

GLASTONBURY IN LEGEND AND HISTORY*

A FINE BOOK is waiting to be made. It is a wonder the work has not been taken in hand. The history, the stories, and the legends of the English church are extant and ready to be put into one volume and given to the world. Who will perform this delightful task? It is true many books on the abbeys of England are to be seen on the shelves of libraries, but I know of no one volume in which a reader may find the story treated as a whole, in the way a skillful historian would unfold the rise of a people to greatness. One who will set his hand to a job of this nature will not be harassed with the usual difficulties of research, of laboring over ancient documents written in Saxon or in Latin. All this has been done, and much of it can be found readily in the handbooks to be picked up in the naves of the cathedrals or in

the bookseller's shop usually placed in an ancient street flanked by Tudor buildings. Such places are familiar to the eyes of visitors to England, and in these nooks of knowledge, many times during my life, heirs of English stock from distant lands have entered into conversation with me and asked questions about the history of the town and its monuments.

Some years ago I selected from my collection of handbooks fully a dozen which record in brief the history of the foundations, and I marvelled, when I thought of what a jewel of information lay there to be shaped into a glorious book. The time, however, was not ripe for such a work, for the mind of the people was concerned with a war; and I put the material away. Now in the midst of another conflict I find a surprising change in the attitude of the public, which may denote a desire to seek some refuge from the strife of the nations. Perhaps the time has come when such a work as I have adumbrated above will prove to be the very talisman the people are seeking, and from which they might learn that, if the future holds out no great hope of security, the hallowed past may provide a place of shelter for their harried minds.

Of the many volumes written on the monasteries, abbeys, and cathedrals of Great Britain

there is none so engrossing as Dr. James's *Abbeys*.¹ This work, undertaken by a great scholar,² is unique. There is an introduction on "Monastic Life and Buildings" by Dr. Thompson.³ It would be hard to discover two men more richly qualified to treat this great subject than they.⁴

It is amazing to note how much care and study have been given by the British authorities to the tasks of restoration of these precious monuments. They have called in the greatest scholars of the time to contribute their knowledge to the work and, collaborating with them, we find the names of many well-known architects.

This is a form of history long slighted by the recorders of dynasties, and the pity of it is that it has been neglected by the schools. For three long, weary centuries the British people were deprived of reasonable knowledge of the glories of their tradition. When I was a boy, I lived in an area that contained the foundations of a Roman city and the ruins of eight abbeys.⁵ So near were they to the cottage in which I lived that I could have walked any day to one and have returned without weariness.

In my early years I saw the ruins overgrown with weeds, brambles, and shrubs; in the nave, or perhaps the choir, a stalwart tree had sprung up; the disorder was a byword; neglect and decay

had fallen upon the abominable work of Thomas Cromwell. But now, in my manhood, I have returned to the scenes of my childhood and witnessed the glorious transformations that have been wrought by the men who have spurred the British Government to aid them in their endeavors to uncover some of the finest monuments expressing the greatness of the English people. I remember Rievaulx⁶ when it was impossible to distinguish anything but the higher parts of the building. When I visited this spot some ten years ago, all the disarray of nature had been cleared away and there were revealed those columns and arches whose grace, so perfect, filled me with joy. In rapt astonishment I looked upon what was left of that abbey and easily imagined the beauty and the majesty that had been there before the sixteenth century.

It might be asked, if there are such books as those referred to above dealing with the work of reconstruction, why do I call for another? Let me explain this desire of mine. Such works as *Abbeys* by Dr. James and *The English Abbey* by Mr. Crossley⁷ are devoted mainly to the history, the architecture, the orders, and the customs of the monasteries. It is true, reference is made to the legends that have been associated with the foundations, their abbots, and the benefactors of the institu-

tions. These works are invaluable as instructions for enlightening the mind of the modern student. But there is far more to an abbey than the acceptable historical account of its being, for deep in the mind of the builders of the monasteries there was something which governed—nay, stimulated—the artist's soul and prompted him to render in stone, in clay, in wood, in metal, the triumphs of art which made the building in truth "the Bible of the poor."

It was legend, as we see it pictured at York, at Lincoln, at Durham, at Ely, that touched the deep wells of imagination in the souls of the medieval artists and urged them to produce the wonders of the Gothic. I believe it is no more possible to dissociate the legend from the history of the abbey than it is to rid the building of the artistic creations of the mason's mind. Therefore, legend, so it seems to me, must be brought back to our sense of the fitness of things if we are to understand why the marvels of the Gothic came to be.

