

holds some of the Bayeux Tapestry's most beguiling secrets. The quest of this book is to attempt to unravel these and other millennial mysteries of the work.

## *A Tale of Consequence: The Impact of Conquest*

Today the walls of eleventh-century buildings, such as survive, are cold and bare and they give nothing away of the brightness and luxuriance that once clothed them within. Were we to be transported back in time, however, and to step inside some of the great churches or secular palaces of the day, it would not be long before we encountered bright and colourful hangings draped around interior walls, as well as painted murals and other decoration on the stonework itself. Thus in the great Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* a secular hall is described as resplendent with drapes, 'embroidered with gold' and picturing 'many a sight of wonder for those that delight to gaze on them'.<sup>1</sup> The widow of the Anglo-Saxon warrior Byrhtnoth, who died in 991 at the Battle of Maldon, is known to have produced an important stitchwork hanging to commemorate her husband's death and to have given it to the church at Ely.<sup>2</sup> Nothing of this survives; its size, design and technique are simply matters of guesswork. The Bayeux Tapestry is the unique survivor of a fragile genre. Even in the eleventh century it probably stood out as exceptional, for few persons would

have had the space to display a work so long and so vast, let alone the resources to commission it. That so many textile decorations, large or small, have perished in the interim is hardly surprising. What is extraordinary is that even one has survived. It is doubly fortunate that the sole surviving work of its kind is the one that recounts the single most important event in English history.

Nowadays it is more fashionable to have been a conquered people, rather than a nation of all-conquering warriors. It is more correct to bask in the innocent glories of defeat than to trumpet the more tainted achievements of conquest. Although England is often portrayed in the latter pose, the invasion and conquest of the country by the Normans must rank as among the most complete and ruthless that any nation has had the misfortune to suffer.<sup>3</sup> The Normans and other Frenchmen who settled in England formed only a small part of the overall population of between one and a half and two million, but they seized almost all the key positions of power. Within a few years, virtually all of the country's Anglo-Saxon aristocracy had been summarily ousted and replaced by a new French-speaking elite. One by one the leading bishops and abbots were also replaced by Normans or Norman appointees. Wealth beyond dreams, the spoils of conquest, now flowed into the coffers of the most important of these foreign invaders. By 1086, when King William took stock of land ownership in the country with his famous Domesday inquest, a quarter of England was held by just eleven of his closest followers. Of the 200 or so other aristocrats and adventurers who held another quarter of the country, only four were English. The great bulk of England's Anglo-Saxon ruling class had either perished in 1066 or had been reduced to second-class citizenry in their own land, or had fled to a hasty exile. Most

of the new men were Normans but an important minority were allies of the Normans from other parts of France and from Flanders.

A network of castles, at first in wood, later in stone, was constructed around the country in order to enforce the new Norman order. Few castles had been built in England before 1066. Now the motte-and-bailey castle – a square fortress built on a man-made mound – became a familiar feature of the English shires. The death of King Harold at Hastings had removed the one man who was remotely capable of uniting the country in opposition. Henceforth resistance was never more than sporadic, and it was ultimately futile. If castles dashed any hope of rebellion, the nation's soul cowered under the shadow of magnificent new churches and cathedrals, confidently built by the invaders in a frenzy of construction in the latest continental style. Elegant, soaring cathedrals, such as those at Winchester, Ely and Durham, are outstanding artistic legacies of the Norman Conquest. The famous White Tower of London is a reminder of the military might which actually brought it about.

No one held a monopoly of violence in these violent times, but it is impossible to ignore the particularly brutal side to William the Conqueror's character. It was this that made the Conquest possible. He was a man of rigid will. If he thought that he was right he did not flinch from acting with all the terrifying force at his disposal, and with little regard for the innocent. The invasion of 1066, so vividly recorded in the Bayeux Tapestry, is a testament to the single-minded strength of purpose of the man. Less well known, though no less revealing, is William's crushing of a revolt in the north of England in 1069 and 1070 with a severity which touched all levels of society. Dividing his army into small units, he ordered

his men to ravage the countryside wherever they went. Crops were burnt, English peasants slaughtered at will and the implements of farming everywhere broken and destroyed. It was a policy of deliberate terror: great swaths of land remained unproductive for at least a generation and there was widespread starvation – but of revolt we hear nothing more. Thousands must have died. Simeon of Durham recorded that corpses were left to rot in the streets and houses and that the surviving English citizens were reduced to eating horses, dogs and cats or else sold themselves into slavery. Every village between Durham and York was left deserted and lifeless.<sup>4</sup> Fifty years later Orderic Vitalis, a monk of dual English and Norman parentage, poignantly recalled all the ‘helpless children, young men in the prime of their life and hoary grey-beards’ who had perished as a result of William’s harrying of the north.<sup>5</sup> It was his reputation for this kind of brutality that enabled William to impose his rule on England. Few dared to speak out against such a man, still less to rebel.

