

Britain's First Missionary

The Life of St. Augustine of Canterbury and
His Companions
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Preface

THE FOLLOWING pages tell the story of a great undertaking rather than describe a saint's life, and St. Gregory, rather than his missionary St. Augustine, holds the chief place of honor. The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons was the brightest ornament of that great Pope's reign, or at least it is that which the Church seems to prize above all the rest, for to this day, three hundred years after the great revolt, St. Gregory is still described in the Roman Martyrology as he "who brought the English to the true faith."

Of St. Augustine himself, the chief lieutenant of the papacy in its conquest of England, but little is known. His life and his virtues are overshadowed by his mission. That mission dates from the abortive schemes of St. Gregory while still a monk and ends with the death of the last Italian archbishop of Canterbury. It is that period which I have included in my sketch. Perhaps it was rash of me to undertake the task, for Montalembert had already told the same story, and he was a bold man who would invite comparison with the glowing pages of *The Monks of the West*. Yet the critical value of that work has been denied: I think with justice. The passionate soul of the orator not unnaturally chafes at the restrictions imposed upon the student of history, though the historian who fears too all by the dullness of his own pages may well envy the tender but stirring narrative of Montalembert.

So I have sought to tell again in my own way what Montalembert has said so well already. Moreover, the occasion seemed favorable, for while France was holding the festival at Rheims in memory of the conversion of Clovis, on the other side of the Channel, Catholics and Protestants alike were thinking of St. Augustine and the baptism of Ethelbert. English Catholics are about to hold their commemoration of that event on the very ground where the saint is believed to have landed with his monks. The Anglican shave already held theirs. The occasion happily concurred with the celebration of the diamond jubilee of the queen's reign; nearly two hundred Protestant bishops gathered in synod from every part of the British Empire; they had held such meetings before, and it was easy to anticipate that those prelates would have difficulty in finding common ground for debate in which their differences should not too much obtrude. We knew they would discuss reunion, and they could not wholly ignore the appeal of the holy see.

Could they fail to draw a comparison in their own minds between Pope Gregory, who sent England the faith, and Pope Leo, who invited her to the reunion? Could they fail to recognize that at an interval of thirteen centuries, there breathes in the utterances of Leo the same spirit that inspired the action of Gregory?" Father, . . . that they may be one!"

I write these lines at the very spot where old St. Augustine lived. For many years, I have lived at Canterbury, a place still rich in traces of the saints who worked and died there. The little city is full of memories of her lost greatness. There preached England's first archbishop; there dwelt a long line of holy prelates; the pavement of the cathedral was once smeared with a martyr's blood; in her archbishop's palace was reared another Thomas, likewise a martyr, though he won his crown elsewhere—he too was chancellor, but to another Henry. A thought-

ful Catholic who lives in such a place must regard with ever-growing affection those witnesses to the past, but his affection will be tinged with sadness. How few of those that visit Canterbury feel aught save a certain antiquarian regret as they look at the crumbling ruins of her abbeys! How few ever picture to themselves the life of the great past of which those ruins stand in the silent record!

To link the Church of the nineteenth century with that of the seventh, there is at Canterbury but a handful of Catholics, chiefly Irish, who are joined at Sunday mass by an occasional visitor from the continent. In the great metropolitan church there is scarcely a stone which does not mourn for the banished faith. Within its walls a Catholic feels like a disinherited son returning after long absence to his ancestral home.

Though the present tenants of Christchurch have held possession for three hundred years, they have not yet made themselves at home there. It is so manifest that the place was not built for them; the nave and choir are too long and too wide; on every side are chapels in which of old Mass was offered daily, for which they have no use. Their services are held apart in a mere corner of the great building; the rest they leave to the tourists.

Once a year, the liberal spirit of the Anglican canons throws the Church open to Catholic pilgrims. They are permitted to kneel there, say their beads, and make their private devotions. Once, even they were allowed to have a meeting in the chapter house. On such occasions, they fill the railway station, wearing their badges, and parade through the city with banners flying. Instead of insult or ridicule, they meet with civility and respect. Who knows but that God will someday be moved by the prayers of those devout souls who flock hither to honor the soil once trodden by His saints?

Principle Works Consulted

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Haddan and Stubbs. *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*.

