INTRODUCTION

I. Historical Background

The Story of the meeting of Gregory the Great with the young English lads in the Roman marketplace and his famous series of puns forms a picturesque if legendary beginning to a train of events that was to alter the whole face of Europe. Gregory may well have had in his mind the vague outline of a plan which could, if it succeeded, save both Rome and civilized Europe as he knew it. He saw the mighty world empire of Rome tottering to its fall, but instead of sitting by and waiting for the end, he conceived the idea of winning the young and vigorous nations for Christ and establishing a new Roman Empire, this time an empire based on the rock foundation of Christ and the Church. He saw Rome ruling a spiritual kingdom won, not by the sword but the tireless efforts of missionaries making dangerous and arduous journeys to the uttermost parts of the known world and risking their lives among heathen peoples. He was only too ready to accept such risks himself. The story of his vain attempt to go in person to the English people (c. 10) may not be historical but is certainly true to character.

Those fair-haired youths whom he saw in Rome were subjects of Ælle, King of Deira, one of the two kingdoms of which the Anglian province of Northumbria originally consisted;[1] it covered roughly the area of modern Yorkshire, while the kingdom of Bernicia extended to the north, though its exact limits are not certain. Bernicia was

[1] P. Hunter Blair, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 42 ff.

ruled over by King Ida. When Æthelfrith, his grandson, came to the throne of Deira in 593, he united the two kingdoms by marrying Ælle's daughter Acha; also, by bloody fighting, he established the supremacy of the English invaders over the Celtic peoples whom they had supplanted. The Anglian conquerors were, as Gregory knew, heathen, but he was probably not aware that the British races whom they and the other Germanic invaders conquered were Christian. The Christianity which had flourished in Britain up to the middle of the fifth century lost touch with Rome and the Gaulish Church when the Anglo-Saxon invasions largely cut the British Christians off from the Continent, thus making it very difficult for them to acquire any but the vaguest knowledge of what was going on in Europe. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Celtic Church, though not differing in any essentials from the orthodox beliefs of the Catholic Church, had none the less developed certain differences in practice, such as the shape of the tonsure, the formula used in baptism, and particularly the use of a different table or cycle for fixing the date of Easter. Nor did the Celtic Church accept the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome as the ruler of the Western Church.[2]

It is not surprising that Gregory should have had little knowledge about conditions in Britain. Some information, probably not always accurate, may have reached Rome through the association of the Frankish royal house with the kingdom of Kent. And it is possible that stories, perhaps highly exaggerated, were carried by British and Irish pilgrims to such places as the monastery at Lérins.[3] But it

[2] Plummer, II, 348 ff.
[3] Bright, p. 47.

is quite clear that, when Gregory sent his band of missionaries under the leadership of Augustine in 597, such information as they had was not calculated to encourage them. They had not gone far before their courage failed them altogether. Bede tells us how they were paralyzed with terror at the thought of going to a barbarous, fierce, and unbelieving nation whose language they did not even know. So they sent Augustine back to ask Gregory to relieve them of this dangerous mission. But Gregory sent them a firm but encouraging reply urging them not to allow themselves to be frightened by the difficulties of the journey and by any horror stories about the land to which they had to go.[4]

When, after a long and perilous journey, the party landed in Britain, they found a highly civilized court in Kent ruled over by King Æthelberht, who was in close touch with the Christian religion, though he was not himself a Christian. His wife Bertha, daughter of Charibert, King of Paris, was a Christian who used the Church of St. Martin as her place of worship, and she had a bishop with her as her spiritual guide. The mission of Augustine was, needless to say, successful, and, though Christianity had its setbacks in this and other neighbouring kingdoms, it was in due course established in most parts of the South and Southeast.

Meanwhile Æthelfrith was king of the combined kingdoms of Northumbria until in 616 he was slain by Rædwald, King of East Anglia, at whose court Edwin had been living and who was now supporting Edwin's cause. Edwin, a son of King Ælle, belonged to the Deiran royal

[4] *HE*, I, 23.

family, and was therefore a rival of Æthelfrith. He had spent his early years in exile, at first with the Britons in North Wales and later with Rædwald. Here in Rædwald's court, as the finds at Sutton Hoo have proved,[5] civilization was of a high standard and European art and culture were familiar. Edwin must have known much about Christianity if he was really at the court of Cadfan in North Wales, as British tradition asserts;[6] while Rædwald had also accepted the new religion, though he afterwards relapsed into a sort of semi-heathenism.

Edwin, having gained the throne, was determined to make himself a king after the heroic type; but his knowledge of southern European culture made him eager to be something more. He succeeded his patron Rædwald as overlord of the whole of Britain with the exception of Kent—the fifth of the series of seven overlords whom Bede names in his *Ecclesiastical History*.[7] It was part of Edwin's ambition to ally himself to a court that stood also for southern culture and had associations with Rome; this was why he asked for the hand of Æthelburh, daughter of Æthelberht of Kent. She was granted to him on condition that she be allowed to keep her Christian faith; to this end she brought with her the Roman Paulinus, a member not of the original Augustinian mission but of the second party of four which arrived in England in 601. Not until late in 625 did he arrive with Edwin's bride in Northumbia. It was more than eighteen months before Edwin finally

[5] For a preliminary report see *The Sutton Hoo Burial*, published by the British Museum (London, 1947). A complete account of these astonishing finds is in course of preparation.

