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INTRODUCTION

"The true field of Historic Study is the history of those nations and institutions in which the real growth of humanity is to be traced: in which we can follow the developments, the retardations and perturbations, the ebb and flow of human progress, the education of the world, the leading on by the divine light from the simplicity of early forms and ideas where good and evil are distinctly marked, to the complications of modern life, in which light and darkness are mingled so intimately, and truth and falsehood are so hard to distinguish, but in which we believe and trust that the victory of light and truth is drawing nearer every day."

W. STUBBS, *Lectures on Medieval and Modern History* (1886), p. 83.

To many of us, and perhaps especially to those whose daily task is most modern and monotonous, the medieval scene brings all the charm of foreign travel. In both cases we find a change of sights and sounds, buildings and fashions of dress, work and play and gestures and accent, things commonplace to them, but holiday things for us. Thus the merest trivialities bewitch us away from the daily routine of home, revealing our own human nature in a fresh, and therefore refreshing, light.

To borrow an almost inevitable simile, the reader may thus stand upon Malvern Hills, in the heart of England, and look down with the medieval dreamer William Langland upon the Field Full of Folk. Looking eastward and westward by turns, he may get a clear and balanced vision of the whole, and mark how the level and populous east shades off into the mountains of the scattered Western folk. Not, of course, that the Westward view is entirely mountainous, or the Eastward unbrokenly flat. Bredon rises almost in the Eastern foreground, and Malvern can listen to those Sunday bells which Housman has immortalized. Next come the Cotswolds, with Edgehill in the far distance; and then, beyond our bodily vision, those Eastern counties which, with their Fenland, were once the wealthiest and most populous of the Kingdom. Westward, again, we know that Snowdonia rises in the background, far overtopping these Black Mountains which close our view. Thus, however East and West may shade off into each other, yet as we stand here facing the rising sun there is a real gulf between the forward and the hindward landscape; a wide difference, in the mass, between Eastern or Western land, Eastern or

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Western folk. We must not exaggerate this; but we shall go still further astray if we ignore it. Geographically and historically, the division is real.

Again, though in the mass East differs thus from West, and Past from Present, yet each has its own interior differences which cannot be ignored. While insisting that there was once a distinctively medieval civilization, and therefore a medieval mind, a medieval character, we must not forget that this medievalism had its own variations from time to time and from place to place. Especially must we bear in mind that in this far-off world nothing *is* for more than a moment; everything is in process of *becoming*. The England of Edward III differed much from that of William I; and Henry VIII's England differed widely from both. This needs special emphasis in a volume like the present, where the necessary division into subjects rather than into periods renders it almost impossible to remind the reader of change at every turn. It is to be hoped that the constant supply of dates may enable him to trace for himself, if only roughly, both the extent to which medieval society was not static but organic, and also the actual trend of its evolution from 1066 to 1536.* Yet the matter is so important that it may be best to start here explicitly upon this note, and to sum up, in a few pages, the action of that long drama which will occupy my fifty-two formal chapters. What were the Seven Ages of this Medieval Man?

Roughly speaking, the Conquest made William into the Universal Landlord of England; the Battle of Hastings gave him the right of transferring confiscated Saxon lands to his Norman followers. But the Anglo-Saxon law, on the whole, suffered no violent interruption; though it was necessarily patched and amended and added to as time went on, yet it is still the foundation of English Common Law, upon which, again, the United States of America founded their own. Thus, when Abraham Lincoln saw that, to win the war, he must needs follow the example of the South and conscript all able-bodied men for his armies, this was done in virtue of the obligation which had been part of English Common Law from time immemorial, before the Conquest and afterwards.

With such important basis of law in common, the conquering

* Where dates are definite, they will be found in round brackets ( ); where they are only approximate, in square [ ].

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minority and the conquered majority had practically coalesced within three generations. They were now strong and united enough to resist further invasion, and to work out their own political salvation undisturbed by forcible interference from interested outsiders. King and barons, here as on the Continent, struggled for supremacy: but the balance was nice enough in England to make both parties appeal for popular support; and thus the generally beneficent despotism of the earlier kings—altogether beneficent as compared with the anarchy which was then the only alternative—was gradually modified by those constitutional checks which are at the foundations of modern democracy.

