



PENGUIN



CLASSICS

**GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH**

*The History of the Kings of Britain*

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH

THE HISTORY OF THE  
KINGS OF BRITAIN

TRANSLATED  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY LEWIS THORPE

PENGUIN BOOKS

# Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	
1. Geoffrey's Purpose	9
2. Who was Geoffrey of Monmouth?	10
3. Geoffrey's Sources	14
4. The Work Itself	19
5. Geoffrey the Artist	24
6. Geoffrey of Monmouth down the Centuries	28
7. Editions of the <i>Historia</i>	31
8. Earlier Translations	33
9. This Translation	34
10. Acknowledgements	36
 <i>Notes to the Introduction</i>	 38
 <i>Short Bibliography of Works Used in the Introduction and in the Notes</i>	 46
 <i>Map of Britain</i>	 50
 <i>Dedication</i>	 51
 <i>Part One</i>	
BRUTUS OCCUPIES THE ISLAND OF ALBION	53
 <i>Part Two</i>	
BEFORE THE ROMANS CAME	75
 <i>Part Three</i>	
THE COMING OF THE ROMANS	107
 <i>Part Four</i>	
THE HOUSE OF CONSTANTINE	149
 <i>Part Five</i>	
THE PROPHECIES OF MERLIN	170
 <i>Part Six</i>	
THE HOUSE OF CONSTANTINE (CONTINUED)	186

## CONTENTS

<i>Part Seven</i>	
ARTHUR OF BRITAIN	212
<i>Part Eight</i>	
THE SAXON DOMINATION	262
<i>Time Chart</i>	285
<i>Index</i>	291

## Introduction

### I. GEOFFREY'S PURPOSE

IN some ways the *History of the Kings of Britain*, this strange, uneven and yet extraordinarily influential book written in Latin by Geoffrey of Monmouth and finished c. 1136,<sup>1</sup> may be said to bear the same relationship to the story of the early British inhabitants of our own island as do the seventeen historical books in the Old Testament, from Genesis to Esther, to the early history of the Israelites in Palestine.

As he explains to us in his preface, Geoffrey's purpose in writing the book was to trace the history of the Britons through a long sweep of nineteen hundred years, stretching from the mythical Brutus, great-grandson of the Trojan Aeneas, whom he supposed to have given his name to the island after he had landed there in the twelfth century before Christ, down to his last British King, Cadwallader, who, harassed by plague, famine, civil dissension and never-ending invasion from the continent, finally abandoned Britain to the Saxons in the seventh century of our era. Between these two extreme limits in time, he planned to relate for us the history of the British people, sometimes as a mere genealogy of royal primogeniture, sometimes in succinct chronicle form, more often as a dynastic sequence told with considerable detail, reign by reign, and occasionally even, when he considered this to be worthy of our close attention, by permitting an individual incident or anecdote to swell out of proportion and to become a narrative in its own right. For Geoffrey, his history was a pageant of striking personalities, moving forward to the greatest personality of them all, Arthur, son of Utherpendragon and Ygernia. With the passing of Arthur his interest gradually died away, and so indeed, does that of the modern reader.

Geoffrey's essential inspiration was a patriotic one. At the point where the story ends, that is, with the death of Cadwallader in

Rome, 'in the six hundred and eighty-ninth year after our Lord's Incarnation', Britain is still the best of all lands, providing in un-failing plenty everything that is suited to the use of human beings; but the British people, who once ruled the country from sea to sea, have now allowed themselves to be divided into two separate nations: those who crossed back over the Channel and settled in the Armorican peninsula and those who stayed on in the island. The vengeance of God and the domination of the Saxons have overtaken these last, who are now called the Welsh, and they live precariously and in greatly reduced numbers in the remote recesses of the western forests.<sup>3</sup> Let these Welshmen remember their glorious past, cries Geoffrey towards the end of his story, their descent from the Kings of Troy and the various moments in their history when they dominated Europe. Above all let them remember the prophecies of Merlin, made to King Vortigern and set out in full in this book, which tell of the triumphs of the British people yet to come, when the mountains of Armorica shall erupt, Kambria shall be filled again with joy and the Cornish oaks shall once more flourish.

As J. S. B. Tatlock pointed out, in Geoffrey's time 'the lack of accounts of British history was notorious' (*Tatlock*, p. 430). Geoffrey had several clear-cut political reasons for what he wrote, his desire to give 'a precedent for the dominions and ambitions of the Norman kings' (*ibid.*, p. 426) and his wish to ingratiate himself with his various dedicatees. To some degree the book pretends to be an ecclesiastical history as well as a political one. Through it runs a deep-felt and often bitter desire to denigrate the Romans and to put the Britons in their place in the forefront of history.

## 2. WHO WAS GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH?

Who then was this Geoffrey of Monmouth who wrote the *History of the Kings of Britain* more than eight hundred years ago? We can learn a number of things about him from a careful reading of his book. On three occasions he refers to himself by name, each time

adding the information that he has some connexion with Monmouth. In vii. 2 he calls himself *Gaufridus Monemutensis*, this being a repetition of the genitive form *Galfridi Monemutensis* given in i.1; and in xi.1 the name comes a third time and is spelt *Galfridus Monumotensis*.

In his later chapters Geoffrey occasionally mentions other monastic and ecclesiastical centres in Wales: Llandaff, ix.15, for example, Bangor Iscoed, xi.3, xi.12-13, and Llanbadarn xi.3. Much more striking than this, however, are the many references to Caerleon-on-Usk, thirteen in all,<sup>3</sup> working up to the long chapter ix.12, which describes in full detail a plenary court which Arthur held in that city after he had conquered the whole of Gaul, this with a wealth of topographical and architectural information.

Where Geoffrey found his material will be discussed later, but for the moment we can observe his clear-cut statement, made in i.1, that he was translating directly into Latin from 'a certain very ancient book written in the British language', that is, presumably, from early Welsh.<sup>4</sup> Three times he names an acquaintance of his, Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, the man who, so he maintains, gave him the ancient book in Welsh.<sup>5</sup> The 'Prophecies of Merlin', printed on pp. 170-85, were originally conceived as a separate volume;<sup>6</sup> and they have a short preface of their own, in which Geoffrey praises Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, the churchman who had asked him to make this part of his translation and from whom he obviously expected some reward for his pains. Finally, there is in this text the double dedication of the work as a whole, which is here presented jointly to Robert, Earl of Gloucester, the natural son of Henry I, and to Waleran, Count of Mellent, son of Robert de Beaumont.<sup>7</sup>

Considerable external evidence can be added to these few facts culled from the text itself.

