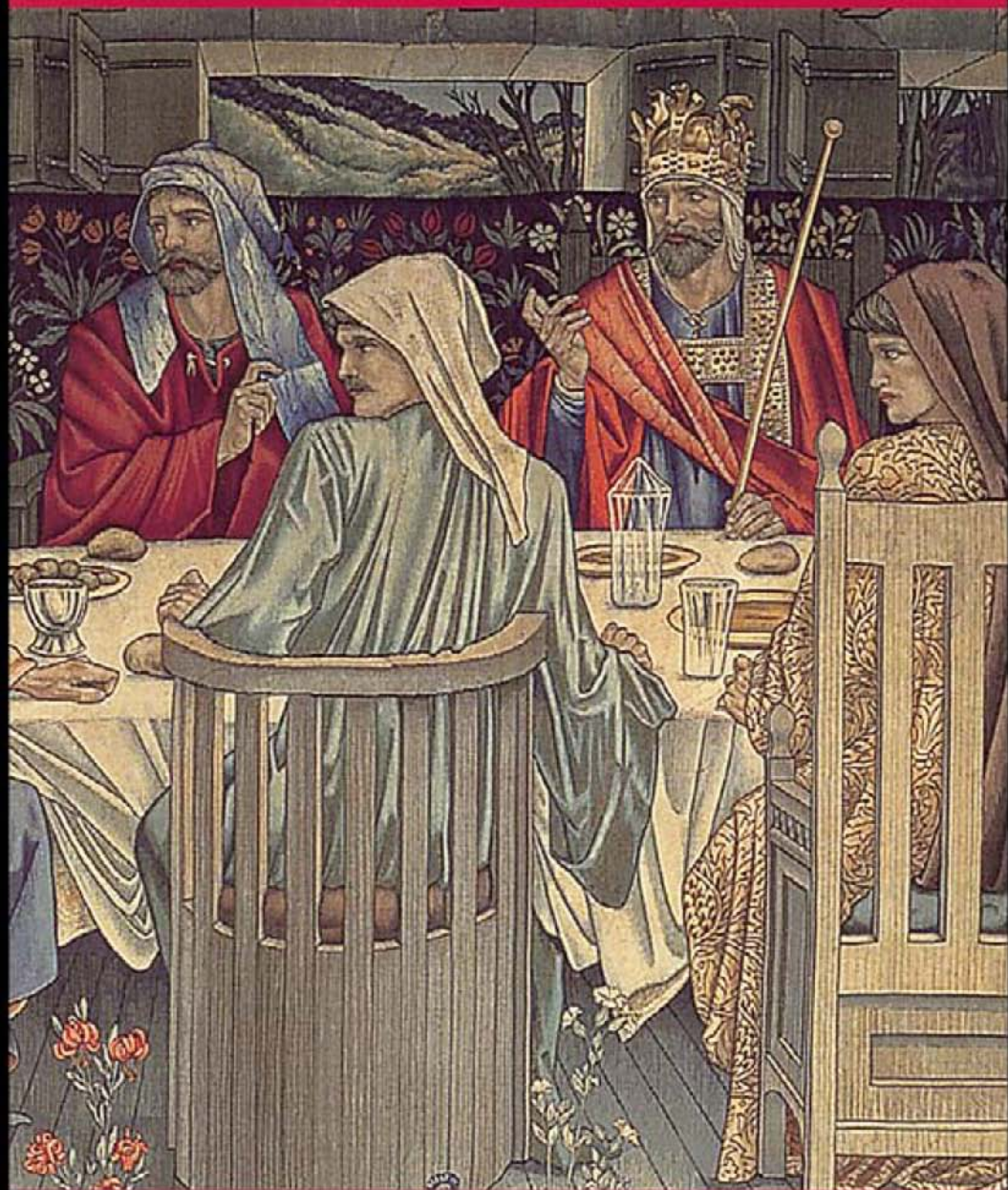


N. J. HIGHAM



KING ARTHUR

MYTH-MAKING AND HISTORY

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N. J. Higham



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INTRODUCTION



The candid historian must admit that the evidence on the subject . . . is meagre, relatively late, and almost wholly fantastic.

(Bruce 1923: 1)

The past century, or so, has witnessed a considerable, and on occasion quite vehement, debate concerning whether or not King Arthur actually existed. On the one side, belief in Arthur as a real figure in real time and space has become deeply entrenched. On the other, several scholars have urged caution or even sought to argue the negative, that no historical Arthur ever existed. There is obviously a great gulf between these two positions, but not even the ‘real’ Arthur positivists are in any sort of agreement. Some have proposed imperial Arthurs, whose power waxed and waned over the whole island, while others offer lesser kings of petty polities at various dates and in several different regions of Britain. Lying behind this debate are a host of issues about local and regional identity and Arthur as a ‘Celtic’ (versus ‘English’ or ‘Germanic’) icon. Beyond those, even, is the entire mercantile perspective, within which Arthur’s name, recognition and reputation are used to brand anything from lottery tickets and hotel rooms to bells and bangles – and books, of course. Arthur’s Camelot has been used variously by Hollywood and by novelists, and to promote a particular cult of the White House under J. F. Kennedy. While most historical debates never impact outside of professional circles, the issue of Arthur is distinguished by its very public nature and wide resonance.

On the face of it, the longevity, robustness and popularity of this debate may seem surprising. On the basis of textual evidence, Arthur was widely considered implausible as an historical figure in the late Victorian era, when he was most often interpreted in mythological terms as a Brittonic culture-hero or demi-god. Even those late nineteenth-century historians who considered Arthur potentially historical conceived of him as a figure of little relevance to the dominant historical enterprises of the day. Their principal interest in the early Middle Ages lay in seeking in the past the unique qualities of the English people and their institutions, to legitimize and underline

current self-perceptions of political, colonial, cultural and economic power and identity. Such ‘truths’ as might be deemed capable of underpinning elevated conceptions of Victorian civilization were sought primarily in the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic past, rather than Romano-British or British ones (Frantzen 1990; for further discussion see Chapter V). This powerful, Anglo-Saxonist and imperialist enterprise necessarily had little occasion to acknowledge an Arthur who, if he existed at all, did so merely to oppose the great destiny of the Germanic peoples in Britain, and threaten the historical continuum linking the Anglo-Saxon settlement with the Victorian establishment. He seemed, therefore, an aberrant figure swimming against a tide of history which was flowing ever onwards towards English civilization, and a British Empire which its apologists claimed was promoting that civilization on a global scale.

Four factors, above all others, undermined the racially framed perceptions of the past which so characterized the Victorian and Edwardian ages: two world wars fought against Germany took a heavy toll of the entire Anglo-Saxonist/Germanist historical enterprise, driving a great wedge between the patriotic vision of what it meant to be British and its roots in a Germanic past; the loss of world empire and both political and economic leadership thereafter, combined with new immigration particularly from the new commonwealth, undermined both the myth of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and the search for that superiority in a Teutonic prehistory, to be replaced by the new causes of multi-culturalism and racial integration; finally the gradual dismantling of social and political privilege – with universal adult suffrage, for example – required and validated a host of new historical enterprises, underpinned by a greater variety of theoretical positions, which challenged and eventually overwhelmed the centrality of national and institutional histories within the narration of the past.