How different it is when one turns to some of the work that has been produced in recent years by French students! The monumental labor of Émile Mâle⁸ is a step in the right direction. That, however, is somewhat recondite and appeals only to a mind versed in the history of medieval art. I am seeking for the monuments of Britain a work

that will incorporate all the historical elements which the cathedral represented. Take such a volume as M. Francis Gourvil's *En Bretagne*,⁹ or one devoted entirely to legends, such as O. L. Aubert's *Légendes traditionnelles de la Bretagne*.¹⁰ In these works the legend assumes an importance which British authors, unfortunately, seem to have overlooked. How they have failed to grasp the significance of the legends that grew up about the monasteries and those marvelous productions which represent some of the finest stories of the Bible and the Apocrypha is something I have never been able to understand. And not until Émile Mâle's work was published had I any clue to the matter. Then, when I learned that the key to the iconography of religious art had been lost after Trent, a light shone in on me which made things clear. Even now, after nearly four centuries of religious turmoil and national strife, men have not been wholly bereft, through these vicissitudes, of their insatiable desire for the mysterious and the miraculous.

Art has ever been the faithful servant of legend. What would literature and art be without mystery and miracle? It is the sense of mystery in the soul of man which begets miracle and, because of his desire to rise above himself and the frailties of his flesh, his creative imagination sets to work

to idealize a personage superior to all he sees around him. Reverence and adoration fire his zeal and delight his soul. Whether or not this be a reasonable view to take of the matter, it should be clear that there was always present, when the church was one and the communicants in and near it every day, the figure of God's greatest miracle, Jesus, in whom the suppliant found solace for his griefs and the prospects of joy hereafter. Again, I say the cathedrals cannot be understood merely from descriptions of their architecture and scholarly recordings of their history. The dominant motif is essential because the inspiration that produced them came from this central figure and it was to perpetuate the memory of the crucified Son that they became things of beauty, monuments to the glory of God.

No one can have the slightest idea how far we have departed from the motives that actuated the medieval man of religion unless he be acquainted with such studies as that of Émile Mâle, which shows clearly the utter falseness of so many of the works that were written on the monasteries by the quasi-rationalist authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Now that the key to the iconography of medieval religious art has been rediscovered, there seems to be no reason why the precise scholars who are

such sticklers for facts should hesitate longer about the significance of the legends and not restore them to their rightful place in the history of the abbeys.

Let us take one of many of the handbooks of an abbey church, that of Glastonbury. It is an appropriate time for looking back at its history because this year we celebrate the millenary of one of its most famous abbots, Dunstan. Here it is well-nigh impossible to ignore the legends, for they have become an essential part of some of our greatest works in literature. Indeed, the story of Glastonbury is the central one of early English history. It touches every activity of life and in it there is shown how, through a period of 1500 years, all that was best in the English character was shaped, and how the work of christianizing Saxon pagans was accomplished. There is no story like it.

Frederick Bligh Bond in his *An Architectural Handbook of Glastonbury Abbey with a Historical Chronicle of the Building*¹¹ begins with the founding of the little church of wattle by Joseph of Arimathea,¹² and he relates that "all through the period of Celtic dominance this humble structure was scrupulously preserved." Let scholars and scientists object and protest as much as they will, they cannot succeed in thrusting that little

wattle church out of its place where, according to the story, it stood for over a thousand years and was revered and venerated through all the storm and travail that attended the Saxon transformations. Only a great fire in 1184 swept it completely away.

It is strange how the critics of these legends have approached the one of the foundation of the wattle church. Some of them lean to the story told by William of Malmesbury, the chronicler of the twelfth century, who was employed to collect evidence and write the history of Glastonbury. Others repudiate William's account of it, root and branch. The author of the article on Glastonbury in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*¹³ gives us a straightforward account without lending any bias toward what is regarded as legend. What is accepted as the earliest piece of real history is the grant of Gwrgan, the King of Damnonia (Devon), in 601 A.D. This grant was the land of Ynyswitrin to the "old church" in the time of the Abbot Worgret, which occurred about the period when St. Augustine was in England.

What recollections this name Ynyswitrin brings to mind! Among the historians of ancient England who place faith in the record set out by William of Malmesbury is Professor Freeman,¹⁴ who gives "sound reasons for believing that the

document, which Malmesbury copied, was a genuine one." This gift of Gwrgan made the area of it a monastic island, and that island was Avalon.