In process of time, the Commons were summoned regularly to the King's council. They came at first merely to approve of what he decreed for them, on the old legal principle that "what concerns all should have the consent of all". Then, from at least 1314 onwards, they permit themselves a certain boldness of initiative, laying their petitions before the King. Presently we find that such petitions are fruitful; that they result in new royal Statutes. Then, we find the Commons bargaining with the Crown; taxes are voted in return for redress of grievances; and this is the thin end of that almost irresistible modern wedge, the Power of the Purse. The growing strength of the Commons is emphasized by the fact that, under a Common Law which made every man his own soldier and his own policeman, the King could never control the whole armed forces of the country with that directness with which they were controlled under hireling professional armies elsewhere. The depositions of Edward II and Richard II were done not only in legal form but with legal reason at their back. Even when medieval society began to disintegrate at the end of the fourteenth century, and a generation of civil wars set in, foreign observers admired the comparatively clean and decent prosecution of those quarrels in England; there was no *tertius gaudens* from the Continent to foment English civil wars for his own profit. When, again, a strong monarchy emerged under Henry VII and his descendants, this was far less despotic, far more considerate of popular opinion, than in any parallel case on the Continent.

Meanwhile the material progress, though slow and sometimes fitful, kept pace with the slow and fitful constitutional development; men felt the growing-pains; theory outran practice, and

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eager spirits experienced the sickness of hope deferred. But, gradually, forest and fen and fell were subdued to the plough; buildings increased in scale and in elaboration; even where the high-water-mark of taste was past in art, the wealth of ornament still increased. By 1500, the inventories of furniture and plate in our parish churches show double the value of those in 1300; for this, again, was part of the forward movement of the common folk. If one of William's Norman knights or his Saxon tenant could have seen Tudor England, the change in outward aspect would have bewildered him. So was it, again, with the inward organization, quite apart from Parliament and the Court. The growth of the Jury system was a great step: so, again, was the fourteenth-century development of Justices of the Peace, intermediary between the royal judges and the minor magistrates: "an extraordinary experiment in justice which was at once anti-feudal and a reversal of the hitherto universal trend towards centralization."*

So, again, with the rapidly increasing franchises of the towns, and their experiences in local self-government which bore rich fruit in the national councils of later generations. Then, as now, men were everywhere struggling to combine personal freedom with collective action and efficiency; and the sum-total was progress, if only that of a man who is pursuing a rainbow. There is a deep pathos for all generations in Dr Salter's quiet remark about the Oxford citizens of 1199: the city obtained royal licence to elect a mayor, "and there seems to have been a general impression that to have a mayor would bring the millennium".† English trade had expanded by 1500 to a point which would have amazed the Conqueror. Modern capitalism had begun, and society had long since abandoned the original absolute prohibition of taking interest for moneys lent. Edward I had expelled the Jews; but the Christian usurer had not proved more merciful; soon, therefore, the State ceased to interest itself in the lender's soul, and set itself only to limit his rate of interest. As the citizen grew richer, and was proud to enrich his parish church with paintings or carvings or plate, so he became dress-proud for himself. Our later medieval satirists echo in substance, though in other words, Dante's yearning retrospect to the palmy days when great citizens were not ashamed to go girt with leather belts and clasps of bone. More

* J. E. A. Joliffe, *Constitutional History of Medieval England* (1937), p. 413.
† *Medieval Oxford* (1937), p. 49.

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simple and graceful forms of mantle and tunic, which had reigned even in the highest classes down to the latter half of the fourteenth century, gave way to a vulgar extravagance of form and colour; eccentricity often killed good taste. It seems fair to trace here a symptom of greater changes on the horizon: even where the old things were perfect in their own simpler fashion, men must needs have something newer for sheer novelty's sake. Archdeacons, on their visitations, would condemn a church as "too small and too dark": in other words, they would have had the little Norman or Early English building replaced by one in the new-fashioned Perpendicular style.

So much for the building: and the great institution itself, the Roman Church, had gone through a similar evolution. Throughout the period covered by this volume, Eastern and Western Christianity were eager rivals, and sometimes even bitter enemies; but this must not make us forget how much they always had in common. Though the break between pagan antiquity and medieval Christianity was neither so sudden nor so complete as is often imagined, yet the Middle Age was definitely a Christian era in a sense which cannot be predicated of preceding or of succeeding generations. The belief in one body of Scriptures and (though less uniformly) in one common tradition of Heaven and Hell, one ethical code, one common core of liturgical worship in spite of local variations, had leavened the whole of European thought and practice more deeply and widely than anything else. By William's time, the Western branch of this Church, the *Ecclesia Romana* as it constantly called itself both colloquially and officially, had become one of the completest examples of a Totalitarian State that history records. It claimed to swallow up and standardize all important variations, so that there should be only one Party, that of the State. For this end almost all means were justified; almost all were employed; and, for many generations at least, they were employed with success.