If the immediate human cost of the Norman Conquest was large, the longer-term impact was in its own way just as dramatic, and in some measure it can still be felt today. The events of 1066 profoundly influenced the subsequent development of British, and indeed European, history. The country was summarily dragged from a niche in the Scandinavian world and with a jolt its face was turned firmly towards France. In the centuries that followed England was led by a French-speaking elite whose interests, or at least ambitions, lay on both sides of the Channel. As time went by England became more, not less, entangled in the regional and dynastic affairs of France. When the Norman dynasty came to an end, with the death of King Stephen in 1154, it was replaced by another French dynasty under Henry Plantagenet, a great-grandson of

William the Conqueror. The conflict known as the Hundred Years War, which finally came to a close in 1453, was the most prominent example of the long and often violent entanglement of Anglo-French relations whose ultimate cause can be traced back to a single event – the victory of Duke William of Normandy at Hastings in 1066.

The administration of England under the Anglo-Saxons had been sophisticated for its time and in their own interest the Normans took over the existing machinery of English government. The Normans retained, for example, the old Anglo-Saxon shires or counties as administrative units, and the division of England into counties survives to this day often with similar boundaries. Schoolchildren are taught that the Normans introduced ‘feudalism’ to England but historians are no longer certain whether this was so, or indeed whether the word ‘feudalism’ is useful at all. If nothing else, the need to hold down and subdue a conquered land with relatively few numbers enhanced the personal authority of the king and his powers of patronage. More susceptible of definition, and perhaps more enduring, were the cultural and linguistic changes. At a stroke, the old English language became the tongue of powerless underlings and it ceased largely, though not entirely, to be written down, and the development of English literature, hitherto represented by Anglo-Saxon poems such as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, was quite simply stalled in its tracks. *Beowulf*, a tale of the old Scandinavian lore, has recently found a wider audience with the acclaimed modern version of the poet Seamus Heaney. If some French speakers scoffed at Anglo-Saxon poetry, which to them probably sounded incomprehensible and uncouth, they, in turn, contributed impressively, both as patrons and authors, to the flourishing of a new culture. French epic poetry, exciting

histories and didactic fables, written and recited to entertain french-speaking lords and ladies in their new English castles, all represent important staging posts in the history of French literature itself. Some even believe that the first great work that was composed in the French language, the *Chanson de Roland* (the *Song of Roland*), was actually written in conquered England.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not this is so, the earliest surviving version of the *Song of Roland* is certainly a copy that was written down in twelfth-century England.<sup>7</sup>

For hundreds of years the two languages existed side by side, French for the richer classes, English for those of middling status and the poor. As Sir Walter Scott observed in his novel *Ivanhoe*, echoes of this social and linguistic division can still be heard in modern English. Many living animals continue to be called by their old English names (sheep, cow, ox, deer) whereas once cooked and served up on the tables of the gentry they acquired names derived from the French (mutton, beef, veal, bacon, venison). Only in 1362 did French cease to be the language of the English parliament. When in 1399 Henry IV succeeded to the throne, he became the first English king since Harold Godwinson whose mother tongue was English rather than French. Even as late as the seventeenth century, English lawyers were using a degenerate form of French in order to report cases in the law courts. The Normans never sought to eradicate English. William the Conqueror is said to have tried to learn the language, but he found it too difficult and quickly gave up. Inevitably, because of the overwhelming preponderance of people speaking English, and endemic wars with France, French slowly died out as a spoken tongue, and by the fifteenth century modern English emerged as the common vernacular of the nation. By this time the French of the Normans and Plantagenets had enriched the language with

thousands of new words. The vast number of synonyms in modern English is largely the result of this grafting of French, in the wake of the Norman Conquest, on to older Saxon and Norse roots. If Harold had won the Battle of Hastings, the language this book is written in would have been very different, a much more Germanic tongue.

Travelling around northern France today one can still find echoes of 1066. There are, of course, great Romanesque buildings erected, in part, thanks to money that poured in from conquered England – the completion of Bayeux Cathedral in the 1070s was probably financed by confiscated English wealth. Other reminders are less tangible but no less noticeable. From the hedged-in pastures of the Cherbourg peninsula in the west to the flat expanse of Flanders in the north-east there are many sleepy towns and villages whose names are poignantly redolent of some of the most famous British families. Each place is quintessentially French, each may have its café-bar, its boulangerie, its shuttered houses, its old ladies in blue cardigans who shuffle quietly down the street. It is from places such as these, with names like Cuinchy, Montbrai, Mortemer, La Pommeraye, Sequeville and Ver, that the eponymous aristocratic families of Britain sprang – de Quincy, Mowbray, Mortimer, Pomeroy, Sackville and de Vere.<sup>8</sup> It is a testament of the lasting social impact of the Norman Conquest that to British ears these names still bring to mind a succession of plummy-voiced aristocrats. The ancestors of these families (and many others could be cited) were powerful men who settled in England as a result of the Norman Conquest, if not immediately, then in the second and subsequent waves of immigration.

In these varying ways the events depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry had an impact that can still be felt today, like distant

ripples in a pond long after the surface has been disturbed by the violent splash of a rock. That more than nine centuries later we can still perceive these effects is not simply a consequence of the Conquest itself. Since then the waters have remained largely undisturbed, for the Norman invasion in 1066 was the last time that England was conquered by a foreign power. No other unwanted invader – neither Philip II of Spain in 1580s, nor the Napoleon in the early 1800s, nor Adolf Hitler in the 1940s – has been able to match the extraordinary achievement of William the Conqueror.

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