

The Adventures of the Normans

Steps by Which the Unbridled Northmen of Scandinavia
Became the Rejuvenation of Western Europe

By C. W. Previte-Orton , 1935

If it is good to see ourselves as others see us, there is also an advantage in seeing others as they see themselves, and the most vivid sketch of the Norman character may be found in the contemporary history of a monk who passed almost all his life in the Norman monastery of St. Evroul. This is how Ordericus Vitalis, French by extraction, English by birth, Norman by training, describes his compatriots at the time when their fame was spread far and wide, from Ireland to Palestine, in the days of Henry Beauclerk, king of England :

" The Normans are an untamed race, and unless restrained by a stern ruler are always ready for mischief. In all societies, wherever they may be, they struggle for the mastery, and spurred by ambition many a time are led to juggle with truth and faith... In them their natural ferocity still abounds, and their inborn ardor for battle rages to such an extent that it does not allow the peasants and peaceful officials to remain quiet in their dwellings . "

And the southern chronicler, Geoffrey Malaterra, gives the Norman conquerors of his land a very similar report :

" They are indeed a most crafty race, revengeful of injuries, despising their native fields in the hope of winning other, greedy of gain and of dominion, capable of all feigning, and keeping a kind of middle way between bounty and avarice; but their chiefs are most bountiful from love of fame. This race knows how to flatter, being so intent on eloquence that you would think the boys professional rhetoricians. Unless they are kept down by the yoke of justice, they are uncontrollable; when fortune requires it, they can endure labor, hunger, and cold. They are zealous in hunting and hawking; they delight in good steeds, in splendid arms and armor, in magnificent garb. "

Yet this stalwart, unamiable race of shameless individualists was destined to do great things for the peoples whom it tormented. The very admixture of the Norman blood seems to have acted like a tonic to communities long ground down to mediocrity in the social mill of old-established civilizations. But their actual work was all-important too. In the first place, they were destroyers, like the northern blizzard with which Odericus compares them, and their onset blew away superannuated helpless institutions and slowly ripening degeneracies, leaving what was real and strong and rooted in fact and necessity to survive and remake western Europe.

In the second place, the Normans, destructive as they were, were also builders and transmuters, who, if they brought few new ideas to the stock of civilization, were adroit in borrowing and combining what they found and learnt. The shattered society of their day needed most of all a framework, a defensive shell and an organized system of government, under which and through which not only art and literature and commerce, but the social sense itself and the habit of life by law in a community could revive.

The Norman race, however, was itself transmuted during the three centuries which elapsed between the death of Charlemagne and the first crusade, so that they appear in two successive manifestations : first, as the Scandinavian sea rovers, Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes, who harried and partly conquered the coasts of France and the British Isles; secondly, as the Normans proper, the mixed race of Scandinavians and North French, who inhabited the land called after them, Normandy. It was the Normans of the second phase who proved themselves builders and adapters as well as destroyers.

As the ninth century wore on, the Viking raids became combined operations of many ship-loads, and in each country they attacked - France, England or Ireland - their method was much the same. The Viking

fleet sailed up a great river artery, the Seine, the Loire, the Thames or the Humber, anchored their ships at some defensible place, fortified a camp, and then, seizing all the horses they could find, began to raid and plunder the country.

Mobile, fully armed and compact, they were more than a match for larger forces of a levy en masse of the natives, in the main half-armed farmers and peasants. To gather a fully armed force of trained warriors outnumbering the invaders meant skimming a wide territory of its true fighting men. Meantime, monastery, town and village went up in flames, and the remnant of the peasantry hid in their surrounding woodlands.

We may notice several phases in these invasions. As their forces grew, schemes of conquest and settlement under famous leaders began to be the Northmen's objective. But, as their own methods were better known and the danger became more pressing, an energetic defence, which was far from ineffectual, was carried on by the kings and nobles of the invaded lands. The Northmen abandoned the hope of limitless conquests, and we come to the phase of limited colonies, to the settlement of the Danelaw in eastern England from the Tees to the Thames, and to the foundation of the duchy of Normandy by the treaty of St. Clair-sur-Epte in 911. By the cessation of the counties at the mouth of the Seine, Charles the Simple, king of France, submitted to the fact of a Norman state in his dominions, and the Viking leader Rollo consented to become a Christian and a vassal in return for a fragment of France.

