

THE NORMAN CONQUEST

or

An Englishman in New York

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The debate

The debate about the Norman Conquest is very old – far older than Sellars and Yeatman's riotous *1066 and All That*. Were the Normans ruthless militarists, who extinguished an older and more sophisticated culture, or proto-Renaissance scholars who gave England a new lease of life?

The clash of opinion amongst modern historians is but an echo of the even more profound differences to be found in the chronicles and histories written at the time. At the end of the entry for 1066 in the 'D' version of the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, the writer tells us that William the Conqueror *promised that he would be a gracious liege lord, and yet [his Norman followers] ravaged all that they overran*. Again, William claimed that he would *rule all his people as well as the best of the kings before him*; but in the event he *laid taxes on people very severely*. When he went back to Normandy his henchmen *stayed behind and built castles here far and wide throughout this country, and distressed the wretched folk, and always after that it grew much worse*. The 'E' version of the same chronicle for 1087 – the year of the Conqueror's death - praises the king for his wisdom and piety but tells us that *he was a very stern and violent man*. This had its upside in that it enabled *any honest man to travel over his kingdom without injury with his bosom full of gold* and ensured that *if any man had intercourse with a woman against her will, he was forthwith castrated*; but the downside was that Englishmen were oppressed, by the building of castles and extraordinary new game laws. Poor men lamented and powerful men complained; but William paid no attention. Every man had to do the king's bidding *if he wished to live or hold his land*. The English monk Eadmer (c.1060-c.1126) regarded the Conquest as a tragedy.

On the other hand, the earliest Norman writers on the subject, William of Jumièges and William of Poitiers, took the same benign view which is so brilliantly (if at times enigmatically) presented by the Bayeux Tapestry. This was that Duke William of Normandy was fully justified in taking the English Crown, because he had been promised it by Edward the Confessor, and impliedly by Harold Godwinson when the latter had sworn fealty to the Duke, during a visit to

Normandy. Moreover the Pope had lent his support to the Norman expedition to England. In the view of Ordericus Vitalis, who was English by birth but became a monk in Normandy and wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* between 1125 and 1141, William the Conqueror was a man who *during his whole life had followed the advice of wise counsellors, feared God... and been the unwearied protector of holy mother Church and he maintained his excellent reputation to the end.*

After the Conquest there was even a view that the Anglo-Saxon nobility 'had it coming'. William of Malmesbury, whose father was Norman, wrote in his *Deeds of the Kings of the English* in the 1120s. According to him, moral standards had declined steeply in England in the years before 1066 and the Conquest had brought about a real religious revival. The Normans were praised for their *economy in large houses*, their taste in dress, their delicacy when it came to food, their hardiness and prowess in war, their politeness and the protection they afforded to their subjects. Though he also condemned their readiness to resort to guile and bribery when they failed to get their way by force, he was harder on the Anglo-Saxons: their priests had been ignorant, their monks had consistently disregarded the Benedictine Rule, and they had given themselves up to *luxury and wantonness*. They had been guilty of robbery and of selling pregnant servants into prostitution and slavery. Above all, *drinking parties had been a universal English custom, in which they passed entire days and nights*. It was excessive drinking which had condemned the Anglo-Saxons to ignominious defeat at Hastings.

Yet William of Malmesbury faced both ways. He had a Norman father but an English mother and it is surely her influence that we can detect in his description of Hastings as *a fatal day for England, a melancholy havoc of our dear country brought about by its passing under the domination of new lords*.

The Anglo-Saxon achievement

There have always been those who thought that the Normans had nothing to teach the Anglo-Saxons. This feeling was behind the theory of the Norman Yoke, which was popular in the 17th century. It was the view taken by the Victorians J.M.Kemble, Bishop Stubbs and E.A.Freeman. In the 20th century James Campbell and Patrick Wormald thought that late Anglo-Saxon England was a nation state, with 'an effective monarchy, uniform institutions, a national language, a national Church, clear frontiers and a strong sense of national identity.' It was also a state with a long and distinguished history, overthrown by men who were essentially parvenus in the civilised world.

By 1066, the Anglo-Saxons had been in England for some 600 years. When they first began to settle here in the 5th century, they were pagan barbarians, but by the Age of Bede (c. 673-735) they had become Christian, and indeed were in the forefront of Western culture in terms of learning and manuscript illumination; English missionaries played a critical role in converting the pagans of Germany in the 8th century.

