

When all the friends of the bishop pledged themselves for his reformation, the king further said: "Whether I will or not, your petition shall be granted, but after my death there will immediately be a violent change in affairs. It is against my own judgment that I permit my brother to be liberated from confinement, for be assured that he will cause the death or the grievous injury of many persons. Further, as I have declared the forfeiture of all the lands of Baudri, son of Nicholas, as a punishment for his folly in quitting my service and going to Spain without my leave, I now restore him his domains for the love of God. I do not think that a braver knight exists, but he is prodigal and inconstant, and loves to wander in foreign parts."

Thus King William, though tormented with excruciating pains in his intestines, preserved throughout the full possession of his faculties and the power of expressing himself with his usual clarity; and gave with readiness useful counsels to all who addressed themselves to him on the affairs of the kingdom.

At length, on Tuesday, 9 September, the king awoke just when the sun was rising, and heard the sound of the great bell of the cathedral of Rouen. On inquiring what it meant, his attendants replied: "My lord, the bell is ringing for Prime in the church of St Mary." Then the king raised his eyes to heaven with deep devotion and lifting up his hands said: "I commend myself to Mary, the holy mother of God, my heavenly Lady, that by her blessed intercession I may be reconciled to her well-beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ." Having said this he instantly expired. The physicians and others who were present and had watched the king all night while he slept (his repose being broken neither by cries nor groans), seeing him now expire so suddenly and unexpectedly, were much astonished, and acted like men who had lost their wits. Nevertheless, the wealthiest of them mounted their horses and departed in haste to secure their property. But the inferior servants, observing that their masters had disappeared, laid hands on the arms, the plate, the robes, the linen, and all the royal furniture, and leaving the corpse almost naked on the floor of the house, they hastened away.

8. William of Malmesbury: "The Deeds of the Kings of the English" (1135-40) and "The Modern History" (1140-2)

The passages which follow are taken from two works by this very voluminous writer: the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and the *Historia Novella*. Some notice of this author is given above, pp. 90 f., and further information will be found in Stubbs's edition of these two works, and also in R. R. Darlington, *Anglo-Norman Historians* (London, 1947). The *Gesta Regum Anglorum* was finished in 1125 but two new recensions appeared between 1135 and 1140. The *Historia Novella* was written in 1140-2. For the reign of Henry I and subsequently, William of Malmesbury is therefore a contemporary source. In these passages will be found his opinion of the Norman Conquest, his estimate of Henry I, his account of the wreck of the White Ship and his description of two important councils held during the reign of Stephen. He was present at one, at least, of these councils. The text is in *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis: Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols, Rolls Series (1887-9). It is translated by J. A. Giles, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle* (1847); by J. Stevenson, *Church Historians of England*, III, pt 1 (1854); and most recently by K. R. Potter, *William of Malmesbury: Historia Novella*, Nelson's Medieval Texts (London, 1955).

(a) *On the English and the Normans*

(*Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. Stubbs, ss 245, 246)

This was a fatal day¹ for England, a melancholy havoc of our dear country brought about by its passing under the domination of new lords. For England had long ago adopted the manners of the "Angles" which had been very various at different times. In the first years after their arrival they were barbarians in their look and manners, warlike in their usages, heathens in their rites; but after embracing the faith of Christ, in process of time and by degrees, owing to the peace which they enjoyed, they came to regard arms as only of secondary importance, and gave their whole attention to religion. I say nothing of the poor, whom meanness of fortune often restrains from overstepping the bounds of justice; I omit men of ecclesiastical rank whom respect for their sacred profession, or fear of shame, sometimes restrains from straying from the true path; I speak of princes who from the greatness of their power might have full liberty to indulge in pleasure. Some of these in their own country, and some at Rome, changing their habit, obtained a heavenly kingdom and a saintly communion; and many during their whole lives to outward seeming so managed their worldly affairs that they might disperse their treasures on the poor or divide them among monasteries. What shall I say of the multitudes of bishops, hermits and abbots? Does not the whole island blaze with so many relics that you can scarcely pass a village of any consequence but that you hear the name of some new saint? And of how many have all records perished? Nevertheless, with the lapse of time, the love of learning and of religion decayed, and some years before the coming of the Normans it had declined. The clergy, content with a very slight measure of learning, could scarcely stammer out the words of the sacraments, and a person who understood grammar was an object of wonder and astonishment. The monks mocked the rule of their Order with fine vestments and with the use of every kind of food. The nobility, given up to luxury and wantonness, did not go to church in the early morning after the manner of Christians, but merely in a casual manner heard matins and mass from a hurrying priest in their chambers amid the blandishments of their wives. The common people, left unprotected, became a prey to the more powerful who amassed riches either by seizing the property of the poor or by selling their persons to foreigners. Nevertheless it is the manner of this people to be more inclined to dissipation than to the accumulation of wealth. There was one custom repugnant to nature which they adopted: namely to sell their female servants when pregnant by them, after they had satisfied their lust, either to public prostitution or to foreign slavery. Drinking in parties was a universal custom, in which occupation they passed entire days and nights. They consumed their whole fortune in mean and despicable houses, unlike the Normans and the French who in noble and splendid mansions live with frugality. The vices attendant upon drunkenness fol-