Geoffrey's signature appears in the list of witnesses appended to six different twelfth-century charters which have been dated between 1129 and 1151, all of them connected with religious

foundations in or near Oxford.<sup>8</sup> In two of these charters Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, appears as co-signatory; in three others the statement witnessed is a grant or an agreement made by Walter himself; and the sixth charter was signed towards the end of 1151, a few months after Walter's death. Twice Geoffrey signed himself *magister*. The island of Osenev, in Oxford, with which the first charter deals, was in the parish of St George and belonged until 1149 to the five or six Augustinian canons of the secular college of St George's. It has been suggested that Geoffrey himself may have been a canon of that college. Weight is added to that suggestion by the fact that it is known that Walter the Archdeacon was Provost of the college and that Robert de Chesney, author of the last of these charters and by then Bishop of Lincoln, had also been one of its canons.

The college of St George's came to an end in 1149, in which year it was made over to Osenev Abbey. Geoffrey's various attempts at dedicating the *History of the Kings of Britain* and his praise of Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, in vii.1-2, had gained him no preferment. Alexander himself had died in 1148. Soon after Alexander's death, Geoffrey added a third literary enterprise to the *History* and the 'Prophecies of Merlin' which he had incorporated in it. This was the *Life of Merlin*,<sup>9</sup> written in Latin verse and dedicated to that Robert de Chesney who, as we have seen, had been one of the Canons of St George's in Oxford and was Bishop of Lincoln from 1148 to 1167, as successor to Alexander. In this poem Geoffrey is named twice, as *Gaufrido de Monemuta* four lines from the end and as *Galfridum Monemutensem* in the *explicit*.

In the early months of 1151, just before the death of Walter the Archdeacon, Geoffrey became Bishop Elect of St Asaph, in what is now Flintshire. He was ordained priest at Westminster in mid-February 1152 and consecrated at Lambeth a week later by Archbishop Theobald.<sup>10</sup> There is no evidence that he ever visited his see, and indeed the wars of Owain Gwynedd make this most unlikely. Towards the end of 1153 he was one of the bishops who witnessed



the Treaty of Westminster between Stephen and Henry Fitz-Empress.<sup>12</sup> If the doubtful evidence of the Welsh chronicles is accepted, then he died in 1155.<sup>13</sup>

It frequently happens that we do not know even the name of the author of a medieval masterpiece. When we are given a name, that is often the sum of our knowledge. With Geoffrey of Monmouth we are much better placed. The facts set out in the last few paragraphs justify us in adding certain tentative conclusions to what we actually know about Geoffrey's life. To have called himself *Galfridus Monemutensis* he must have had some vital connexion with Monmouth, probably that of birth. Everything in his writings and his thinly-sketched biography points to his having been a Welshman, or perhaps a Breton born in Wales. There must have been some biographical reason for his constant preoccupation with Caerleon-on-Usk, situated some twenty miles only south-west of Monmouth. Over a period of twenty-three years, from 1129 to 1151, he seems to have been connected closely with events in Oxford. That he twice signed himself *magister* may imply some teaching function, although the University of Oxford did not yet exist. That in five of his signatures as we have them, the first dated 1129 – seven years, that is, before the completion of the *History of the Kings of Britain*, with its long panegyric of Arthur of Britain – and the second, let us remember, a forgery, he should have added *Artur*, [*Arthur*], *Arturus*, *Arturo* and *Artour* to his first name may possibly imply that his father's name was Arthur.<sup>14</sup>

For twenty-three years of his life, during which period he wrote three works which have come down to us, the evidence is, then, that Geoffrey was resident in Oxford; and for the last four he seems to have lived in London. Much is known of the Oxford of the first half of the twelfth century. What was formerly a prosperous market-town had declined sadly at the time of the Norman invasion. By the early twelfth century, however, Oxford was flourishing once more, although it was still far from being a University. In a letter dated c. 1117 Theobald d'Estampes called himself *magister*

*Oxenefordiae*, using the same title as Geoffrey. The Oseney Chronicle says that the theologian Robert Pullen came over from Paris in 1133 to give a series of lectures, and many other contemporary scholars seem to have been connected with the place. Beaumont Palace was built just outside the North Gate by Henry I, who often visited it; and there Richard Cœur de Lion was born in 1157. Stephen held council in Oxford in 1136; and to that council came Robert, Earl of Gloucester, the eldest bastard of Henry I and step-brother to Matilda. In 1142 Matilda herself took refuge in Oxford Castle and was besieged there by Stephen, eventually making her celebrated escape across the ice and through the snow to Abingdon.<sup>24</sup>

These were eventful times in Oxford and one can imagine that Geoffrey must have met many distinguished visitors there and often been interrupted in his duties in St George's Chapel and in his literary pursuits.

### 3. GEOFFREY'S SOURCES

Where did Geoffrey of Monmouth find his material? This question is infinitely more important than any argument as to where he was buried, or whether or not one of the charters which he was supposed to have signed is a thirteenth-century forgery. There are two simple answers to the question, simple in the sense that they are naïve: these are that he took his material from a little book which a friend had given to him; and alternatively that he made his material up.

We have seen how, at the beginning of his *History*, Geoffrey stated categorically that Walter the Archdeacon presented him with 'a certain very ancient book written in the British language' and that he then proceeded to translate the book into plain, straightforward Latin. This source-book is mentioned again casually in xi.1; and then referred to a third time in the short epilogue which appears at the end of some versions of the *History*, with the variation that its antiquity is not stressed and we are given the new information that Walter had fetched it *ex Britannia*. The essential problem

of Walter's very ancient book is that we do not possess it. As Sir John Lloyd wrote, 'no Welsh composition exists which can be reasonably looked upon as the original, or even the groundwork, of the *History of the Kings of Britain*'.<sup>15</sup>

The first obvious comment is that the fact that we do not possess this book does not rule out its possible one-time existence. It would have been a manuscript, of course, and maybe a unique copy; and far more medieval manuscripts have been destroyed than have come down to us.

