EDWARD THE CONFESSOR AND THE NORMAN CONQUEST

NINE hundred years and a few weeks have elapsed since the death of Edward the Confessor, the last English king descended directly from Cerdic, king of Wessex in the sixth century—and so from the pagan gods. Nine hundred years are a long time; and if Edward had been succeeded by a son, or if his actual successor, Harold, had won the battle of Hastings, it is doubtful whether later generations would have paid much attention to his reign or person, even more unlikely that he would have obtained any place at all in popular history and tradition. Edward, as we know him, is a creation of the Norman Conquest. In fact the Conquest led to the creation of two Edwards—the saint in the ecclesiastical legend and the friend of Normandy in the political legend. These two legends are not basically connected. By simplifying, we can say that the legend of Edward's holiness and justice derived at least its popular support from native English feeling—it was the work of the conquered—whereas the political legend was purely a creation of the conquerors. But it is doubtful whether the ecclesiastical legend would have flourished without the support it was able to derive from the political legend. Normans could accept Edward's sanctity more easily because they believed that he had been a friend to their cause, a kinsman and benefactor.

I have already published my views on the ecclesiastical legend, and have lectured often enough on that subject. Here I will neglect it, except where it is relevant, and confine myself primarily to the problem of the part that Edward played in the events which led to the Norman Conquest. If I were setting an examination paper I might ask the crude question, 'Did Edward deliberately scheme to make William his successor?' I would not, however, wish for a short answer. In historical research it is naïve to expect to find simple answers to simple questions. Clio is not a simple and straightforward

young woman. She prefers her 'buts' and 'ands', her 'perhapses' and 'may-bes'.

I do not, in any case, believe that a straight and assured answer to this question is possible. The basic difficulty lies in the nature of the sources of our information. There is, first of all, the unsatisfactory nature of all early-medieval sources; and then there are the particular problems presented by the evidence relevant to our subject.

Let us look first at the general hindrance to understanding the politics of eleventh-century princes. Contemporary writers, usually monks, always members of the clergy, are most unreliable on character and almost useless on motives. They offer us puppets, types, in which we cannot believe. They provide us with no basis at all for a sophisticated discussion of attitudes, intentions, or policies. The images are too coarse to stand up to projection or detailed analysis. An historical novelist can try his hand; but the professional historian usually winces at the result. Moreover, the contemporary writers were unashamedly biased; they were not writing history as we understand it today: they usually had an ecclesiastical, occasionally a political, purpose. In the saint's legend, Edward is drained of every aspect which does not suit the theme of sanctity, and, where the historical story was deficient, holy deeds and attributes were invented. Saints' lives were for edification; they contain only vestiges of historical fact. Likewise, the political legend was created for a definite purpose—to show how Edward had planned William's succession. And so a few facts, true or false, were put together to make a case, while whole areas of Edward's career—everything irrelevant to, or awkward for, the case—were disregarded.

We have already moved into the particular problems posed by the sources for Edward's reign. We have two legends and, unfortunately, almost no material with which to correct those simplifications. There are no relevant records, no treaties, not even a chronicle giving the English point of view, which could serve as a corrective to the Norman *apologia*.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is almost useless for this purpose. Although we only have versions which were assembled after the Conquest, there has been little tampering with the annals out of which it was composed. The annals for 1042 to 1057 were first written down before the Conquest, and, although those for 1058 to 1065 were compiled probably after 1066, the annalist never interpreted the past in the light of the future. The events of 1066,

therefore, cast no shadow over the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for Edward's reign. The annalist does not give an English view of the steps which led to the Conquest. The invasion comes out of the blue. If he explains the Conquest at all it is attributed to Harold's misfortune at the battle of Hastings. Moreover, the annalist was completely uninterested in Normandy. In the period 1042 to 1065 there is only one significant reference to Normandy in the annals, and this may be mistaken. Of foreign countries the annalist was interested only in Scandinavia and Flanders.

