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Jordan Crawford

Harding University, jcrawfor@harding.edu

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“GREAT”
THE QUEST TO FIND THE MAN AND THE
MYTH OF KING ALFRED
by **Jordan Crawford**

For Alfred, the only English monarch ever to own the title “Great,” legends are abundant and to be expected. Tales abound of the king who disguised himself as a traveling minstrel to spy on the enemy camp, accidentally burned the cakes of a simple herdsman’s wife and humbly apologized for his inattention, and built an island fort in the middle of a marsh in which he entertained ghostly saints and planned his assault on the Vikings who had stolen his kingdom. His reign fell during the turbulent Viking Age of the ninth century, was fraught with battle and intrigue, and could, in many ways, be thought of as the first reign of a true King of England – a realm that had previously existed as a collection of minor kingdoms such as Wessex and Mercia rather than a unified whole. Alfred ruled over a time and place about which there is as much mystery as there is factual record, and legend often serves to fill in the gaps left by history. Some stories, such as that of Saint Cuthbert’s miraculous visit, tie Alfred even closer to the otherworldly aura of the time. Others, such as the legend of the cakes, are of the type which inevitably spring up around the founders of nations. To what degree Alfred was the “father of England” is an issue almost as difficult as discerning the fact from the fiction about his reign. Throughout the ages, and especially in the last century, the great task of historians studying King Alfred has been to sort the man from the myth and find the truth of what Alfred accomplished and its significance for the future of the English nation. Through their interpretations of Alfred, “the Man Who Made England,” these scholars have revealed more than just the details of a Saxon king who laid the foundations for a nation. They have reflected the changing values that have shaped England for generations.

Most scholarship agrees that Alfred was born in 849 in the royal village of Wantage, the youngest of the six surviving children (five sons and one daughter) of Ethelwulf, King of Wessex (839-856), the Saxon kingdom located in the southwest of Britain. His was royal blood of the highest caliber, and the title of *bretwalda* had been in his family since the reign of his grandfather Egbert (802-839). The title denoted an acknowledged hegemony over the other Anglo-Saxon kings throughout England: Essex and East Anglia in the east, Sussex and Kent in the southeast, Mercia in the center, and Northumbria in the north. In 853, four-year-old

Alfred went to Rome as part of a delegation from his father. There he became godson to Pope Leo IV, who also, according to record, anointed him future king of Wessex.¹ He travelled again to Rome in 855, this time accompanied by Ethelwulf himself. Ethelwulf died in January of 858, not long after returning to find that his eldest surviving son, Ethelbald, had usurped his kingdom.²

Alfred spent the rest of his childhood years in the courts of his eldest brothers Ethelbald (856-860) and Ethelbert (860-865), whose reigns were short and fraught with peril. It was under the reign of his closest sibling Ethelred (865-871) that Alfred came to hold a prominent position of his own, both in court and on the battlefield. He was present at Ethelred's court almost constantly and cosigned many charters and decrees with his royal brother. Alfred also made a name for himself militarily, most famously in the Battle of Ashdown on January 8, 871. Commanding half of his brother's army against the Viking warlords Halfdane and Bagsecg, he charged the advancing enemy without hesitation – even as Ethelred piously refused to let his troops enter the fray until they had finished hearing mass – and through his courage the Saxons won the battle. Ethelred, possibly wounded in the battle, did not survive long after the victory. He died in April 871, leaving Alfred the last of the sons of Ethelwulf and the sole ruler of Wessex.³

Alfred soon faced a new threat: the Viking warlord Guthrum. He faced this foe in a number of battles in 871, with mixed results. He was eventually able to buy a four-year peace, but Guthrum was again in the field by 876. On January 6, 878 – during the Saxon festival of Twelfth Night – Guthrum's army broke an uneasy truce, attacking and capturing the royal residence of Chippenham in the middle of the night while the Saxons celebrated. Alfred and his retainers barely escaped with their lives. The exiled king spent several months in hiding while Guthrum effectively assumed control of Wessex. With his supporters, Alfred built a makeshift fortress at a site called Athelney, in the misty marshes of Somerset. From here he waged a guerrilla war, out-raiding the Viking raiders and steadily garnering support until he was able to raise a *fyrð* (army) strong

¹ There is some confusion about this event – most scholars agree that what actually took place was simply a customary Roman ceremony. In particular, see: Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alfred the Great* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 27-28; and Justin Pollard, *Alfred the Great: The Man Who Made England* (London: John Murray, 2007).

