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## ARTICLE VIII.

## CÆDMON, THE FIRST GREAT ENGLISH POET.

BY THE REV. DANIEL SEELYE GREGORY, D.D., LL.D.

TWELVE HUNDRED years have passed since the first great English poet was laid to rest at Streanshalh in old Northumbria. Late in September, 1898, there was a notable gathering to unveil a memorial cross erected at Whitby, the old Streanshalh, in honor of Cædmon, "the divine ox-herd." The address at the unveiling was delivered by Mr. Alfred Austin, the Poet-Laureate. For almost a millennium, Cædmon, with all the other representatives of that marvelous early English literary development, had been practically forgotten, only to be brought to mind again during the present century. To the last generation they were scarcely more than legendary names; but now that an admiring nation sets up a Cædmon Memorial, and a poet-laureate delivers an address affirming that Cædmon, rather than Chaucer, should be called "the morning star of English poetry," the English-speaking peoples are naturally turning back to this primeval bard with awakened interest. Such questions as these are being asked: Who was Cædmon, and what is the story of his life? What was the poetry that gave him such renown? What was his influence upon his own age, and what has it been on later ages? Does he deserve to be so remembered and celebrated? Some of these questions will be answered directly and others incidentally in this article.

*The History of Cædmon.*—The story of the poet—

or the romance, if one prefers so to call it—has been preserved in brief by that illustrious church-historian, the Venerable Bede, or Beda, the early English church-historian, and in England at least, if not in the world, the greatest teacher of his age. Bede was born A. D. 673, ten years before the death of Cædmon. In his masterpiece, "The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation," Bede briefly tells the story of the first great English poet, in Latin, the literary language of the world of that age. Later it was translated into Anglo-Saxon and improved by King Alfred, in order to bring it within the reach of a larger number of his people.

The environment, as may be gathered from the history, was just fitted for the development of a great religious poet.

Cædmon lived when the overlordship of Northumbria extended over the major part of Britain, and when its period of greatest intellectual awakening was just at hand. His life-work was reaching out toward its highest at the very time when the religious conflict between Roman and Irish Christianity culminated in the Synod of Whitby. Never was the English religious nature more deeply stirred than in that age. That was a necessity to the production of such a poet as Cædmon, as truly as the Puritan rousing was to the coming of Milton.

The story of the conversion of Britain from the Roman side of approach is a familiar one. It was Edwin that so extended the overlordship of Northumbria in the first third of the seventh century. His queen, the sister of the king of Kent, when she came to her new home in the North, brought with her Paulinus, one of the followers of the Roman monk Augustine, the chief apostle from Rome to Britain. Edwin was soon converted, by Paulinus and the queen, to the new faith, and then he summoned that historic gathering of the wise men of the realm to consider the reception of the new teaching. Said an old Ealdor-

man, as he recognized the light that it threw over the darkness that encompassed human life:—

“So seems the life of man, O king, as a sparrow's flight through the hall when you are sitting at meat in winter-tide, and the warm fire lighted on the hearth, but the icy rain-storm without. The sparrow flies in at one door, and tarries for a moment in the light and heat of the hearth-fire, and then flying forth from the other, vanishes into the wintry darkness whence it came. So tarries for a moment the life of man in our sight; but what is before it, what after it, we know not. If this new teaching tells us aught certainly of these, let us follow it.”<sup>1</sup>

That was beautiful theory. Coifa the priest struck the practical note for the people: “None of your people, Edwin, have worshiped the gods more busily than I, yet there are many more favored and more fortunate. Were these gods good for anything they would help their worshippers.” Then leaping on his horse, the historian tells us, “he hurled his spear into the sacred temple at Godmanham, and with the rest of the Witan embraced the religion of the king.”

