The unHeroic Age? Anglo-Saxons and English Identity, 16th-20th Century

Hector Munro Chadwick’s *The Heroic Age* (1912) is a celebrated work, still in print, which explores common features of the Germanic and Greek heroic ages. The Old English poem *Beowulf* naturally has a central role in the Germanic section. The poem had been rediscovered by English scholars in the late 17c. The first edition in English was that of John Kemble in 1833, but the poem had surprisingly little impact on either scholarly or popular history in England before the twentieth century. This paper is an exploration of why that should have been the case, and why, although the Anglo-Saxons were of great importance to English identity after the Reformation of the sixteenth century, it was Alfred and the later Anglo-Saxons, rather than the heroic world of *Beowulf*, that captured the public imagination.

The defeat of the Anglo-Saxon ruler King Harold II in 1066 temporarily eclipsed interest in the Anglo-Saxon past, not least because of the ensuing cultural success of the Norman French hero-king Arthur. Even supposed Anglo-Saxon heroes such as Guy of Warwick were conceived as living in a similar world of crusading and chivalric values. However, by the end of the middle ages there was an increasing interest in reforming circles in presenting their claims as lost freedoms that by judicious editing could be discovered in written records of the Anglo-Saxon past. As the reign of King Alfred (871-99) was particularly well-recorded attention began to focus upon him.

Archbishop Parker, for instance, in 1574 was responsible for the first printed edition of Asser’s ninth-century biography of the king. He mined this and other works to argue that the Elizabethan Protestant church was returning to its Anglo-Saxon roots. In the seventeenth century those who wanted a greater role for Parliament used Alfred’s lawcodes among other works to argue for Parliament’s descent from the *witan*, the assembly of chief men who had advised Anglo-Saxon kings. When the elector of Saxony became King George I of England and Scotland in 1714 references to King Alfred escalated as a means of praising—and criticising—the new Hanoverian line. Essential features of English identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as its constitution, army and navy and Anglican Church were seen as being Anglo-Saxon in origin, and typified by King Alfred and his reign.

By the end of the nineteenth century Alfred was being commemorated as the embodiment of the ‘English’ character which had enabled the creation of the British Empire, and which had been successfully transplanted to America by the earliest English settlers. The 1901 celebrations of the death of King Alfred, which were centred on the unveiling of a statue in Winchester, marked his apogee. The Old English poem *Beowulf* did not fit into this version of the Anglo-Saxon past. It did not even refer to England; it was set in the wrong place [Scandinavia] and at the wrong time [pre-Christian 4c/5c] to be a symbol of Englishness as perceived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

However, the virtual end of the British Empire in the twentieth century, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and the changing nature of society have reversed the
relative popular standing of Beowulf and King Alfred. But watch this space; other readings of Alfred and his reign are possible and it may be time for a heroic make-over of the ninth-century wars of the Anglo-Saxons with the Vikings.

Select Bibliography

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- H. M. Chadwick, The Heroic Age (Cambridge, 1912)
- A.J. Frantzen and J. D. Niles (eds), Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity (Florida, 1997)
- C.A. Simmons, Reversing the Conquest. History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature (New Brunswick, 1990)

Quotations

1. Alfred: 'The Mildest, Wisest Most Beneficient of Kings who drove out the Danes, protected learning, established armies, crushed corruption, guarded liberty and was the founder of the English constitution', accompanying a bust of King Alfred as one of the 'British Worthies' in Lord Cobham's Landscape Gardens at Stowe (Bucks) 1734-5.

2. Stourhead Tower (Wilts) 1762, above a statue of Alfred: 'Alfred the Great AD 879 on this summit erected his standard against the Danish invaders. To him we owe the origin of juries, the establishment of a militia, the creation of a naval force. Alfred the light of a benighted age, was a philosopher and a Christian; the father of his people, the founder of the English monarchy and liberty'.

3. Now so much is Alfred the founder that every ship in our navy might have his name, every school his bust, every Guildhall his statue. He is everywhere. But he is invisible. But the people do not know him. The boys do not learn about him. We want a monument to Alfred, if only to make the people learn and remember the origin of our Empire, if only that his noble example may be kept before us, to stimulate and to inspire and to encourage'. Walter Besant, speech in the Guildhall, Winchester 1898, quoted in Alfred Bowker, The King Alfred Millenary. A Record of the Proceedings of the National Commemoration (London, 1902), pp. 8-9.
4. US General Rockwell; reply to the toast ‘The Anglo-Saxon Race and the Memory of Alfred’ Winchester 1901 :‘Other races have had the same impelling love of gain, but no other one has planted itself in so many of the waste places of the earth ...it was because it has carried everywhere with it those principles of self-reliance and individual freedom – inherent in the race – a birthright developed and strengthened during these thousand years .... Is it too much to say that the Anglo-Saxons will be, if they are not already, the dominant race of the world?’, Bowker, *Millenary*, p. 120.