

THE LEGEND OF ST KENELM

Through the kindness of Mr James Parker, who has collated the Chronicles and manuscripts containing the history of St Kenelm, and who has allowed me freely to make use of this notes, I am able to give the following appendix.

The life of St Kenelm is given in the following manuscripts:-

- 1 M S. Corpus Christi Coll.Camb., No 367
- 2 M S. Bodley, Douce, 368 (ff.79.82b)
- 3 M S Bodley, No 285 (ff. 80-83)
- 4 M S. Lansdowne, No 436 (ff.88-91)
- 5 M S. Coll. S. Johannis, Oxon, No 149 (fol.79b)
- 6 M S. Cottonian, Tiber E VI.1. (fol.299).
- 7 M S. Bodley, Tanner, No.15
- 8 M S. Harleian, No 2277

Of these No 1 has not been seen; it may be earlier than No 2, but the first part of it is abridged. No 2 was copied in the twelfth century at Winchcombe, a monastery founded by Kenulph, the father of Kenelm, and where father and son were buried. Owing to the direct association of Kenelm with the Abbey, it is probably as complete a copy as possible of the original legend, and may be taken as the typical story. No 3 also belongs to the twelfth century, and corresponds very closely with No 2, so much so that possibly it was copied from the same original. No 1 belongs to the thirteenth century, and provides nothing in addition to No 2. No 5 is a paper manuscript of the sixteenth century, and has not been examined. Nor has No 6 been attempted; it has suffered much from fire, and though it has been repaired, it is scarcely legible, and the edges are gone; while No 7 is a copy of Capgrave's Nova Legenda Anglia. The English version, No 8, has been printed by Mr W J Furnival, for the Philological Society in 1862.

In the regular Chronicles, the story is shortly given by Florence of Worcester (ob.1118); at fuller length by William of Malmesbury (ob. 1143) both in his Gesta Regum and his Gesta Pontificum; and by Matthew Paris, the monk at St Alban's, who probably gives it as left by Roger of Wendover about 1220. It is also to be found in Brompton's Chronicle, probably of the date 1400.

Comparising these Chronicles with the manuscripts mentioned above, there is evidence to show that Florence of Worcester, writing before 1118, had some copy of the legend before him in such very similar language to the Winchcombe copy of the Douce manuscript as to warrant one in supposing it was practically the same version; and that for the purposes of his Chronicle he abridged it. The same reasoning applies to William of Malmesbury's summary (1120-1125). From numbers of his expressions it may be accepted that he used some early copy of the same version as the Winchcombe legend, and that he did not use Florence of Worcester's summary, but made one of his own. The variations he makes look as if he had tried to improve the original by putting it into better Latin, rather than as if he were writing from a different copy.

The chronicler who wrote the St Alban's version freely made use of William of Malmesbury's summary, which was here and there improved by the copyist, just as its author himself had improved upon the original. But in one or two minor instances there seems to be in these corrections a "harking-back" to the original legend, as if from time to time the scribe referred to a copy of the Winchcombe version, though he made use of Malmesbury's abstract, instead of making one for himself. But besides these minor additions, one important passage is introduced; the English words on the scroll are given, "In clenc cu beche Kenelm cunebearn lith under thorne havedes bereafed." The copy of the legend to which the St Alban's chronicler had access apparently contained the English as well as the Latin of the scroll. The Winchcombe copy has only the Latin; William of Malmesbury has neither. The St Alban's chronicler would hardly invent these words. Their omission in the Winchcombe version may be owing to the carelessness of the scribe, who might consider them of no importance; though they are omitted also in manuscripts Nos 3 and 4. Or they may have been taken from some other version than the Winchcombe one, of perhaps an earlier date; but of such version there is no further trace.

I think it will be adviseable now to give the legend itself; and the following is an abbreviation of the story as it is given in the Douce Manuscript (No 2) in which it purports to be derived from a certain monk of Worcester, by name Wlfwyn, a disciple of Oswald, Archbishop of York (972-992); while it is said that so many English writings recorded it, and it was testified to by so many miracles, that "rebellatrix obstinatio" and could not gainsay it.

When Kenulph died in 819 he left as his heir Kenelm his son, who had two sisters, Quendryda and Burgenhilda. Kenelm was endowed with every grace of body and mind, and, in right of his birth and by his father's will, was chosen by the people to be their king. But Quendryda, moved by a strong desire to reign herself, plotted against him, and since poison had no effect, bribed Askobert, his guardian, to kill him, by the offer of great rewards and the hope of sharing the throne with her. About this time Kenelm had a dream, which he told to his nurse Wlwene, who lived at Winchcombe. "I saw", he said, "O dearest mother, a tree that reached to the stars standing by my bed, and I stood on the top of it, whence I could see all things. It was most beautiful, having wide spreading branches; and it was covered from top to bottom with all kinds of flowers and glowed with innumerable lights. But as I wondered at the sight, some of my people cut down the tree with a great crash. And forthwith I made for myself white wings, and flew up to heaven." "Alas!", said the nurse as he spoke, "my sweetest son, whom I have nourished with my milk! I fear the falling tree means the destruction of your life, through the wicked plot of your sister and the treachery of your guardian. And by the bird which went up to heaven is meant the glory of the ascension of your soul." But the child had no fear; and when at length Askobert, seizing a chance of carrying out his crime, took him into a wood as if to hunt, the child followed like a lamb to the slaughter, to reach the crown of glory.

