

G. K. CHESTERTON



**A SHORT HISTORY
OF ENGLAND**

A Short History of England

G. K. CHESTERTON

A Short History of England, G. K. Chesterton
Jazzybee Verlag Jürgen Beck
86450 Altenmünster, Loschberg 9
Deutschland

ISBN: 9783849650889

www.jazzybee-verlag.de
admin@jazzybee-verlag.de

CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION

THE PROVINCE OF BRITAIN

THE AGE OF LEGENDS

THE DEFEAT OF THE BARBARIANS

ST. EDWARD AND THE NORMAN KINGS

THE AGE OF THE CRUSADES

THE PROBLEM OF THE PLANTAGENETS

THE MEANING OF MERRY ENGLAND

NATIONALITY AND THE FRENCH WARS

THE WAR OF THE USURPERS

THE REBELLION OF THE RICH

SPAIN AND THE SCHISM OF NATIONS

THE AGE OF THE PURITANS

THE TRIUMPH OF THE WHIGS

THE WAR WITH THE GREAT REPUBLICS

ARISTOCRACY AND THE DISCONTENTS

THE RETURN OF THE BARBARIAN

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

It will be very reasonably asked why I should consent, though upon a sort of challenge, to write even a popular essay in English history, who make no pretence to particular scholarship and am merely a member of the public. The answer is that I know just enough to know one thing: that a history from the standpoint of a member of the public has not been written. What we call the popular histories should rather be called the anti-popular histories. They are all, nearly without exception, written against the people; and in them the populace is either ignored or elaborately proved to have been wrong. It is true that Green called his book "A Short History of the English People"; but he seems to have thought it too short for the people to be properly mentioned. For instance, he calls one very large part of his story "Puritan England." But England never was Puritan. It would have been almost as unfair to call the rise of Henry of Navarre "Puritan France." And some of our extreme Whig historians would have been pretty nearly capable of calling the campaign of Wexford and Drogheda "Puritan Ireland."

But it is especially in the matter of the Middle Ages that the popular histories trample upon the popular traditions. In this respect there is an almost comic contrast between the general information provided about England in the last two or three centuries, in which its present industrial system was being built up, and the general information given about the preceding centuries, which we call broadly mediæval. Of the sort of waxwork history which is thought sufficient for the side-show of the age of abbots and crusaders, a small instance will be sufficient. A popular Encyclopædia appeared some years ago, professing among other things to teach English History to the masses; and in

this I came upon a series of pictures of the English kings. No one could expect them to be all authentic; but the interest attached to those that were necessarily imaginary. There is much vivid material in contemporary literature for portraits of men like Henry II. or Edward I.; but this did not seem to have been found, or even sought. And wandering to the image that stood for Stephen of Blois, my eye was staggered by a gentleman with one of those helmets with steel brims curved like a crescent, which went with the age of ruffs and trunk-hose. I am tempted to suspect that the head was that of a halberdier at some such scene as the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. But he had a helmet; and helmets were mediæval; and any old helmet was good enough for Stephen.

Now suppose the readers of that work of reference had looked for the portrait of Charles I. and found the head of a policeman. Suppose it had been taken, modern helmet and all, out of some snapshot in the *Daily Sketch* of the arrest of Mrs. Pankhurst. I think we may go so far as to say that the readers would have refused to accept it as a lifelike portrait of Charles I. They would have formed the opinion that there must be some mistake. Yet the time that elapsed between Stephen and Mary was much longer than the time that has elapsed between Charles and ourselves. The revolution in human society between the first of the Crusades and the last of the Tudors was immeasurably more colossal and complete than any change between Charles and ourselves. And, above all, that revolution should be the first thing and the final thing in anything calling itself a popular history. For it is the story of how our populace gained great things, but to-day has lost everything.