Treaty of St. Clair-sur-Epte

At the end of two generations from the treaty of St. Clair-sur-Epte, the duke of Normandy and his subjects were French in tongue and habits. Over his wide territory, which extended up the Seine to the river Epte and along the coast from Mont St. Michel to near the Somme, the duke rules with literally regal sway, for he claimed within his duchy to exercise all the royal prerogatives.

It would be out of place here to recount the series of the Norman dukes or even the early deeds of the greatest of them, William the Bastard, later called the Conqueror, in any detail. Born, like several of his predecessors, of a handfast union - of his father Robert with Arletta the tanner's daughter of Falaise - left duke at the age of seven by the death of that father on pilgrimage in 1035, he succeeded in the great victories of Val-des-Dunes and Mortemer in taming the turbulent Norman barons and in re-establishing all and more than all the ducal authority over his duchy.

The duke's authority had two sources, royal and feudal. As deputy sovereign the duke had large estates and valuable financial dues scattered over the duchy; in justice he held the 'peas of the sword' like murder, which involved life or limb, and which could belong to a baron only by his special grant. Normandy was partitioned into a number of circumscriptions called 'vicomites', each ruled by a viscount appointed by the duke; this official held a court, gathered in the ducal income, kept order, guarded ducal castles. Then the duke on occasion could call out the 'arrière-ban', that is, the levy en masse; like the Frankish kings, he could order his subjects to give him information on oath, the so-called 'sworn inquest'; he had the right of coining money; his 'curia' was the supreme judicial court; and last, not least, he controlled the Church in Normandy, which formed the ecclesiastical province of Rouen. This meant that he appointed the bishops and great abbots, controlled their synods and their legislation, and indirectly supervised their special courts, which dealt with moral and church offenses. Only four or five petty counts broke, as far as they did break, the unity of this administration.

As feudal suzerain the duke was ultimate owner of almost all of the duchy's land, which was held from him in military service. This meant that, besides his demesne knights, he could summon some eight hundred knights for forty days a year; and by a wise provision of Norman feudalism all sub-tenants owed their first allegiance to the duke, and only in the second place to their immediate lord. The barons and the other tenants-in-chief who held directly of the duke owed him service in peace as well as war; they were bound to attend his 'curia', or solemn court, to advise him in judicial and other court business; they paid 'reliefs' to succeed to their fiefs; they could build castles only by his license, and on terms of admitting his

garrisons at demand; they paid the feudal 'aids' for his ransom, the knighting of his eldest son, and the marriage of his eldest daughter.

To all this and more they were bound by the feudal oath of fealty, and by the still more sacred homage. In the latter ceremony the vassal knelt unarmed before his lord, between whose hands he placed his own, and thus became his 'man'.

The upper stratum of Norman society, including the barons, numbered some 1,200 to 1,400 fully armed knights, and below them came a class of freeholders, called vavassors, who had not the full knight's outfit and fought on foot. Although the vavassors did good service, like the archers at Hastings, the decisive factor in both battle and skirmish was the charge of heavy-armed knights on horseback. Of generalship, beyond a few striking exceptions, there was little or none. A suitable charging ground and, if possible, surprise were the things aimed at.

The homes of these warlike nobles varied with their rank and wealth. The duke had his great square stone castles, like the White Tower in the Tower of London or the castle at Rochester. The baron in the eleventh century built in stone when he could afford it; more frequently his castle consisted of a square wooden tower erected on an artificial mound, the earth for which was obtained by excavating a moat around it. Outside this moat lay a bailey or courtyard surrounded by a stockade on an earthen rampart, which in its turn was excavated from an outer moat. The keep was entered by a bridge over the inner moat; the bailey was also entered by a similar contrivance. Fire could be partly guarded against by hides spread over the timber. Even the wooden castle, however, could only be built by ducal license. The appearance of unlicensed 'adulterine' castles was a sure sign of anarchy and weakness, while a strong and well-supported ruler at once demolished them.

The favorite occupation of these Norman nobles were war and hunting; with a preference for war. Their best outlet at home was in family and personal feuds, strictly limited in law of which the pages of Ordericus are full. The deeds of the hatefully cruel house of Belesme and their like provide a full tale of atrocities, treachery, murder, mutilation, which perhaps give a too gloomy picture of Normandy in general. At any rate the dukes sternly repressed these doings to the utmost of their power. Among the chief sufferers were the peasantry, whether the full serfs who paid heavy dues and performed a full 'tale' of 'works', or the more favored 'guests' ('hospites'), who seem to have been free tenants. Their crops might be destroyed, themselves killed or maimed.