In short, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us nothing at all about Anglo-Norman relations in Edward's reign. This silence does not prove that the Norman story is false. There must have been some diplomacy between the two courts. But the silence is at least cautionary. It does seem to show that one well-informed Englishman regarded such diplomacy as of little interest; and it does suggest that England could not have been permanently rent by the rivalry of pro-Norman and anti-Norman factions, a view which has been in fashion since, at least, Freeman's study of this period.

Let us now turn to the unsupported and unverifiable Norman story. This legend was created after 1070 with the purpose of explaining, justifying, and immortalizing the Conquest. William of Poitiers, who wrote his history of William, duke and king, between 1072 and 1074, used as literary sources William of Jumièges' brief account of the Norman dukes and probably a poem on the battle of Hastings, possibly composed by Guy, bishop of Amiens. These literary accounts, primarily William of Poitiers', were utilized by the designer of the Bayeux Tapestry. About Anglo-Norman relations before 1066 they all tell basically the same story. It is a story they took one from another, or from some underlying common source, now lost. The repetitions are, therefore, no confirmation of the truth of the story. These apologists produced a legend acceptable to their patrons and their people. Although its version of the events cannot be corroborated from enemy or neutral sources, there is no good reason for thinking it completely untrue. But when we consider its purpose—justification and self-congratulation—we would be gullible to swallow it whole. Indeed, historians would be happy to be spared it. We have no justification of the Scandinavian invasions of England in the ninth century, little justification for their invasions in Æthelred's reign. Without this Norman case William's expedition in 1066 would be just another in the long series of invasions of

Britain since the beginning of historical time, and would probably be explained by some historians in economic terms: a Norman aristocracy, impoverished by its growing numbers, needed larger estates. Others would look for Cleopatra's nose.

The Norman justification is short and can easily be summarized. Edward, because of his kinship to William and the many benefits he had received during his exile in Normandy, decided to appoint William as his heir. The English magnates agreed, and swore to uphold this act, and the grant was conveyed by Robert of Jumièges, archbishop of Canterbury. We can, therefore, date this alleged act 1051. Later, to confirm the grant, Edward sent Harold, earl of Wessex, to Normandy; and Harold became William's vassal and swore that he would do everything in his power to secure the execution of the bequest. The likeliest dates for this alleged embassy are spring 1064 or spring 1065. However, on Edward's death, Harold broke his oaths to God and the duke, and nefariously took the throne for himself. William, therefore, invaded to destroy the perjured intruder and obtain his legal inheritance. When Harold was killed at the battle of Hastings, God showed which claimant had justice on his side. Only one complication is allowed in this simple story. William of Poitiers admits (and the Bayeux Tapestry seems to follow) that Edward, on his deathbed, bequeathed the throne to Harold. Naturally the chronicler introduces Harold's case only in order to refute it. Harold's acceptance of the bequest was not only criminal but also invalid owing to his earlier engagements to the duke. Moreover, Harold never became a true king, for he had not been elected by the people and was crowned by a schismatic and excommunicate archbishop. He was nothing more than a cruel tyrant whom it was laudable to kill.

The diplomacy contained in this story cannot, as I have said before, be corroborated. The most one can say is that there is nothing impossible in the Norman account—no anachronisms—and that there are domestic English episodes which give it some support. The year 1051, the year in which, according to the Norman story, Edward adopted Wiliam as his heir, saw also the visit of Count Eustace of Boulogne to Edward's court and the rebellion of Earl Godwin. In 1052 Godwin returned from exile by force and expelled a few Normans, including Robert, archbishop of Canterbury. It is possible to treat the English and Norman accounts as two sides of the same story. Then there are some obscure remarks in the *Vita*

Ædwardi Regis about Harold's behaviour and continental journeys, which could refer to his visit to Normandy at the end of Edward's reign.

Yet, even if we accept the two facts, Edward's bequest of the throne to William in 1051 and Harold's diplomatic mission to Normandy in 1064 or 1065, we are still not thereby compelled to accept the Norman case. Two isolated acts subtracted from the whole complicated web of Edward's diplomacy may give a very misleading picture. The very fact that some of the Norman apologists themselves were prepared to admit that at the end Edward ignored these acts and nominated Harold as his successor should put us on guard. The only way to judge the Norman story is to consider it within a general view of English diplomacy and England's and Edward's interests as they developed during the twenty-three years of his reign.

