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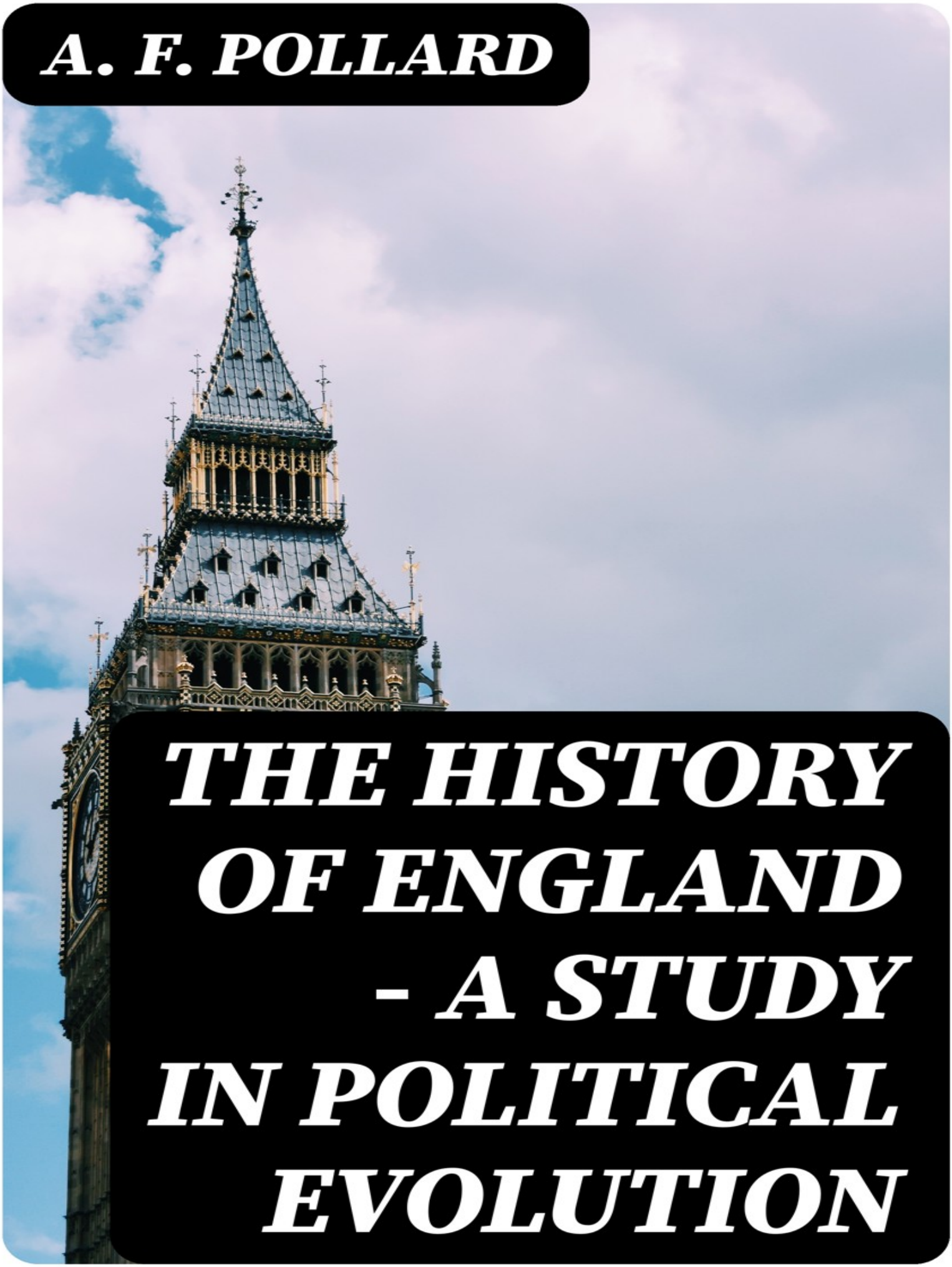

THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND - A STUDY IN POLITICAL EVOLUTION

