1

The Legacy of Alfred the Great

Dunstan grew up in a kingdom, Wessex, whose shape and unity had been fashioned by Alfred the Great and his son, Edward the Elder. Within living memory, Alfred had faced his supreme crisis, when in 878 the marauding Vikings had descended upon Chippenham and driven him into flight. From that moment, the whole of Alfred's reign was dominated by twenty years of fighting back to regain his kingdom, to resist the Danes and to reassert the power and influence of Wessex over the English areas still free from Danish control. His son, Edward, carried the attack into the Danelaw: this was the area of England, roughly north of Watling Street, which was firmly under Danish control and undergoing extensive Danish settlement. After the decisive battle of Tettenhall in 909 (the likely year of Dunstan's birth), he brought all the southern Danelaw under his sway. Both kings adopted a clear policy of accommodation and reconciliation towards their new Danish subjects. This may well have been born of necessity; but in part at least it reflected a far-sighted and Christian policy.[1] Asser, for example, records how Alfred sealed his peace in 879 with Guthrum, the Danish leader, by baptising him, and how in due course Danish youths were educated for the Christian ministry at the king's religious foundation at Athelney.[2] Before Alfred's reign closed in 899, missionaries, probably from London and Canterbury, were at work converting the Danes of East Anglia to the Christian faith with considerable success. Around the figure of the martyred East Anglian king, Edmund, who died in 869, a cult sprang up at this time which appealed to both English and Danes in that region, a sign perhaps of their gradual reconciliation.[3]

Alfred's defence of the realm stimulated far-reaching reforms in the way Wessex was organised. His policy of *burghs,* fortified centres, spread evenly throughout the kingdom and dependent on local support, ensured that none of his people was out of reach of organised defence. They were strategically distributed by the king but actually defended by the local inhabitants, not always enthusiastically. Many of these places, for example Oxford and Winchester, became centres of trade and settlement in more peaceful times. Alfred's capture of London in 886 proved irreversible, and the city re-emerged as an important political and trading centre and also as a symbol of the new unity

between Wessex and Mercia. The creation of a small but powerful navy further enhanced the position of the king as the focus of military authority, and he committed the shires to its regular maintenance by taxation. The kings of Wessex also asserted strong control over their currency, using it as a means of exerting their authority over all the peoples under their rule. Finally, Alfred was remembered as a law giver. His concern to reiterate the laws of his predecessors in Wessex, Kent and Mercia, and to corroborate them by reference to the teaching of the Bible, demonstrated his conception of Christian kingship. For Alfred believed that a Christian king was in fact Christ's deputy on earth to further the standards of the kingdom of God, but was himself always subject directly to the judgement of God.

This reassertion of strong monarchy in England not only put the Danes on the defensive; it affected too the rulers of the adjacent Celtic lands, especially Wales and Cornwall. Beginning with Alfred's friend and biographer, Asser, who came from St Davids, contacts grew between England and the Celtic Churches. Asser himself records Alfred's generosity towards the Churches in Wales, Ireland and Brittany, and the king's personal devotion while in Cornwall.[4] The reputation of Alfred and Edward spread to the continent also. Regular embassies were sent to Rome, and towards the end of his reign Alfred's daughter married Baldwin II, lord of Flanders.[5] Edward the Elder, around the year 919, married his daughter in turn to Charles the Simple, king of the Franks.[6] Alfred in his childhood had experienced for himself life at the Frankish court and at Rome, and there is little doubt that contacts with the continent were as strong as the troubled circumstances of the period permitted.

Alfred's own commitment as a Christian king plunged him into the reform of the Church. In his view, the state of the Church was weak, and therefore both Church and kingdom were exposed to the judgement of God. The Viking assault had undermined the resolve of many, and the king deplored the decay in learning among many of the bishops and clergy whom he encountered.[7] From at least 838, the kings of Wessex had enjoyed a close working relationship with successive archbishops of Canterbury, however, and by the time of Alfred's reign the primate was in fact appointed by the king of Wessex.[8] Alfred set out to reinforce the role of the diocesan bishops and to spur them into action. Plegmund, whom Alfred appointed in 890 as archbishop of Canterbury, proved the mainstay of this reforming movement throughout the rest of Alfred's reign and that of Edward also; he died in 923.[9] He was a Mercian, 'wise and venerable', respected at home and abroad for his learning. The climax to his endeavours came in 910 when he divided the two Wessex sees of Winchester and Sherborne into five new bishoprics, more closely related to the shires they served: Crediton, Ramsbury and Wells thus came into existence, and Dunstan's uncle, Athelm, became the first bishop of Wells.[10]

The depth of Alfred's Christian commitment expressed itself also in the two religious houses which he founded at Athelney and Shaftesbury. Athelney proved a disaster. It was a lonely and unhappy place, filled with foreign clergy and led by John, a Saxon from Germany. Dogged by scandal, it nearly ended in tragedy, lingering on into the tenth century as an impoverished and insignificant house.[11] Shaftesbury fared better, however. It was a nunnery led by Alfred's own daughter, Aethelgifu, and it remained rich and strong throughout the tenth century.[12] This action of Alfred showed that he and probably some of his bishops regarded the revival of regular religious life as vital to the integrity and welfare of the Church as a whole.