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Celts and Saxons

THE SAXON invasion of Britain began about the year 450. Some fifty years later, the places where the invaders had disembarked or which they had first won from the natives were still mere isolated stations lying at intervals along the island's eastern and southern coasts. In the middle of the sixth century, these little centers so grew in extent as to reach from one to the other, and thus, the Teutonic races became possessed of territory forming a broad, irregular, but almost unbroken band compassing nearly half the island. Fresh hordes still kept pouring in across the seas. The stream flowed unceasingly until certain districts of Germany were stripped of their inhabitants. Kent was so thoroughly mastered that not a Briton remained, although it had taken nearly ten years to annihilate the Celtic population and to dislodge them from their strongholds in the forest of Anderida. Twenty-six years passed before Wessex was established in the south, and then, in that part of the island, the tide of invasion ceased for half a century. On the eastern coast, the German tribes still flowed in, bringing their wives and flocks with them.

The natives were gradually driven back into the interior, so that about the middle of the sixth century, they only held the Thames Valley as far as London. In the beginning at least the invasion was terribly fierce. The Britons had recovered something of their former spirit, and by their resistance exasperated their Jute and Saxon enemies.

Unfortunately, those who should have been united in defending their homes against the common foe were perhaps even more lacking in concert than the invaders themselves. Just as each of the German chieftains acted for his private ends, so did those petty British princes give heed only to their own personal danger. The story of their defense against the Romans was repeated. They made heroic efforts, but their bravery was rendered unavailing by their heedlessness and selfishness. Not till they saw the Saxons gain point after point before their very eyes were they roused from their stolid indifference. Gildas the monk observed from his retreat in Wales the ever-victorious progress of the enemy. "Just vengeance for our people's former sins!" he cried in his own weird style; "from sea to sea spread the fire kindled in the east, fed by sacrilegious hands, laying waste town and country-side, only staying its course when, after withering well-nigh the whole face of our island, it licked with its fierce red tongue the western ocean. Towns crumbled into ruins beneath the battering-ram; and they that dwelt therein with their bishops, their clergy and all their people . . . amid the flash of swords and crackling of the flames fell dead to the ground. Oh, the horror of that sight! In the public squares lay the gateways wrenched from their hinges, stones from the city walls, consecrated altars, mangled corpses weltering in red pools of clotted gore, all mingled in dire confusion, as though crunched together by some horrible machine. Their tombs were the ruined houses or the bellies of wild beasts or birds of prey, save only the souls of the saints, if perchance there were found any in those dread times whom the angels might bear aloft to Heaven. How many poor wretches were pursued to the mountains and were massacred by troops! Others dying of starvation delivered themselves up to a life-long slavery, if they might not perish on the spot, the boon they craved most. Others passed over the sea with loud lamentations, and beneath the swelling sails they

sang: Thou hast given us like sheep to be eaten; Thou hast scattered us amongst the gentiles. Others again, entrenched within the mountains, behind sheer precipices, or sheltered by dense forests or the cliffs by the sea, ever watchful and trembling, yet hopeful, forsook not their fatherland."

It is said that traces of these poor refugees are still found in certain caves near Settle in Yorkshire. The different layers of the rubbish there accumulated bear witness to the sad fate of those that there sought shelter. First the hyena came to devour limbs of bears, or bisons, or mammoths; next came a race of savages, armed with flint hatchets and arrows of bone. Long after these had passed away came the British refugees, driving before them their cattle, swine and goats," whose bones lie scattered round the hearth-fire at the mouth of the cave, where they served the wretched fugitives for food. . . . At night-fall all were crouching beneath the dripping roof of the cave or round the fire that was blazing at its mouth, and a long suffering began in which the fugitives lost year by year the memory of the civilization from which they came."