In the first half of the eleventh century, in the period of renewed Scandinavian expansion, the English court had to keep a close watch on the Viking rulers and close contact with those powers which could check or hinder their raids, principally Germany, Flanders, and Normandy. A friendly Flanders was considered the real key to England's security; but, as Flanders was usually hostile, it was vital to deny the Norman harbours to Viking raiders; and so King Æthelred, Edward's father, soon established diplomatic relations with the Norman court. The diplomatic advantage was with Normandy; Æthelred was the petitioner; and he had to pay for the alliance. In 1002 he married Emma, the sister of Richard II, count of Normandy, apparently on condition that the descent of the English crown would be limited to their offspring. After Cnut, the Dane, had usurped the English throne, he too was allowed to marry the now widowed Emma, apparently on the same condition. Thus the Norman court offered England help against Viking raiders in return for a spindle interest in the English crown. But, although two of Emma's children, Harthacnut and Edward, reigned in turn, all her sons were childless; and before she died in England in 1052 she must have realized that the Anglo-Norman dynasty, which she had founded, was going to die out. But she had plenty of Norman kinsmen; and what was more natural than that her great-nephew, William the Bastard, Edward's cousin-once-removed, should aspire to be recognized as the heir to the ageing king. Once Æthelred and Cnut had married Emma, Norman interest in the English crown was

lively and persistent. The Norman Conquest can be explained, simply and persuasively, in these dynastic terms.

It is likely, indeed, that William schemed to succeed Edward and importuned the king to acknowledge him as his heir. Naturally there is nohing of this in William of Poitiers. The duke's panegyrist never portrays his hero as a petitioner: he is always the recipient of flattering offers. We will be more realistic; and what we would like to know is how Edward viewed Norman ambitions. One way of approaching this problem is to try to answer some specific questions, especially those raised by the Norman case. Was Edward a devoted son of his Norman mother? Did he love William as a brother or son? Was he grateful to the Norman court for its generosity and assistance? Was it his desire when king to enrich his maternal kin in England? Did he wish William to succeed him on the throne? William of Poitiers would answer all these questions, except the first, which he does not raise, with an assured 'yes'. My answer to most of them would be 'no'.

Normandy was certainly a refuge for Æthelred, Emma, and their children in 1013 when Svein of Denmark got control of England. But once Svein's son, Cnut, had established his power, the Norman court made terms with the usurper. Emma married the new king, abandoned the interests of her first brood, and fixed her ambitions on her children by Cnut. Was Edward grateful to her? All we can say is that once he had become king, after Harthacnut died, he gathered the earls together, marched on Winchester, and deprived his mother of all her possessions, because, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, she had disregarded his interests. True, Edward soon pardoned her. He may have reflected that she had, after all, not completely forgotten the existence of her eldest son. But we can hardly believe that their reunion after a cold separation of some twenty-five years was a touching scene or that there ever developed much intimacy between them.

Did Edward love William as a brother or son? In 1041, when Edward left Normandy for England, William was about thirteen years old. Doubtless Edward knew the boy; but we have no idea at all what Edward was doing during William's dangerous minority. We are not told that he helped the young count in any way; and it is difficult to imagine how William could have aided him. If Normandy was really as turbulent as later observers described it, Edward may easily have spent this time at other courts. Once

Edward left Normandy he probably never met William again. Even if he loved his young cousin in 1041, did he still love him in 1051, ten years later, and in 1065, a quarter of a century after their last meeting? Such things are possible. But Edward seems to have made and discarded friends fairly easily. So long an attachment seems out of character.

Was Edward generally grateful to his mother's kin? Did he remember with constant gratitude the benefits conferred on him by the Norman comital family? He had certainly found a safe refuge in Normandy. If Cnut had demanded his assassination as a dangerous pretender, the request had not been allowed. But Edward could with justice hold that until Cnut's death, and the unexpected collapse of the Danish dynasty in England, the Normans had favoured the usurpers who were depriving him of the throne that was his by inheritance. Rancour, rather than gratitude, is a more likely attitude.

