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Alfred and his Biographers: Images and Imagination

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Where now are the bones of the famous and wise goldsmith Weland?¹

ALFRED'S RHETORICAL question from his translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* was meant to point up the transitory nature of human glory and fame. That we are still studying Alfred eleven hundred years later perhaps denies this assumption, but, looked at from a different perspective, the question is quite relevant to the survival of material and textual evidence for early medieval people, even one as famous as Alfred.² Finding the bones of King Alfred the Great was, appropriately, the goal of the Hyde Community Archaeology Project's well publicised and fruitless excavation of the Abbey in 1999.³ As dearly as historians would like to have Alfred's remains to learn some personal details about the man, Alfred's bones are probably no more recoverable than Weland's.

'Read no history', a character in Disraeli's novel *Contarini Fleming* exclaims. 'Nothing but biography, for that is life without theory.'⁴ It is a good line, but I think

¹ *Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius, De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield, Oxford 1899, ch. 19, 46; trans. W. J. Sedgefield, *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Boethius Done into Modern English*, Oxford 1900, 48. An extended version of this chapter was presented as a featured talk at the annual meeting of the Charles Homer Haskins Society in November 2003. I owe a debt of gratitude to my late friend and colleague, Patrick Wormald, for his wise comments and advice. I am also indebted to Paul Kershaw, David Bates, Paul Hyams, Ellen Harrison, Diane Korngiebel, Nancy Ellenberger, and my colleagues at the United States Naval Academy History Department's works-in-progress seminar for their criticism, comments and encouragement. Above all I wish to thank Frank Barlow whose scholarly work on Anglo-Saxon and Norman England did so much to shape my views, and whose masterful biographies of Edward the Confessor, William Rufus, and Thomas Becket are models for all of us who aspire to write biographies of medieval people.

² Simon Keynes, 'The cult of King Alfred the Great', *ASE* 28, 1999, 225–356, is an invaluable guide to popular reception of Alfred from the twelfth through to the beginning of the twentieth century.

³ 'Summary of Hyde Community Archaeology Project', Archaeological Services, Winchester City Council (www.winchester.gov.uk/arts_museums/archaeology/alfred_search.shtml), 29 June 2003. The researchers concluded that Alfred's remains were lost when a town gaol was built in 1788 upon the site of his grave. The prisoners assigned to remove the rubble left by Henry VIII's commissioners two and a half centuries before discovered Alfred's coffin. For them the lead that encased the stone coffin was far more valuable than what lay within it. They shattered the coffin, scattered the bones, and sold the lead.

⁴ Benjamin Disraeli, *Contarini Fleming*, part 1, ch. 23, quoted in *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. Robert Andrews, New York 1993, 91.

completely mistaken. Biographers do not live the lives of their subjects; they create narratives of those lives through selection and analysis of evidence.⁵ For modern biographers this often entails selecting what they deem truly germane to the planned narrative from a plethora of information, much as security analysts separate out meaningful intelligence from the ‘noise’ surrounding it. For biographers of early medieval people the problem is dramatically different. The evidence is fragmentary, and the difficulty of writing about the ‘inner life’ of a person without the ‘tools of the biographer’s trade’ – diaries, private correspondence, memoirs and the memories of those who knew the subject – is self evident.⁶ The authenticity and meanings of the sources, moreover, are often questionable. None of the evidence is truly transparent.

A historian ideally determines what is and is not authentic evidence through the application of objective, scientific principles, and then fashions a narrative through the ordering and interpretation of the validated sources, attempting to recover as well as possible the historical reality underlying those sources. In the case of ‘twice-told tales’ such as that of King Alfred, however, historians begin with received narratives and meta-narratives reflecting the broad consensus of the historical community. In each retelling, of course, the story is modified, as the historian reshapes it according to his or her interests, assumptions, and understanding of the historical record. How critical a historian is about a disputed source is, moreover, influenced to a degree by how well the information offered by that source accords with the other elements of the narrative he or she has fashioned. Both of these trends can be detected in the narratives of Alfred fashioned by the one contemporary and three modern biographers I have chosen to discuss in this chapter: Asser, Charles Plummer, Alfred Smyth and myself. I shall briefly review how each presented Alfred and his life, how the images of Alfred that they brought with them influenced their judgment on the authenticity of evidence (and vice versa), and how evidence and image combined to dictate the ‘story’ each constructed. I will conclude with my own views on what we can know about Alfred and what we cannot.

Much of what we know about Asser comes from autobiographical asides in his *Life of King Alfred*. He was ‘raised, educated, tonsured and, eventually, ordained’ at St David’s, a monastery in Dyfed in the farthest reaches of south-western Wales.⁷ A kinsman of a bishop of St David’s, Asser himself may have been the monastery’s bishop in 885 when King Alfred first summoned him to his

⁵ The essays in *The History and Narrative Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Roberts, London and New York 2001, and Murray G. Murphey, *The Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, Albany 1994, 288–99, are good introductions to the philosophical debates over narrative and historical epistemology.

⁶ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, London and New York 1998, 9; Sarah Hamilton, ‘Review article: Early medieval rulers and their biographers’, *EME* 9, 2000, 247–60, esp. 248. For the difficulties faced by biographers of modern subjects in constructing their ‘interior reflections’ and ‘self’, see Nancy W. Ellenberger, ‘Constructing George Wyndham: narratives of aristocratic masculinity in fin-de-siècle England’, *Journal of British Studies* 39, 2000, 487–517, particularly 491–2 and notes.