Acton Griscom, inspired to some extent by an address given by Sir Flinders Petrie<sup>16</sup> to the British Academy on 7 November 1917, had a second theory. This was that, while it is agreed that Geoffrey's 'very ancient book' no longer exists, we may have in our possession, without realizing it, evidence of the book's one-time existence.<sup>17</sup> In various collections in England and Wales there are to be found at least fifty-eight manuscripts and two fragments of manuscripts which contain early Welsh chronicles. All of them, admittedly, are later in date than the *History of the Kings of Britain*, but it does not follow that some of the material incorporated in them does not pre-date Geoffrey's work. It is now accepted that he had at his disposal something closely related to MS. Harl. 3859 in the British Museum, the contents of which are Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* with the *Cities and Marvels of Britain*, the *Annales Cambriae* and the medieval Welsh king-lists and genealogies. He also knew something of Taliesin's panegyrics to Urien Rheged; much of the material underlying *Culhwch and Olwen*; and the *Life of Saint David* and certain other hagiographical material.

There is a third possibility. Despite his categorical statement about the 'very ancient book', was Geoffrey perhaps thinking symbolically?<sup>18</sup> By this 'ancient book' did he really mean the knowledge of early British history which his friend Walter the Archdeacon had culled from a lifetime of talking to fellow enthusiasts and of extensive reading, he being so 'well-informed about the history of foreign countries', which knowledge he had shared with

Geoffrey during the long years of their acquaintanceship? Some support is given to this idea by the statement in xi.1, concerning the battle of Camlann, in which Arthur received his mortal wound, that Geoffrey 'heard it, too, from Walter of Oxford, a man most learned in all branches of history'.

In the last few years, a fourth and most striking suggestion has been made about Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*. In a book published in 1951, Jacob Hammer printed a variant version of the *Historia*, which differs in many ways from the standard or Vulgate text.<sup>29</sup> Hammer's suggestion was that this variant version was an adaptation of what Geoffrey himself had written, made by some other contemporary author. Concerning this variant version, Robert A. Caldwell has now put forward a startling theory. This is that the variant version possibly preceded the standard text. 'The former, therefore,' he writes, 'looks like an early draft put together from original sources, the latter like a deliberate revision.'<sup>30</sup> The variant version lacks the dedications, the acknowledgements to Walter the Archdeacon, and the references to the 'very ancient book'. The only mention which it contains of Geoffrey himself is at the end in a colophon, which may be false.<sup>31</sup> We come then to this point: if we are prepared to ignore the evidence of the colophon and the variant version's lack of antiquity, it is conceivable that someone else wrote the variant version and that Geoffrey merely adapted it; in short that Jacob Hammer's variant version, written admittedly in Latin and not in British, is itself Geoffrey's source, his 'certain very ancient book'. To push Professor Caldwell's argument to the extreme, the source of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* may be a contemporary book by a person whom, for want of a better name, we can call the pseudo-Geoffrey. It would then remain for us to discover the sources used by the pseudo-Geoffrey.

We have, then, a choice of possibilities: that Geoffrey had a source-book and that this book has disappeared without leaving any other trace; that Geoffrey's source-book is lost indeed, but that we can trace his use of at least one written Old Welsh source in his

reproduction of the names preserved in the dynastic genealogies of MS. Harl. 3859 and in the Nennian list of the Cities of Britain; that Geoffrey's essential source was really oral tradition, personified, as it were, in his friend Walter the Archdeacon (himself, no doubt, a widely-read man); or that behind the Geoffrey of Monmouth of the Vulgate text of the *History* there lies a pseudo-Geoffrey who had earlier written the variant text, an arch-hoaxer, who not only left no clue whatsoever to his own personality but was happy to see his *History* fathered on to Geoffrey. We are free to accept any one of these theories, to attempt a combination of two or more of them, to try to discover some intermediary position between some pair of them, or, indeed, to reject them all.

What nobody who has examined the evidence carefully can ever dare to say is that Geoffrey of Monmouth, or the pseudo-Geoffrey, simply made up his material. It is true that William of Newburgh, writing about 1190, less than forty years after Geoffrey's death, condemned his fellow-chronicler out of hand. 'It is quite clear', maintained William, 'that everything this man wrote about Arthur and his successors, or indeed about his predecessors from Vortigern onwards, was made up, partly by himself and partly by others, either from an inordinate love of lying, or for the sake of pleasing the Britons.'<sup>22</sup> One is sometimes tempted to agree with William of Newburgh. After all, the *History of the Kings of Britain* rests primarily upon the life-history of three great men: Brutus, grandson of Aeneas; Belinus, who sacked Rome; and Arthur, King of Britain. This particular Brutus never existed; Rome was never sacked by a Briton called Belinus; and Geoffrey's Arthur is far nearer to the fictional hero of the later Arthurian romances, of whom he is the prime but not the 'onlie begetter', than to the historical Arthur of whom we learn a few scanty details in Nennius and elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> In short, most of the material in the *History* really is fictional and someone did invent it. What is more, Geoffrey is a great believer in circumstantial detail. In the description of the decisive battle between Arthur and Lucius Tiberius, for example, he gives us

precise information about the positioning of the divisions on each side, the number of men engaged and the names of the divisional commanders. Then come, in direct speech in the Vulgate version, Arthur's address to his troops and that of Lucius Tiberius to the Roman army. One is tempted to say that this is romanticized history with a vengeance, until one remembers that the battle never took place and that it is merely romantic fiction.

Fortunately there is ample evidence to sway us in the opposite direction. The list of proper names and place-names given at the back of this volume includes 871 head-words. A large proportion of these are the names of historical people and of places actually on the map. Much of this background material is twisted almost beyond recognition; but in earliest essence it has some element of truth. Geoffrey did not invent it, nor did the pseudo-Geoffrey: *ergo* one or other of them must have taken it from somewhere.<sup>34</sup> In addition to the debt which he acknowledged to Walter's 'very ancient book' and to the book of the 'Prophecies of Merlin' which he said he translated, also from British, to please Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, Geoffrey made many cross-references in the Vulgate text to such writers as Cicero, Juvenal, Lucan, Apuleius, Bede, King Alfred, etc. He can also be shown to have drawn upon Livy, Orosius and Virgil. For the variant version Jacob Hammer has made a long list of such cross-references to the Old Testament and to the New, and then to twenty-eight separate Latin writers.<sup>35</sup> Finally, there is the archaeological evidence, the fact that strange light has been thrown upon certain of the alleged fancies of Geoffrey of Monmouth by subsequent archaeological discoveries. The connexion of Vortigern and his son Pacentius with Ireland (viii.14) is, for example, allegedly supported by the ogham stones with Vortigern's name on them which have been discovered at Ballybank and Knockaboy.<sup>36</sup> As fate caught up with him, Vortigern, in Geoffrey's account (viii.2), fled to the fortified camp of Genoreu, on the hill called Cloartius, in Erging, by the River Wye. Here 'Gonoreu' is Ganarew and 'Cloartius' a misspelling for the modern