Perhaps the best protection against the mutual outrages of their lords lay in the provisions of the Truce of God, introduced into Normandy in 1042. This forbade hostilities from Wednesday sunset to Monday sunrise, and endeavored to shield the husbandman and the merchant. It is to be remembered also that the atrocities of the bad figure most easily in chronicles; on the other side we merely hear that a knight might have been taken for a model by all living men. That he did justice in his manorial or baronial court, that he was peaceful, loyal, and merciful, appear only in the collective portrait of a lifetime, for no single act of it burnt itself into the memory of men. The race, however, was hard at best, and its women matched its men.

Norman life apart from war is not very easy to picture. The best of it was out-of-doors in the chase, so cruelly preserved for the nobles by barbarous forest laws, in which mutilation and death were common punishments. The mimic warfare of the tournament was coming into fashion in the eleventh century; it consisted in the jousting of two knights together, but more especially in the combat of large parties in the meleé. To the participants it was little less dangerous than real war, while infinitely less burdensome to the peasantry. But tournaments were not for every day. The castles were dark, draughty, and smoky; feasting and listening to tale or song must have been the chief entertainment in them. Yet there were clerkly nobles too, bred for the Church perhaps, and not always accepting the vocation. They, like the monasteries and their founders, help to complete a picture which is not all fire and rapine and slaughter, nor even law-making and tax-collecting.

Some evidence of a growth of what, in comparison with the conditions in much of France, may be termed peace and prosperity, is to be found in the rapid growth of population and the revival of monastic foundations. Increased security, increased food supply, and an increased susceptibility to Christianity were all implied. To take religion first : The Cluniac reformation was brought to Normandy under Duke Richard the Good, in 1001, and in the next sixty years monasteries rose with some frequency over the country. Such a one was the famous Bec founded in 1054 by the ex-knight Herluin, and made a European center of learning by the Lombard lawyer Lanfranc. Unmixed religious impulse in its medieval garb of asceticism, the desire for learning and culture, the wish for cloistered peace and gentleness, the aversion, like Herluin's own, from the injustice and evil-doing which a vassal's duty to his lord might entail, all these, apart and together, guided men to the monastic profession in these days of revival; and by all, we may say, a better example was set and a better ideal was held up than was practicable in the ordinary feudal world around.

It was the increase of population which sent the now mingled race of Norman-French off again on the paths of emigration and adventure for over a century. Nothing is more remarkable than the size of the families which Norman knights and vavassors reared to maturity. The twelve sons of Tancred of Hauteville were no exception, and for this teeming progeny the bounds of Normandy were too narrow, though the woodlands might be cleared and the plough lands grow. The twelve sons of a knight could not all live as knights unless they went abroad to win horse and arms and land for themselves.

Whenever the clash of arms sounded in Europe and there was hire to be had, it was caught by Norman ears, and parties of adventurers and banished men were to be seen moving along the highways towards it. There was generally at least a tinge of religious motive about these enterprises which appealed even to men whose lives were criminal enough. War, however ferocious, with Moslem or schismatic or against a perjurer left no qualms of conscience. Hundreds, or rather thousands were thus drafted away from their native land; but the greatest emigration of all was that led by the greatest man of Norman stock, the conquest of England by Duke William.

William the Conqueror, to give him the new appellation he won, was, paradoxically, so typical a Norman in most ways as to be an exception, for in him the stronger qualities of his race were developed to the full. Tall and portly, a valiant knight of his lands, a tireless hunter, his physical vigour enabled him to support a government which was personal in every sense of the word, and to enjoy the endless journeys of a medieval sovereign who passed from manor to manor to eat up the produce and guard his own. William also had a real capacity for generalship, in his day the rarest of gifts; as a diplomatist, the skill with which he obtained the papal blessing for his attack on England, and made his unprovoked assault appear almost a holy war, is truly remarkable. But his greatest qualities were a marvelous strength of will and an admirable capacity for organizing and conducting business.

The conquest of England begun at Hastings in 1066 took some five years to achieve; the reorganization of the kingdom was a longer process, only ending, if it did then, with Domesday Book in 1086. To begin with, there was the actual immigration of Normans and the very numerous other French adventurers who flocked for the spoil. How many these were it is hardly possible to say - the army of invasion had numbered some 5,000 men - but their coming must have had an appreciable effect on the sparsely populated England of the time with its three to five million inhabitants; they meant an addition of talent and energy to the national stock.