⁷ For reasons I have expressed elsewhere, I am not persuaded by Alfred P. Smyth’s vigorous attempts spanning two books to prove this work a forgery. I still believe it to be what it purports to be: a contemporary *Life* of the king written by one who knew him, the Welsh monk and bishop Asser.

court.⁸ With the approval of his fellow monks, Asser agreed to serve in Alfred's household for six months in each year. As presented by Asser, this arrangement was to benefit both parties: the monks were to gain a powerful lay protector against the depredations of the king of Dyfed, who had recently submitted to Alfred's lordship, and Alfred was to profit from the learning of St David, in the person of Asser. Alfred also made it clear to the Welshman that he would find the king a most generous patron – and he did. Over the next few years, King Alfred bestowed upon Asser two monasteries in Somerset, Banwell and Congresbury, and, some time later, a far larger monastery in Exeter with its various dependencies in Cornwall and Devonshire. Some time between 892 and 900, Asser succeeded Bishop Wulfsgige in the see of Sherborne. He survived into the reign of Alfred's son, Edward the Elder, and died in 908 or 909.

If Alfred rewarded Asser with ecclesiastical offices and land, Asser answered the king's generosity with love and service. He read to the king from the Bible and other salutary Latin works and helped him acquire the competency in Latin that enabled Alfred – with the help of Asser, among others – to translate these works into his native tongue. The *Life of King Alfred*, written in 893 at a time of crisis when Alfred was fighting off a second viking invasion of his kingdom, was a manifestation of that love and service.

Asser's *Life of King Alfred* is an authentic and invaluable source, but it is also a problematic text that must be used critically.⁹ Alfred Smyth is quite right to remind us that no medieval manuscript, let alone a contemporary copy, of this work survives, and that all that we have are reconstructions based upon early modern transcripts of a lost manuscript. The *Life's* loose organisation, repetitions, inconsistent use of verb tenses, and lack of conclusion, moreover, suggest a work in progress rather than a polished text. What we call the *Life of King Alfred* may be no more than an imperfect copy of an incomplete draft. But the greatest stumbling block to the historian is the nature of the work itself. The *Life of King Alfred* is not a biography in the modern sense. Asser did not strive for historical accuracy and objectivity. Rather, like Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, upon which it drew,¹⁰ the *Vita Ælfredi* was meant to be an encomium, a celebration of Alfred's greatness for the edification of its multiple audiences: the monks of St David's, the royal court, the king's sons, and, first and foremost, Alfred

⁸ Asser's *Life of King Alfred together with the Annals of Saint Neots erroneously attributed to Asser*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, Oxford 1904; *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. with an introduction and notes by S. D. Keynes and M. Lapidge, London 1983, ch. 79. Alfred calls Asser his bishop in the preface to his translation of *Pastoral Care*, though Asser was not yet bishop of Sherborne. It is possible that Asser served as a suffragan bishop at Exeter under Bishop Wulfsgige, but it is more likely that Asser's episcopal office was in Wales. In ch. 79 of the *Life*, Asser associates himself with the bishops of St David's expelled by King Hyfaidd of Dyfed in disputes with the monastery over jurisdiction. If one rejects Asser's authorship of the *Life*, Asser becomes a far more shadowy character. Even the identification of him as a Welshman is called into doubt. See Alfred P. Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great. A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke and New York 2002, 115–17.

⁹ On the question of authenticity, see Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 318–26.

¹⁰ Asser, ch. 73, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 88; Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, 54, 294. Cf. Einhard, *Vie de Charlemagne*, ed. L. Halphen, 4th edn, Les Classiques de l'Histoire de France au Moyen Age, Paris 1967, 2.

himself, to whom the work was dedicated.¹¹ Asser's 'Alfred' is a model ninth-century Christian king: a lover of wisdom, truthful, patient, munificent in gift-giving, just, a defender of the poor and weak, incomparably affable, intimate with his friends, faithful to his God, and, to top it all off, a victorious warrior in a holy war.¹² Underlying Asser's image of Alfred are received models: biblical exemplars of virtuous kingship, Solomon and David in particular; Carolingian mirrors for princes; and, most importantly, the teachings and personal example of Pope Gregory the Great.¹³ As is well known, Asser explicitly shaped his presentation of the king's life, actions and character along the lines of Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, just as Einhard modelled his biography on Suetonius's Augustus. Even Asser's personal reminiscences may have been influenced by a desire to follow a model. His reluctance to join Alfred's court without the permission of his people and the gifts that Alfred gave him recall Alcuin's entry in Charlemagne's service as recounted in the anonymous Frankish *Life of Alcuin*, a comparison flattering to both author and patron.¹⁴ Although Asser used Carolingian models, much of what he added to the *Life* came from his own knowledge of Alfred and the court. He repeated the king's favorite stories, such as the tale of the wicked Queen Eadburh and how she came to a wretched end, and wrote of Alfred's love of learning and methods of governance from first-hand experience.