Now I will modestly maintain that I know more about English history than this; and that I have as much right to make a popular summary of it as the gentleman who made the crusader and the halberdier change hats. But the curious and arresting thing about the neglect, one might

say the omission, of mediæval civilization in such histories as this, lies in the fact I have already noted. It is exactly the popular story that is left out of the popular history. For instance, even a working man, a carpenter or cooper or bricklayer, has been taught about the Great Charter, as something like the Great Auk, save that its almost monstrous solitude came from being before its time instead of after. He was not taught that the whole stuff of the Middle Ages was stiff with the parchment of charters; that society was once a system of charters, and of a kind much more interesting to him. The carpenter heard of one charter given to barons, and chiefly in the interest of barons; the carpenter did not hear of any of the charters given to carpenters, to coopers, to all the people like himself. Or, to take another instance, the boy and girl reading the stock simplified histories of the schools practically never heard of such a thing as a burgher, until he appears in a shirt with a noose round his neck. They certainly do not imagine anything of what he meant in the Middle Ages. And Victorian shopkeepers did not conceive themselves as taking part in any such romance as the adventure of Courtrai, where the mediæval shopkeepers more than won their spurs—for they won the spurs of their enemies.

I have a very simple motive and excuse for telling the little I know of this true tale. I have met in my wanderings a man brought up in the lower quarters of a great house, fed mainly on its leavings and burdened mostly with its labours. I know that his complaints are stilled, and his status justified, by a story that is told to him. It is about how his grandfather was a chimpanzee and his father a wild man of the woods, caught by hunters and tamed into something like intelligence. In the light of this, he may well be thankful for the almost human life that he enjoys; and may be content with the hope of leaving behind him a yet more evolved animal. Strangely enough, the calling of this

story by the sacred name of Progress ceased to satisfy me when I began to suspect (and to discover) that it is not true. I know by now enough at least of his origin to know that he was not evolved, but simply disinherited. His family tree is not a monkey tree, save in the sense that no monkey could have climbed it; rather it is like that tree torn up by the roots and named "Dedischado," on the shield of the unknown knight.

THE PROVINCE OF BRITAIN

The land on which we live once had the highly poetic privilege of being the end of the world. Its extremity was *ultima Thule*, the other end of nowhere. When these islands, lost in a night of northern seas, were lit up at last by the long searchlights of Rome, it was felt that the remotest remnant of things had been touched; and more for pride than possession.

The sentiment was not unsuitable, even in geography. About these realms upon the edge of everything there was really something that can only be called edgy. Britain is not so much an island as an archipelago; it is at least a labyrinth of peninsulas. In few of the kindred countries can one so easily and so strangely find sea in the fields or fields in the sea. The great rivers seem not only to meet in the ocean, but barely to miss each other in the hills: the whole land, though low as a whole, leans towards the west in shouldering mountains; and a prehistoric tradition has taught it to look towards the sunset for islands yet dreamier than its own. The islanders are of a kind with their islands. Different as are the nations into which they are now divided, the Scots, the English, the Irish, the Welsh of the western uplands, have something altogether different from the humdrum docility of the inland Germans, or from the *bon sens français* which can be at will trenchant or trite. There is something common to all the Britons, which even Acts of Union have not torn asunder. The nearest name for it is insecurity, something fitting in men walking on cliffs and the verge of things. Adventure, a lonely taste in liberty, a humour without wit, perplex their critics and perplex themselves. Their souls are fretted like

their coasts. They have an embarrassment, noted by all foreigners: it is expressed, perhaps, in the Irish by a confusion of speech and in the English by a confusion of thought. For the Irish bull is a license with the symbol of language. But Bull's own bull, the English bull, is "a dumb ox of thought"; a standing mystification in the mind. There is something double in the thoughts as of the soul mirrored in many waters. Of all peoples they are least attached to the purely classical; the imperial plainness which the French do finely and the Germans coarsely, but the Britons hardly at all. They are constantly colonists and emigrants; they have the name of being at home in every country. But they are in exile in their own country. They are torn between love of home and love of something else; of which the sea may be the explanation or may be only the symbol. It is also found in a nameless nursery rhyme which is the finest line in English literature and the dumb refrain of all English poems—"Over the hills and far away."

