

The Hagiology of Somerset.

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IN all ages it has been the weakness of learned folks to make themselves look far wiser than they really were, by the use of hard words and mysterious terms! Let me then begin, by pleading that I use the word "Hagiology" for shortness sake, and that it means in simple English, a talk about old saints and their holy places. There are thousands of good people, male and female, who have reached this dignity—though, indeed, they must be divided into many classes. Every-body is quite willing to concede the claims of the Apostles and the names in the Bible—they are the aristocracy of saints, whose names are in "*the Peerage*," so to speak; but after them comes a vast multitude, like "*the landed gentry*" who flourished in different centuries, from the 2nd down to the 16th. Certain good men, called the Bollandists, commenced to write their histories, about 200 years ago; they are still at work in Belgium, and are not yet nearly through their task! After A.D. 1600, however, saints become rather scarce. It is, we are told, an expensive thing to canonize a saint in these days—costing about £800 at Rome; there are regular forms to be gone through, and it is essential that some miracles should have been performed, either by the saint or at his tomb, and there is a certain officer of the Court appointed, called "*the Advocatus Diaboli*," to bring up all that can be said against the proposed saint!

But it seems, that though now so difficult to become a saint, it was comparatively very easy to get at least "*brevet rank*" in that line, either in Ireland or Wales, or Cornwall, any time

between the 5th and 7th centuries; and this the traveller finds out when he enquires after the dedications of churches in Wales or Cornwall, or Ireland. Instead of the ordinary names to which he has been accustomed in the centre or South of England, he hears of Celtic saints—St. Dubritius, or St. Petrock. Strange names—stranger to his ear.

But though we cannot, like Wales or Ireland, or Cornwall, boast in Somerset a host of local saints, yet we have a few interesting and peculiar church dedications, which still point to the long distant days, when the land of the Somersætæ was a border territory. A glance at the map will show how the county lies along “the Severn Sea,” and what an opportunity its long line of coast opposite to South Wales afforded for the missionary energies of Celtic clergy. Thus, as Christianity advanced from its new colony at Canterbury, under the auspices of St. Augustine, gradually pushing westward, at length Ine, the West-Saxon King, advanced to Taunton, and Adhelm came to Doulting. On his way thither, Ine reached the remaining establishment and outwork of Romano-British Christianity at Glastonbury. It would also seem that when the Christian teachers evangelizing amongst the heathen “Old English” (as Mr. Freeman has told us to call them) came westward, and crossed the wild Mendip hills, they saw across the wide marshes and morrasses a fringe or line of chapels, or oratories, which the influence of Welsh missionaries had planted or preserved. Thus we have along the coast of Somerset the following church dedications or other traces of early or Celtic character. St. Bridget (Chelvey), St. Julietta and Cyricus (Tickenham), St. Lawrence (Wick), St. Kew (Kewstoke), St. Bridget (Brean), St. Decumans (Watchet), St. Dubritius (Porlock), and St. Culborne (at Culbone); and between Watchet and Porlock, St. Carantoc, at Carhampton. If we look more inland, we find at Glastonbury, St. Benignus; at Barton, St. David; at Badgeworth, St. Congar; at Wellow, St. Julian; and at Stratton, St. Vigor.

I think that many people could not give a very accurate account of these excellent ecclesiastics, and therefore a few particulars may be acceptable about them. It is interesting, also, to remark that in some cases these very early dedications are found in the neighbourhood of Roman remains. Thus at Wellow, where a large Roman villa existed, we find the church dedicated to St. Julian. St. Julian was one of the earliest Christian missionaries into Celtic Gaul, and became Bishop of the celebrated city of Le Mans. Not far off at the village of "Stratton-on-the-Fosse"—betokening by its name a Roman road—we have a dedication to St. Vigor. Of his history, we learn that he was of a noble race in Gaul; that he was educated by St. Vedart, but difficulties being raised to his wish of taking holy orders, he ran away with one friend and concealed himself, near Bayeux, where he was at length ordained. In 513 he was chosen Bishop of Bayeux. Near the city was an idol of female form, which the rustics revered. St. Vigor obtained a grant of this hill from King Childeric, and having destroyed the idol, built a church there, and called the place Mons Chris-matis—the Hill of Unction. A certain evil chieftain having invaded these lands of the Bishop, Vigor prayed for his punishment, and lo, news almost instantly came that he had been thrown from his horse and killed. But it is perhaps as probable that a Norman settler called the church after the local saint of his old home.

