"The Memory of Me in Good Works": the Importance of the Legends of King Alfred the Great to English Society

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At the end of the 1963 movie, “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,” Ransom Stoddard, played by James Stewart, has just recounted how it was someone else, not he, who shot the outlaw Valance, an event upon which Stoddard had built his entire political career. When the reporter rips up his notes, a stunned Stoddard asks, “You’re not going to use the story?” The reporter replies, “No, sir. This is the West. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

In much the same way, the legends surrounding King Alfred of Wessex serve the same purpose. They have been recounted for such a long time that, even though the events did not take place, the legend has replaced the facts as perception has become reality. These stories tell us much more about the people of England than about Alfred himself. They give the English a sense of who they are and where they have come from. It matters not if the stories are true, for their purpose is to create a national identity. The aim of this paper is to explore why these stories are important, their impact upon society and religion in England both early in

2. Stephen J. Harris, “The Alfredian world history and Anglo-Saxon identity,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 100, No. 4, (Oct., 2001): 482-510. He makes a compelling argument for the case of religious and social identity working together to bring about a distinct English identity. Harris argues that, while other historians have viewed the idea of “Englishness” as having a foundation in Christianity, “…Christendom, a religio-ethnic order of identity altogether distinct from Christianity…” (483) better represents the force behind the ethnogenesis of “Englishness.”
her existence and later, and what they tell us about the people of England.

When someone says the word “legend,” the listener is most likely reminded of words and phrases such as “story,” “fiction,” and “larger-than-life.” In literature, there is the legend of Paul Bunyan. In sports, we have Babe Ruth and his legendary “called shot” in the 1932 World Series. In the motion pictures, we have the aforementioned Ransom Stoddard and his supposed shooting of Liberty Valance. Different though they may be, in each case there is one thing tying them together: they are all about events or people that, in reality, did not occur or exist. It matters not that Paul Bunyan did not create the Grand Canyon by dragging his massive axe behind him. Sports fans are not all that concerned with the fact that Ruth was most likely indicating to the opposing bench that he still had one strike left. The newspaperman did not care that Tom Doniphan, and not Stoddard, actually killed Valance. Why? Because in each instance, the legend gives those most affected by the story something to hold on to, something to be proud of, something by which they define themselves and their lives. Escaping the gravity of truth, the legend has taken a flight of mythic proportions.

The legends surrounding Alfred have also strayed into the area of mythology. Looking back, the myths of ancient Greece were explanations of why things happened the way they did and to give a beginning to the world of the Greeks. In the same way, the stories of Alfred have been used to demonstrate all that is good and desired in both an English people and an English leader. “Tracing English institutions and traditions back to Alfred,” writes David Horspool, “is a quasi-historical game that has been played for centuries. Modern scholarship discredited most of these shaky genealogies, but…these pseudo-historical notions illustrate the concerns of
the time in which they originate or become established…”

For many, the word “myth” has a negative connotation. As Dr. Stephen Ausband writes, “We tend to think of myths as stories other people believe or once believed to be true, but that are not really true.” Upon closer inspection, however, we see that while they are still “not really true,” myths are and have always been, much more than simple stories meant to entertain. In 1963, the late religious historian Mircea Eliade wrote,

For the past fifty years at least, Western scholars have approached the study of myth from a viewpoint markedly different from, let us say, that of the nineteenth century. Unlike their predecessors, who treated myth in the usual meaning of the word, that is, as ‘fable,’ ‘invention,’ ‘fiction,’ they have accepted it as it was understood in the archaic societies, where, on the contrary, ‘myth’ means a ‘true story’ and, beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because (italics mine) it is sacred, exemplary, significant. It is this definition, this view, that best allows us to understand the Alfredian stories and their importance. If we can see Alfred as earlier generations did, we can catch a glimpse of their worldview, limited as that glimpse may be.