Little Doward, with its hilltop camp, all of it very near to Monmouth.<sup>27</sup> There is the remarkable story of how Merlin brought Stonehenge piecemeal from Mount Killaraus in Ireland to Salisbury Plain (viii.10-14) and its resemblance to the parallel account of the carrying of the bluestones by sea and overland from the Prescelly mountains which is given by modern archaeologists.<sup>28</sup> In v.4 Geoffrey tells how the Venedoti decapitated a whole Roman legion in London and threw their heads into a stream called Nantgallum or, in the Saxon language, Galobroc. In the 1860s a large number of skulls, with practically no other bones to accompany them, were dug up in the bed of the Walbrook by General Pitt-Rivers and others.<sup>29</sup>

We are presented, then, with a well-nigh insoluble mystery. Whether the author of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* was Geoffrey of Monmouth himself or some curious pseudo-Geoffrey, it remains true that much, if not most, of his material is unacceptable as history; and yet history keeps peeping through the fiction. We can perhaps give Acton Griscom the last word here: 'How much allowance must be made for expansion and embellishment', he wrote, 'is admittedly hard to determine, because, first and foremost, Geoffrey was bent on turning chronicle history into literature.'<sup>30</sup> From the great number of borrowings which, as I point out in my notes, he makes from the *De excidio Britanniae* of Gildas and the *Historia Brittonum* of Nennius, his debt to these two early chroniclers is certainly a considerable one. Some scholars have suggested that our search for sources might well begin and end there.

#### 4. THE WORK ITSELF

In Geoffrey's long and eventful account of the history of the Britons there are, as we have seen, three personalities which dominate: Brutus himself, the imaginary founder of the nation, and the father-figure; Belinus, who, with his brother Brennius, is supposed to have captured and sacked Rome; and Arthur of Britain, with his beautiful

wife Guinevere, Mordred who betrayed him, and his four brave knights, Cadour of Cornwall, Gawain son of Loth, Bedevere the Cup-bearer and the Seneschal Kay. Some 82 pages of the *History of the Kings of Britain*, in this translation of the Vulgate text, are devoted to these three, and Arthur himself fills more than a fifth of the book. In between the adventures of Brutus, Belinus, Arthur, and their supporting chieftains, come a host of lesser figures and a succession of curious episodes: some of them more than touched with reality, others purely fictional; some of them well-known Romans, others half-forgotten Britons, but many of them still familiar enough today to all who are interested in the literature and the early history of our island: the giant Gogmagog; Loctrinus who married Gwendolen but loved the Saxon woman Estrildis; Hudi-bras; Bladud and the founding of Bath; King Lear and his three daughters; Gorboduc; the brothers Ferrex and Porrex; Lud who built London; Cassivelaunus; Julius Caesar; Cymbeline; Claudius; Vespasian; Constantine; King Cole; Vortigern; Hengist and Horsa; Octa; the prophecies of Merlin the magician; Utherpendragon; the moving of Stonehenge from Ireland to Salisbury Plain; the seduction of Ygernia of Tintagel; Loth; Lucius Tiberius; Gormont and Isembard; and, finally, the coming of Saint Augustine.

The first half of Geoffrey's book is a well-ordered chronicle of what might well appear to be remote but nevertheless historical events, were it not for their very strangeness, the imaginative treatment given to some of them, and their factual extravagance in certain fields of history where we are too well informed from other sources to allow ourselves to be misled.

It is not until vi.17 that we read of the discovery by Vortigern's messengers of the boy Merlin, the soothsayer son of an incubus and of a princess who had entered a nunnery, a discovery to be followed a little later by the long interpolation devoted to Merlin's prophecies. If we have been deceived before, and Merlin is the first really other-worldly element in the book, then we now at once realize how far away we are from anything which can ever approach real



history. As a direct result of the magic arts of Merlin, Arthur himself is born, and there follows the most striking part of Geoffrey's *History*: the long series of extraordinary episodes which form the life-history of the most outstanding of all British heroes, from his mysterious conception in the castle of Tintagel to his mortal wounding but not death at the battle of Camlann. After holding our attention for so long, Arthur then steps out of the story as mysteriously as he had entered it. At one moment we are told that 'Arthur continued to advance, inflicting terrible slaughter as he went.' A few lines later Geoffrey tells us laconically that 'Arthur himself, our renowned King, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to' (xi.2). He is never mentioned again, apart from two trifling cross-references in xii.2 and xii.6, until, nearly at the end of the book, the Angelic Voice announces to Cadwallader that 'God did not wish the Britons to rule in Britain any more, until the moment came which Merlin had prophesied to Arthur' (xii.17).

Merlin the magician and Arthur the all-conquering British King: it was these two personages who were to give Geoffrey of Monmouth his place in the development of European literature. 'Here,' wrote Professor Lewis Jones, 'was just what a romantic age was thirsting for, and Arthur immediately became the central figure of the most popular and most splendid of the romantic cycles . . . a hero whose deeds challenged comparison with those of Alexander and Charlemagne.'<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey may be said to have created the figure of the prophet Merlin as he appears in later romance, even though, according to Celtic scholars, it can now be regarded as certain that he derived the outline of the Merlin story from anterior Welsh sources.<sup>32</sup> Behind Geoffrey's new literary Arthur, on the other hand, lies a long tradition of historical references, going back in ultimate essence to the ninth-century chronicler Nennius.<sup>33</sup>

If we leave Brutus on one side, it is an interesting exercise to set face to face Geoffrey's other two major heroes: Belinus, who sacked

Rome, and Arthur, who was forced to turn back when he had reached the passes over the Alps; and then to consider why the former has had no appeal for later writers, while the latter has enjoyed a European, and, indeed, a world, success which still continues unabated today. We must note, first of all, that, as a personality and as a character, Geoffrey's Arthur is nearer to Belinus than is the later and more literary Arthur of Chrétien de Troyes. What is there about Geoffrey's Arthur which was to make him a world figure? In Geoffrey's book, Arthur's story is coupled with that of Merlin; but so was Vortigern's. From his coronation at the age of fifteen Geoffrey's Arthur was all-conquering; but so was Belinus. Arthur fought with a giant on St Michael's Mount; but Corineus had been a famous bairer of giants in his day. Arthur's wife Guinevere was a very beautiful woman; but there are many other striking beauties in Geoffrey's book. The truth is that Geoffrey's Arthur differs from Belinus and the other characters in the *Historia* by the air of other-worldliness and mystery attached to his person from before his birth; by his identification with the new ideal of chivalry in Western Europe, e.g. at the plenary court which he held at Caerleon-on-Usk, and by the attractive, up-to-date nature of his four favourite knights, Cador, Gawain, Bedevere and Kay; by the fact that he did not die, but was carried away to the Isle of Avalon, there to await the moment when he would fulfil Merlin's prophecy by reappearing in history; and finally, most important and pervading all the rest, by the romantic way in which Geoffrey chose to describe his every action.<sup>33</sup>

