

# CHRONICLES OF ENGLAND

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THE ostentatious sobriety of the title, "Chronicles of England," is perhaps less likely to excite the modern reader's interest, than to stir past fears of horrid memorization. Yet it was not always so, as the present volume eloquently testifies. From the earliest times, the chronicle had always had a following, and this following gained in numbers as the chronicle ceased to be the almost exclusive possession of the monastery, and passed into the hands of writers such as Froissart, who was both poet and chronicler. Yet the period during which the historical appetite developed most rapidly, and in consequence the venerable chronicle form attained its greatest popularity, was to come much later—and then, paradoxically, only in company with the printing press. The herald of this era, as was to be expected from the infallibility with which he detected the popular and saleable, was William Caxton. In 1480, from Caxton's press at Westminster was issued the first *Chronicles of England*, made more inescapably English by the inclusion of a kind of sociological geography of the British Isles, "The Description of England." Within two years, Caxton had issued a second edition, this one, however, without the "Description." The success of Caxton's venture may be judged by the reaction of other printers. In 1485, 1486, 1493, new *Chronicles of England* appeared from various presses, but all were, in fact, adaptations or direct copies of Caxton's two editions, principally of the second (1482) edition.<sup>1</sup> However, at the time of his much imitated second edition, Caxton obviously had further plans for chronicles, as is evident from the issuance in 1482 of a much more extensive and complicated work, the *Polychronicon* of Ranulf Higden, monk of Chester, from whom Caxton had previously drawn the "Description of England" appended to the 1480 edition of the *Chronicles*. In the *Polychronicon*, Higden's basic technique was to place English history in the context of "universal history"; that is, history from the beginning of the world to the

<sup>1</sup> For a general account of Caxton, see N. S. Aurner, *Caxton, Mirrour of Fifteenth Century Taste* (Boston, 1926), especially Chapter X.

time of the individual chronicler. By the use of Geoffrey of Monmouth's great fabrication, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, which presented him with a line of fictional kings extending back to the fall of Troy,<sup>2</sup> Higden was able to present English history, even that of the remotest antiquity, as if in parallel columns with all history. Thus if one were interested in Homer, he could discover that at the time Brutus, first of the mythical kings, was engaged in building Britain, Homer was in excellent health. Of equal importance with the universal history, was Higden's time scheme. St. Jerome had seen history as that of four great monarchies; Orosius as that of six ages. Higden was more pious. He divided history into seven ages, "in imitation of the primal Creator."<sup>3</sup>

It is at this point that one must take cognizance of the printer of St. Alban's, whose device was the "Schoolmaster," and who, in about 1485, himself issued a *Chronicles of England* based on Caxton. But the Schoolmaster did not simply copy Caxton's second edition, as did Machlinia (1486) and Leeu (1493); he did, instead, something quite different. He accepted the value of Higden's various contributions, as the others did not: he made use of the universal history and the seven-period division of history, but he limited the former to a brief summary of Biblical history up to Brutus, and he divided only England into the seven ages. Hence all the piety of man's creation, and all the piety of the periods of man's subsequent history, could be applied to England alone.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For an able study of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, see *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger S. Loomis (Oxford, 1959), pp. 79-89.

<sup>3</sup> Theories of history are well discussed in the collection of essays by the late Theodore E. Mommsen, *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* (Ithaca, 1959).

<sup>4</sup> Technically, this is perhaps too strong a statement, but I believe it conveys the sense of the narrative. Although, subsequent to the appearance of Brutus, the secular and religious history of other nations is touched upon, it is touched upon only to an extent sufficient to maintain the necessary illusion that the reader is viewing all history simultaneously. It is, in fact, the history of England which holds the stage, and that history is divided and subdivided into all the forms of universal history non-heretical piety had been able to conceive—primarily the seven periods of Higden; secondarily the six ages of Orosius; and scattered about, allusions to the four monarchies of Jerome and later writers (see above n. 3). An example of the distinction between the treatment of English and non-English historical figures is afforded by the respectful attention given St. Augustine of Canterbury, and that devoted to the rather more famous but regrettably non-English, St. Augustine (immediately below).

Further religiosity was added by a liberal sprinkling of popes, martyrs, and bishops—as for instance “St. Augustine, the rhetorician” whose notice occurs along with that of the birth of Siamese twins. Finally, for reasons discussed below, he restored the “Description of England” to its position in Caxton’s first edition. It is from the Schoolmaster’s ingenious compilation that the Rutgers *Chronicles of England*, bought for the Library through the Curlett H. Wilhelm Fund, is descended. It would appear that Wynkyn de Worde, Caxton’s successor and editor of the present volume, was not slow to recognize practical genius, for it is evident that he followed the Schoolmaster’s version with respect.

Such was the imposingly moral cover of the *Chronicles*. What was the substance of the book? The answer to this question is as uncomplex as the attitudes the *Chronicles* were designed to appeal to. Its content was nothing more nor less than the English *Brut*, which begins with an abbreviated but heightened version of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*—its title being derived from the first of these—and continued by various hands to the editor’s own day. Far from being extracted from the learned Latin sources named in the “Introduction,” it is popular English history.<sup>5</sup>

First of all, the reader of the *Brut* finds in England no ordinary locality. It is a land of action and magic. Murder, prophecy, battle, sacrilege, childbirth, saintliness—all is action and vitality in this chronicle world of wonders. For instance, Brutus battles giants in his new kingdom, but Geoffrey of Monmouth gives no hint of how they got there. The *Brut* fills in magnificently. It seems that “King Dioclycian of Sirrie,” whose wife was beautiful and loved him “as reason wolde,” had thirty-three daughters, whose manners proved not only paradoxically unreasonable but positively embarrassing to the king, since all thirty-three killed their thirty-three husbands. He therefore sent them to sea in a rudderless boat, and, as fate or story would have it, they arrived at an uninhabited island which they subsequently named Albion, after the eldest of the sisters. They became prodigious huntresses, in consequence “wonder fatte,” and in

<sup>5</sup> The *Brut*, ed. Friedrich W. D. Brie, *Early English Text Society*, original series, vols. 131, 136. It is interesting to note that the *Brut* is published not in an historical series, but in a primarily literary series.

consequence, "wonder courageous of kynde." Though this last may puzzle the reader, it did not Satan, who sent his élite emergency corps of incubi, so that in those days there were giants in the land of Albion. Yet wonders and realism are not mutually exclusive. In the capture and murder of Thomas of Lancaster, one can see the creation of a popular saint out of a man whom objective history has been able to view only in a quite opposite light. His elevation to "Saynt Thomas" by the popular chronicler shows a blind partisanship prophetic of the wars to come. Finally, wonder and partisanship merge in the pure marvel of being English. Perhaps it was because this particular marvel is better conveyed in the "Description of England" than elsewhere, that the Schoolmaster chose to restore it. Though the Englishman does not pass entirely without criticism, the other inhabitants of the British Isles are made to look appreciably inferior. The Welsh are a whimsical people, particularly in their sanitary habits. The Irish are not precisely whimsical: "great fyghters . . . cruell of herte, angry of speche, & drynketh fyrst blood of deed men that ben slayne." The Scots are "wylde inough," but hope existed for them then as it does even to-day: "by medlyng of Englysshmen they ben moche amended."

As a contribution to the knowledge of history, the *Chronicles of England* is of limited value. However, for the study of cultural history, the book is invaluable. In it one finds narrative built upon narrative, a series of stories which somehow cumulatively illustrate a people's sense of the turbulence, richness, and wonder of their nation; and which vividly reflect an uncritical and intense national pride.