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CHAPTER I

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THE FOUNDATIONS OF ENGLAND

55 B.C.—A.D. 1066

"Ah, well," an American visitor is said to have soliloquized on the site of the battle of Hastings, "it is but a little island, and it has often been conquered." We have in these few pages to trace the evolution of a great empire, which has often conquered others, out of the little island which was often conquered itself. The mere incidents of this growth, which satisfied the childlike curiosity of earlier generations, hardly appeal to a public which is learning to look upon historical narrative not as a simple story, but as an interpretation of human development, and upon historical fact as the complex resultant of character and conditions; and introspective readers will look less for a list of facts and dates marking the milestones on this national march than for suggestions to explain the formation of the army, the spirit of its leaders and its men, the progress made, and the obstacles overcome. No solution of the problems presented by history will be complete until the knowledge of man is perfect; but we cannot approach the threshold of

understanding without realizing that our national achievement has been the outcome of singular powers of assimilation, of adaptation to changing circumstances, and of elasticity of system. Change has been, and is, the breath of our existence and the condition of our growth.

Change began with the Creation, and ages of momentous development are shrouded from our eyes. The land and the people are the two foundations of English history; but before history began, the land had received the insular configuration which has largely determined its fortune; and the various peoples, who were to mould and be moulded by the land, had differentiated from the other races of the world. Several of these peoples had occupied the land before its conquest by the Anglo-Saxons, some before it was even Britain. Whether neolithic man superseded palaeolithic man in these islands by invasion or by domestic evolution, we do not know; but centuries before the Christian era the Britons overran the country and superimposed themselves upon its swarthy, squat inhabitants. They mounted comparatively high in the scale of civilization; they tilled the soil, worked mines, cultivated various forms of art, and even built towns. But their loose tribal organization left them at the mercy of the Romans; and though Julius Caesar's two raids in 55 B.C. and 54 B.C. left no permanent results, the conquest was soon completed when the Romans came in earnest in A.D. 43.

The extent to which the Romans during the three and a half centuries of their rule in Britain civilized its inhabitants is a matter of doubtful inference. The remains of Roman roads, Roman walls, and Roman villas still bear witness to

their material activity; and an occupation of the land by Roman troops and Roman officials, spread over three hundred and fifty years, must have impressed upon the upper classes of the Britons at least some acquaintance with the language, religion, administration, and social and economic arrangements of the conquerors. But, on the whole, the evidence points rather to military occupation than to colonization; and the Roman province resembled more nearly a German than a British colony of to-day. Rome had then no surplus population with which to fill new territory; the only emigrants were the soldiers, the officials, and a few traders or prospectors; and of these most were partially Romanized provincials from other parts of the empire, for a Roman soldier of the third century A.D. was not generally a Roman or even an Italian. The imperial government, moreover, considered the interests of Britain not in themselves but only as subordinate to the empire, which any sort of distinctive national organization would have threatened. This distinguishes Roman rule in Britain from British rule in India; and if the army in Britain gradually grew more British, it was due to the weakness and not to the policy of the imperial government. There was no attempt to form a British constitution, or weld British tribes into a nation; for Rome brought to birth no daughter states, lest she should dismember her all-embracing unity. So the nascent nations warred within and rent her; and when, enfeebled and distracted by the struggle, she relaxed her hold on Britain, she left it more cultivated, perhaps, but more enervated and hardly stronger or more united than before.

Hardier peoples were already hovering over the prey. The Romans had themselves established a "count of the Saxon shore" to defend the eastern coasts of Britain against the pirates of the German Ocean; and it was not long after its revolt from Rome in 410, that the Angles and Saxons and Jutes discovered a chance to meddle in Britain, torn as it was by domestic anarchy, and threatened with inroads by the Picts and Scots in the north. Neither this temptation nor the alleged invitation from the British chief Vortigern to come over and help, supplied the original impulse which drove the Angles and Saxons across the sea. Whatever its origin—whether pressure from other tribes behind, internal dissensions, or the economic necessities of a population growing too fast for the produce of primitive farming—the restlessness was general; but while the Goths and the Franks poured south over the Roman frontiers on land, the Angles and Saxons obeyed a prophetic call to the sea and the setting sun.