¹the day of the battle of Hastings

lowed in due course and these, as is well known, enervate the human mind. Hence it came about that they engaged William more with rashness and fury than with military skill, and so they doomed themselves and their country to slavery by giving him an easy victory in a single battle. For nothing is less effective than rashness; and what begins with violence is quickly checked. The English at that time wore short garments, reaching to the mid-knee; they had their hair cropped, their beards shaven, their arms laden with gold bracelets, their skin adorned with punctured designs¹; they were wont to eat until they became surfeited and to drink until they were sick. These latter qualities they imparted to their conquerors; as to the rest they adopted their manners. I would not, however, have these bad propensities ascribed to the English universally. I know that many of the clergy at that time trod the path of sanctity, and I know that many of the laity of all ranks and conditions were well-pleasing to God. Far be it from me to be unjust: my accusation is not indiscriminate. But as in peace the mercy of God often cherishes both the bad and the good together, so also does his severity sometimes include them both in tribulation.

The Normans – that I may speak of them also – were at that time, as they are now, exceedingly particular in their dress, and delicate in their food, but not to excess. They are a race inured to war, and can hardly live without it, fierce in attacking their enemies, and when force fails, ready to use guile or to corrupt by bribery. As I have said, they live with economy in large houses; they envy their equals; they wish to vie with their superiors; and they plunder their subjects though they protect them from others. They are faithful to their lords, though slight offence gives them an excuse for treachery. They weigh treason by its chance of success, and change their opinions for money. They are the most polite of peoples; they consider strangers to merit the courtesy they extend to each other; and they intermarry with their subjects. After their coming to England they revived the rule of religion which had there grown lifeless. You might see churches rise in every village, and, in the towns and cities, monasteries built after a style unknown before; you could watch the country flourishing with renewed religious observance; each wealthy man counted the day lost in which he had neglected to perform some outstanding benefaction.²

(b) *On the death of William Rufus*

(*ibid.*, ss 331, 332, 333)

In the thirteenth year, which was the last of his life, there were many adverse events, but the most dreadful incident was that the devil visibly appeared to men in woods and secret places, and spoke to them as they passed by. Moreover, at Finchampstead in Berkshire, a well flowed so freely with blood for fifteen whole days that it discoloured a neighbouring pool. The king heard of

¹ cf. the pictorial evidence of the Bayeux tapestry (No. 5)

² cf. the description of the Normans by Ordericus Vitalis (No. 7, p. 306)

it and laughed. Nor did he heed his own dreams, or take note of what others saw concerning him.

Many visions are recorded as having been seen, presaging his death, and three of these being vouched for by the testimony of credible witnesses I shall myself record. Eadmer, the historian of our times,¹ a man noted for his veracity, says that Anselm, the noble exile, with whom religion was also banished,² came to Marcigny that he might communicate his sufferings to Hugh, abbot of Cluny.³ There, when the conversation turned upon King William, the abbot said: "Last night that king was brought before God; and was finally judged to have incurred the dire sentence of damnation." How he came to know this he neither explained at the time, nor did any of those who heard him ask; nevertheless these words coming from a man who was so respected convinced many of those present that they were true. Hugh led such a life and had such a character that all took heed of what he said and valued his counsel, even as though an oracle from heaven had spoken. Soon after the king was slain (as we shall relate) there came a messenger to beg the archbishop to resume his see.

The day before the king died, he dreamed he was let blood by a surgeon, and that the stream reaching to heaven clouded the light and obscured the day. Calling upon St Mary for protection, he suddenly awoke, and told his attendants they were not to leave him. Thus they watched with him for several hours even unto daybreak. Shortly afterwards, just as the day began to dawn, a certain foreign monk came to Robert, son of Haimo, one of the chief magnates at the court, and told him that he had that night dreamed a strange and fearful dream about the king. "The king," he said, "came into a certain church with threats and boasting as is his custom. He looked contemptuously on those present, and then seizing the crucifix he gnawed the arms and almost tore away the legs. The image endured this for a while, but at last struck the king with its foot so that he fell backwards, and from his mouth as he lay on the ground there came out such a flame that the smoke touched the very stars." Robert, thinking this dream ought not to be neglected, ventured to tell it to the king with whom he was very intimate. William burst into loud laughter, and said: "He is a monk and dreams for money. Give him a hundred shillings." None the less he was not unmoved and hesitated a long time whether he should go out hunting as he had planned, and his friends urged him not to take the risk of testing the truth of these omens. He therefore did not hunt before dinner, but attended to serious business instead, hoping by occupation to dispel his uneasiness. They say that he soothed his cares with more food and wine than usual. After dinner he went into the forest with a very small number of attendants. Among these the most intimate with the king was Walter, surnamed Tirel, who had come from France attracted by the liberality of the king. This man alone remained with him, while the others were widely

¹ *see* No. 107

² *see* Nos 108–112

³ Hugh I, 1044–1109