² Regarding Alfred's childhood: Duckett, 20-43; and Pollard, 41-78.

³ Regarding Ethelred's reign and the Battle of Ashdown: Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alfred the Great*, 44-58; and Justin Pollard, *Alfred the Great*, 112-128.

enough to challenge Guthrum directly. In May 878, Alfred met and defeated Guthrum in the Battle of Edington (alternatively called Ethandune), the “Marathon of England” that determined the fate of a nation.⁴ In the Peace of Wedmore that followed, Alfred became one of the first European kings to receive what amounted to an unconditional surrender from a Viking warlord. Most notably, Alfred chose not to slay the adversary who had caused him so much woe, but rather to make an ally of him. Guthrum submitted to baptism as a Christian, and Alfred allowed him to retain his holdings in East Anglia as well as some of the Mercian lands he had conquered. Thus, Guthrum became the first Christian Viking king in Britain.⁵

Alfred had won back his kingdom; now it was time to rebuild it. Throughout the next years of his reign, Alfred set about restructuring Wessex, laying the foundation for the English state. He commissioned the building of several *burhs* – fortresses manned by a small community intended to keep watch and provide the first line of defense against future Viking invasions. Recognizing that defeating the Vikings required command of the waterways on which they traveled, Alfred built ships to guard the coasts. This precaution earned him the title of “father of the British navy.” To make the army more efficient, Alfred divided the *fyrð* into two sections, with half the fighting men in the field and half at home for a season at a time. He also restructured the administrative system of the shires and renovated the old Roman town of Londinium (London), allowing it to grow into the thriving medieval trade center that would one day be the capital of England. To bring order and stability to his kingdom, Alfred created a doom, or law code, incorporating Biblical law, Roman law, and laws established by the great English kings who came before him, such as Offa of Mercia.

Believing that only a learned, literate population would be able to ensure unity, prosperity, defense against the Vikings, and rightness in the sight of God, Alfred took several measures to provide for the education of his people: he summoned educated men from all corners of Britain and even some from the Continent to his court, including, most notably, the bishop Asser of Wales, and created a palace school where all sons of free men (mostly nobles) could come to learn. Alfred himself translated many classical Latin works into Anglo-Saxon, including Gregory’s *Book of Pastoral Care* and Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. Alfred

⁴ Frank Herbert Hayward, *Alfred the Great* (London: Duckworth, 1935), 45.

⁵ Regarding Alfred’s war with Guthrum: Duckett, 59-86; and Pollard, 129-197.

also encouraged the development of the arts and craftsmanship in England. Alfred's policies enabled him to successfully defend the kingdom against further Viking attacks and create a stable, prosperous England until his death in 899.⁶

The historiography of Alfred the Great begins with Asser, the Welsh bishop who helped advance culture and learning in Alfred's court. Asser was a prominent member of court and a close friend and advisor to the king, and the author of *The Life of King Alfred*. Because it is a contemporary account of Alfred's life, nearly all scholars draw their interpretation of Alfred primarily from this source. *The Life of King Alfred* provides a wealth of information about Alfred's life and reign, including several anecdotes which provide insight into the mind of Alfred, as well as points of contention for historians debating their authenticity. Asser's account raises almost as many questions as answers, however. For example, it does not span Alfred's entire life. It ends abruptly at about 887, roughly twelve years before his death. Also, a fire in 1731 destroyed the original copy of Asser's *Life*. Scholars must rely on a copy written by archbishop Matthew Parker in the sixteenth century, which most scholars do not believe is a literal translation.⁷ At times, scholars question the authenticity of Asser himself, noting the bishop's obvious bias toward Alfred. He composed his biography during Alfred's lifetime, possibly even on Alfred's command, and certainly with Alfred watching over his shoulder. Because of this, some scholars accuse him of obscuring the facts of Alfred's reign. One of the great debates concerning Alfred is how much – and what – historians can believe in Asser's account. However, most scholars acknowledge that “with all its defects, the book remains a most important contemporary authority for the history of the ninth century,” and the chief source for interpreting the reign of Alfred the Great.⁸

Another contemporary source is *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which Alfred himself commissioned some time during his reign. As in most medieval chronicles, many entries are simply matter-of-fact statements of notable events such as births, deaths, accessions to high offices such as king or archbishop, and the movements of armies. Interspersed are more detailed and colorful accounts of important or interesting occurrences. Like most medieval chronicles, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was almost

⁶ Regarding Alfred's accomplishments: Duckett, 87-128; and Pollard, 198-268. Alfred's translations are discussed at length in Duckett, 142-188.