The reappearance of an historical Arthur has been one by-product of these several processes (Chapter I). In some respects this might have been anticipated, since the Arthurian and *Brut* (the myth of Trojan descent) historical traditions were central to the perception of history and its writing in southern Britain (in particular) from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, when a new interest in the Anglo-Saxon past re-emerged. Yet this post-war rebirth occurred despite the wholesale demolition of the Arthurian historical mythology which had already been achieved, for example, by Polydore Vergil, under the early Tudors. Few have argued recently that there is anything particularly historical about Geoffrey of Monmouth’s, or later medieval Arthurs. Notwithstanding this, earlier texts from the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries have been read and reread, compared and picked over for evidence of a ‘real’ Arthur. The result has been the re-emergence of debate concerning a fifth/sixth-century historical reality for a figure first encountered in a ninth-century text, the *Historia Brittonum* (‘History of the Britons’), a work written for highly contemporary and political motives in Gwynedd c. 829–30 (see

Chapter III). There are plentiful voices, of course, warning against the acceptance of ninth- and tenth-century writings on their own as adequate evidence for the fifth and sixth centuries (Dumville 1977a; Sims-Williams 1983; Yorke 1993). Yet the very vagueness of our only relevant, contemporary author (Gildas), and his admission that the Britons achieved some temporary successes in war against the Saxons, provided an opportunity in the twentieth century, much as he did in the ninth, for those who wished to construct an ‘historical’ Arthur in the decades around 500.

To take a seminal example which is quoted at the opening of this introduction, Professor J. D. Bruce (1923) wrote the key study of the early evolution of Arthurian literature prior to that edited by Loomis (1959). On the first page he expressed incredulity concerning the case for a ‘real’ Arthur in Dark Age history, but then, on the very next page, inclined himself to view Arthur as historical. Such suspensions of disbelief have continued to resurface throughout the century and even beyond: King Arthur remains an extraordinarily persistent presence, not just as a literary construct that transcends time but also as an historical figure who requires discussion – or at least refutation – in attempts to write the history of the fifth and sixth centuries.

The current status of the ‘historical’ Arthur debate is, therefore, our starting point, which the initial chapter of this book will survey across the twentieth century. Arthur’s triumph came briefly in the 1960s and 1970s, when insular history was reshaped around him, but the vehemence of criticism then derailed the enterprise in academic though not in popular circles. Thereafter, the struggle over Arthur’s reality and place in history continued to be fought throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This has, however, been a phoney war, with academic historians in general confining their work to journals and articles and being unwilling to acknowledge or engage with the large and enthusiastic ‘real Arthur’ literature, which has, therefore, tended to monopolize (alongside Morris 1973) the considerable market in historical, Arthurian writing.

The present work will, however, make no effort to judge between one ‘real’ Arthur and another, let alone propose another variant. Rather than continue to address questions concerning Arthur’s historicity, it will be proposed that a focus instead on the *idea* of King Arthur and its shifting utility in different texts has greater potential to carry forward our discussion of the past into fruitful areas. This *idea* of Arthur has been one of the most persistent and powerful in Western culture over the last millennium, at least, and shows little sign now of abating. It has had successive transformations, each refashioned to conform to the world-picture projected by a particular author writing for a particular élite at a particular time. Each Arthurian manifestation therefore reflects the way in which a particular author and his or her audience thought to fashion their own conceptions of the past, so as to benefit their own positioning in the present. It is in this process of interaction between various presents and their pasts that Arthur has been conceived and utilized ever since the ninth century.

For what? The major constant in these successive constructions is Arthur's usefulness as a means of envisioning Dark Age history from a particular and highly contemporary standpoint, which has had some potential to empower significant figures in the present – the author and his or her audience among them. When all these visions are considered as a group, it becomes clear that questions about ethnicity, group identity and nationality are commonly at issue. To be interested in Arthur is to be interested in how 'Britishness', 'Englishness', 'Welshness', 'Cornishness', 'Scottishness', and so on, have been constructed and successively revalued, both in the present and in many pasts. We cannot divorce an examination of Arthur from the investigation of how and why he has been constructed through time.

The basic issue is worth emphasizing. We are confronted by an accumulation of opinion that the Arthurian legends, in the earliest manifestations which can be identified, contain inherent historical meaning capable of both recovering and displaying a 'real' figure of the past, in an appropriate and verifiable historical context. The principal agreed methodology is careful exploration of the origins of the extant texts, their textual histories and the histories of whatever putative underlying texts it is imagined (or even occasionally demonstrated) that their authors might have used, but barely any two authors agree on any particular reconstruction of Arthur. The least disputed message coming out of this debate is the recognition that outcomes have always been contested, and that the evidence for Arthur is so ephemeral that it needs only differences of approach or different historical agendas for the resulting narratives to be contradictory (Shichtman and Carley 1994). There is nothing particularly remarkable about this, since historical writings are often mutually combative regarding re-envisioning the past. However, in the case of Arthur every single aspect of his characterization even down to his very existence is at issue, which could not be said of disagreements regarding Napoleon, for example, or Alexander the Great. To debate Arthur is closer to discussing the historicity of Christ than arguing about most figures of the past. There is an unfathomable depth to the disagreements, therefore, and no bedrock of universally accepted dates, places or events on which all concur. Put simply, an overview of the historical literature reveals a plethora of historical Arthurs, but no one safely recoverable, historical Arthur, of whose historicity, dates and locality we can be confident and on which all will agree.

If this stance seems an abnegation of responsibility on the part of an historian whose own interests do cover this so-called 'Arthurian period', I apologize. However, the evidence to sustain this view is not hard to find. I quote numerous mutually conflicting opinions in Chapter I, and offer in Chapter V a brief survey of insular, historical treatments of Arthur from Geoffrey of Monmouth up to the Victorian period. With little exception, it must be stressed that those whose work is explored enjoyed access to the same principal texts, or, at the very least, to secondary works based on those texts. Their differences of opinion concerning the historicity of Arthur and, if

historical, his dates, activities and whereabouts, cannot derive primarily from the source materials themselves. Rather, attitudes towards historicizing King Arthur depend far more on the thought world occupied by the writers, and the meaning which Arthur has for them in their several presents, than on the texts *per se*.

