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King Alfred in Early-Modern and Enlightenment Britain: Historiographical Precursors to the Victorian Cult of Alfred

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Ian King
History Senior Thesis
Advisor: Professor Jonathan Elukin
Spring, 2018
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Acknowledgements

My first true exposure to the intricacies of insular medieval history came during my term as a visiting student at Trinity College, Dublin in 2016. Although my coursework was mostly in seventh and eighth century Irish hagiography, I found myself most intrigued by the interactions of the Celtic monks of Iona with the Anglo-Saxon world. I soon discovered Asser’s *Vita Alfredi*, and when it came time to select a topic for my senior thesis, a research question surrounding King Alfred was perhaps more of an inevitability than it was a conscious decision.

I am indebted to my advisor, Professor Jonathan Elukin, whose advice throughout the past year helped me to organize my thoughts and dramatically improve my writing skills. I am also grateful for my second reader, Professor Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre, who was supportive of this project from start to finish, and who always encouraged me to present my ideas in an assertive way. While both Professors Elukin and Regan-Lefebvre could probably do without hearing the term “Alfredian” for quite some time (as they are correct in pointing out that it sounds like a pasta dish), their guidance was instrumental in enabling me to complete this project.

I would also like to thank Professor Darío Euraque for taking me under his wing over the course of the past year. Professor Euraque’s trademark attention to detail was imparted to me in his historiography class and during my time as his summer research assistant, and it is doubtful that I could have written this thesis without his support. I am also grateful for the Leroy family’s generous undergraduate research fund that enabled me to travel to England in August, 2017. I was fortunate enough to meet with Professor Simon Keynes at Cambridge University, and his expression of interest in my project further convinced me that a study of Alfred’s early-modern and Enlightenment image was a worthwhile undertaking.

Finally, I would like to thank my mother, Kim, my father, Jonathan, and my sister, Gillian, for their unwavering support of my peculiar interest in pre-Conquest Britain. I am grateful in advance for their continuing support as I start the next chapter of my life as a postgraduate student of Anglo-Saxon history.
Introduction
Contextualizing “Alfredism” and the Victorian Cult of Alfred

Alfred the Great ruled the English kingdom of Wessex from AD 871 until the end of his life in 899. Over the course of the eleven-hundred year period since King Alfred’s death, the image of the Anglo-Saxon king has experienced a number of complex shifts that will be illuminated throughout this study. During the Victorian period in particular, King Alfred was embraced by a significant proportion of the British population. According to Joanne Parker, the Saxon king “enjoyed something of a ‘cult’ in England during the nineteenth century, and as a national icon was credited with the foundation of just about everything from trial-by-jury to Oxford University”.¹ For Parker, Alfred’s nineteenth-century appeal was the result of his association with these foundational myths of distinctly British institutions.

Similarly, Barbara Yorke has observed that “by the end of the nineteenth century, Alfred could mean many different things to different people, but was valued by them all for apparently demonstrating that the principles or institutions with which they were concerned were deeply embedded in the English past and basic to the English character”.² Yorke’s argument illustrates the most common nineteenth-century interpretation of King Alfred’s place in English history, and it is true that the development of Alfred’s cult following was assisted by his supposed embodiment of Victorian values. Alfred’s piety, his scholarly diligence, benevolence, military valor, his alleged role in founding the British nation, and perhaps even his perceived Anglo-

Saxon racial purity undoubtedly facilitated the astronomical increase in his popularity which marked the nineteenth century. Yet the Victorian cult of Alfred has been thoroughly investigated in the past twenty years by Yorke and Parker (among others), perhaps at the expense of a deeper understanding of Alfred’s image in periods prior. This thesis will therefore not approach the Victorian cult for its own sake, but rather as a means of working backward to explore the reasons for which early-modern and Enlightenment historians became interested in King Alfred. It is important to note that Alfred’s nineteenth-century stature was not a product of the Victorian ethos alone. Rather, from the late sixteenth century, Alfred was invoked to justify institutions identified by Parker and Yorke as results of uniquely Victorian historicism.

This study is not a fact-finding investigation intended to distinguish Alfred’s actual accomplishments from apocryphal accounts of the Saxon king’s achievements and personal characteristics. However, a brief description of Alfredian Wessex and the existing contemporaneous evidence seems warranted before shifting to the following discussion of early-modern and Enlightenment Alfred scholarship:

Ninth-century England, comprising seven independent kingdoms known as the Heptarchy, was ravaged by constant, unrelenting Viking pillage. The compilation of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a collection of annals recounting events worthy of remembrance in the eyes of its monastic authors, began during Alfred’s reign, and provides useful, albeit sparse, evidence for a reliable description of Alfred’s England. According to the Chronicle, a “great heathen army” of Danish Vikings invaded from the east in 865, conquering much of East-Anglia, Mercia, and

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Northumbria with relative ease. When Alfred ascended to the throne of Wessex six years later, his kingdom was already under threat of invasion by the Viking army which had encountered such little resistance elsewhere in Britain. Alfred’s great victory at Edington in 878 effectively staved off the immediate Danish threat—causing the Vikings to turn their attention to continental Europe for the time being. It was only after Alfred had attained a degree of military security that he initiated the legal and institutional reforms that have earned him such reverence.

The details of Alfred’s reign, institutional reforms, military campaigns, diplomatic negotiations, and personal characteristics are recounted in the most important document for Alfred studies: the *Vita Alfredi*, a biography of the Saxon king compiled during Alfred’s own lifetime by Bishop Asser, a Welsh monk brought to Alfred’s court in or around 885. Asser was certainly aware of a few of the other biographies of kings which had been produced during the eighth and ninth centuries on the continent, most notably Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne*. Supplied with a template on which to base his *Vita*, Asser composed a biography of Alfred that described the Saxon king’s exploits and accomplishments in extraordinary detail. Beyond Alfred’s military campaigns, Asser notes the king’s admirable piety, his interest in education, his frequent involvement in “judicial hearings”, and his general benevolence as a ruler.

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7 Joanne Parker, *England’s Darling*: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great, pp. 48.

8 Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Asser’s Life of Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, pp. 55.

However, the entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 901, long thought to be the accurate year of Alfred’s death due to errors in calendrical calculation, reads as follows: “This year died Alfred, the son of Ethelwulf, six nights before the mass of All Saints. He was king over all the English nation, except that part that was under the power of the Danes. He held the government one year and a half less than thirty winters; and then Edward his son took to the government”.

Apparent contradictory to the king’s nineteenth-century image as founder of the British nation and representative figure of the British ethos, the *Chronicle* only briefly describes Alfred’s influence and accomplishments before turning to Edward. Where the nineteenth-century historian E.A. Freeman calls the Saxon king “the most perfect character in history”¹⁰, the author of the above excerpt does not appear to find the Saxon king particularly noteworthy. It is precisely this conflict between the *Chronicle*’s presentation of Alfred and the reputation the king achieved during the nineteenth century that has so intrigued the small group of modern historians who have written on the subject.

This project was inspired in part by that paradox, and while the “Alfred-mania” that characterized the latter half of the nineteenth century has been thoroughly investigated, I will argue that nineteenth-century claims of Alfred’s unquestioned greatness were not solely products of Victorian values and ideals. Rather, Victorian “Alfredism” simply followed a long tradition of similar Alfred scholarship, as early-modern Anglican clergy, lawyers, and Oxford historians.

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invoked King Alfred in order to advance their own polemical and political agendas. Historians of the subsequent Enlightenment period necessarily based their multi-volume national histories on source material created and circulated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that had been produced with such polemical and political intent. Following the Act of Union of 1707 and the solidification of some form of a *British* national identity (as opposed to the discrete notion of Englishness inherent to the early-modern historiography cited throughout this thesis), Alfred was increasingly hailed as a foundational figure of many institutions central to that newly-formed identity. Additionally, Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge's observation that “the further development of King Alfred’s reputation is a subject worthy of study in its own right” has yielded a small number of Alfredian reception histories published over the past two decades. However, this thesis explores the early-modern and Enlightenment uses of Alfred that predated the Victorian cult, and which contributed to Alfred’s prominence in English—and ultimately, British—historiography.

Keynes and Lapidge argue that “it is likely that tales of Alfred’s wars and wisdom circulated orally before the Conquest, and were handed down in popular tradition to later generations, but it is difficult now to distinguish any remnant of such tales from the purely fictional and imaginary elements in the literary accounts of Alfred which survive”. Despite the difficulty of tracing the reception of Alfred in post-Conquest and high-medieval England,

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12 Barbara Yorke credits John McGavin, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Southampton, for the introduction of “Alfredism” to scholarly discourse, pp. 361. The term is employed frequently throughout this thesis to denote Alfred studies or historical scholarship related to King Alfred.


14 Ibid., pp. 46.
Keynes’ 1999 essay, “The Cult of King Alfred the Great”, presents a wide range of Alfredian source material produced over the eleven-hundred years since the death of the Saxon king. While Keynes’ objective is to distinguish the image of Alfred that developed in post-medieval England from accounts of the king as presented in the Anglo-Saxon sources, his essay invites a deeper analysis of the contemporary conflicts to which early-modern and Enlightenment historians applied King Alfred and the ways in which Alfred’s image was consequently altered. Barbara Yorke’s work on “The Use and Abuse of King Alfred’s Reputation in Later Centuries” was equally influential in the conception of this project. However, it was not the content of Yorke’s essay so much as its basic premise which was instrumental in dictating the direction of this thesis, as her presentation of the “uses and abuses” of the Saxon king’s identity similarly opened the door for a more in-depth study of Alfredian appropriation. While she is clear in asserting that “no one wants to return to the past distortions of Alfred to serve current preoccupations or to the racist associations of Anglo-Saxonism”\(^\text{15}\), Yorke’s candor regarding the repeated abuses of King Alfred’s identity throughout English history is not found in either Parker’s study or in Keynes’ landmark essay.

Despite a number of other representations of the Saxon king outside of academic circles in pre-Victorian Britain\(^\text{16}\), this project is primarily concerned with developments in Alfredian historiography. Therefore, this thesis will elucidate patterns in the usage of King Alfred in early-modern and Enlightenment historical writing, which, as I will show throughout the succeeding

\(^{15}\) Barbara Yorke, “The Use and Abuse of King Alfred’s Reputation in Later Centuries,”, pp. 380.

\(^{16}\) Alfred features quite heavily in the art and literature of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. While the artistic and literary representations of Alfred of the period were necessarily products of early-modern and Enlightenment historical writing, a future study of pre-Victorian Alfredism might benefit from an analysis of relevant period art and literature within the context of the polemical and political debates examined in each of the four chapters of this thesis.
chapters, were constructed to support different arguments of the major polemical and political conflicts of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Chapter one explores the ways in which Alfred was employed to justify the newly-established Anglican faith, beginning in about the 1570s with the efforts of Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury under Elizabeth I. The following chapter illustrates how Alfred came to be heralded as a foundational figure of English common legal practices. Chapter three investigates the early-modern association of Alfred with the foundation of Oxford University, and finally, chapter four analyzes the Alfredian connection to various principles and institutions closely linked to the British national identity in the wake of the political union of England and Scotland in 1707. The Victorian cult of Alfred has been treated by a number of scholars over the past twenty years, perhaps most extensively by Joanne Parker, whose 2007 study of Alfredism explores the Victorian sensibilities of piety, morality, temperance, and societal progress in an attempt to explain the nineteenth century attraction to the Saxon king. However, Dr. Parker’s presentation of Alfredism as a particularly Victorian strand of historical thought seems to dismiss early-modern and Enlightenment uses of King Alfred as secondary prerequisites of the Victorian cult, rather than notable historiographical engagements with the Saxon king in and of themselves. This thesis, then, addresses sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century Alfredian scholarship to demonstrate the extent to which Alfred became a pawn of early-modern religious polemic and political debates through the Enlightenment period.
Chapter 1
Alfred, Religious Polemic, and Early Anglo-Saxonism in Late Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England

Prior to this first examination of early-modern Alfredism, it is important to first point out that the development of professionalized historical writing in England was a relatively slow process. As such, the significance of history—specifically British history—to sixteenth century English culture seems somewhat paradoxical. Yet the Elizabethan era was marked by a pervasive strand of Anglican religious polemic, as prominent Protestant intellectuals turned to England’s Saxon past to provide the newly-established Church of England with a definitively English pre-Conquest foundational narrative. Felicity Heal explains that for sixteenth-century Protestants, history “offered an obvious way of legitimating the identity of the new Church of England by locating it in time and space”.

It is precisely this Protestant quest for ecclesiastical legitimization that triggered the movement of Anglo-Saxon scholarship which hailed Alfred as a de facto founder of the Anglican Church, some six-hundred years prior to King Henry’s split with Rome.

Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1559 until his death in 1575, initiated the sixteenth century rebirth of Alfred studies. The scholarly efforts of Archbishop Parker and his cohorts effectively laid the groundwork not only for the rapid growth of Anglo-Saxon studies, but also for a strand of religious polemic of which Alfred became a powerful weapon. Without assigning too much linearity to the narrative of early-modern interest in Alfred of Wessex, Parker was one of the first Anglo-Saxon scholars to edit and transcribe Asser’s Life of Alfred. His 1574

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18 Joanne Parker, ‘England’s Darling’: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great, pp. 50.
edition of the *Life* (with its countless erroneous interpolations and edits) became the textual authority for Alfred scholars who came after him, particularly following the Cotton library fire of 1731 which destroyed the unique manuscript of Asser’s text.

As the first Archbishop of Canterbury after the Elizabethan settlement, Parker was fighting a two-front liturgical and political war with both the Catholics, who resented the Anglican ascendancy, and the Puritans, who felt that the newly-established Church of England was misguided in its interpretation of Protestant ideals. While Parker may, in fact, have been “much more alarmed by the papists than by the Puritans”,¹⁹ the archbishop nevertheless found himself in quite a precarious position. In the late 1560s, Parker was tasked by Queen Elizabeth to assist her in attempting to solidify England’s new Protestant identity. Elizabeth writes to Archbishop Parker: “…we do understand that there do daily repair into this realm great numbers of strangers from the parts beyond the seas, otherwise than hath been accustomed, and the most part thereof pretending the case of their coming to be for to live in this our realm with satisfaction of their conscience in Christian religion, according to the order allowed in this our realm”.²⁰ Elizabeth continues to advocate for the creation of registers of non-Anglicans entering England as a result of high crime rates and an overall lack of religious uniformity, “or otherwise that shall not be conformable to such order of religion as is agreeable with our laws”.²¹ She explains to the archbishop that she and her allies equally concerned with security were “minding

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²¹ Queen Elizabeth to Archbishop Parker, 13th May, 1568, in *Correspondence of Matthew Parker, D.D., Archbishop of Canterbury*, pp. 322.
earnestly to have a perfect reformation of all abuses, attempted to deform the uniformity prescribed by our laws and Injunctions, and that none should be suffered to decline either on the left or on the right hand from the direct line limited by authority of our said laws and Injunctions, do earnestly by our authority royal will and charge you [Parker], by all means lawful, to proceed herein as you have begun”. Elizabeth’s desire to rid her kingdom of religious conflict and create a hegemonic Protestant state to the fullest extent possible is reflected by Parker’s attempt to assist his queen in accomplishing that object. For Parker, that object was to be realized by way of a historical investigation of England’s Anglo-Saxon past.

In 1568, Archbishop Parker received permission from the Privy Council to gather materials scattered around England which would support a historical narrative presuming pre-Conquest origins of the English church. He explains:

“Whereas the Queen’s majesty, having like care and zeal as divers of her progenitors have had before times for the conservation of such ancient records and monuments, written of the state and affairs of these her realms of England and Ireland, which heretofore were preserved and recorded by special appointment of her ancestors, in divers Abbeys, to be as treasure houses, to keep and leave in memory such occurrences as feel in their times. And for that most of the same writings and records so kept in the monasteries are now come to the possession of sundry private persons, and so partly remain obscure and unknown: in which said records be mentioned such historical matters and monuments of antiquity, both for the state ecclesiastical and civil government.”

Anthony Grafton has observed that Parker and his cohorts “expended comparable energy on the gigantic tasks of searching for and publishing the sources that could prove that their

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22 Queen Elizabeth to Archbishop Parker, 20th August, 1571, in Correspondence of Matthew Parker, D.D., Archbishop of Canterbury, pp. 386.

supposed innovations were in fact restorations”.

The polemical agenda inherent in Parker’s Anglo-Saxon work is ostensibly subtle (at least in his request to the Privy Council). However, the crux of his historical interest lies in the “historical matters and monuments of antiquity” to which he would like access, for the purpose of grounding English governmental institutions and the Anglican Church in English antiquity. His 1572 _De Antiquitate Britannicae Ecclesiae_ (complete with an attached history of Cambridge University, no less) is a particularly useful document in its attempt to “trace the course of religion from Augustine ‘until the days of Henry VIIIth, when religion began to grow better, and more agreeable to the Gospel’”. This assertion reflects Parker’s true interest in Anglo-Saxon sources. Parker therefore dispatched his subordinates (including his particularly savvy and loyal secretary, John Joscelyn) all over England in search of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts which may help to affirm their claims of English ecclesiastical antiquity and righteousness.

In his contemporaneous biography of his employer, Joscelyn explains that Parker “indeuored to sett out in printe certaine off those aunciente monumentes whearoff he knew very fewe examples to be extante and which he thoughte woulde be most profitable for the posterytye to instructe them in the faythe and religion off the elders”. Called “one of the greatest


25 Matthew Parker, _De Antiquitate Britannicae Ecclesiae_, pp. i-xxxv.

26 Matthew Parker, _De Antiquitate Britannicae Ecclesiae_, transl. V. J. K. Brook, _A Life of Archbishop Parker_, pp. 323.


antiquarians of his age”\textsuperscript{29} by his eighteenth century biographer John Strype, the contributions of Parker and his contemporaries to this new field of historical inquiry represent conscious efforts to highlight Protestant values found in England’s pre-Reformation figureheads and institutions. Parker would thus be able to construct a historical narrative surrounding the church which could legitimize its primacy in opposition to widespread dissent.