At that period, Britain was in a sad plight. In no other part of Europe had the existing civilization vanished so completely before the inroads of barbarism. It is true that what civilization there was, was slight and superficial; Romans and Celts had not mixed much together. The conquering nation had built little save garrison towns, fortresses and camps. Except in London, Verulam, Colchester, York, and other great military stations or centers of commerce, where a mixed race had grown up and formed the bulk of the population, the Britons for the most part held sullenly aloof; they were ever ready to give secret assistance to the Picts, who would constantly force their way within the great walls in the north and descend as far as the Thames. Save for a few isolated Roman stations, the island was much

as it had been in the past. Vast wildernesses lay between the towns; the Roman roads traversed the country, passing by forest, moor and fenland, the lair of the wild bull and the wolf. There also lived the Britons in solitary huts, a race of shepherds, little better than savages, who still spoke their own language and kept their own laws; a hardy people, but quite incapable of political life. What was the fate of the old Roman and British cities during the invasion? In some cases, as at Deva or Anderida, the population was annihilated. Deva rose up again in later years, but nothing was known of Anderida save the square Mass of masonry which forms its ruins. In the twelfth century, it was a mere heap of stones without a single inhabitant. Other towns had so completely disappeared that till a little while ago, no one knew where to look for their traces.

Calleva Atrebatum was not a military station, hemmed in like Lincoln by strong fortifications, but a commercial city of some extent, boasting of a forum, with streets and suburbs, which lay quite unprotected by citadel or walls. How and when did she fall? Recent years have again brought her to light under the foundations of modern Silchester, with her Christian Church and a wall hastily set up on the very eve of the enemy's approach.

Uriconium met with a similar fate, but we know the date of her fall —a.d. 583. She was even greater than London in Roman times, and the British bard sang of her as "the white town in the valley, the town of white stones gleaming among the green woodland." When the bard went back to her, he found only a mass of charred ruins. Her palaces were "without fire, light, or song," their stillness was broken only by the eagle's scream, the eagle "who has swallowed fresh drink, heart's blood of Kyndylan the fair." Uriconium also has been excavated. When discovered, her wide streets were still strewn with bones,

and human skeletons were found even in the warming chambers of her baths and houses.

Other towns were afterwards restored. Towards the seventh century, Winchester rose upon the site of Guenta Belgarum. During the eighth century, Cambridge was still a mere heap of ruins. The military station of Deva remained for four centuries a nameless solitude, spoken of as the "waste camp," } till it was restored under the vague name of Chester — the camp, castra. York was not built on the old site of Eburacum till the days of Canute. The London of the Angles did not reach the importance it had enjoyed under the Romans till just before the Norman conquest. The small plot of ground enclosed by the walls of Durovernum was yet a good deal too wide for Saxon Canterbury.

II

MEANWHILE the Church was swept away with the rest. Hitherto the Church in Britain had been the only abiding monument of the Roman occupation; she alone had survived the departure of the legions. Her bishops sat at the councils of Aries and Sardica, and submitted like the rest to the papal legates. They were poor men, for at the synod of Rimini they alone had boarded at the cost of the emperor Constantius. They had kept up communion with the continental Churches and especially with Rome so far as was permitted by their remote situation at the very limits of the inhabited world. In other countries, people were not unmindful of the existence of the British Church, and when a learned writer wished to describe the Church's victories, it was to Britain that he turned: the faith had penetrated even to Britain! In Britain, the Church had had her martyrs — first and foremost amongst them, St. Alban. The archheretic Pelagius also had been one of her children. Monasticism flourished in her bosom. The Popes and her sister Churches in Gaul watched her with kindly interest, and sent her apostles and reformers, such as German of Auxerre, Victricius of Rouen, Ninian, Palladius, and Patrick. She possessed organisation and life of her own. Yet even she was carried away by the torrent. Her sacred buildings were burnt or pulled down or devoted to the idolatrous worship of her enemies." The priests were slain," says Venerable Bede; "the bishop and his flock were driven forth by fire and sword, and none remained to bury the maimed bodies of the dead." Then began the emigration of monks, laymen and bishops, which bore the remnants of the scattered Church to Armorica, and even into Spain. Soldiers and bards, chieftains at the head of their clans, abbots with their monks put to sea in frail barks, carrying away whatever

property was left to them. A new country was founded which received the name of that from which they had fled. Hermits driven forth from their solitude sought a more peaceful retreat beyond the sea and were sometimes raised to be bishops when they found one. The exiles left with heartfelt grief, and the Bretons of Armorica long remembered the land whence they were sprung." We still tarry in France," wrote Radbad, bishop of Dol, some three hundred years later, "in exile and captivity."