To help us to accept some of his flights of fancy, Geoffrey has a number of favourite devices. From time to time, he provides cross-references to allegedly contemporary events in other parts of the world, and, in particular, allusions to Old Testament and Roman history. 'At that time,' he adds, when describing the reign of Cunedagius, 'Isaiah was making his prophecies; and on the eleventh day after the Kalends of May Rome was founded by the twin brothers Remus and Romulus' (ii.15). He shows us the extent of his read-

ing by an occasional modest remark about some other historian. 'However, since Gildas the historian has dealt with this quarrel at sufficient length,' he writes of the disagreement between Lud and Nennius, 'I prefer to omit it, for I do not wish to appear to be spoiling by my homelier style what so distinguished a writer has set out with so much eloquence' (i.17). Or again: 'Cadwallader, the son of Cadwallo, succeeded his father in the government of the realm. This was the youth whom Bede called Cliedvalla' (xii.14). Geoffrey's text is larded with toponymic conundrums, made the more exciting by the interlocking of Celtic and English roots. The capital of Britain, for example, according to Geoffrey, was first called 'Troia Nova'. This degenerated into 'Trinovantum', but Lud changed the name to 'Kaerlud' or 'Lud's City', from which last the word 'London' was formed (i.17). As a supreme touch, Geoffrey occasionally rejects some more than usually indigestible story, thus attempting to show his historical sense and to prove to us that there were bounds to his credulity. When discussing the building of the fortress of Paladur, now called Shaftesbury, by King Rud Hud Hudibras, son of Leil, he adds: 'There the Eagle spoke, while the wall was being built. If I believed its Sayings to be true, I would not hesitate to hand them down to history with my other material' (ii.9). This fine show of critical judgement is spoiled by the fact that, at the very end of the *History*, when the Angelic Voice has spoken and Alan of Brittany is called upon to make the fateful decision as to whether or not he should support the exiled Cadwallader in his attempt to recapture Britain, it is to the Auguries of the Eagle that he turns. 'Alan thereupon took a number of books, such as the one about the Auguries of the Eagle which had prophesied at Shaftesbury and those on the oracular Sayings of the Sybil and of Merlin' (xii.18). Once he had translated the Prophecies of Merlin, no doubt Geoffrey's judgement of what was credible or not became less severe.

## 5. GEOFFREY THE ARTIST

Those critics who have studied the *History of the Kings of Britain* down the centuries, from William of Newburgh to Jacob Hammer, have been so preoccupied with the problem of Geoffrey's sources and so anxious to condemn him as a historian, that they have had little time to consider him as an artist.

About his own Latin style Geoffrey is modest, but one senses that his modesty is assumed and that in effect he was pleased with what he had written. To compare his medieval Latin with the classical mastery of Caesar, Cicero or Tacitus is clearly to ask too much. However familiar he may have been with texts written in classical Latin, and however fluently he may have spoken and written medieval and ecclesiastical Latin himself, it is after all a derived tongue which he is using, a second or third stratum overlying what was once a vernacular language, now kept alive as something more artificial. For all that, his vocabulary is extensive and his sentences ring with a note that is vibrant and true, even if their word-order is sometimes nearer to modern French than to classical Latin. According to the changes of circumstance, he writes with a variety of styles, now quiet and descriptive, now impassioned, sometimes in a long and languorous strain, on other occasions with a soldierly pithiness and a terse abruptness. His dullest passages by far are the tortured addresses to Robert of Gloucester, Waleran of Mellent and Alexander of Lincoln. He makes no claim to be a writer of purple passages. '... I have been content with my own expressions and my own homely style', he tells us in his opening dedication, 'and I have gathered no gaudy flowers of speech in other men's gardens. If I had adorned my page with high-flown figures of speech, I should have bored my readers, for they would have been forced to spend more time in discovering the meaning of my words than in following the story.' From time to time he must have put down his grey-goose quill, to pause a moment and savour a more than usually neat expression. 'Among the wise he was himself wise,' he writes of

the youthful Brutus, 'and among the valiant he too was valiant' (i.3). Once, when Arthur had delivered a powerful harangue, Hoel, King of the Armorican Britons, rose to reply. 'Your speech,' he said to Arthur, 'adorned as it was with Ciceronian eloquence, has anticipated exactly what we all think' (ix.17). After all, it was Geoffrey of Monmouth who wrote all these speeches delivered by Arthur and the other chieftains of Britain and Rome.

From the very beginning Geoffrey makes it clear that he is writing to be read by the solitary reader, not to be declaimed aloud in serial form and listened to with less than half an ear by inattentive audiences who come and go and who, indeed, may well vary completely from recital to recital. There are none of the calls for silence so common in medieval vernacular literature, none of the three-fold repetitions felt necessary in the *chansons de geste*. 'If I had adorned my page with high-flown figures of speech, I should have bored *my readers*. . . .' The silent reader is more appreciative of the artistry of the writer than can ever have been the tired pilgrims round their camp-fire on the Via Tolosana, or the young lords and ladies flushed with food and drink who lingered at the high table in the banqueting-hall. What, then, are Geoffrey's virtues as an artist? He has a long and spindly tale to tell, stretching over nineteen hundred years, a period as long as from the death of Christ down to our own decade. J. A. Giles once compiled a family tree of all these Kings of Britain, from Brutus down to Cadwallader: there are no fewer than ninety-nine of them. Yet Geoffrey keeps our interest throughout. With the exception, perhaps, of the interpolated prophecies, the story has a wonderful shape to it. Geoffrey's material is under tight control. He refers to and fro, drops his threads and nimbly picks them up again. No two of his innumerable characters are alike. The tempo of his royal progress varies from page to page. Sometimes we move through a hundred years in almost as many words; at other times the tale stands motionless while Geoffrey elaborates a point or paints a mighty picture. The great panoramas of the later romances are already here, notably the

plenary court at Caerleon-on-Usk. The *History* is a succession of battles no less than a sequence of kings; yet each battle is different, each has its carefully sketched-in backcloth: for example the ambush at the opening to a lush valley in which Belinus caught the swiftly-marching Romans (iii.9), or the sally made by Brutus from the castle of Sparatinum down into the gorge of the River Akalon, where the unarmed troops of Pandrasus were moving up in open order (i.5). For every battle we are, as we have seen, given the most precise information: numbers of men in each division engaged, deployment of cavalry, names of divisional commanders; it might be Livy describing the battle of Cannae. As I have pointed out already, the finer points of circumstantial detail are everywhere set clearly before us. This was to be abused more and more by the later writers of romance, and Rabelais made savage fun of their excesses in his five books.