Unfortunately for what remained of Roman civilisation, Western Europe suffered from a fresh cocktail of barbarian invasions in the 9th and 10th centuries, in the form of repeated attacks by the Hungarians, Saracens and Vikings. The first two did not trouble the British Isles or Ireland; but it was quite otherwise with the Vikings, who arrived by sea from Scandinavia. Their voyages and activities were extraordinarily widespread. The Swedes went East, settling coastal areas around the Baltic and travelling along the great rivers of Russia, to Staraya Ladoga, Novgorod, Kiev and Constantinople. The Norwegians travelled to the Faroes, Shetland, the Orkneys and Hebrides, the far North of Scotland, Iceland, Greenland and North America, but also Yorkshire, Cumberland and Ireland. The Danes raided widely in the North-West of England, West Francia and even the Moslem world. All three kinds of Viking were at this date pagan, and they held Christendom in contempt.

In Francia, the successors of Charlemagne paid the Danes to go away but they always came back and started to settle, around the mouths of the Seine and the Loire. In 911 Rollo, who was the leader of a Viking war-band, agreed to do homage to the Frankish King Charles the Simple, and became his vassal for lands in what we now call 'Normandy' (the land of the Northmen). By the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, Rollo became Count of Rouen and was thereafter recognised as Duke of Normandy. In addition, he agreed to be baptized as a Christian and married Charles's illegitimate daughter.

In England, where the first Viking raids were recorded in 787 in Dorset and in 793 in Northumbria, Danish settlement began in 865, when a large army of Vikings landed in East Anglia, captured York and quickly overran all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms except Wessex. But whereas the Danish settlement in Normandy was never rolled back, Alfred 'the Great' of Wessex did manage to defeat the Danes in England; and his successors succeeded in re-conquering the 'Danelaw', the name given to the area of Viking settlement.

As a result of the re-conquest the Kings of Wessex managed to create a new Christian Kingdom of all England, including London. Alfred's distinctive ideas about government and civilisation spread throughout his kingdom. Roman Christianity was central to this endeavour; and under St Dunstan (909-988) the English Church saw a notable revival. Many of the churches and monasteries which had been destroyed by the Vikings were re-built.

Yet, as we know, the Anglo-Saxons were utterly defeated in 1066, and the defeat was at the hands of men whose ancestors had been recent arrivals and recent converts to Christianity by comparison. In this way, the Norman Conquest can be described as 'the last barbarian invasion' of the British Isles, a victory for brute force and relative ignorance over a long-settled people, whose society and culture had much deeper roots. Even Marc Morris, by no means an unthinking Anglo-Saxonophile, thinks that England was a 'strong united kingdom' in 1066, where the 'political fragmentation' which feudalism and private castle-building had created in other parts of Western Europe had not yet manifested itself.

The last century of the Old English state

But it is difficult to be as positive about the late Anglo-Saxon state - say between 975 and 1066 – as it is about the age of Bede or Alfred, because in the last years of the 10th century the Vikings returned to England in greater numbers than before, sometimes backed by the monarchs of Denmark and Norway, and almost destroyed it.

The problem was particularly bad during the reign of Aethelred ‘the Unready’ (978-1013 and 1014-16). In 991, at the Battle of Maldon, the Vikings inflicted a notable defeat on local Anglo-Saxon forces; but there was a more general failure to defend the country. The Alfredian system of defence in depth, based on fortified burghs and a standing army and navy broke down. Demoralisation was widespread. During the worst period of renewed raiding there were disgraceful episodes – occasions when Vikings landed and led away slaves in droves, or engaged in gang rape, while local men helplessly on, entirely unable to stop them. When the English did fight back, it was in disorganised and indiscriminate fashion: the St Brice's Day massacre of 1002 saw large numbers of Danes killed on the orders of Aethelred, regardless of whether they had been involved in the recent violence; but the usual response was to buy the Vikings off. ‘Danegelds’ were levied in 994, 1002, 1007 and 1012; and a total of some £250,000 was paid to the Vikings over a period of 50 years or so.

In Eric John's view this not just due to the strength of the Vikings: ‘disunion and dissension acted like a magnet’. In other words, the Vikings had got to know that they could act with impunity, because there was something rotten in the state of England. At the same time, Marc Morris is clearly right to say that the return of the Vikings ‘re-emphasized the importance of violence and opportunism, in a land which was only just developing a settled law of legitimate succession, with regard to the Crown’. The result was there was a major political crisis there every time an English monarch died. These troubled times could indeed be regarded as the War of the English Succession, though they have never been called that.