The few Britons that remained were treated as slaves and pariahs. These were most numerous in the western portion of the island. The Saxons naturally spared, whenever they might safely do so, as many men as would serve to work and till their newly won territory. It has been noticed that neither in standard English nor in its provincial dialects are there any words of Celtic origin concerned with legislation or war, or denoting articles of luxury. Some British words, however, of grosser meaning, and terms relating to husbandry, the crafts and home life were adopted by the conquerors. Without entering here upon a controversy which has been warmly debated it is clear that there still remained a few relics of the native population. For long afterwards these were distinguished from the race of their masters by the low *wergeld* at which their lives were assessed.

Did these captive Britons retain the faith when they became the slaves of their captors? In order to belittle the part played by our saint in England's conversion and to force a relationship between the present Anglican establishment and the old British Church—to which without any sufficient reason they attribute an eastern origin, independent of Rome—certain writers have alleged that St. Augustine and his Italian monks merely built a new on foundations that were already laid; that the Saxons had not exterminated the ancient race, and that the work of conversion was comparatively easy, since a

kind of Christianity lay smouldering beneath the ruins, only waiting to be rekindled. There is, however, no evidence that the missionaries from Rome ever found in Saxon England a trace of any such dormant embers of the old religion. Neither is it certain that marriages with native women were frequent, or that the barbarians entertained so great an admiration for Rome as to make them the least bit more ready to adopt the faith of the vanquished. Even had the Britons remained Christians, owing to their lot as slaves, they could not have exercised any religious influence over their proud captors. Three-fourths of Britain became heathen, as though the faith had never yet been preached there.

Very few are the material remains which survive from those days. Here and there may be found a cross, a tomb, an inscription, a few traces of a Christian church. At Canterbury, there exists a most precious relic of the banished faith in the little Church of St. Martin. I know no spot in England so suggestive to the Catholic heart as those four walls in spite of the restorations of succeeding ages. Glastonbury standing in solitary grandeur with many an old Celtic legend clinging about its ruins, and perhaps also the Tower of London with its stories of bloodshed and martyrdom, alone thrill the heart with such sad eloquence.

St. Martin's is merely a little parish church standing in one of the poorer parts of the town. The learned are divided concerning the true date of its foundation. Bede speaks of an ancient church lying to the east of the city and dedicated in his day to the holy bishop of Tours, and tradition has it that it has endured to the present time. For more than three hundred years, the cold worship of Anglicanism has replaced the Mass offered on the spot by St. Augustine's predecessors and by St. Augustine himself. The sanctuary lamp which was tended with so much care till the very eve of the reformation will perhaps

never shine there again. To most visitors it is merely a curious relic of an age long since passed away.

Each succeeding century has left its mark on the fabric. The Romans probably built the chief part of its walls. Their work may be recognised by the bricks built in with the flints, and by their mortar, made from sea-sand full of tiny pebbles and shells, which is much stronger than that used by Saxons or Normans. The chancel is Saxon work; so is the rudely cut font. The Normans raised the massive arches with their coarse mouldings. Later on the windows were enlarged; their tracery dates from the fourteenth or fifteenth century. The big square tower, now clad in a thick vesture of ivy, was built in the fifteenth century. Lastly in our own times much that was covered up has been excavated, and much that was perishing has been restored.

In the country round there is something to recall the past at every step. The slopes of yonder hill were once covered with Roman villas. The road which passes by its side was once lined with tombs. Those two fine towers were raised up in Saxon times and mark the entrance to St. Augustine's abbey, the mother-house of English monasteries. The apse of the cathedral church is Norman and existed in Lanfranc's day. Often portions date from the time of Anselm, or Thomas, or Edmund. The tall central tower with its bold presence yet simple lines marks the period of the Church's greatest temporal splendour, when England was spread with the geometrical tracery of her national Gothic. Ugly modern buildings now meet the eye where the abbey-church of St. Augustine once rose with nave and aisles as wide and tall as those of a cathedral — sad witness to an age when bishops fell away and monks were weak, and when at Canterbury a few mendicant friars alone were found worthy to be hanged or burnt for the faith of Rome. The spot brings back to memory these martyrs of a later date also, for behind the trees on the left is the British tumulus —

now forming a portion of a public pleasure ground — where Blessed John Stone, the Augustinian monk, was hanged by order of Henry VIII. Close at hand is Oaten Hill, where three priests and a layman of Canterbury perished under Elizabeth.