What would English literature be if it were stripped of the Arthurian legends? Nay, let me go further and ask: What would the legends of Brittany suffer if this were done? At the close of one of the most beautiful of the legends of Brittany which have been preserved (incorporated in M. Aubert's book) I find the following: "Et c'est ainsi que, depuis quinze siècles, Arthur se repose dans l'île d'Aval, en attendant que sonne l'heure où la Bretagne, ayant besoin de lui, le rappellera à la lumière."¹⁵

Those of us who had the benefit of a liberal education must remember the stories told in the home circle about Arthur, for it was at that time that Tennyson published *The Idylls of the King*.¹⁶ The very names of the personages in the Arthurian story were household words. What school-boy of that day would not thrill at the word Excalibur! Legend was so woven into the texture of English thought that it is depressing now to think how, in the last two generations, instructors have departed from the English tradition of learning.

The next interesting period concerning the wattle church is dated 725, when, in the Charter of Ine, King of the West Saxons, we read of it having been signed in the "Lignea Basilica." Mr. Bond tells us that this charter "was framed to exempt the church of Glastonbury and its belongings from all outside jurisdiction. . . ."¹⁷ Then, for something like four hundred years, the monks of Glastonbury and the bishops of the diocese disputed the validity of this document which is now regarded by some of the authorities as a spurious composition. Three hundred years later a Charter of King Cnut¹⁸ was signed within its walls.

Myth is so often only a simple fact hidden by the romance of the creative imagination that the suspicious investigator stops short of the source. Incredulity is the enemy of the searcher after truth, and many recent discoveries by the geologist, by the archaeologist, and other diggers into the past have revealed stores of knowledge far beyond the ken of the skeptics of the nineteenth century. One instance will serve to point this fact, notably the explorations of Professor Garstang at Jericho¹⁹ and later at Mersin²⁰ where finds of the sixth millennium B.C. were uncovered.

But for our purpose, concerned with the founding of the wattle church, we now have the work

of investigation by J. Charles Wall, *The First Christians of Britian*.²¹ In his book we read: "It was only ten years after the Crucifixion that the Emperor, Claudius, sent his general Aulus Plautius to conquer Britain."²² Wall, moreover, reminds us that trade between Britain and the Mediterranean was carried on long before the days of Julius Caesar. Then he writes:

The Emperor Claudius shortly followed his general to the shores of Britain to direct the military operations, and among other native chieftains who submitted to him was Arviragus, King of the Dobuni, a tribe occupying the country on the east side of the River Severn. This king, who is associated with Joseph of Arimathaea, was left to rule over his people as tributary to the Empire.²³

Although I suppose the correct procedure for a student is to follow the footsteps of the skilled investigator, I must admit that, when I do so, I do not jettison the myths and legends that he spurns. I do not find it at all difficult to go along with the scientists and, at the same time, cling to the wondrous stories men have told of their heroes. And with this regard I love to turn back to some of the histories that have met with severe criticism because of the amount of space that has been given to unfounded narrative. I treasure Sharon Turner's *The History of the Anglo-Saxons*,²⁴

for he had the unique quality of sifting a myth without completely demolishing it. I find in him the courage to accept what seems plausible and also a sense of how the myth arose.

Myth has always seemed to me to be the rolling stone that does gather moss; as it passes from tongue to tongue, generation after generation, it receives a new garb because it has passed through more mature imaginations. Thus, after a few centuries of telling the story, from a simple person there emerges a grand figure arrayed in gorgeous robes, and from some unusual event there is dramatized a tragedy, or a comedy, of such dimensions that the action which gave it life is lost in the accretions the telling has added to it.

Over a period of many years I read everything I could find on the Arthurian legends and when, in Turner's book, I came across the description of Henry II's action after he learned that Arthur was interred at Glastonbury, I felt that I had met an historian who might be safely trusted to find whatever value there was in the subject with which he was dealing. Turner says:

. . . The king communicated this to the abbot and monks of the monastery, with the additional information, that the body had been buried very deep to keep it from the Saxons; and that it would be found not in a stone tomb, but in a hollowed oak.