In fact, Edward, after he became king, did little for his more important Norman relatives. He had ceased to be much of an Englishman and in England preferred to have foreigners around him; but Normans were always a small part of this foreign group. To concentrate attention on these few men, because later there was a Norman conquest, is completely to falsify the situation. At Edward's court were Germans, Lotharingians, Flemings, men from Ponthieu and the Vexin, Normans, and Bretons. The only foreigner he made an earl was his nephew, Ralf, the son of the count of Mantes, not a Norman. Robert, abbot of Jumièges, was for a time a close friend, but was not a kinsman.

William of Poitiers explains Edward's lack of generosity to Normans as forced on him by the English magnates, who strictly controlled the number of Normans in his household. There may be something in this. We learn elsewhere that the earls insisted that Edward should marry into one of their families. But when we reflect on all the circumstances and consider all the evidence, we may well decide that the Norman apologists greatly exaggerated Edward's love for Normandy. He possibly had the typically ambivalent attitude of many expatriates, both towards the country of his exile and the country of his birth. Possibly he had become rootless, discontented, mean, and irascible. Scraps of evidence can be produced in support of each of those disagreeable qualities.

Finally, was it Edward's constant desire that William should succeed him on the English throne? Unless our interpretation is

completely wrong we can hardly answer 'yes'. After Edward had punished his mother, almost his first act was to take an English wife. Even if he had little interest in women, even if he had become accustomed to the life of a bachelor, even if the marriage was forced on him by the counsel of the earls, the purpose of the union was to produce an heir to the throne. Those who had secured the restoration of the Old English dynasty were tired of dynastic revolution: it jeopardised their power. They wanted a future assured by the promise of a male heir. Edward and Edith cheated their hopes. We do not know where the fault lay. Both the English and the Norman ruling families were usually prolific. Æthelred had at least ten children by his first wife and three by Emma. Emma was one of a family of at least eight. Likewise Edward's wife came from a large family, and her elder brothers were fertile. But there were occasionally unexpected dead ends in such flourishing dynasties, and it may be of no significance that only one of Emma's five children, the fruit of two marriages, had offspring. In any case there seems to be insufficient evidence here for a genetical theory. All that we can safely say is that an exogamous marriage, which aroused no speculation at the time, was unexpectedly—and, for the English nobility, tragically—barren, and that, because of the consequences, after Edward's death mythical reasons for the tragedy were invented. Men could not explain the event by God's punishment of the wicked, for the view was forming that Edward and Edith had been an exemplary pair. Medical knowledge was rudimentary, and, in any case, medieval man had little interest in natural causation. So fanciful explanations began to circulate. William of Malmesbury, writing in the twelfth century, reports two of the theories: that Edward had lived a celibate life because of his piety, or that he had refused to consummate the marriage because he hated his father-in-law, Earl Godwin. Both seem to be equally ridiculous.

Thus, it is most likely that, until the marriage was proved unfruitful, Edward expected to be succeeded by a son. But once it became probable that no child would be born, an heir had to be selected from the many collateral branches of the royal family. The theoretical number of possible claimants was immense. The problem was far more involved than that of the succession to the Scottish throne in Edward I's reign. And there could be no Edward I, with his posse of counsellors and lawyers, to adjudicate on the claims. There was no question in the eleventh century of determining such

a difficult problem by the strict law of hereditary descent. Such an academic exercise would have occurred to no-one. Choice would be made of a suitable adult kinsman who was acceptable to the English magnates. This attitude considerably narrowed the theoretical field. But if no generally acceptable nomination could be made, or if the chosen heir could not be put in an impregnable position—ideally by associating him with the kingship before Edward died—then the door would be wide open for a coup d'état, civil war, even invasion.