Eventually the renewed Scandinavian onslaught resulted in the conquest of the kingdom of England. In 1013 Sweyn (who was King of Denmark and Norway) invaded England and received the submission of Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex in turn. The reign of his successor King Cnut (1016-1035) is normally portrayed as relatively benign. In particular this was the view of Sir Frank Stenton, author of the magisterial *Anglo-Saxon England* (1943). He recognised the decline of the old English monarchy but thought that ‘scholars survived the bad times’; that there was ‘no sign that Cnut aimed at founding a northern empire; and that ‘Cnut stressed the continuity of his government with that of his predecessors’. Finally, ‘despite obvious

weaknesses the idea of political unity was accepted everywhere [in England] in the last generation of the Old English state’.

But nothing is what it seems in late Anglo-Saxon England. Cnut, though King of England and a Christian, must have seemed very Danish at the time. Eric John writes of the ‘defeat and humiliation’ of 1016; and Cnut was only king because of that defeat. At the beginning of his reign he silenced dissent by assassination and purges. He was beholden to his Danish followers – and rewarded them with earldoms, though it is true that, towards the end of his reign, he appointed more Englishmen to high office. He used the Danegeld to pay for his wars in Scandinavia and recruited Englishmen into his armies for the wars which he prosecuted there. This looks like a kind of Danish imperialism, despite Stenton’s protestations to the contrary.

Cnut is often said to have protected England from further Viking attack; but there were renewed Viking raids on the kingdom in 1048. As a result of Cnut’s conquest of Norway in 1028 there was a new threat from that direction too, since both Magnus ‘the Good’ of Norway (1035-47) and his son Harald Hardrada (killed at Stamford Bridge in 1066), had designs on England. In the Earldom of Northumbria, many people of Scandinavian descent in Yorkshire were ruled by a Danish Earl (Siward), who managed to reduce the area North of the Tees to his rule.

The famed unity of the Old English kingdom was put in jeopardy each time a new king ascended the throne. Although Cnut and his sons ruled the kingdom from 1016 to 1042, and were succeeded by Edward the Confessor (son of Aethelred the Unready) between 1035 and 1066, there were several contenders for power in the mid 11th century, especially once it became clear that Edward would not produce an heir. There were Scandinavian candidates who wished to succeed him; there were the descendants of Edmund Ironside of Wessex, briefly king in 1016; there was William of Normandy; and there was the house of Godwine, Earl of Wessex and one of the original ‘overmighty subjects’. At one point in Edward’s reign, Godwine and his sons controlled every part of England except Mercia, and his appointees controlled both archdioceses, while his daughter Edith was Edward’s Queen. In 1051-2 there was almost civil war, when Edward first sent Godwine into exile and then felt obliged to bring him back. Civil war almost erupted again in 1065, when there was a rebellion in the North which succeeded in driving Earl Tostig (Harold Godwinson’s brother) into exile. The Northerners invaded the South and Harold aligned himself with them, against his own brother.

It could truly be said, of England in 1065, that ‘things fell apart, the centre could not hold’. One can understand why some historians give credit to the Normans for rescuing England once and for all from the grip of the Vikings and the curse of internal anarchy.

The Normans

Let us turn then to the Normans. For Stenton, Normandy was still 'a state in the making' in 1066; but consider what had been achieved since 911. Duke William's subjects in Normandy had changed a good deal since their ancestors had followed Rollo's longship up the Seine.

If Rollo's allegiance to the Roman Church owed a good deal to expediency, his descendants became almost fanatical devotees of the Pope; and they also learned to speak French rather than Danish. Indeed in his *Normans and their Myth* (1976, Thames & Hudson), R.H.C. Davies concluded that the Viking war band must have intermarried and integrated with the local Frankish population to a remarkable extent, producing what was visibly 'a new aristocracy, a new Church, a new monasticism, and a new culture' by the beginning of the second millennium. He might have added 'a new state', since the Dukes of Normandy rapidly took to the new French concepts of knighthood and feudal tenure. As Duke of Normandy William the Bastard strengthened the duchy enormously, overcoming internal and external enemies alike in battle, founding abbeys and churches, developing Caen and making judicious ecclesiastical appointments. The extent of the transformation can be seen in the way in which the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers refer to the victors of Hastings as 'the French' rather than 'the Normans';

This transformation had beneficial effects for England. Whereas the Vikings of Normandy had originally provided shelter, support and supplies to their kinsmen who still engaged in raiding England, a treaty of 991, signed between Normandy and England, was designed to prevent this kind of collaboration. Thereafter the Normans were good friends to the English. Emma, daughter of Duke of Normandy, married both Aethelred and Cnut of England. Edward the Confessor, being the son of Aethelred and Emma, was half Norman. He spent 25 years in exile in Normandy, spoke French and relied on French advisers and churchmen and courtiers (so much so, that he has been called 'the English Quisling' by his 20th century English detractors).