⁷ Pollard, 7-18.

⁸ Beatrice Adelaide Lees, *Alfred the Great: The Truth-Teller; Maker of England; 848-899* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1919), 389.

certainly intended as a tool to further legitimize and idealize Alfred's rule and that of his dynasty. Most entries focus on Alfred's achievements and rise to power. They describe the Viking conquest of England in great detail, making Alfred's victory seem all the more heroic. For example, the *Chronicle's* description of the surprise attack on Chippenham reads, dramatically,

This year about mid-winter, after twelfth night, the Danish army stole out to Chippenham, and rode over the land of the West-Saxons; where they settled, and drove many of the people over sea; and of the rest the greatest part they rode down, and subdued to their will; - all but King Alfred.⁹

Despite the certain bias, the *Chronicle* is still a useful and oft-cited resource and one of the earliest historical accounts to discuss the reign of Alfred the Great.

As much fiction as fact concerning Alfred exists in the works of medieval historians in the centuries after the king's death. Popular traditions arose – promulgated by works such as the twelfth-century *Annals of St. Neot's* (the origin of the story of the cakes) and the writings of William of Malmesbury – celebrating Alfred as “the scholar king, the friend of the poor, and the favourite of the saints.”¹⁰ By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the stories told of Alfred had entered the realm of fairy-tale and legend, adding fantastical and romantic elements to the tales. In at least one account, Alfred was even credited with the founding of Oxford University.¹¹ In the sixteenth century, Matthew Parker wrote an edition of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* which, despite several likely alterations, demonstrated in true Renaissance form a desire to return to the sources in the study of Alfred. In the seventeenth century, Sir John Spelman, a royalist supporter in the English Civil War, first gave Alfred the formal title of “The Great.”¹² Although Spelman's work was contemporarily criticized as royalist propaganda, the title stuck, reflecting the continuing popularity of Alfred in the modern age.

To Enlightenment thinkers, like Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume, Alfred was a true philosopher king: a shining light of culture and civilization in a barbarous age. Hume

⁹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 878.

¹⁰ Lees, 433. Further discussion of medieval historiography of Alfred found in pgs. 433-453.

¹¹ Lees, 451-452.

¹² Lees, 459.

published the first volume of his *History of England from The Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Abdication of James the Second* in 1762. The words Hume uses to describe Alfred read like a checklist of Enlightenment virtues:

“He knew how to reconcile the most enterprising spirit with the coolest moderation; the most obstinate perseverance with the easiest flexibility; the most severe justice with the gentlest lenity; the greatest vigor in commanding with the most perfect affability of deportment; the highest capacity and inclination for science with the most shining talents for action.”¹³

To Hume, Alfred’s greatest contributions are the advances he made toward securing liberty for the English people. In Alfred’s compilation of the greatest laws of his predecessors, Hume sees the origins of common law, the great safeguard of English liberty.¹⁴ By establishing equal wergilds – blood prices that a man paid to the family of someone he had killed – for both Saxon and Dane in his law code, Alfred established himself as a pioneer of equality and equal treatment under the law – an important tenet of eighteenth-century English political thought.¹⁵ Hume is also impressed with the king’s advancement of literacy and education, believing that “good morals and knowledge are almost inseparable, in every age.”¹⁶ Hume’s Alfred is England’s first champion of liberty, fighting to ensure that “the English should forever remain as free as their own thoughts.”¹⁷

The so-called “cult of Alfred” reached its height in the Victorian era, when the people of an empire upon which the sun did not set celebrated the millennial anniversaries of the great events in the life of “England’s darling” who had forged their nation from that small patch of land at Athelney.¹⁸ Alfred enjoyed a considerable level of popularity in this period, his achievements exonerated and rarely, if ever, questioned.

As the twentieth century dawned, historians became concerned with finding the truth about Alfred, attempting to

¹³ David Hume, *The History of England: From the Earliest Times to the Norman Conquest*, vol. 1 of *The Political History of England* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 69-70.

¹⁴ Hume, 73.

¹⁵ Hume, 65.

¹⁶ Hume, 74.

¹⁷ Asser 24, quoted in Hume, 74.