Had this easy-going Roman conversion been all, there could have been no Cædmon with his sacred poetry. The real conversion and the inspiration came from another quarter. That work was begun when the good bishop Aidan came on his mission from the living and independent church of Ireland, where Columba from his island of Iona had done his grand work, established his bishop's see at Lindisfarne, and went forth—from the very spot from which during the present century that heroine, Grace Darling, pushed out from her lighthouse home into the darkness and storm to rescue the perishing sailors—to rescue the perishing heathen of Britain. Who has not been inspired with new zeal by the story of Aidan and of his disciple, the peasant-preacher Cuthbert, as they bore the gospel over Northumbria? Nightfall once found Cuthbert and his companions supperless on the waste. “Never did

<sup>1</sup> Green, *A Short History of the English People*, p. 21.

man die of hunger who served God faithfully," said the preacher. "Look at the eagle overhead! God can feed us through him if he will." And once at least he had for his meal a fish that the scared bird let fall. "The snow closes the road along the shore; the storm bars our way over sea," said his companions mournfully, when a snow-storm drove his boat on the coast of Fife. Said Cuthbert, "There is still the way of heaven that lies open!" Such faith was irresistible, and the white crosses erected here and there on the high-places were witnesses of that real conversion of the land that made a great religious poet possible.

But the jealousy of Rome was roused, and her ecclesiastics set to work to destroy this spiritual primacy of the Irish church in Britain. Hence the great ecclesiastical establishments at Whitby and Jarrow became the centers of conflict. In 664 the Synod or great Council, at Whitby, was called to decide the future allegiance of England. The debate may have been trivial, but the results were momentous. So the historian relates it:—

"Colman, Aidan's successor at Holy Island, pleaded for the Irish fashion of the tonsure, and for the Irish time of keeping Easter; Wilfrid pleaded for the Roman. The one bishop appealed to the authority of Columba, the other to that of St. Peter. 'You own,' cried the king, at last, to Colman, 'that Christ gave to Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven—has he given such power to Columba?' The bishop could but answer 'No.' 'Then I will rather obey the porter of Heaven,' said Oswin, 'lest when I reach its gates, he who has the keys in his keeping turn his back on me, and there would be none to open.'"<sup>1</sup>

The Irish Christians were defeated and driven back, but they had already prepared the way for a great age by breathing the breath of life into the people. Out of this environment came Cædmon, who began to sing after the famous Synod and in this same Abbey of Whitby.

St. Hilda, the abbess of the monastery, was the encourager and patroness of the poet. Hilda, Bede tells us, "was

<sup>1</sup> Green, p. 30.

nobly born, being the daughter of Hereric, nephew to King Edwin, with which king she also embraced the faith and mysteries of Christ, at the preaching of Paulinus, the first bishop of the Northumbrians, of blessed memory, and preserved the same undefiled till she attained the sight of him in heaven." Hilda devoted herself to a religious life, and was first made abbess of Heruteu, where she "began immediately to reduce all things to a regular system, according as she had been instructed by learned men; for Bishop Aidan, and other religious men that knew her and loved her, frequently visited and diligently instructed her, because of her innate wisdom and inclination to the service of God." Later she undertook the organization or establishment of the monastery at Streanshalh, or Whitby, where her labors were crowned with wonderful success. Bede relates that—

"She taught there the strict observance of justice, piety, chastity, and other virtues, and particularly of peace and charity; so that after the example of the primitive church, no person was there rich, and none poor, all being in common to all, and none having any property. Her prudence was so great, that not only indifferent persons, but even kings and princes, as occasion offered, asked and received her advice; she obliged those who were under her direction to attend so much to reading of the Holy Scriptures, and to exercise themselves so much in works of justice, that many might be there found fit for ecclesiastical duties, and to serve at the altar."<sup>1</sup>

Such a religious center—with such environment of strenuous conflict, of Christian culture and heroism, and of earnest study of the Holy Scriptures—was just the place to call out the latent powers of the poet and make him the first English singer of the wonders of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*.

The story of the development of Cædmon in that environment, the Venerable Bede will be permitted to tell in his own inimitable way:—

<sup>1</sup> *Ecclesiastical History of England*, Book iv. chap. 23.

“There was in this abbess’s monastery a certain brother, particularly remarkable for the grace of God, who was wont to make pious and religious verses, so that whatever was interpreted to him out of Scripture, he soon after put the same into poetical expressions of much sweetness and humility, in English, which was his native language. By his verses the minds of many were often excited to despise the world, and to aspire to heaven. Others after him attempted, in the English nation, to compose religious poems, but none could ever compare with him, for he did not learn the art of poetry from men, but from God; for which reason he never could compose any trivial or vain poem, but only those which relate to religion suited his religious tongue; for having lived in a secular habit till he was well advanced in years, he had never learned anything of versifying; for which reason being sometimes at entertainments, when it was agreed for the sake of mirth that all present would sing in their turns, when he saw the instrument come towards him, he rose up from table and returned home.