Geoffrey has few figures of speech. 'The Greeks woke up at the groans of the dying, and when they set eye on those who were about to butcher them they were stupefied, like sheep suddenly attacked by wolves' (i.9). 'Those who were wounded where the battalions met in conflict fell to the ground as if they had been standing corn cut by the reapers' sickles' (iii.3). This is trite enough. He tries apostrophe and the historic present. Where he excels is in his use of direct speech: the exhortation before battle, the *oraison funèbre*, the sober debate in the council chamber. His characters roar and rant, they wheedle and persuade, they are in turn noble or revengeful, magnanimous or implacable. Dialogue, as such, does not exist; but there are interlocking speeches. Much has been written of the psychological treatment of certain characters in medieval writings: the state of mind of Ganelon as he commits the greatest act of treachery since the kiss of Judas; the lament of the Chatelaine de Vergi as she dies of a broken heart. Geoffrey has little time for this. He paints landscapes for us, and now and then seascapes. He never attempts a physical portrait, female or male. There is pathos in plenty, the horror of weltering blood, the gay

colours of the plenary court, the curious plainsong of the prophecies, the other-worldly touches brought by Merlin. There are superb word-pictures, as when Corineus wrestles with Gogmagog on some great windswept cliff in Cornwall and finally hurls the monster 'far out to sea . . . on to a sharp reef of rocks, where he was dashed into a thousand fragments and stained the waters with his blood' (i.16); when Utherpendragon steps out into the dark night on his way to meet the trusting Ygernna in the dim torchlight of her own castle (viii.19); or when Merlin dismantles the stones of the Giants' Ring (viii.11). There is no humour. Geoffrey's young women do not live for us, least of all Guinevere; but two of his old crones stick in our memory, Tonuene, mother of Brennius and Belinus (iii.7) and the hag of the Mont-Saint-Michel. There are giants in plenty, but none of the spiteful little dwarfs and hunchbacks of the later romances.

Three major threads go to form the pattern of Geoffrey's design: the variation of bare genealogy, chronicle entry, dynastic portrait and vast panoramic anecdote; the dominating personalities of first Brutus, then Belinus and finally Arthur; and the gradual crescendo movement up to Arthur's victory over Lucius Tiberius.

How much of all this is Geoffrey of Monmouth and how much the pseudo-Geoffrey, how much is Vulgate text and how much variant version, this can be deduced only from a careful comparison of the two redactions. Maybe Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote them both and was his own double-ganger. J. S. P. Tatlock wrote of the *History* in general: 'It is hard to think of a single medieval work of any extent with such foresighted, indeed classical symmetry; it recalls the structure of good tragedy.'<sup>34</sup> As Robert A. Caldwell concludes, the problem of the two versions 'deserves further study in all its facets. But until it has been demonstrated that Geoffrey was not the father of the work which has so long passed under his name, we may continue to give him the credit for his audacious and brilliant performance'.<sup>35</sup>

In his opening sentence Geoffrey uses the words 'the history of

the Kings of Britain'. It might perhaps be a salutary exercise to pause a moment at this point and to ponder just what he meant by the word *historia*, or indeed what medieval French writers meant by *histoire*, *historie* and *estoire*, all of them so close etymologically to our modern word 'story' and semantically so far away from the modern connotations of the word 'history'. Jacob Hammer traced no fewer than 137 references to the *Aeneid* in his variant version of the *Historia*. Is the *Aeneid* a history? Is the *Odyssey* a history? Are we less ready to criticize Homer and Virgil for the liberties they take with historical fact? For that matter, are we sure that we know exactly what we mean by historical fact? Perhaps if we ceased to think of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* as a history and called it instead a prose-epic, we might be more just to Geoffrey as an artist.

## 6. GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH DOWN THE CENTURIES

Whatever curious elements of truth the book might contain, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* was, as we have seen, severely criticized by more orthodox historians writing well within the author's own century. As romanticized history on the other hand, as a source-book for the imaginative writing of others, as an inspiration for poetry, drama and romantic fiction down the centuries, it has had few if any equals in the whole history of European literature.

The results of the appearance of Geoffrey's *History* in 1136 were immediate and striking. A great number of copies of the text were made. Acton Griscom listed 186 Latin manuscripts which are still extant today, including 48 complete texts and two fragments of the twelfth century;<sup>36</sup> and since he made his list in 1929 a number of other manuscripts have been discovered.<sup>37</sup> A long series of mentions, many of them, it is true, of a deprecating and derogatory nature, began to appear in the Latin, English and French works of the more serious-minded chroniclers of the time, from Robert de



Torigai's *Chronica* down to Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon*.<sup>30</sup> Numerous adaptations and paraphrases were prepared in Latin prose and verse. Next came a succession of vernacular *Bruts*. Apart from the various Welsh versions known as *Brut y Brenhinedd* (the 'Brut of the Kings'), going back to the thirteenth century, the most famous of these are the lost *Estoire des Bretuns* and parts of the extant *Estoire des Engles* by Geoffroi Gaimar, both mid-twelfth century, the *Brut* of Robert Wace and the English *Brut* of Layamon (c. 1200). Meanwhile Geoffrey's *Historia* had begun to be incorporated in the works of a long line of English chroniclers, from Alfred of Beverley, writing c. 1150, down to John Stow at the end of the sixteenth century.

The French writers of romances soon recognized a fellow-spirit in Geoffrey of Monmouth. Between 1167 and 1184 Marie de France was writing her *Lais*, the most clearly Arthurian of which is *Lanval*. Meanwhile Chrétien de Troyes, the most famous of all the French medieval poets who took their inspiration from the *matière de Bretagne*, was composing his long series of Arthurian verse-romances, *Erec et Enide*, *Cligès*, *Lancelot*, *Yvain* and *Perceval*. In France Chrétien was followed by Raoul de Houdenc with his *Meraugis de Portlesguesz*, Renaud de Beaujeu with his *Li blaus Descouneuz* and Heldris de Cornuälle with *Le roman de Silence*; and in Germany by Wolfram von Eschenbach with *Parzival* and by Hartmann von Aue with *Erec* and *Iwein*. In short, the Arthurian verse-romance was soon in full spate. It was not long before this led to a series of prose adaptations, *Le roman de Laurin*, the so-called Arthurian Prose Vulgate and then back again in England to Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* of 1469, between which date and that of Layamon's *Brut* the only English Arthurian work of any merit had been *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight* of 1360-70.