Yet before 1500, for all her greatness, this Church was in many ways out of touch with the "modern" world, to use an adjective which was in men's mouths from the twelfth century at least. In England, however, as compared with the Continent, the Church might claim to have run something of the orderly course which we have traced in our political institutions. Each, of course, acted and reacted on the other. The Conquest brought us strong

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prelates, some of them equally conspicuous for piety, and therefore a stricter discipline. The impulse for founding monasteries was almost stronger here, for five generations or more, than anywhere else. Even when the abbeys had become overloaded with riches, the English political and social atmosphere tempted less to that unabashed worldliness which disgraced so many Continental prince-bishops, prince-abbots, and monasteries into which none were admitted but scions of noble stock. Our prelates were among the most prominent lawyers, especially under Henry II and Edward I; thus the State reaped the great benefit of their help, in those days when learned laymen were almost non-existent. But the Church herself lost those men's individual services almost altogether; and the system of clerical lawyers, reprobated at first by Popes themselves, brought its final Nemesis. Great Churchmen were among the most prominent statesmen in the earlier fight for liberties, even when they, like the barons, were mainly and most directly concerned with the liberties of their own order. But, as time went on and the richer Church endowments went more and more systematically by royal appointment (apart from papal nominees who were often non-resident aliens), then prelates and archdeacons and rich rectors were increasingly degraded to the position of courtly tools or pettifoggers or clerical drudges. If the Churchman had not become so much of an ordinary politician, that division between clergy and laity would have been avoided of which our ancestors complained with increasing bitterness; and the Church herself, under Henry VIII, would have been far less vulnerable to the slings and arrows of baser political conflict.

Meanwhile, the Church's own beneficent work had raised up rivals against her. Such schools as existed had always been clerical, and the population had slowly begun to grow out of its primitive illiteracy. Before the end of the twelfth century, writing was entirely superseding oral tradition among the lawyers. By the thirteenth, manorial accounts were written everywhere, and manorial customs were frequently committed to parchment. The growing numbers of "copyholders" were peasants whose position at law depended primarily on a written "copy". Then, in the fourteenth century, while some of the countryfolk could see nothing better than to burn all the manorial records in revenge, others of their class, and still more among the citizens, were listening to the subversive doctrines of Wyclif and clamouring

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for an Open Bible. At the same time there was intensive multiplication of orthodox religious treatises and pious manuals for the people. This movement was enormously hastened on both sides by the invention of printing. Thus, before our period ends, the serious and resolute peasant or artisan is often in a position to form some religious judgment for himself; while the bishop or the University scholar has at his disposal, if he chooses to taste of it, the vast and epoch-making work of Erasmus.

Everything, therefore, is ripe for revolution in English thought by the time we come to 1536; and on the verge of that revolution we stop. The defeat of Roman Catholicism in this country, and the follies or crimes with which the revolutionaries sullied their victory, and the subsequent alternations of success or failure in a war of ideals which is not yet fought out, would belong to quite another story. In this volume, it is enough to attempt a picture of the social drama as it was acted between two crucial events in our early annals—the Norman Conquest and the Reformation.

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I. THE CAULDRON OF GOD'S WRATH

We cannot deal with the civilization even of a single country at a definite period without a preliminary glance at the world-culture upon which it was grafted. Thus the Middle Ages can be rightly understood only as a period of convalescence—slow at best, and with continual relapses—from the worst catastrophe recorded in the whole history of the Western World.

The Roman Empire had begun with benevolent despotism, an active and fairly healthy body: it ended as an unwieldy machine. "Augustus, with his genius, succeeded in restoring not only the State but also the prosperity of the people; Diocletian and Constantine, on the other hand, doubtless against their own will, sacrificed the interests of the people to the salvation and security of the State"; such is the summary of the greatest modern authority on this subject.[1] The Empire was defended no longer by its old citizen armies, but by hirelings recruited mainly from the less settled frontier districts. Finances were disorganized; taxation pressed intolerably upon the middle class, and especially the yeoman-farmers, while multitudes lived upon the dole—*Panem et Circenses*. Literature and art showed less and less originality. A period of peace, unexampled in world-history for depth and duration, had not in this case made for higher civilization, by whichever of the current standards we may judge. Crude experience had belied the philosophic ideal. The Higher Pacifism, an active virtue, was too heavily alloyed with that passively defensive mood which claims the same title: War had still her victories, but Peace had not. What wrecked the Empire, as I shall presently try to show, was not such peace as Christ had preached, but, in part at least, the dilettantist patriotism which puts words before deeds. Men followed the line of least resistance, and called it peace. On the other hand, what carried the invading barbarians forward was not their brutality, but the energy and courage which are so often bound up with that vice. We may say of the Roman Empire that, as so often occurs in history, it was more concerned for peace than for justice.