Parker’s objectives become even clearer upon analysis of his letters, many of which are addressed to William Cecil, 1st Baron Burghley. As Cecil was a major proponent of the political unification of the British Isles under a single Protestant authority, his position as advisor to Queen Elizabeth allowed for his ecclesiastical politics to achieve a certain degree of legitimacy in the late Tudor court.\textsuperscript{30} While Cecil’s interpretation of the religious conflict to which Parker was actively contributing was likely more about politics than it was liturgical practice, letters between Parker and Cecil, as well as correspondence between Parker and Queen Elizabeth herself, reflect the perceived necessity for the defense of the Anglican faith—a necessity which ultimately manifested itself in the study of Anglo-Saxon England, its source material, and in turn, King Alfred.

After acquiring his title of nobility, Cecil writes to Parker, warning that Parker “shall see how dangerously I serve in this estate, and how my lord-keeper also, in my respect, is with me bitten with a viperous generation of traitors, papists, and I fear of some domestic hidden scorpions. If God and our consciences were not our defense and consolation against these

\textsuperscript{29} John Strype, \textit{Life and Acts of Matthew Parker}, pp. 528.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
pestilential darts, we might well be weary of our lives”. While a certain degree of paranoia is discernible in Burghley’s tone, his words are indicative of the plight of the late-sixteenth century Protestant elite. Despite the constant Catholic threat, Burghley finds solidarity in Parker in the mutual defense of their religion and shared Protestant ethos. It is precisely this brand of anti-Catholic paranoia which allowed for Parker’s defensive polemic to develop and grow into an influential intellectual and antiquarian movement grounded in English antiquity.

Whereas Lord Burghley’s outlook reflects his desire to exert English Protestant influence over Scotland and Ireland, Parker’s response to an omnipresent “Papist” enemy is an attempt to justify the Anglican religion in definitively English historical—and as well shall see—Alfedian terms. After completing his edition of Asser’s *Life of Alfred* in 1574, Parker explains to Burghley:

“This last addition of Alfred’s *Life* I have added to such stories as before I sent to my lord Arundel, which yet being so homely, I would not have done if his lordship had not seemed to desire it. I send your lordship one which is but meanly bound, as to certain others of my good lords I purpose to send the like. And thus I wish your lordship well to fare in all things as myself. Because her Majesty is come secretly to my lord of Leicester, I know not whether I might offer myself to her Highness…the correcting of [the text], and the binding and printing, hath stayed me thus long only”. Parker’s Alfred scholarship, then, seems to have been somewhat well-received and in high demand by his noble patrons—however small a population that may have been.

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31 Lord Burghley to Archbishop Parker, 11th September, 1573, in *Correspondence of Matthew Parker, D.D., Archbishop of Canterbury*, pp. 444.

It is also interesting to consider the way in which Parker seems to have understood his own work. That is to say, his “corrections” (perhaps more accurately referred to as manipulations) have hindered the work of Alfred scholars since the 1850s.\textsuperscript{33} John Strype’s 1711 biography \textit{The Life and Acts of Matthew Parker} is clear in pointing out that the archbishop “commonly made improvements to MSS by additions of his own”—a statement which would seem to indicate that Parker’s less than objective methodology was well-documented.\textsuperscript{34} To provide a brief example of Parker’s questionable scholarship, the notorious story of Alfred and the cakes\textsuperscript{35} has been shown to have originated in the annals of St. Neots, an eleventh-century document which Parker incorrectly assumed to have been written in Asser’s hand.\textsuperscript{36} While the decisions Parker made in order to produce what he thought to be the most accurate edition of Asser’s text possible do not reflect his polemical agenda in and of themselves, Bishop Asser no doubt “appealed to Parker as a member of an early, native ‘British’ church which he believed wielded some independence from Rome”.\textsuperscript{37} Alfred thus undoubtedly appeared to the archbishop to be an important and powerful king from the period which became the subject of his historical investigation, and Parker seems to have been impressed by Alfred’s welcoming reception of the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Joanne Parker, \textit{England’s Darling: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great}, pp. 51.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} The story in question involves Alfred retreating to the Somerset countryside to ride out a particularly devastating period of Danish pillage. Disguised as a commoner to avoid detection, Alfred takes refuge in a peasant home and is charged with keeping watch over a few cakes the resident woman was baking. Alfred was apparently so preoccupied by the state of his kingdom that he inadvertently let the cakes burn, for which he was summarily berated by the woman upon her return. Alfred evidently handled the situation so gracefully that he never revealed his identity to the woman or complained of his ill-treatment at the hands of one of his subjects. Parker appended this anecdote to his edition of Asser’s \textit{Life of Alfred}, in the chronological place where he thought it should be included. In Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 197-99.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Joanne Parker, \textit{England’s Darling: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great}, pp. 50-51.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Welsh cleric’s non-Roman religious influence in his court which, to Parker, would have necessary preceded the close relationship Asser himself purports to have had with Alfred in the *Vita Alfredi*.

Furthermore, Parker’s decision to append to his edition of the *Life* Alfred’s Old English translation of Pope Gregory’s *Pastoral Care* provided him the ammunition to portray Alfred as a king “who had pre-empted (and so could vindicate) the Anglican practice of translating Latin scripture into the vernacular”.38 By including Alfred’s most renowned piece of scholarship alongside his 1574 edition of Asser’s *Life*, Parker was able to justify modern Protestant liturgical practices (conducted in English rather than Latin) by way of a translation believed to have been completed by Alfred himself. This decision certainly helped Parker to present Alfred as a representative figure of the Anglo-Saxon period which the archbishop so desperately desired to be associated with a definitively English medieval church of which Anglican Protestantism was a direct descendant.

The inclusion of Alfred’s translation of the *Pastoral Care* in Parker’s edition of Asser’s *Life* represents another major contribution on the part of the archbishop to the early-modern arsenal of Alfredian historiography, due in large part to the prose preface written by Alfred himself. As discussed above, the act of translation is probably that which most attracted Parker to the *Pastoral Care*. Yet Alfred’s words themselves align with Parker’s polemical intentions. While the objects of Alfred’s secular education programs become apparent through his preface, his ecclesiastical goals come across equally as clearly. The Saxon king recounts the state of education in Wessex when upon his ascension to the throne in AD 871 as follows: “So

38 Ibid.
completely had wisdom fallen off in England that there were very few on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter from Latin into English…” 39 Alfred laments the decline in knowledge of Latin in England, to which he responds by translating into English “certain books which are the most necessary for all men to know”. 40 Alfred’s attempt to render texts (both theological and secular) more accessible to his subjects was certainly thought to represent the same Protestant liturgical practices Parker and his colleagues were attempting to justify, and, considered in this light, the inclusion of the Pastoral Care alongside Asser’s Life is evidence of the polemical nature of early Alfred scholarship.

Archbishop Parker and his early Anglo-Saxonist subordinates were not the only Protestants interested in Alfred in late sixteenth-century England. Others dedicated to establishing their religion’s “ecclesiastical identity” integrated rhetoric similar to Parker’s into their own works of historical writing, and by the end of the Elizabethan period, this brand of historically-grounded religious polemic had become quite normative within Protestant intellectual circles. 41 John Foxe is one of the more interesting figures who continued Parker’s polemical scholarship, due in large part to his views on English ecclesiastical and national destiny. Foxe’s great work, the Actes and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Days, touching matters of the Church, similarly endeavors to identify pre-Conquest foundations of an English church separate from Papal influence. He devotes a section of book VI of his Actes and


40 Alfred, prose preface to his translation of Gregory the Great’s Pastoral Care, pp. 126.

Monuments to a “brief note of Ecclesiastical lawes ordeined by auncient kynges in this Realme”, pointing out the widespread misconception that “the Byshops of Rome be the vniuersall heads of the whole militant Church of Christ in earth”, and continues to argue that “the gouernement of Christes Church here in earth vnder Christ, hath not depended onely of the Pope from auncient tyme, but hath bene rather directed by such Kynges and Princes, as God here had placed vnder him to gourne the people of this Realme of England”. Foxe’s contention is simultaneously quite radical and yet representative of the entire Protestant polemical movement discussed to this point. After a brief description of King Ine’s religious policies (rather simplistic policies at that), Foxe turns to Alfred, identifying a series of judicial punishments instituted by the Saxon king “for violating the holy preceptes of God commaunded by Moses”. Foxe assigns to Alfred a hand in the foundation of the juridical policy which in its very nature separates the English Church from Rome and serves to qualify Anglicanism in Anglo-Saxon and Alfredian terms. While Foxe certainly disagreed with Parker on a number of ecclesiastical and liturgical matters, both individuals nevertheless contributed to a growing interest in Alfred which allowed for scholars to continue to analyze pre-Conquest source material and to familiarize themselves with the king who would eventually become a representative figure of the Anglo-Saxon period as a whole.

Late sixteenth and seventeenth century Alfredism becomes much more abstract with the development of a more secular academic tradition devoted to the Saxon king that also addressed

43 Ibid.
Alfred’s ecclesiastical reforms and religious policy. John Spelman, MP for Worcester in 1626, as well as Cambridge University’s first lecturer in Anglo-Saxon, is a figure whose contributions to early-modern Alfred scholarship align with each of the uses of the Saxon king’s image explored throughout the following chapters of this study. Most of the modern historiography on Spelman considers his Anglo-Saxon scholarship in decidedly political terms to illustrate his Royalist leanings during the Civil War, and as a result, largely ignores the significance of his *Life of Alfred the Great* in the polemical context that has been the subject of this chapter thus far. Though Spelman’s politics are indeed important to understanding the secular academic environment in Civil War England (and will be discussed at length in the following chapters), his biography of King Alfred in many ways continues the tradition of English ecclesiastical qualification initiated by Parker in the 1560s-70s.

Spelman frequently finds evidence to support claims that the English Church was in a state of disarray prior to Alfred’s ascension to the throne. He argues that the emphasis Alfred placed on the tenth commandment “remains as a Note of the Corruption of the Church at that time, and of the Uprightness of the King’s profession notwithstanding”. Spelman here prefaces his eventual description of Alfred’s accomplishments by identifying a state of disorganization within both the pre-existing English Church and the Papacy so as to more effectively present Alfred as an ecclesiastical reformer. Spelman subsequently explains: “the Papals, to defend [the Catholic Church] by the Antiquity thereof, have very much insisted upon King Alfred’s Acknowledgement and Submission to the Ecclesiastick Sovereignty of Rome; [whereas] by these Laws of his it appears, that the Romish Supremacy was not in those times extended to the

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Restraint of the Authority of Christian Princes, in such sort as now it is: or if it were, K. Alfred never submitted so far unto it”. Spelman counters Catholic claims of Alfred’s allegiance to Rome, grounding his argument in the ecclesiastical policy analyzed by Foxe. Spelman’s argument presents English common law alongside divine law, yet he nevertheless underscores the significance of Alfred’s reign in the ninth-century reformation and development of the English Church. While not necessarily a member of the polemical academic tradition that originated under Parker, Spelman nevertheless invokes Alfred for the purpose of emphasizing Alfred’s role in reforming the English church and freeing it from the scourge of Roman influence.

Though subsequent historians have berated Parker for the disservice he inadvertently did unto their academic discipline by way of his interpolations and emendations, Parker’s scholarly pursuits had a significant effect on the future of Anglo-Saxonism and Alfredism—particularly after the destruction of the Cotton manuscript of Asser’s *Life of Alfred* in 1731. The availability of medieval source material related to Alfred facilitated the process by which Alfred eventually became the embodiment of the Anglo-Saxon period in order to more effectively support Anglican claims of ancient ecclesiastical roots. Despite the effects of the dissolution of the monasteries (in which many of the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts were held prior to the reign of Henry VIII), Parker and his circle were able to obtain a myriad of Anglo-Saxon documents, including the unique


48 For example, Anthony Grafton describes the extent to which Parker’s work is distinguishable by the archbishop’s trademark red chalk in the margins, which he used to “improve” his manuscripts, pp. 165-66.
manuscript of Asser’s Life. Parker’s 1574 edition of Asser became the authoritative document used by historians engaging with Alfred as a historical figure, and while the need for religious qualification gradually subsided, the conditions under which Parker produced his Life necessarily assigned to Alfredism an unavoidable Protestant polemical legacy.

Interest in English antiquity during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was by no means limited to the Protestants. Similar historical efforts were taken by Catholics who set out to “combat Protestantism and convert the heathens”.49 Like Parker and his colleagues, "Catholic scholars also manipulated their evidence” to fit their own religious narrative, and by the seventeenth century, “the age of primitive accumulation of ecclesiastical learning gradually gave way to one of analysis and investment”.50 Catholic antiquaries and intellectuals went to great lengths to counter the blasphemous claims of the Anglican polemicists. Richard Verstegan, a converted Anglo-Dutch Catholic, (dedicating his 1605 Restitution of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities to James I, no less)51, challenges “the Protestant antiquarians on their own ground”.52 Yet Verstegan largely ignores Alfred, holding that Cnut, as a result of his mighty and sprawling North Sea Empire was “consequently the greatest king that England ever had, and prooved, in the end a very notable, and good Christian Prince”.53 Through analyzing the Catholic polemical histories of the early seventeenth century, it becomes apparent that Alfred does not seem to have

53 Richard Verstegan, A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence: In Antiquities, Concerning the Most Noble and Renowned English Nation, pp. 162.
played quite as significant a role in the Catholic attempts to counter Parkerian thought as the Saxon king did in the Protestant narrative. For Parker, the study of English history had been largely ignored to the late sixteenth century, a phenomenon which therefore suggested to the archbishop conscious “neglect and Catholic depredations.” With members of Parker’s circle working tirelessly to compile ancient textual evidence to support claims of Anglican superiority, Parker intended for his Anglo-Saxon work, riddled with intentional interpolations and cross-textual references, to be circulated amongst the educated Protestant and wealthy elite so that his scholarship might assist in demonstrating the supremacy of the Anglican Church. The works of Foxe and Spelman demonstrate the continuation of that polemical objective and its inherent connection to Alfred.

Outside of the historians engaged in the post-Reformation ecclesiastical debate, there is evidence to suggest that Parker’s work had been circulated in England beyond the sphere of Protestant elites he perhaps envisioned. While modern historians identify an early seventeenth century antiquarian preoccupation with classical antiquity as opposed to British medievalism, the case of William Blundell illustrates the extent to which late sixteenth century Anglo-Saxon texts (now linked to Alfred) had spread to non-clerical figures—and in Blundell’s case, even to Catholics. In April 1611, the fourteen-year-old son of a tenant farmer in the small northern town of Little Crosby stumbled upon a collection of silver coins with curious markings on them. D.R. Woolf posits that early finds such as these were frequently met with inquiries into the coins’


55 Ibid.

worth before any sort of historical investigation took hold. Yet there seems also to be a class distinction at play between the way in which tenant farmers (the individuals who more often than not actually found these numismatic hordes) and their masters, the typically learned individuals who, in addition to their initial interest in the artifacts’ worth, seemed to belong to a wider tradition of antiquarianism and interest in identifying the origin of the treasures found on their property—regardless of their religious affiliation.

In the case of Little Crosby, that master was one William Blundell, a wealthy recusant from the north of England, who was preparing an area of his property to be designated a Catholic burial site. It is likely that Blundell had read the works of William Camden and of other “professional” antiquarians, and he was in fact quite familiar with Matthew Parker’s transcription of Asser’s *Life of Alfred* and similar works of medieval emendation. While Blundell’s reading of and familiarity with Anglo-Saxon source material may suggest a personal interest in pre-Conquest England on the part of Blundell himself (rather than a widespread rejection of classical antiquity in the early seventeenth century), the Harkirke find (as it came to be known) offers a great deal about how Alfred was perceived in the direct wake of the polemical movement described above. Perhaps most significantly for the purposes of this chapter, Blundell’s admiration of Alfred represents the beginning of the relative evaporation of religious boundaries established by Parker’s own scholarship and the early acceptance of Alfred as an English cultural figurehead.

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58 Ibid., pp. 97.
The case of William Blundell is a perfect entry point for understanding Alfred’s image outside of the polemical circumstances under which much of the textual source material he read had been created. Blundell is by no means the normative early seventeenth century antiquary; his devotion to the Catholic Church would seem to render him a relative outcast in the established Anglo-Saxon antiquarian tradition. Yet it appears that this was far from the case, as Blundell evidently saw in Alfred an “ancient model for faith under dire circumstances”\textsuperscript{59}, despite Blundell’s Catholicism and the overwhelmingly Anglican polemic which had dominated Alfredian discourse for the past four decades. His appreciation for Alfred, exemplified by his interest in the great find (never mind the fact that many of the coins unearthed on his property were in fact of Danish origin) indicates an early embrace of Alfred by members of English society across the aforementioned religious divide. Blundell’s familiarity with Parker’s transcription of Asser’s \textit{Life of Alfred}, then, suggests that not all devout Catholics averted their eyes from translations and renderings of texts created with such overtly anti-Catholic intent. That is to say, regardless of the reasons Parker, Foxe, Spelman, or other early-modern Protestant intellectuals invoked Alfred’s name in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Blundell’s embrace of the text and King Alfred reflects the beginning of the extension of Alfredian source material into wider English society—an extension which influenced Blundell to such an extent that he incorrectly assumed the Danish coinage found on his property to belong to his country’s Saxon forebears.