Nowhere was this more conspicuous than the Church; a swarm of eager, bustling French ecclesiastics, headed by the Lombard Lanfranc, the new archbishop of Canterbury, came to restore its discipline, to increase its efficiency and to introduce a new stir of art and thought. A fervor of building began. The Normans practiced a version of the prevalent ' Romanesque ', with its small windows, round arches and heavy pillars. With this style of cathedral, abbey and church they began to cover the country, taking up many an English notion of decoration by the way.

William undoubtedly meant to reign as successor to the native English kings. He had no intention to destroy either the independence or the government that he found; but he did mean to innovate. What native institutions he found in good working order, adding to the efficiency of government and the strength of the crown, he kept, but he introduced the strict feudalism in tenure and service which he knew in Normandy as a valuable adjunct to his ducal power.

All land in England was henceforth held of the crown, even the unconfiscated Church lands. Lay land, not kept in the royal demesne, was granted out in feudal vassalage; that is, with all the duties and liabilities that we have seen in Normandy. The knight service due to the crown from barons and Church alike was some five thousand knights. As every feudal vassal owed his first allegiance to the crown, and indeed acknowledged the duty in person in the famous Oath of Salisbury, the crown, so far as feudal law went, was immensely strengthened; and the large and well-distributed royal demesne made the monarchy able to exert its legal claims. The Saxon provincial earldoms were broken up, and only on the frontiers, like the Welsh borders, were solid fiefs granted; the lands of most barons were scattered and hard to combine in a revolt.

This wholesale settlement of a Norman and French class of feudal landholders as a permanent garrison under new and stringent conditions and the rearrangement of the royal demesnes were William's first great task of reorganization in England; the second was the Domesday Survey. Royal commissioners took evidence on oath from representatives of each hundred or subdivision of the shire as to the ownership, the population, the sources and amount of income, and the taxable value of each manor within it; and the evidence was digested and written down in Domesday Book. This was indeed a unique achievement in the eleventh century and of extraordinary value for the monarchy, which thereby knew its resources.

Here we come to William's work of preservation of what he found. English kings had levied a general tax, the Danegeld; this right, lost elsewhere in the west, was kept. The old popular court of the shire was still functioning, a valuable check on feudal jurisdictions; it was retained. The English 'fryd', or national militia, was kept - in better working order than the Norman's 'arriere-ban' which it resembled. The native law was left to stand with an admixture of Norman customs, such as the ordeal by battle. Like the law, the native sheriff, the royal officer of the shire-court, remained with powers, if anything, increased, and was assimilated to the Norman vicomte whom he paralleled.

A Norman version of an English institution may be seen in the King's Council. The old English assembly of 'wise men', the witenagemot, was transformed into the Curia Regis, which every tenant-in-chief was feudally to attend at call. This heterogeneous assembly, which might vary from day to day from a few household officers to a complete gathering of barons and bishops, was the parent not only of Parliament, the privy council and the higher courts of law, but of all state departments. The Normans had an innate tendency to allot to officials appropriate spheres of work.

It was not only in war and government and in Church matters that the Norman invaders transformed England. They were now Frenchmen, and they put the land once more in close touch with the tradition of Latin Civilization gathered round the Mediterranean: what as Danes they had destroyed, as Normans they more than renewed. S. Anselm of Canterbury was almost a Father of the Church and a school of historians arose, equals of any in the West. The cult of Canon Law, itself an offspring of the ancient Civil Law, was a cult of Roman civilization. Norman vernacular literature was a mere department of that of medieval France; nevertheless, it exercised an important influence on the whole by introducing the themes of Arthurian and Celtic legend from Brittany and Wales into French poetry and prose; and, again, as being one channel by which French literature transformed English from Anglo-Saxon into the Latinised tongue of Chaucer.

In the humbler task of exploiting the land the Normans were also proficient. The Saxons had been great village-founders in primeval woodland; now the Normans replace woodland by arable, and with the increase of the food supply increased the population and the value of the land. If the peasant and the fallen

Saxon proprietor very commonly fell to the hard lot of a mere serf, a new energy and a new capacity reigned in England.