“Having done so at a certain time, and gone out of the house where the entertainment was, to the stable, where he had to take care of the horses that night, he there composed himself to rest at the proper time; a person appeared to him in his sleep, and saluting him by his name, said, ‘Cædmon, sing some song to me.’ He answered, ‘I cannot sing; for that was the reason why I left the entertainment, and retired to this place, because I could not sing.’ The other who talked to him, replied, ‘However, you shall sing.’ ‘What shall I sing?’ rejoined he. ‘Sing the beginning of created things,’ said the other. Thereupon he presently began to sing verses to the praise of God, which he had never heard, the purport whereof was thus:—We are now to praise the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the power of the Creator and his counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory. How he, being the eternal God, became the author of all miracles, who first, as almighty preserver of the human race, created heaven for the sons of men as the roof of the house, and next the earth. This is the sense, but not the words in order as he sang them in his sleep; for verses, though never so well composed, cannot be literally translated out of one language into another, without losing much of their beauty and loftiness. Awaking from his sleep, he remembered all that he had sung in his dream, and soon added much more to the same effect in verse worthy of the Deity.

“In the morning he came to the steward, his superior, and having acquainted him with the gift he had received, was conducted to the abbess, by whom he was ordered, in the presence of many learned men, to tell his dream, and repeat the verses, that they might all give their judgment what it was, and whence his verse proceeded. They all concluded, that heavenly grace had been conferred on him by our Lord. They expounded to him a passage in holy writ, either historical or doctrinal, ordering him, if he could, to put the same into verse. Having undertaken it, he

went away, and returning the next morning, gave it to them composed in most excellent verse; whereupon the abbess, embracing the grace of God in the man, instructed him to quit the secular habit, and take upon him the monastic life; which being accordingly done, she associated him with the rest of the brethren in her monastery, and ordered that he should be taught the whole series of sacred history. Thus Cædmon, keeping in mind all he heard, and as it were chewing the cud, converted the same into most harmonious verse; and sweetly repeating the same, made his masters in their turn his hearers. He sang the creation of the world, the origin of man, and all the history of Genesis: and made many verses on the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt, and their entering into the land of promise, with many other histories from holy writ; the incarnation, passion, resurrection of our Lord, and his ascension into heaven; the coming of the Holy Ghost, and the preaching of the apostles; also the terror of future judgment, the horror of the pains of hell, and the delights of heaven; besides many more about the Divine benefits and judgments, by which he endeavored to turn away all men from the love of vice, and to excite in them the love of, and application to, good actions; for he was a very religious man, humbly submissive to regular discipline, but full of zeal against those who behaved themselves otherwise; for which reason he ended his life happily."<sup>1</sup>

The happy ending of his life is also described by Bede, fitting end for the man and the career. He had been laboring for a fortnight under a bodily infirmity, but so slight that he could talk and walk the whole time.

"He desired the person who attended him, in the evening, as the night came on in which he was to depart this life, to make ready a place there for him to take his rest" in the neighboring house to which "those that were sick, and like shortly to die, were carried. This person, wondering why he should desire it, did what he had ordered. He accordingly went there, and conversing pleasantly—in a joyful manner with the rest that were in the house before, when it was past midnight, he asked them, whether they had the Eucharist there? They answered, 'What need of the Eucharist? for you are not likely to die, since you talk so merrily with us, as if you were in perfect health.' 'However,' said he, 'bring me the Eucharist.' Having received the same in his hand, he asked whether they were all in charity with him." Having responded affirmatively, they asked him the same question. He answered, "I am in charity, my children, with all the servants of God." "Then strengthening himself with the heavenly viaticum, he prepared for the entrance into another life, and asked, how near the time was when the brothers were to be awakened to sing the nocturnal praises of our Lord? They an-

<sup>1</sup> Eccl. Hist., Bk. iv. chap. 24.



swered, 'It is not far off.' Then he said, 'Well, let us wait that hour'; and signing himself with the sign of the cross, he laid his head on the pillow, and falling into a slumber, ended his life so in silence."