It was a nasty cloud on the horizon. And those who kept their weather eye open must have feared the storm which one day might rage. Still, it is unlikely that Edward, or his courtiers, were constantly worried by the future. Edward often reminds me of Charles II, a king resolved never to go on his travels again, anxious to keep his belated honour at any cost, fully enjoying the present, and careless of long-term policy. It is likely that it was the claimants themselves who were most interested in the succession. If so, Edward had a useful diplomatic asset. He could always dangle the promise of the succession to steady an ally or neutralize an enemy. We are told that on different occasions Edward promised the succession to Svein Estrithson, king of Denmark, William of Normandy, Edward 'the Exile', and Harold, earl of Wessex. We know that his court was visited by many suitors or their envoys. Eustace, count of Boulogne, another brother-in-law, and Walter, count of the Vexin, another nephew, may have had hopes. Walter died in one of William's prisons, some believed poisoned by the duke. Eustace invaded England on his own behalf in 1067. Svein of Denmark tried several times to wrest the English crown from William.

Although there were many possible pretenders, some historians have believed that William was always in Edward's mind and that other claimants were favoured only when Edward was acting under duress, especially when controlled by Godwin, earl of Wessex, or his sons. This seems to be too simple an explanation. A more realistic interpretation would be that Edward offered William the throne whenever he particularly wanted a Norman alliance. This appears to be so in 1051, when Edward's action can be plausibly explained with reference to the diplomatic situation in north-west Europe. In that year, Edward, and England, desperately needed Norman benevolence. And I believe the Norman story that the English earls, including Godwin of Wessex, were fully committed to Edward's diplomatic move. But I doubt whether anyone, at least on the

English side, expected the promise to be honoured. Edward was still on the right side of fifty; William was in the hazardous early twenties, frequently on campaign. Much could happen before Edward died.

By 1064 or 1065, however, the position was quite different. And if we believe the Norman story that at this time Edward sent Harold to William in order to renew his promise of the crown and enter into binding engagements to ensure William's succession, we must take this offer far more seriously. But here we have the difficulty that we have no context in which to consider it. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle provides only sparse information for the period 1057-65. A Norwegian fleet, under Magnus, the son of Harold Hardrada, attacked western England in 1058; but we are ignorant of any military danger or diplomatic crisis in 1064 or 1065 which would help to explain a new approach to Normandy. The Norman explanation of Harold's embassy was that Edward was reaching the end of his life. Although Edward's closeness to death proved to be true, and it may have been obvious that the king's years, if not his days, were numbered, Edward was by no means in his dotage and remained active until the end. Another difficulty about the Norman explanation is that William was not invited to become an associate king. Edward himself had been recalled to England in 1041 on these terms, and as a result had managed to succeed a year later without bloodshed. If Edward or his *witan* were convinced that the throne would soon be vacant and wanted to be sure that William then took peaceful possession they can hardly have overlooked the obvious steps they had to take. The only reference we have to even a symbolic investiture is in the untrustworthy *Carmen de Hastingae proelio*, where there is mention of a ring and a sword which Edward sent to William through Harold.

All the same, Edward could not have been expected to last more than another five years; and, if the succession problem was under discussion in 1064-5, William's claims could not have been ignored, for the ranks of the possible claimants had been thinned. Edward 'the Exile', indeed all the king's nephews, were dead; Queen Edith's nephews were infants. Edward seems never to have cared much for Svein of Denmark, the queen's cousin, and he had no interest at all in Harold Hardrada, king of Norway. William of Normandy had survived to become the only possible adult dynastic claimant—apart from the queen's brothers.

We can only speculate about the hopes of these. Harold forced, or allowed, Tostig to go into exile in the autumn of 1065. The two brothers may have been rivals or have held different views on the succession. Since Harold acted decisively in 1066 we must believe that in 1065 he was planning to succeed his brother-in-law. How, then, can we explain his willingness to carry out Edward's plans in that, or the former, year? The only explanation offered by a contemporary is contained in some general remarks in the *Vita Ædwardi:* Harold was a skilful dissembler; he cunningly studied the character, policy, and strength of the French princes, and could not be deceived by any of their proposals. He was too ready with oaths, but passed through all ambushes with watchful mockery, as was his way. If we may give these observations a point, we could think that Harold carried out his mission light-heartedly, taking pleasure in deceiving his host while he discovered his plans, enjoying the adroitness with which he escaped from the various traps into which he fell. 'Harold', wrote the anonymous author of the *Vita Ædwardi Regis*, 'unlike his brother Tostig, not only persevered with his intentions but also enjoyed himself *en route*.' He may well have enjoyed making a fool of William.