By the early seventeenth century, Parker’s image of Alfred as an inherently “Protestant” king was well-established. While it is generally accepted in the relevant historiography that

\footnote{59 Little Crosby Records 50-51, cited in D.R. Woolf, “Little Crosby and the Horizons of Early Modern Historical Culture”, pp. 122.}
Alfred did not achieve much of a following amongst English royalty to this point (outside of Queen Elizabeth, to whom Parker’s polemical work was dedicated)\(^6\), Protestant scholars began to observe ways in which Alfred could be used to guide contemporary rulers toward more agreeable action. Robert Powell’s 1634 presentation of King Charles in Alfredian terms is one of the more well-known cases of this practice. Powell, a prominent Stuart-era lawyer, compiled his own translation of the *Life of Alfred*, which he presents alongside his beloved Charles I in a work entitled “*The life of Alfred…the first institutor of subordinate government in this kingdome, and refounder of the University of Oxford Together with a parallell of our soveraigne lord, K. Charles untill this yeare, 1634*”.\(^6\) Powell’s decision to place Alfred alongside Charles is indicative of Alfred’s increasing prominence within certain fragments of English society, and Alfred’s piety and devotion to scholarship in particular would have seemed to Powell obvious starting points to begin his parallel of the two kings.\(^6\)

In his *Dedicatoria*, Powell writes: “wave after wave of reflections poured into my mind about His most serene Majesty, Charles, our King, who resembles so closely in almost every point of comparison his illustrious Saxon forebear…”\(^6\) Powell attempts here to draw comparisons between Alfred and Charles not only in monarchical terms, but also in terms of character—in particular, his religiosity and his devotion to education. Francis Wilson, the editor of the twentieth-century edition of Powell’s *Life*, perhaps over-romantically entertains the notion

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\(^6\) Robert Powell, *The life of Alfred…the first institutor of subordinate government in this kingdome, and refounder of the University of Oxford Together with a parallell of our soveraigne lord, K. Charles untill this yeare, 1634* (London, 1634); repr. With Introduction by Francis Wilson and notes by S. Tyas (Stamford, 1996).


\(^6\) Robert Powell, *The life of Alfred*, pp. 3.
that Powell wished to serve as Charles’ own Asser, “writing his Prince’s story in His Majesty’s own lifetime, as the Welsh monk had done for Alfred himself”.\textsuperscript{64} Despite the impossibility of knowing for certain precisely how Powell conceived of his biographical task, he does explain that "some write the lives of dead Princes, to eclipse the glory of the living; in such, a lawlesse humour discontented with the present State, overswayes the legiance of a loyall heart. This Treatise aimes at no such end, nor other; but only an impartiall parallell of two such Princes, the one dead, yet living in the other, and the living, raised as it were, out of the ashes of the dead…”\textsuperscript{65} The likelihood of the work having been composed only as an “impartial parallel” is, consequently, quite slim. Rather, in the words of Professor Keynes, the juxtaposition allows Charles to “bathe in Alfred’s reflected glory” while “suggesting by implication how Charles might bring himself into line”.\textsuperscript{66} Powell’s biography appears to make use of the rhetoric of Spelman and his royalist sympathizers to underscore Charles’ divine right as monarch, but also to indirectly suggest that the king ought to follow the Alfredian model of pious rulership and abandon his perceived Catholic leanings.

In many ways, the image of Alfred the Great across time and space is inseparably linked to both the evolution of Asser’s \textit{Life of Alfred} and the political climates in which the Alfred scholars of each period discussed throughout this thesis will be shown to have operated. Whereas medieval chroniclers had certainly engaged with Alfred and the Saxon king was never a figure of true obscurity, Matthew Parker’s historical and ecclesiastical task, amidst a period of great religious turbulence, rekindled academic interest in Alfred—albeit for the purpose of identifying

\textsuperscript{64} Francis Wilson, introduction to 1996 edition of Robert Powell’s \textit{Life of Alfred}, pp. vii.


\textsuperscript{66} Simon Keynes, “The Cult of King Alfred the Great.”, pp. 254.
Anglo-Saxon origins of an English church independent from Rome. Although the Catholic response to Parkerian rhetoric was also grounded in history, Parker’s Catholic counterparts did not seem to perceive quite so much potential in Alfred as a means to their own polemical ends. Later historians interested in pre-Norman England operated within historiographical constraints purposefully or inadvertently established by the Protestant polemicists of the late sixteenth century. As such, Parker’s Alfredian scholarship (and the work of his contemporaries) is integral not only to understanding the English attitude toward King Alfred during the late sixteenth century, but also to tracing Alfred studies throughout the ensuing centuries as well. Parker’s Anglican polemicists were amongst the first to begin to shape Alfred’s early-modern identity—initiating the developments in historiographical practice that facilitated the application of Alfred to debates surrounding English institutions beyond the Anglican Church. Throughout the remainder of the early-modern period and into the Enlightenment, Alfred was increasingly seen as a historical tool that could be implemented to justify institutions whose superiority or antiquity was being questioned.
Chapter 2
Alfred, Law, and Government in Early-Modern England

Throughout the previous chapter, I drew upon various sixteenth and seventeenth century sources to illustrate how Alfred was propelled into academic discourse by way of Protestant efforts to justify the antiquity of the Church of England. In attempting to legitimate the Anglican faith, Parker and his allies scoured the English countryside (and ironically, sparsely-surviving archives in the monasteries dissolved on King Henry’s orders in the 1530s) in search of evidence to support their claims that pre-Conquest English churches operated separately from Rome, removed from papal influence. As was demonstrated by way of the earlier discussion of Parker, Alfred’s image benefited from the scholarly pursuits of a small contingent of sixteenth and early seventeenth century Protestant elites. However, only a small proportion of contemporary scholarship addresses sixteenth and seventeenth century uses of Alfred to justify English legal practices and governmental structure. While most of the historiography credits Civil War era political rhetoric for the Saxon king’s early-modern association with law and government, this chapter will illustrate a strand of pre-Civil War historical writing that attributes a number of central elements of English law and governmental structure to King Alfred—a phenomenon that has been largely overlooked to this point.

Following the previous discussion of Archbishop Parker and his efforts to justify the antiquity of the Anglican Church, making sense of contemporaneous attempts to similarly justify secular institutions proves considerably more difficult. This is partly due to discrepancies between sixteenth-century notions of the law and our modern understanding of its place in society and its effects on a polity’s self-understanding. Rebecca Brackmann implores the
historian of early-modern England to remain aware that the late sixteenth century was “a time when the emphasis began to shift from defining the law as the collective understanding to defining it more textually as decisions made and recorded, and written statutes of legislative bodies”.67 It is true that the sixteenth century witnessed changing definitions of law and legal structure, but as D. Alan Orr argues, “the common law was, after all, the fundamental law of the land, defining England as a distinct constitutional entity from other European states”.68 As a result, sixteenth and seventeenth-century attempts to justify the antiquity of the English legal system comprise not only discussions of ancient legislation, but also governmental infrastructure, questions of nationhood, and politically-charged “models of Christian kingship”.69

J.G.A. Pocock has proposed that during the sixteenth century, many Englishmen “supposed that the common law was the only law their land had ever known, and this by itself encouraged them to interpret the past as if it had been governed by the law of their own day”.70 Here, Pocock approaches the critical question of legal continuity—the notion of consistency in English common legal practices between the pre-Conquest Saxons and the post-Conquest Anglo-Normans. The subject of much scholarly discourse, this alleged continuity—and antiquity—of English law and government became embedded into the political rhetoric of the Civil War. Two

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distinct theories regarding the Norman Conquest thus emerged, as participants in the legal debate sought either to demonstrate the Norman appropriation of a pre-existing Saxon legal structure, or, on the other hand, a complete reorganization of the laws and government of King William’s newly-conquered territory known as the Norman Yoke.

R.B. Seaberg explains that “proponents of the theory of continuity…and later, the parliamentarians during the civil war, argued that whatever the assumption might have been it assuredly was not a conquest: William claimed the throne by ancient right and English laws and customs remained inviolate. Opponents, however, believed that William's assumption was achieved and maintained by force; and that Norman customs and institutions vitiated those of the simpler Anglo-Saxons”. The bulk of the references to Alfred in re his role in the foundation of the common law and governmental practices date from the early-to-mid seventeenth century, during the Civil War. However, this chapter will show that Alfred had long been celebrated for his legal reforms— reforms which enabled secular Alfred scholars of the early-modern period to make claims surrounding the antiquity of the common law and parliamentary system of government in England.

As one of the more active proto-antiquarians of the 1530s and 1540s, John Leland is an appropriate figure with whom to begin. In his New Year’s Gift, Leland expresses his gratitude to Henry VIII for encouraging him “to peruse and dylygentlye to searche all the lybraryes of Monasteryes and colleges of thyse your noble realme, to the extent that the monumentes of auncyent wryters, as wel of other nacyons as of your owne prouynce, myghte be brought out of


deadly darkenesse to lyuelye lyght, and to receyue lyke thankes of their posteryte, as they employed their longe and greate studyes to the publyque wealthe”. Similar in a few ways to Parker’s request to Queen Elizabeth, Leland’s expressions of appreciation reflect not only his early sixteenth-century conception of the purpose of history, but also the types of sources he understood as useful in seeking to bring “out of deadly darkness” the “monuments of ancient writers”. Despite this apparent consistency, it is clear that Leland understood the purpose of historical inquiry quite differently from the way in which Parker later conceived of his.

A brief example of a historical question from Leland’s perspective may assist in drawing the important distinction between his work and Parkerian (or as we shall see, Lambardian) polemic. Leland explains to John Vallans, to whom a portion of the Itinerary is dedicated, that certainly Vallans recalls “at my being with you last, wee with certaine of our friends talked. And I am well assured that you remember what a styr N.B. kept, when I said that ships had bene at Ware, affyrming, how it was unpossible that that river, which but of late was scarce able to bear a smal whyrrie, should in times past beare big and mighty ships. Truly his wordes were many and great, but his reasons were smal. And since at that time I promised to send you in a letter a plaine and evident provee of those words which there I uttered…I will shew you the cause for which the ships went thither, and what they did there. Then will I plainly proove both by authoritie and examples, that is is likely that they were there. Lastly, I wil (as my promise was) shew you about

73 John Leland, New Year’s Gift. 1544, pp. 33.

74 Historians such as Woolf, Kewes, and Herendeen have repeatedly pointed out difficulties in identifying distinctions between “history” and “antiquarianism” in early-modern England—particularly in the eyes of the self-styled historians and antiquarians themselves. For example, recent criticisms admonish T.D. Kendrick for attempting to evaluate sixteenth and seventeenth century antiquarian-historians in accordance with modern historiographical method. As such, the following discussion of John Leland’s uses of Alfred is intended to merely observe certain developments in sixteenth-century historical method which are integral to the argument of this chapter.
what time and by whome Ware was builded”. As if delivering the opening statement for the proverbial defense, Leland systematically presents the question which he plans to address and the method by which he plans to address it. Shortly thereafter, Alfred appears as the hero of his tale and a central element of his argument.

Leland’s non-polemical invocations of Alfred provide useful contrast to understanding the ways in which the Saxon king was appropriated to fit narratives of legal continuity in the seventeenth century. For example, in attempting to prove that ships had, at one time, been able to sail to the town of Ware, Leland relates one of Alfred’s military campaigns, imparting that after a centuries of decisive defeats at the hands of the Danes, “this misery continued the space of 300 and odde yeares, within which yeares, namely about the…23rd yeare of King Alfred’s raigne, a great armie of Danes, having received an overthrow at a place called Buttington beside Severne, fled into East England, and there wintered, and prepared a great host againe out of Northumberland and other places”. After describing the Saxon defeat, Leland continues:

“But the good King Alfred, who alwaies was carefull for the welfare of his subjectes, gathered an armie, and before harvest time pitched his tents neer to the place of [his enemies’] abode….In this space, it happened on a time, as the King rode amongst by the river side, he viewed the water, and received how that in some places of it the chanell might easily be stopped, and the streame made lesse. Whereupon he (as Huntington writeth) caused it to be cut into three severall braunches or armes. But howsoever it was, hee so weakened the streame, that the Danes could not bring back their ships the same way they came. Which thing the Danes perceiving, knowing well it was in vaine for them to abide any longer there, they left their Ships, and fled by land as fast as they could…After this the King departed, and the Londoners and Countrimen seeing the Danes were gone, burst downe their Holde, and got some of their ships backe again to London, and the rest they burned and brake all to peeces”.

75 John Leland, Itinerary. 1538-43, pp. XXI.
76 Ibid., XXII
77 Ibid., XXIII-XXXIV
Leland makes extensive use of medieval sources to support his claim that ships had, in fact, once been at the town of Ware, if only to settle what seems to have been nothing more than an affable disagreement over a relatively non-consequential historical question. While Leland portrays the archetypal Alfredian characteristics of benevolent rulership and inventive military tactics, the document reads more as a chronicle—a narrative history—than the polemical works of Parker and Foxe. That is to say, Leland’s intention was notably not to prove the antiquity of any English political, religious, or legal institution, and as Herendeen has shown, Leland’s antiquarian work was for the most part archival, “designed to observe, record, and preserve, and thus to fulfill what we have seen to be the basic goals of the historian’s task. As [John] Bale, Leland’s first editor, points out, and as Leland himself makes clear, his desire is to contribute towards the preservation of the monuments and manuscripts of the past, and to serve posterity through the description of the historical landscape”. Although Leland was operating some forty years prior to Parker’s most important contributions to the Anglo-Saxon canon, his methodology and his use of Alfredian sources are crucial to understanding the academic climate out of which Alfred came to be so closely associated with the foundation of English legal practices and governmental infrastructure.

While Leland refrains from identifying Alfred as the father of the English legal system, he uses Anglo-Saxon and late medieval sources to illustrate Alfred’s attempts to reorganize the governmental framework of Hertfordshire. This represents an early foundation upon which subsequent portrayals of King Alfred as law reformer were built. Like the diligent Tudor

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historian that he was, Leland explains that his account of Alfred’s feats is “confirmed by the reporte of a verie auncient, reverent and learned Wryter, namely Asserus Menevensis, Bishop of Saint Davies, that lived in the verie selfe same time when these thinges were done, and Maryanus Scotus, who lived and wrote a Chronicle at least 500 yeares ago, as Florentinus, a Monk of Worcester, who continued it, doth witnesse and declare. Besides divers others of great antiquitie and credite, as Henry of Huntingdon, Matthew of Westminster, and manie more, who doe all confirme that which is before declared”. Leland clearly seems to have had a remarkably firm grasp on the Anglo-Saxon and late medieval sources available to him, yet he amounts to scarcely more than a footnote in Joanne Parker’s extensive study of Alfredism. Keynes briefly addresses Leland’s contributions to sixteenth century Alfredism, explaining that “neither Leland nor Bale had much occasion to reflect on matters of larger historical import, and their estimation of the king is not easy to discern; but both may have been too steeped in the British myth to give [Alfred] any degree of prominence beyond intellectual distinction”.  

Despite Leland’s favorable estimation of Alfred in the Itinerary, his understanding of appropriate uses of history may have prevented him from applying the past to legitimize elements of his own society— a practice which conversely defined the subsequent period of Alfred scholarship. As was argued at the outset of this chapter, contemporary historians of Alfred often ignore Leland and claim instead that the Alfredian association with law and government was a product of Civil War era politics. Rather, not only is Leland a important scholar in tracing the history of Alfredism as a whole, but his analysis of Alfred includes a description of the Saxon

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79 John Leland, Itinerary. 1538-43, pp. XXIV.
80 Joanne Parker, England's Darling: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great, pp. 52.
king’s innovations in law and government—over a century prior to the parliamentary conflict and subsequent Civil War that scholars such as Seaberg hold responsible for the development of Anglo-Saxon legal idealism. His work is therefore worthy of analysis for the purposes of demonstrating the evolution of Alfred’s role in early-modern English legal justification.

In volume V of the *Itinerary*, Leland explains that “King Alfred was the first that divided [Hertfordshire] into Shires, Hundreds, and Tenthes, whereby hee repressed the outrages and robberies which the English-men (following therein the Danes) committed one upon another. Hee appointed that every man should be in some Hundred or Tenthe, and if he were accused of any offence, if he found not in his Hundred or Tenth a surety or pledge for himself, he was grievously punished.” Leland makes no comprehensive claims regarding the Anglo-Saxon roots of modern English juridical institutions, but he does, in fact, describe Alfred’s efforts to more effectively maintain law and order in his kingdom through the establishment of smaller, more manageable administrative units and counties. Leland continues to describe the successes of Alfred’s legal reorganization, explaining that “Hereby [Alfred] brought to passe, that hanging golden bracelets by cross-waies, there was none durst steale or take them away. This Shire aboundeth in plenty of corne, pasture, meadows, water and woods: and hath in it 120 Parishes.”

Alfred’s administrative and juridical reforms, according to Leland, seem to have been effective in the process of administering justice and in deterring future “outrages and robberies”.

William Lambarde was an equally significant figure in developing the conception of Alfred as a foundational figure of English legal and governmental institutions during the late

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83 Ibid.
sixteenth century. Lambarde’s generation spanned the age of the Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries— an organization whose scholarly pursuits certainly benefitted from the range of Anglo-Saxon sources produced during the latter half of the sixteenth century in Archbishop Parker’s household.\(^8^4\) While Allen Boyer is careful not to observe too close a relationship between the two groups of academics, he argues in a footnote with a fair degree of certainty that “Lambarde was perfectly aware that his own Saxon studies reinforced those of the archbishop, and the two circles of scholars seemed to have mixed constantly”.\(^8^5\) Lambarde’s Anglo-Saxon work can be understood not necessarily as a product of Parker’s polemic, but as a secular version of Alfredian appropriation which sought to uncover alleged ancient origins of the English legal and governmental traditions.

In the *Archeion* (completed in 1591), Lambarde emphasizes the efficiency of the Saxon courts. He juxtaposes the Anglo-Saxon model with “King William the Conqueror: During whose Reigne (as also under the Government of King Rufus, his Sonne) it is to be thought, that the ordinarie course of Justice was greatly disturbed…because these two Princes governed by a mere and absolute power, as in a Realme obtained by Conquest”.\(^8^6\) Within the frame of the “great disturbance” of the Norman Conquest, Lambarde describes the composition of Alfred’s governmental infrastructure. He explains that “the Saxon, (but Christian King of England) *Alfred*, divided this whole Realme first into *Shires*, then those *Shires* into *Lathes*…or *Ridings*, and those againe into *Hundreds*, and lastly those also into *Lees, Boroughs*, or *Tythings*: and did

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\(^8^4\) Simon Keynes, “The Cult of King Alfred the Great.”, pp. 243.


with all establish Jurisdiction in every of these, permitting to the Reeves (or Judges of the lower Roomes) Authoritie of hearing smaller Suits, granting greater power to the Sheriff, and Aldermen which had charge of greater assemblies, and retayning to himself the decision of such matters, as by just cause of Appellation, either for Law, or Equitie, should be brought unto him”.