But this is a very poor specimen of the marvellous, and our Somerset hagiology can show a finer example of the legendary miracle! At *Carhampton*, near Dunster, we are told that the name of the village is derived from St. Carantocus. This worthy man was the son of a Prince of Cardigan, in the 6th century. He is said to have become a monk in early life, and crossed to Ireland, where he preached with great success, being constantly attended by a white dove—supposed by some to be a guardian angel. He returned to Wales, and entered a cavern with his disciples; but the dove fluttered upon him,

darted away, and then returned, as though alluring him to follow. So he said, "I will go and see whither the bird leads." But it led him to a grassy spot, and rested there; and he said, "Here will I build a church." Then in his history we read that a certain marshy district in South Wales, called "Carr," was infested by a huge serpent. Next we hear that it befel at that time that "an altar of wondrous colouring" was cast down from heaven, and St. Carantoc obtained it; but as he was taking it in a boat over the Severn, it fell over-board into the sea; but Carantoc the hermit said, "God will waft it by his waves to the place where it shall be set up." And he went to King Arthur (who was, I suppose, at Avalon in Somerset), and asked him if he knew whether his altar had come ashore any where? Then said King Arthur, "Bind fast the serpent in the 'Carr' first, and I will tell thee!" Then the saint went to the edge of the morass and called the venomous beast, and it came, and he cast his stole about it, and brought it into the hall where the King and his nobles sat, and he fed it there; and after that he let it go, and bade it do no harm to any man or beast! So King Arthur gave him up the altar, which had been washed ashore, and which he had purposed to make into a table for himself and his knights. And Carantoc set up the altar and built a church to hold it, and the place was afterwards called Cardigan.

This legend ought to satisfy the lovers of the marvellous. Certainly it is a very picturesque one, and we must admire the kindness of the saint in giving the serpent a feed after his journey. I hope it was King Arthur's own dinner; for he seems to have acted rather shabbily in this affair. I suppose that Carhampton was thought to be the place where it came on shore. The origin of such stories I imagine to be this. Some fervent preacher described sin and wickedness as an evil serpent or dragon, that a saint had driven out; and our stupid ancestors turned the metaphor or allegory of the poetical orator into a real transaction of prosaic history! To this day one

meets with many excellent people, who take everything that is said—in a perfectly literal sense!

But, talking about serpents, the following is a curious example of how a legend might take rise. As I was one day walking along a vicarage garden that had a pleasant terrace walk, near a little wood; my host remarked, “This is a place where we sometimes see snakes. Last night, when walking up and down with my relative, the Bishop of No-matter-where, we saw a large snake crossing this path, and when he was here *three years ago* the same thing happened.” Now, thought I to myself, if the Bishop had only lived 1400 years ago, we could have got up a fine legend of the serpents flying from his sacred presence!

Not far from Carhampton, on the coast, is the parish of St. Decumanus. The parish keeps the name, though, as is often the case, the church has been re-dedicated. The history of St. Decuman will be best appreciated if read in the quaint language of old Cressy—a curious writer, who had a curious life in the time of King Charles I:—

“A.D. 706. The year following wee find commemorated in our Martyrology—the martyrdom of Saint Decumanus, born of noble parents in the south-western part of Wales, who, forsaking his country, the more freely to give himself to *mortification* and devotion, passed the river Severn upon a hurdle of rods, and retired himself into a mountainous vast solitude, covered with shrubs and briars, where he spent his life in the repose of *contemplation*, till in the end he was slain by a murderer. The place so described in the authour of his life (in Capgrave), is seated in the county of Somerset, where a *castle*, in after times called Dorostocum (now Dunster), was built. To this castle (saith Camden) are adjacent two villages, consecrated to two saints. The one is called Carantor, from a British saint, Carantock; and the other, Decombus, from St. Decumanus, who out of South Wales

arrived here, renouncing all worldly vanity, and by a murderer was pierced through with a sword, for which he obtained in the esteem of the ignorant common people divine honours."

This veneration he probably obtained from a *miracle*, related by the author of his life in this manner:—"Wee must not," saith he, "leave buried in silence this prodigious wonder, how when his head was cutt from his body, the trunk, raising itself up, took the head, which it carried from the place where he was slain to a spring not far off, which flowed with a most crystalline water, in which with the hands it washed the blood away; which spring, in a reverent memory of the saint, is to this day called St. Decumanus his spring. Near to this place the body, together with the head, was honourably buried by the neighbouring inhabitants."