There were two pyramids or pillars at that time standing in the cemetery of the abbey. They dug between these till they came to a leaden cross lying under a stone, which had this inscription, and which Giraldus says he saw and handled—"Hic jacet sepultus inclytus Rex Arthurus in insula Avalonia." Below this, at the depth of sixteen feet from the surface, a coffin of hollow oak was found containing bones of an unusual size. The leg-bone was three fingers (probably in their breadth) longer than that of the tallest man then present. This man was pointed out to Giraldus. The skull was large, and showed the marks of ten wounds. Nine of these had concreted into the bony mass, but one had a cleft in it, and the opening still remained; apparently the mortal blow.

Giraldus says, in another place, that the bones of one of Arthur's wives were found there with his, but distinct, at the lower end. Her yellow hair lay apparently perfect in substance and colour, but on a monk's eagerly grasping and raising it up, it fell to dust.

The bones were removed into the great church at Glastonbury, and deposited in a magnificent shrine, which was afterwards placed, in obedience to the order of Edward I., before the high altar. He visited Glastonbury with his queen, 1276, and had the shrine of Arthur opened to contemplate his remains. They were both so interested by the sight, that the king folded the bones of Arthur in a rich shroud, and the queen those of his wife; and replaced them reverentially in their tomb.

The circumstances of Arthur's funeral could be known only from Welsh traditions. Giraldus has left us one of these: "Morgan, a noble lady, proprietor of this district and patroness of the Abbey, and related to Arthur, had the king carried, after the battle of Camlan, to the island called Glastonbury to heal his wounds." The same facts are alluded to by Jeffry, in his elegant poem, which entitles him to more literary respect than his history, and which contains more of real British traditions.

The pyramids or obelisks that are stated to have marked the place of Arthur's interment, long remained at Glastonbury. They had images and inscriptions, which have not yet been understood, but which do not seem to relate to Arthur. A sword, fancied to have been his caliburno, was presented by Richard the First, as a valuable gift, to the King of Sicily.²⁵

There are increasing indications today that the scholars are not satisfied to accept the attitude that was taken by most of the writers of the nineteenth century. The eminent orientalist of Johns Hopkins University, William Foxwell Albright, in his book, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*,²⁶ remarks:

. . . Thanks to the new control of tradition which archaeology affords in the hands of men like Collingwood, Wheeler, and Crawford, the substantial historicity of the Arthurian cycle is becoming

more and more evident, however much poetic fancy may have refracted and embellished the facts.²⁷

Further, he writes:

. . . Recent volumes of *Antiquity* bear eloquent testimony to the increasing seriousness with which literary tradition is being regarded in England, in spite of the obviously imaginative character of most of the Arthurian legends.²⁸

It is a long step to take from Arthur to Dunstan—long indeed—for it means passing from the realm of myth to reality. The Abbot of Glastonbury in the records is a very real personage, and his character has been examined so closely that the historians are divided in opinion of his true worth. Perhaps he is the most amazing Englishman of all time. The influence that he wielded over court and church was so great that it is felt at times even to this day, notably in the coronation service of an English king.

Dunstan was born at Glastonbury in 925 not far from the old wattle church. William of Malmesbury seems to have derived the name from *dun*, a hill, and *stan*, stone. James Ingram, however, says: "It is a contraction, perhaps, from *thungenestan*, *thun'stan*, Dunstan; signifying *most noble*."²⁹ When a child, he had visions of his future greatness and dreamed he was to build a

superb monastery. He was encouraged to study and so easily did he master his tasks that he advanced far more quickly than his companions. He suffered serious ailments when a boy and in delirium ran away into the hills, imagining that wild dogs were chasing him. After a time he entered the monastery at Glastonbury and, under Irish monks, he set to work to store his mind. Extraordinary stories are told of his precocity and versatility. He was so far advanced in knowledge that the ignorant accused him of demoniacal arts. Later the king was influenced against him, and Dunstan was driven from court.

Then he developed an unfortunate attachment for a maiden whom he wished to marry. The bishop dissuaded him, however, and conjured him to become a monk. There is no doubt that his illnesses and the frustration of his intention to marry had a serious effect upon his mind but, although he seemed to outgrow these weaknesses and live a life of extraordinary activity, there remained in him certain traits which affected his character. The story of his rise to power, of how he became Abbot of Glastonbury and, afterwards, Archbishop of Canterbury, is told in all the history books on the Anglo-Saxons.

There are legends enough associated with the history of Glastonbury, from the first days of the

wattle church to the passing of Dunstan, to provide material for a full book as interesting as that I referred to above—*The Legends of Brittany*. When we reach the period of more precise recording, the legends are forgotten and scarcely ever mentioned in the documents. But we have not then reached a period of less interest, for the story of the building of the cathedral is wonderful in itself, and it is fully recorded by Mr. Bond³⁰ in a chronology taken from the documents.

