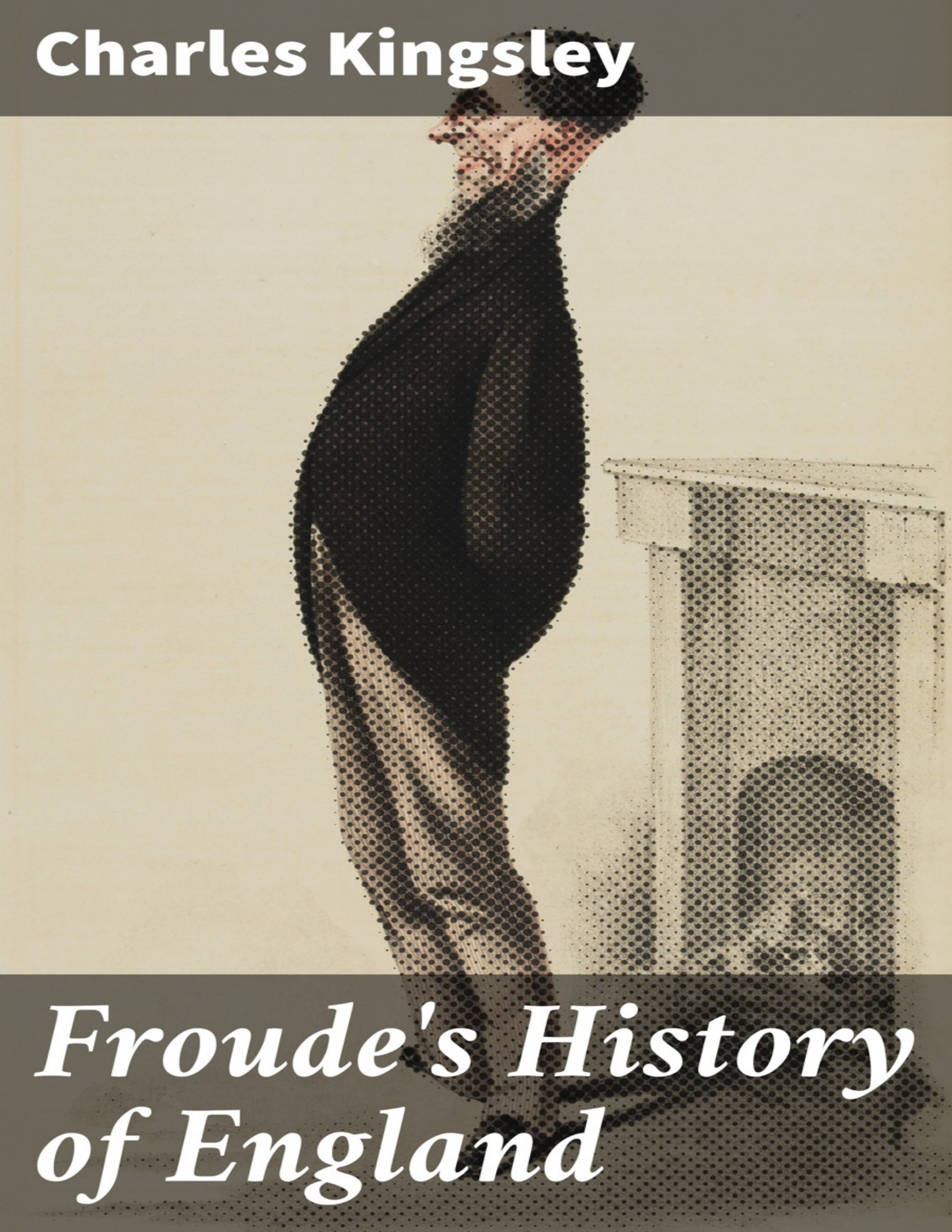
Charles Kingsley



Froude's History of England

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THERE appeared a few years since a ‘Comic History of England,’ duly caricaturing and falsifying all our great national events, and representing the English people, for many centuries back, as a mob of fools and knaves, led by the nose in each generation by a few arch-fools and arch-knaves. Some thoughtful persons regarded the book with utter contempt and indignation; it seemed to them a crime to have written it; a proof of ‘banausia,’ as Aristotle would have called it, only to be outdone by the writing a ‘Comic Bible.’ After a while, however, their indignation began to subside; their second thoughts, as usual, were more charitable than their first; they were not surprised to hear that the author was an honest, just, and able magistrate; they saw that the publication of such a book involved no moral turpitude; that it was merely meant as a jest on a subject on which jesting was permissible, and as a money speculation in a field of which men had a right to make money; while all which seemed offensive in it was merely the outcome, and as it were apotheosis, of that method of writing English history which has been popular for nearly a hundred years. ‘Which of our modern historians,’ they asked themselves, ‘has had any real feeling of the importance, the sacredness, of his subject?—any real trust in, or respect for, the characters with whom he dealt? Has not the belief of each and all of them been the same—that on the whole, the many always have been fools and knaves; foolish and knavish enough, at least, to become the puppets of a few fools and knaves who held the reins of power? Have they not held that, on the whole, the problems of human nature and human history have been sufficiently solved by Gibbon

and Voltaire, Gil Blas and Figaro; that our forefathers were silly barbarians; that this glorious nineteenth century is the one region of light, and that all before was outer darkness, peopled by ‘foreign devils,’ Englishmen, no doubt, according to the flesh, but in spirit, in knowledge, in creed, in customs, so utterly different from ourselves that we shall merely show our sentimentalism by doing aught but laughing at them?

On what other principle have our English histories as yet been constructed, even down to the children’s books, which taught us in childhood that the history of this country was nothing but a string of foolish wars, carried on by wicked kings, for reasons hitherto unexplained, save on that great historic law of Goldsmith’s by which Sir Archibald Alison would still explain the French Revolution—

