

**THE LIFE OF SAINT
WERBURGE
OF CHESTER**

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The life of Saint Werburge of Chester by Henry Bradshaw

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HENRY BRADSHAW

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WERBURGE
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The Life of
Saint Werburge
of Chester,

By HENRY BRADSHAW.

ENGLISH A.D. 1513, PRINTED BY PYNSON A.D. 1521
AND NOW RE-EDITED

BY

CARL HORSTMANN.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE
 LYFE OF ST. WERBURGE BY HENRY
 BRADSHAW.

THE present legend is extant only in an edition by Pynson (London), 1521 (described in Dibdin's *Typogr. Antiq.* II. 491), of which five copies are known to exist¹: one (the copy described by Dibdin as Heber's) in the British Museum, two in the Bodleian, one in the Minster library at York, and one in Mr. Christie Miller's collection (cf. Hawkins). It was carefully reprinted (in the type and shape of Pynson's ed., with all its faults, and without punctuation) for the Chetham Society, 1848, by F. Hawkins, with an introduction. Extracts had been given by Dibdin, and, not always correctly, by Warton (*List. of Engl. Poetry*, II. 371—380).

In Pynson's edition the poem is preceded by a prologue in the honour of St. Werburge by J. T. (whose name neither Herbert nor Hawkins were able to make out). This prologue in an acrostic of the two first stanzas, and in vv. 17, 23, 28, names Henry Bradsha, "sometyme monke in Chester," and servant of St. Werburge, as the author of the English legend. At the end of the book are appended three "balades" by different authors, the first of which, "A Balade to the auctour," written by an (official?) examiner to whom the book was sent for approbation (cf. p. 200, v. 8 ff), mentions that its author, "though vncertayne be

¹ It was mentioned by Maittaire (who in 1741 inserts it in a list of books not before noticed), and in Ames's *Typogr. Ant.* 1749, who must have had a copy before him. However, Heber, *Typog. Ant.*, I. 270, says, that a few years before he wrote, the very existence of the book was questioned; and Dr. Foote Gower, in his Sketch of materials for the history of Chester, 1771, also doubts its existence; cf. Hawkins.

his name,"¹ died in "the present yere of this translation MDXIII"—which implies that the legend was completed that same year (1513), shortly before the author's death; the second ballad, written, as it seems, by a friend of the author, perhaps an inmate of the same abbey, shortly after his death, calls him "Harry Braddeshaa, of Chestre abbay monke" (v. 24), and laments his premature death (v. 27). All these "ballades" speak of the author and his work in terms of the highest praise, and testify to the admiration it must have inspired. So, then, Henry Bradsha(w) is the author of the English life of St. Werburge.

Of this poet nothing more is known than what is recorded by Anthonyà Wood, who says (in his *Athene Oxonienses*, 1691, ed. Bliss, 1813, I. col. 18)—"he was born in the auncient town of Westchester, commonly called the city of Chester; and being much addicted to religion and learning, when a youth, was received among the Benedictine monks of St. Werburge's monastery in the said city. Thence at riper years he was sent to Gloucester college in the suburb of Oxon, where, after he had passed his course in theology among the novices of his order, he returned to his cell at St. Werburge, and in his elder years wrote *De antiquitate et magnificentia urbis Cheshire chronicon*, &c., and translated from Latin into English a book which he thus entitled, *The lyfe of the glorious Virgin St. Werburge: Also many miracles that God had shewed for her*, London 1521, 4°. He died in 1513 (5 Henry VIII.), and was buried in his monastery, leaving then behind him other matters to posterity; but the subject of which they treat, I know not" (cf. Hawkins). The date of his death (1513) agrees with that stated in the

¹ There cannot be the least doubt that these words refer to the author of the English legend, not to that of its Latin source, as Hawkins maintains. It seems that the legend had been sent for approbation to the authorities without the author's name, or with his Christian name only, he being a monk. The mistake was caused by the word "author," v. 6, which Hawkins applies to the composer of the Latin source as Bradshaw modestly calls himself a translator only.

"Balade to the author." He died just upon the completion of his legend (cf. p. 200, v. 20), which does not betray any traces of old age, nay, seems to have been written in his full vigour. This fact, and the expressions used in the second "balade" (p. 201, v. 27), that death had "abridged the life of this good clerke," seem to imply that he died not very old. His premature death would explain why a poet of his talents left no more works from his pen. Besides, he calls "preiginaunt Barkley, nowe beyng religious" (who died in 1552), and "inuentiue Skelton, poet laureate" (laureated before 1490, died in 1529), his contemporaries (cf. p. 199, v. 2024). Assuming him to have reached 45—50 years, the date of his birth may be fixed about 1465. Of his Latin work quoted by Wood, *De antiquitate et magnificentia urbis Chestricie Chronicon*, nothing is known; it was no doubt preparatory to his *Life of St. Werburge*, and the substance of it was embodied in the legend.¹ "Of the 'other matters to posterity' nothing more is positively known to us than to Wood; but Mr. Herbert was in possession of a poem, *The Lyfe of St. Radegunde*, also printed by Pynson, of which he says, 'although the name of the author or translator of this book does not decidedly appear on the face of it, yet on comparing it with the life of St. Werburge, it may readily be perceived that both were penned by the same person, Henry Bradshaw, but hitherto omitted in every list of his works'" —*Typogr. Antiq.* p. 294 (Hawkins). Of this *Lyfe of St. Radegunde*, ed. by Pynson, a unique copy is now in the