It is not the purpose here to sift fable and fact. The basis of Bede's narrative is doubtless fact. Some things stand out clearly: Cædmon became a monk late in life, led thereto by his eminent piety; he heartily abhorred the heathen and diabolical songs, connected with the pagan religion, that were in vogue at their festivals and entertainments, and so refrained from joining in them; he was encouraged by the good abbess Hilda to put into poetic form the grand Bible narratives that in the great awakening came to take the place of all others in the monastery and in the entertainments of the people; that his genius made itself felt in his own day, so that he was recognized as one of the brightest glories of his age. Given the poetic genius, and we can well imagine the man of probity and piety, loathing the rude pagan revelries more and more as the Christian spirit of Aidan wrought a transformation in the life of the people, meditating on the grand Bible themes day and night, and at last breaking forth into sacred song that has never been surpassed in sublimity.

*The Poetry of Cædmon.*—The poetry of the old English bard—so recently restored only in small part to the world that had lost it for a thousand years—will doubtless be studied with increasing interest by the coming generations. From Bede and other sources we get a glimpse, through the fragments, of what the grandeur of the original whole must have been. It consisted, so to speak, of two great books.

Book First treated of Old Testament events, its theme being Paradise Lost. With great tact the poet selected the truly epic events that fall in with theme and aim, the prominent landmarks of the history of redemption. So he sang of the creation, of the origin and fall of man, and of

the banishment from Paradise, and the results; of the miraculous deliverance from Egypt, laying stress on the whelming of Pharaoh's host, and the entrance into the Promised Land; and of the supernatural revelations of Daniel that anticipate, foreshadow, and delineate the unfoldings of the future until the advent of Messiah on whom is to depend the restoration of that which had been lost, and on beyond all to the final consummation.

Book Second, of which only the recorded outline with some fragments has been preserved, treated of "the incarnation, passion, resurrection of our Lord, and his ascension into heaven"; of "the coming of the Holy Ghost and the preaching of the apostles," or the inauguration of the New Dispensation, or the Kingdom of Heaven, on earth, and the first impulses toward its world-wide extension; of "the terror of future judgment, the horror of the pains of hell, and the delights of heaven," rising to the consummation of all things in Paradise Regained.

Cædmon's theme was therefore substantially that of Milton in his double epic, no less than that of the Vision of Piers the Plowman,—the ever-recurring theme of the Christian ages.

The sole manuscript of the poem, known to be extant—and that fragmentary and doubtless more or less changed in the transcription—is an illuminated one in the Bodleian Library, assigned to the tenth century. The manuscript belonged to Archbishop Usher, the author of the once most commonly received Bible chronology. He gave it to Francis Dujon or Junius, who, under guidance of Bede's outline, assigned the poem to Cædmon as its author. Junius had it printed as Cædmon's in 1655. And Brother Azarias, in "The Development of English Literature" in the Old English Period, adds:—

"And Dujon had a friend to whom he communicated his literary projects; that friend was then in his forty-seventh year, and was meditating

a grand epic; he saw this MS.; no doubt he received a copy of the printed poem from his friend; it decided his subject and its treatment; the materials he had collected for a Miracle-play he made use of in this new project, and forthwith he produced a work of great genius. That man was Milton, the poem was 'Paradise Lost.'"<sup>1</sup>

Some snatches from the earlier poem done into modern English will prove more than suggestive of the later one.<sup>2</sup>

Here is the sublime opening:—

"Mickle right it is that we, Heaven's guard,  
Glory-King of hosts! with words should praise,  
With hearts should love. He is of powers the efficacy;  
Head of all high creations;  
Lord Almighty! In Him beginning never  
Or origin hath been; but He is aye supreme  
Over heaven-thrones, with high majesty  
Righteous and mighty."

The poet's description of the primitive condition of the earth takes us back to the "chaos" of Genesis and forward to the "darkness visible" of Milton:—

"Earth's surface was  
With grass not yet begreened; while far and wide,  
The dusky ways, with black, unending night,  
Did ocean cover."