The little Church also suggests a thought about the future. In the narrow country churchyard which surrounds it, clergymen, bishops and soldiers have chosen to rest. The white crosses which mark their graves rise close together side by side. This choice of so lonely a spot in the city suburb marks the love for long past ages which lies deep in the hearts of many English churchmen. May it lead them back some day to that faith which alone has received the promise of everlasting life and alone preserves the deposit of unfailing tradition.

A new race had now settled in Britain, bringing with it from the shores of Germany its own political and social methods, its own customs and its own religion. The chiefs who had first established themselves in the island became kings. Then there sprang up a complicated machinery of local government, embracing the gemot or council of the village, the hundred-moot, the shire-moot, the witenagemot, or King's council of wise men. The soil was parcelled out; whatever remained after each family had received its share became common land. There were no longer any large towns. The German, Tacitus tells us, preferred to live alone, and therefore the Roman cities remained in great part unoccupied. Villages large and small grew up on the country-side. War was the Saxon's favourite pastime; his days were chiefly spent either in attacking or defending. The wealthy fortified their dwellings, while the villages and farms were protected by earth-works surmounted by a palisade or quickset hedge. Feuds would arise between one lord and another, or between neighbouring villages. Even the freemen, who suffered their hair to grow long and fall about their

shoulders as a sign of independence, had a right to engage in private warfare.

The story of the Saxon conquest shows us what barbarism really meant. These men were pirates and thieves; they sacked and plundered; their cruelty was revolting; they shared the vices of those other turbulent races which for many centuries had been a scourge to the ancient world. In their Saxon homes they were neither better nor worse than the Franks and Burgundians, though they had a slight advantage in never having had contact with Roman civilisation.

When the stress of conquest was over, or nearly so, their fierce characters became somewhat tamer. When kingdoms were established in comparative peace and laws began to be administered, their manners softened. The Jutes, who had been so terrible a century and a half ago, seem to have made tractable and peaceful subjects under King Ethelbert, though they still remained pagans. Perhaps their neighbourhood with the Franks and their trade with the continent had brought them indirectly under some slight Christian influence. In their German fatherland, they had been mere warriors and rovers by land or sea. They now settled upon the land, lost all taste for piracy, and became wealthy. They never cared for husbandry, but their wealth enabled them to employ slaves to till the soil. Their taste for war they never lost, and it found abundant scope in their own domestic quarrels.

Saxon literature throws a vivid light upon their character. Their paganism made them take a sad and gloomy view of life. If ever they thought of Heaven, it was a kind of German beer shop that they pictured to themselves, where they might sit drinking all day long, reclining on thrones in a vast hall. Their fancy loved to roam over seas that washed dismal island shores, where dwarfs and giants dwelt among ghosts and dragons and gnomes; or they would dream of climes where crows filled the air with their cries and eagles flew by

bearing carrion in their beaks; of captured enemies flung into ditches filled with hissing serpents; of meals of human flesh; of battlefields running with human blood.

Such was the train of thought which runs through the poetry which has survived from their day; and their ideals were well-nigh realized in their actual lives. Their history is a long, continuous tale of assassinations and slaughter. For many years they were best known by their piracies, they were the scourge of the northern seas. In their flatbottomed boats, they would land on any suitable shore and row up rivers heedless of shoal or sandbank. Their galleys of oak carried not merely the crew but bands of warriors as well, armed with spears, long arrows and knives. Sometimes they put to sea in a frailer vessel still — a mere wicker basket covered with hide. By means of these they inspired terror into the western ports. Their favorite quarry was human life, and they pursued it with every refinement of cruelty.