¹⁸ P.J. Helm, *Alfred the Great* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1963), 9.

discern reality from legend, even in the contemporary accounts of Asser and the *Chronicle*. This attitude is exemplified by the work of Beatrice A. Lees, who is often more concerned with the setting of events and their existence than in interpreting their causes and effects. In *Alfred the Great: The Truth-Teller; Maker of England; 848-899*, published in 1919, Lees's vision of Alfred is of a hard-working king who, through his diligence, not only repelled the Viking invaders but laid the foundations for the English state, society, and literature. Not far removed from the Victorian era, Lees still praises hard work as the noblest of virtues. To Lees, Alfred is key to the development of English statesmanship and the various "organs of government"; she says that "in Alfred's reign the lines were laid down on which development should proceed, and in the work of political organization the King took the leading part."¹⁹ In an age which was beginning to look at centralization of power with growing apprehension, Lees wrote that, while Alfred certainly did more than any ruler before him to strengthen the power of the king, he did so not for any self-seeking purpose but because of "his own active and competent intervention in the work of administration," and that he created the stabilization and security desperately needed in an age of disorder and danger.²⁰ Lees devotes a lengthy chapter to Alfred's literary work, believing that "in literature as in politics ... King Alfred stands at the opening of a new era in the development of England."²¹ Alfred played a critical role in the development of English literature and the practice of reading and writing great works in English rather than in Latin, but, as in everything with Lees, statesmanship was at the core of Alfred's literary achievements – he advanced reading and writing in order to more effectively administer his kingdom. In the final section of her work, Lees examines the historiography of Alfredian scholarship from the Middle Ages to the turn of the twentieth century, exploring the development of the mythical Alfred in her quest to recover the historical Alfred.

Remarkably little seems to have been written about Alfred the Great in the years between the end of World War I and the end of World War II. Robert Hodgkin, writing in the 1930's, affirms that Alfred's popularity had declined by that time.²² Those scholars who did study Alfred in the 1920's and 30's continue the trend of exploring the extent to which the information available

¹⁹ Lees, 215-216.

²⁰ Lees, 222-223.

²¹ Lees, 321.

²² Robert Hodgkin, *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 2:670.

about Alfred is believable. As F. H. Hayward puts it, “doubtless there was in Alfred the Truth-teller – Asser’s own description of him – something that induced truth-telling.”²³ However, scholars of this time often disagreed over such matters. For example, Hayward praises Asser for writing an accurate and factual account of the king’s life despite a tendency of many medieval clergy to overuse miracles and fables in their historical writings. Hodgkin, on the other hand, believes that “this elderly bishop was unfortunately not the man to understand fully the mind of a many-sided layman.”²⁴ Pressing issues of the day find their way into 1920-1940 Alfredian scholarship, including equity and the “promotion of morality by direct state action” in Alfred’s laws,²⁵ and the question of dictatorship in the centralization of government and strengthening of the monarchy.²⁶

In 1935, F. H. Hayward published a relatively short monograph simply entitled *Alfred the Great*, as part of a series of brief biographies called “Great Lives,” published by Duckworth Press. Despite its brevity, Hayward’s work displays many of the qualities typical of Alfredian scholarship in this period. Hayward believes that Alfred’s greatest quality was his eagerness – his conviction of “quite uncommon intensity that the world to which he belonged had to be understood, and the best things in it (threatened with destruction) to be saved.”²⁷ Such sentiments characterized the decades between the World Wars. It is this eagerness – this “indignation at the spoiling and ruining of the civilisation of England” – that compelled Alfred to make his famous charge at Ashdown without waiting for his brother.²⁸ Hayward also sees in Alfred “not only the greatest constructive educationist England has produced, but almost the only one.”²⁹ Writing in a time of sweeping educational reform, Hayward saw Alfred’s steps toward creating a literate, educated England as not the politically-charged, organization-centric movements of the day but a “vivid and authentic educational vision followed by inspired and effective educational action.”³⁰ To Hayward, this is the most exciting moment in all the centuries of England’s educational history. Hayward writes with passion about Alfred’s love of science: of his summoning of great scholars to his court, his

²³ Frank Herbert Hayward, *Alfred the Great* (London: Duckworth, 1935), 50-51.

²⁴ Hodgkin, 2:537.

²⁵ Hodgkin, 2:602-603.

²⁶ Hodgkin, 2:607.

²⁷ Hayward, 12.

²⁸ Hayward, 13-14.

²⁹ Hayward, 17.