Be that as it may, one thing is certain: the break-up of this vast

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Empire was followed by scenes of disorder, not only far more intense than what we have seen in the most unhappy districts of modern times, but prolonged for a period exceeding the worst that we can reasonably fear as a result of the present international rivalries and class-conflicts. Even in the comparatively fortunate East, and before the great barbarian invasions, Origen had struck a painfully modern note in his commentary on Matthew xxiv. 7–8. The earth, like the human body, must naturally decay before its final dissolution; and thence "it follows that, through lack of food, men should be stirred to greed and wars against those who suffer no want; and that, through comparison with others who abound in things needful, some men should rise against their fellows, and nation should fight against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. For it is not possible that, together with the lack of other things, there should also be a lack of men who have good sense, so that there should be no quiet and peaceful life among many folk; yet insurrections and quarrels and perturbations come to pass, sometimes through greed, sometimes again through covetousness of leadership, sometimes by reason of mad longing for vainglory, sometimes also through vainglorious greed of princes, who are not content with their own kingdoms but desire to extend their principalities and subdue many nations to themselves." Generations later, when the barbarians had burst in and Alaric the Goth had even taken Rome, men felt as though the sky had fallen. Jerome, who had played so great a part in the civilization of the Eternal City, wrote from his retreat at Bethlehem, in his Preface to Ezekiel: "No doubt all things born are doomed to die....But who would have believed that Rome, victorious so oft over the universe, would at length crumble to pieces?...She who made slaves of the East has herself become a slave; and nobles once laden with riches come to little Bethlehem to beg. In vain I try to distract myself from the sight by turning to my books; I cannot fix my thoughts on them." The oppression and the tumult grew worse and worse; and we find St Gregory the Great, five generations later, writing in even deeper despair:[2] "What is there now, I ask, to please us in this world? Everywhere we see mourning and hear groans. Cities are destroyed, strong places are cast down, the fields are depopulated, and the land is become desert. No inhabitants remain on the land, and scarce any in the towns; yet even these scanty relics of humanity are beaten with

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daily and incessant stripes. Moreover, the scourge of God's justice resteth not, because men's guilty deeds have not been corrected even under this scourge. We see some led into bondage, others mutilated, others slain...nay, what is left of that Rome which once seemed mistress of the world? She is ground down with manifold and immeasurable pains by the desolation of her citizens, the pressure of her enemies, and the frequency of ruin; so that we see that fulfilled in her which Ezekiel saith against the city of Samaria: *Set on a pot, set it on, I say, and put water into it; heap together into it the pieces thereof*: and a little further: *The seething thereof is boiling hot, and the bones thereof are thoroughly sodden in the midst thereof*: and again: *Heap together the bones, which I will burn with fire; the flesh shall be consumed and the whole composition shall be sodden and the bones shall be consumed; then set it empty upon burning coals, that it may be hot and the brass thereof may be melted*....For where is now the Senate, and where is the people? The bones have been dissolved and the flesh consumed; all pride of worldly dignity hath been extinguished in her. The whole composition of her is sodden, nevertheless even we, the few who are left, are yet daily oppressed with the sword and with innumerable tribulations. Let us say, therefore: *Set it empty upon burning coals*, for, seeing that the Senate is gone, the people have perished, and yet, among the few that are left, pain and groans are daily multiplied; now Rome stands empty upon the fire. Yet why do we speak thus of the men, when ruins multiply so sore that we see even the buildings destroyed? Wherefore it is aptly added concerning the now deserted city: *Let it be hot and let the brass thereof be melted*: for now the pot itself is being consumed wherein aforetime the flesh and bones were consumed; for since the men have failed the very walls are falling. But where are they who once rejoiced in her glory?...Boys and young men of the world and the sons of worldly folk flocked hither from every hand when they wished to profit in this world. No man now hasteneth hither for worldly profit; no mighty and violent man is now left to snatch his prey by oppression....Moreover, whatsoever we say concerning this grinding of Rome to pieces we know to be repeated in all the cities of the world. For some cities are desolated by ruin, others consumed by the sword, others tormented with famine, others swallowed up by earthquakes. Let us, therefore, despise with all our heart this world, present or destroyed.

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