Take the list of Northumbrian kings during the eighth century; out of fifteen princes only two died peaceful deaths. Erdwulf was driven into exile; Osred fell victim to a conspiracy; Osric was slain; Ceolwulf was captured, stripped of his possessions and made to abdicate; Oswulf was slain by members of his own house; Ailred and Ethelred were exiled; Elfwald was overthrown and slain by a conspiracy; Osred was made prisoner, banished and then slain; Ethelred, after being restored, was slain by his own subjects; Oswald was dethroned and exiled. Things were hardly any better in Wessex. There, Cynewulf was murdered, and Brihtric was poisoned by his queen. Such scenes as these represent to us the *Nibelungen* as they were acted on the stage of history. And the actors were Christians.

In private life their morals were no better. Though Tacitus extolled the chastity of German women, the respect paid to marriage and to family ties, his praise was merely relative. The Germans entirely lacked

the refinement of the old civilizations. On the contrary they were grossly brutal; and under the spur of drunkenness — that terrible form of the vice to which only nations of gloomy temperament are subject — their passions were roused to the verge of madness.

The Penitential ascribed to St. Theodore, which may have been compiled some hundred years after the first converts had been baptized, makes some curious disclosures. In reading through the list of sins, some of them monstrous in their character, one appreciates that in morals these men were still pagans, and that though possessed of higher intelligence they were on the whole little superior to the better races of African negroes. Above all, their frequent relapses from the faith no longer give rise to wonder.

They entertained lasting and most bitter hatred. A murder never ended with the death of the victim. In their contracts, their public gatherings, their councils, there was ever question of old alliances being renewed, of reconciliations being made only to yield again to new quarrels. A code of laws existed, but though theft and brigandage were treated severely, murder went almost unpunished. Bands of robbers infested the country, levying blackmail upon the farms, and carrying off the cattle. Though measures were taken to prevent stolen property from being sold, the evil seemed incurable; and all, from highest to lowest, made a practice of pillage.

Slavery formed another feature in the sad picture. Prisoners were offered for public sale, the price of a man being about that of four oxen. Exportation of natives was forbidden, but the thirst for gain was too strong to be restrained by law. Nothing could exceed the barbarity of the men of Bristol, who sent out bands of ruffians to scour the country around and bring in children and women, especially those who were pregnant, to be shipped off to Ireland. This practice lasted until the eleventh century. Only the unceasing energy and continual preaching

of Wulfstan, bishop of Worcester, who made journeys across country in pursuit of the traffickers in human flesh, succeeded in the end in killing this long-established pagan tradition.

The fierce and bloody religion of their German forefathers had a share in forming this cruel disposition of the Angles and Saxons. It taught no lesson of meekness and peace. They pictured the thunder god, Thor, the mighty smith, as one who dealt crushing blows with his terrible hammer. If a man died, it was because he had encountered Tiw, the God of the sky, whose symbol was a naked sword. Their chief deity was Woden, the war-God, who from a window of his heavenly palace would gaze out upon the battlefields of men, allotting victory to those he favoured and taking the slain to form his own escort in his passage through the sky. They dreamed of a paradise in which days of carnage should alternate with nights of debauch when they might drink blood from the skulls of their foes.

Of such a character were the traditions the invaders brought with them from their German home; but after its transplantation to a new soil the old religion had not time to take firm root. Even in Germany before the conquest of Britain it was beginning to lose its hold upon the people. The priesthood, once so powerful, had lost nearly all its influence, and there was no regular worship. Their temples were mere wooden huts enclosing idols in gold, silver or stone, a few symbols of nature, and a table of sacrifice, placed towards the east. Just as every head of a family was his own judge, so was he also his own priest, and himself offered sacrifice to the God of his hearth.

Did the decay of their national religion render easier the task of their conversion? By no means. The faith takes a firmer grip on a race which clings to its errors than on one which believes in nothing at all. It is a paradox of which the truth has been established over and over again in the history of Christianity that old forms of worship which seemed

to be perishing under the blight of skepticism are roused into a very delirium of life when brought face to face with the divinely intolerant religion of Christ. So did the coming of the monks to England provoke a reaction towards paganism.

Yet this religious decay seems to have brought with it some advantages. We shall see later how ideas of a superior being, free from the grossness of their native gods, seem to have floated vaguely in the more noble Saxon minds. But a Saxon king was a warrior and a son of warriors and gods. He breathed hatred with every breath and regarded vengeance as his natural right. He was not easily led to bow before a God who was born in want and who died in shame, and by the example of His love for man, He might teach men to love one another.