Here, building on Leland’s contributions, Lambarde recounts the administrative and legal structure of Alfred’s kingdom: “The Court of the whole Shire was of two forts: whereof the first…the assemblie of the Shire…was then (as now also) holden twice a yeare. And this court was of like jurisdiction to the court of the Leet, or of the burroughs or tithings, as it was then called…And to the Court Baron is, the Court of the Mannor, or chiefe place which now at this day to bee kept, and maintained once in three weekes, if the Lord will so have, and use it”. As the above excerpt indicates, Lambarde draws explicit comparisons between Alfred’s jurisdictional reforms and sixteenth-century legal practices, frequently identifying Anglo-Saxon—and specifically Alfredian—methods of law and government as foundational elements of modern English legal institutions. While it would never have occurred to Leland to argue that Alfred founded modern English law and local government, Lambarde’s comparisons between past and present represent a significant shift in the understanding of the uses of history and, as a result, the claims surrounding contemporary institutions the historian could make through the use of Alfred.

Placing Alfred’s effective and intricate judicial structure alongside William’s destruction of the Anglo-Saxon mechanisms of law and order, Lambarde cleverly argues that “it was so farre off, that any of [the Norman kings] did utterly abolish [Alfred’s] courts, that the same did not only remaine during all their times…but also had continuance afterwards, and doe yet (as they may) beare life amongst us. For (as I said) those Courts of the Shires, Hundreds, Burroughs, and Mannors, doe yet remaine (in a manner) the same in substance that they then were”.89 Between the period of Leland’s work and that of Lambarde’s inquiry into Alfredian administration, Archbishop Parker’s Anglican polemic had swept through English academic circles. Although secular and ecclesiastical Alfred scholars were not working in direct coordination per se, members of both groups conducted historical investigations using Anglo-Saxon source material for similar (albeit distinct) reasons, and seem to have been cognizant of their discrete yet somewhat-shared objectives.90

As this study has thus far shown, the early founders of the practice of secular Alfredian appropriation facilitated its evolution in a critical way. Also the case with Parker’s work, Lambarde and his colleagues expanded the corpus of historiographical and primary source material that emphasized Alfred’s role in the foundation of English legal infrastructure (which, of course, had remained unchanged through the Norman Conquest to the sixteenth century). The result was the pervasive theory of legal continuity which continued to be addressed into the seventeenth century and beyond.

89 Ibid., pp. 18.

There is no shortage of early seventeenth-century material in line with Lambarde’s claims. In 1606, the poet Barnabe Barnes was able to trace English legal procedure to Moses, “who did establish Judges: These ruled Tribes, Hundreds; Fifties, tenths; to whom he referred the decision of small causes, reserving to himselfe matters of most importance”.\textsuperscript{91} Barnes parallels the Mosaic delegation of judges with the English system, holding that “these courts were continued amongst us in example by king \textit{Alfred} the \textit{Saxon} and a Christian king, who deuided his realme, First into lathes, rapes, ridings; and them into wapentakes, hundreds; and those into leets, court Barons, tithings, piepowders”.\textsuperscript{92} Barnes’ relatively-undocumented degree of interest in English legal origins aside\textsuperscript{93}, it is nonetheless interesting that a poet very much on the fringe of the academy (as it then existed) chose to portray Alfred not as the architect of the entire English legal system, but as the pious inheritor—and institutor—of the Mosaic juridical model, as the great historians of the Enlightenment would later argue.

Beyond judicial structure, early seventeenth-century Anglo-Saxonists of varying backgrounds increasingly began to find meaning in Alfred’s laws. Considered by many historians to be the preeminent legal scholar of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, Edward Coke (lawyer, intellectual, member of parliament, and Attorney-General under Queen Elizabeth), is responsible for a large proportion of the early-modern scholarship on Alfred and the law.\textsuperscript{94} Above all else, Coke valued the common law and the role of parliament in drafting new legislation or

\textsuperscript{91} Barnabe Barnes, \textit{Foure Bookes of Offices Enabling Privat Persons for the Special Service of All Good Princes and Policies} (1606), pp. 136.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{93} A footnote in Anthony Earl’s \textit{Late Elizabethan Devotional Poetry and Calvinism: A Re-evaluation of Barnabe Barnes} includes a less-than-favorable contemporary characterization of Barnes as ‘a paltry scrivano betwixt a lawyer’s clerk and a poet’, pp. 224.

\textsuperscript{94} George Paul Macdonnell, \textit{D.N.B., 1885-1900}, vol. 11.
“removing a mischief which the common law had left”.\textsuperscript{95} While there is no evidence to suggest that Coke had any sort of vendetta against the English monarchy, his belief in the superiority of the law even over the monarchy earned him a dismissal from his post as Chief Justice of the King’s Bench in 1616.\textsuperscript{96}

For Coke, Alfred became a champion of legislative reform and observance of legal supremacy. In volume VIII of his \textit{Reports}, “published in the ninth year of the most high and most illustrious James” (1612), Coke asserts that the ancient English laws were “the same which the Norman conqueror then found within this realm of England. The laws that William the Conqueror swore to observe, were…good, approved, and ancient”.\textsuperscript{97} It would be difficult to find a more obvious example of the theory of continuity, yet Pocock explains in a word the reason that Coke’s understanding of English law has maintained its ubiquity as distinctions between Britain and the European continent became increasingly emphasized. After drawing upon the Victorian legal historian Frederic William Maitland to argue that “until English law was viewed as part of the law of western Europe, none of the influences which had shaped its development could be discerned, and consequently no historical analysis of its growth was thinkable”, Pocock points out that “the root of Coke’s thought was his firm belief that the law was a purely insular product”.\textsuperscript{98} When Coke criticizes the rhetoric of his opponents in the continuity debate, he does


\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., pp. 85.

\textsuperscript{97} Edward Coke, \textit{The Reports of Sir Edward Coke, kn.t. [1572-1617] in English, in thirteen parts complete; with references to all the ancient and modern books of the law.} (London: J. Rivington and Sons, 1777), pp. iv.

so by lamenting the omission of the laws of the Anglo-Saxon kings in the laws currently on the
books. It is no coincidence that Alfred appears first on his list of the tragically excluded.

Coke mentions Alfred repeatedly throughout his Reports, invoking the Saxon king to
illustrate a number of points central to his argument. Consider the following excerpt from book
V, in which he alludes to the fourteenth-century Mirror of Justices, which has “been used by holy
customs since the time of King Arthur”: “King Alfred ordaineth [the High Court of Parliament]
for a usage perpetual, that twice in the year or oftener if need be, they shall assemble themselves
at London to treat in Parliament of the government of the people of God, how they should keep
themselves from sin, should live in quiet, and should receive in right, by certain laws and holy
judgments”. Coke’s commentary is notable in citation of Alfredian policy in a treatise on
modern legal procedure intended to inspire future action according to an ideal historical model.

Other scholars of the common law soon followed in Coke’s footsteps, similarly invoking
King Alfred to justify English legal procedure and governmental structure in a similar fashion.
The period of political strife out of which Coke’s legal rhetoric emerged reached its climax in
1642 with the outbreak of the Civil War. Though John Spelman was discussed in the previous
chapter for his contributions to Parker’s strand of religious polemic, his Life of Alfred the Great,
compiled during the Civil War, is of paramount importance to the present study, due in large part
to the political conditions under which it was produced. While Spelman does not in so many
words relate his description of Alfred to Civil War politics, Joanne Parker points out that it was
“clearly intended as a source of comfort and inspiration to Charles and his Royalist


100 Ibid., pp. iv.
Indeed produced to support the rhetoric of Coke’s political enemies, a repeated analysis of Spelman’s biography within the context of each category of Alfredian appropriation discussed in this thesis demonstrates the universality of King Alfred, even amidst such entrenched ideological conflict.

Following an extensive description of Alfred’s military and diplomatic accomplishments in book I, book II of Spelman’s Life, “Containing his Laws and Political Government”, addresses the common law question directly. Spelman clearly thought very highly of Alfred’s interest in justice for all of his subjects, asserting that “in the Composing of his Laws, [Alfred] so much desired to find out those that were best and most equal, as that he is said to have made search into all Laws, both Divine and Humane, that he could light on; and first and chiefly those of the Old and New Testaments, and, after them, the Laws of the Trojans, Grecians, Britains, and Danes; some of which he translated….and from them he composed… some such Additions…to those that were already generally known and received, as might make them perfect, and authorize them to become a Common-Law to the whole Nation…”. Spelman nevertheless considers the Saxon king to be the “great Founder of our English laws”, and cites Lambarde as consistent with his own judgments of Alfred’s contributions to English legal institutions.

The principal intent of this chapter has been to demonstrate the longstanding Alfredian association with important legal and governmental reforms, and the way in which Alfred fits into the question of trans-Conquest legal continuity. However, this study has so far identified two

101 Joanne Parker, England’s Darling: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great, pp. 58.
102 John Spelman, The Life of Alfred the Great, pp. 94.
103 John Spelman, The Life of Alfred the Great, pp. 96-98.
104 Ibid., 98.
major appropriations of King Alfred which may be used to better understand early-modern legal, and by extension, national identity. As practices of historical method evolved from Leland’s narrative history to the more overtly practical applications of the Saxon king developed by the likes of Parker, Lambarde, and Spelman, Alfred’s role in the English national identity of the early-modern period became increasingly pronounced. Similar to the way in which Robert Powell presented Alfred as a sort of proto-Protestant model that Charles I ought to follow, Spelman observes a connection between Alfred’s legal reforms and the foundation of the English Empire of the seventeenth century. Spelman explains:

“it shall not be unworthy of our labour now, to cast an Eye… to behold with what Industry, Care, and Providence, [Alfred] proceeded to the Planting, and Furnishing of the State in such a Sort, as that it should neither be defective, in any thing, conducing to the Felicity of the Subject, neither yet to the eternal Glory of an Empire. And while we shew the Imperial State of this Land to have received the first Modeling from the Act of his Hand, it is fit that we also observe the Justice of that Act in particular; for that it does not always fall out, that Founders of Empires do well observe the Rule of Justice, neither are smaller Kingdoms, or Signories, always brought into the Form of one entire Imperial State under one and the same common Laws and Policy, without some Injustice to the particular Subject”.

For Spelman, Alfred’s legal reforms represent the responsible “modeling” of the English state—an observance of the “rule of justice” that facilitated the eventual creation and prosperity of an imperial polity. As this chapter has shown the centrality of the common law to the early-modern English national identity as it then existed, chapter four will illustrate Alfred’s relationship with the British nation following the political union of England and Scotland in 1707.

105 John Spelman, The Life of Alfred the Great, pp. 95.
Chapter 3
Alfred the Scholar King and Oxford University

The previous two chapters have explored the reception of King Alfred in the context of the English intellectual traditions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly Alfred’s importance to Anglican efforts to justify the antiquity of the Church of England and the role of the Saxon king in founding the English common law. No less central to understanding the uses of Alfred in sixteenth and seventeenth century England is the Saxon king’s alleged Oxford connection—particularly, the notion that King Alfred had a hand in the establishment (or at the very least, the reestablishment) of Oxford University. Unsurprisingly, scholars affiliated with the university’s counterpart some seventy miles to the east did not take well to Oxford’s claims of Anglo-Saxon antiquity and its purported association with the illustrious Alfred. The ensuing historiographical warfare involved academics from both universities attempting to prove the veracity or falsity of these assertions depending on their own institutional affiliations. As was the case with both Parker’s Anglican polemic (a Cambridge man, for that matter) and the debate surrounding Alfred and the common law, the Oxford question provided yet another venue in which Alfred was invoked for a decidedly political purpose. In this case, the conflict divided the two camps of scholars shown in previous chapters to have largely been polemical allies—further complicating the narrative of the image and appropriation of Alfred in sixteenth and seventeenth century England.

Alfred’s Oxford connection is a deceptively simple concept. Of course, it stands to reason that Oxford intellectuals should want to prove that their university predates its rival in Cambridge and that Cambridge academics should want to refute those claims. My argument in
this chapter does not concern the terms of the debate itself so much as it concerns the ramifications of the debate for Alfred’s image both in subsequent historiography and in wider English culture. Oxford’s alleged Alfred connection can be traced to the fourteenth century, and the rivalry between the two ancient universities dates back much further. As the debate heightened and different personal, historical, political, and financial elements were introduced, the conflict became more entrenched but it also made use of King Alfred in a critical manner. The volume of historical writing which utilized the Saxon king increased substantially.

Regardless of the effects of Oxford’s claims of antiquity or its connection with Alfred, the debate produced a vast number of textual sources—some of which became accessible not only to later Anglo-Saxonists, but intrigued members of English society outside of the academy as well. Whereas by the late seventeenth-century Alfred had been used as a weapon of Anglican polemic and as a tool to display the antiquity of the English legal system, the Oxford debate provided much of the evidence on which later historians would support their works and laid the groundwork for an eventual wider interest in England’s pre-Conquest past. Were it not for the circumstances described within this chapter, it is doubtful that Alfred would have so towered over other Anglo-Saxon kings and become an English national icon for intellectuals and lay persons alike.

The Alfredian Oxford connection can trace its roots to Ranulf Higden’s *Polychronicon*, an extensive fourteenth-century chronicle in Latin—translated into English by John Trevisa in 1387—in which Higden asserts that Alfred himself established the University of Oxford. Higden devotes a substantial portion of the sixth volume of his work to praising the Saxon king,

writing that “he taughte poemes or metres in the language of Saxons, kepede theyme in his mynde, experte in the arte of huntynge, and specially in geometry; compacte psalms and preyers into oon boke…also he gate not gramer [perfectly], for that tyme there was not oon techer of gramer in alle his realme”. Similar to the way in which other historians, chroniclers, and annalists have documented and recorded these personal elements of Alfred’s character, Higden clearly decided to highlight the Saxon king’s aptitude for memorizing poetry, organizing scripture and liturgical texts, and geometry. Yet Higden rather interestingly argues that Alfred himself struggled in grammar, not for any deficit in the king’s intellectual capacities, but simply due to the lack of knowledgable scholars who could have provided him with the skills necessary to be more proficient in grammar than Higden seems to think he was.

Higden juxtaposes the Saxon king’s sole intellectual flaw with the widespread illiteracy in Wessex, of which Alfred was acutely aware. He explains: “Wherefore [Alfred] ordeynede firste at Oxenforde scoles of diverse artes after the cownsaile of Neotus thabbot, whom he visitte moche; whiche cite he causede to have grete privilegys in mony thynges. Whiche wolde not suffre eny man illiterate to enjoye eny benefice, and turnede noble lawes into Ynglische. This Aluredus encraeasede in age, wyllynge to fixe his mynde in the drede and lawes of God”. Higden’s Alfred is conscious of his own intellectual limitations but desirous of improving learning throughout his kingdom. Higden’s presentation of Alfred, then, is in agreement not only with the biographical sources he would have had available to him, but it also seems to fit the narrative established by Alfred himself in his introduction to the Cura Pastoralis, in which he


famously laments the state of learning in England and outlines the “books most needful for all men to know”. The *Polychronicon* represents the first known document that claims Alfred established the University of Oxford, and was a critical piece of evidence on which early-modern historians based their own arguments surrounding the Alfredian Oxford connection.

In or around 1380, the fellows of University College, Oxford, in dire need of funds and the title to land in Oxford, petitioned Richard II claiming that their century-old college had, in actuality, been established by Alfred in the 870s. Although Professor Keynes identifies the possibility (likelihood, even) that an edition of Asser’s *Life* was produced in the late fourteenth century which included a passage about Alfred and Oxford, the text is now lost, and its legitimacy cannot be assessed with any degree of certainty.

This theme was, of course, developed further by other Alfred scholars, for whom there was no limit to the educational and pedagogical accomplishments of Alfred’s fine university in Oxford. The *Liber Monasterii de Hyda* is a perfect example of the “scholarly” practice of molding historical narratives to fit this particular agenda. Its unknown fifteenth century author recounts not only Alfred’s role in establishing Oxford, but also the individuals Alfred allegedly hand-picked to restore learning to his kingdom. Among the illustrious scholars appointed by Alfred to run his university (according to the author of the Hyde text) were Grimbald, John of St. David’s, St. Neot, and Asser, the king’s esteemed biographer himself.

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109 Alfred, prose preface to his translation of Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care*, pp. 126.


111 Ibid.

Unsurprisingly, John Rous, a fifteenth-century antiquary and Oxford graduate, takes the information presented in the Book of Hyde a step further. He explains in his *Historia Regum Angliae* that Alfred “in the year 873 at the instigation of S. Neot established public schools for the several arts in Oxford; to which city on account of his special love for the scholars he granted many privileges, not allowing any one who was illiterate to be promoted to any dignity. The masters and scholars, who had been converted to the faith taught in the Monasteries and in other places set apart according to the manner of the ancient schools of Greklade, Lechlade, Stamford, Caerleon, Cambridge, and Bellistum, and of such other schools of this kind as were already in the island”.\(^{113}\) Rous is explicit in distinguishing Alfred’s University of Oxford from all of the educational institutions which had already existed in the ninth century, and he was deliberate in his inclusion of Cambridge on that list. However, for reasons that will become clear, Rous’ claim represents a key element of the Alfredian Oxford question as more scholars began to inquire into its legitimacy.

Rous continues in his *Historia* to argue that “At the first foundation of the University the noble King Alfred established at his own expense within the city of Oxford three Doctors, namely in Grammar, in the Arts, and in Theology, in three different places in the name of the Holy Trinity…Besides these grew up in a short time many other Halls of the different faculties, established by the burgesses of the city and of the neighbourhood and then by those from a distance, yet not at the King’s expense, but through the King’s gracious example”.\(^{114}\) Rous’ Alfred is a generous scholar king, so intent on improving the intellectual state of his kingdom

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\(^{114}\) Ibid.
that he established a unique and independent institution of learning out of his own coffers. His presentation of Alfred’s role in the foundation of the university allows for a slightly more plausible narrative of the establishment of Oxford— a narrative in which other colleges were subsequently founded following Alfred’s “gracious example”, yet one that simultaneously allows for University College and Brasenose College to maintain a special Alfredian connection.115

It was out of the necessity for Oxford’s historical justification that Alfred became intertwined in the institutional rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge from the sixteenth century onward. John Caius, namesake of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, explains in the introduction to his 1568 *De Antiquitate Cantabrigiensis Academiae*:

> “a serious controversy arose between a certain Oxonian and the Cambridge orator concerning the antiquity of either University, one which will become more serious if the dispute is not settled...The cause of this great controversy was this. The Cambridge orator (William Masters), when he delivered his oration on the occasion of the visit of the Queen to the University of Cambridge in the nones of August 1564, amongst other things by chance stated briefly that the Cambridge University was ancient and much more ancient than Oxford...Hence a certain Oxonian taking offence sets to work on the opposite side, at a commentary which he calls, ‘The assertion of the Antiquity of the University of Oxford,’ in which he insists with great contention that the Oxford University was far older than the Cambridge...Two years after these things took place at Cambridge, he, by the interposition of a friend at court, exhibited this commentary to the same Queen Elizabeth, when her Majesty on the day before the Kalends of September visited Oxford".116

The words of Dr. Caius reflect precisely how personally—and indeed, how universally—members of both universities internalized their allegiances and institutional loyalties.


