

## ENGLISH CULTURE FROM BEDE TO ÆLFRIC.

England in the middle of the seventh century consisted of seven kingdoms, and war and devastation were the order of the day. Occasionally a stronger kingdom would conquer. Then a period of quiet would prevail; but it was only the quiet that precedes the storm, for suddenly and without warning some kingdom would rise in revolt. In such a state of things it is easy to see that civil improvement would be little thought of—the terrible struggle for existence swallows up for the time all national public energy.

At this time Northumbria was in the height of its power. The king Egtrith undertook the extension of his northern boundary. The expedition was a disastrous failure. Assailed on the north by the Picts, and by the king of Mercia on the south, Northumbria barely saved herself from ruin. The bloody encounter of Wodensburh in 714, divided the country into three provinces of about equal power. As time wore on Mercia seemed to be gaining the ascendancy. National affairs were tending toward a national unity; but the work of Northumbria was foiled by the resistance of Mercia, the work of Mercia by the opposition of Wessex. A three-fold division seemed to have stamped itself upon England, with powers so nearly equal that no efforts of one or the other could fuse them into one people. Only when the Northmen began to descend upon them can we find any trace of a national feeling. From this time to the close of our period—1006—the whole national strength was strained to drive back the fierce Vikings.

Having briefly traced the political divisions of the country, we now go back to take up the great underlying principles that even the fierceness of the Northmen could not conquer.

Early in the struggle with Rome the Christian religion was introduced. Missionaries went about from place to place, preaching and teaching. At this time education and christianity went hand in hand. As christianity gained ground the desire for knowledge grew. Monasteries sprang up in many places, Northumbria, although fallen from its political prestige, still remained a great power in learning. Under the reign of Aldfrith and Ceolwulf this kingdom became the great literary centre of western Europe. Yarrow and York were the most famous schools of that time and the whole literary life of the age seemed to be embodied in one man, the "Venerable" Bede. Born in 673, about ten years after Rome had completed the conquest over Iona and four years after Theodor had arrived at Canterbury to complete the ecclesiastical conquest, his religious character and teachings must have had a great influence on the bent of thought in England. His power to impart knowledge to others was wonderful. At one time the schools of Yarrow and York contained over six hundred students. This, with a knowledge of the times, shows plainly how the ignorance of heathendom was rapidly giving way for the light of christianity. It is probable that had the Anglo-Saxons been unmolested this growing culture would have given England, at the close of the ninth century, a civilization far in advance of the times.

Bede left his countrymen a rich legacy of educational works; all we really know of the century and a half after the landing of Augustine is from him. First among English scholars, historians and theologians, it is in Bede that English literature strikes its roots. Green says: "In the six hundred scholars who gathered around him for instruction he is the father of England's national education." After his death advancement stopped. Only in mid-England did order and peace remain.

Wherever they set their foot progress of every kind stopped,

culture was blasted and civilization died away. But fortunately for civilization Providence had raised up a man who possessed the ability to use the shattered forces of his realm to expel the Northmen. For twenty-six years Alfred struggled with the pirates. During this time education was much neglected. The Anglo-Saxon had all he could do to maintain his own existence. Still the tone of their culture was slowly rising. The Christian missionaries at times won some of the Danes to their cause. Their natural bitterness made them difficult to convert and prone to relapse. Their energy and indomitable courage made them valuable when thoroughly converted.

When Alfred succeeded in driving the Danes back England was almost a smoking ruin. In Mercia and Northumbria the pirate's sword had left few survivors of the school of Bede. In Wessex, which so far had been the most ignorant of the provinces, affairs were still worse. Its condition is best shown by Alfred's own words: "When I began my reign I cannot remember of one priest south of the Thames who could render his service book into English." Scarcely had the last pirate ship disappeared when Alfred began a moral and intellectual restoration. Destroyed monasteries were rebuilt, and instructors from other lands were hired to teach. Nor did Alfred fail to do his share of the work. He took the books as he then found them and translated them into Anglo-Saxon, enriching them with ideas and illustrations of his own. Throughout all his works we can see his aversion to display. Through his labors the whole face of English literature was changed. Before his time England possessed in her own tongue a few songs, one great poem, and no prose.

In addition to these literary labors he sent out exploring parties in the White sea, along the coast of Esthonia, and also along the southern coasts. In the face of the ruined condition of the country these facts are significant. They show that the minds of the Anglo-Saxons were becoming enlarged and directed to inquiry concerning lands and people far beyond their own.

The remaining portion of our period is little less than a series of military campaigns. However, in the periods of peace that now and then prevailed, we can trace the smouldering fires of Anglo-Saxon culture. The Northmen had failed in the purpose of their conquest, but they had done a powerful work. In their struggle with the Englishmen they created an English people. Burn and plunder as they would, the Anglo-Saxon culture held the Northmen in check.

Only a brief account of the writers of this period has been left us. The internal confusion again became great. Culture began to fall from the height it had reached in Alfred's time. But under the guidance of that master mind the threads of Anglo-Saxon culture were so closely interwoven that they stood the test. Alfred, when he began to struggle against the ignorance of his own countrymen, commenced a warfare that was destined to conquer the world.

## PROGRESS IN METHOD.

The old fashioned way of memorizing a text book in order to deliver it in a manner worthy of a parrot to the instructor has lost ground wonderfully of late years. Especially is this true in the study of the sciences. In chemistry the instructor instead of as formerly performing the experiments before the class, who looked on much as small boys at a sleight-of-hand show, acts as a helper or guide, supplying that which the student cannot himself discover. By this method the interest is increased because of the pleasure which always comes from discovery, and the facts demonstrated are fixed much more