But perhaps the most remarkable anticipations of Milton—sometimes passing the Puritan poet in conception while not falling behind him in sublimity—are those found in Cædmon's delineation of the character of Satan. Witness his portraiture of the original, unfallen Satan:—

"So fair was he made—so beauteous his form  
Received from the Lord of hosts—he was bright  
As are the bright stars. His task was to praise  
The works of his Lord; his heavenly joys  
To cherish most dear; their Giver to thank  
For beauty and light upon him bestowed."

<sup>1</sup> On "Cædmon's Influence at Home and Abroad," p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> These somewhat poetical translations of Guest, in *English Rhythms*, and of Thorpe, in his *Cædmon*, will doubtless be found more effective, if not even more exact, than would be the bald literal rendering.

The plotting of Satan against God is built upon that wonderful passage in Isaiah<sup>1</sup> concerning the fall of "Lucifer, the son of the morning":—

" 'Wherefore,' he said, 'shall I toil?  
No need have I of master. I can work  
With my own hands great marvels, and have power  
To build a throne more worthy of a God,  
Higher in heaven. Why shall I, for His smile,  
Serve Him, bend to Him thus in vassalage?  
I may be God as He.  
Stand by me, strong supporters, firm in strife.  
Hard-mooded heroes, famous warriors,  
Have chosen me for chief; one may take thought  
With such for counsel, and with such secure  
Large following. My friends in earnest they,  
Faithful in all the shaping of their minds;  
I am the master, and may rule this realm.' " <sup>2</sup>

The punishment visited upon him for this rebellion, is his being cast into hell, where he is afflicted with alternate heat and cold,—the description combining the biblical and the old Anglo-Saxon conceptions:—

" Each fiend through long and dreary evening,  
Hath fire renewed about him; cometh then,  
Ere dawn, an eastern wind, fierce cold upon it—  
The dart of fire or frost must rankle there—  
Some hard affliction each must ever have."

The address of Satan to his companions in this abode of suffering—a passage certainly not unworthy of a Milton—must suffice for the purpose of these extracts:—

" And Satan spake—he who in hell should rule,  
Govern th' abyss henceforth—in sorrow spake.  
God's angel erst, in heaven white he shone,  
Till urged his mind, and most of all his pride,  
To do no honor to the Lord's sweet word.  
Within him boiled his thoughts about his heart;  
Without, the wrathful fire pressed hot upon him—  
He said: 'This narrow place is most unlike  
That other we once knew in heaven high,  
And which my Lord gave me; though own it now

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah xiv. 12-14.    <sup>2</sup> Morley, in *A First Sketch of English Literature*.

We must not, but to Him must cede our realm.  
 Yet right He hath not done to strike us down  
 To hell's abyss—of heaven's realm bereft—  
 Which with mankind to people He hath planned.  
 Pain sorest this, that Adam, wrought of earth,  
 On my strong throne shall sit, enjoying bliss,  
 While we endure these pangs—hell-torments dire—  
 Woe! woe is me! could I but use my hands  
 And might I be from here a little time—  
 One winter's space—then with this host would I—  
 But press me hard these iron bands—this coil  
 Of chain—and powerless I am, so fast  
 I'm bound. Above is fire; below is fire;  
 A loathlier landscape never have I seen;  
 Nor smolders aye the fire, but hot throughout.  
 In chains; my pathway barred; my feet tied down;  
 Those hell-doors bolted all; I may not move  
 From out these limb-bands; binds me iron hard—  
 Hot-forged great grindles! God has griped me tight  
 About the neck!''<sup>1</sup>

How wrathful the rebellion! How dreadful the agony!  
 How unspeakable the jealousy of Adam! How terrific and  
 Titanic the struggle with the dread environment! How  
 awful the gripe of God upon him! It is all imagination  
 at white heat.

These fragments from the opening portions of his poem  
 can scarcely fail to accredit Cædmon's claim to be the  
 "First Great English Poet," with emphasis upon "Great,"  
 and to justify the celebration of the twelve-hundredth an-  
 niversary of his death.