The great rationalist hero who first conquered Britain, whether or no he was the detached demigod of "Cæsar and Cleopatra," was certainly a Latin of the Latins, and described these islands when he found them with all the curt positivism of his pen of steel. But even Julius Cæsar's brief account of the Britons leaves on us something of this mystery, which is more than ignorance of fact. They were apparently ruled by that terrible thing, a pagan priesthood. Stones now shapeless yet arranged in symbolic shapes bear witness to the order and labour of those that lifted them. Their worship was probably Nature-worship; and while such a basis may count for something in the elemental quality that has always soaked the island arts, the collision between it and the tolerant Empire suggests the presence of something which generally grows out of Nature-worship—I mean the unnatural. But upon nearly all the matters of modern controversy Cæsar is silent. He is silent about whether the language was "Celtic"; and some of the place-

names have even given rise to a suggestion that, in parts at least, it was already Teutonic. I am not capable of pronouncing upon the truth of such speculations, but I am of pronouncing upon their importance; at least, to my own very simple purpose. And indeed their importance has been very much exaggerated. Cæsar professed to give no more than the glimpse of a traveller; but when, some considerable time after, the Romans returned and turned Britain into a Roman province, they continued to display a singular indifference to questions that have excited so many professors. What they cared about was getting and giving in Britain what they had got and given in Gaul. We do not know whether the Britons then, or for that matter the Britons now, were Iberian or Cymric or Teutonic. We do know that in a short time they were Roman.

Every now and then there is discovered in modern England some fragment such as a Roman pavement. Such Roman antiquities rather diminish than increase the Roman reality. They make something seem distant which is still very near, and something seem dead that is still alive. It is like writing a man's epitaph on his front door. The epitaph would probably be a compliment, but hardly a personal introduction. The important thing about France and England is not that they have Roman remains. They are Roman remains. In truth they are not so much remains as relics; for they are still working miracles. A row of poplars is a more Roman relic than a row of pillars. Nearly all that we call the works of nature have but grown like fungoids upon this original work of man; and our woods are mosses on the bones of a giant. Under the seed of our harvests and the roots of our trees is a foundation of which the fragments of tile and brick are but emblems; and under the colours of our wildest flowers are the colours of a Roman pavement.

Britain was directly Roman for fully four hundred years; longer than she has been Protestant, and very much longer

than she has been industrial. What was meant by being Roman it is necessary in a few lines to say, or no sense can be made of what happened after, especially of what happened immediately after. Being Roman did *not* mean being subject, in the sense that one savage tribe will enslave another, or in the sense that the cynical politicians of recent times watched with a horrible hopefulness for the evanescence of the Irish. Both conquerors and conquered were heathen, and both had the institutions which seem to us to give an inhumanity to heathenism: the triumph, the slave-market, the lack of all the sensitive nationalism of modern history. But the Roman Empire did not destroy nations; if anything, it created them. Britons were not originally proud of being Britons; but they were proud of being Romans. The Roman steel was at least as much a magnet as a sword. In truth it was rather a round mirror of steel, in which every people came to see itself. For Rome as Rome the very smallness of the civic origin was a warrant for the largeness of the civic experiment. Rome itself obviously could not rule the world, any more than Rutland. I mean it could not rule the other races as the Spartans ruled the Helots or the Americans ruled the negroes. A machine so huge had to be human; it had to have a handle that fitted any man's hand. The Roman Empire necessarily became less Roman as it became more of an Empire; until not very long after Rome gave conquerors to Britain, Britain was giving emperors to Rome. Out of Britain, as the Britons boasted, came at length the great Empress Helena, who was the mother of Constantine. And it was Constantine, as all men know, who first nailed up that proclamation which all after generations have in truth been struggling either to protect or to tear down.