Several of these stories are historically problematic, so much so that Alfred Smyth sees them as proof positive that the author of the *Life* could not have known the real Alfred. Though historical accuracy is of paramount concern to modern historians, it was less critical to Asser and his audience. As with Bede, Asser's truth was moral rather than empirical, and his *Life of Alfred* provided for its subject a useable past. Although Alfred undoubtedly did suffer from life-long illness, possibly Crohn's disease, for Asser what was important was the spiritual significance of the king's suffering. His narrative of Alfred's illness, as Paul Kershaw, Tony Scharer, and David Pratt have argued, was designed to legitimate the king's rule at a time when it was being challenged by viking incursion and, possibly, the coming of age of Alfred's nephews. The king's haemorrhoids become a divine gift, a scourge of God intended to strengthen his devotion to chastity. When Alfred prays for a less agonising and visible condition that would still temper his carnal lusts, he is miraculously cured, only to be visited by another God-given ailment years later on his wedding night.¹⁵ Gregorian teaching about the

¹¹ J. Campbell, 'Asser's *Life of Alfred*', in *The Inheritance of Historiography 350–900*, ed. C. Holdsworth and T. Wiseman, Exeter 1986, 122–5; Anton Scharer, 'The writing of history at King Alfred's court', *EME* 5, 1996, 185–206. Cf. D. P. Kirby, 'Asser and his *Life of King Alfred*', *Studia Celtica* 6, 1971, 12–35; Keynes and Lapidge, 56, and Simon Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', in *Kings, Currency, and Alliances: The History and Coinage of Southern England, AD 840–900*, ed. M. A. S. Blackburn and D. N. Dumville, Woodbridge 2002, 1–45, who argue for a principally Welsh audience.

¹² Asser, chs. 13, 42, 76, 80, 81, 88, 91, 99–106. See Scharer, 'The writing of history', 194–9.

¹³ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, Oxford 1971, 141, and, much more fully, Scharer, 'The writing of history', 188–200. Scharer emphasizes Asser's debt to Sedulius's *Liber de rectoribus Christianis*, a mirror for princes composed for King Charles the Bald around 870.

¹⁴ Keynes and Lapidge, 265, n. 195. Cf. Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, Oxford 1995, 225–7.

¹⁵ Asser, ch. 74.

salutary value of physical suffering to restrain sexual desire underlies Asser's constructed narrative, as do Carolingian political ideas about humility and self-restraint being (in Paul Kershaw's words) 'the *sine qua non* for the legitimate and propitious exercise of royal power'.¹⁶ Alfred's ability to perform his duties as king despite the ravages of the flesh provides a moral counterpoint to the nobility's duty to obey the king in all things necessary for the 'common good'.¹⁷ Asser's intention was not to remake Alfred into a saint, but to glorify him as a Christian king without blemish, a lord who deserved love and obedience. This was how Alfred himself wished to be perceived.

The first biography of King Alfred was already a twice-told tale. Underlying Asser's *Life of King Alfred* were two preexisting narratives, one historical and the other what a biblical exegete would call tropological. The latter was the story of King David. Alfred's life as presented by Asser parallels David's in a number of significant ways. Both were younger sons who rose to kingship. Just as Samuel had chosen the child David in preference to his brothers, so the child Alfred was anointed king by the pope – or at least that was how the story was told in 893. And just as David had to flee into the wilderness from his enemies, so Alfred had to retreat into the marshes of Somerset before he emerged as the triumphant king. David was, of course, provided the *topos* for *christus rex* in the early middle ages, and as such was, along with Solomon, the biblical persona favored by Carolingian rulers and their clerical supporters. But David's story may have resonated with Alfred and Asser for other reasons, some personal and others topical. There were, after all, other 'sons of Jesse' who could claim the throne or at least succession to it.

The other preexisting narrative was, of course, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. About half of the *Life* is a Latin translation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the years 851 to 887. From the Chronicle Asser inherited a narrative of Alfred's heroic and lonely defence of his kingdom against a 'great heathen army', and of his improbable victory that not only saved his people but rescued the Mercians from Danish rule. The Chronicle enabled Asser to place Alfred within a historical context, so that his audience would appreciate Alfred's providential rise to the West Saxon kingship, his victories over a heathen enemy who had destroyed the kingdoms of his neighbors, his founding of a new kingdom of 'Angles' and 'Saxons', and (with a touch of hyperbole) his triumphant emergence as 'ruler' (*rector*) of 'all the Christians of the island of Britain'.¹⁸ The only thing missing from the story was that which could not be provided by a contemporary, an appreciation of Alfred's place in the meta-narrative of England; that was to be the

¹⁶ Paul Kershaw, 'Illness, power and prayer in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', *EME* 10, 2001, 220. See also Scharer, 'The writing of history', 177–206; and 'Zu drei Themen in der Geschichtsschreibung der Zeit König Alfreds (871–899)', in *Ethnogenese und Überlieferung angewandte Methoden der Frühmittelalterforschung*, ed. K. Brunner and B. Merta, Vienna and Munich 1994, 200–08; *Herrschaft und Repräsentation. Studien zur Hofkultur König Alfreds des Grossen*, Vienna and Munich 2000, 66–76.

¹⁷ Asser, ch. 91, ed. Stevenson, 79. David Pratt, 'The illnesses of King Alfred the Great', *ASE* 30, 2001, 83–90. I do not go as far as Pratt in seeing Asser (and Alfred) as having constructed a narrative in which the king's 'sexual sinfulness . . . implicated the king himself in the spiritual cause of the Danish attacks' (p. 86).

¹⁸ Asser, 1.

contribution of St Albans' great thirteenth-century historians, Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris.¹⁹ That the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* presentation of history was conducive to Asser's purposes is not surprising; both works emerged from the same milieu, Alfred's court, and both were designed to propagate what might be thought of as the 'official' image of the king. Asser was an image-maker, to be sure, but the image he devised came ultimately from Alfred himself, and this image proved so compelling and seductive that it has shaped all subsequent portrayals of Alfred.