The most famous of the Alfred legends is, of course, the burnt cakes. The details of the story have varied over the centuries but the main points remain intact. Briefly, Alfred, in desperate straits after the Vikings

have routed his little band of soldiers, seeks anonymous solace amongst his own people at Athelney. Finding himself housed with a farmer and his wife, Alfred sullenly contemplates his fate and his future. One day in his depression, he fails to notice that the cakes his hostess was baking had burnt. Upon discovering this, she scolds him, chiding him for his ignorance and self-absorption. Adequately chastised, Alfred vows to not lose sight again of his responsibilities, either as baker’s apprentice or as king.6

The story of the burnt cakes illustrates a key element in the English view of Alfred by demonstrating the humbling of a king. Subjects of a monarchy desire a leader that is at once strong, yet understanding of their plight. As the father figure of his country, Alfred must be attuned to the needs of his subjects. The fact that “the once all-powerful king was transformed into the most menial of servants” gives the reader the hope that their father-king understands them, sympathizes with them, feels for them, and loves them.7 In Alfred, the people have a focal point, someone to rally around as the epitome of all that is good and English. Looking closer to home, it should not be surprising if this sounds somewhat familiar, for while England has Alfred, America has George Washington, as interpreted by the stories of Parson Weems.

Weems’ purpose in writing his Life of Washington mirrors that of Alfred’s earliest biographer, the Welsh monk Asser. Published a year after the death of Washington in 1799, Weems weaved together inspiring and uplifting stories about America’s first president, many of which were true. However, the most memorable ones have no basis, and rather are meant to canonize the recently deceased leader in the hearts of his countrymen.

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6 Horspool, King Alfred, 80.
The most famous involves a cherry tree, a hatchet, and young George’s refusal to tell a lie. Weems’ higher moral purpose in recounting this story (which is to demonstrate the faultless character of Washington), outweighs the fact that it is false. Coupled with Washington’s standing in the country at the time of his death, it is no wonder that this anecdote gained widespread and enduring acceptance as fact. When comparing each case, the American view would be that Alfred is their Washington, when in fact Washington is our Alfred. Washington, as “The Father of His Country,” gives Americans a guidepost to point to in finding the beginnings of a national identity, much like Alfred gives rise to a sense of Englishness.

Not only have the Alfredian legends had an effect on the way the English have viewed themselves, they have also impacted religion and the religious life of England. Here, too, we see Alfred being used to validate a certain aspect of an English viewpoint. In order to fully appreciate the impact of the Alfredian legends in this area, it is imperative that we understand the relationship, historically, between myth and religion. Myths have enjoyed a close, even symbiotic, relationship with the religious life of those telling the tales. They have been the building blocks of explaining the “why” and “how” of the origination event. When viewed in this way, myths begin to transform, becoming “a sacred history…” that “relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the

fabled time of the ‘beginnings’.”

8 While Weems’ treatment of Washington is the one most-recognized by the general public, there are numerous other examples in the treatment of American history that demonstrates the power of myth. One of the most interesting is the account of the Almo, Idaho massacre in 1861, recounted by Dr. James W. Loewen in his book, Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong, (New York: The New Press, 1999), 89-93. On a stone in the shape of the state of Idaho, erected by the Sons and Daughters of Idaho Pioneers in 1938, is the following inscription: “Dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives in a horrible Indian massacre, 1861. Three hundred immigrants westbound. Only five escaped.” The problem, according to Dr. Loewen and other historians cited by him, is that this massacre NEVER occurred.

9 Eliade, Myth and Reality, 5-6. Eliade goes on to write that “…myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality…or only
According to a recent biographer of Alfred, the king was portrayed as a “model ruler, with deep religious and ascetic tendencies…”  

“Much of the Alfredian legends’ centrality to English Christendom can be attributed to Alfred himself, through the assistance of his biographer Asser. As Richard Abels writes in his biography of Alfred, “It is from Asser and Alfred’s own writings that we know him best. But what they teach us is less about the man as he actually was than about what he aspired to be and how he wished others to see him.” For Asser, Alfred was the “embodiment of the ideal, but practical, Christian ruler…the ‘truthsayer,’ a brave, resourceful, pious man, who was generous to the church and anxious to rule his people justly.” Again, we find the legend overshadowing the truth. While it is true that he attempted to lead a pious life, Alfred could also be ruthless when dealing with his enemies, and his subjects who ignored royal “admonitions.” Since, however, this was done in the vein of trying to spiritually lead his people, Alfred was not viewed as a tyrant, but as a firm, yet loving, spiritual leader.