It was not until about the middle of the fourteenth century that most of the abbey was completed. What a thing of beauty it must have been—the work of centuries of thought and labor; one of the architectural glories of England! It was of immense size; indeed, the older antiquaries give the internal total length of the abbey church as 580 feet. Only one edifice in England is recorded as larger than Glastonbury—old St. Paul's, which according to Dugdale was 690 feet in total length. But the measurement of it is now shown to have been a mistake. It should have been 100 feet less. From the remains the visitor to Glastonbury, unless he be a skilled architect, can form no idea of the beauty that once was there. Standing in the space of what was the choir and looking toward the nave through what is left of that gigantic arch, one can imagine the

immensity and majesty of it all. And St. Mary's Chapel, or what remains of it, reveals a sense of beauty that is really touching, it is so exquisite in its graceful adornment and well-balanced proportions.

And then this work of the soul and mind of man, all the strange stories of the beginning of the little wattle church, the grants of land given to the abbey, the association of Arthur, the incumbency of Dunstan, nay all the labors of the abbots to make Glastonbury a thing of perfection, raised to the glory of God, were wiped out in a few weeks to provide money for a royal purse and lands for ducal houses. There is no myth or legend about the destruction of the abbey. The methods by which it was demolished can be read from the documents, and there is no better short account than that to be found in Brooks Adams' *The Law of Civilization and Decay*.³¹ The Abbot, Richard Whyting, though he signed the deed which proclaimed Henry VIII supreme head of the church, became a victim of the royal greed because he refused to surrender his monastery and yield up its accumulated treasure. This man had the courage to resist tyranny and injustice but suffered the cruelest death for the love of his abbey and the defense of her liberties. He was

dragged on a hurdle to Tor Hill nearby and there executed. The recorder says:

He would confess no more gold nor silver, nor any other thing more than he did before your Lordship in the Tower. . . . And thereupon took his death very patiently, and his head and body bestowed in like manner as I certified your lordship in my last letter.²²

Further we learn: "One quarter standeth at Wells, another at Bath, and at Ilchester and Bridgewater the rest. And his head upon the abbey gate at Glaston."

Thus ended the glory of the abbey church at Glastonbury. The edifice was destroyed, broken up, and the land sold. The writer of the article in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* says:

A darker passage does not occur in the annals of the English Reformation than this murder of an able and high-spirited man, whose worst offense was that he defended as best he could from the hand of the spoiler the property in his charge.²³

Since that day the world has been afflicted with sore troubles, and I cannot but think that there must have been a subtle link running from myth to reality, a something that bound men to a discipline that ordered their lives much better than the theory and practice in vogue this day. We

look in vain for the things of beauty our heirs will honor as the work of our hands. There is nothing we see that will remind them, as do the ruins of the abbeys, of the greatness that is past. And perhaps it is because we are beginning to feel the lack of some binding quality in our lives, a re-linking with tradition, that we yearn occasionally for glimpses into the long ago, hoping we shall find a magnet there that will draw us out of the present strife and unite us all in the work of reaffirming and re-establishing the great tradition of Christian Europe.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

* *Amer. Jour. Econ. Sociol.*, IV, No. 1 (Oct., 1944), 9-23.

¹ 2nd ed.; London: The Great Western Railway; printed by Spottiswoode, Ballantyne & Co. Ltd., 1926.

² M. R. James, Litt.D., F.S.A., F.B.A., Provost of Eton.

³ A. Hamilton Thompson, M.A., D.Litt., F.S.A., Professor of Medieval History in the University of Leeds.

⁴ The work was produced for the Great Western Railway Company, and, in the first two years of its publication, 40,000 copies were issued. Surely this denotes a surprisingly large audience thirsting for knowledge of the past: Dr. James gives us—alas, in too brief space—the history of seventy-eight abbeys, and the book is beautifully illustrated. Indeed, the art of the printer is noticed on every page; the production is a finished work deserving a place in every library worthy of the name.

⁵ Shropshire.

⁶ Founded in 1131.

⁷ F. H. Crossley, F.S.A. (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1935).

⁸ See chap. V, "Émile Mâle and the Spirit of Medieval Culture."

⁹ Grenoble: B. Arthaud, 1929.

¹⁰ Saint-Brieuc: Prud'Homme, 1928.