A thousand years later, the Reverend Charles Plummer, Fellow and Chaplain of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, published his *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great, Being the Ford Lectures for 1901* in the midst of Alfred's millenary celebration and in the shadow of the death of Queen Victoria.²⁰ At the time he wrote, England was, in Plummer's words, in the midst of 'a "boom" in things Alfredian'. Plummer, who had recently made his mark on the study of Anglo-Saxon history with wonderfully annotated critical editions of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (1896) and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1892 and 1899), was the natural person to inaugurate Oxford University's Ford Lectureship with a series of lectures on the suggested subject, King Alfred.²¹ Plummer was well aware that he stood in a long line of biographers of Alfred stretching back to Powell and Spelman in the seventeenth century, and accepted the honour with the caveat 'that it was unlikely that on such a well-worked period of English history I should be able to offer anything very new or original'.²² All that he could aspire to, he said, was to remove 'some of the difficulties and confusions which have gathered round the subject, and put in my own words, and arrange in my own way, what has been previously written by others or myself'. 'But', he added, 'if I cannot tell you much that is very new, I hope that what I shall tell you may be approximately true.'²³ Plummer's goal was to prune away the many myths that had gathered around Alfred and to restore the historical person and celebrate his real accomplishments.

Plummer was particularly interested in establishing the authenticity and reliability of the sources. The first two of his six lectures were devoted precisely to this, but his critical approach to texts marks the entire book. 'We shall begin', he announced

¹⁹ Keynes, 'Cult of King Alfred', 231–2.

²⁰ The various activities of the millenary celebration are recorded in Alfred Bowker's *The King Alfred Millenary. A Record of the Proceedings of the National Commemoration*, London 1902. W. H. Stevenson, who was to publish what is still the standard critical edition of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* in 1904, protested, to no avail, against the misdating of the celebration by a national committee of government officials, educators, and prelates, W. H. Stevenson, 'The date of King Alfred's death', *EHR* 13, 1898, 71–7.

²¹ See P. S. Allen, F. M. Stenton, and R. I. Best, 'Charles Plummer, 1851–1927', *PBA* 15, 1929, 463–76, esp. 467–9, repr. (without bibliography of his writings) in Michael Lapidge, compiler, *Interpreters of Early Medieval Britain*, Oxford and New York 2002, 77–88. See also the appreciation by J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Bede and Plummer', in *Early Medieval History*, Oxford 1975, repr. in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary*, OMT 1988, pp. xv–xxxv.

²² Charles Plummer, *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great, Being the Ford Lectures for 1901*, Oxford 1902, repr. New York 1970, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

with a critical survey of the materials at our disposal. We shall find them in many respects disappointingly scanty and incomplete. But we must not allow ourselves to supply the defects of the evidence by the luxuriance of a riotous imagination. The growth of legend is largely due to the unwillingness of men to acquiesce in inevitable ignorance, especially in the case of historical characters like Alfred, whom we rightly desire to honour and to love.²⁴

As is perhaps natural for an editor, for Plummer 'the material at our disposal' was literary texts. Though he mentions in passing the archaeologist and topographer the Rev. C. S. Taylor and comments briefly on the surviving earthworks at Wareham and the Alfred Jewel, Plummer was largely uninterested in (and perhaps failed to see the relevance of) the evidence offered by material remains; nor was he interested in the technical disciplines of philology, diplomatic, or Old English law.²⁵ For Plummer historical evidence meant texts, and the centerpiece of his discussion of Alfredian sources is a thirty-eight-page long (pp. 14–52) analysis of 'the so-called life of Alfred which bears the name of Asser'. Working independently, Plummer came to the same conclusion as would W. H. Stevenson in his critical edition of Asser's *Life* three years later: the *Life* is the authentic work of the Welsh bishop Asser but nonetheless must be 'used with caution and criticism' in part because of its textual history. 'That there is a nucleus [in it] which is the genuine work of a single writer, a South Walian contemporary of Alfred, I feel tolerably sure', Plummer announced, 'and I know no reason why that South Walian contemporary should not be Asser.'²⁶

What persuaded Plummer that his analysis was correct, or at the very least impartial, was that he had begun with 'a strong prejudice against the authenticity of Asser'.²⁷ The text was indeed authentic, but that did not mean that its testimony was historically reliable. Plummer, like V. H. Galbraith and Alfred Smyth later, was particularly disturbed by Asser's story about Alfred's illness. He found it 'inconceivable that Alfred could possibly have accomplished what he did under the pressure of incapacitating illness'. But Plummer appreciated, as Galbraith and Smyth have sometimes not, 'we must distinguish between what is historically doubtful and what is textually suspicious'.²⁸

Despite the care with which he approached source criticism, Plummer brought a number of preconceptions to his analysis. Asser's less credible statements, for instance, are attributed to the largeness of his 'Celtic imagination' and its characteristic 'rebellion against facts'.²⁹ Plummer found the story of Alfred's illness not only muddled but distasteful, reeking of unpleasant religious morbidity unworthy of his Alfred.³⁰ As a High Churchman, Plummer felt it proper to begin his book

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6, 47, 100. Both Stenton and Wallace-Hadrill note his lack of interest in technical disciplines. Allen, Stenton, and Best, 'Charles Plummer', 469, and Wallace-Hadrill, 'Bede and Plummer', in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, xvi.