Later, the stories of Alfred’s religious leadership were used to “illustrate the king’s moral virtues and to connect him with St. Neot and St. Cuthbert, a reflection of the desire of Alfred’s descendants to extend their patronage and political control over the churches of Wales and North Umbria.” This attempt to “forge a link between crown and monastery”

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10 Smyth, King Alfred, 206.
13 Asser himself wrote that “those who had opposed the royal commands were humiliated in meaningless repentance by being reduced to virtual extinction.” Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred, translated with an introduction and notes by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 102.
14 Abels, Alfred the Great, 158.
resulted in a new vision of King Alfred.\textsuperscript{15} St. Neot, who was supposedly a cousin of Alfred, had prophesied that the king “would suffer at the hands of the Vikings and be driven from his country.” If, however, Alfred were willing to place his trust in Neot, then he (Neot), who would pass away before the restoration of Alfred’s kingdom, would intercede on his behalf.\textsuperscript{16} Alfred did so and soon after won a decisive victory at the Battle of Ethandun. In regard to the connection between Alfred and St. Cuthbert, legend has it that, at the same time of Alfred’s exile on Altheney, he was visited in a dream by Cuthbert who, like Neot, promised victory to the king. St. Cuthbert established this promise with the accurate prediction that Alfred’s men would return to him with a large catch of fish, despite the fact that the river was frozen over.\textsuperscript{17} Again, victory on the battlefield was the result.

Although the stories themselves are different, the idea behind each remains the same. The saints each assist or aid Alfred in some manner, resulting in the king being indebted to them, a debt that he acknowledges. For both St. Neot and St. Cuthbert, or more importantly, their followers, the “end result was royal patronage for each saint’s monastery.” Each story “thus provides ‘historical precedent’ for what was in fact a novel change in patronage.”\textsuperscript{18} For the followers of these saints, the result of this connection to Alfred is the validation of their religious sect. Additionally, each instance (Alfred’s exile, the prophesy of the fish, the eventual restoration of his throne) is reminiscent of biblical stories of God’s love for His people and His kings, such as David’s exile from Saul

\textsuperscript{16} Horspool, \textit{King Alfred}, 79.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{18} Johnson-South, “King Alfred’s Aura,” 618.
and Jesus telling Peter to cast his nets for fish. Much in the same way as these stories serve to demonstrate the justification of God’s love for His people, the stories of Alfred’s connection to St. Neot and St. Cuthbert serve to justify the worldview of the followers of these saints as being blessed by God, by linking them to the aura of Alfred.

What made Alfred great is not found in anything that he actually did, though he accomplished much. From scholastic and administrative functions, to military organization and ecclesiastical reformation, Alfred left an imprint upon early Britain that is both compelling and undeniable.¹⁹ In 1897, in an address calling for a celebration of the one-thousandth anniversary since the end of Alfred’s reign, the British jurist and historian Frederic Harrison described the effect of Alfred on England:

> No people, in ancient or modern times, ever had a Hero-Founder at once so truly historic, so venerable, and so supremely great. Alfred was more to us than the heroes in antique myths—more than Theseus and Solon were to Athens, or Lycurgus to Sparta, or Romulus and Numa were to Rome, more than St. Stephen was to Hungary, or Pelayo and the Cid to Spain, more than Hugh Capet and Jeanne d’Arc were to France—more than William the Silent was to Holland—nay, almost as much as the Great Charles was to the Franks.²⁰

We cannot ignore the fact that Alfred is most remembered for things he did not do. “What made King Alfred ‘England’s Darling,’ […] was the general acknowledgement that he was the first native of the British Isles to combine in his person the moral, physical and intellectual

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¹⁹ Alfred’s lasting legacy can also be found in his military and defensive organizational skills. As Horspool writes in King Alfred, “To many modern historians the greatest of Alfred’s achievements was his creation, if not from scratch then from fairly rudimentary beginnings of a well-administered system of defense to keep his kingdom safe from Viking attack.” (98).
While it is agreed by most, if not all, English historians that these events did not take place, it is also agreed that their continued importance lies in their significance, and not in their authenticity. In the case of King Alfred the Great, when the legend does indeed become fact, you print the legend.