THE IMPORTANCE OF KING ALFRED TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

By Rider, 20 January 2008;

King Alfred is the only king in English history to be deemed worthy of the title of 'the Great’. There are reasons for that and these reasons lie not only in his campaigns against the Vikings and the establishing of the navy but also much deeper, in the reforms Alfred passed in his lands that enabled the populace to educate themselves.

The roots of his actions are set in his visits to Rome (in 853 and 855) where he learned much and saw even more but foremost, the concept of a centralized state, and that was his wish to create in England also.

Alfred’s first literary endeavour was the gathering and writing of the legal code. He first set up gathering the ancient Anglo-Saxon laws of Mercia, Wessex and Kent and from those he wrote his own code that became the law in the lands that he ruled. He also wrote a lengthy prologue to the code and that was a show of power and wisdom. This was the beginning of the first phase of educating his people.

He next continued with translating various Latin books to English for the commoners to be able to learn from them – he selected specifically such books that were useful by nature. Amongst his translations are Gregory the Great’s 'Pastoral Care’, Boethius's 'Consolation of Philosophy’, St. Augustine’s 'Soliloquies’, and the first fifty psalms of the Psalter. Also, at the direction of Alfred were translated Gregory's 'Dialogues’, Orosius's 'Histories against the Pagans’, and Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History’.

The actual greatness of Alfred also shows in his decisions – he gathered to his court a number of intellectuals and was ready to help them in their work. Secondly, he also established schools by which the children of his courtiers and nobles, plus a number of commoner children, were educated. This opened up the way for more people who could write and read and therefore were eligible for the ruling of the land. Alfred also hoped to have an administration who could use the code as a reference and would not need to ask for help from professional writers. This enabled the governmental system to work more efficiently.

His biographer, Asser, has written that Alfred’s sole purpose was to make it possible for the youth, born of free men, to learn until such time when they can read English. This, and his other actions, for example the concept of kingship he created and the common English law he imposed, may be seen as his steps towards creating an 'English’ culture.

Alfred’s achievements are well said in the following passage:

Before his time reading and writing in Anglo-Saxon Britain was reserved to the clergy, and even there it was low-level in many cases. Alfred's program to boost up learning began a renaissance within the Anglo-Saxon world, which increased culture in many forms.
Literate nobility means that much more business will be arranged in writing, like charters, writs and laws. The number of administrative written sources from before Alfred's age are really few and far between. After him, their numbers soar up. More business arranged by official documents can be a basis for a stronger state.  

However, some of the recent researchers have thought that Alfred’s actual aim was not to simply educate everyone but also to get a better grasp on the loyalty of the people by giving them the ideas that such governing is demanded and necessary and that it will work no other way. This view also relies on that Arthur demanded that his clerks would learn to read and write lest they be left without work.

Even with such views on King Alfred, people can’t leave aside that King Alfred’s quest to bring reading and writing closer to the people was a good and fruitful one which benefitted the entire English nation (or rather, the people who would one day make up the English nation).

Sources

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King Alfred

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