³⁰ Hayward, 57-58.

desire to listen to the tales of world travelers and learn geography, his astronomical asides in his translation of Boethius, and his own inventions of the candle-clock and horn lantern.³¹ Interestingly, Hayward compares Alfred to the Roman philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius, speaking of their shared “effect on the world,” “versatility,” and “high and noble character” which earned Alfred the title of “Great.”³²

From 1950-1980, historical work concerning Alfred the Great resurfaced. Scholarship reflected a wide variety of viewpoints indicative of the diverse, ever-moving postwar world. Even Eleanor Shipley Duckett, whose work shows considerably less bias than that of many scholars, reflects the progressivism of the time by discussing an oft-overlooked aspect of Alfred’s law: women’s rights.³³ Published in 1956, Duckett’s *Alfred the Great* is, in her own words, a “very simple book” with the simple goal of educating interested but casual readers about what is known of the deeds and character of King Alfred.³⁴ To Duckett, Alfred was a man who did his duty to the best of his ability and had high expectations for himself as well as his subjects. Though presenting little in terms of new theories or interpretations, Duckett weaves the story of Alfred as well as any writer, and has certainly done her research, a fact to which her extensive bibliography – a useful resource for anyone studying the historiography of Alfred – can attest. Duckett informs her readers of what was known about the subject at the time, including what was known to be more legend than truth,³⁵ without using the details to support any particular agenda. This “just-the-facts” approach reflects the continued effort of twentieth-century scholarship to get to the truth of Alfred’s legendary reign.

Of special note in the historiography of Alfred the Great is the work of British Prime Minister and famous twentieth-century personality Winston Churchill. In the first volume of his *History of the English Speaking Peoples*, published in 1956, Churchill makes a colorful study of the reign of King Alfred. Churchill focuses almost exclusively on Alfred’s military career, undoubtedly viewing the king’s struggle to preserve England against Viking invasion through the window of his own efforts to see Britain endure against the German assault in World War II. In Churchill’s opinion, Alfred’s most important qualities were his strong morality, his comprehension of the greater world, and his

³¹ Hayward, 91-102.

³² Hayward, 125-126.

³³ Duckett, 95-96.

³⁴ Duckett, vii-viii.

³⁵ Duckett, 74-75.

devout faith yet willingness to engage in active statesmanship and military force to achieve the greatest good.³⁶ Like the Battle of Britain in 1940, Alfred's victory at Ashdown prevented England from sinking into "heathen anarchy," giving hope for "a civilised Christian existence in this Island."³⁷

Churchill considers Alfred's first peace treaty with his Viking enemies in 871 more of a defeat than other scholars, who saw this as a necessary purchase of much-needed time for his kingdom.³⁸ The key to understanding this perspective may lie in Churchill's negative experience with politicians who sought to forestall war with Nazi Germany through appeasement of Hitler. Like Churchill, Alfred was a shipbuilder, believing the defense of an island nation required a strong navy to defend its coasts, and, like Churchill, Alfred believed in personally overseeing the writing of history to ensure that it paid proper respect to his own achievements, as exemplified by his commission of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In Churchill's eyes, Alfred was the first of many inspirational English leaders who saw his people through perilous times with his courage, words, and action, in whose company Churchill himself could now claim to sit.

Consistent with the contemporary tone of questioning the traditions of the past, P.J. Helm, writing in 1963, claims that "the ordinary person might be hard put to it to justify the king's claim to this unique honour [the title of "Great"],"³⁹ although he ultimately concludes that English history would have taken a much different course had it not been for Alfred's ability. Helm believes that "a country should, in each generation, reassess its great men," judging them by new evidence as well as new standards, and he stresses the difficulty in achieving a balance between the legendary and the factual with Alfred which makes it hard to assess the king in this way.⁴⁰ By the 1970's, enough evidence had been collected for David A. Hinton to build an archaeological case for the authenticity of Alfred's achievements, including the creation of the *burhs*, church-building, the revival of shipping and trade, and the advancement of the arts and craftsmanship.⁴¹

³⁶ Winston S. Churchill, *The Birth of Britain*, vol. 1 of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1956), 104.

³⁷ Churchill, 106.

³⁸ Churchill, 108.

³⁹ Helm, 9.

⁴⁰ Helm, 191.

⁴¹ David A. Hinton, *Alfred's Kingdom: Wessex and the South 800-1500* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1977), 31-57.