This migration by sea is a strange phenomenon. That nations should wander by land was no new thing; but how in those days whole tribes transported themselves, their wives and their chattels, from the mouths of the Elbe and the Weser to those of the Thames and the Humber, we are at a loss to understand. Yet come they did, and the name of the Angles at least, which clung to the land they reached, was blotted out from the home they left. It is clear that they came in detachments, as their descendants went, centuries later, to a land still further west; and the process was spread over a hundred years or more. They conquered Britain blindly and piecemeal; and the traditional three years which

are said to have elapsed between the occupation of Sheppey and the landing in Kent prove not that the puny arm of the intervening sea deterred those who had crossed the ocean, but that Sheppey was as much as these petrels of the storm could manage. The failure to dislodge them, and the absence of centralized government and national consciousness among the Britons encouraged further invaders; and Kent, east of the Medway, and the Isle of Wight may have been the next morsels they swallowed. These early comers were Jutes, but their easy success led to imitation by their more numerous southern neighbours, the Angles and Saxons; and the torrent of conquest grew in volume and rapidity. Invaders by sea naturally sailed or rowed up the rivers, and all conquerors master the plains before the hills, which are the home of lost causes and the refuge of native states. Their progress may be traced in the names of English kingdoms and shires: in the south the Saxons founded the kingdoms of Sussex, Essex, Middlesex, and Wessex; in the east the Anglians founded East Anglia, though in the north they retained the Celtic names, Bernicia and Deira. The districts in which they met and mingled have less distinctive names; Surrey was perhaps disputed between all the Saxon kingdoms, Hampshire between West Saxons, South Saxons, and Jutes; while in the centre Mercia was a mixed march or borderland of Angles and Saxons against the retiring Britons or Welsh.

It used to be almost a point of honour with champions of the superiority of Anglo-Saxon virtues to maintain that the invaders, like the Israelites of old, massacred their enemies to a man, if not also to a woman and child. Massacre there

certainly was at Anderida and other places taken by storm, and no doubt whole British villages fled at the approach of their bloodthirsty foes; but as the wave of conquest rolled from east to west, and the concentration of the Britons grew while that of the invader relaxed, there was less and less extermination. The English hordes cannot have been as numerous in women as in men; and in that case some of the British women would be spared. It no more required wholesale slaughter of the Britons to establish English language and institutions in Britain than it required wholesale slaughter of the Irish to produce the same results in Ireland; and a large admixture of Celtic blood in the English race can hardly be denied.

Moreover, the Anglo-Saxons began to fight one another before they ceased to fight their common enemy, who must have profited by this internecine strife. Of the process by which the migrating clans and families were blended into tribal kingdoms, we learn nothing; but the blending favoured expansion, and expansion brought the tribal kingdoms into hostile contact with tougher rivals than the Britons. The expansion of Sussex and Kent was checked by Saxons who had landed in Essex or advanced up the Thames and the Itchen; East Anglia was hemmed in by tribes who had sailed up the Wash, the Humber, and their tributaries; and the three great kingdoms which emerged out of the anarchy—Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex—seem to have owed the supremacy, which they wielded in turn, to the circumstance that each possessed a British hinterland into which it could expand. For Northumbria there was Strathclyde on the west and Scotland on the north; for

Mercia there was Wales; and for Wessex there were the British remnants in Devon and in Cornwall.

But a kingdom may have too much hinterland. Scotland taxed for centuries the assimilative capacity of united England; it was too much for Northumbria to digest. Northumbria's supremacy was distinguished by the religious labours of Aidan and Cuthbert and Wilfrid in England, by the missions of Willibrord on the Continent, and by the revival of literature and learning under Caedmon and Bede; but it spent its substance in efforts to conquer Scotland, and then fell a victim to the barbaric strength of Mercia and to civil strife between its component parts, Bernicia and Deira. Mercia was even less homogeneous than Northumbria; it had no frontiers worth mention; and in spite of its military prowess it could not absorb a hinterland treble the size of the Wales which troubled Edward I. Wessex, with serviceable frontiers consisting of the Thames, the Cotswolds, the Severn, and the sea, and with a hinterland narrowing down to the Cornish peninsula, developed a slower but more lasting strength. Political organization seems to have been its forte, and it had set its own house in some sort of order before it was summoned by Ecgberht to assume the lead in English politics. From that day to this the sceptre has remained in his house without a permanent break.

Some slight semblance of political unity was thus achieved, but it was already threatened by the Northmen and Danes, who were harrying England in much the same way as the English, three centuries earlier, had harried Britain. The invaders were invaded because they had forsaken the sea to fight one another on land; and then

Christianity had come to tame their turbulent vigour. A wave of missionary zeal from Rome and a backwash from unconquered Ireland had met at the synod of Whitby in 664, and Roman priests recovered what Roman soldiers had lost. But the church had not yet armed itself with the weapons of the world, and Christian England was no more a match than Christian Britain had been for a heathen foe. Ecgberht's feeble successors in Wessex, and their feebler rivals in the subordinate kingdoms, gave way step by step before the Danes, until in 879 Ecgberht's grandson Alfred the Great was, like a second King Arthur, a fugitive lurking in the recesses of his disappearing realm.