There is nothing very novel about this, since history has long been characterized as an engagement between the present and the past, even without getting too deeply into debates about ‘pastism’ and ‘presentism’ (Biddick 1998). Differences on either side of this temporal equation will necessarily impact on the history being conceived. All histories can be thought of as attempts to influence or persuade contemporaries, written so as to change the present, as Foucault famously recognized. In this sense, the writing of history is both a political and a cultural act. A perception of history which centres on its contemporaneity, its potency and its utility, is at least as pertinent to the more distant as the recent past, and thus to the pre-Conquest period. Within the insular early and central Middle Ages, that history was written for contemporary political and cultural purposes has been widely acknowledged, but not so widely accommodated, with texts still often quarried for ‘facts’ or ‘events’, without much attempt being made to understand the viewpoint and objectives of the author. The historical perspectives of both Gildas and Bede have been particular victims, as are the *Historia Brittonum* and *Annales Cambriae* (the ‘Welsh Annals’) – the works of Hanning and Dumville being the long-standing exceptions. Writers of the early Middle Ages have now, in contrast, begun to be read in very different ways, with the construction of histories and chronicles, for example, being viewed as political and ideological action, rather than the passive recording of events (e.g. McKitterick 1997; Hen and Innes 2000). The time is ripe for a reconsideration of the whole question of Arthur’s treatment in (primarily Latin) texts of the central Middle Ages, what he was used for and what he was constructed against. Given the texts involved, this exploration leads inevitably into issues about the constructions of ethnicity with which the authors were familiar, and how they proposed to effect those constructs. Chapter II begins, therefore, with a review of how ‘Britishness’ and to a lesser extent ‘Englishness’ were constructed prior to the writing of the *Historia Brittonum* in the early ninth century, in ways which impacted markedly on that author’s text.

Stories about Arthur have also been woven into the topographical and antiquarian perceptions of the ‘British’ world, from southern Scotland to Cornwall. This seems to have occurred over a very long period, which stretches up to the present, making the early stages in the process difficult to distinguish and to interpret. Whether this Arthur, the superhuman demi-god, folk-hero, giant or force of nature, or the Arthur of historical literature came first is an issue which has repeatedly been raised and on which there are diverse opinions (most recently see Padel 1994, whose excellent study leaves little to add in this area). However, this polarization of Arthur between historical

figure and force of nature may ultimately be unhelpful, if the ‘historical’ is as much a cultural construct as the elemental. It may be more useful to view both as complementary (and to an extent contemporary) manifestations of Arthur as a multi-purpose figure capable of being used in many theatres as a means of explanation. This occurs most obviously in the landscape, where Arthur’s agency is invoked as interpretation of some unnatural or awesome feature. But it is equally pertinent in terms of moral justification or repositioning within salvation history – hence the Dark Age historical figure. The distinction between historical character and folk-hero is a modern phenomenon, which would have had little relevance in the central Middle Ages.

As an historical or historicized figure, Arthur was constructed initially within the context of the *Historia Brittonum*, a redemptive narrative written in northern Wales c. 829–30 (the author offered 831). A fundamental part of this text was necessarily a defensive review, from a British perspective, of the moral, political and military meaning of the Anglo-Saxon settlement (see Chapter III). Writers in the central Middle Ages were aware that Britain had been a long-held part of the Roman Empire. They also knew that Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had successfully supplanted indigenous control of much of it thereafter. Indeed, Anglo-Saxon kings were still then pushing their authority ever further into British-held territories.

There was plenty of room for manoeuvre. These medieval scholars were writing history to contest and appropriate memory, to own the past and drape it in particular colours for present purposes (Geary 1994). The *Historia Brittonum* is all too often treated as a rather poor attempt to *record* the past, badly flawed, yes, but an attempt nonetheless. Rather, it should be seen as more polemical than historical reconstruction in any modern sense, and as constructed for recoverable, contemporary political, cultural and ideological purposes. The anonymous author has set about ordering the past for the sake of contemporary authority (and therefore power). Like Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* (commonly termed the ‘History of the English Church and People’), to which it is in part a reaction, this work offers a grandiose historical framework, couched in moral and providential terms. It is an explanatory narrative, or what postmodernists call a ‘metanarrative’, written from within a very specific ethnicity and in part at least against ‘Others’. It offers an historical plot capable of joining together the past and the future into a seamless robe, which is continuous and purposive in relation to issues in the present. It uses historical figures, certainly, but its author’s objective was to make a political case and the past is reformed in that image, with characters and their deeds treated as highly malleable in the process. How Arthur was used within this text was crucial to the author’s binary division of current society between ‘British’ and ‘Saxon’. However, the great ‘truth’ which the author was seeking to address through this text was not so much the historicity or otherwise of Arthur but the particular place of his own, ‘British’ people in salvation history, in the past, the present and the future.

Arthur has been one of the most deeply contested historical ideas thrown up by insular history. One aspect of that contest is the delay before his historicity became embedded, even in a Welsh context and even despite the political triumph of the second dynasty of Gwynedd, for whom this icon was initially developed. He is, for example, omitted from the early to mid-tenth-century British polemic *Armes Prydein* (Williams 1972b), which offers two other early British champions famed in poetry and legend as exemplars of military leadership in the great enterprise of ejecting the English (see pp. 191–2). Nor was Arthur included in many of the royal genealogies as those developed during the ninth and tenth centuries – that of Dyfed is the only one to use the name and had arguably done so already long before the *Historia* was written. Perhaps Arthur’s mythological and topographical connections and his lack of any known claim to royalty at an early date rendered him unattractive in this regard (Padel 1994). He does feature, however, in the *Annales Cambriae*, written in tenth-century Dyfed, and in several works of Latin hagiography written in or shortly after the eleventh century (for the texts, see Wade-Evans 1944; the dating issues were addressed first by Tatlock 1939). The author of the *Annales* arguably based his Arthur on that of the *Historia* (see Chapter IV) but made subtle alterations, again for particular political purposes relevant to the time of composition. In the later hagiographical texts, Arthur’s role has little of the moral authority invested in his characterization by the author of the *Historia Brittonum*, for the purposes of these authors were very different, being to glorify the individual saint and so reinforce a local authority and history particular to the cult at a time when that was in question. Other characters were necessarily diminished morally in consequence, and Arthur seems to have been utilized as a type of secular figure of power (hence a king), so necessarily quite local in context, against which to pit the saint (Loomis 1933). He does have a martial role in, for example, the *Life of St. Cadog*, wherein his protection is highly rated, but this Arthur is a lascivious figure reined in from satisfying his lust only by the protests of his followers. He is, however, a king in these works, for the first time in the literary record.

The very diversity of evidence, and the lack of consensus in the central Middle Ages as now, are important features in the modern perception of Arthur’s role in history. It is this very fuzziness which has, in turn, provided space and opportunity for numerous reformations of the central stories. We have profited enormously from such works and it is largely these which will carry an interest in, and hunger for, Arthurian stories into the future. T. H. White’s *Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlyn*, for example, combined to construct what was ultimately a great tragedy, but one of great wit and warm humanity, which was founded primarily on Malory’s late fifteenth-century *Mort d’Arthur*. The author’s perception of the warfare of his own time, which overshadowed and charged his authorship, makes this again a highly contemporary reworking of the legend. It may well be its later, Disney cartoon version, however, that will be, for most of this generation of

undergraduates, their initial introductory text to Arthurian literature. For others it will be films such as *Excalibur* or *First Knight*. Had Arthur's position in history been clearer, the suspension of disbelief necessary to accommodate each different story line would have been more difficult. It is far harder to construct attractive, imaginative stories which are capable of capturing the imagination around Alexander the Great, for example, or Edward I, than Arthur, since periodically all which is obviously fanciful is cut away by the historian. That said, there are signs that the plasticity of Arthurian ideas had begun to fail by the later sixteenth century, when Spencer and others were attempting once more to rework the legend for current political effect, bringing a distinct lull in the literary exploration across several generations.