¹ Hawkins thinks it not improbable that some fragments dispersed in various MSS. descriptive of Chester may have been extracted from his chronicle. He further remarks: "Mr. Cowper, in his Summary of the Life of St. Werburge, quotes more than once the Latin life of this lady by Bradshaw, and these extracts he derives from Leland's *Collectanea*; but where this collector discovered his original authority does not appear. Mr. Cowper is probably mistaken in ascribing the work to Bradshaw's own pen; it is much more probable that the extracts are derived from the original chronicle or passionary which Bradshaw translated; for he himself states distinctly that his poem was a translation from a Latin history preserved in his monastery."

possession of Mr. Miller, Britwell. I have in vain applied to the possessor to be allowed to take a copy of it for the present edition, of which the *Life of St. Radegunde* was to form part, so making up the works of Bradshaw. As I have not seen that book, I cannot say more about it than what I have quoted from Hawkins.

The *Life of St. Werburga* is the work of Bradshaw's life, finished only shortly before his death. This saint was called the Patroness of Chester¹ (II. 1741); she was the patroness of Bradshaw's abbey, where her bones rested. Local saints at that time were the chief glory of their respective places, their "legend" a subject of the deepest local interest; to have their "legend" in Latin, or in the vernacular tongue, was the chief object of local ambition.² Most of the Latin *Vitas* are due to this local interest. The original Life was often subsequently enlarged by the history of the translation, by additions and appendices containing more recent local miracles. English literature abounds not only in legends, but in local legends in prose and verse, written in the absence of a Latin life, or when that was deemed insufficient, as being intelligible to the clergy alone, or deficient and inadequate in style. Tydgate's *Edbunn and Fremund*, and *Alba and Amphabell*, were the standard works of this kind in the preceding century. There were others which combined the legend of the saint with the history of the town or monastery where he rested.³ So Bradshaw undertook to write the life of *his* local saint, a task for which he was eminently qualified, both by inclination, parts, and studies.

¹ When the author calls her prioress and lady of Chester Abbey (I. 99), which she never was, he can only mean it in the sense that King Ethelred made her "lady ruler and president" over all the nunneries in his kingdom; or perhaps he only calls her so because she was enshrined there, and was considered its patroness.

² Bradshaw considers it as a sign of a good reign when "The lynes of sayntes were soth in eche place, And written in legendes for our comfort and grace," II. 1155.

³ So *St. Editha, sive Chronicon Wilodunense* (ed. by me, Heilbronn, 1883).

As his book shows him, he was a man of a childlike, sweet temper, simple, pious, without affectation, warm-hearted, modest, sincere, a friend of the people, to whom he dedicated his work (II. 2016). He had a natural sense of beauty, an innate grace, a deep moral feeling. He was of a religious, poetic, and antiquarian cast. His life was spent in the narrow walls of his monastery, in the stillness of his cell, of his study, far from the tumult of the great world. He was not ambitious, but unregardful of the applause of the great. His interest centred in his native place, in his abbey, in its saint. He knew Latin, and was well versed in Latin literature; he knew of course the Bible; he was well acquainted with the English literature of his time—with Chaucer, Lydgate, Barclay, Skelton;—but his chief delight was the chronicles and histories and legends of old. He had written in Latin a chronicle on the antiquities and magnificence of Chester, and was Chester's best antiquary. So it was that, not feeling so bold as "to describye hye hystorieses," and scorning to write "bawdy balades, to exeyte lyght hertes to pleasure and vanyte" (I. 91), he, to avoid idleness and make himself useful, undertook "to wryte a legende good and true, and translate a lyfe into Englysshe, I meane Blessed saynt Werburge, Protecetrice of Chester and of the abbay" (I. 92 ff.).

The *Life of St. Werburge* is a legendary epic after the fashion introduced by Lydgate; in two books, with the apparatus of prologues and epilogues (Lenvoye), with episodic ingredients—the lives of the immediate relations of his saint—with frequent descriptions, in the modern style full of "aureate terms," in the stanza used by Lydgate. But it is of a more comprehensive plan than the more legendary epics of that poet, containing not only the life of his saint, and those of her relations, St. Andry, St. Sexburge, and St. Ermenilde, but connecting it with the history of the city of Chester and its abbey, and grounding the whole on the history of England and Mercia. It is the result of careful studies