It is not difficult to observe how convoluted and complex the debate eventually became. Hundreds of years of fabricating evidence and sacrificing factual accuracy for the sake of confirming the antiquity of one ancient university over the other led to a scholarly conflict in which Alfred once again played an important role—some seven hundred years after his death. For example, Francis Godwin’s 1601 Catalogue of the bishops of England is dedicated to “the Right Honorable Sir Thomas Sackvyll, Baron of Buckhurst, Knight of the most noble order of the Garter, Lord high Treasurer of England, and Chauncellor of the Universitie of Oxford”, and describes Asser as follows: “This man writ a certaine Chronicle of (amongst diuers other works) wherein he reporteth of him selfe that he was a disciple and scholler of that famous welchman Iohn, that hauing studied long in Athens, perswaded king Alfred to institute a vniuersitie at Oxford, and him selfe became the first publique there”.117 Godwin continues: “By reason thereof waring weary of his office, [Asser] left his countrey, and comming into England to king Alfred, became schoolemaster of his children, vntill such time as Bishop of Sherborne dying, he was preferred to his place”.118 This excerpt supports the notion that Alfred would have appointed Asser to serve at the university he himself had founded. Additionally, the following statement by Godwin suggests that Alfred’s involvement with the university may have been more nuanced than originally thought: “By his exhortation also that good king did much for the Uniuersity of Oxford, aloting diuers stipends vnto the readers and professors there”.119 Although Godwin does subscribe to the idea that Alfred did, in fact, found the University of Oxford, the previous statement would retain its truth value even if it were to be proven that Alfred was not involved in

118 Ibid., 269.
119 Ibid.
founding the institution. As we shall see, the possibility that Alfred “did much for the University of Oxford” became an integral element of the debate as it evolved over time and attracted increasing criticism.

William Kempe, a prominent Elizabethan educational theorist, published his treatise on *The education of children in learning declared by the dignitie, vtilitie, and method thereof* in 1588. The work illustrates the extent to which the Oxford debate had developed by late sixteenth century, due in large part to the artful way in which Kempe navigates the many competing legends regarding the major English educational institutions. He explains:

“For as the Schoole of humanitie was heere planted when it was yet tender and young, so was the Schoole of Christianitie, insomuch that our Countreyman Gyldas writeth, that the Gospell was receiued heere euen from the comning of Christ, in the dayes of Tiberius, by the preaching of Joseph of Arimathea (as others declare) whome Phillip the Apostle sent hither out of Fraunce. Then in the time of the valiant King Arthur, the exercise and studie of learning was diligently applied in Southwales. The like is recorded to be done an hundred and twenty yeares after in the dayes of Sigebert King of the Eastangles, who set vp Schooles of the Gréeke and Latin toong. And Egbert King of Kent fortie yeares after followed the same steps of his predecessors. King Ethelstane was not only a founder of Schooles for learning, but also a profound learned Astronomer himselfe”.

This excerpt serves much the same purpose as Rous’ introductory passage discussed earlier, in that it sets up educational deficiencies for the perpetual hero Alfred to ultimately fill.

While Kempe does not emphasize the perceived decay of learning in the same manner as does Rous, he reveres Alfred all the same. He observes: "Yet of all our auncient Kings, none may be preferred, no nor compared to that most vertuous King Alfred, either for knowledge in the

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Artes and all good letters, or for loue and diligence to advance the same. For besides that he translated diuers bookees into the vulgar toong, and wrote many new of his owne, he also instructed all his Children, Sonnes, and Daughters, in the liberall Artes, and did shut the dore of climing to any dignitie in the Court against such as wanted the furniture of learning”. Kempe’s estimation of Alfred’s scholarly interests portrays him in a light which would further develop throughout the ensuing centuries, culminating during the Victorian period, during which Alfred came to be synonymous with knowledge, piety, and education.

While knowledge and learning should not be equated with the universities, Kempe recounts that Alfred “procured with great charges learned men, some to be his Counsellers, as the godly Diuine John Scot, afterwards martired by his Schollers at Malmesburie, some to teach the Schooles and Colledges, whereof he ordeined diuers in Oxford”. It seems as if this is what is meant by Alfred’s “diligence” to advance learning in his kingdom: that Alfred not only respected and valued education and knowledge, but actively took steps to facilitate its dissemination.

Kempe addresses the Oxford controversy directly, asserting that:

“therefore now we haue the blessed founder of that famous Uniuersitie of Oxford, founded aboue seauen hundred yeres agone, whether before or after the founding of the Uniuersitie of Cambridge it is not materiall, but in either of them at this day are sixteene goodly Colledges: and moreouer in Oxford eight Haules builded by Kings, Queens, Princes, Bishops, and other good men, and enriched with lands, reuenewes, stipends, as also established and fortified with lawes, ample priuiledges, and immunities for the maintenance and commoditie of Students and learned men. These are two bright fountaines of learning, whose wholesome streames runne plentifully abroade, watering not only this Realme, but also forraine Countries, to the great benefit of the Church of God”.

122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
The reason for which Kempe’s position on the Oxford and Cambridge question is not quite as militant as some of the debate’s more active participants is not particularly difficult to comprehend; he was not master of an Oxbridge college, nor was he an academic associated with either of the ancient universities. He was, however, interested in education, and Alfred, already established as the scholar king, undoubtedly appealed to him as a representative figure of England’s great intellectual history. It is nevertheless notable that Kempe seems to have believed that Alfred did found the University of Oxford, while remaining somewhat neutral in the debate by assuring his reader that whichever “bright fountain of learning” was founded first is of little import in the larger historical narrative he is providing.

The exchange between Oxford and Cambridge scholars with regard to the Alfred question became further complicated with the publication of William Camden’s *Britannia*, published in Latin in 1600 and translated into English in 1610. Camden allegedly received an edition of Asser’s *Life of Alfred* at some point during the 1590s that included a passage connecting Alfred to Oxford.\(^{125}\) Camden begins his discussion of Alfred as follows: “When the tempestuous Danish storms [blew] over, Alfred that most devout and Godly king recalled the long banished Muses unto their owne sacred Chancellles and built three Colledges: one for Grammarians, a second for Philosophers, and a third for Divines. But this you may more plainely understand out of these words in olde Annales of the new Abbey of Winchester: …*and in the second yeare of Saint Grimbald his coming into England, was the Vniversitie of Oxford beganne. The First Regents in the same and readers in the Divinitie schoole were Saint Neot an Abbat, and besides a worthie

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\(^{125}\) Joanne Parker, *’England’s Darling’: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great*, pp. 56.
teacher in Divinitie, and holie Grymbald a right excellent professor of the most sweete written word of holy scripture”.

To this point, Camden has largely reiterated the claims of Rous and other Oxford scholars, writing on the teachings of Grimbald, “at [whose] lectures was present the most glorious and invincible King Ælfred, whose [memory] in every man’s mouth [was as] sweet as hony”. Yet to properly contextualize Camden’s own leanings and position within the debate, it is prudent to consider what he has to say about the origins of Cambridge University. For reasons that have earned him substantially more respect amongst modern historians than many of his contemporaries, Camden does not ignore the mythical foundation story of Cambridge University. Rather, he confronts it, and provides his analysis regarding why he believes it to be baseless:

“The report goeth, that Cantaber, a Spaniard, 375 yeeres before the nativity of Christ, first began and founded this Unvieristy; Also that Sebert King of the East-Angles restored it againe… Afterwards being other whiles overthrown and destroied with the Danish storms, it lay a long time forlorne and of no account, until all began to revive under the Normans government”. He points out that the institution was not “altogether free from the furies of Mars. For, when the Danes robbed and spoiled up and downe, many times they wintered heere: and in the yeere of the redemption 1010”. Camden cites William the Conqueror’s Domesday Book and other sources as his evidence, and contemplates giving his own opinion regarding “the antiquity of Vniversity”

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127 Ibid.

128 Ibid., 487.

129 Ibid., 488.
before explaining that he “will be no dealer in this case: For I meane not to make comparison betweene these two most flourishing universities of ours, to whom I know none equall…I feare me, [purveryors of the Cantabrian myth] have buildded Castles in the aire and thrust upon us devises of their owne braines”.

Patrick Collinson has rightly identified the irony of Camden’s claims of historical objectivity in the face of seemingly-apocryphal legends and myths, for it seems as though Camden had forgotten (or more likely, chosen to ignore) the methodological practices which earned him such high esteem amongst his nineteenth century successors when it came to his own University of Oxford. Yet whatever good faith intentions he may have had before engaging in this university debate become eclipsed by the fact that he inadvertently opened the door for Cambridge academics to claim superiority over their Oxford counterparts as members of the other ancient English university, “the other eye…as it were, thereof, and a most famous mart and storehouse of good literature and Godlinesse [which] standeth upon the river Cam”. It should not be surprising, then, to learn that Camden desired to have the last word—and that he might employ Alfred in the defense of his alma mater as so many Oxford men had done before him.

Camden approaches the Oxford question in an entirely new light—based, according to Camden himself, upon a unique edition Asser’s Life to which few others had access. He writes: “as wee reade in a verie good manuscript copie of the said Asserius, who at the same time professed learning heere: There arose a most dangerous and pernicious dissension at Oxford,

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130 Ibid.
132 William Camden, Britannia, pp. 486.
betweene Grimbald and these great clerkes whome he brought thither with him of the one side, and those olde schoolmen whom hee there found, on the other side; who upon his comming refused altogether to embrace the rules, orders and formes of reading prescribed and begunne by him. For three yeares...the variance and discord betweene them was not great, howbeit there lurked a secret hatred...[fester][ing] among them, which brake out afterwards in most grievous and bitter manner.\textsuperscript{133} Approaching the Alfred connection slowly but steadily, Camden continues to quote his alleged excerpt of Asser: \textit{"For the appeasing whereof, that most invincible King Ælfred beeing by a message and compliant from Grimbald certified of that discord, went to Oxford to determine and end this controversie: Where also himselfe in person tooke exceeding great paines in giving audience to the quarells and complaints of both sides"}.\textsuperscript{134}

Camden’s Alfred is not the founder of Oxford University but rather the mediator of a pedagogical dispute between Grimbald (Alfred’s man, sent to Oxford to assist in the all-important educational revival of England) and the “old schoolmen” who were already working and teaching in Oxford long before Alfred ascended to the throne of Wessex. Camden proceeds to recount Alfred’s role in the negotiations, after which the Saxon king ordered a compromise between the two factions of scholars and returned to Winchester.\textsuperscript{135} For Camden, this provided the basis on which Oxford could claim antiquity over Cambridge, (whose academics tirelessly argued that their university had been founded by Sigeberht some time in the seventh century) on the grounds that Alfred merely re-established a university which had in fact been operating since

\textsuperscript{133} William Camden, \textit{Britannia}, pp. 378.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
before the reign of the alleged East-Anglian founder of Cambridge.\textsuperscript{136} Collinson, although mistaken in his claim that “Camden was prepared to believe that his own university had been founded by King Alfred, and to tamper with the text of Asser to bolster his belief”, indirectly alludes to a crucial point regarding Camden and the Oxford question.\textsuperscript{137} That is, that Camden’s primary interest was in confirming the antiquity of Oxford—an interest which facilitated the use of Alfred to accomplish his task but did not necessarily require the Saxon king to do so. Although Oxford’s Alfredian origins were apparently of secondary importance to Camden’s efforts to prove the antiquity of his alma mater, Alfred’s key role in the inter-university debate of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries propelled the Saxon king toward the forefront of English historical discourse.

Spelman’s \textit{Life of Alfred} offers a substantial degree of relevant evidence—in this case not only for the reception of Alfred during Spelman’s lifetime, but also for the extent to which Camden’s unique assertions regarding the Alfredian Oxford connection were internalized by later historians. Spelman devotes a large portion of his biography of the king to education, writing, for example: “Next unto these are we to reckon the Schools which the King founded. And amongst them the University of Oxford, that which of all the Works of his Magnificence there was not any of greater Note, and Consequence, as well for the important Benefit thereby brought unto the Nation, as also for the ample and exact Institution, beyond the Use and Example of any whatsoever formerly in Being”.\textsuperscript{138} As was discussed in the previous chapter, Spelman’s conception of history was inseparably linked to his Royalist affiliations during the English Civil

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\textsuperscript{136} Simon Keynes, “The Cult of King Alfred the Great,” pp. 245.
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\textsuperscript{137} Patrick Collinson, "One of Us? William Camden and the Making of History”, pp. 250.
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\textsuperscript{138} John Spelman, \textit{The Life of Alfred the Great}, pp. 171.
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War, and as such, his interest in Alfred can be seen as an attempt to justify royal authority and the Anglican Church. Yet as the first true Anglo-Saxonist at Cambridge, it is to be assumed that Spelman would have investigated Camden’s outlandish claims of Oxford’s antiquity despite having venerated Alfred for founding the University of Oxford himself.\textsuperscript{139} However, as will become clear, arguing that Alfred did in fact found Oxford was proof enough for Spelman to be confident in the antiquity of Cambridge and thus, its supremacy.

Spelman expands on the Oxford question as follows: “For that Alfred was the first Founder of the University of Oxford is a Matter controverted, denied, disclaimed by the University herself, (as I understand it) and (by the Apology for her Antiquity) determined to the contrary. And yet seeing it falls to directly cross by Argument, I shall crave leave of all that are opposite in Opinion that, for the better doing right unto the Honour of a Prince so well deserving of all, and particularly of those of Oxford, I may for this once, without Censure of Pertinacity, briefly draw the Question to a new Examination”.\textsuperscript{140} Spelman directly refutes Camden’s claims that Alfred refounded the University of Oxford. In Camden’s eyes, this placed the university’s actual date of foundation sometime during the early seventh century, a few decades before the establishment of Cambridge, by cleverly conceding the Saxon king’s affiliation with his rival institution. Alfred was, in a manner of speaking, “surrendered” by Spelman to Oxford for the greater object of illustrating the antiquity of Cambridge.

It is indeed telling to analyze Spelman’s prose, as his tone is indicative of quite how personally he seems to have internalized the debate. Spelman explains: “I have often found

\textsuperscript{139} Joanne Parker, ‘England’s Darling’: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great, pp. 57.

\textsuperscript{140} John Spelman, The Life of Alfred the Great, pp. 171-72.
Alfred stiled *First Founder of the University of Oxford*, and I am so much engaged to the Subject I have undertaken, as not to swallow without Examination a Construction so much differing as *First Founder* and *Restorer* are”. Following his introductory remarks, Spelman pleads his case with vigor: “It is pretended, that the University of Oxford was an Academy of Letters before our Alfred’s Time, yea before the Saxons Coming over, even in the Time of the Ancient Britains. And this pretence is fortified with many arguments… the best of which are grounded upon Authorities that clearly receive their greatest Approbation and Credit from certain passages in Mr. Camden. As for Leland and [Rous]…they have scarcely any Thing of monument to this purpose, which (if the Passages in Mr. Camden be taken away) will not fall together with them”. Spelman’s words here do not even approach the most vicious *ad hominem* attacks he heaps onto Camden, as the distinguished Alfred biographer continues to argue that “Mr. Camden, in his *Britannia*, though well affected to promote the Pretence of the University his Foster Mother, yet coming to speak of Oxford…vouches our annals, but in particular quoteth none: and as we can less question an Authority which we know not, so if he had gone no further we had perhaps without Examination received his Testimony upon his own Credit”. Spelman’s scathing commentary on Camden’s ignorance and the consequential illegitimacy of his major work marks an important point in the debate regarding Oxford’s association with Alfred the Great, as Spelman’s concluding remarks on the subject indicate. After thoroughly dismantling the notion that pre-Saxon Britons established a University at Oxford, Spelman argues that “the Saxons named it, and the Saxons preferred it for the Place of an

141 Ibid., 172.

142 Ibid.

143 Ibid., 172-73.
University. And it will be work enough for a new Apology to shew any such Thing done at Oxford by any Saxon King, or other Saxon whatsoever before Alfred’s time…And however Mr. Camden in his annals speaks of a MS. Copy of Asser, containing the late mentioned Passage in it, yet (as if he set forth his Edition by one of the Archbishop’s [Parker’s] Printed copies only) he makes no mention of any other Copy than that of the Archbishop’s Edition”.

After an extensive, systematic review of Camden’s work (to which Spelman repeatedly takes personal offense), Spelman provides the following in summation: “By this we may see that Alfred was the First Founder of the very University it self, First, by his own Act, in the three Halls that he built; which being the first only Colleges that the University can truly be said to have had at that time, bear name with Relation to the University, viz. The Greater, Lesser and Little-Hall of the University; as if beside them there was no other. So that Alfred was not only Founder of the University, but first Author also of the Name University that ever we read used in that sense. Secondly, he was by Example, Founder of all that was after built in Imitation of his Work…that these three first halls being likewise founded into one College did still, in Memory of what they were at first, retain the Name of University-College, because they alone had once been all the University”. Spelman’s less than favorable judgment of Camden’s work assigns in itself a significant Alfred connection to Oxford University and to University College in particular. Yet Spelman seems to have been more than willing to support claims that Alfred founded the University given that it allowed him to declare the antiquity of his own Cambridge University over its rival.