About that revolution no man has ever been able to be impartial. The present writer will make no idle pretence of being so. That it was the most revolutionary of all revolutions, since it identified the dead body on a servile

gibbet with the fatherhood in the skies, has long been a commonplace without ceasing to be a paradox. But there is another historic element that must also be realized. Without saying anything more of its tremendous essence, it is very necessary to note why even pre-Christian Rome was regarded as something mystical for long afterwards by all European men. The extreme view of it was held, perhaps, by Dante; but it pervaded mediævalism, and therefore still haunts modernity. Rome was regarded as Man, mighty, though fallen, because it was the utmost that Man had done. It was divinely necessary that the Roman Empire should succeed—if only that it might fail. Hence the school of Dante implied the paradox that the Roman soldiers killed Christ, not only by right, but even by divine right. That mere law might fail at its highest test it had to be real law, and not mere military lawlessness. Therefore God worked by Pilate as by Peter. Therefore the mediæval poet is eager to show that Roman government was simply good government, and not a usurpation. For it was the whole point of the Christian revolution to maintain that in this, good government was as bad as bad. Even good government was not good enough to know God among the thieves. This is not only generally important as involving a colossal change in the conscience; the loss of the whole heathen repose in the complete sufficiency of the city or the state. It made a sort of eternal rule enclosing an eternal rebellion. It must be incessantly remembered through the first half of English history; for it is the whole meaning in the quarrel of the priests and kings.

The double rule of the civilization and the religion in one sense remained for centuries; and before its first misfortunes came it must be conceived as substantially the same everywhere. And however it began it largely ended in equality. Slavery certainly existed, as it had in the most democratic states of ancient times. Harsh officialism certainly existed, as it exists in the most democratic states

of modern times. But there was nothing of what we mean in modern times by aristocracy, still less of what we mean by racial domination. In so far as any change was passing over that society with its two levels of equal citizens and equal slaves, it was only the slow growth of the power of the Church at the expense of the power of the Empire. Now it is important to grasp that the great exception to equality, the institution of Slavery, was slowly modified by both causes. It was weakened both by the weakening of the Empire and by the strengthening of the Church.

Slavery was for the Church not a difficulty of doctrine, but a strain on the imagination. Aristotle and the pagan sages who had defined the servile or "useful" arts, had regarded the slave as a tool, an axe to cut wood or whatever wanted cutting. The Church did not denounce the cutting; but she felt as if she was cutting glass with a diamond. She was haunted by the memory that the diamond is so much more precious than the glass. So Christianity could not settle down into the pagan simplicity that the man was made for the work, when the work was so much less immortally momentous than the man. At about this stage of a history of England there is generally told the anecdote of a pun of Gregory the Great; and this is perhaps the true point of it. By the Roman theory the barbarian bondmen were meant to be useful. The saint's mysticism was moved at finding them ornamental; and "*Non Angli sed Angeli*" meant more nearly "Not slaves, but souls." It is to the point, in passing, to note that in the modern country most collectively Christian, Russia, the serfs were always referred to as "souls." The great Pope's phrase, hackneyed as it is, is perhaps the first glimpse of the golden halos in the best Christian Art. Thus the Church, with whatever other faults, worked of her own nature towards greater social equality; and it is a historical error to suppose that the Church hierarchy worked with aristocracies, or was of a kind with them. It was an inversion of aristocracy; in the

ideal of it, at least, the last were to be first. The Irish bull that "One man is as good as another and a great deal better" contains a truth, like many contradictions; a truth that was the link between Christianity and citizenship. Alone of all superiors, the saint does not depress the human dignity of others. He is not conscious of his superiority to them; but only more conscious of his inferiority than they are.