The perennial and underlying weakness of Anglo-Saxon monasticism had always been the way in which the laity regained control of the monastic endowments.[13] It was perhaps inevitable that local families would regard land bequeathed to the Church as a spiritual extension of their own patrimony. This was most obviously true with regard to the parish churches which were beginning to be founded, built and maintained at this time by the local thegns. But it was true also of the older 'minsters', and appointing members of their own kindred to preside as 'abbots' and senior clergy of these ostensibly religious communities reinforced this proprietorial view. The widespread marriage of clergy introduced a further hereditary dimension: their offspring claiming succession to the endowments of the Church. Thus in the minds of reformers and idealists, notably Bede himself, the integrity and spiritual vitality of the Church was continually entrammelled by this 'lay dominion'. Yet tackling this widespread problem effectively posed a real political and psychological challenge.

After Alfred's death, Edward maintained the impetus and founded the New Minster at Winchester according to his father's wishes. This was a royal religious house of clerics, but not a monastery as such. At the same time, Alfred's widow, Eahlswith, founded the Nunnaminster there, and a daughter of Edward, called Edburga, resided there, leaving a reputation of sanctity. Other daughters of the king were remembered as nuns at Wilton and Romsey, and in general the nunneries of Wessex persisted under royal patronage as signs of real continuity with the earlier period of English monasticism.[14] But the two foundations at Winchester confirmed the growing importance of that city as the emerging centre of renewed church life in the early part of the tenth century.[15] A remarkable feature of Alfred's commitment to the reform of the Church was the way in which he personally contributed to the revival of learning and education in England. He was himself largely self-educated as an adult, and he always lamented his own lack of early and formal education.[16] His biographer, Asser, paints a vivid picture of the king's labours in this regard, and Asser was just one of the scholars from outside Wessex whom Alfred attracted to his court. The king found at Worcester in western Mercia a living tradition of English learning in the figure of Bishop Werferth; and from that bishop's *familia* came learned clergy to assist the king.- Athelstan, Werwulf and Plegmund himself.[17] From overseas, and after much negotiation, the king secured Grimbald, a monk from St Bertin's in Flanders, who brought with him John the Saxon who ended up at Athelney.[18] Around Grimbald the germ of a community grew up at Winchester which formed the basis for the foundation of the New Minster.[19] The tangible result of the king's labours, in concert with his learned helpers, is found in the collection of books translated from Latin into English at this time. The king himself was instrumental in translating the 'Pastoral care' of Gregory the Great, also Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy,* and some of the *Soliloquies* of Augustine, together with the first third of the psalter. The last three works were clearly of personal value for the king; but the first, the 'Pastoral care', the king intended for his bishops, and copies were circulated for diocesan use.[20] In addition to these texts, the king instigated the translation by Bishop Werferth of Worcester of the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great. The *Dialogues* include the hagiography of St Benedict, whose rule and cult were the pivot upon which the subsequent renewal of monasticism in the tenth century turned.

Two other works of an historical nature were also translated into English under the king's aegis: Orosius' *Histories,* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. To

these may perhaps be added also a leechbook (a medical text), and also a martyrology, which was a register and brief history of selected Christian martyrs, compiled for liturgical use.[21] The purpose of this programme was to make available basic Christian texts to Englishmen in their own language, as the foundation for their education and as a spur to learning Latin. To this end, the king set up schools, one certainly in his own household for his children and for the offspring of the nobility. Literacy was indispensable for good government as well, and throughout the tenth century written documents came to be used more and more as instruments of administration. It is quite likely that the wealth which Alfred bestowed on existing religious houses was used in part for educational purposes, and the 'school' at Glastonbury to which Dunstan went in his youth may well have been revitalised at this time. Certainly the royal policy of educating young men for the service of Church and state was firmly established in the opening years of the tenth century as a consequence of Alfred's foresight and the policy of his heirs.[22]

The translation of Orosius and of Bede reflect also Alfred's interest in history. The way in which the writing of history developed at Winchester at this time, which produced the earliest versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* may well reflect both the influence of the king and the hand of Grimbald of St Bertin's. There is, for example, a somewhat dynastic element in the chronicle, asserting the history of the royal house of Wessex and Alfred's own claim to the throne. There is also a significant component of contemporary continental history, drawn from Frankish sources; and this suggests that Grimbald and his circle may have been emulating earlier ninth-century Frankish history writing. The purpose of the chronicle was both to record contemporary events, often in a dramatic manner, and to place contemporary English history within the long perspective of both national and Christian history. Like Bede, scholars at this time tended to interpret current history in the light of the impending judgement of God and in the light of the Old Testament, using the books of Kings especially as a practical model. The moral aspect of history was coupled to a genuine fascination with the past and to a sense of providence and ancestry.[23]

One of the most important consequences of Alfred's reforms was the flowering of the arts that began to occur early in the tenth century. This was the foundation for all that was accomplished later, and it helps to account for the sophisticated artistic education enjoyed by young men like Dunstan and Ethelwold at Glastonbury and Winchester.