144 John Spelman, The Life of Alfred the Great, pp. 181.

145 Ibid., 189.
Gerard Langbaine published his *Foundation of the Universitie of Oxford* in 1651, half a century after Camden’s paramount contribution to the debate but nearly twenty-five years prior to Obadiah Walker’s term as master of University College, during which time the Alfred connection seems to have been most pronounced. Langbaine, an Oxford graduate himself, prefaces his history of Oxford by recounting the various myths he had encountered regarding the foundation of the university. However, he is clear in arriving at the conclusion that “Elfred, of some called *Alured*, King of the West Saxons, about the year 872, was the chief and Principall Founder thereof: And that (besides the ancient Hostles for Scholars, which is evident were there remaining after many overthrowes of warres) he caused to be erected therein three Colledges or publick Schools, for the teaching of Grammer; Philosophy, and Divinitie, sending thither his owne son *Ethelward*”.\(^{146}\) Despite his allegiance to Oxford and his brief reference to the ancient hostels, Langbaine does not concern himself with the complexity of Camden’s argument of re-foundation. For example, section I of Langbaine’s history, entitled “University College, Founded 872” reads as follows:

“*Alfred or Alured* King of the West Saxons, being addicted to Religion and good literature, for the increase and study of Divinity, Philosophie and other arts, in the second year of his reigne founded this Colledge, by the name of the *Great Hal, or Universitie Colledge*; from the foundation whereof the students were maintained out of the Kings Exchequer, until King *William* the Conqueror did take the same from them: by which means both the Colledge wanted repairing, and the students also were for many years enforced to live by the devotion of religious people. Afterwards *William* Arch-deacon of *Durham*, about the year, 1217 repaired and endowed the same with new possessions, establishing therein a Master, two Fellows, a Bible Clark, which is the Porter”.


\(^{147}\) Ibid., 3.
Langbaine’s description of the king and his “addiction” to religion and good literature reflects the benevolence, piety, and intellect which, by the mid-seventeenth century, had become attributes closely associated with King Alfred. Though Langbaine certainly reiterates the claim that Alfred himself founded University College, his presentation of the effects of the Norman Conquest on the University is nonetheless interesting. By showing that the college had fallen into a state of disrepair throughout the one-hundred-fifty year period immediately following William’s invasion of Britain, Langbaine is able to present his narrative history while simultaneously maintaining the importance of Alfred’s role in founding the first college at Oxford in 872. Langbaine’s 1651 history, then, connects Kempe, Spelman, and Camden to the following period during which Alfred’s connection with Oxford grew notably more pronounced due to a variety of political and economic conditions.

Even considering the significant amount of evidence presented thus far which supports the existence of factional, partisan entrenchment in the Alfred discussion amongst scholars loyal to one university over the other, it must be pointed out that there were exceptions within this seemingly-uncomplicated historiographical debate. For example, in his 1662 History of the Worthies of England, the historian Thomas Fuller, a Cambridge man through and through, grants that Alfred “gave the first Institution, or (as others will have it) the best Instauration, to the University of Oxford” and that Saint Neot "moved King Alfred to found (or restore) the University of Oxford, on which account his memory is sacred to all posterity". Fuller’s more objective description of Alfred’s role in either founding or re-founding the university accounts

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149 Ibid., 323.
for both sides of the dispute, and he seems to take no issue with Alfred’s alleged connection with
Oxford despite his own membership in three different Cambridge colleges throughout his
lifetime. Fuller’s *History* shows that although Alfred was typically invoked either by Oxford
academics to prove the antiquity of their university or by Cambridge intellectuals to refute such
assertions, the debate was not quite so straightforward. As such, one cannot make claims of
scholarly homogeneity based simply on university affiliation. Rather, each piece of historical
writing which makes use of Alfred to either support or refute the king’s association with,
founding of, or refounding of Oxford University must be considered individually so as to more
accurately understand the motivational factors behind each argument.

For a number of reasons, the Oxford question is crucial to understanding the mass
popularity Alfred eventually achieved during the Victorian period. This is particularly evident in
the efforts of Oxford scholars during the mid-seventeenth century to continue to promote the
Alfredian origin story of University College. As a matter of considerable personal interest to him,
Professor Keynes has personally investigated Alfredian imagery at Univ., and has identified
portraits of the Saxon king in the master’s lodge as particularly significant not only to the Oxford
connection, but also to “much of the eighteenth century iconography of the king”.150 While
Keynes holds that these portraits, proclaiming “Alfred as founder of University College in 872…
appear to have originated in the late seventeenth century”151, this chapter has shown that there is
ample evidence to suggest a pronounced Alfredian connection to Oxford University long before
the commission of the paintings.

151 Ibid.
Historians of Oxford and contemporary Anglo-Saxonists have emphasized the significance of the interests and efforts of Obadiah Walker (master of University College 1676-88) not only to the Alfred connection within the university but also to a rise in Alfred’s notoriety within wider English society during the seventeenth century.152 Spelman’s all-important *Life of Alfred* owes its publication and dissemination to Walker, who evidently uncovered Spelman’s restoration-period biography and used it to assist in the fundraising process to subsidize construction projects in University College.153 The nineteenth-century German historian Reinhold Pauli describes Spelman’s text in a footnote, observing that the *Aelfredi Magni Vita* had been “originally written in English, and first translated into Latin by Dr. Obidiah Walker, of unhappy memory. Spelman’s Life of Alfred the Great, published with additions and remarks by Thomas Hearne, Oxf. 1709”.154 Pauli’s contempt for Walker’s methodology aside, Walker’s translation (followed by Hearne’s more circulated 1709 edition) seems to have had a profound impact on the self-identity of Oxford University and University College in particular, and while Keynes largely reserves the impact of Walker’s text to the educated elite in Oxford, the publication of Thomas Hearne’s English translation of the *Life of Alfred* only twenty years before the Cotton Library fire provided a lasting piece of partly-original source material which (not insignificantly) propagated the Oxford connection and rendered Alfred accessible to interested individuals outside of the academy for the first time.

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153 Joanne Parker, *England’s Darling*: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great, pp. 60.

Chapter 4
King Alfred and the British Nation
Enlightenment Continuations of Early-Modern Alfredism

Joanne Parker is clear in pointing out that John Spelman was “not the first to present an Alfred distorted through the lens of his own times”, a claim she supports via William of Malmesbury’s twelfth-century presentation of the Saxon king as an embodiment of high-medieval chivalry. While Parker’s study of the Victorian cult of Alfred briefly addresses the sixteenth and seventeenth century applications of Alfred to Anglican polemic, the English common law, and the Oxford debate, she does relatively little to connect Spelman to the longstanding tradition of Alfredian appropriation. The 1709 publication of Spelman’s Life in English not only made Alfred more accessible to a larger portion of the English population, but also served as a singular Alfredian source whose content was influenced by the various purposes for which Alfred had been invoked throughout the period prior. In the wake of the Act of Union of 1707, Enlightenment intellectuals relied heavily upon Spelman’s work to compile their own histories—many of which feature Alfred as a prominent figure in their narratives of the evolution of England—and in turn, the unified British nation. Dr. Parker’s conception of the “distorted Alfred”, then, must be applied to the early-modern sources discussed in the previous three chapters, Spelman’s Life, and the eighteenth century sources as well, as the Enlightenment period saw the development of a pronounced Alfredian association with British national identity, driven by historians of differing political philosophies and theories of legal continuity. This national identity became further associated with the Alfredian traits of benevolence, diligence, piety, and

155 Joanne Parker, 'England’s Darling’: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great, pp. 60.
valor during the eighteenth century—characteristics which were certainly integral elements of the Victorian cult of Alfred, but were certainly not products of the Victorian ethos alone.

Defining the Enlightenment is itself a point of historiographical contention. James Schmidt notes that “Enlightenment can be used both to designate a particular historical period (i.e. ‘the Enlightenment’) and the refer to a process (i.e., ‘enlightenment’) that, thought associated with certain historical periods, is captive to none of them”.156 For the purposes of this thesis, the Enlightenment is to be roughly considered the period between 1650 and 1800. This designation is intended to clarify not only what is meant by the repeated references to the “Enlightenment” throughout this chapter, but also to denote a historical era that witnessed a significant development in the idea of the nation-state and the need to ground such a development in historical terms. Although “enlightenment” (or “Enlightenment”) carries with it connotations of more objective historiographical methodology and increased secularization, it is interesting to consider the ways in which Alfred, perhaps the most pious of the Anglo-Saxon kings, became a champion of the British state following the union of England and Scotland in 1707. As the sixteenth and seventeenth century Alfredian scholarship discussed thus far was shaped to support a range of polemical applications of early-modern English historiography, Enlightenment Alfredism similarly evolved to fit eighteenth century conceptions of British nationhood. During the Enlightenment period, Alfred was hailed as a foundational figure not only of the English kingdom, but of the British nation.

The extensive histories written during the Enlightenment period in Britain are, above all, narrative chronicles of the English or British polity. They are primarily concerned with questions

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of nationhood, yet they rather significantly draw upon the established models of early-modern Alfredian scholarship discussed to this point. However, it is necessary to first clarify that the Anglo-Saxon connection with modern national identity was not purely a product of the Enlightenment. For example, the historian and lawyer Sir John Hayward published his *Treatise of the Union of the Two Realmes of England and Scotland* in 1604—a year after the initial union of England and Scotland under James VI. Hayward explores, among other aspects of the union, "what common name is most fit to comprehend the English and the Scots" following the establishment of a more formal bond between the two countries.¹⁵⁷ He argues that the collective political entity should be known as “Britain”, “for that it hath been heretofore the ancient common name of all the inhabitants within this Ile: and a thing may easily bee reduced to the first condition and state”¹⁵⁸

Hayward points out that the island had been called England by King Egbert in the early ninth century, but that “Britain” had not gone out of fashion altogether, as evident from Alfred’s alleged self-proclaimed title of “Governor of the Christians of all Britaine”.¹⁵⁹ Hayward’s argument indicates a close reading of Asser’s *Life*, but it also presents an important question of political and national definition. Chapter XIII of the *Treatise of the Union* explores the legal implications of renaming the newly-unified polity and analyzes the actions of a number of English kings—pre-Conquest and Anglo-Norman alike— for historical inspiration.¹⁶⁰ Hayward


¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 35-36.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 41-45.
seems to equate the expanded jurisdiction of the laws of Alfred’s Wessex with the freedom of the monarch to define his kingdom as he wishes. Hayward’s *Treatise*, then, helps to illustrate the early-modern conception of the rule of law and its increasingly pronounced relationship with nationhood, as it would be received by scholars of the later seventeenth century and, as this chapter will show, historians of the Enlightenment. That is to say, the sixteenth and seventeenth century association of Alfred with the Anglican Church, the common law, English governmental structure, and Oxford University, transcended divisive political and polemical conflicts and provided the majority of the source material on which Enlightenment historians based their claims.\footnote{161}{Simon Keynes, “The Cult of King Alfred the Great,” pp. 269.}

In tracing the emergence of the Alfredian affiliation with the origins of the English polity which is so central to the Enlightenment histories, it is useful to once more consider Spelman’s biography of Alfred. Spelman’s insinuation that Alfred had a hand in founding the English state is noteworthy—and indeed representative in tone of much of the historiographical material which has been referenced to this point—particularly with regard to the late sixteenth and seventeenth century works produced amidst such periods of religious sectarianism and political unrest.\footnote{162}{John Spelman, *The Life of Alfred the Great*, pp. 98.} Furthermore, Spelman’s association of Alfred’s juridical innovations with “imperial statehood” described at the end of chapter two is consistent with D. Alan Orr’s argument that the mid-seventeenth century experienced a notable conflation of legal structure and English national identity.\footnote{163}{D. Alan Orr, ”A Prospectus for a "New" Constitutional History of Early Modern England,” pp. 446.} The common law, for many legal historians of the period, was in effect synonymous with the English polity. The nation’s legal structure was considered an original English
institution, free of foreign influence from continental Europe. By default, the king most responsible for the common law was therefore inseparably tied to historical conceptions of the English nation and all that it stood for, despite the anachronistic nature of that association. Spelman’s biography of Alfred clearly reflects the perceived importance of King Alfred in the pre-Conquest foundation of the English state, and as such merits one final analysis, framed in an eighteenth-century context, so as to appropriately understand Enlightenment applications of his seminal text.

Spelman’s *Life* was not published until 1678 (in Latin translation), and it was not until 1709 that Thomas Hearne’s edition of the original English text was printed and circulated. Not insignificantly, the full title of the biography is *Alfred the Great, First Founder of the English Monarchy*, and the *Life* is split into three books— the first of which is entitled “Containing his Wars and Troublesome Reign”. Over the course of the opening ten pages of the first volume, Spelman weaves a narrative history of Britain, interpolating where he deems fit his own estimations of the merits and deficiencies of each ethnic group which had, at one point, occupied the island. He describes the Anglo-Saxons as follows:

“… on the time that the *Saxons*, wholly given to Violence and the mutual Spoil of one another, had so far made their own way to Barbarism, as that they had rejected Literature and all good Studies, and even banned both Justice and Religion, the *Danes* seconding of them, in that impious Work of theirs, for a matter of four score years together (from the 10th year of *Brichtrick* the *West Saxon* [793] to the sixt year of *Alfred* [878]) did at last introduce it in so great a Height, as that after the spoil of the Country, slaughter of the Men, their Wives and Children, or Captivating of them, burning their Cities, sacking their Monasteries, (the few, and in those times the almost only Nurseries and Bulwarks of Religion, of Letters, and Civility) prophaning their Churches and appropriating to themselves their Treasure…they not only laid the Country in a manner

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164 Joanne Parker, *‘England’s Darling’: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great*, pp. 57.

[waste] and at once deprived it both of Religion, Virtue, Beauty, Strength and Plenty, but took away all means in humane judgment from any sudden change to good, either of themselves or of the People they had so subdued".\textsuperscript{166}

Spelman muses on the organizational, military, disciplinary, legal, and even moral deficiencies of the pre-Alfred Saxons. Parallels should be observed between Spelman’s characterization of the Saxon eighth and ninth centuries and the turbulent state of English politics during the 1640s. He continues to describe the faults of the Saxons, berating them for falling prey to the Danish Vikings, “a people so far at first inferior to themselves…

‘Till Alfred happily surviving the fate of all his Neighbour Kingdoms and (in a manner) likewise of his own, and becoming sole head of the few that remained undeveloped of the War and unrevolted to the Enemy, did not only for his time give a stop and countermand to the \textit{Dane} his licentious Courses, and repair in all Kinds what his barbarous Cruelty had ruined, but so mightily broke and subdued the Power of him, as that from being Lord and in a manner sole Possessor of the Country he brought him at last to be no more than a Colonie, and a Vassal of his own Kingdom”.\textsuperscript{167}

In recounting Alfred’s ultimate victory over the Danes in the face of hundreds of years of unrestricted Viking pillage, Spelman undoubtedly intended for King Charles and his royalist allies to be reassured and inspired by the heroism of the “founder of the English monarchy” in response to a similar threat to regnal authority. We see here, then, an application of Alfredian history for the purpose of inspiring future action—in this case intended for a Royalist audience—something that would never have occurred to Leland or other historians prior to the Anglo-Saxon revival and the emergence of utilitarian history in the late sixteenth century. This practice was neither developed by Spelman nor unique to Spelman alone as a seventeenth-century historian, yet Spelman’s Alfred heroically triumphs over the “inferior” Danes who had so long prevented

\textsuperscript{166} John Spelman, \textit{The Life of Alfred the Great}, pp. 11-12.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 12.
the establishment of a more centralized polity—earning the Saxon king his prominence in the narrative of English political history as Spelman seems to have understood it.

Following a lengthy description of the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the heptarchy and his disdain for their counterproductive competition and their respective ineptitude as governmental structures, Spelman once again turns to Alfred: “And thus at last we have beheld Alfred, by his own Act and Personal Virtue, first subduing the [powerful] Enemy, and making way to the Reducing of the broken Reliques of the Saxon-Heptarchy into and intire and absolute Monarchy…and in the end…we see him by the Reputation of his Doings brought unto the End of his work, and become sole Sovereign of the whole Island; as also we see him styled in his Life Time by Asser of St. David’s…”\(^1\)

Spelman’s exaggerated description of the king’s influence borders on the absurd, yet he staunchly defends his claims of Alfred’s dominion over all of England, Wales, Scotland, and the Danelaw by arguing that Alfred only used the title “King of the West-Saxons” in all of his legal documents and scholarly texts because “they were made before he had yet wholly reduced the Kingdom under his Obedience”.\(^2\) His rationale logically follows; Alfred would not have been in a position to declare himself king of the whole of England during the early years of his reign. Yet Spelman continues, asserting that “Neither was he only Potentially Sovereign of all, in the sense that Ulysses makes himself the Overthrower of Troy, but he was indeed more Actually Sovereign than he seemed to be”.\(^3\) Spelman’s Alfred is the heroic figure who rescued England not only from the threat of the Danish vikings, but also from the rampant “barbarism” which had so

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\(^1\) John Spelman, *The Life of Alfred the Great*, pp. 92.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.
prevented the Anglo-Saxons from achieving their unified potential. As such, his overstatement
of Alfred’s influence represents one of the more pronounced seventeenth century
appropriations of Alfred to fit an early-modern agenda.

Spelman’s Life has been perhaps the single most drawn upon primary source document
throughout this thesis, yet in each case, I have attempted to present Spelman’s biography of
Alfred as congruous with certain factions of the various intellectual, political, or religious
conflicts in which Alfred became polemical cannon fodder. Spelman’s Alfred reformed the
religious institutions of his kingdom, ensured the removal of his church from papal influence,
founded the English common law—culminating with Spelman’s claim that the "Imperial State of
this Land…received the first Modeling from the Act of his Hand”.171 Enlightenment historians
ultimately presented Spelman’s Alfred as a foundational figure of extraordinary consequence in
their narratives of English history.