But while a million little priests and monks like mice were already nibbling at the bonds of the ancient servitude, another process was going on, which has here been called the weakening of the Empire. It is a process which is to this day very difficult to explain. But it affected all the institutions of all the provinces, especially the institution of Slavery. But of all the provinces its effect was heaviest in Britain, which lay on or beyond the borders. The case of Britain, however, cannot possibly be considered alone. The first half of English history has been made quite unmeaning in the schools by the attempt to tell it without reference to that corporate Christendom in which it took part and pride. I fully accept the truth in Mr. Kipling's question of "What can they know of England who only England know?" and merely differ from the view that they will best broaden their minds by the study of Wagga-Wagga and Timbuctoo. It is therefore necessary, though very difficult, to frame in few words some idea of what happened to the whole European race.

Rome itself, which had made all that strong world, was the weakest thing in it. The centre had been growing fainter and fainter, and now the centre disappeared. Rome had as much freed the world as ruled it, and now she could rule no more. Save for the presence of the Pope and his constantly increasing supernatural prestige, the eternal city became like one of her own provincial towns. A loose localism was the result rather than any conscious intellectual mutiny. There was anarchy, but there was no

rebellion. For rebellion must have a principle, and therefore (for those who can think) an authority. Gibbon called his great pageant of prose "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." The Empire did decline, but it did not fall. It remains to this hour.

By a process very much more indirect even than that of the Church, this decentralization and drift also worked against the slave-state of antiquity. The localism did indeed produce that choice of territorial chieftains which came to be called Feudalism, and of which we shall speak later. But the direct possession of man by man the same localism tended to destroy; though this negative influence upon it bears no kind of proportion to the positive influence of the Catholic Church. The later pagan slavery, like our own industrial labour which increasingly resembles it, was worked on a larger and larger scale; and it was at last too large to control. The bondman found the visible Lord more distant than the new invisible one. The slave became the serf; that is, he could be shut in, but not shut out. When once he belonged to the land, it could not be long before the land belonged to him. Even in the old and rather fictitious language of chattel slavery, there is here a difference. It is the difference between a man being a chair and a man being a house. Canute might call for his throne; but if he wanted his throne-room he must go and get it himself. Similarly, he could tell his slave to run, but he could only tell his serf to stay. Thus the two slow changes of the time both tended to transform the tool into a man. His status began to have roots; and whatever has roots will have rights.

What the decline did involve everywhere was decivilization; the loss of letters, of laws, of roads and means of communication, the exaggeration of local colour into caprice. But on the edges of the Empire this decivilization became a definite barbarism, owing to the nearness of wild neighbours who were ready to destroy as

deafly and blindly as things are destroyed by fire. Save for the lurid and apocalyptic locust-flight of the Huns, it is perhaps an exaggeration to talk, even in those darkest ages, of a deluge of the barbarians; at least when we are speaking of the old civilization as a whole. But a deluge of barbarians is not entirely an exaggeration of what happened on some of the borders of the Empire; of such edges of the known world as we began by describing in these pages. And on the extreme edge of the world lay Britain.

It may be true, though there is little proof of it, that the Roman civilization itself was thinner in Britain than in the other provinces; but it was a very civilized civilization. It gathered round the great cities like York and Chester and London; for the cities are older than the counties, and indeed older even than the countries. These were connected by a skeleton of great roads which were and are the bones of Britain. But with the weakening of Rome the bones began to break under barbarian pressure, coming at first from the north; from the Picts who lay beyond Agricola's boundary in what is now the Scotch Lowlands. The whole of this bewildering time is full of temporary tribal alliances, generally mercenary; of barbarians paid to come on or barbarians paid to go away. It seems certain that in this welter Roman Britain bought help from ruder races living about that neck of Denmark where is now the duchy of Schleswig. Having been chosen only to fight somebody they naturally fought anybody; and a century of fighting followed, under the trampling of which the Roman pavement was broken into yet smaller pieces. It is perhaps permissible to disagree with the historian Green when he says that no spot should be more sacred to modern Englishmen than the neighbourhood of Ramsgate, where the Schleswig people are supposed to have landed; or when he suggests that their appearance is the real beginning of

our island story. It would be rather more true to say that it was nearly, though prematurely, the end of it.