‘The dog, to serve his private ends,
Went mad, and bit the man?’

It will be answered by some, and perhaps rather angrily, that these strictures are too sweeping; that there is arising, in a certain quarter, a school of history books for young people of a far more reverent tone, which tries to do full honour to the Church and her work in the world. Those books of this school which we have seen, we must reply, seem just as much wanting in real reverence for the past as the school of Gibbon and Voltaire. It is not the past which they reverence, but a few characters or facts eclectically picked out of the past, and, for the most part, made to look beautiful by ignoring all the features which will not suit their preconceived pseudo-ideal. There is in these books a scarcely concealed dissatisfaction with the whole course of

the British mind since the Reformation, and (though they are not inclined to confess the fact) with its whole course before the Reformation, because that course was one of steady struggle against the Papacy and its anti-national pretensions. They are the outcome of an utterly un-English tone of thought; and the so-called ‘ages of faith’ are pleasant and useful to them, principally because they are distant and unknown enough to enable them to conceal from their readers that in the ages on which they look back as ideally perfect a Bernard and a Francis of Assisi were crying all day long—‘O that my head were a fountain of tears, that I might weep for the sins of my people!’ Dante was cursing popes and prelates in the name of the God of Righteousness; Boccaccio and Chaucer were lifting the veil from priestly abominations of which we now are ashamed even to read; and Wolsey, seeing the rottenness of the whole system, spent his mighty talents, and at last poured out his soul unto death, in one long useless effort to make the crooked straight, and number that which had been weighed in the balances of God, and found for ever wanting. To ignore wilfully facts like these, which were patent all along to the British nation, facts on which the British laity acted, till they finally conquered at the Reformation, and on which they are acting still, and will, probably, act for ever, is not to have any real reverence for the opinions or virtues of our forefathers; and we are not astonished to find repeated, in such books, the old stock calumnies against our lay and Protestant worthies, taken at second-hand from the pages of Lingard. In copying from Lingard, however, this party has done no more than those writers have who would repudiate