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A Gloucestershire Rector's Lament for Edward I

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A GLOUCESTERSHIRE RECTOR'S LAMENT FOR EDWARD I

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READERS of these 'Transactions' for the years 1933 and 1934 may perhaps remember the name of John of London, who was rector of Newland in the Forest of Dean from 1264 to 1302. He was the last of the notable series of early rectors of that parish, his predecessors being Robert of Wakering, king's clerk and builder and first rector of the church, Peter of Bordeaux, a distinguished diplomat, and Hugh and Walter Giffard—the latter afterwards bishop of Bath and Wells and finally archbishop of York. Particulars of their careers are collected in my papers on *Newland in the Middle Ages* in vols. 55 and 56 of the Society's 'Transactions'.

At p. 202 of vol. 55 it is stated that on the death of his original patron, Edward I, John of London wrote for the widowed queen an appreciation of Edward's life and work, entitled *Commendatio Lamentabilis in Transitu magni Regis Edwardi Quarti*.¹ This work enjoyed a wide popularity in its day. It filled a want, for Edward had been a popular king. Also its form was attractive, being highly dramatic—a sort of verbal pageant, in which, after the image of the dead king, there appear the pope, the kings, the queen, the bishops, the nobles, the knights, the clergy and the laity—each contributing their own particular meed of praise. The result is a vivid, varied and

¹ The reckoning of 'quarti' includes the three Saxon Edwards—'the Elder', 'the Martyr' and 'the Confessor'. Among other new departures in favour of the English, Henry III named his two eldest sons after Saxons instead of Normans.

detailed presentment of the king's character and achievements at home and abroad during his long, critical and eventful reign. A high authority² says that there is in it an insight into the historical position of Edward, and an appreciation of his devotion to his royal work, which places the *Commendatio* far above the common run of panegyrics and that there is scarcely a characteristic feature of the king and his reign that is not in one way or another touched upon in it.

The original is, of course, in Latin, but the pervading sentiments are entirely British and it seems strange that (so far as I have been able to discover) no translation of it into English has yet been published. Stimulated by the discovery that a Gloucestershire rector was probably the author, I have made the following attempt to supply the deficiency—at least as regards the more salient passages. I have also added a few notes as to the existing manuscripts of the text and the evidence in favour of our Newland rector's claim to the authorship of the work.

DESCRIPTION OF THE KING'S PERSONAL APPEARANCE

(Descriptio corporalis regis Edwardi)

He was very tall: when among others, he always showed above them. The colour [of his hair] was neither red nor yellow, but a mixture of white and black, his nose was long and his hair curly. His head, the seat of great wisdom, was rounded. His eyes, when he was pleased, were mild and dove-like, but in anger were lion-like and flashed fire. His limbs were those of a strong and agile man. Simple in his dress, he avoided strong colours and went about like one of the people. Asked why he did not wear royal apparel he replied, 'What

² Bishop Stubbs, *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, 1883, II, xviii (and text of the 'Commendatio', loc. cit, pp. 3-21) in *Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages*.

more am I worth in those than in these'? He was a great lover of the woods and wild animals and, when resting from fighting, enjoyed himself with hawk and hound. Firm of flesh and straight as a palm tree, he retained in age the buoyancy of youth. He was very seldom ill. Instead of staying idle in his palace, as some kings do, he travelled about the country, looking into everybody's work—especially that of the judges.

THE POPE (*Commendatio lamentabilis domini Papæ*)

[The pope's commendation is short, but characteristic and to the point, namely, that] the King—invincible in war and glorious in peace, by joining in the crusade against the Saracens and Hagarens, contributed materially to the peace of Christendom.

THE KINGS (*Commendatio lamentabilis Regum*)

[As might be expected, the kings dwell upon his specially regal virtues—support to the church, brilliance in war and unbending justice, resulting in the conquest of Wales and Scotland and consolidation of outlying portions of England.]

THE QUEEN (*Commendatio Margaretæ Reginae*)

[The queen, with womanly feeling, tells how] all his thoughts, words and works were devoted to the peace of the flock committed to his care—witness the parliaments he united and the treaties he made with foreigners.