The key question addressed is not, therefore, 'Was Arthur an historical figure?', to which a wide range of answers are on offer, although I shall return to this issue very briefly in the epilogue. There is far more to be said in the context of the contemporary cultural and political utility of Arthur as portrayed in early insular sources, and that is the focus of the current work. The central issues are: 'What role was Arthur intended to perform, why was he utilized in texts of the central Middle Ages, and what did he mean to both authors and their audiences?' Within the confines of this present work, this exploration replaces the historicity of Arthur as the central matter of debate. Discussion focuses instead on the textual evidence reflecting political and cultural worlds in which allusions to Arthur were perceived as valuable. By this means we have an opportunity to explore the genesis of the *idea* of Arthur and his meanings as projected by different authors for themselves within their own time frames.

It is only fair to state at this point what this volume will not seek to achieve. During the later Middle Ages (c.1150–1480), the idea of Arthur was a major focus of stories which were told, written, listened to and read from Iceland to the Mediterranean (e.g. Loomis 1959, but see Dean 1987 for a minimal picture). Clearly this theme attracted some extremely talented writers and story-tellers and the excellence of much of their output added new layers to Arthur's popularity in several languages. Additionally, Arthurian stories were sufficiently flexible to adapt to the changing cultural and social needs of Western Europe post-1100 – and the very absence of a powerful historical framework arguably aided and abetted this process considerably, in contrast to the stories surrounding, for example, Charlemagne. The Arthurs of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes, for example, are in many respects twelfth-century figures, exemplars of kingship for the new and much romanticized realm of knighthood, inhabiting a world opened up by crusading and by the carriage of Frankish culture into Britain, Sicily and the Holy Land by (*inter alia*) Norman adventurers. His court, which eventually went by the French name of Camelot, played already by the eleventh century an important part in capturing stories which may earlier have been independent (see, for example, *Culhwch and Olwen*). The congregation at Arthur's court of droves

of characters was clearly a useful mechanism by which to position particular stories within the wider repertoire. This work will not stray far into the world of Arthurian culture and medieval literature (post-1000) and its criticism (see, for example, Barron 1989, 1999; Patterson 1987; Bromwich *et al.* 1991; Warren 2000, and their bibliographies). This is a vast subject, which cannot be covered effectively in this short volume. It will, therefore, (somewhat regretfully) be passed over at great speed (in Chapter V) or omitted altogether, with no more than a very basic sketch of the development of the political cult in England. The reasons are simple: this work focuses on pre-Galfridian Latin ‘historical’ works and the ways in which they characterized Arthur for their own purposes. Once Geoffrey’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* and its numerous spin-offs in several languages had become accepted as the central, authoritative texts on early British history, the pre-Galfridian, British histories were rarely consulted until the Renaissance, so they had little direct impact on the historicization of Arthur during the Middle Ages. Furthermore, the discussion of post-Galfridian Arthurian literature is a highly specialized area of study which this author cannot hope to engage with effectively.

This book has been written, therefore, primarily as an investigation of the nature, role and purposes of Arthur in the pre-Galfridian Latin texts, and the way that different generations of historians, both then and thereafter, have chosen to portray their Arthurs within the intellectual and political perceptions which conditioned their purposes in re-envisioning the sub-Roman past in Britain. Within this framework, it will be suggested that Arthur was initially developed in a ‘Dark Age’ context as a martial and Christian leader to contest visions of a cowardly and immoral British people, and a race excluded from salvation history. The strategy was empowered by the fact that such concepts, inherited by the author of the *Historia Brittonum* from Gildas and Bede, respectively, were inimical to the self-perceptions of his audience – that is of King Merfyn of Gwynedd and his supporters. The author sought to develop and then privilege a particular nationalist, ‘British’ identity to the advantage of this political faction. This was necessarily in opposition to the ‘Englishness’ of Bede’s work and was intended to contest the centrality of Anglo-centric visions of providential history within Britain. Investment in ‘British’ identity was a fundamental part of political and cultural resistance to English conquest and Anglicization, and marks the commitment of this élite to such resistance. The separate existence of Wales is a lasting testimony to their achievement.

This work is written from a fundamentally sceptical viewpoint, and thus outside of any assumption *ab initio* of an historical Arthur during the fifth or sixth centuries. However, it is far more an exploration than a negation. It seeks, most of all, to offer new theories about how we should read the two particular texts which are fundamental to each and every argument about Arthur – the *Historia Brittonum* and *Annales Cambriae*.

A KING OUT OF TIME

King Arthur in the twentieth century



It is difficult to say anything precise about the Arthur of history.

(T. Jones 1964: 3)

The historicity of Arthur has been deeply contested across the twentieth century. The roots of that debate lie, inevitably, in the previous epoch, which will be explored in Chapter V, but the discussion is of such significance to this work that the past 100 years or so are surveyed at this point, so that they can act as an introduction to the issues discussed in greater detail in Chapters II, III and IV.

The dominant voices in late Victorian perceptions of the insular early Middle Ages – Freeman, Stubbs, Green, and so on – focused on Anglo-Saxon England, and sought to demonstrate that their own, present community, its institutions and its very bloodlines, descended directly and predominately from the English settlement. It was initially Welsh and Scottish scholars who began to contest what they interpreted as glib and racially motivated, Anglo-centric dismissals of such issues as Dark Age British resistance to the Anglo-Saxons, which they in turn wished to own. The historicity of Vortigern and Arthur was inevitably involved. During the nineteenth century, Welsh medieval literature was gradually being made available in new editions and translations, which offered a considerable opportunity for the historian and literary scholar. William Skene's massive work of translation was published in 1868, containing numerous texts which could be viewed as Arthurian, and he offered a sketch of the historical framework in which he believed they should be contextualized. Skene provided a discussion in some detail of Gildas (the fifth- or sixth-century British author of *De Excidio Britanniae* – 'Concerning the Ruin of Britain'), whose historical sequence he challenged, and the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* ('History of the Britons', which was until recently believed to have been written by Nennius). He proposed a Saxon conquest as early as 441, on the basis of the 'Gallic Chronicle of 452', against which the Britons then appealed to Aëtius, the imperial general active in Gaul from c. 430 to 454. Unlike Robertson, who had already published on Scotland's history in 1862, Skene gave considerable credit to the *Historia*

Brittonum, and therefore to the historical Arthur, whom he thought of as a quasi-Roman military commander of cavalry. His argument has a ring made familiar by later reiterations:

There is always some substratum of truth on which the wildest legends are based, though it may be so disguised and perverted as hardly to be recognised; and I do not hesitate to receive the Arthur of Nennius as the historic Arthur, the events recorded of him being not only consistent with the history of the period, but connected with localities which can be identified, and with most of which his name is still associated. That the events here recorded of him are not mentioned in the Saxon Chronicle and other Saxon authorities, is capable of explanation. These authorities record the struggle between the Britons and the Saxons south of the Humber; but there were settlements of Saxons in the north even at that early period, and it is with these settlements that the war narrated in the *Historia Brittonum* apparently took place.