²⁶ Plummer, *Alfred the Great*, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 41, 52.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27–8.

with a eulogy for Bishop Stubbs and to end it with the sermon he had preached before the University of Oxford on the Sunday following the death of Queen Victoria, a sermon in which he noted how appropriate it was for the Queen to pass in the year of the millenary anniversary of the death of King Alfred, the greatest of her ancestors, and the one whom she most resembled in her adherence to duty, uncompromising honesty, and devotion to the good of her people.³¹ P. S. Allen remembered the Rev. Plummer as attending every Chapel service, reading the lessons on weekday evening services and playing the organ on Sundays.³² But Plummer's piety was the High Anglicanism of the Victorian era. He accepted Alfred's piety as 'true and earnest' but had little sympathy for the credulity of the ninth century which accepted miracle tales uncritically, transformed 'the natural feeling of Christian reverence for the body . . . into an unhealthy passion for collecting dead men's bones', and reduced the prayers of saints to 'a mere sort of lucky bag or wishing cap for the obtaining of anything that is wanted'.³³ The nearest that Plummer comes to criticism of Alfred is when he labels him in terms of religion 'the child of his century'.

Plummer knew Alfred from his long study of the sources and he brought this knowledge to bear on assessing the authenticity of dubious texts such as the *Life of St Neot* and the *Annals of St Neot*. Plummer disposed, for instance, of 'the silly story about the cakes, and the yet more silly story of the tyranny and callousness of Alfred in the early years of his reign' by pronouncing them 'utterly inconsistent . . . with the genuine history of the reign'.³⁴ Similarly, he denounced the 'abominable theory' that Alfred's father King Æthelwulf divorced his mother in order to marry the Carolingian child princess Judith. Plummer knew Osburh to be 'noble in character as in race' and Æthelwulf to be too honorable to act so disgracefully. Plummer protested: 'No amount of chronological difficulties [in Asser's story of Alfred's childhood reading contest] would induce me to accept a moral impossibility like this.'³⁵

How Plummer came to know Alfred so well is not at all clear from reading *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great*. Plummer's biography offers little discussion or speculation about the 'inner man', not even in his summary and conclusion. The closest that Plummer comes is in his discussion of Alfred's putative translation of Orosius, where he quotes approvingly a German scholar's appreciation of Alfred: 'We see Alfred here . . . simple, high-hearted, and earnest; full of warm appreciation for all that is good, and of scorn for all that is evil.'³⁶ Plummer also identifies passages in the Boethius that he believed to be indicative of Alfred's 'soaring superiority to . . . "the wind of stern labours, and the rain of excessive anxiety"'.³⁷ But Plummer made such remarks cautiously, since he was well aware that many of these interpolations may have arisen from glosses that

³¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

³² Allen, Stenton, and Best, 'Charles Plummer', 467.

³³ Plummer, *Alfred the Great*, 143–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, 54–8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

Alfred and his circle of learned 'friends' used in the work of translation.³⁸ Indeed, Plummer's discussion of Alfred's literary works focuses on source criticism. His main concern was to establish which works were actually translated by Alfred, and he devoted much of his effort, ironically, to a spirited defence of the king's authorship of the Old English Orosius and Bede, texts that are no longer included in the Alfredian canon.³⁹

Even stripped of the myths that had grown around him, Plummer's historical Alfred still looks remarkably like the Alfred of tradition. Gone were picturesque stories about burnt cakes, encounters with saints, and Alfred's visit to the Danish camp disguised as a minstrel.⁴⁰ Gone also were his invention of England's tithings, hundreds and shires, his founding – or better, refounding – of Oxford University, and even his fatherhood of the English navy. What remained was an Alfred who 'holds in real history the place which romance assigns to Arthur', an English Christian king whose victory at Edington was 'a turning point in the history, not only of England, but of Western Europe'.⁴¹ Plummer's 'real' Alfred remained England's 'Darling'. Alfred, Plummer admits, won Edington in part because he spent his time at Athelney organising victory rather than burning cakes.⁴² But the greatest cause of his success, according to Plummer, was his personality and character which inspired love among his subjects. Plummer, ever the textual scholar, cited the authority of the *Chronicle*, for it tells us that when Alfred met his assembled troops at Egbert's Stone, they rejoiced to see him.⁴³ Plummer's Alfred also made good use of the peace he won. He reorganised the army and his civil administration, built forts at strategic points, issued law, restored justice, and, after weathering the second viking storm, fostered education and personally took the lead in a royal program of translation of those Latin books 'most necessary for all men to know'.⁴⁴ In Plummer's judgment Alfred was history's most perfect king, just as England was its finest nation.⁴⁵

Alfred P. Smyth's *King Alfred the Great*, published by Oxford University Press in 1995, was the first full-scale scholarly biography of Alfred since Plummer's. Plummer had declared that there was nothing new to be said on the subject; Smyth set out to prove him wrong. Alfred Smyth had previously earned a reputation as an iconoclast by defending the historical value of eleventh-century skaldic verse and thirteenth-century sagas for Scandinavian military and political activities in ninth- and tenth-century Britain. Now he was to add to that reputation by claiming to have uncovered an academic conspiracy of silence concerning 'a thousand years of deceit'.⁴⁶ For Smyth had discovered the truth about

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 180–1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 156–75. Cf. Janet Bately, ed. and commentary, *The Old English Orosius*, Early English Text Society, suppl. ser. 6, Oxford 1980, pp. lxxiv–lxxv; D. Whitelock, 'The Old English Bede', *PBA* 48, 1962, 57–90.

⁴⁰ Plummer, *Alfred the Great*, 6–7, 24, 56–9, 62–8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 104, 105, 210.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 105–6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 102, 107, quoting ASC s.a. 878.

⁴⁴ Plummer, *Alfred the Great*, 139–96.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 199–202.