It is common to dismiss the legitimacy of the Norman claim to the English throne in 1066; but Edward the Confessor had no children and William was certainly a kinsman. Eric John thought that there was 'no smoke without fire', in other words that there was substance to the claim in the Bayeux tapestry that Edward the Confessor had promised William the throne in 1052, and that Harold had at some stage pledged homage to him. The claim was certainly accepted by the Pope.

If we ask why the victory of the Normans over the Anglo-Saxons was so complete, one answer might be 'military superiority'; but this was the result of a combination of Viking fighting spirit with qualities which we would more readily associate with the Franks: in particular the use of armoured horsemen, who knew how to charge in formation and fight with lances. It also helped that the Vikings had become wealthy (as well as pious) when they conquered the rich province of Normandy and merged with its previous inhabitants. In addition, the 'Norman' army of 1066 was not purely Norman. According to Davis, around a fifth of Duke

William's forces were from Brittany, Flanders, Artois and Picardy. It was a Northern French army, not an army of barbarians.

King Harold Godwinson's defeat at Hastings was due to several circumstances. One was the need to defend against two almost simultaneous invasions – Norse and Norman - so that when he arrived in Sussex his troops were tired. Then again, William was the more experienced commander, and the fact that the English fought on foot allowed Harold fewer tactical options. David Nicolle has written that William's army 'demonstrated... the superiority of Norman-French mixed cavalry and infantry tactics over the Germanic-Scandinavian infantry traditions of the Anglo-Saxons'.

As for the effects of the conquest, R. Allen Brown had no doubts. He thought that the Conquest brought a new unity and dynamism, which enabled the country to fully enter into the mainstream of western Latin Christendom for the first time. 'The victory of William's knights over the Anglo-Danish housecarls and Saxon infantry symbolised not only a clash of cultures and military traditions but also the inevitable triumph of a brave new feudal European order over a retrospective and outmoded Anglo-Saxon state, a fossilized relic echoing the old Carolingian world order.' Equally, it is clear that the Normans re-orientated English interests and policy after 1066. Whereas the Anglo-Saxons of the period 800-1066 had been principally concerned with the Scandinavian threat, the focus of interest for the Anglo-Norman kings and their Angevin and Plantagenet successors, was France; and this remained the case for some 400 years.

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In the end, it is a question of perspective; but there seems little doubt as to what the Anglo-Saxons thought about the Norman Conquest in 1066, or 1087, or 1100: it was their equivalent of the *Nakba* – the catastrophe, which saw 700,000 Palestinians driven from their homes in 1948. The numbers of Englishmen who were killed, expropriated or driven into exile during the reign of William the Conqueror was nothing like so great as in Palestine; but it was very substantial nonetheless.

In the years which followed, William spent much of his time putting down rebellions, which only diminished after Edgar the Aetheling (grandson of Edmund Ironside) surrendered in 1074. In 1067 rebels in Kent launched an attack on Dover Castle, while Eadric the Wild raised a revolt in Western Mercia in alliance with the Welsh rulers of Gwynedd and Powys. In 1068 there was a rising in Exeter, two in Mercia and a fourth in Northumbria. Meanwhile the late King Harold's sons raided the South-West from the sea. Early in 1069 there was another rebellion in Northumbria. The rebels besieged York, a large fleet sent by Sweyn II of Denmark arrived later in the year and the Danes joined forces with a second rising in the North, which defeated the Norman garrison at York and took control of Northumbria. There was renewed resistance in western Mercia, and in the south-west, rebels again attacked Exeter. In 1070 Sweyn renounced an earlier agreement

with William and sent forces to join English rebels led by Hereward the Wake in the 'Isle' of Ely. (Surprisingly, for someone who has gone down in English history as a patriotic hero, Hereward welcomed yet another attempted Danish invasion). The Fenland rebels, protected by the marshes, engaged in further hostilities in 1071. William crushed all these risings, displaying a ruthlessness which was remarked upon even by the Norman chroniclers. The so-called Harrying (or Harrowing) of the North in 1069 was so brutal that its effects were still in evidence when the royal commissioners compiled Domesday Book 20 years later.