*The Cædmon Memorial.*—It seemed a tardy recognition  
 of greatness when, on that late September day, the men of  
 England met to unveil a white cross that had been erected  
 at Whitby in honor of Cædmon. It was a most appropri-

<sup>1</sup> Thorpe translates this passage:—

"So *that* with aught I cannot  
 From these limb-bonds escape:  
 About me lie of hard iron,  
 Forged with heat huge gratings,  
 With which me God hath fastened by the neck."

ate memorial, for the Cross was the poet's central thought. Moreover, the magnificent crosses at Bewcastle, Ruthwell, and Hexham date back to his age, when the work to which Aidan and Cuthbert gave impulse was going forward, and testify to the zeal of their converts. Cædmon himself furnished, in his old age and as his latest production, the inscription on the Ruthwell cross, which is a part of a poem, on the Holy Rood, found entire in the Vercelli collection.

The setting up of the Ruthwell cross twelve hundred years ago might well have been taken as a pattern for that of last Autumn. It had been the custom in more ancient times to inscribe on similar stone monuments the praises of heathen gods in Runic rhyme; but now that a Christian hymn was to take its place, who was so capable of preparing it as the aged Cædmon? That olden cross has thus been described:—

“A large stone cross is to be erected. It is a costly monument, a great artistic effort for that day. Our Lord is represented as standing on two swine. A Latin inscription tells us that he is a judge of equity, and that the wild beasts acknowledge the Saviour of the world in the desert. Lower still Paul and Anthony are pictured breaking their loaf in the desert; another Latin inscription speaks the fact.”<sup>1</sup>

It was upon this that a part of Cædmon's last, and perhaps greatest, poem was inscribed in Runic character. The poet has a dream in which the Rood recounts its emotions as our Lord was transfixed to it:

“Methought I saw a Tree in mid-air hang—  
Of trees the brightest—mantling o'er with light-streaks;  
A beacon stood it, glittering with gold.”

He lay long looking upon this Healer's Tree, which at last told him how it grew upon the wood's edge and was cut down and set upon a hill. Then it tells the “whole story of the suffering and death and burial and resurrection of the Saviour”; and recounts how the Rood had

<sup>1</sup>The Development of English Literature, p. 106.

been transformed from a thing of deepest shame into a glorious symbol of honor, even as—

“ His Mother, Mary’s self, Almighty God  
Most worthily hath raised above all women.”

Then at last the poet’s thought turns within himself, and his soul fixes confidently upon the Cross—on which his inscription is to be fixed for ages to come—as the symbol of his own personal salvation; and then the voice that had so long charmed men became silent forever:—

“ Soul-longings many in my day I’ve had,  
My life’s hope now is that the Tree of Triumph  
Must seek I. Than all others oftener  
Did I alone extol its glories;  
Thereto my will is bent, and when I need  
A claim for shelter to the Rood I’ll go.  
Of mightiest friends, from me are many now  
Unclassed, and far away from our world’s joys;  
They sought the Lord of Hosts, and now in heaven,  
With the High-Father, live in glee and glory;  
And for the day most longingly I wait,  
When the Saviour’s Rood that here I contemplate  
From this frail life shall take me into bliss—  
The bliss of heaven’s wards: the Lord’s folk there  
Is seated at the feast; there’s joy unending;  
And He shall set me there in glory,  
And with the saints their pleasures I shall share.”

That ancient celebration, with its noble Christian poem, might well have been taken—we repeat—as a pattern for the recent one,—the more so, as the Poet-Laureate was given the place of honor on the occasion. It had been previously suggested that it would furnish opportunity for a noble poetic effort; but Mr. Austin held himself to the plainest prose. In the course of his address he is reported to have said:—

“ Chaucer has been called the ‘morning star of English poetry,’ but it seems to me that the designation would be more aptly applied to Cædmon, since, with the prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, the glorious sunlight of English song already illuminated the horizon. But the somewhat rudimentary verse of Cædmon has all the tentative and hesitating

character of yet imperfect dawn. He is the half-inarticulate father of English poets yet to be, and it is, as I understand it, not only to the lisping ancestor, but to his full-voiced descendants in this island throughout all time, that this memorial cross has been erected. For, if we look closely and carefully into the circumstances of his life and seek the cause and origin of his singing, we shall find that Cædmon serves, in all essentials, as the very type of the poet in all ages and all lands. To begin with, he was unlettered. I am aware there have been learned poets, though Milton is perhaps the only English poet of consequence who could so be described with any approach to accuracy. As a rule, poets have but small erudition, but large understanding; to understand rather than to know, to be wise rather than erudite, being the distinctive mark and mission of the poet. Very little learning equipped the greatest of English poets for universal apprehension, and Cædmon, his remote predecessor, was wholly unencumbered with the lumber of learning, and therefore all the more impressionable to the two main earthly sources of poetic inspiration—external nature and the human heart.