[6] This tradition is preserved only in a twelfth-century Life of St. Oswald. See *Symeon of Durham*, ed. T. Arnold (*RS*, LXXV) I, 345.

[7] *HE*, II, 5.

made up his mind to become a Christian and to be baptized at York on Easter Eve, 627. Among those who were baptized with him was his great-niece Hild, who was afterwards to become the first abbess of the monastery at Whitby.[8]

Edwin's reign was extremely prosperous while it lasted, and Bede describes with enthusiasm the peace that prevailed in Britain wherever his dominion reached, and his majestic progresses through his kingdom.[9] But it was not to last, for Bede ends his second book with an account of his overthrow by the combined force of Cædwalla (or Cadwallon), King of Gwynedd, and Penda of Mercia at the Battle of Hatfield Chase in 633. Edwin and his son Osfrith were killed. His enemies followed up their victory by a calculated devastation of all Northumbria. Paulinus fled, taking with him the widowed Queen Æthelburh and her two young children, one of whom, Eanflæd, was later destined to become Abbess of Whitby.

For a whole year Northumbria seemed to have returned to its old paganism. Once again it fell apart into its separate divisions of Bernicia and Deira. It was left to the warrior saint, Oswald, son of King Æthelfrith, to restore Christianity. Although Oswald was the son of Edwin's sister, Edwin had regarded him as a rival, for Oswald was the heir to the throne of Bernicia; so both Oswald and his brother Oswiu spent their youth in exile and received Christian teaching from the monks of Iona, the Irish monastery off the southwest coast of Scotland. At the battle of Heavenfield in 634 the British king Cadwallon was killed, the invaders were driven out, and the two king-

[8] *HE*, II, 14; IV, 23.
[9] *HE*, II, 16.

doms were united again under the rule of Oswald. Oswald at once set about re-establishing Christianity with the help of St. Aidan, an Irish monk from Iona, who naturally introduced the practices and liturgy of the Irish Church.

The Christianity of the British Church was very naturally suspect so far as the Saxon invaders were concerned, no attempt having been made by the Britons to convert their conquerors. But the Irish had always been on friendlier terms with those invaders, for they had never been subject to their cruel ravages. Hence Oswald had no trouble in getting help from the Irish for the reconversion of the Northumbrian kingdom. St. Aidan set up his diocesan centre at Lindisfarne, accessible only at low tide and isolated enough to give Aidan and his monks the remoteness that the Irish monastics loved, but within easy access of Bamborough, where Oswald had his fort residence. The King and the Bishop worked together and succeeded in re-establishing the church on more solid foundations than Paulinus and his helpers had been able to build. Unfortunately Oswald was killed in battle in 642, while fighting against Penda of Mercia, his heathen foe, who was to be a constant thorn in the side of Northumbria for thirteen years. Oswald died praying for his followers. In fact, " 'May God have mercy on their souls,' as Oswald said when he fell to the ground,"[10] afterwards became a proverbial expression.

After Oswald's death the kingdom once more was divided up into its two parts, Oswald's brother Oswiu assumed the throne of Bernicia, while a young man of the royal house of Deira, Oswine, a great-nephew of King

[10] *HE*, III, 12.

Ælle, became ruler of that kingdom but still retained the friendship of St. Aidan. He was an earnest Christian, but his reign was destined to be a short one. Oswiu was ambitious and was determined to become ruler of the whole of Northumbria. First of all, he married Eanflæd, who as a child of ten had been taken by Paulinus to Kent, where she grew up. As Eanflæd was a daughter of Edwin, this marriage gave him a claim to the throne of Deira. But meanwhile Penda of Mercia was growing more and more powerful and becoming Oswiu's greatest rival. Oswiu knew it was only a matter of time before Penda leapt. So, perhaps to gain extra power, he invaded Deira in 651 and put Oswine to flight, afterwards causing him to be murdered in cold blood. He got little good out of this action, however, for the Deirans chose as ruler a son of Oswald, Œthelwald, who speedily put himself under the protection of Penda. Aidan survived his friend Oswine by only a few days.[11]

After a few years of uneasy peace, Penda made up his mind to destroy Oswiu. Bede tells us that Oswiu made an attempt to buy Penda off but was finally compelled to fight for existence. He was surrounded by enemies. His nephew Œthelwald was willing to help the enemy all he could, even though he refrained from going into the fight himself, possibly fearing the greatest calamity that could befall a Germanic warrior, that of killing a near kinsman either accidentally or deliberately. Also fighting for Penda was Æthelhere, King of the East Angles, who is referred to by Bede as *"auctor ipse belli,"* whatever that may mean.[12]

[11] *HE,* III, 17.