Wessex, however, was more closely knit than any Celtic realm had been; the Danes were fewer than their Anglo-Saxon predecessors; and Alfred was made of sterner stuff than early British princes. He was typical of Wessex; moral strength and all-round capacity rather than supreme ability in any one direction are his title-deeds to greatness. After hard fighting he imposed terms of peace upon the Danish leader Guthrum. England south-west of Watling Street, which ran from London to Chester, was to be Alfred's, the rest to be Danish; and Guthrum succumbed to the pacifying influence of Christianity. Not the least of Alfred's gains was the destruction of Mercia's unity; its royal house had disappeared in the struggle, and the kingdom was now divided; while Alfred lost his nominal suzerainty over north-east England, he gained a real sovereignty over south-west Mercia. His children, Edward the Elder and Ethelfleda, the Lady of the Mercians, and his grandson Athelstan, pushed on the expansion of Wessex thus begun, dividing the land as

they won it into shires, each with a burh (borough) or fortified centre for its military organization; and Anglo-Saxon monarchy reached its zenith under Edgar, who ruled over the whole of England and asserted a suzerainty over most of Britain.

It was transitory glory and superficial unity; for there was no real possibility of a national state in Anglo-Saxon-Celtic-Danish England, and the whole meaning of English history is missed in antedating that achievement by several hundred years. Edgar could do no more than evade difficulties and temporize with problems which imperceptible growth alone could solve; and the idealistic pictures of early England are not drawn from life, but inspired by a belief in good old days and an unconscious appreciation of the polemical value of such a theory in political controversy. Tacitus, a splenetic Roman aristocrat, had satirized the degeneracy of the empire under the guise of a description of the primitive virtues of a Utopian Germany; and modern theorists have found in his *Germania* an armoury of democratic weapons against aristocracy and despotism. From this golden age the Angles and Saxons are supposed to have derived a political system in which most men were free and equal, owning their land in common, debating and deciding in folkmoots the issues of peace and war, electing their kings (if any), and obeying them only so far as they inspired respect. These idyllic arrangements, if they ever existed, did not survive the stress of the migration and the struggle with the Celts. War begat the king, and soon the church baptized him and confirmed his power with unction and biblical precedents. The moot of the folk became the moot of the

Wise (Witan), and only those were wise whose wisdom was apparent to the king. Community of goods and equality of property broke down in the vast appropriation involved in the conquest of Britain; and when, after their conversion to Christianity, the barbarians learnt to write and left authentic records, they reveal a state of society which bears some resemblance to that of medieval England but little to that of the mythical golden age.

Upon a nation of freemen in arms had been superimposed a class of military specialists, of whom the king was head. Specialization had broken down the system by which all men did an equal amount of everything. The few, who were called thegns, served the king, generally by fighting his enemies, while the many worked for themselves and for those who served the king. All holders of land, however, had to serve in the national levy and to help in maintaining the bridges and primitive fortifications. But there were endless degrees of inequality in wealth; some now owned but a fraction of what had been the normal share of a household in the land; others held many shares, and the possession of five shares became the dividing line between the class from which the servants of the king were chosen and the rest of the community. While this inequality increased, the tenure of land grew more and more important as the basis of social position and political influence. Land has little value for nomads, but so soon as they settle its worth begins to grow; and the more labour they put into the land, the higher rises its value and the less they want to leave it; in a purely agricultural community land is the great

source of everything worth having, and therefore the main object of desire.

But it became increasingly difficult for the small man to retain his holding. He needed protection, especially during the civil wars of the Heptarchy and the Danish inroads which followed. There was, however, no government strong enough to afford protection, and he had to seek it from the nearest magnate, who might possess armed servants to defend him, and perhaps a rudimentary stronghold within which he might shelter himself and his belongings till the storm was past. The magnate naturally wanted his price for these commodities, and the only price that would satisfy him was the poor man's land. So many poor men surrendered the ownership of their land, receiving it back to be held by them as tenants on condition of rendering various services to the landlord, such as ploughing his land, reaping his crops, and other work. Generally, too, the tenant became the landlord's "man," and did him homage; and, thirdly, he would be bound to attend the court in which the lord or his steward exercised jurisdiction.