(Skene 1868: 50–1)

Writing in Scotland, Skene had his own reasons for preferring a northern – even a Scottish – context for Arthur. He was not alone in this endeavour, for this was also being suggested by J. H. Burton (1873), the Historiographer-Royal for Scotland, and, in 1869, Stuart-Glennie in turn claimed to be the first to have made the connection between southern Scotland and Arthur on topographical grounds. Skene's interpretation of the names of Arthur's battle list in the *Historia Brittonum* was heavily influenced by this northern preference. Indeed, he offered a vision of Arthur's wars, complete with lines of attack, which took him far beyond the sources. For all that, his critical evaluation of the historical evidence to be found in Old Welsh poetry was the first for two generations and offered a new beginning, particularly for non-Welsh-speaking scholars. This approach was to have a profound impact over the next two generations, as various different visions of Arthur began to spread outwards from Celtic studies to be embraced by a much wider scholarly community.

This was also an era of enthusiastic folklorists (see Dorson 1968), and this proved a second and rich source of Arthur stories to be considered in any discussion of the historicity of Arthur. Sir John Rhys (1891) recognized the problems of reconciling the widespread but generally localized Arthurian legends with the scanty pre-Galfridian texts (the so-called 'historical', Latin texts which predate Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* in the twelfth century) and suggested that we need to think in terms of two Arthurs. One was the by now commonplace Brittonic divinity who was a 'Culture Hero' or 'Celtic Zeus'. Rhys's was the academically respectable end of a growing literature on Arthur and many other Celtic hero-figures – the

entire round table catalogue of knights were included on occasion – which argued that their proper place lay within a mythological perspective. But Rhys's alternative Arthur was envisaged (much like Skene's) as a military leader of the Britons in the fifth century, who might have been a late Roman-type *Comes Britanniarum* in charge of the island's field forces.

The folkloric model of Arthur has since proved a very influential, if much contested, one. Perhaps the strongest case for the 'mythological Arthur' from the first half of the twentieth century was that of Malone (1924), who approached the issue from the perspective of a philologist and argued that Arthur and Uther were not only both mythological culture heroes but identical ones at that. He was, however, also prepared to speculate regarding an early historical origin (Malone 1925), suggesting the officer Lucius Artorius Castus, a Dalmatian career soldier who commanded VI *Victrix* at York and is known to have led a force from Britain to Armorica (Brittany) in a thoroughly Roman, punitive context, in the second half of the second century (pp. 75–6). This Artorius offered, Malone suggested, remarkably close parallels to the Arthur of later legend. An origin for King Arthur in the second century also circumvented the obvious difficulty that no historical writer between 400 and 820 actually names Arthur.

Malone, therefore, followed Rhys in constructing a dual Arthur – a popular device at this date which was also used of both Gildas and St Patrick, to quote just two parallels. In many respects, the twentieth-century debate was to be characterized by the contest between the historical Arthur as Roman-type commander and the mythological Arthur, with the advantage going to the historical model within a few years of Malone's contributions.

Speculation that an historical reality might well lie behind the legendary Arthur marks a very different approach from the Anglo-Saxonist vision developing across the nineteenth century. This hypothesis was to become the central dictum of Dickinson's review of Arthur (1900), which opened with the words: '*Ex nihilo nihil fit*' ('From nothing nothing comes'). Dickinson argued forcefully that the later legends pertaining to Arthur *must* have some foundation in an historical figure, and he sought this prototype in several localities. He preferred a northern Arthur for the battle-list of the *Historia Brittonum* (after Skene) while focusing otherwise very largely on the south-west peninsula, on the basis of later legendary material local to Cornwall. Dickinson was unusual, at that date, in giving considerable space to topographical and archaeological evidence, so offering discussions of Tintagel, Damelioc Castle and Castle Killibury, for example, as possible 'Arthurian' sites.

In two respects this work lays down important markers for the development of Arthur as an historical figure during the course of the twentieth century. First, Arthur was most commonly to be a figure who emerged at the ragged interface of history and archaeology, rather than specifically from one discipline or another. Second, this revival was characterized by a growing interest in, and willingness to rely on, much later, folkloric, Arthurian stories.

That development could not flourish, however, until the racial constructs and theories in which English history had been enmeshed throughout the nineteenth century had begun to dispel, and this was to prove a long and fitful process, stretching into the second half of the twentieth century and beyond.

The great *History of Wales* published in two volumes by John Edward Lloyd in 1911 represented a highly scholarly approach to Welsh texts, which both encapsulated historical thought to that date and made an enormous contribution in its own right. Lloyd could, for example, review a total of seven editions, publications and/or translations of Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae*, culminating in the authoritative work of Theodore Mommsen in 1894, which was reprinted with an English translation by Hugh Williams in 1899. Lloyd was as patriotic as other contemporary historians, but he was a Welsh patriot, writing against the dominant portrayal of the Welsh as the marginalized losers of insular history, and demanding that a higher value be attached to those whom he perceived as his own ancestors. So Lloyd resoundingly rejected the Gildas-originating vision of feeble Britons incapable of contesting the loss of Britain:

The facts are that the Picts and the Scots were kept almost entirely out of the province and that the Saxons only effected a lodgment in it after a long struggle; obscure as is the history of the period, it may be regarded as certain that the place of the Roman legions was taken by a fairly efficient fighting organization.

(Lloyd 1911: 99)

Lloyd would have found it harder to reach this conclusion had he not assumed, along with the generation before (e.g. Skene 1868: 44) that the place-name and inscriptional evidence for Irish influence in (largely) western Wales reflected an indigenous occupation left over by an early westerly wave of Celtic migrations. In practice, of course, this evidence needs to be viewed in the context of new interconnections with Ireland in the late Roman and post-Roman periods, but his position otherwise presages that of several later scholars. He was highly dubious about the relevance of Arthur to Wales, but looked favourably on the suggestion that he might have been a successor to the late Roman Count of Britain. With some provisos, he placed an historical Arthur, and Vortigern, in the south-east, and argued that the comparative lack of residual information in Wales about his contest with the Saxons was consequent upon a division of the military command of the Britons into two. For Lloyd, Wales lay in the northern and western half of the diocese, where the principal business of British generals was successful warfare against the Picts and Scots. As part of this, he envisaged that the period witnessed a war which 'secured a lasting [British] supremacy throughout Wales' (p. 111). For westward migration from the lowland zone he argued persuasively that 'there is no evidence whatever', so contesting one of the principal paradigms

of contemporary English visions of the Dark Ages and threatening long-cherished and highly valued visions of Germanic racial purity in England. The only option left to those requiring a ‘pure blood’ style of English settlement was wholesale slaughter on the improbable scale envisaged by J. R. Green in the 1870s and 1980s (p. 261).

Lloyd’s historical perception differed dramatically, therefore, from those of English contemporaries. He rejected the English vision of universal British political and moral collapse, which was necessary to the ‘clean slate’ vision of English origins. This he replaced with a regional narrative of conquest and achievement supportive of Wales-centric history, beyond which England – and with it Arthur – could for the time being be largely ignored.