[12] *HE,* III, 24. The Old English translation reads *ordfruma* for *auctor,* meaning "source" or "origin."

Oswiu's old British foes combined against him while his own son Ecgfrith was a hostage at Penda's court. The battle was fought in 655 at an unidentified river, the Winwæd, somewhere in the Leeds district. It resulted in a great victory for Oswiu. Penda and Æthelhere were both killed.

Oswiu's victory had many important results. It established his rule over Deira and gave the deathblow to heathenism in the Midlands. Through it Oswiu became overlord not only of the Mercians but of all the peoples of southern England. But this did not last long, for soon afterwards Penda's son, Wulfhere, gained the throne of Mercia, and after 658 he gradually made himself supreme over southern England and forced Oswiu to confine his influence to the area north of the river Humber.

Another important result of the battle was the fulfilment of the vow which Oswiu made before the battle, that if he were successful he would dedicate his baby daughter, Ælfflæd, to the Lord and give twelve small estates on which to build monasteries, six in Bernicia and six in Deira. Ælfflæd was put under the care of St. Hild, whose subsequent career will concern us later.

Meanwhile Oswiu continued to reign successfully in Northumbria and the time began for a fresh and very important series of journeys to Rome which were to alter the whole face of Northumbria, in fact of Western Europe. These journeys are connected with the names of two young men, Biscop Baducing, later known as Benedict Biscop, and Wilfrid, a youth of noble birth who had been brought up in Lindisfarne and was a protégé of Oswiu's queen, Eanflæd. The Queen, who had been educated under the influence of Paulinus and was entirely devoted to the Roman form of worship, was much interested in Wilfrid's

desire to go to Rome and may well have had something to do with Biscop Baducing's determination to go. With the help of her cousin Eorcenberht, King of Kent, the two young men started off together for Rome in 653.[13] Benedict returned home some time before Wilfrid. When the latter got back about 658, his enthusiastic description of all he had seen and learned filled Alhfrith, the sub-king of Deira and son of Oswiu, with such fervour that in due course he and Alhfrith managed to persuade Oswiu to call the Council of Whitby, a gathering of kings, bishops, and priests, which in 664 accepted the Roman allegiance and so brought the Northumbrian Church into the main stream of Roman culture.[14] When in 665 Benedict Biscop went to Rome again, Alhfrith would have gone with him if Oswiu had not forbidden it. But meanwhile Wilfrid remained and in 664 there was a vacancy in the see. This happened because the Irish bishop Colman left, refusing to accept the Roman allegiance, and his successor Tuda died suddenly of the plague soon after the Council. So, at the age of thirty, Wilfrid was consecrated bishop of the whole realm, having his diocesan seat at York. Though Wilfrid had many difficulties and spent only twenty of the forty-six years of his episcopacy ruling his see, yet by his journeys to Rome and his appeals to the Apostolic See, he brought the North into close contact with the papal court; he built churches at Ripon, Hexham, and York which were as fine as any in Western Europe, and he exercised a great influence on the learning, art, and architecture of his time. He is also generally credited with the introduction of the Benedictine Rule in the North.[15]

[13] *Eddius*, c. 3.
[14] *HE*, III, 25; *Eddius*, c. 10.
[15] *Eddius*, c. 14.

An equally close bond was created by Benedict Biscop, who during the reign of Oswiu made two more visits to Rome and finally brought back Theodore of Tarsus, the newly consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury, who was to play an important part in refashioning the English Church and bringing it still more closely into contact with Rome. One of his first journeys was to the North, where he re-consecrated Chad, who had been consecrated by British bishops and who was acting as bishop in Wilfrid's place, as Bishop of York, having been appointed by Oswiu while Wilfrid was in Gaul. Theodore restored Wilfrid to his rightful position and soon afterwards Oswiu died, in 670.

During the twenty-seven years of his reign, Oswiu had seen Christianity firmly established. He was succeeded by his son Ecgfrith, who, a few years before, had married Æthelthryth, better known as St. Audrey or St. Etheldreda. She was the daughter of Anna, King of the East Angles. Not long afterwards, encouraged by St. Wilfrid, she left her husband before the consummation of their marriage, entering the double monastery of Coldingham, which was ruled over by Æbbe, Ecgfrith's aunt. Wilfrid had been on friendly terms with Ecgfrith until this happening, for which Ecgfrith never forgave him. When he married his second wife, Iurminburg, sister-in-law of Centwine, King of Wessex, trouble quickly arose. So when Theodore and Ecgfrith agreed that Wilfrid's great diocese should be divided into three parts, the Bishop refused to accept their decision and in 679 went to Rome to appeal to the Pope. He returned in 680 with the papal judgment. Even though this was a compromise, Ecgfrith refused to accept it and, after imprisoning Wilfrid for a time, finally expelled him altogether.[16]

[16] *Eddius*, c. 34.