At Tickenham Church, which stands on the edge of what must have once been a salt water estuary, we have the dedication to the two saints, Julietta and Cyricus. Their history is a very touching one, and we cannot wonder at its interesting Christians in far distant lands. The story in the ancient martyrologies, of Cyricus and his mother Julietta, is derived from an ancient letter written by Theodore, Bishop of Iconium, about 520, which contains information drawn from an aged man, who belonged to the family of the martyrs.

The persecution of Diocletian raged in Lycaonia. Julietta, a widow lady of Iconium, escaped with her little boy, Cyricus, aged three, and two servants, to Selucia; but, finding that a certain Governor, Alexander, was persecuting the Christians, she fled to Tarsus. It happened that Alexander had business in that city, and arriving about the same time, heard of the strange lady of Christian religion, who had just settled there, and ordered her to be arrested. She was brought before Alexander, with her boy at her side, and to the many questions addressed to her, she only replied, "I am a Christian." Then Alexander ordered her to be scourged and tortured, at the

same time taking the child upon his knee. But the boy, seeing his mother's sufferings, struggled to get away to go to her; and being still held by the Governor, struck him with his tiny fist, crying out, "I am a Christian, also." In a fit of anger, Alexander threw the child from him, who falling against the marble steps, had his head fractured. Julietta thanked God, that her child had won the martyr's crown; and the exasperated Alexander commanded her at once to be beheaded, and their bodies cast forth; but they were afterwards buried by pious hands.

St. Cyricus is well known in France under the name of St. Cyr, and a great school for the children of the officers of the French army is called by that name.

But of all our Somerset saints, St. Congar is perhaps the most interesting; because some folks deny, not that he was a saint, but that he ever existed! In reply, we point to Badgeworth, dedicated to him; and to Congresbury, which is called after him. And the truth of some parts of his history seems to have received confirmation by the recent discovery of a Roman villa at Wymmering lane, in the parish of Yatton; which discovery has proved that the river Yeo was embanked in Roman times. It is also a curious coincidence, that the mosaic floor in this villa seems to show a well-marked cross as its chief device—perhaps indicating its having had a Christian owner.

The legend of St. Congar is, that his father was an Emperor of Constantinople; that, being childless, with many prayers and alms he besought an heir. That at length, in answer to his intreaties, Congar was born, and grew up a sweet and noble youth; but being urged to marry and assume his high position, when his aspirations were for a religious life only, he fled to the sea shore, and sought "some distant land—a retired spot—for a hermitage." We might have thought he could have found some wild place nearer than Somerset. But the legend brings him first to Wales, and then, seeking a lonely sequestered region, he pitched upon the slight rising—half an

island in the marshes—where now stands Congresbury church. We may easily imagine it damp, unhealthy, and marshy, after the Roman embankments had been broken down: for some parts of the parish are still nine feet below the level of the high tides. Here there gathered round him a little band of disciples; and here he worked, according to the narrative of his biographer, Capgrave, certain miracles, of which we give specimens from that quaint chronicler, translated from the Latin:—

“The first miracle was carried out through Divine clemency, and by the most righteous Congarus. The places which were round about his own cultivated spot were full of water and covered with reeds, and at that time of no use, but were converted (by him) into fields most suitable for cultivation and into flowry meadows. This wonder was heard of every-where through England, and even over all the Brittanic regions, for with uncommon reverence they magnified the elect servant of God in relating so great things in his praise and honour. ‘How fields, together with meadows, took the place of where used to grow the marshy bull-rush.’ Such and so great a miracle having taken place, it came to pass that the most Reverend Congarus happened to be standing in the cemetery, with his clergy standing around him, when he expressed his desire that a yew tree might grow up and become a shelter (literally, an umbrella), on account of the heat of the summer, and that the grave-yard might be adorned by its branches with their wide-spreading shade. Whilst, therefore, he had wished those things, he had fixed his staff, which he was holding in his hand, and which was made out of a yew tree, into the ground—nor could he draw it out thence! On the day following, with all those standing there and beholding, it budded out! Afterwards it grew into a most wide-spreading tree, according to the prayer and longing of the most blessed Congar, and was a shelter for the clergy and people through the summer heat, whence it is said, ‘A green yew tree is there; not a dry stick, nor one which can be held in the hand!’”

Time will not allow me to quote more. I will only add that the dead trunk of an enormous yew tree remains in the churchyard of Congresbury, and that the village gossips say that the bones of the saint repose beneath in a golden coffin! Of St. Benignus, the pupil of St. Patrick, and the other saints I have mentioned in the hagiology of Somerset, the records must be left to another opportunity.