Lloyd’s strategy had little attraction for the mainstream of Anglo-centric writers, of course, who, even despite the massive shock administered by the Great War (1914–18) to their Germanist vision of insular history, continued for the moment to reiterate their collective acceptance of a wholesale British military collapse in the face of Anglo-Saxon warriors penetrating deep into western Britain in the great raid ‘from sea to sea’, which had been referred to by Gildas, with or without ‘their half-mythical King Arthur’ (as summed up by the great Whig historian, Trevelyan 1926: 37).

The most incisive, and complete, single contribution to the debate about Arthur of this period was Chambers’s book-length work in 1927. This might fairly be described as the first modern study of the place of Arthur in British history. Chambers’s approach was to explore Arthur as a cultural and literary phenomenon and he tried to avoid committing himself in any particular direction within the historical debate. He exploited instead Arthur’s special place in ‘the historical imagination’, and acknowledged that Arthur was widely perceived as:

the legend-hung champion of a dying order, through whom we reach back, beyond the advent of the chill barbarians from the north, to the slow spread of Mediterranean civilization by the shores of the Atlantic, and to that *pax Romana*, of which this island was the ultimate outpost.

(Chambers 1927: 1)

It is important to recognize the extent to which Chambers attempted a critical analysis. He retained a degree of scepticism as to the reliability of ninth-century writings when putatively describing the fifth and sixth centuries, and an even more pronounced atheism regarding later accretions to the legend. Chambers attempted an historical discussion of the textual sources available for the fifth and sixth centuries in some detail, which recognized (p. 181) the complete absence of any reference to Arthur in Gildas’s *De Excidio Britanniae*. He was, however, inclined towards an exceptionally early date for a prototype of the *Historia Brittonum*, imagining that such might even have been the work

of St Paulinus in the early seventh century, and so credits that text with greater historicity than scholars would now accept. He also commented on the difficulties posed by archaeological dating to the notion of British control of the southern lowlands of the diocese in the mid-fifth century, but was insufficiently confident of the evidence to make as much of this issue as one can today.

Chambers was very aware of the difficulties he faced when postulating an historical Arthur, remarking that:

Beyond the bare notice of Badon, the reports lack confirmation. The most that history can say is that they are not inconsistent with what we do know of the period to which they relate. I hope to show that it can say that. But it amounts to little, in view of the obscurity which envelopes the fortunes of the island during the greater part of the fifth and sixth centuries.

(Chambers 1927: 169)

For all his caution, Chambers was inclined to accept the historicity of an Arthur figure, imagining him opposing Saxon conquests from the Thames valley, operating perhaps from the legend-enshrined South Cadbury. He surveyed in addition the widespread occurrence of Arthur-names in the countryside of Celtic Britain, in an attempt to identify from that evidence some hint as to where Arthurian legend had originated, but found it too widespread to offer any solution. Indeed, he could do little more than express bewilderment as to the occurrence of localized stories in Scotland, where he felt (p. 196) that there was a distinct lack of literary connection of Arthur even with British Strathclyde. He surveyed, as well, the battle names, in particular exploring the numerous suggestions so far made concerning the locality of Badon, in search of a southern theatre for Arthur's activities, but could offer no firm conclusions in most cases. He also noted the several occurrences of the name Arthur in insular dynasties (pp. 169–70) at around 600, without passing judgement on what light (if any) these might shed on an earlier Arthur figure.

At the same time, Chambers took issue (pp. 206ff.) with the mythological interpretation of Arthur, and with current attempts to parallel him with such figures as the Irish Fionn (attempts which would be reinforced by Van Hamel 1934). This is not to say that he disputed that there might be mythological elements in the various late stories circulating around Arthur, merely that he did not accept that Arthur's origins lay in this sphere.

Chambers's work was produced just before a new edition of the primary text (Harley 3859) of the *Historia Brittonum* was published as part of his great study of Arthurian materials by Edmond Faral in 1929, with a commentary which outlined, *inter alia*, the relationship between Gildas's description of Ambrosius Aurelianus and the subsequent wars with the Saxons and the *Historia's* construction of Vortimer's wars. Like Skene, Faral postulated a northern theatre for Arthur's battles.

It is difficult to offer a consensus within this debate at the end of the 1920s, but, on the whole, establishment historians remained unimpressed by the historicity of a great King Arthur figure and of any serious opposition to the foundations of England. However, students of late Roman Britain were increasingly prepared, on the evidence primarily of the *Historia Brittonum*, to accept the existence of some sort of ‘chieftain of mixed Roman and British parentage who had learned the art of war from the Romans and successfully led the forces of the British kings against the Saxon invaders’ (*Encyclopedia Britannia*, 14th edn, 1929: II, 461). Otherwise, Arthur was, in the same text and despite Chambers’s recent efforts, considered the stuff of ‘prehistoric myth, a hero of romance, and a fairy king’, so a figure primarily for literary critics and mythologists rather than the historian. The dual Arthur was established, therefore, and a platform constructed on which an historical Arthur could begin to take shape.

The debate was to shift dramatically in favour of an historical Arthur during the late inter-war years, with the publication of three seminal works by distinguished scholars of the new, more critical school of history and textual study. The first out was volume one of a three-volume work by Hector Munro Chadwick and Nora Kershaw Chadwick titled *The Growth of Literature* (1932), the principal focus of which was comparative literature. In important respects, their offering should be viewed as seminal in the development of textual deconstruction as applied to medieval texts. The Chadwicks made no attempt to disguise their own historical concerns and they discussed the problems posed by texts such as the *Historia Brittonum* as historical sources. They particularly highlighted many of the weaknesses of the approaches then widely used by historians, which can best be described as synthesizing or reconciling. This practice involved (and still involves) different texts being ransacked for individual facts and dates, all of which could then be combined in a new narrative without explicit notice of the ultimate purposes of these snippets of information within the narratives from which they derived. They noted, for example, the significant discrepancies existing between ‘Arthurian’ material in the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae* (‘Welsh Annals’), both in the MS Harleian 3859 text, and they highlighted the ‘complicated literary history’ which apparently underlay the *Historia Brittonum* (pp. 146–57). It was the Chadwicks who first suggested that a Welsh catalogue-poem might have been used in compiling *Historia Brittonum* 56 – the list of Arthur’s putative battles – and suggested that this was unlikely to be trustworthy as an indicator of Arthur’s locality. In addition, they remarked:

For Arthur we have not been able to find any contemporary, or indeed any very early direct evidence. The *Historia Brittonum* shows that he was famous in the first half of the ninth century. The entries in the *Annales Cambriae* (517, 538) are independent of this, but their

antiquity cannot be proved; and the same may be said of certain references in the poems.

(Chadwick and Chadwick 1932: 161)

That said, they were impressed by the appearance of the name Arthur within several royal dynasties, and argued (p. 162) that ‘its wide currency towards the end of the sixth century must have been due to some famous person of that name in the near past’. For the Chadwicks, the name was certainly the Roman *Artorius*, and they felt that the pattern of Roman naming only comparatively early in surviving British genealogies (now see Bartrum 1966, 1983) should favour a date for Arthur in the first half of the fifth century. They clearly favoured an historical Arthur, therefore, but the greatest achievement of the Chadwicks was to offer a real advance in textual criticism, which historians thereafter ignored at their peril.