The few surviving manuscripts of Alfred's reign are poor in terms of illumination; they are distinguished by the new and deliberate style of handwriting used. Such rudimentary drawing as occurs looks back to much earlier styles. But by the turn of the tenth century, the first stirrings of continental influences may be detected in manuscripts from places like Worcester and Winchester. However, the reigns of Alfred and Edward saw brilliant artistry in metalwork and jewellery, of which the famous Alfred jewel is the most outstanding example. In all of this artistic influences from the continent are manifest; so too is an interest in complex iconography expressed in elaborate decoration, a feature found also in the stone and ivory carving of the period. Perhaps the most marvellous survival from this time is the embroidery found in the tomb of St Cuthbert at Durham, which comes from Winchester and was carried out early in the second decade of the tenth century. These vestments reflect the richness and intricacy of ecclesiastical taste at that time, and are a unique memorial to all that has since been lost. 'Few as these artistic survivals

are, they already indicate the directions in which the subsequent course of Late Saxon art was to go, up to and even beyond the Conquest. Thus Alfred and his successors participated in the creation of one of the greatest and most individual phases of English art.'[24] Throughout the tenth century the artistic and intellectual developments mirror the changes in Church and society, almost exactly.

Dunstan therefore grew up as the heir to a strong tradition, and his early life and education were moulded by a clear royal and ecclesiastical policy. The life of the Church in tenth-century England was on the one hand highly traditional, drawing heavily on the past whilst seeking to impose the values and principles of that Christian past upon the present. But, on the other hand, it was also radically clear-sighted, and the policy of bishops and archbishops for 120 years after the death of Alfred was constant and on the whole single-minded. Their goal was the reform of the Church so that a thoroughly Christian society might be created. The revival of monasticism was an instrument of this overall policy; it proved a crucial and a momentous development. Art and culture became the medium through which these Christian values and this over-riding vision were expressed.

At the same time, the life of the Church was deeply rooted in politics. Bishops and archbishops frequently lived longer than kings: they were often political survivors with considerable influence in the king's witan, or council, and also in the localities. As such they were partners, and at times rivals, of the landed nobility in whose hands the good order of the kingdom lay. The laity valued the Church for the spiritual intercessions it could bring to bear upon the normal uncertainties of human life. Against a background of almost continual warfare and the natural brevity of life, the Church was a refuge and sign of more permanent things. The problem for reforming churchmen was to prevent the Church from becoming absorbed in the wrong way into the lay society which it served and upon which it so completely depended. Thus the education of the clergy and the endowment of monasteries were seen as tangible ways of safeguarding the integrity of the Church's spiritual life for more than just one generation.

The fact that a king of Wessex had taken so personal an interest in the welfare and reform of the English Church left an indelible mark upon the ecclesiastical expectations of the monarchy. The profound partnership between kingship and episcopacy stimulated the flowering of a Christian vision of monarchy and society which is peculiar to this period. This theory of Christian kingship, interpreted in the light of episcopacy, developed in England and on the continent throughout the tenth century. It was rooted in earlier English tradition and in the customs and writings of the Carolingian kings and their bishops on the continent in the ninth century, and it was couched in biblical language. As a consequence, the bishops, and especially the archbishops of Canterbury, stood at the heart of the political and judicial process. But at the same time, the English bishops were the nominees of the king. In the light of the later quarrels of the eleventh century, the Investiture contests between secular rulers and the Church's hierarchy, this marriage of secular and spiritual seemed a naive anachronism. But in the tenth century in England there was no formal separation between Church and state.

The framework for this remarkable ecclesiastical, political and cultural development was a profoundly religious one, a spiritual perspective shared by all people of any education, both clergy and laity. The sense of the past was cultivated to show how the

present age also fell under the judgement of God. His divine law stood unchanged, to condemn or to encourage. The turbulence of the times was a sign that the end was at hand. Sincere piety and reform of life, by individuals and by society, would safeguard against evil and prepare men for the final test. This prognosis was not always gloomy; it could inculcate hope, bred from a godly fear. The way of Christ offered an eternal reward, and a way of living in a time of trials in which human existence felt precarious, and culture and order seemed transient and always under threat.

In the light of such vicissitudes, tangible and psychological, the achievements of the tenth century, political, cultural and ecclesiastical, were remarkable and lasting. For it was in this century that the foundations of medieval English Church and society were laid. The life, personality and work of Dunstan emerge at the focus of this whole development.