain narrative based on all the accessible evidence will, it is believed, restore the credit of Peter of Blois as a genuine person and an honest writer.

The discussion of the Saxon Abbots of Glastonbury carries on the justification of William of Malmesbury's work, and offers a further contribution to the history of the abbey which has suffered so greatly from an overgrowth of legend. It may also serve to restore some measure of credit to the earliest Glastonbury charters, and to indicate their value for the story of the Saxon conquest of the West.

The Essay on the First Deans of Wells was primarily an effort to rectify chronology. But it offers incidentally a picture of the growth of a Cathedral Church of the Old Foundation. At this moment such a study may not be without its value. It is to be hoped that any new reform of our English Cathedrals will recognise the variety of their history: that it will aim at setting them more free to pursue their own lines of development in accordance with the demands of their

several localities, and will avoid cramping them by uniformity of regulations. In the towns and in the country they have very different services to render: they will adapt themselves gradually to modern needs, if they are freed from restraints which at present, in some instances, hinder them from self-improvement. Above all, the original purpose of their foundation must be borne in mind, and proposals for change must be made in the spirit of Bishop Robert's words, 'that the praises of Almighty God may be the more fully and joyfully rendered in the choir'.

The Early Somerset Archdeacons are here for the first time sorted out and dated with such accuracy as the documents permit. In the course of this somewhat tedious work light is thrown on an important ecclesiastical institution. Moreover, the Somerset archdeacons of the end of the twelfth century play no small part in English history. The Appendix on John Cumin's early career is the only portion of the book that has been published before; it is reprinted with the courteous permission of the editor of the *Nineteenth Century*.

The Essay on Bishop Jocelin and the Interdict formed the subject of a paper read before the Historical Congress held in London in 1913. To what extent the Interdict affected Church life in England, apart from the monasteries, is a question which needs to be investigated. Our modern historians, following some of the monastic chroniclers, have been too easily satisfied with the assumption that its effect was what Canon Law intended it to be.

The writer's best thanks are due to the Council of the British Academy for undertaking the publication of these Essays out of the Raleigh Fund for the encouragement of historical research, endowed by Sir Charles Wakefield, Bart., on the occasion of the Raleigh Tercentenary.

The Deanery, Wells, Somerset.

11 November 1921.

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I.

WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY 'ON THE ANTIQUITY OF GLASTONBURY'

THERE was a pretty rivalry in mediaeval times between the great abbeys of Westminster and Glastonbury, not unlike the contest for historical precedence between the universities of Oxford and Cambridge which produced less reputable forgeries at a later time. If Oxford found in Asser's *Life of Alfred* that Grimbold had kept school in that ancient city, Cambridge made the happy discovery that some seven hundred years before two of her pupils had been sent by K. Lucius to the Pope of Rome to ask for Christian teachers.¹ The great abbeys had at any rate a more solid reason than academic jealousy for insisting on priority of foundation. The precedence of abbots at a General Council was something worth fighting for; and Glastonbury's claim was challenged and defended again and again, and notably in 1434 at the Council of Bale, when the Spaniards were asserting priority over England in virtue of the preaching of St James of Compostella.²

Westminster might at first be content to go back to K. Seburt in 604; for the great minster at Glastonbury was known to have been built by K. Ina a century later. But the Glastonbury monks discovered that K. Lucius had been left out of account, and they claimed a visit from the missionaries of Pope Eleutherus in 166. Westminster on enquiry discovered that their church also had been founded in the days of K. Lucius, though after the Diocletian persecution it was turned for a while into a temple of Apollo. Glastonbury, while insisting on 166 as her own date, allowed that Westminster followed quickly in 169;³ but presently she made a bolder bid for antiquity and took over the legend of Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail, and so settled her date once and for all as the thirty-first year after the Passion of the Lord and the fifteenth after the Assumption of the glorious Virgin. It was vain for Westminster to plead that the blessed Peter himself had left the gate of heaven and come down to consecrate his new church with

¹ Ussher, *Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates*, c. iv (ed. 1687, pp. 27 f.).

² *Ibid.*, c. iii (p. 13).

³ Trin. Coll. Camb. MS 724 (in Dr. James's Catalogue), f. 20 b.