While Joanne Parker underscores the significance of the eighteenth century in providing
the foundation for the Victorian cult of Alfred, she does not seem to find much meaning in the
strands of historical thought to which the Enlightenment scholars cited in her discussion
belonged.172 Whig and Tory conceptions of history were instrumental in dictating the ways in
which narratives of English history were presented, somewhat paradoxically to the increased
emphasis scholars of the period placed on historical objectivism. Laird Okie has explained that
Enlightenment philosopher-historians “dismissed all invocations of the deity and all attempts to
show the hand of God behind great events as super-historical exercises in theology. A strong anti-

171 Ibid., 95.
172 Joanne Parker, ’England’s Darling’: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great, pp. 61.
clerical bias ran through Enlightenment historiography, but on balance the secularization of historical inquiry produced better history. Rather than invoke providence to explain change, historians focused on the mundane realities—political, social, economic and cultural… They were less interested in gathering facts than in explaining and generalizing about the course of events.”. This understanding of historical method and the purpose of history for eighteenth-century historians is essential in attempting to grasp the historiographical treatment Alfred received during the eighteenth century from both political and philosophical traditions of Enlightenment history.

It is important to note that new editions of Anglo-Saxon and Alfredian sources were steadily produced throughout the early eighteenth century, perhaps culminating with Francis Wise’s edition of Asser’s *Life of Alfred* published in 1722, and based largely on the work of William Camden. It is equally essential to point out that many of the Enlightenment historians cited throughout the following discussion were not “English” per se. A handful were of Scottish background (which also contributed to the notion of “Alfred as Briton” in the modern sense of the word, as opposed to the English constraints which had by-and-large defined him throughout the period prior), and a number were French. For example, the French Huguenot Paul de Rapin-Thoyras (veteran of the conflict which facilitated the ascension of William of Orange to the throne in 1689) published his eight-volume *History of England* during the mid-1720s, which Rapin dedicated in its original French to the Hanoverian King George I. However, it is also necessary to consider how Rapin’s *History* came to exist in English translation so as to attain the

175 Ibid., pp. 272.
vast readership that it did. Nicolas Tindal, fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, translated Rapin in 1727, which he dedicated to Frederick, Prince of Wales.\textsuperscript{176}

Tindal’s dedication is a striking reflection of the transitory period of British political thought which immediately followed the union of 1707 and the aforementioned shift in the purpose of history within Enlightenment academic circles. Tindal explains to Frederick: “My presuming to offer Your Royal Highness this Translation, is in some measure justified by the Nature of the Subject, and Reason of the Thing. For History, however useful to others, is infinitely more so to a Prince, and particularly the History of that Crown He is born to wear. How instructive, as well as agreeable, must a fair and impartial Narration of the Lives and Actions of a long Series of Predecessors be to Him? And that such is the following history, originally penned by a foreigner, who had no Party to serve, or Interest to promote, may be undoubtedly concluded from the universal Approbation it everywhere meets with”.\textsuperscript{177}

It is difficult not to observe parallels between Tindal’s dedication and that which precedes Robert Powell’s 1634 \textit{Life of Alfred} (discussed in chapter one), which also intended to instill in the contemporary monarch the values of benevolent and responsible rulership by way of a venerable historical model. Yet Tindal’s emphasis on the impartiality of Rapin’s work is representative of the recent practices of Enlightenment historiography. Furthermore, Tindal concludes his dedication with a description of the newly-formed union, on which he remarks: “As this Union, so essential to our Government, was by Your Royal Grandfather, and is by His Present Majesty, Your Royal Father, steadily adhered to, so it is with extreme satisfaction


\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
presumed, that the same Adherence will distinguish Your Royal Highness’ future Reign, a
Presumption grounded upon Your many noble endowments, but chiefly on the Foundation of all
other, as well as Royal, Virtues, a generous Mind, which naturally abhors Oppression and
Tyranny”\textsuperscript{178} While it has been argued that the Stuart monarchs did not particularly admire the
Anglo-Saxons or seem to hold King Alfred in high esteem, the Hanoverians (and Prince
Frederick especially) very much did, perhaps exhibited through the bust of Alfred that Prince
Frederick had erected at Carlton House during the summer of 1735.\textsuperscript{179} Considered in this light,
Rapin’s treatment of Alfred would have particularly appealed to Frederick as a known Alfred
enthusiast in a manner which Powell would have certainly appreciated yet never received from
King Charles in 1634.

Similar to Spelman’s description of pre-Alfred Wessex, Rapin explains that Alfred’s
brother, Ethelred, “had left the Affairs of his Kingdom in a deplorable condition. The \textit{Danes},
already masters of \textit{Northumberland} and \textit{East-Anglia}, were in the very heart of the Kingdom of
\textit{Wessex}. Notwithstanding the many battles \textit{Ethelred} had fought with them, they were in
possession of several Towns, and not only kept their footing in the Country, but had reason to
hope they should soon go through with the Conquest of it”\textsuperscript{180} Rapin’s presentation of the
deficiencies of Anglo-Saxon society to the mid-ninth century is significantly less blunt than
Spelman’s lamentations of Saxon society, however Rapin nevertheless employs pejorative

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{179} Kimerly Rorschach,”Frederick, Prince of Wales (1707-51), As Collector and Patron.” \textit{The Volume of

\textsuperscript{180} Paul de Rapin-Thoyras, \textit{The History of England}, (London: James, John, and Paul Knapton, 1732), pp. 90.
language so as to set the stage, as it were, for Alfred—the hero of his narrative—to enter as the savior of England in its hour of need.

Although Rapin does not devote as much of his discussion of Alfred to questions of English or British nationhood as he does to questions of the ancient constitution, the common law (in line with the seventeenth century associations of English legal practices with the Saxon king), and Alfred’s military endeavors, he signals a shift in subject as follows: “Hitherto I have considered this Prince as a Warrior only, sometimes victorious and sometimes vanquished, but, whether prosperous or unfortunate, shewing on all occasions signal marks of valour and military Conduct. It is now time to display his other Virtues, and set him in another Light”. Rapin’s description of the constant military pressure Alfred had placed on the Danes in England continues, citing Spelman to claim that “these considerations induced [the Danes] at length to submit to the Dominion of Alfred, and acknowledge him for Sovereign of all England. Historians do not inform us whether he was obliged to use Force to bring them to this: But it is certain, his authority was acknowledged, as well as in Northumberland, Mercia, and East-Anglia, as in Wessex. The Welsh themselves, who had been terribly plundered by the Danes, finding they were in no condition to resist, became his Tributaries. It is further added, the King of Scotland paid him Homage also. But this is too disputable a Point to be affirmed for Truth”. Rapin’s History is a landmark text in the history of Alfred studies, as his apparent historiographical candor indeed serves to indicate.

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182 Ibid.
This is not to say that Rapin was a “modern” historian by any standard or that his aim was pure historical objectivism, yet the significance of his treatment of Alfred for the present study seems to lie in the afterlife of his text—for in the words of Professor Keynes, the work “provided a suitably idealized view…of early English society, in full accordance and sympathy with the ‘Whig’ conception of the origins of English liberties, and without undue glorification of kings”. Thus, it is fair to argue that Rapin’s notably Whiggish idealization of Alfred’s reign and regnal accomplishments, perhaps incidentally, provided the basis for subsequent historians (Whig or Tory) to synthesize claims originally made by sixteenth and seventeenth century Alfredianists and apply them to the newly-unified nation of Great Britain.

It is important to consider the reception of Rapin’s overtly Whiggish presentation of King Alfred across the channel. William Guthrie, a heretofore obscure historian of Scottish origin, composed his *General History of England* between 1744 and 1751 under the guidance and patronage of prominent Whigs, the Lord Chesterfield and the Baron Dodington. Surprisingly few studies of Alfredism cite Guthrie (even Keynes only mentions him in passing), however his decidedly British adaptation of Rapin’s Whig theory is spelled out quite clearly in the introduction to his *General History*. Guthrie explains that “Particular care will be taken to interweave [history] with an account of the rise, progress, improvement, or decay of trade, manufacturing, learning, arts and sciences of the English nation, upon a more useful and extensive plan than has hitherto been attempted”. However, Guthrie is explicit in distancing

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himself from Rapin, whose *History*, in Guthrie’s words, “appeared at a time, when, [histories] were useful to a party…To this ridiculous prepossession that a foreigner was best fitted to write the history, was owing the reception it met with from the public…[the efforts of its translator, Tindal, have] rendered it a more useful history [than that which] came from the hands of its author…its inaccuracy being so general”. 186 It is difficult to imagine a more Whiggish conception of English history, and Guthrie’s presentation of Alfred, albeit from a Scottish perspective, is indeed a continuation of Rapin’s Alfredian narrative (reframed for an English audience through Tindal) centered around societal progress of “our fundamental liberties and constitutions”187, "glorifying great men” and “titillating readers with a sensationalistic narrative”. 188

What is perhaps of more consequence to this chapter on Enlightenment Alfredism and the British nation in Guthrie’s preface is his classification of Rapin as a “foreigner”, significantly less qualified to relate an English history than he, a Scot. The notable consistencies between Guthrie’s history of England and Rapin’s text further underscores the blurring of national boundaries which had, during the era prior, largely separated English history from its Scottish counterpart—despite the intensity of Scottish Jacobitism which culminated at Culloden in 1746. As Alasdair Raffe has shown in his article on Scottish unionist historiography after 1707, “the union was not simply imposed and the Scottish people ignored. Unionism was not solely an elite

186 Ibid., iii.
187 Ibid.
idea, much less a purely English one, but a product of genuine political negotiation”.\textsuperscript{189} Although Scottish unionism was, and remains, a complex concept in terms of politics and issues of national identity, Raffe’s argument helps to contextualize the reception of King Alfred amongst Scottish historians of the Enlightenment and their understanding of Alfred’s role in the formation of the British state. That is to say, by way of Scottish Whig historians of the Enlightenment, Alfred came to be understood as a notable figure of British history, free from the “English” constraints placed upon him in the early-modern period, yet lauded for many of the same characteristics and accomplishments.

As a Whig historian (though less blunt in the intended applications of his work to Whig politics than Rapin), Guthrie was predominantly interested in the ancient constitution of England, around which—as we have seen in chapter two—a substantial historiographical tradition had long existed. He introduces Alfred as the “father of the English constitution” before explaining that “Great were the advantages and disadvantages with which he mounted the throne. Happy in the love and confidence of his subjects, who, under him, young as he was, thought themselves next to invincible; or, if defeated, yet, he at their head, they never desponded. The example which Alfred, while his father and brothers lived, had set, of filial and fraternal piety enhanced his character”.\textsuperscript{190} However, Guthrie appears to have been significantly more willing to identify possible inaccuracies in his source than Spelman was. For example, on the Danish winter encampment at Cambridge in 876, Guthrie explains in a footnote that “Sir John Spelman is very


\textsuperscript{190} William Guthrie, A General History of England, from the Invasion of the Romans Under Julius Caesar, to the Late Revolution in MDCLXXXVIII, pp. 211.
confused in all his relation of this period”. Although Guthrie draws upon Spelman’s biography of Alfred consistently throughout his chapter on the Saxon king, he never takes Spelman’s words at face value. Instead, he prefers the medieval sources which he finds less marred by contemporary politics and closer to their shared subject.

Despite his apparent skepticism and frequent cross-references of Spelman with other Alfred scholars discussed in previous chapters (i.e. William Lambarde, if only for the purpose of correcting Spelman’s errors), Guthrie nevertheless finds Alfred worthy of much of the historical adulation which the king had received to the 1740s. In typical Whiggish fashion, he quickly turns to Alfred’s laws to support the theory of the ancient constitution and underscore Alfred’s role in its foundation. Guthrie writes: “[Alfred] was himself the finest scholar, and the politest gentleman, of his age; by nature endued with every advantage of person and genius, and by study he improved those endowments to their utmost perfection. In civil matters, and the knowledge of mankind, he proposed to himself the best of models, that of the wisest of men”. Beyond the admirable personal qualities the author ascribes to the Saxon king, he explains that in Alfred’s law codes “the general divisions and sub-divisions of the kingdom were provided for. Men of abilities were obliged to give their sons clergy, that is, learning, at school; and excommunicated persons were disabled from suing in courts of justice”. Guthrie draws heavily upon Lambarde and Horne’s fourteenth-century legal textbook *The Mirror of Justices* to

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191 Ibid., 212.
192 Ibid., 218.
194 Ibid., 220.
argue that despite the fierce scholarly debate over the exact content of Alfred’s law codes, Lambarde omitted a number of Alfred’s laws in his Archeion, as according to the Mirror of Justices, “Alfred’s laws were extant in the time of Edward III”. For Guthrie, the point of all of this was ultimately to present the structure of Alfred’s government, in which various “English states” answered to what he significantly calls “our parliament”. He refrains from claiming that Alfred had actually founded the English nation, yet recounts a structure of Alfredian representative government centered around “our parliament”—a concept which, for a Scot, would have been quite foreign prior to 1707.

William Guthrie also compiled an extensive History of Scotland, which he completed in the 1760s, and in which one can begin to comprehend Alfred’s image in post-union Scotland. He laments the fact that from his perspective, English historians of the pre-Conquest period “every where seem to be prepossessed against the Scots; and very probably, considering the distracted state of England at that time, they had no opportunities of being informed of what passed in the northern parts of their country, at least not early enough to enter it upon their annals, for such is the form of their histories”. Guthrie draws upon Camden’s Britannia to explain that “it is, however, certain, that a great friendship subsisted between Alfred and Gregory [by which he means King Giric of Alba]; and that the former agreed to yield to the latter, all the lands which had once belonged to the Scots and the Picts between the two pretentures. Despite the

195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
198 Ibid., 166.
historiographical inferiority complex evident in Guthrie’s writing, his decision to emphasize interactions between Gregory and Alfred is intended to both underscore the significance of Giric in the line of pre-Conquest Scottish kings and, in the process, legitimize medieval Scotland for its relationship with Alfredian Wessex. Yet Guthrie’s argument that it was in fact Alfred who yielded influence to Giric exists in direct opposition to the excerpt from Rapin discussed above. Though Rapin seems to have been admirably skeptical of Spelman’s claims of Alfredian dominion over the entirety of Britain, he nevertheless grants the possibility that Alfred’s influence extended to such an extent. Thus, Guthrie uses Alfred for the opposite purpose as does Spelman, but with the same consequence for this study, as the respect Guthrie’s Alfred allegedly harbored for Giric utilizes Alfred’s established stature to justify the medieval Scottish kingdom.

On Giric’s successor, Donald, Guthrie once more recounts a notable Alfredian connection, citing the fourteenth-century Scottish chronicler John of Fordun to argue that “the Scotch historians seem unanimous that Northumberland was, at this time, in possession of Donald; this, however, is contradicted by the best English authorities, which tell us, that ever since the year 883, it was governed by Guthred, who was of Danish extraction, but tributary to Alfred. We therefore have reason to believe, that the Danes recovered whatever acquisitions the late monarch [Giric] had made in Northumberland, before the end of his reign; and that Alfred found it convenient for him to accept of their homage. Notwithstanding this, we find that Donald sent Alfred a body of troops, who did him considerable service, in his wars with the Danes”.

Yet Guthrie’s final word on Alfred complicates the narrative further: “Donald’s friendship was the more meritorious, as the Northumbrian Danes had offered to submit to him, provided he

would join them in opposing Alfred; but he refused all their terms, unless they became Christians… [John of Fordun]…informs us, that the Danish king of Northumberland and East-Anglia (whom he calls Gurmund) had been baptized by means of Alfred; and that though Donald knew that both he and his family had sworn fealty to Alfred, yet he entered into an alliance with his son Ranald, and his kinsman Sithric, who succeeded him”.

Considered alongside his Whiggish presentation of the ancient constitution and the significance he ascribes to Alfred’s role in the establishment of “his” parliament, Guthrie presents Giric and Donald as having had a seat at Alfred’s proverbial table. Guthrie’s Scottish kings are not necessarily superior to the Saxon king, but by no means submissive to his rule. Rather, Guthrie presents medieval Scotland in Alfredian terms, contributing to a post-union historical narrative of which Scotland had an equally important role.

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries witnessed two critical political events for the development of Alfredism: the 1707 Act of Union— which has been discussed throughout this chapter— and the Hanoverian ascendancy of 1714— which solidified a Protestant rulership of Germanic extract. Richard Blackmore’s 1723 *Alfred: An Epick Poem* is dedicated, much like Tindal’s translation of Rapin’s *History* to the “illustrious Prince, Frederick of Hanover”. Following such divisive religious polemic as described in chapter one, Blackmore, an Oxford-educated Englishman, expresses his contentment with the present Protestant administration, echoing Parker’s sixteenth-century rhetoric in writing that “it is a peculiar Favour of Heaven to *Great-Britain* that she is subject to his Majesty, your Royal Grandfather, a Prince, who governs

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200 Ibid.

by Law and not by despotick Will; a Christian, not a *Pagan*; a Protestant, not a Papist, and of all Protestant Kings the best”. Protestant, anti-Catholic rhetoric is not, in and of itself, exclusively Parkerian. However Blackmore’s presentation of Alfred as “one of the greatest Monarchs that ever ruled this or any foreign Nation, a Prince sprung from the ancient *Saxon* Race of your own native land” does reflect an increasingly-racialized conception of British national identity, built on the island’s Anglo-Saxon past.

Blackmore’s use of the word “race” to convey his message of common ancestry is one of the aspects of pan-Saxonism which proved to be so important to the Victorians during the age of Kipling and E.A. Freeman: the racial and national purity of the native English over others. However, this particular brand of racial superiority does not seem to have been quite so sinister during the eighteenth century. Beyond its dedication to the Hanoverian Prince, the epic includes the following passage:

“*Alfred* with num’rous princely Virtues bright/ The People’s Darling and the Court’s Delight/ With mournful Eyes oft view’d *Britannia’s* State/ Pity’d her Suff’rings, and bewail’d her Fate:/ Nor did he silent and unactive grieve/ But form’d wise Schemes her Honour to retrieve/ And strove by various Efforts to inspire/ A gen’rous Zeal, and set her Sons on Fire/ Celestial Virtue to pursue, and aim/ At *Albion’s* Greatness, and Heroick Fame/ But the prevailing *Dane* was not suppres’d/ Nor *Britain’s* painful Grievances redres’d/ Till *Alfred*, who had ne’er before encas’d/ His Limbs in Steel nor martial Danger fac’d/Forsook the gameful Wood, and took the Field/Renounc’d the Huntsman’s *Silvan* Arms, to wield/ The battling Warrior’s; and, by Wonder shown/ Of conduct, strength, and courage yet unknown/ The Heroe three unrivaled conquests gain’d/ Broke the proud Foe, and barbarous Rage restrain’d”.