The settlement and the adventures of the Normans did not stop with England itself. They soon began to spread to the rest of Britain. The marcher barons took up with joy the border warfare with the various Welsh princes which they inherited, and under William I South Wales was conquered by and divided among them. In the reign of Rufus, too, the last heir of the Saxon kings, Edgar the Atheling, led an Anglo-Norman army to place his nephew Edgar on the throne of Scotland, and thence followed a half-English, half-Norman migration north, which eventually led to Bruce and Balliol and Stewart becoming Scottish as well as Anglo-Norman houses; and with them they carried something of the Norman ways and civilization. The very last wave of the same impulse carried Richard Strongbow, earl of Pembroke, and other Anglo-Normans to Ireland in the days of Henry II.

Norman Adventurers in South Italy

It was a similar series of private enterprises which in the preceding century had led to the foundation of the second Norman kingdom, that of Sicily and South Italy. Till the conquest of England, no field of immigration rivaled it. Whole families like the twelve sons of Tancred of Hauteville came in detachments to carve themselves fortunes by their swords.

Robert Guiscard (the cunning), a younger son of Tancred, typifies their method of conquest. Fixing himself in northern Calabria he led the life of a brigand chief; he starved the little towns into surrender by destroying their crops; and his band increased. Like him were many others, and a wail of distress went up from the plundered land. The reforming pope, Leo IX raised an army to exterminate these pests, but he was defeated and captured at Civitate in 1053; and a later pope, Nicholas II, adopted a startling change of policy.

Perhaps at the suggestion of Cardinal Hildebrand, the pope, who needed a protector against Roman nobles and German officials, decided to ally with the Normans, and made a feudal grant of Apulia and Sicily as duchies to Robert Guiscard, and of Capua to its Norman possessor, Richard. The treaty of Melfi (1059) meant a revolution in the Norman position : from anarchic bandits they became vassals of the Papacy with a lawful state. Under the new regime it became possible that the conquest of Apulia from the Byzantines should be completed in 1071, and that the conquest of Sicily from the Moslems, carried on chiefly by Guiscard's younger brother, Roger, should come to an end in 1091. Unlike England, Apulia was conquered by many adventurous chiefs, who submitted to a single ruler and his rights on compulsion; Apulia therefore became the classic land of baronial disloyalty and revolt. Apulia, again, was only made a monarchy by the remarkable abilities of the Hauteville family; odious as Guiscard was, he was great in war and council; his brother Roger of Sicily was only less able; but what their talents gained was an artificial creation demanding equal talents to preserve - a difficult problem in hereditary succession.

Robert Guiscard was barely secure in Apulia before he began to attempt the conquest of the Eastern Empire. He did not succeed, but he left the inspiration for eastern conquest in the mind of his disinherited eldest son, Bohemund; and Bohemund was one of the leaders and prime movers of the First Crusade. In that new migration the Normans took their full share. We may think of Palestine as the eastern limit of their wanderings.

It was not unnatural that, while its sons filled Europe with their wars and achievements, Normandy became less prominent. Like the rest of Henry I's dominions, it fell for a while under the disorderly rule of Stephen, and was accepted with joy by Henry I's Plantagenet heir, Henry II, the Angevin. Henry II ruled Normandy like a native sovereign; and it could not help being the connecting link between England and his other French possessions. Richard I fortified the province incomparably with stone walls, like those of Chateau Gaillard, but it submitted with singular ease to Philip Augustus of France when he declared it confiscated from the odious John. We may suspect that the fever of the Norman particularism had been allayed by the blood-letting of the emigration.

The function of the Normans in the history of civilization appears to be mainly that of a stimulus to more creative races. Each Norman, like the Scandinavian Viking before him, comes before us as abounding with restless individual energy, as possessed of a remarkable capacity to trade, which is allied to his quick perception of the merits and value of other men's belongings and an immediate desire to acquire them. It may have been because of their very individualism that, when unmixed in the north, they do not appear as the creative organizers of institutions that they became when blended with Frenchmen in Normandy. Their original outlook, that of the sagas, was too individual and personal. But in the lands of their settlement, in the process of melting into other nations, they both gave and took. They gave their energy, their businesslike procedure, their aptitude for arranging the terms of a bargain, their insatiable acquisitiveness.

They acquired a social outlook, a capacity for the joint enterprise of civilization, a reverence for the abnegations of religion. Hence in their latest phase they are the creators of institutions, of efficient methods of carrying on community life, methods quite unlike those of jaded imitation current in Charlemagne's empire; but new devices for new needs, simple, diverse, elastic, adaptable, able to grow and differentiate. These things, of inestimable value for the future, were some compensation for the addition they made to the sum of human misery.