⁴⁶ Alfred Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, Oxford 1995, pp. ix–xii, 1, 149–70, in particular 153–4.

Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, namely that it was a forgery composed around the year 1000 by Byrhtferth of Ramsey. Given that about a third of Smyth's 602 dense pages is given over to arguing his case against Asser, the book might have been more accurately entitled, 'King Alfred the Great and the Case of the Fraudulent and Incompetent Life attributed to Asser'.

With some exceptions, the scholarly community was not persuaded, either on linguistic or historical grounds. Some of the critical reviews, in fact, were quite harsh.⁴⁷ Smyth himself acknowledges that his views 'are still those of a dissenting minority', and has answered his critics with a new translation of what he now terms the 'Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great' and a full commentary in which he reiterated and, in some places, expanded upon his thesis of deceit.⁴⁸

I am not going to rehearse here the arguments for and against the authenticity of Asser.⁴⁹ I am more interested in the impact that Smyth's conviction had upon his handling of other source materials and on the portrait that he drew of Alfred. As Simon Keynes observed in an extended review article, Smyth was intent upon proving that the 'Pseudo-Asser' offers nothing of original historical value. Given this premise, it was necessary for him, as Simon Keynes put it, to 'debunk as forgeries' 'any surviving texts or documents which seem to corroborate the Life in one respect or another, and which are not likely to have been available to the (supposed) forger'.⁵⁰

This is quite apparent in his discussion of Alfred's charters in Chapter Fourteen, where he begins by challenging the idea that charters offer 'some superior form of historical testimony'.⁵¹ As Smyth points out, we have only eighteen charters that are purported to have been issued in Alfred's name and six others in which he only witnesses.⁵² Of these only three, Sawyer nos. 344, 350, and 1203, survive in their original form or as an early copy. The others are either medieval copies of originals (some with monastic improvements) or forgeries. Charter criticism is a highly technical, but hardly exact, science and, as Smyth points out, specialists have pronounced contradictory assessments upon virtually every charter that has survived only in later form.

Though Smyth's general caveat is valid, when it comes to his actual analyses of the charters attributed to Alfred, Smyth shows remarkably little interest in the traditional methods of authentication. Rather, he seems to regard as spurious any charter that might offer support for the authenticity of Asser.⁵³ Typical of his

⁴⁷ See, e.g., M. Lapidge, 'A king or monkish fable?', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 8 March 1996, 20; D. R. Howlett, review of Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, *EHR* 112, 1997, 942–4; S. D. Keynes, 'On the authenticity of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', *JEH* 47, 1996, 529–51; James Campbell, 'Alfred's Lives', *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 July 1996, 30, is more positive but still rejects the thesis of forgery; M. Altschull's review in *American Historical Review* 102, 1997, 1463–4.

⁴⁸ Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, p. xvii.

⁴⁹ For my views, see Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 318–26.

⁵⁰ Keynes, 'Authenticity', 534.

⁵¹ Smyth, *King Alfred*, 374. The title of the chapter is a rhetorical question: 'The charters of King Alfred: a higher order of scholarship or speculation?'

⁵² S342a–357 (issued in Alfred's name); S217, 218, 223, 1441, 1442 (Mercian charters attested by Alfred); S1203.

⁵³ Keynes, 'Authenticity', 540.

approach, Smyth rejects as forgeries, without analysis of their formulae, those charters whose witness lists have the ætheling Alfred attesting in conjunction with his brother Æthelred because 'it is obvious that Æthelred's name was used by forgers as a mere adjunct to that of his younger brother – prompted by the Chronicle's harping on the formula "King Æthelred and his brother Alfred"'.⁵⁴ Smyth's suspicions about charters surviving in late copies evaporate, however, when he turns in the very next chapter to Alfred's Will, a document preserved in an early eleventh-century copy in the archives of the New Minster in Winchester.⁵⁵ Because the Will provides needed details for his account, and because at points it seems to be at odds with 'Pseudo-Asser', Smyth accepts it without question or reservation.

While Smyth contests virtually all the information contained in the *Life*,⁵⁶ he is far more accepting of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as a source, albeit as a misleading and tendentious one. Smyth accepts, *contra* Stenton, Plummer's contention that Alfred was the guiding spirit behind the composition of the *Chronicle*. Alfred, he argues, commissioned and supervised a team of scholars to write a chronicle designed to anchor West Saxon history and the accomplishments of Alfred's royal house in a Roman and Christian past, and to preserve Alfred's own glory for posterity.⁵⁷ Though Smyth rejects R. H. C. Davis's term 'propaganda', he embraces whole-heartedly, as I do, the idea that the *Chronicle*'s narrative is carefully fashioned to reflect Alfred's own 'spin' on English history and, in particular, on events during his own reign.⁵⁸

Smyth's narrative of military events, covering the book's first one hundred and forty-six pages, shows a healthy scepticism about the Chronicle's reporting, and he critiques it by referring to the fuller narratives of contemporary Carolingian and Irish chronicles. In line with the work of his mentor, the late J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, and contemporaries such as Janet Nelson and Patrick Wormald, Smyth places his story of Alfred within a wider European setting. Viking activity in ninth-century England, Alfred's response to the threat, and the king's literary program – discussed ably, if provocatively, at the book's end – are considered in relation to happenings in Francia and Ireland. But perhaps what most characterises Smyth's narrative is its pugnacity. He seems intent upon challenging virtually all the traditional assessments, especially those made by Stenton and Whitelock, who for him represent the 'Establishment' par excellence. I find some of his revisionist analysis persuasive – because I came to the same conclusions independently – and much of it not.⁵⁹ Though he dismisses harshly the 'preposterous chain(s) of supposition and guesswork' used by Stenton and others to confirm historical information contained in the *Life*,⁶⁰ Smyth asserts on the basis of equally, if not more, suspect reasoning, and even less evidence, that Æthelred's

⁵⁴ Smyth, *King Alfred*, 377.