This growth of private jurisdiction was another sign of the times. Justice had once been administered in the popular moots, though from very early times there had been social distinctions. Each village had its "best" men, generally four in number, who attended the moots of the larger districts called the Hundreds; and the "best" were probably those who had inherited or acquired the best homesteads. This aristocracy sometimes shrank to one, and the magnate, to whom the poor surrendered their land in return for protection, often acquired also rights of jurisdiction,

receiving the fines and forfeits imposed for breaches of the law. He was made responsible, too, for the conduct of his poorer neighbours. Originally the family had been made to answer for the offences of its members; but the tie of blood-relationship weakened as the bond of neighbourhood grew stronger with attachment to the soil; and instead of the natural unit of the family, an artificial unit was created for the purpose of responsibility to the law by associating neighbours together in groups of ten, called peace-pledges or frith-borhs. It is at least possible that the "Hundred" was a further association of ten frith-borhs as a higher and more responsible unit for the administration of justice. But the landless man was worthless as a member of a frith-borh, for the law had little hold over a man who had no land to forfeit and no fixed habitation. So the landless man was compelled by law to submit to a lord, who was held responsible for the behaviour of all his "men"; his estate became, so to speak, a private frith-borh, consisting of dependents instead of the freemen of the public frith-borhs. These two systems, with many variations, existed side by side; but there was a general tendency for the freemen to get fewer and for the lords to grow more powerful.

This growth of over-mighty subjects was due to the fact that a government which could not protect the poorest could not restrain the local magnates to whom the poor were forced to turn; and the weakness of the government was due ultimately to the lack of political education and of material resources. The mass of Englishmen were locally minded; there was nothing to suggest national unity to their imagination. They could not read, they had no maps, nor

pictures of crowned sovereigns, not even a flag to wave; none, indeed, of those symbols which bring home to the peasant or artisan a consciousness that he belongs to a national entity. Their interests centred round the village green; the "best" men travelled further afield to the hundred and shire-moot, but anything beyond these limits was distant and unreal, the affair of an outside world with which they had no concern. Anglo-Saxon patriotism never transcended provincial boundaries.

The government, on the other hand, possessed no proper roads, no regular means of communication, none of those nerves which enable it to feel what goes on in distant parts. The king, indeed, was beginning to supply the deficiencies of local and popular organization: a special royal peace or protection, which meant specially severe penalties to the offender, was being thrown over special places like highways, markets, boroughs, and churches; over special times like Sundays, holy days, and the meeting-days of moots; and over special persons like priests and royal officials. The church, too, strove to set an example of centralized administration; but its organization was still monastic rather than parochial and episcopal, and even Dunstan failed to cleanse it of sloth and simony. With no regular system of taxation, little government machinery, and no police, standing army, or royal judges, it was impossible to enforce royal protection adequately, or to check the centrifugal tendency of England to break up into its component parts. The monarchy was a man rather than a machine; a vigorous ruler could make some impression, but

whenever the crown passed to a feeble king, the reign of anarchy recommenced.

Alfred's successors annexed the Danelaw which Alfred had left to Guthrum, but their efforts to assimilate the Danes provoked in the first place a reaction against West Saxon influence which threatened more than once to separate England north of the Thames from Wessex, and, secondly, a determination on the part of Danes across the sea to save their fellow-countrymen in England from absorption. Other causes no doubt assisted to bring about a renewal of Danish invasion; but the Danes who came at the end of the tenth century, if they began as haphazard bands of rovers, greedy of spoil and ransom, developed into the emissaries of an organized government bent on political conquest. Ethelred, who had to suffer from evils that were incurable as well as for his predecessors' neglect, bought off the raiders with ever- increasing bribes which tempted them to return; and by levying Danegeld to stop invasion, set a precedent for direct taxation which the invaders eventually used as the financial basis of efficient government. At length a foolish massacre of the Danish "uitlanders" in England precipitated the ruin of Anglo-Saxon monarchy; and after heroic resistance by Edmund Ironside, England was absorbed in the empire of Canute.

Canute tried to put himself into the position, while avoiding the mistakes, of his English predecessors. He adopted the Christian religion and set up a force of hus-earls to terrify local magnates and enforce obedience to the English laws which he re-enacted. His division of England into four great earldoms seems to have been merely a