THE BISHOPS (*Commendatio Pontificum*)

[The bishops, after touching on his sympathy with the wretched and the oppressed and his curbing of the proud and turbulent, proceed to throw rather a lurid light on the practice of former monarchs in regard to the revenues of vacant offices, mentioning as a specially commendable feature of his government that] all vacant

bishoprics, earldoms, abbeys and baronies under his power were fiscally administered, he taking only the due and usual portion according to the custom of the realm. Also that when the time came for giving them up he kept his hands free from any venal blemish—as to these matters adopting a higher standard than any former king. He fought Saracens, French, Scots and Welsh—*perfidios christianos*.

THE NOBILITY (*Commendatio Comitum et Baronum*)

[The nobility, like their successors in our own day, place Church and State, national defence and personal prowess high in the order of importance. They tell us that] before the turmoil of war the king's whole energies were given to defending the liberties of churches and adorning the shrines of the Saints with golden ornaments (*aureis jocalibus*)³, the whole Anglican church proclaiming his generousities. For the peace of the realm he received, accumulated and gave away vast sums. In the building of castles and fortifying of towers, in the construction of ramparts, outworks, munitions, entrenchments and enclosures of wild creatures and fishes, his cleverness and his magnificence were unsurpassable. A man of war from his youth, he excelled in tilting and sword combat (whence his weapon returned not to him void, nor his lance unbroken). Swifter than an eagle, stronger than a lion, he threw knights right and left, but was never himself unhorsed.

THE KNIGHTS (*Commendatio Militum*)

[In the commendation of the knights a notable change occurs in the phraseology. All the other characters, both before and after the knights, speak of the king in the third person. The knights speak of him as one of

³ See p. 193, note.

themselves, frequently using the first person plural in describing his exploits—a striking, because apparently unconscious, touch, showing the feeling of fraternal equality which animated the knightly order of the Middle Ages.

After brief references to the capture, in one hour, of Berwick on Tweed, to the sinking, in one day, of the whole Neustrian fleet⁴ and to the expulsion, in one day, of the ‘*perfida multitudo Judæorum et incredula*’, they continue] As, of old, with Alexander of Macedon, we conquered the Kings of the Persians and Medes and subdued eastern provinces, so, now, in the end of time, with our great king Edward, we carried on a ten years war with the illustrious Philip of France; we recovered Gascony, we acquired Wales, we rescued the realm of England (like Daniel) from the mouth of the lion and freed Henry III from the hand of the beast, Simon de Montfort. Richard I and Alexander were fine soldiers, but the former was taken prisoner (which Edward never was) and (unlike Edward) was shot after a reign of only ten years. But above all kings Edward advanced the glory of knighthood by his edict, published in France, Flanders, Aquitaine, England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, inviting all who desired to serve in arms to apply to himself for their equipment, on the most generous scale.

Under him ‘*militare erat regnare, proficisci proficere, denique configere triumphare*’ (to be a soldier was to be a king, to begin was to accomplish, and, finally, to fight was to overcome).

THE CLERGY (*Commendatio Clericorum*)

[The commendation of the clergy (of whom the author was one) is simple but comprehensive.] In Edward’s time

⁴ Neustria was the name given to the western part of northern France in the time of Charles Martel. H. A. L. Fisher, *History of Europe*, p. 148.

peace flourished, envy was silent, the church blossomed in tranquillity. [After this idyllic opening, the *commendatio* turns somewhat abruptly into a long quotation from Josephus, extolling the warlike virtue of courage, as exemplified in King Saul, and leading to the claim that Edward was still more courageous]—being actually carried to war on a litter when too ill to ride—and undeniably more fortunate.

THE LAITY (*Commendatio laicorum*)

[Finally, the commons strike the patriotic note in a new key, applauding] the king's habit, in moments of peril, of commending himself to English saints—especially to Edward the Confessor [after whom he was named and whose then splendid shrine at Westminster must have been often in his thoughts] and ascribing to their merits his escapes (of which he had more even than St. Paul's famous list) and successes. On his return, he adorned their shrines with golden ornaments (*aureis jocalibus*).⁵ He fought for the peace of the English people, who in his days knew neither slaughter, plague nor famine.