It was in England that had come the first frontal attack on Geoffrey of Monmouth and all that he stood for, this already in the twelfth century, from the chroniclers William of Newburgh and Giraldus Cambrensis. A second frontal attack came from the

English antiquarians of the sixteenth century: Polydore Vergil and William Camden. As far as pure literature was concerned, this second condemnation had the same encouraging effect as the first. A new and lengthy series of works was inspired either directly by Geoffrey, or through Holinshed and the other sixteenth-century compilers. This included Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc* (1565), or *The Tragedie of Ferrex and Porrex*, as it was called in the 1570 version; William Warner's *Albion's England* (1586); Thomas Hughes's *The Misfortunes of Arthur*; Spenser's *Faerie Queene*; Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and *Lear*; Michael Drayton's *Polyolbion* (1612); Milton's *History of Britain* (1670); Dryden's *King Arthur, or the British Worthy*, and Sir Richard Blackmore's *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697). Wordsworth published his *Artegal and Elidure* in 1820 and Tennyson his *Idylls of the King* between 1859 and 1885.

The twentieth century has seen the founding of the International Arthurian Society, with its objective of studying dispassionately all literature devoted to the historical or the literary Arthur. In the 1975 number of its annual bulletin, the Society listed 980 active members in 33 countries and printed a critical bibliography of 424 books, articles and reviews dealing with Arthurian matters which had been published during the calendar year 1974.

More than eight hundred years have passed since Geoffrey of Monmouth finished his *History of the Kings of Britain*. Despite William of Newburgh and Giraldus Cambrensis, in defiance of Polydore Vergil and William Camden, the world of today seems more than ever interested in

The sage enchanter Merlin's subtle schemes;  
 The feats of Arthur and his knightly peers;  
 Of Arthur, who, to upper light restored,  
     With that terrific sword

Which yet he brandishes for future war,  
 Shall lift his country's fame above the polar star!<sup>19</sup>

No doubt much of the influence is now indirect, in the sense that

Tennyson turned to Sir Thomas Malory rather than to Geoffrey of Monmouth; but without Geoffrey's *History* there would have been no *Morte d'Arthur*, and no *Idylls of the King* either.

## 7. EDITIONS OF THE HISTORIA

Anyone who has any dealings with Geoffrey of Monmouth is immediately made aware of the difficulty of finding a reliable version of the original Latin text:

'No critical, or even reasonably accurate text of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* has hitherto been published,' lamented Acton Griscom in 1929. 'The several printed texts . . . are not the accurate reproductions of manuscripts they claim to be; for even the later, nineteenth century, imprints are no more than copies of a sixteenth-century edition, itself full of errors and prepared with an almost total lack of critical judgment.'<sup>40</sup>

'It is deplorable,' wrote R. W. Chambers, 'that we should still be depending for our text of Geoffrey upon the whim of a sixteenth-century printer.'<sup>41</sup>

To some degree this has been put right by Acton Griscom himself, by Edmond Faral and by Jacob Hammer, but much work remains to be done, and much, indeed, is being done at the moment.

There are now in existence eight printed texts of the Latin *Historia*:

1. 1508. Edited by Ivo Cavellatus and printed by Josse Bade in Paris. Cavellatus used four Paris manuscripts, none of which has been identified. He said that he 'collated' them: that is, formed a composite text from them, and then 'corrected' it. Of this editor Acton Griscom wrote: '... his editorial changes, compared with available manuscript evidence, appear in most cases to be downright error. . .'<sup>42</sup> Cavellatus divided the text into nine books and each book into a series of chapters.

2. 1517. A reprint of the text of Ivo Cavellatus, made by Josse Bade in Paris, with a few minor changes in the reading.

3. 1587. Edited and printed by Jerome Commelin in Heidelberg. This is the text of one or other of Josse Bade's two editions, 'collated' with a fifth manuscript, also not identified, which Commelin's acquaintance, Paul Knibbe, had brought from Belgium. Of Commelin's edition Acton Griscom wrote: '... his text is full of obvious misreadings and errors'.<sup>43</sup> Commelin was the first to divide the text into twelve books.

4. 1844. Edited by J. A. Giles and published by David Nutt, London, in the series *Scriptores Monastici*. Despite the protestations of the editor, this version is little more than the Commelin text of 1587, with a considerable number of new errors added.<sup>44</sup>

5. 1854. Edited by A. Schulz, Halle. This is a reproduction of the text of J. A. Giles.

In short, prior to the labours of Acton Griscom, all that the world possessed in print of the Latin text of Geoffrey's *Historia* was the extremely faulty 1508 version of Cavellatus, with various strata of subsequent errors heaped upon it.

6. 1929. Edited by Acton Griscom, London. This is a most careful copying of Camb. Univ. Libr. MS. 1706, with, at the foot of each page, the variants of Berne, Stadtbibliothek, MS. 568 N.I. 8 and MS. Harlech 17, with, beneath that again, a literal translation of the Welsh text of Jesus College, Oxford, MS. LXI. This edition shows the old division into twelve books, for the convenience of cross-reference.

7. 1929. Edited by Edmond Faral, in *La Légende Arthurlenne*, Vol. III, pp. 64-303, Paris. This is Trinity College, Cambridge, MS. 1125, with, at the foot of the page, the variants of Berne, Stadtbibliothek, MS. 568 N.I. 8; Leyden, Univ. Libr., MS. B.P.L. 20; and Paris, Bibl. Nat., f. lat. 6233. Faral's text is not divided into books.

8. 1951. Edited by Jacob Hammer, Cambridge, Massachusetts. This edition offers the variant version as it appears in five rather late manuscripts, variant, that is, in distinction from the standard or Vulgate version of the *Historia*, as explained on p. 16. It is divided into eleven books.<sup>45</sup>

Of these eight editions of the Latin text, only two need be considered by a modern translator, those of Acton Griscom and Edmond Faral, unless, indeed, he wishes to present a composite version, which would be pointless. For my own translation I have chosen to use Griscom's text, that is Camb. Univ. Libr., MS. 1706.