The Normans and their allies were few in number – around 8,000 compared to a native population of about 2 million. Moreover, they expected to be rewarded with land and titles in return for their service during the invasion, and in the putting down of these numerous rebellions. A certain degree of ruthlessness was therefore to be expected from the Conqueror and the eventual outcome was the almost complete replacement of Anglo-Saxon lords with Normans. William not only expropriated the rebels, he also asserted his ultimate right to all the land in England. Henceforth, all land was held directly from the king in return for military service; and this kind of centralised feudalism has formed the basis of English land law ever since.

The Conquest itself made William both rich and powerful – far more than he had been before. The Old English state was relatively wealthy and the Conqueror had almost unrestricted access to that wealth. He was able to reward his followers handsomely, build castles on an unprecedented scale and hire mercenaries when necessary. He also felt able to impose a type of military obligation which had never existed before in such precise form – arbitrary, decimal-based quotas of knight-service were required of the tenants-in-chief. In 1070 he even imposed military obligations for the first time on English bishops and abbots.

Monarchy, Church and State were all transformed. Anglo-Saxons were removed from high governmental and ecclesiastical office. After 1075 all earldoms were held by Normans, and Englishmen were only occasionally appointed as sheriffs. Senior English office-holders were either expelled from their positions in the Church, or kept in place for their lifetimes and replaced by foreigners when they died. By 1096 no bishopric was held by any Englishman, and English abbots became uncommon, especially in the larger monasteries.

Many Anglo-Saxons, including groups of nobles, fled the country for Scotland, Ireland, or Scandinavia. The largest single exodus occurred in the 1070s, when a fleet of 235 ships sailed for Constantinople. Englishmen became an important element in the elite Varangian Guard, part of the Byzantine army which fought Robert Guiscard, Norman conqueror of Southern Italy, at Durazzo in 1081. According to French and Icelandic sources, some of these English exiles were rewarded with a gift of land, possibly in the Crimea, where they had towns named after London, York and other places which reminded them of home.

For those who remained in England, the French spoken by the conquerors became the official language for a period of 300 years; and, when English re-

emerged, it was no longer Anglo-Saxon but Middle English. Relationships within society changed: the class of slaves disappeared but the number of serfs increased. Moreover, the law discriminated against the subject people both directly and indirectly. The *murdrum* fine provided that, if a Norman was killed and the killer was not apprehended within five days, the hundred within which the crime was committed should be collectively punished. (An Anglo-Saxon enjoyed no such protection). At the same time, new forests established for the benefit of the Normans made the English who presumed to hunt outlaws in their own land. Inhabitants of the forest were forbidden to bear hunting weapons, and dogs were banned from the forest. Mastiffs were permitted as watchdogs only if they had their front claws removed.

At the time the Norman Conquest was a catastrophe for the whole English nation. The Normans moved the principal seats of several English bishops, while the new incumbents called their predecessors 'rustics' and 'illiterates'. They tore down old and venerated cathedrals and shrines. There was a kind of 'cultural revolution', the extent of which is hidden from us, because the Normans appropriated literacy and literature, substituting French and Latin for Anglo-Saxon. In the golden age of the monastic chronicle, the chroniclers were predominantly Norman or Anglo-Norman monks. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle ceased to be written and the collective memory of the defeated people ceased to be recorded. One of the last entries was an uncomplimentary verse about King William, complaining that he had treated his subjects worse than animals:

*[He] preserved the harts and board
And loved the stags so much
As if he were their father.*

Domesday Book demonstrates the virtual extinction of the old Anglo-Saxon nobility. By the end of William's reign there were less than half a dozen of the 180 greater lords who were English. Of 1,000 tenants in chief, there were only 13 Englishmen. Of 8,000 sub-tenants, only 800 English. Even this tiny residue was further diminished in the decades that followed, the elimination of native landholding being most complete in the southern parts of the country. Of necessity modern fans of Anglo-Saxon England look back from 1066 on 600 years of English history. The advocates of the Normans can fast-forward from 1066 to the strength of the Anglo-Norman monarchy, the legal reforms of Henry II, and the achievements of the 12th century Renaissance; but, if we stop the clock for a moment, what would an Anglo-Saxon, living in exile in New York at the end of the 11th, have thought of 'the Norman achievement?' And what would the famed continuity of English law mean to his countryman who had remained at home, when the landowners, judges and sheriffs were now overwhelmingly French?

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