

THE NORMAN YOKE

Among those who stayed behind and did not go into exile after 1066 (see article entitled 'The Norman Conquest'), there was a lingering sense of resentment (as well as more active resistance than the Norman chroniclers cared to remember or record). In the 12th century, the Anglo-Norman chronicler Ordericus Vitalis describes the English as 'groaning aloud' for their lost liberty and plotting to regain it, by throwing off the yoke of the invader. The idea of the Norman Yoke was born; and it survived. We find it in the works of the Gilbertine monk Robert Mannyng (c. 1275 – c. 1338). He tells us plainly that we are all still suffering under the yoke of serfdom imposed by the Conqueror, from whose lords the upper class claims descent. In Thorlac Turville-Petre's translation:

For all this thraldom that now on England is,
Through Normans it came in, bondage and distress;
And if [the French] now had us in their power, mark ye well,
We should be controlled ten times more severely.

At the same time, Robert of Gloucester (fl. c. 1260 – c. 1300) wrote a chronicle of British, English, and Norman history, in which he told how William the Conqueror had usurped the throne of England, harried the North country and made use of Domesday Book to impose ruinous taxes on the poor. In Robert's view the Normans still held the people of England in subjection, 250 years after 1066! This is a very different view from the 'assimilationist' narrative that we were given when I was young. Instead, Robert tells us that those in power in his day are still the masters; and the effects of the Conquest are a daily reality:

The Normans could then speak nothing but their own language,
And spoke French as they did at home and also taught their children,
So that the upper class of the country that descend from them
Stick to the language that they got from them.
For, unless a person knows French he is little thought of-
But the lower class stick to English and their own language even now.

The idea was developed further in the early 14th century by Andrew Horn, in a textbook for lawyers, *The Mirror of Justices*; and this was widely copied, and circulated in manuscript in Queen Elizabeth I's time. William Tyndale (1494-1536) linked the Norman Yoke with Protestantism, because the Pope had supported William the Conqueror in 1066, and promised 'forgiveness of sins to all in the invading army.' In return, William had established tithes, to support the clergy, who provided a veneer of respectability for the Norman king, his lords and bishops.

The next stage in the life of the myth was linked with the career of one of the outstanding lawyers of his day, Sir Edward Coke (1552-1634). Coke was Solicitor General and then Attorney General for England and Wales, and then Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and Chief Justice of the Court of King's Bench – though he clashed several times with James I, because he stood for the independence of the judiciary, at a time when some lawyers thought that judges should be 'lions under the throne.' Coke was a champion of the common law (meaning of course, English common law), and traced its origins back to Anglo-Saxon times. More importantly perhaps he was the author of 13 volumes of law reports, and four volumes of commentary known as Coke's Institutes. Lastly, he was an MP and addressed the House of Commons on the subject of the common law in 1621. His most powerful point was that this pre-dated the Norman Conquest (which had by implication, strengthened monarchical power).

After the meeting of the Long Parliament in 1640 censorship was effectively abolished and there was an enormous outpouring of radical literature, of all kinds. In particular, 1642 saw the publication of an English translation of *The Mirror of Justices*, which expressly used the term 'Norman Yoke'; and this purveyed the idea that Magna Carta had been an attempt in 1215 to restore lost English rights, or as we might say, to get our country back, from the legal and regulatory burdens imposed on us by the Normans. The idea that there was a Yoke, which ought to be lifted off our shoulders became widely popular, and a rallying cry, first for the 'respectable classes' of a radical persuasion, who were prepared to side with Parliament against the King during the first Civil War of 1642-6, and then by the Levellers and Diggers (see chapter seven).

Lucy Hutchinson (1620-1681), wife of the Roundhead Colonel Huchinson, wrote that the English monarchy had been founded by the Conqueror 'in the people's blood, in which it had swum about 500 years'; but Christopher Hill tells us that 'the most thoroughgoing anti-Normanist was the Leveller John Hare, who published *St Edward's Ghost* in 1647. In this, Hare proposed that all laws emanating from Normandy should be abolished and replaced with the English laws of Edward the Confessor; and that the nobility, who were nothing more than the descendants of William the Conquerors' followers, should be expropriated, and that the English language should be purged of all 'Gallicisms'. Other writers of similar persuasion proposed the abolition of tithes and copyhold tenure, along with all other remnants of 'feudal' law. In 1649 the leader of the Diggers, Gerrard Winstanley, addressed an appeal to the ruling class, in his *True Levellers Standard Advanced*:

O what mighty Delusion, do you, who are the powers of England live in! That while you pretend to throw down that Norman yoke, and Babylonish power, and have promised to make the groaning people of England a Free People; yet you still lift up that Norman yoke, and slavish Tyranny, and holds the

People as much in bondage, as the Bastard Conquerour himself, and his Council of War.

Legal textbooks tell us that in England 'feudalism', in the sense of feudal land tenure, wardship and the Court of Wards, was abolished at the Restoration, by the Tenures Abolition Act of 1660, but Hill tells us that all these were first abolished by a Parliamentary Ordinance of 1646, when Parliament had won the First Civil War, and that this was confirmed by one of the Acts of Oliver Cromwell's Parliaments, in 1656. This was one of the undoubted achievements of the much disputed 'English Revolution' (see Chapter Seven).

The Norman Yoke became a potent source of myth in modern times. In Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) and Charles Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake* (1865) Anglo-Saxon England was portrayed as a demi-paradise, where we were all happy, until the Normans came along and spoiled the party; but there is a danger of exaggerating its importance, even in the medieval period. Englishmen had other reasons for resenting foreigners at court: in the 13th century, they were often royal relatives from other parts of France than Normandy. On the other hand, some of the truly Norman barons had become 'more English than the English', in matters other than language. Another view of the idea of the Norman Yoke might be, therefore, that it was little more than a false nostalgia for the lost golden age that the English thought they had once inhabited.