Alfredian scholarship since 1990 has produced a number of new ideas and new theories interpreting the life and reign of Alfred the Great. H.R. Loyn's 1991 monograph *The Making of the English Nation: from the Anglo-Saxons to Edward I* argues, in unusual single-causation fashion, that Alfred's most significant contribution was repelling the Danes, and that in fact everything Alfred did – including his efforts toward reforming Saxon law and education, were driven by the necessity to provide for the defense of the country.⁴² In August 2010, Stefan Jurasinski published an article in the *Journal of Legal History* entitled "Sanctuary, House-Peace, and the Traditionalism of Alfred's Laws," in which he challenges the traditional scholarly position that Alfred's sanctuary laws were not innovative or reform-minded but rather continued longstanding Germanic tradition with minor differences. Jurasinski believes that the intent of Alfred's sanctuary and house-peace laws was to give penance a proper place in English law and move beyond the idea that the right to protection from violence is created by the sanctity of the building but rather by the standards of behavior of those involved.⁴³ Current studies of Alfred pay special attention is to class distinctions and gender differences.⁴⁴ Popular histories about Alfred the Great, such as *Alfred the Great: the Man Who Made England* by Justin Pollard and *The White Horse King: The Life of Alfred the Great* by Benjamin Merkle, are another common trend of twenty-first century scholarship. The authors of these works write in sensational, journalistic style, "as a narrative intended for any interested reader and not simply an academic readership."⁴⁵ Many of these do not, at first glance, appear particularly academic (Merkle's thesis rather simplistically suggests that "Alfred was great because he was a great king"⁴⁶), but they too produce a surprising number of new theories, to varying degrees of credibility.

Most notably, Justin Pollard proposes that the 878 attack at Chippenham – which sent Alfred into hiding in Athelney – was not in fact a surprise Viking invasion but rather a coup instigated by members of Alfred's own court.⁴⁷ Although treason is absent from contemporary or later records, Pollard supports his

⁴² H.R. Loyn, *The Making of the English Nation: From the Anglo-Saxons to Edward I* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 64-67.

⁴³ Stefan Jurasinski, "Sanctuary, House-Peace, and the Traditionalism of Alfred's Laws," *Journal of Legal History* 31, no. 2 (August 2010): 129-147.

⁴⁴ Pollard, 22-24, 49-52.

⁴⁵ Pollard, 5.

⁴⁶ Benjamin Merkle, *The White Horse King: The Life of Alfred the Great* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2009), xv.

⁴⁷ Pollard, 159-162.

hypothesis with carefully assembled evidence including holes in Asser's account and the Chronicle, precedence of similar behavior in other English kingdoms, charters and correspondence regarding bishops and nobles, and Alfred's behavior after reclaiming his throne.⁴⁸ It remains to be seen whether scholarship will accept Pollard's theory as credible or if he has simply taken evidence that allows for multiple possible scenarios and chosen the one which tells the most exciting tale. Like historians for a century before him, however, Pollard is concerned with finding the "true" Alfred, seeking "to peel away the confusion of myths and legends ... and to reveal the man underneath."⁴⁹ To Pollard, Alfred's role in the making of England is unmistakable and just as relevant today as it was more than a millennium ago: the influence of Alfred the Great "continues to resonate through the modern world like that of no other mediaeval [sic] king."⁵⁰ Pollard and other popular historians paint Alfred as a hero and a rallying point for his people, as great national figures often are – not, this time, to pull England through a time of crisis, but rather to reaffirm a fading national identity.

One of the many epithets associated with Alfred is "The Man Who Made England." Nearly every generation of scholarship acknowledges Alfred's claim to this achievement, but every generation views Alfred as the man who made a different England. To Alfred and his own generation, he was the king who united England, made it safe and stable, and laid the foundations for a civilization that could stand proudly among those of continental Europe. To medieval writers, Alfred was the king of an England shrouded in myth and legend: a hero in an age of heroes. To Enlightenment scholars, Alfred made the England of education, law, and most importantly, liberty. To Victorians, Alfred made the England that grew from a patch of land in the Somerset marshes to an empire that spanned seven continents. To historians of the early twentieth century, Alfred was a man of truth, hard work, and effective administration – qualities he gave to his kingdom. To writers between the world wars, Alfred was the man who made England with statesmanship and reform. To those who lived in the years following World War II, Alfred was the man who made the England that could face impossible odds against overwhelming enemies and stand victorious. To modern authors, Alfred was the man who first defined a nation with a heroic and storied past: an England that could be proud of its culture and

⁴⁸ Pollard, 162-169.

⁴⁹ Pollard, 4.

⁵⁰ Pollard, 304.

accomplishments. Each of these interpretations reveals the values of its generation. Each of these interpretations also holds truth, as England cannot be defined by any one point in time. England has a continuous and evolving history, and Alfred laid the foundations for many of the qualities which developed in England over time, truly earning him the title “Great.”