The hatred of Harold shown by the earliest Norman apologists is understandable. Harold seems completely to have deceived the unsuspecting William. He was even able to get Edward's death-bed bequest of the crown. Edward was dying of a stroke and for days was unconscious or delirious. It is most doubtful whether, by modern standards, he was capable of making a valid will. But, paradoxically, his state of mind made the bequest particularly valid according to the ideas of the time. Edward was experiencing visions; he believed that for a moment he had risen to heaven only to be snatched back for an instant to the terrestrial world. He nominated Harold as his heir while his soul hovered between this world and the next. Not even William of Poitiers dared question Edward's testamentary capacity. The bequest was invalid only because Harold was barred from accepting it. It was as though Edward was nominating a monk or a dead man as his heir.

What part, then, did Edward play in the Norman Conquest? Obviously his most important contribution was his failure to beget a son. But not even the Norman apologists suggested that Edward deliberately declined paternity in order to pass the crown to William. Indeed, the Norman writers omit direct reference to Edward's

marriage. It was one of those awkward facts which did not fit their case.

It is when we advance beyond this factual point that different opinions, based on different interpretations of Edward's character and policy, can be held. My own view is based on Edward's recorded acts and the non-hagiographical parts of the *Vita Ædwardi Regis*, the earliest account of the man. I see no evidence for believing that Edward was meek and mild, a devoted kinsman, a man grateful for past benefits, a man true and loyal to his friends through thick and thin. Edward had not known a happy, settled childhood; he had never been properly educated to rule; he had spent most of his life in poverty, spongeing on relatives. Until he was forty he was a somewhat unadventurous adventurer. Cheated of his father's throne by the treachery of his mother and the neglect of his mother's kin, living in obscurity from hand to mouth, without, so far as we can see, a landed estate which would have enabled him to marry, doubtless passing his time in hunting and minor warfare in the train of his hosts, what sort of behaviour should one expect from such a man, when, in middle age, he unexpectedly inherited great honour and great wealth? Did he become a new man, generous with his new riches, forgiving to those who had neglected him, constantly anxious to adopt as his heir a remote kinsman to whom he seems to have owed no debt of gratitude, whom, indeed, he may have known far from well? Is it not more likely that he used his new power so as to demonstrate his power, to show that the suppliant had become the master?

Edward became a target for fortune-seekers of every kind. He made strong friendships, although none lasted long, and he made gifts to many of those who solicited them, although seldom of great value. All contemporaries seem to agree that the queen, Edith, was more generous than he. There are indications that Edward was much like his father, Æthelred, a man of whims, a man, possibly, of cruel humour. It is told that in 1051, when Earl Godwin begged him for permission to prove his innocence of the murder of the king's brother, Alfred, with which he was charged, Edward offered him this mode of proof: that Godwin should restore to him his brother and the others who had been killed, together with all their goods. Bishop Stigand wept as he pronounced this judgment; Godwin mounted horse and fled. If Edward in his later years saw that all his nephews were aspiring to succeed him, what more

amusing than to play them off against each other? If he realized that his brothers-in-law were jockeying for position, what more amusing than to needle their rivalry? And if he judged that Harold was getting the upper hand, what more amusing than to send him to Normandy in order to promise the succession to William? This view may be a caricature, even fanciful. But the other interpretations of Edward's behaviour seem no less fanciful to me.

I believe in effect, that Edward made almost no positive contribution to the Norman Conquest. The principal causes of that event were Æthelred's marriage to Emma, Edward's childlessness, and William's determination to press his claim and his ability to destroy or keep at bay those of his rivals who had not already disappeared from the scene. In the course of this lecture I have asked many questions and tried to answer them. I will conclude with one, which I will not answer, for it epitomises my position. Would William have invaded England on Edward's death even if Edward had given him no encouragement at all? I will leave that question to be answered by you.