

**CHRONICLES OF THE
ANCIENT BRITISH
CHURCH, ANTERIOR
TO THE SAXON ERA**

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Chronicles of the ancient British church, anterior to the Saxon era by James Yeowell

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BY JAMES YEOWELL.

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P R E F A C E.

THE substance of the following work was originally published as miscellaneous papers in a monthly periodical during the year 1839, and collected at the close of the series as a separate tractate. The present republication has been suggested by the favourable reception and speedy sale of the first rough sketch already presented to the public. During those intervals of time when the writer has found himself released from other engagements, he has endeavoured, to the best of his ability, to gather up the precious fragments which remain in the works of historians of acknowledged authority respecting the primitive Church of Britain, that no part of so valuable a treasure might be lost. If nothing more has been effected than merely collecting and arranging the materials of our early Church history, and placing them in a light best calculated to convey instruction, it will be a satisfaction to have exerted even the feeblest effort.

The particular period of history discussed in the following pages is one of considerable interest to the ecclesiastical student, embracing as it does an account of the rise and progress of the infant Church of our country, and the triumphs of the faith over druidical mythology and Roman paganism. From the title of his work, it will be perceived that the writer has confined himself almost entirely to the Church history of this early period, and has only indirectly referred to its civil and political, with a view to illustrate its ecclesiastical affairs. Of the invasion of Britain under Julius Cæsar, and again under Claudius—its struggles for liberty under Caractæus, Boadicea, and others—the rise of the

British tyrants—the desertion of the island by the Romans—the irruption of the Picts and Scots—and the establishment of the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons, much has already appeared in the volumes of those who have written expressly on the civil and military transactions of Britain.

The origin and true nature of our social and political institutions must ever form a subject of peculiar interest for the study and reflection of every Englishman; but to the christian who believes that the Church is the divinely appointed channel for conveying the precious gifts promised by God to his people, its introduction into his native land must be a matter of no common importance. He looks back on its earliest dawn with pleasing retrospection, watches its progress with intense solicitude, and at every step feels a personal interest in all the vicissitudes of its eventful history.

The conversion of a nation to christianity, and the advantages resulting to an idolatrous people from the blessings of the gospel, are circumstances of such transcendent importance, that it is matter of regret, they have been so slightly noticed by those who have written the annals of our country. It must be confessed that the portion of ecclesiastical history which relates to the primitive Church of Britain, has been allowed to fall into a neglect altogether inexcusable, and has not received the attention which it so much deserves. This disregard of its early history, has, in no small degree, helped to spread the baneful influence of many a heresy which at present disturbs the peace of the church, and is one great obstacle in bringing about that unity and intercommunion of the various branches of the visible church of Christ, which good and holy men have so earnestly desired.

The popular writers of our national history, if they touch upon this subject, too often dismiss it with a few passing remarks, and begin their notices of ecclesiastical affairs with the mission of St. Augustine at the close of the sixth century. It is acknowledged that Hume took very little trouble to examine ancient records containing the earlier accounts of this island, his

aim being rather to make out a pleasing narrative than to ascertain facts. This, observes Mr. Burke, he had discovered in consequence of having, in some degree, gone over the same ground himself. On one occasion, indeed, Hume himself, being pushed pretty hard in conversation, acknowledged to Boswell that he had not paid much attention to the older historians on controverted points; he had merely dipped into them; for little, he thought, was to be gained by a minute examination.* Hume is also said to have turned aside with terror from the presses containing original documents, when they were thrown open for his use in the compilation of his history; and to have retreated in haste to the sofa, upon which the greatest part of his brilliant and popular work was composed. In the writings of our old chroniclers—with all their blunders and faults—we discover a disposition to acknowledge the doctrine of a Divine Providence, as well as to trace and investigate God's dealings with his church; but in those of Hume there is an entire absence of religious feeling, and we look in vain for any thing of higher stature or diviner mould than what belongs to this world. If we ask for bread, he will give us a stone.

The materials of British Church history anterior to the Saxon era are exceedingly scanty; a few brief notices, therefore, of the sources whence may be obtained the most credible accounts respecting it, may be acceptable to such as feel an interest in ecclesiastical and historical studies, and who are anxious to pursue their researches into the original sources of information.

The earliest British historian is GILDAS THE WISE, who flourished at a time when the Britons had been driven by the Saxons to the western parts of the island. He is supposed to have been born in the year 520, of a Bardic family and connexion, and to have received his early education at the college of Lantwit Major, Glamorganshire. In his work he feelingly deplores the miserable state of his country, and declaims severely against the vices and habits of both clergy and laity. The numerous quotations

* Prior's Life of Burke.

he has given from the Old and New Testaments, lead us to infer that their contents were deeply studied in the early British colleges.