By far the best-known work of the 1930s, however, is *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, written primarily by R. G. Collingwood, but with an addendum on the Anglo-Saxon Settlement (book V) by J. N. L. Myres, published in 1936 as the first volume of the newly conceived and highly ambitious Oxford History of England. The structure of this great work reflects precisely the very different conceptions and moral values of Dark Age history, with its fault line dividing the Roman and British-centric major part of the work from the very different research styles and world of knowledge of Myres’s contribution on the English settlements.

Collingwood was the most erudite figure ever to have tackled the subject of Roman Britain, writing at a time when it was still possible to be master not just of its history but also its historical archaeology, all alongside his role as a leading academic philosopher. He made every effort to make sense of the fifth century, adopting a profoundly reconstructionist approach. For Collingwood, part of the puzzle lay in the archaeological record, which had to date revealed (Collingwood and Myres 1936: 318) a wholesale but peaceful evacuation of settlements. Where did the population go? The notion of a mass migration westwards was as implausible to Collingwood as it had been to Lloyd. Apart from some departing for Brittany, he postulated that ‘the greater part of them were absorbed by degrees into the population of the English settlements’, while those of the highland zone simply stayed put. He was comparatively sanguine about the historicity of Gildas’s account, proposing Ambrosius Aurelianus as a war-leader about 470–80 and suggesting that such monuments as the Wansdyke should be viewed in the context of this era.

Collingwood was prepared to treat Arthur as historical on the basis of an only slightly more cautious reworking of Dickinson’s reasoning, on the basis of what has since come (after Dumville 1977a: 187) to be called the ‘no smoke without fire’ school of history. He concluded that an early version of the *Historia Brittonum* had been used by Bede, and so must be comparatively close in date to Arthur’s putative lifetime, and argued for the independence

from it of the *Annales Cambriae*, so supposing that references in these texts to Arthur's role in the battle or siege of Mount Badon confirmed one another:

That there was such a battle, and that it resulted in a British victory of so crushing a nature that for at least forty-four years afterwards the Saxons never took up arms again, is beyond question: Gildas, a contemporary witness, is our evidence.

(Collingwood and Myres 1936: 320)

Although Collingwood was unimpressed by the argument that 'the bear' and 'the bear's stronghold' (in *De Excidio Britanniae* xxxii, 1) alluded to Arthur (his name means 'bear-man' in Welsh), if only because his association with Mount Badon stretched the chronology too far, he preferred to leave open the issue of whether or not Gildas referred to Arthur. However, even without that important testimony: 'the historicity of the man can hardly be called in question'. For Collingwood, the sheer quantity of material (which he never actually discussed but treated as if impressive enough for this conclusion *en masse*, without comment) later accruing to the literary character implied that Arthur was as real as, for example, Alexander or Aristotle: 'The place which the name of Arthur occupies in the Celtic legend is easiest to explain on the hypothesis that he really lived, and was a great champion of the British people.' Again, like the Chadwicks, he saw this fifth-sixth century figure as Roman-named, so likeliest from 'a good family in one of the *civitates* of the lowland zone'. Collingwood concurred (albeit without reference to previous adherents, such as Zimmer 1896) with the developing vision of Arthur as a *Comes Britanniarum* of the fifth century, commanding mobile troops – primarily heavy cavalry – whom he brought to the aid of British kings in their struggles against the Saxons. This persona, he felt, helped explain the apparent ubiquity of his fame within the British community. Since so many of his reputed battles – as listed in the *Historia Brittonum* – are obscure and difficult to place, he argued that they were probably factual. Indeed, he followed Skene (1868) and Crawford (1935), in treating the battle-list as historical and argued that Arthur's last battle at Camlann (unnamed in *HB*, see *AC* 537) should be interpreted as *Camboglanna* (Birdoswald). The Chadwicks' doubts concerning their historicity passed unmentioned.

In the last resort, Collingwood recognized the hypothetical nature of his case but he does seem to have been convinced himself:

Through the mist of legend that has surrounded the name of Arthur, it is thus possible to descry something which at least may have happened: a country sinking into barbarism, where Roman ideas had almost vanished; and the emergence of a single man intelligent enough to understand them, and vigorous enough to put them into practice

by gathering round him a group of friends and followers, armed according to the tradition of civilized warfare and proving their invincibility in a dozen campaigns. There are other elements in the tradition which may have a foundation of truth. After the final victory, Arthur's occupation as champion of the Britons was gone. Twenty-one years later was fought the battle of Camlann . . . dissension had broken out in the band itself, and finally it was destroyed in a battle of one party against the other . . . For Arthur, I have suggested, was the last of the Romans: the last to understand Roman ideas and use them for the good of the British people. The heritage of Rome lived on in many shapes; but of the men who created that heritage Arthur was the last, and the story of Roman Britain ends with him.

(Collingwood and Myres 1936: 324)

And so, indeed, did Collingwood bring book four of his great eulogy to Roman Britain to an end, in an atmosphere of tragic pathos which contrasts dramatically with the bulk of the work, which celebrates Rome's furthest outpost, leaving Myres to refocus on the Anglo-Saxons. The latter declared himself (pp. 327–30) to be generally unimpressed by the literary evidence coming from either Anglo-Saxon or British sources as a basis for reconstructing the past. However, he was likewise prepared to imagine that the *Historia Brittonum* contained much early material virtually unchanged in the early ninth century, acknowledging the force of the highly uncomplicated preface found in the 'Nennian' recension: 'I have made a heap of all that I have found.' To Myres:

It is precisely his ignorance and his stupidity which caused him to jumble together good and bad materials without amalgamating them into a single whole, and each successive commentary on the evolution of his curious book makes it more possible to sort out the different elements of which it is composed.

Even so, he did not feel that there was an historical framework for the fifth and sixth centuries to be had here. Despite this agnosticism, however, that was, to all intents and purposes, what he then constructed, weaving names and events derived from this and other texts into an account which was otherwise conceived on the basis of his own interpretations of the archaeological evidence.

Despite such frailties, it is difficult to overemphasize the influence of this two-part work on the world of history and archaeology over the next few generations, remaining a central plank in undergraduate studies well into the 1980s. While it was Collingwood's last major contribution to the study of the past, the much younger Myres went on to develop further the ideas which he had laid out. A series of works through the early post-war era culminated in a major treatise on Anglo-Saxon pottery and its historical context (Myres

1969). It is fair to suggest that his work had a greater influence on the study of pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and their cremation pottery than any other of the twentieth century. He was invited at the very end of his both wide and varied academic career to rewrite his contribution to the original work (of 1936). This new, single volume was published in 1986, but the reworking was quite limited: Myres did not take account of the textual criticism, as well as artefactual and settlement archaeology, which had by then been achieved. The result was a reiteration of his earlier reconstruction, now somewhat detached from the intellectual environment in which it had been conceived fifty years earlier.