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203 Ibid.

Blackmore’s Alfred nevertheless embodies many of the qualities associated with the Victorian cult, with the Saxon king’s “princely virtues” and “conduct, strength, and courage” proudly on display. Beyond Blackmore’s continuation of this tradition, he expands upon the post-union conception of British historical identity, illustrated above through Guthrie. The great deficiencies of Anglo-Saxon society to Alfred’s assumption of power in 871 as described by a number of early-modern and Enlightenment scholars were not, for Blackmore, specifically issues within the English kingdom alone, but rather it was “Britain’s painful grievances” which prevented the realization of “Albion’s greatness”. The significance of Blackmore’s language is not limited to terminology; rather, his Alfredian epic reflects a widespread acceptance of the British polity and Alfred’s important role in its foundation, as the link between the island’s Saxon past and its new Germanic rulers came to be understood, developed, and embraced.

The intensely divided political environment of the mid-eighteenth century enabled the “Patriots”, a group of “Whigs and disaffected Tories” who alongside Prince Frederick, opposed George II and the Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, to construct a historical narrative upon which they could defend the “parliamentary freedoms” which they understood to be of Anglo-Saxon origin.205 Blackmore’s epic poem certainly seems to have been a significant literary source which was intended to contribute to such a narrative. The pervasiveness of this movement and the importance of Frederick’s sponsorship, though, is perhaps most explicitly conveyed by way of Thomas Arne’s _Masque of Alfred_, which Frederick himself commissioned, and which was first performed at his Cliveden residence on 1 August, 1740.206 Though David Mallett and James

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206 Joanne Parker, _'England’s Darling’: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great_, pp. 63-64.
Thomson, the librettists and producers of the drama, are not obscure literary figures in their own rights, the masque is perhaps most remembered for its finale, *Rule, Britannia!* which remains to this day an important musical expression of British patriotism. In its original form, the three most pertinent verses read:

> "When Britain first, at Heaven's command  
> Arose from out the azure main;  
> This was the charter of the land,  
> And guardian angels sang this strain:  
> 'Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:  
> 'Britons never will be slaves'".

> "The nations, not so blest as thee,  
> Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall;  
> While thou shalt flourish great and free,  
> The dread and envy of them all.  
> 'Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:  
> 'Britons never will be slaves'".

> "The Muses, still with freedom found,  
> Shall to thy happy coast repair;  
> Blest Isle! With matchless beauty crown'd,  
> And manly hearts to guard the fair.  
> 'Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:  
> 'Britons never will be slaves'".²⁰⁷

Two major themes reveal themselves upon analysis of the libretto: first, the resistance to tyranny and “slavery”, which Mallett and Thomson seem to find so central to British identity and which they attribute to Alfred. Secondly, the librettists emphasize the dominance of Alfred’s navy, as evident by the imagery recurrent in the refrain—a notion dating back at least to the *New Year's Gift*, in which John Leland settled a historical argument and came to a rather insignificant

conclusion which revolved around the presence Alfred’s navy at the town of Ware, in Hertfordshire. Alfred as “founder of the British navy” eventually became a favorite trope of Victorian Alfredism, yet the eighteenth-century Patriots would undoubtedly have understood British military might and its accompanying national pride in a decidedly naval context. While the musicologist Ken McLeod sees the *Masque of Alfred* as “one of the most prominent manifestations of the transition to the myth of Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic origin” from that of the Trojan Arthur\footnote{208 Ken McLeod, "Ideology and Racial Myth in Purcell's "King Arthur" and Arne's "Alfred"." *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 34, no. 1/2 (2010): pp. 92.}, the untimely death of Frederick in 1751 before he could ascend to the throne has been understood, if only by Professor Keynes, as having “denied the British people the pleasure of being ruled by one who seems to have taken King Alfred to heart”.\footnote{209 Simon Keynes, “The Cult of King Alfred the Great,” pp. 281.} Although it would seem an oversimplification of the historical forces at play to assert that Frederick’s death is the only event which prevented an earlier enthusiasm for Alfred on the scale of the Victorian cult, it assuredly did not help the Saxon king as David Hume’s undeniably Tory scholarship came to “set the view of English history which prevailed throughout the reign of George III”.\footnote{210 Ibid., 282}

Perhaps the most famous historian of Enlightenment Britain was, like the comparatively obscure Guthrie, a Scot. David Hume’s six-volume *History of England*, compiled between 1754 and 1762, represents a significant milestone in Enlightenment Alfredism. Hume, primarily known for his contributions to modern philosophical thought, has attracted substantial scholarly attention over the course of the past few decades due to a recent and widespread historiographical consensus that Hume’s works of historical writing have been “unfairly
criticized” for their methodological flaws. While Hume has often been labeled a Whig historian, his response to the theory of the ancient constitution suggests otherwise. He presents Alfred as “restoring order to the state… in establishing civil and military institutions; in composing the minds of men to industry and justice; and in providing against the return of like calamities. He was, more properly than his grandfather, Egbert, the sole monarch of the English (for so the Saxons were now universally called)…”. Hume’s self-proclaimed objectivism may have kept him from dubbing Alfred “King of the English nation” as a number of his predecessors did and as an even larger number of his successors would do during the nineteenth century, yet he nonetheless extols the Saxon king for his benevolent leadership and sphere of influence within a divided and, during the early stages of Alfred’s rule, crumbling heptarchy.

Hume then signals his approach of the question of legal continuity, asserting that “we should give but an imperfect idea of Alfred’s merit, were we to confine our narration to his military exploits, and were not more particular in our account of his institutions for the execution of justice, and of his zeal for the encouragement of arts and sciences”. Following a rather Lambardian template, Hume explains: “That he might render the execution of justice strict and regular, he divided all England into counties; these countries he subdivided into hundreds; and the hundreds into tithings. Every householder was answerable for the behavior of his family and slaves, and even of his guests, if they lived above three days in his house. Ten neighboring householders were formed into one corporation, who, under the name of a tithing, decennary, or


213 Ibid., pp. 69.
fribourg, were answerable for each other’s conduct, over whom one person, called a
tithingman…was appointed to preside…. [Alfred’s legal structure] was well calculated to reduce
that fierce and licentious people under the salutary restraint of law and government. But Alfred
took care to temper these rigours by other institutions favourable to the freedom of the citizens;
and nothing could be more popular and liberal than his plan for the administration of justice”.
This passage seems on the surface consistent with the Whig theory, however Hume continues,
pointing out the following on Alfred’s laws:

“Alfred framed a body of laws; which, though now lost, served long as the basis of
English jurisprudence, and is generally deemed the origin of what is denominated the
Common Law. He appointed regular meetings of the states of England twice a year in
London, a city which he himself had repaired and beautified, and which he thus rendered
the capital of his kingdom. The similarity of these institutions to the customs of the
ancient Germans, to the practice of the other northern conquerors, and to the Saxon laws
during the Heptarchy, prevents us from regarding Alfred as the sole author of this plan of
government; and leads us rather to think, that, like a wise man, he contented himself with
reforming, extending, and executing the institutions which he found previously
established… this great prince preserved the most sacred regard to the liberty of his
people; and it is a memorable sentiment preserved in his will, That it was just the English
should for ever remain as free as their own thoughts”.

Hume cites Spelman’s Life consistently throughout his discussion of Alfred, yet he never
explicitly subscribes to the theory of legal continuity. Stockton cites Hume’s essay, Of the
Coalition of Parties, and Pocock’s work on the Whig theory to argue that Enlightenment Whigs
who so wished to embrace legal continuity and the ancient constitution were met with the rather
unwelcome realization that feudalism was not an English invention.

214 Ibid., pp. 69-70.
215 Ibid., pp. 72.
comparison of Alfred’s legal structure with that of the “ancient Germans”, then, exemplifies the

toryism which Hugh Trevor-Roper finds so obviously apparent in Hume’s *History.* Regardless
of the popularity Hume’s *History* attained or his modification of the ancient theory of the
constitution, Hume’s Alfred embodied the values of princely benevolence, good character,
emphasis on education, interest in societal progress, and above all, individual liberty by which he
judged the merits of a polity. While Roper argues that Hume, “in placing the machinery of
progress firmly into a social context, looked at history more profoundly than [T. B.
Macaulay]” (perhaps Hume’s most vocal critic), it was not Hume’s somewhat-objective
conception of English history which was received by the nineteenth century. Rather, the many
elements of Alfred’s character and reign which Hume celebrated shine through the
historiographical complexities presented by Hume’s dynamic historical politics. His Alfred is a
scholarly king, interested in promoting morality, justice, and education. While Hume may have
been interested in supplying England with its first “comprehensive, non-partisan history”218, his
refutation of the theory of the ancient condition can be seen as accomplishing quite the opposite.

Although the Whig historian John Baxter edited, interpolated, and re-published Hume’s
*History* in line with a more agreeable narrative of English history and continuity219, it is certainly
the case that Hume’s favorable treatment of Alfred (despite the one obvious point of contention)
and the popularity of his text contributed to a more widespread and personal understanding of the
Saxon king in the collective English or British psyche as it then existed. Professor Keynes points

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217 Hugh Trevor-Roper, "David Hume, Historian." In *History and the Enlightenment*, pp. 121. Yale

218 James Noggle, "Literary Taste as Counter-Enlightenment in Hume's "History of England"." *Studies in
English Literature, 1500-1900* 44, no. 3 (2004): pp. 626.

to the establishment of organizations such as the “Laudable Society of Anti-Gallicians”, who, as the name of the group might suggest, were acutely aware of the Gallic origins of the post-Conquest English monarchy.\textsuperscript{220} Groups such as these contributed to the growing movement of eighteenth-century Britons who identified the Anglo-Saxon period as more definitively “English” than the historical narratives beginning in 1066 which had largely dominated historical discourse outside of the circles described thus far in this thesis.\textsuperscript{221}

By the time Obadiah Hulme published his \textit{Historical Essay on the English Constitution} in 1771, Hume’s relative objectivity seems to have become removed from the Alfredian historiographical tradition altogether. While Hulme relates many of the same Alfredian characteristics as does Hume, Hulme’s essay attempts to make Alfred accessible to a wider readership at the expense of Hume’s comparatively admirable objectivity. Hulme writes on the Saxon tribes uniting for protection against Danish invasion: “In like manner was our Heptarchy connected; and their mode of union became part of the constitution, when the seven kingdoms united under one king. The matter was simply this: one of the seven kings, was always chosen generalissimo over the whole body; and they appointed him a standing council, of a certain number of deputies, from each state, without whose advice, and concurrence, it is probable he could not act…And when Alfred the great, united the seven kingdoms into one, he, undoubtedly, with the approbation of the people, incorporated this great council, as a separate branch of the witenagemot, or parliament; so that they still continued to be the king’s great council, and a

\textsuperscript{220} Simon Keynes, “The Cult of King Alfred the Great,” pp. 284.

branch of the legislative authority; which they are at this day”. Obadiah Hulme’s Alfred received the long tradition of Alfredian exaggeration, and the *Historical Essay* contributed to the further development of a less empirical, more mythological Saxon king who represented the height of English society prior to the upheaval that came with the Norman invasion. In eighteenth-century terms, Alfred was a champion of “Britishness” before William and his French vikings arrived and destroyed all that he had accomplished.

The Enlightenment period witnessed the application of Dr. Parker’s “distorted Alfred” not only to the Kingdom of Wessex and to the English proto-state, but to a decidedly new political concept: the British nation. While Archbishop Parker’s polemical narrative of Alfred’s alleged Protestantism was not in itself reworked during the eighteenth century, it was primarily the early-modern conception of the ancient constitution which contributed so significantly to the Enlightenment understanding of Alfred as a predominantly British figure who reformed the church of his kingdom and certainly influenced its laws, but whose regnal influence and personal characteristics came to be understood as definitively British in the wake of the union of 1707. As British nationhood and a distinct British identity became further developed, the established tradition of Alfred scholarship facilitated the application of the Saxon king to a definitively British shared history, in opposition to the Norman Yoke. The historiographical material created during the eighteenth century further contributed to the narrative of Alfred’s Britishness and the multi-volume British Enlightenment histories—based on the inherently polemical Alfred

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222 Obadiah Hulme, *An historical essay on the English constitution: or, an impartial inquiry into the elective power of the people, from the first establishment of the Saxons in this kingdom. Wherein the right of Parliament, to tax our distant provinces, is explained, and justified*, (London: R. Moncrieffe, 1771), pp. 22-23.

223 Joanne Parker, *‘England’s Darling’: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great*, pp. 40.
scholarship of the early-modern period—provided the source material through which the Victorians were able to apply Alfred to so many elements of the nineteenth-century British identity and its accompanying sentiments of racial and national exceptionalism.
Conclusion
Reflections: Toward the Victorian Cult of King Alfred, “The Most Perfect Character in History”

The process of researching and writing this thesis required a few major methodological decisions to be made, specifically involving constraints which had to be placed on the scope of the project for the sake of focus and clarity. As explained in the introduction, my study of pre-Victorian Alfredism (as has hopefully been evident throughout the past four chapters) has been predominantly historiographical. A larger-scale project might also investigate Alfred’s representation in pre-Victorian art and popular culture in line with the quasi-revisionist argument of this thesis, as Keynes and Parker both emphasize the significance of art and drama in the development of the Victorian cult. However, above all, this thesis has demonstrated the various polemical and political agendas during the early-modern and Enlightenment periods that Alfred was consistently employed to advance. As a result, Victorian Alfredianists inherited an Alfred whose image was the product of entrenched and pervasive historiographical debates.

In 2005, Robert Allen Rouse addressed a number of recent developments in the study of Anglo-Saxon history and literature relevant to this project. Moving beyond the decidedly racial uses of the term “Anglo-Saxonism” in the 1980s, Rouse argues that Britain’s Anglo-Saxon past “is not simply created by language in an entirely subjective manner…rather, the past is constructed on the basis of memories, places, events, and people that have left an imprint upon the reality of the present”.224 Although Rouse’s primary interests lie in Middle English literature, his book contextualizes the movement of pre-Conquest historical scholarship which allows for an

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understanding of pre-Victorian Anglo-Saxonism as a practice of appropriation as well. While Keynes, Yorke, and Parker approach the issue of Alfredian appropriation to differing degrees, the historiographical trend within modern Anglo-Saxon scholarship identified by Rouse has facilitated a revised inquiry into the convention of Anglo-Saxon appropriation—a practice long understood to have been uniquely Victorian. It stands to reason that Alfred, the favorite Saxon king of the nineteenth century, should be an entry point into this intriguing strand of historical revisionism.

Throughout her study of the Victorian cult, Joanne Parker frequently cites the work of E. A. Freeman, the nineteenth-century historian who so famously designated Alfred “the most perfect character in history”, arguing that “part of the reason why Freeman’s stress upon Alfred’s character seems to have been drawn upon so enthusiastically in the late nineteenth century probably lies in the development of racialist theories which sought to identify a distinct English ‘type’ or ‘national character’”. Parker’s conclusion, though apt, may, in fact, be incomplete. It is without question the case that the Victorian period was marked by an increased sense of ethnic racialization, and that the Anglo-Saxons were heralded as the societal embodiment of British—and particularly English—racial purity. However, one of the purposes of this project has been to show that this notion of historically-grounded English exceptionalism was not a nineteenth-century invention, but rather an element of Alfred scholarship which had, in one form or another, been attached to the image of the Saxon king since Archbishop Parker first made use of him to prove the antiquity and supremacy of his church. Joanne Parker’s implication that admiration of

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Alfred’s personal characteristics was a specifically Victorian development, then, seems to ignore the long tradition of Alfred scholars presenting the Saxon king’s military, religious, and legal accomplishments through the lens of his piety, his learnedness, his courage, and his princely benevolence.²²⁷

The version of Alfred inherited by the Victorians was a Saxon king who had been used time and again to advance polemical agendas, legitimize the ideals of certain political factions, settle disputes over the antiquity of one ancient university over the other, and by the eighteenth century, Alfred found his way into the very fabric of British national identity. It should not be surprising to learn, given the historical trends outlined throughout the preceding four chapters, that the Victorians further promoted these narratives for their own ends, and that King Alfred was summarily commercialized in the age of Albert of Saxe-Coburg. The Germanic connection was once again fashionable, and the “creature” of Alfred the Great—the product of so many uses, abuses, and distortions— was ready to fully assume his symbolic position in Victorian society.²²⁸

Freeman’s estimation of Alfred as “the most perfect character in history”, then, reflects a nineteenth-century reading of the Alfredian characteristics of monarchical benevolence, piety, morality, military fortitude, and scholarly diligence which, combined with the king’s pronounced association with the origins of the English (or British) nation and its defining institutions, had been introduced and circulated during the major polemical and political conflicts described throughout the previous four chapters. Victorian values certainly contributed to the mass

²²⁷ Dr. Parker goes so far as to argue that in his 1867 History of the Norman Conquest, the historian E.A. Freeman “allotted a mere ten pages to Alfred’s reign, but within that narrow scope it dwelt upon the exceptional nature of the Saxon king’s character as never before”, pp. 168.

²²⁸ Simon Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred delivered to posterity a creature of whom, perhaps, the less said the better; and it only remains to consider, albeit briefly, how the modern conception of the historical King Alfred accords with his legendary namesake”, pp. 354.
popularity the Saxon king achieved during the nineteenth century, but to assert that Alfred had no such following prior to the Victorian period is to ignore over three-hundred years of similar, inherently divisive Alfred scholarship. The increasingly-racialized spirit of nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxonism illustrates the continuation of that trend, and perhaps the inescapable legacy of Alfredism—a strand of historical discourse that can trace its origins directly to the work of Archbishop Parker and his polemical allies. Scholarly interest in Alfred developed steadily throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries as a historical means to a variety of decidedly political and polemical ends. As a result, this thesis has demonstrated the nature of early-modern and Enlightenment interest in the Saxon king—a phenomenon that has been nominally identified in the context of the Victorian cult, but deserves an analysis in its own right.
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