English Literature

The Britons and the Anglo-Saxons

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Introduction:

The two earliest of the nine main divisions of English Literature are by far the longest--taken together are longer than all the others combined--but we shall pass rather rapidly over them. This is partly because the amount of thoroughly great literature which they produced is small, and partly because for present-day readers it is in effect a foreign literature, written in early forms of English or in foreign languages, so that to-day it is intelligible only through special study or in translation.

THE BRITONS:

The present English race has gradually shaped itself out of several distinct peoples which successively occupied or conquered the island of Great Britain. The earliest one of these peoples which need here be mentioned belonged to the Celtic family and was itself divided into two branches. The Goidels or Gaels were settled in the northern part of the island, which is now Scotland, and were the ancestors of the present Highland Scots. On English literature they exerted little or no influence until a late period. The Britons, from whom the present Welsh are descended, inhabited what is now England and Wales; and they were still further subdivided, like most barbarous peoples, into many tribes which were often at war with one another. Though the Britons were conquered and chiefly supplanted later on by the Anglo-Saxons, enough of them, as
we shall see, were spared and intermarried with the victors to transmit something of their racial qualities to the English nation and literature.

The characteristics of the Britons, which are those of the Celtic family as a whole, appear in their history and in the scanty late remains of their literature. Two main traits include or suggest all the others: first, a vigorous but fitful emotionalism which rendered them vivacious, lovers of novelty, and brave, but ineffective in practical affairs; second, a somewhat fantastic but sincere and delicate sensitiveness to beauty. Into impetuous action they were easily hurried; but their momentary ardor easily cooled into fatalistic despondency. To the mysterious charm of Nature--of hills and forests and pleasant breezes; to the loveliness and grace of meadow-flowers or of a young man or a girl; to the varied sheen of rich colors--to all attractive objects of sight and sound and motion their fancy responded keenly and joyfully; but they preferred chiefly to weave these things into stories and verse of supernatural romance or vague suggestiveness; for substantial work of solid structure either in life or in literature they possessed comparatively little faculty.

This charming fancifulness and delicacy of feeling is apparently the great contribution of the Britons to English literature; from it may perhaps be descended the fairy scenes of Shakespeare and possibly to some extent the lyrical music of Tennyson.

THE ROMAN OCCUPATION:

Of the Roman conquest and occupation of Britain (England and Wales) we need only make brief mention, since it produced virtually no effect on English literature. The fact should not be forgotten that for over three hundred years, from the first century A. D. to the beginning of the fifth, the island was a Roman province, with Latin as the language of the ruling class of Roman immigrants, who introduced Roman civilization and later on Christianity, to the Britons of the
towns and plains. But the interest of the Romans in the island was centered on other things than writing, and the great bulk of the Britons themselves seem to have been only superficially affected by the Roman supremacy. At the end of the Roman rule, as at its beginning, they appear divided into mutually jealous tribes, still largely barbarous and primitive.

The Anglo-Saxons:

Meanwhile across the North Sea the three Germanic tribes which were destined to form the main element in the English race were multiplying and unconsciously preparing to swarm to their new home. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes occupied territories in the region which includes parts of the present Holland, of Germany about the mouth of the Elbe, and of Denmark. They were barbarians, living partly from piratical expeditions against the northern and eastern coasts of Europe, partly from their flocks and herds, and partly from a rude sort of agriculture. At home they seem to have sheltered themselves chiefly in unsubstantial wooden villages, easily destroyed and easily abandoned; For the able-bodied freemen among them the chief occupation, as a matter of course, was war. Strength, courage, and loyalty to king and comrades were the chief virtues that they admired; ferocity and cruelty, especially to other peoples, were necessarily among their prominent traits when their blood was up; though among themselves there was no doubt plenty of rough and ready companionable good-humor. Their bleak country, where the foggy and unhealthy marshes of the coast gave way further inland to vast and somber forests, developed in them during their long inactive winters a sluggish and gloomy mood, in which, however, the alternating spirit of aggressive enterprise was never quenched. In religion they had reached a moderately advanced state of heathenism, worshipping especially, it seems, Woden, a
'furious' god as well as a wise and crafty one; the warrior Tiu; and the strong-armed Thunor (the Scandinavian Thor); but together with these some milder deities like the goddess of spring, Eostre, from whom our Easter is named. For the people on whom they fell these barbarians were a pitiless and terrible scourge; yet they possessed in undeveloped form the intelligence, the energy, the strength--most of the qualities of head and heart and body--which were to make of them one of the great world-races.