⁵⁵ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 313; S1507.

⁵⁶ Smyth, *King Alfred*, 1–8, 527–8, 544–8. See the detailed responses by Keynes, 'Authenticity'.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 523, 529–30, 586.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 39, 71, 75, 91, 95.

⁵⁹ E.g. Smyth's suggestion that Guthrum regarded arrival of a viking band at Fulham in 878 as a threat. Smyth, *King Alfred*, 87. Cf. Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 163.

⁶⁰ Smyth, *King Alfred*, 27.

and Alfred's mother was not the same woman who gave birth to their elder siblings, and the even more remarkable conclusion that Alfred never went to Rome as a child and, for reasons that were not clear to me, deliberately lied in the *Chronicle* about having done so.⁶¹ And though Smyth does end up agreeing with Plummer and Whitelock about the significance of Edington, his scepticism is such that the gifts that Alfred gave Guthrum at his baptism become 'dangegeld' (!) rather than the more likely symbol of Alfred's hard-won overlordship.⁶²

If the *Chronicle* brings us into the presence of Alfred the 'spin doctor', Alfred's translations serve Smyth as a more transparent window into the mind of the king. Smyth's discussion of Alfred's literary efforts in Chapter Nineteen, tellingly entitled 'The Genuine Alfred', is, in fact, sensitive and insightful. He, like myself, assumes that the translations represent the thoughts of Alfred rather than those of his teachers. Smyth was persuaded of this by his conception of Alfred as a learned scholar and philosopher. Moreover, having rejected Asser, he needed the *Chronicle* and the translations to be reliable sources for his subject. For without them, no biography at all would have been possible. The elevation of the *Chronicle* and Alfred's translations, then, was the necessary, if unconscious, consequence of rejecting the authority of Asser.

So what does Alfred look like if, following Smyth, we strip away the accretions of 'Pseudo-Asser' and finally do justice to the man? Actually, remarkably like Plummer's Alfred, since Plummer regarded many of the stories related in the *Life* as Celtic tall tales and was just as unaccepting of the idea of Alfred the invalid king.⁶³ Smyth's Alfred is still the warrior-king and scholar. If anything, Smyth's Alfred, whose love of study is now revealed as a childhood as well as adult passion, is a more devoted and precocious intellectual than in any earlier presentation, with the possible exception of William of Malmesbury's.⁶⁴ Although Alfred was a concrete thinker unable fully 'to cope with Boethian and Augustinian arguments', he was nonetheless a mature scholar whose 'intellectual achievement compares well with that of Gregory the Great'.⁶⁵

Smyth's Alfred also remains the astute military leader, albeit one who, like George Washington, triumphed despite having lost the majority of his battles. He is appreciated, once again, for his strategy of fortress building that secured his kingdom and paved the way to the establishment of an even greater one. He is now an astute, if cynical, student of politics, who grasped (in Smyth's words) the 'need to be wary of his closest and his most powerful thegns, and to penetrate beyond outward appearances to unmask resentment or hidden ambition'.⁶⁶ Smyth's Alfred, moreover, is ever 'economical with the truth, in order to glorify

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11, 17.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶³ Plummer, *Life and Times*, 28. In a note (2) Plummer added that it was even more inconceivable that Alfred should have accomplished what he did if the illness were, as some have thought, epilepsy. Apparently Plummer forgot about Julius Caesar.

⁶⁴ *Gesta Regum*, i, 188–95, 240–1; John Gillingham, 'Civilizing the English? The English histories of William of Malmesbury and David Hume', *Historical Research* 74, 2001, 31–3, 35.

⁶⁵ Smyth, *King Alfred*, 581–2, 582.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 589.

his own achievement',⁶⁷ giving the lie to 'Pseudo-Asser's' characterisation of the king as *veredicus*, the 'truth-teller'.⁶⁸ And, restored to health, he is also William of Malmesbury's brave and fearsome warrior who, as Smyth puts it, thought nothing of 'treading on the entrails of the dying'.⁶⁹

And what of my Alfred? When I signed the contract to write my book back in 1988, I, like Smyth, had planned to say something new on the subject, to be, in George W. Bush's words, 'a revisionist historian'. My prospectus announced that I intended to strip the Victorian veneer from the portrait of Alfred and rediscover the face of an early medieval barbarian king. My starting point would be the story told by the medieval monks of Abingdon about the 'Judas' who plundered their Church and the letter of Pope John VIII that chastised the rapacious king for his encroachments on the landed endowments of Canterbury. I was going to drag Alfred off his pedestal at Winchester as surely as American soldiers and freed Iraqis were to pull down the statue of Saddam Hussein. I would ignore previous historians – and not even read Smyth's new book – until after I had written my narrative – and would tell a new story, one in which Alfred would become a West Saxon Charles Martel.

And I failed. For years I found myself incapable of writing a narrative, so I wrote instead analytical essays on Alfred's conception of kingship, his military reforms, and his governance, the sort of historical writing with which I had experience. Part of my problem, I discovered, was that the sources did not support a narrative based upon my initial conception of Alfred. Asser's *Life*, which I believed and still believe to be an authentic, though problematic, source, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and Alfred's own writings forced me to write what turned out to be a very traditional biography. To paraphrase Plummer, I found myself putting the received story into my own words, and 'arranging in my own way, what has been previously written by others or myself'. I flatter myself to think that I added to and modified the story, paying greater attention, for example to numismatic evidence, though, to his credit Smyth has interesting things to say on this topic, and reinterpreting the viking threat and Alfred's military response.