The next work in point of time is "THE HISTORY OF THE BRITONS," attributed to NENNIUS. Some obscurity hangs over the name of this author. From the Prologite it appears to have been written in the year 858; although Bale and other writers consider 620 as the correct date. Nennius styles himself the disciple of St. Albotus, and says that he compiled it "partly from traditions of our ancestors, partly from writings and monuments of the ancient inhabitants of Britain, partly from the annals of the Romans and the chronicles of the sacred fathers, Isidore, Jerome, Prosper, Eusebius, and from the histories of the Scots and Saxons." In 1819, the Rev. W. Gunn, rector of Istead, Norfolk, published an English translation, with the Latin original, under the following title: "The *Historia Brittonum*, commonly attributed to Nennius; from a manuscript lately discovered in the library of the Vatican Palace at Rome: edited in the tenth century by Mark the Hermit, with an English version, fac-simile of the original, notes and illustrations." The work consists of sixty-six chapters, or rather paragraphs, and in this limited compass the writer includes the remains of the earliest history of the Britons from the arrival of Brutus the Trojan to the subjugation of the island by the Saxons.

The Welsh have a very singular collection of historical facts, called THE TRIADS, or metrical triplets; three events, which have an analogy in some point or other, being arranged together. These Cambro-British fragments allude to circumstances connected with the first population and early history of the island, of which every other memorial has perished. Some are historical, whilst others are ethical, legal, and theological. Mr. Vaughan, the antiquary of Hengurt, refers them to the seventh century; and they have been noticed with respect by Camden. They were published in 1801, by the munificence of Mr. Owen Jones, and have since been edited by Mr. Probert, and their genuineness elaborately vindicated by Mr.

Sharon Turner, and the editors of the *Myvyrian Archaiology*. The only other remains still extant of ancient Welsh literature consist of Bruts, or Chronicles, in the form of regular histories, and the poems of the Bards.

No work, however, to which the title of a history or a chronicle can properly be assigned, appeared until the era of the venerable BEDE, who compiled his *Ecclesiastical History* a short time before his death, A. D. 731. Bede was the light and wonder of his age, and, as one of our earliest annalists, is perhaps the most trustworthy and faithful which any country in a similar state of cultivation ever possessed. His writings fill eight folio volumes, which are usually bound in three, and contain more matter than would be comprised in twenty modern quartos. The historical portion is but a small part, one volume of the eight. In the dedication prefixed to his *Ecclesiastical History* he removes all uncertainty with respect to his materials, the authorities being quoted with most scrupulous exactness. These he obtained partly from chronicles, partly from annals preserved in contemporary monasteries, and partly from the information of prelates with whom he was acquainted. He deputed Nothelm, a priest of the church of London, and afterwards archbishop of Canterbury, to search the papal archives at Rome, and to copy the epistles of St. Gregory and other prelates for his work. As to civil transactions he has followed Gildas and Marcellinus; and in geographical and natural accounts, Pliny and Orosius.

Besides the foregoing works, which may be considered the primary sources of our early history, the Chronicles which appeared during the middle ages may be perused with advantage. The writers of them treated history as every other branch of human knowledge then cultivated was treated—in connexion with religion. One of the earliest is the *British History* of Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was, as he asserts, merely a translator of an ancient British chronicle. The writings of Giraldus Cambrensis, another learned Welshman, are extremely numerous, “many of

which," says Warton, "are written with some degree of elegance." Next follow the works of William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, Roger de Hovenden, William of Newburgh, and Florence of Worcester, in all of whom some fragmentary notices of our early ecclesiastical history may be gleaned. Some of the details respecting the early British Church are doubtless fabulous; but industry and erudition have, of late, elucidated many of the once rejected legends: ancient British learning has been cultivated with patriotic zeal; societies have been formed for printing inedited manuscripts, and to render accessible whatever is valuable amongst the materials for the civil and ecclesiastical history of the United Kingdom; many ancient documents have been brought to light; and what is probable has been separated from what is hopelessly obscure.

Many of the later divines of the English Church have illustrated by their researches the early Church history of our country; those deserving particular mention are Archbishop Ussher, Bishop Stillingfleet, and Bishop Lloyd. USSHER's work "*De Primordiis Ecclesiarum Britannicarum*," was subsequently published under the title of "*Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates*," and is so great a treasure of historical research, that, as Dr. Parr justly remarks, "all that have written since with any success on this subject must own themselves beholding to him for his elaborate collections." In his "*Discourse on the Religion anciently professed by the Irish and British*," he has given numerous extracts from the writings of the early British and Irish saints, showing their agreement in doctrine and discipline with the Reformed Church of England. Bishop Stillingfleet's "*Origines Britannicæ: or, the Antiquities of the British Church*," is the most complete and learned work on the subject, containing a full account of the early ecclesiastical history of Britain, from the first introduction of Christianity to the conversion of the Saxons. He rejects many of the traditions respecting the British Church, but is disposed to believe in the visit of St. Paul to this country. Bishop Lloyd published an "*Historical*