THE ANGLO-SAXON CONQUEST AND SETTLEMENT:

The process by which Britain became England was a part of the long agony which transformed the Roman Empire into modern Europe. In the fourth century A. D. the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes began to harry the southern and eastern shores of Britain, where the Romans were obliged to maintain a special military establishment against them. But early in the fifth century the Romans, hard-pressed even in Italy by other barbarian invaders, withdrew all their troops and completely abandoned Britain. Not long thereafter, and probably before the traditional date of 449, the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons began to come in large bands with the deliberate purpose of permanent settlement. Their conquest, very different in its methods and results from that of the Romans, may roughly be said to have occupied a hundred and fifty or two hundred years. The earlier invading hordes fixed themselves at various points on the eastern and southern shore and gradually fought their way inland, and they were constantly augmented by new arrivals. In general the Angles settled in the east and north and the Saxons in the south, while the less numerous Jutes, the first to come, in Kent, soon ceased to count in the movement. In this way there naturally came into existence a group of separate and rival kingdoms, which when they
were not busy with the Britons were often at war with each other. Their number varied somewhat from time to time as they were united or divided; but on the whole, seven figured most prominently, whence comes the traditional name 'The Saxon Heptarchy' (Seven Kingdoms). The resistance of the Britons to the Anglo-Saxon advance was often brave and sometimes temporarily successful. Early in the sixth century, for example, they won at Mount Badon in the south a great victory, later connected in tradition with the legendary name of King Arthur, which for many years gave them security from further aggressions. But in the long run their racial defects proved fatal; they were unable to combine in permanent and steady union, and tribe by tribe the newcomers drove them slowly back; until early in the seventh century the Anglo-Saxons were in possession of nearly all of what is now England, the exceptions being the regions all along the west coast, including what has ever since been, known as Wales.

Of the Roman and British civilization the Anglo-Saxons were ruthless destroyers, exulting, like other barbarians, in the wanton annihilation of things which they did not understand. Every city, or nearly every one, which they took, they burned, slaughtering the inhabitants. They themselves occupied the land chiefly as masters of scattered farms, each warrior established in a large rude house surrounded by its various outbuildings and the huts of the British slaves and the Saxon and British bondmen. Just how largely the Britons were exterminated and how largely they were kept alive as slaves and wives, is uncertain; but it is evident that at least a considerable number were spared; to this the British names of many of our objects of humble use, for example mattoc and basket, testify.

In the natural course of events, however, no sooner had the Anglo-Saxons destroyed the (imperfect and partial) civilization of their predecessors than they began to rebuild one for themselves; possessors of a fertile land, they settled down to develop it, and from tribes of
lawless fighters were before long transformed into a race of farmer-citizens. Gradually trade with the Continent, also, was reestablished and grew; but perhaps the most important humanizing influence was the reintroduction of Christianity. The story is famous of how Pope Gregory the Great, struck by the beauty of certain Angle slave-boys at Rome, declared that they ought to be called not Angli but Angeli (angels) and forthwith, in 597, sent to Britain St. Augustine (not the famous African saint of that name), who landed in Kent and converted that kingdom. Within the next two generations, and after much fierce fighting between the adherents of the two religions, all the other kingdoms as well had been christianized. It was only the southern half of the island, however, that was won by the Roman missionaries; in the north the work was done independently by preachers from Ireland, where, in spite of much anarchy, a certain degree of civilization had been preserved. These two types of Christianity, those of Ireland and of Rome, were largely different in spirit. The Irish missionaries were simple and loving men and won converts by the beauty of their lives; the Romans brought with them the architecture, music, and learning of their imperial city and the aggressive energy which in the following centuries was to make their Church supreme throughout the Western world. When the inevitable clash for supremacy came, the king of the then-dominant Anglian kingdom, Northumbria, made choice of the Roman as against the Irish Church, a choice which proved decisive for the entire island. And though our personal sympathies may well go to the finer-spirited Irish, this outcome was on the whole fortunate; for only through religious union with Rome during the slow centuries of medieval rebirth could England be bound to the rest of Europe as one of the family of cooperating Christian states; and outside that family she would have been isolated and spiritually starved.
One of the greatest gifts of Christianity, it should be observed, and one of the most important influences in medieval civilization, was the network of monasteries which were now gradually established and became centers of active hospitality and the chief homes of such learning as was possible to the time.

Reference: *A History of English Literature 1918*