I was only able to write my narrative once I had a sense of who my subject was, and this came, oddly enough, from reading a chapter in Asser's *Life* which described Alfred lecturing his dog-keepers on the finer points of their trade. Despite my own thorough-going secularism, Alfred's own writings persuaded me that, underlying all that he did, were his religious beliefs, and that stories such as that of his childhood anointing were not 'propaganda' or 'lies' but a retrospective conviction that, like King David, Alfred was chosen by God to save his people. So my Alfred became a pious and earnest micromanager who lectured his dog keepers, his ealdormen, his reeves, and undoubtedly even the learned clerics with whom he surrounded himself on the finer points of their professions. He was an ingenious problem-solver, a systematiser, a lover of wisdom, both theoretical and practical, who read the Bible as a handbook on governance as

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 552.

⁶⁸ Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ch. 13.

⁶⁹ Smyth, *King Alfred*, 600.

well as a guide to spiritual life, and a king who believed firmly in the Providence that had elevated him so improbably to the throne. He was, in other words, a warrior-king and pious scholar who understood the two aspects of his life as complementary, both grounded in his Christian duty as a man and as a ruler.

What struck me most when I was writing Alfred was how disputable all the evidence was. Constantly I had to make decisions about authenticity and interpretation, and often felt as though I was strolling through an academic minefield. This was particularly true for fields that require technical specialisation, such as numismatics and semantic analyses. Material remains such as coins are no more transparent than written texts. Take the case of Alfred's and Ceolwulf II's joint issue of the Cross-and-Lozenge penny. In 1998 the numismatist Mark Blackburn and historian Simon Keynes, working in tandem, published essays that pushed back the chronology of Alfred's coin issues, with profound historical implications for Alfred's and Ceolwulf's reigns.⁷⁰ The numismatic evidence as they presented it seemed to indicate that Alfred alone was recognised as king of Mercia in London c. 875, at least by the London moneyers, and that Ceolwulf II did not achieve such recognition there until the last years of his brief reign. But in the same year that Blackburn and Keynes published their papers a new Ceolwulf II Cross-and-Lozenge coin appeared on the market that suggested Ceolwulf's London coinage was as early as Alfred's, forcing Keynes and Blackburn to reconsider this historical scenario, or at least Ceolwulf II's position in it.⁷¹

This is a lot of historical weight for fifty-odd coins to bear, especially given the vagaries of coin finds. As nerve-wracking as it is for historians who rely upon it, numismatics is as imprecise a science as charter criticism. Numismatists assure us that moneyers struck millions of pennies in Alfred's name, but this is simply an inference based on an assumption that a die would have been used until it was no longer functional. We actually possess from Alfred's reign only 348 coins.⁷² Archaeological evidence is no easier to interpret and no more certain. Like other sources, artefacts must be interpreted and are susceptible to different constructions. If we had Alfred's bones they would probably generate as much historical controversy as they would add to our objective knowledge. At this point one might ask, what is that 'objective knowledge'?

The answer, I am afraid, is not much. That Alfred lived and reigned are facts. But even such basic points as when he was born, or when he died, have been the subjects of controversy. And if the basic facts of Alfred's life are subject to speculation, then what are we to do with his 'self'? Those of us who have used 'Alfred's' translations as evidence for the inner man have wrestled with whether they actually reveal the thoughts and feeling of an individual or the consensus of

⁷⁰ Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', and Mark Blackburn, 'The London Mint during the reign of Alfred', both in *Kings, Currency and Alliances*, ed. Blackburn and Dumville, 1–45 and 105–23.

⁷¹ M. A. S. Blackburn, 'Alfred's coinage reforms in context', in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Century Conference*, ed. T. Reuter and D. Hinton, Aldershot 2003, 199–215.

⁷² 'Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds/Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles', devised by S. M. Miller for the Fitzwilliam Museum (www-cm.fitzmuseum.ac.uk/emc/), 5 July 2003.

a committee, or perhaps only the extent of the literary materials available to that committee. What makes this conclusion all the more disturbing is we have more 'evidence' for the life and reign of Alfred the Great than for any other Anglo-Saxon person.

Although profoundly different in detail, the accounts of King Alfred's life and reign by Charles Plummer, Alfred Smyth and myself share the same underlying narrative, that of a warrior-scholar king who preserved his kingdom against invasion, promoted learning, and began a process that would culminate in the creation of the kingdom of England. What truly separates the stories has less to do with their narratives, or even the sources that underlie those narratives, than with the sensibility and imagination that each historian used to create a coherent story and plausible personality out of fragmentary evidence, and the reason that he chose to tell that story.

The narratives told by these very different historians are, when all is said and done, remarkably similar. This, I believe, is because the narrative is common to the sources that underlie all three historical accounts, sources that ultimately derive from Alfred's court. These are the stories that Alfred himself wanted told to preserve his 'memory in good works'. In other words, the underlying narrative which has seduced so many historians, including me, is Alfred's own narrative – the story and image that he and his courtiers shaped to make sense of his life. This, of course, is not to say that this story and image are historical truth, only that it is the closest to historical truth that the surviving sources will permit us to get – and the closest, I believe, that Alfred wanted us to get.