To finish with this group of studies published in the late inter-war years, what is now the least known work of the three was in fact earlier than Collingwood and Myres's by a year, being, of course, R. H. Hodgkin's two-volume *A History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1935). Hodgkin recognized the problems inherent in reconstructing the text of the *Historia Brittonum* and using it as a basis for historical writing but, despite the strictures of the Chadwicks, he was also attracted, at least, by Arthur's battle-list (I, p. 80), which he felt had 'on it some stamp of popular tradition'. In later editions (1940, 1952), Hodgkin acknowledged the authority and expertise of Collingwood in treating of Welsh Latin texts and adopted (pp. 122–3) his vision of Arthur as a cavalry general. This *comes* he imagined leading heavily armoured and armed troopers like that of the late Roman cataphracts, and fighting battles all over what had been Roman Britain. At the end of the day, Hodgkin adhered to traditional English values in considering that British resistance to the Anglo-Saxons was inadequate and undermined by its own moral failings. Of these he lists (p. 181) culpable blindness (which derives from a literal reading of Gildas), failure to understand their own political geography (the *Historia Brittonum*), lack of foresight and chronic disunity (Gildas again). Only in imagination did the Britons excel, and he particularly remarked (p. 182) 'the gorgeous web of fiction' woven around 'the sordid realities of the long struggle and their ultimate defeat' which rendered 'Artorius, the harassed leader of a rough war-band, living in a low state of civilization . . . a wonder-working national champion who [following the *Historia Brittonum*] "in all his battles was the victor", who felled 960 men by his own onslaught at Mount Badon, and whose dog, Cavall, left a magical footprint on a stone in Buelt'.

On the very eve of renewed war, a more focused work by Brodeur (1939), took issue with several recent visions of the period (including the historicity of the Gallic Chronicle of 452 and Mommsen's reading of the dating clause in *De Excidio Britanniae*, xxvi, 1). He insisted that Arthur was a matter of legend rather than mythology (*contra* Malone 1924), and argued, like Collingwood, for a *locus* for Arthur and his battles in the south, against the Jutes and in the context of Hengist's son Oisc, in the early sixth century. Like the Chadwicks, however, Brodeur was unimpressed by the authenticity of the battle list in the *Historia Brittonum* as specifically Arthur's.

In the late 1930s Frank Stenton (later Sir Frank) was working on the second volume in the Oxford History of England, which came out in 1943. This massive and authoritative work was to be the central tome of Anglo-Saxon historiography throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, and the position which Stenton adopted was central to the perception of the British Dark Ages by early medievalists for generations. In what he described (p. 2) ‘either as an epilogue to the history of Roman Britain or as a prologue to the history of Anglo-Saxon England’, he summarized Gildas’s framework of post-Roman insular history up to Badon. He attempted to date that event c. 500, and discussed the Britain in which Gildas himself lived. Stenton’s reading of Gildas was comparatively literal, but his observations were typically acute:

It is remarkable that Gildas ignores the British leader whose legendary fame was to carry the struggle between Saxons and Britons into the current of European literature. Gildas has nothing to say of Arthur . . . The silence of Gildas may suggest that the Arthur of history was a less imposing figure than the Arthur of legend. But it should not be allowed to remove him from the sphere of history, for Gildas was curiously reluctant to introduce personal names into his writing.

(Stenton 1943: 3–4)

An historical Arthur survived, therefore, Stenton’s Germanist approach and close focus on Anglo-Saxon England, but only just. He did not survive into the vision of early Anglo-Saxon England proffered by Stenton’s disciple, Dorothy Whitelock, whose widely read *The Beginnings of English Society* (1952) rested on a platform of (pp. 14–18) ‘great stretches of continuous woodland’, ‘upland villages’ abandoned by the Britons, the old Roman administration broken down into ‘petty rulers of native race’ and ‘valley sites which the English cleared and worked with their own heavy plough’. She envisaged a negligible debt on the part of the Anglo-Saxons to British material culture, language or population, all of which were entirely marginalized in her account.

Whitelock’s new study aside, however, the Second World War had a considerable impact on insular history. I propose to highlight only two issues. Revulsion at Nazi genocide and the racially constructed vision of German superiority encouraged a reappraisal of the racial constructs which had, either implicitly or explicitly, been central to the way British history had been constructed for centuries. Put simply, newly raised anti-German sentiment put into perspective older tensions in British historiography and led ultimately to an appreciation that English history had previously been constructed against other peoples. More recently the primary ‘Others’ had been both indigenous societies within the British Empire and European (and other) competitors for world power. Before that the French had been the foil for English history for much of a millennium, plus the Jews (despite their expulsion in the Middle Ages), the Irish and the other insular communities

(primarily Welsh and Scots). Pre-Conquest historiography particularly identified the Britons, thus the Welsh – the *wealas* – as unvalued and excluded foreigners, against whom ethnic values and racial identity could be constructed (Wormald 1983, 1995; Foot 1996, 1999; Smyth 1998; see generally Hutchinson and Smith 1996; Jenkins 1996, 1997; S. Jones 1997).

Secondly, the war over-extended the British Empire both politically and economically. Exhaustion within the imperial enterprise, as much as external pressures from the US and local demands for independence, led to the British retreat from Empire. In a world in which the ex-colonial race had perforce to deal as equals with ex-subjects as rulers, diplomats, religious leaders, shippers and manufacturers, Anglo-British-centric historical values and perceptions were increasingly exposed as indefensible, and were gradually both undermined and overturned.

One result was the final overthrow of the old certainties provided by a belief in the inherent superiority of English social and political institutions and Germanic ancestry, by which the British establishment had been sustained for generations. This provided opportunities for the revival or construction of alternative visions of the past. Historically, insular Germanism was rooted in the enterprise of legitimizing the early and unique rise of the English Parliament to supremacy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but its fragility was now revealed (MacDougall 1982). Despite the Germanist perceptions of the mature work of Edward Leeds (1945) and the popularist, Anglo-centred vision of history offered by Sir Winston Churchill (1956–8), even the assumption of a general Teutonic descent of the English was to be challenged repeatedly in the post-war period, with Nora Chadwick (1963) initially reviving Hector Munro's earlier vision (published in 1905) of a large British genetic contribution to the English nation. The presumption of a significant genetic continuity from Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England has since been mooted by a wide spectrum of authors (see particularly Taylor 1983; Arnold 1984; Hodges 1989; Higham 1992a) and from a variety of premisses. It has now become well established in the broader historical literature of Anglo-Saxon England (e.g. J. Campbell 1982: 29), if less well in the archaeological – where intellectual Germanism and an insistence that migration should remain central to our understanding of the formation of Anglo-Saxon ethnicity are both now facing their 'High Noon'. It also has support from geneticists (although that has so far made little impact on the literature). Martin Evison, for example, has suggested to me that the demographic impact of the Vikings in Britain may have been greater than the Anglo-Saxons, and Professor Brian Sykes has confirmed that his initial findings suggest that no more than 30 per cent of the insular gene pool derives from Germanic immigration of all sorts (for a general introduction to the subject, see Cavalli-Sforza 2000).

Alongside this debate about genetic continuity, which still remains without final resolution, several other planks of the Germanist position, as postulated by Whitelock, have since been irretrievably destroyed. For example, the island