NOTES

The Text. The most easily accessible version of the full text is that in the Rolls Series (1883) *Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages*, (see note, p. 189), with an introduction and notes by Bishop Stubbs. From these we learn that the text is from five good manuscripts, all of them nearly coinciding in date with the original composition—two in the Bodleian Library (Hatton 53 and Laud 572), one in the College of Arms (Arundel 20) and another in the British Museum: Cotton MSS. Nero D, 2, ff. 199–203. The Lambeth and Trinity College, Cambridge, libraries also have versions.

⁵ The nobles use the same expression (*ante* p. 191). It is notable that the laity and not the clergy select this trait—the adornment of shrines—for special commendation.

Authorship. Though most of the copies have no attribution, that in the College of Arms has the following words at the end of the title (in the same hand as the rest) '*secundum Johannem de London*' and, at the end of the work '*non nobis Domine sed nomini tuo da gloriam et Johanni de London peccatorum veniam*': (Not unto us Lord, but unto thy name give glory and to the sins of John of London, pardon). That in the British Museum has at the end of the title '*secundum Johannem de Londoniæ*' (according to John of London) but the '*de Londoniæ*' is in a small hand, at least a century later than the rest.

Assuming that the attribution to 'John of London' is correct, a slight difficulty arises owing to the fact that more than one person was known by that name about that time. Bishop Stubbs, in his preface to the text, discussed, pp. XI-XIII, the question of authorship and, after noticing three other claims, writes 'a more plausible conjecture makes [the author] a monk of Westminster and identifies him with John Bever' but his general conclusion is that there is not much evidence either way.

Since Bishop Stubbs wrote, three facts have come to light, two of which show that our rector had reason to be grateful to the king, and the third shows that after the king's death he continued to have intimate relations with the royal family. The facts I refer to are these:—

(1) The king was patron of the benefice of Newland and had presented him to the rectory, which was a valuable one—in 1248 it is recorded⁶ as being 40 marks yearly. In 1248 this was equal to about £1300 of our money.⁷ (2) In 1283 the king made him a special grant

⁶ 'The church of Newland is of the gift of the King . . . and it is worth by the year XL marks'. *Pleas of the Crown co. Gloucester*, 32 Henry III. Forest of Dean. Assize Roll, 274 mem. d.

⁷ The mark was thirteen shillings and fourpence, so 40 marks would be £26 odd. Hallam writing in 1834 (*Middle Ages*, III, 448) reckoned the value of money *temp.* Hen. III as about 25 times its value in his own day. Since then prices have risen to about double what they were in 1834, and about 50 times the figure for 1248.

of the tithes of Whitemead (which is not in the parish), and of all the king's new enclosures made or to be made in the Forest.⁸ The wording of the gift (by not mentioning successors) appears to show that it was a personal favour to John of London himself and limited to the term of his life,⁹ and (3) an entry in the Close Rolls of King Edward II,¹⁰ stating that the goods and chattels of ' John of London, late parson of the Church of la Newelande in the Forest of Dene . . . were immediately after his death taken into [the King's] hands for certain purposes '. What the purposes were is not stated, but the entry shows at least that some fairly intimate personal relationship existed for some years after the great king's death between the rector and the royal family.

John of London ceased to be rector of Newland in 1302 and in the same year the name appears for the first time in a list of monks of Westminster,¹¹ while in 1303 it appears in the Westminster Abbey muniments (folio 1032) as that of a witness to a deed. The last entry at Westminster relating to him is in the infirmary accounts of 1311, which, being the same year as the above quoted entry in the Close Rolls about the goods and chattels of the late parson of Newland, furnishes support to the conjecture that the monk and the rector were the same person. None of these circumstances by itself amounts to positive proof. But, taken together, I submit that they leave little room for doubt that the quondam rector of Newland was the author of the work.

⁸ Close Rolls, 1279-88, p. 219, quoted *Trans. B.G.A.S.* LV, 231.

⁹ See *ibid.* p. 200.

¹⁰ Calendar, 4 Edward II (1311), p. 287.

¹¹ See Westlake, *Westminster Abbey*, II, 430-56.