“But if nature be the chief teacher of the poet, there is yet another, to whom his debt is almost equally great, and Cædmon did not lack the second helpmate of the muse. It was a woman, and a woman who was both a princess and a saint, to whom he owed shelter and inspiration, and would it be too fanciful to say that Cædmon was Hilda's laureate? I have observed, with some surprise, that in these later days, more eager perhaps for novelty than for real originality, a sort of crusade has been organized for the extension of the influence of women. For my part, I am unable to see how that is possible, since their influence, one is happy to think, has ever since the days of Adam been coextensive with the feelings, aspirations, and activities of man.

“Stress has been laid, and rightly laid, on his being a Christian poet. A poet is perforce and inevitably religious. By religious I do not mean dogmatic, much less disputatious, but his nature is steeped through and through with religious sentiment, the spiritual expression of which is an abiding sense of the infinite harmony that reconciles our finite discords, and whose practical fruits are intellectual humility and tender toleration.

“Thus, alike by the limitation of his acquirements, by his rustic familiarity with the aspect and language of nature, by his willing submission to the elevating influence of woman, and, finally, by his lips being touched with hallowed fire, Cædmon may serve and stand as the type of the English poet.”

Such commonplace was hardly worthy of so great occasion. It seems rather like the belittling of a great poet by a small one, than an interpretation and appreciation of an almost incomparable genius, and of a Christian mission the grandest of its age. It is probably well that Mr. Al-



fred Austin, Poet-Laureate, did not attempt poetry at the unveiling of the white cross memorial. It was well, too, that there was a speaker present who had some knowledge of English history, and some discriminating sense of the mission of the first of our great English poets. Canon Rawnsley said in substance:—

“Those assembled round the beautiful cross had come to pay, after centuries of silence and of apparent neglect, a debt owed by the whole of Anglo-Saxon literature to the first Christian poet of our land. They had met that day not only to honor the first Christian poet of England, but an inspired Christian missionary of the seventh century. They had met to honor the man who first translated the Holy Scriptures into Anglo-Saxon verse. Cædmon's Bible-paraphrase was the means of doing two things. It helped to Christianize Northumbria, it helped to fix and crystallize our vernacular for us.”

These two points certainly called for emphasis: that Cædmon was the first great Christian poet of England; and that he is the chief representative of the earliest English attempts at literary expression.

Brother Azarias has admirably summed up the work of Cædmon in transferring the worship of our Anglo-Saxon fathers from Odin and Thor, to which they were devoted, to that Holy Trinity to whom the church was seeking to lead them. He says:—

“A religion so imbedded in the popular thinking cannot be easily uprooted. It is only by a long course of training that the fancy and imagination can be brought to run in the new groove of thought. To that end does the Church bring to bear all her teaching and discipline. By degrees she weeds out the tares of the old faith, and plants the seeds of the new. She finds special difficulty in getting this people to forget its heathen mythology, its heathen songs, and its heathen rites, especially in connection with wakes and burials. Council after council issues decree after decree; but at first with slight success. A more effectual method was at hand. A great genius was about to sing the glories of heaven and earth and make Christian truth so acceptable in song that the popular mind willingly lets the heathen imagery drop out of its memory and in the stead fills it with Scripture thought and Scripture allusion.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Development of English Literature: The Old English Period.

That transcendent genius was Cædmon, and his task was accomplished through his poetic paraphrases of the Sacred Scriptures, by means of which he was not only an inspiration to his own age but also to the ages since. To the White Cross just erected to his memory at Whitby, the English-speaking peoples may well repair as to a sacred shrine. For Christian history, to the English race, that Cross marks the richest portion of the globe outside of Palestine; and, for any one of that race susceptible to ennobling influences, in looking out from that Cross toward Lindisfarne and the North Sea with the memories of those apostles of the Irish Church, Aidan and Cuthbert, toward Jarrow with its associations with Biscop and Bede, and upon Whitby with its trooping recollections of St. Hilda and Cædmon, there can scarcely fail to be a marvelous uplift of soul.