CHAPTER 5

A Tale of Two Kings: The ‘Celtic’ Arthur and the ‘Gothic’ Alfred

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The city of Winchester embodies in capsule form the competing claims of the ‘Celtic’ and the ‘Gothic’ over the last two centuries. In the Victorian period, the city alleged (as it continues to claim today) that it had been the capital of both the Ancient British monarch Arthur and also the Saxon king Alfred. Indeed, on the Winchester tourist trail, it is still possible to take in both the ‘Round Table’ (a thirteenth-century table, decorated as Arthur’s round table early in the reign of Henry VIII, and now on display in Winchester Castle) and also a prominent Victorian statue of King Alfred. The popularity of Arthur that developed in the nineteenth century has been analysed many times: most notably by Inga Bryden and Stephanie Barczewski.1 Alfred’s strikingly similar esteem in that same period has, however, received far less attention. This chapter will aim to cast some light on both enthusiasms—and the wider issue of British national identities—by discussing the nineteenth-century afterlife of King Alfred alongside the better-known story of Arthur and the Victorians.

Winchester’s striking King Alfred statue was unveiled on Friday 20th September 1901—a day then erroneously believed to be the thousandth anniversary of the Saxon king’s death. The streets of Winchester were jammed with spectators, and there were even folk crowded onto roof-tops and balconies, and hanging out of windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of the grand procession which wound its way through the town to the statue. Cathedral and church bells pealed, and the guns of the Royal Field Artillery fired as the cloth fell from Alfred’s manly shoulders. Later that afternoon, 2,000 children were treated to a moralistic lecture and cakes, while a commemorative service for the Saxon king, held in the Cathedral, proved so popular that hundreds were left outside, unable to gain even standing room.2 All this was not merely a

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matter of localised pride. The Winchester commemorations had been organised over many years by a national committee which counted among its members the Duke of Wellington, Sir Edward Burne Jones, Henry Irving, Arthur Conan Doyle, and John Ruskin. And while they were underway, numerous smaller-scale celebrations were taking place in other cities.

The 1901 anniversary moreover, was just the apex of the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for Alfred which paralleled, complemented, and competed with that for Arthur. The period between 1801 and 1901 saw the erection of at least three other Alfred statues, the completion of more than twenty-five paintings and, perhaps most strikingly, the publication of over a hundred works of literature. These included Alfredian novels by the commercially successful Gordon Stables and G. A. Henty, a popular history by Thomas Hughes, poetry by Wordsworth and two nineteenth-century laureates (Henry James Pye and Alfred Austin), and a striking number of amateur productions by figures like the attorney John Fitchett, whose *King Alfred: A Poem*, at 1,500 pages, allegedly ‘occupied his leisure hours for forty years’, and has been cited as the lengthiest poem in the English language.

Throughout the century, as the railway system opened up the country to the middle classes, tourists flocked to the sites of Alfred’s birth, death and most glorious battles, just as they visited Tintagel and Glastonbury for their Arthurian associations. Boats and racehorses were named for both monarchs. And when artwork was selected for the new Houses of Parliament, between the 1840s and the 1870s, 15 works depicting Alfred were entered into the competitions, alongside numerous Arthurian works. So both kings held prominent roles in nineteenth-century culture. And there was certainly some sense that they were in competition for the nation’s affection. Interestingly, very few authors seem to have written about both monarchs—you were, it seems, either on the side of the Celt or on the side of the Goth. Those whose allegiance was with Alfred often stressed the Saxon king’s superiority to Arthur. Thomas Hughes argued that while Arthur was great, Alfred was certainly ‘a greater king’; while the children’s historian Katie Magnus told her juvenile readers that ‘Alfred’s reign was in truth what […] King Arthur meant his to be’—implying that where Arthur

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