## 8. EARLIER TRANSLATIONS

There exist three English translations of the *Historia*.

1. 1718. *The British History, translated into English from the Latin of Jeffrey of Monmouth, with a large Preface concerning the Authority of the History*, by Aaron Thompson, London, cxi+410 pp. This is a translation of Commelin's 1587 edition, although Thompson claims to have looked at Josse Bade's 1517 edition and to have consulted several manuscripts. At the end of the book is printed an 'Explication of the ancient names of countries, cities, rivers, mountains, etc., mentioned in this history' and then a short index.

2. 1842. *The British History of Geoffrey of Monmouth, in twelve books, translated from the Latin by A. Thompson, Esq., a new edition, revised and corrected by J. A. Giles, London, xxvii+282 pp.*, including an *index raisonné* of 24 pp. This translation was later reprinted as *Six Old English Chronicles*, by J. A. Giles, London, 1848. In his introduction to the 1842 edition, Giles says that 'the translation of Thompson has been followed, revised and corrected wherever the phraseology appeared to be unsuited to the more accurate ears of today'. There is little evidence of correction; but the English has certainly been brought up to date.

3. 1896. *Histories of the Kings of Britain by Geoffrey of Monmouth*, translated by Sebastian Evans, Temple Classics, London, 370 pp., later reprinted by Everyman's Library, London, 1912, xxvi+223+27 pp. This is a translation of the 1854 edition of Schulz, made into curious pseudo-Spenserian English. The Everyman reprint has an introduction of 18 pp. by Lucy A. Paton, a one-page bibliography and a translator's epilogue.

In effect, directly or indirectly, all three of these versions are made from Commelin's very faulty text of 1587. My own impression is that Thompson's translation is by far the most sound. All three translators adopt the division of the *Historia* into twelve books and a great number of chapters. The translations of Thompson and Giles are, of course, out of print. There is no doubt that Evans made much more use of Thompson and Giles than he was prepared to admit. In a number of passages I have doubted Evans's understanding of the Latin; he omitted sentences which he considered unseemly; and I myself find his attempts at period English regrettable. It should be added that in 1963 Everyman's Library brought out a revision of Sebastian Evans's translation, prepared by Charles Dunn, with an introduction by Gwyn Jones.

## 9. THIS TRANSLATION

What follows is a faithful translation into contemporary English of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* as contained in Camb. Univ. Libr. MS. 1706 and as printed by Acton Griscom in 1929. I have omitted nothing. Where the manuscript has an obvious haplography, I have added a few words from Edmond Faral's 1929 edition of Trinity College, Cambridge, MS. 1125, e.g. in vii.4, where *Mox adibit in oculos eius et faciem* becomes *Mox adibit [ipse cadaver et, dum superstabit, anhelabit] in oculos eius et faciem*.<sup>46</sup> Having written the *-bit* of *adibit*, the scribe of MS. 1706 let his eye run on to the last three letters of *anhelabit*, and so omitted six words. English is often much less concise than Latin, so that *In culturas mortallium irruent . . .* becomes *They will sweep down on to the fields which men have cultivated . . .* (vii.4). In many places I have found it desirable to insert pronouns and to repeat proper names, in order to make the meaning clear, and *Salto quoque facto . . .* (vii.4) becomes *Then the Fox will leap at the Boar . . .* On one point I agree wholeheartedly with Sebastian Evans.<sup>47</sup> Where Geoffrey's Latinized names represent persons well-known to English readers, I have printed the standard English form

e.g. *Guenhuueram* (ix.9), *Ganhumaram* (x.13), *Ganhumare* (xi.1) and *Ganhumere* (x.2), in its various spellings and cases, becomes *Guinevere*. Where I have used a Latin name, I have chosen one particular spelling and not departed from it. My index of proper names and place names, on pp. 291 ff. gives full details of the scribal variants.

There has been much debate about the division of the *Historia* into twelve, eleven or nine books, and then the breaking down of each book into chapters.<sup>48</sup> Whatever devices the various scribes and editors have adopted here, it seems reasonably clear that these subdivisions were not made by Geoffrey himself. I have divided my translation into eight main parts, according to the subject-matter, and given a clear title to each part.<sup>49</sup> These titles are repeated as a running-head at the top of my verso pages; and at the top of my recto pages there is printed an indication of the point reached in the narrative; a really full *index raisonné*, the first ever printed of Geoffrey's book, is given at the end of the volume.

Geoffrey of Monmouth was writing for contemporary readers and not playing some curious antiquarian game in his language, as Sebastian Evans seems to have imagined. I have therefore avoided most sedulously such outmoded expressions as *sithence*, *withal* and *albeit*; and I have reduced such mathematical conundrums as 'twice ten cities and twice four more' (i.2) to simple modern figures. From my experience of copying medieval manuscripts I know how arbitrary are the paragraph divisions made by the scribes; and the divisions into paragraphs in this translation are my own. The sole object of my translation is to enable modern English readers who have no Latin, or whose Latin is not equal to the task of struggling with the original, to understand and enjoy a reputable text of the *History of the Kings of Britain*, which R. W. Chambers once called 'one of the most influential books ever written in this country'<sup>50</sup> and J. A. Giles 'a work from which nearly all our great vernacular poets have drawn the materials for some of their noblest works of fiction and characters of romance'.<sup>51</sup>

*'On his head he placed a golden helmet, with  
a crest carved in the shape of a dragon'*

Completed in 1136, *The History of the Kings of Britain* traces the story of the realm from its supposed foundation by Brutus to the coming of the Saxons some two thousand years later. Vividly portraying legendary and semi-legendary figures such as Lear, Cymbeline, Merlin the magician and the most famous of all British heroes, King Arthur, it is as much myth as it is history and its veracity was questioned by other medieval writers. But Geoffrey of Monmouth's powerful evocation of illustrious men and deeds captured the imagination of subsequent generations, and his influence can be traced through the works of Malory, Shakespeare, Dryden and Tennyson.

Lewis Thorpe's translation from the Latin brings us an accurate and enthralling version of Geoffrey's remarkably vivid narrative. His introduction discusses in depth the aims of the author and his possible sources, and describes the impact of this work on British literature.

Translated with an introduction by LEWIS THORPE

P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

Cover Detail from a  
14th-century French manuscript  
by Robert de Barron, showing  
King Arthur in combat, in the  
Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris  
(photo: Bridgeman Art Library)



Penguin Literature

UK £12.99 CAN \$25.00 US \$19.00

ISBN 978-0-140-44170-3



5 1900



9 780140 441703