When they had come near to the wood, the tender child, being about seven years old, became very tired, and got down from his horse; and as if secure from evil fell fast asleep, while his cruel guardian dug a grave in which he might quickly hide him. When he awoke with prophetic mind he said, "It is in vain that you have dug for me this grave. I shall not rest here, but in a far distant place, which God has provided for me. And this shall be a sign; for this stick (he carried a stick), when I plant it in the ground, shall burst into leaf." This did happen, and to this day a vast ash tree is shewn which bears the memory of the holy Kenelm. But the cruel butcher slew him, and put him in the hole he had dug, where there is a valley hidden between two hills in the wood called Clent. Here under a thorn, Kenelm's head was cut off, after he had said in our Lord's words, "What thou doest do quickly;" and straightway

a white dove with golden wings flew up to the sky, as in the vision had been shewn. They say that as he was about to be beheaded he sang the hymn, "We praise Thee, O God;" and when he had come to the words, "The White-robed army of martyrs," he fell slain.

Though the murderer thought he could hide his crime in that great wilderness, a shining column of light was often seen over Kenelm's body. Moreover a white cow, leaving the pastures on the hills, went and stayed by the place, and could not be taken from it. And as often as the herd grazed near the spot, they gave a double supply of milk; so wholesome was the herbage there; moreover what was eaten in the evening had grown more abundantly the next morning. So the place came to be called Cow-vale (vaccae vallis).

Quendryda having obtained the kingdom at the price of her brother's blood, ordered that any one who should seek for him, or even name him, should be at once beheaded. But even dumb animals spoke, and the light that was quenched in England burned more brightly at Rome. For while Pope Leo junior was celebrating Mass before a great crowd of people, behold a dove whiter than snow appeared from above, bearing a snow-white scroll written in English with letters of gold, and placing it on the altar of St Peter's disappeared again into the height. The holy man beheld the unknown words with fear, and asked those around what it might mean. There happened to be some Englishmen there, and by them the letter was interpreted as follows:-

"In Clentho vaccae valli Kenelmus regius natus
Jacet sub spino, capite truncatus."

So the Pope sent an embassy to Wilfred, the Archbishop of Canterbury (805-832) and the bishop of England, the future martyr of God, might be taken from his unworthy hiding-place to the church at Winchcombe, built in honour of God; and so it was done, to the joy of all the people of Mercia and of England; and Kenelm reposed in the temple which his father had founded and endowed with kingly wealth. When the body was taken up, a sacred fountain burst out from the dry cave and flowed away in a stream, which brought health to many who drank of it. And while he was being carried out of the woods, the way was stopped by a great multitude; and numbers of blind and deaf and halt were healed.

While the body was being borne along by the people of the province of Gloucester, an armed body of the people of the province of Worcester came up, and at the ford called Pyriford tried to stop the carrying away of the precious treasure. While the dispute was going on, it was agreed that the people who woke earliest at the dawn of the next day should have the body; and it happened that the men of Gloucester were wakeful, and had gone five miles before the Worcester men arose. Moved by anger, they followed with all the speed possible; and when the fugitives saw them close at hand, calling on Kenelm they rushed panting along a narrow path under some protecting foliage. They had come in sight of the abbey of Winchcombe, when, overpowered by thirst and labour, they sank breathless on the sacred turf, and forthwith a spring burst out from under a neighbouring stone, of which the assembly drank; and regaining strength, they went on their way. And the spring of water still flows down into the river.

Quendryda was standing in the upper part of the western end of St Peter's Church, and when she saw the multitude running down the hill, she seized a Psalter and began to sing backwards the 108th Psalm, from end to beginning, so that it should be perverted from his good to his ill. But her malice was turned against herself, for when she had reached from the end the verse "Let this be the rewards of my adversaries," her two eyes fell from their orbits on to the page she was reading. And the Psalter still exists, and is marked with the gore of the fallen orbs. A short time after this the wretched woman died, and they say that neither church, nor churchyard, nor field would hold her when buried, but by the order of a shining angel-child she was thrown into a deep, far distant ditch.

Thus the Martyr Kenelm was borne to his father's monastery of Winchcombe. Here his sanctity was shewn by many miracles then and thereafter, down to the present time.

When Canute was king, a wealthy Dane, whose name was Osgot, strove to take possession of a piece of ground next to the land of the holy Kenelm, at Newenton, to join to his land at Rudinton. When the assembly had come together, Godwin, who was then Abbot, brought the holy Kenelm into the midst, and ordered the man, with twenty-four of his peers, to swear upon the body of the martyr. And as he advanced to take the oath, struck by the manifest power of God, he went backwards and fell prone along the ground. So he was led home, and not longer after died. And because he had unjustly endeavoured to seize a small possession, he lost all his property.

A certain well-known man, named Godric, swore by the holy Kenelm that he had never defrauded anyone of a single farthing; and he suddenly became dumb, and by his silence betrayed his guilt.

At that time the Abbot had decreed that the feast of Kenelm should be celebrated in Peyleton by the staying of all work. But the lady of the manor, hearing of it when she reclined at meat, offered no work to be stopped. She said; "I don't know why we should lose a day's work for Kenelm." But no sooner had she spoken, than her eyes fell out upon the table. Moreover her oxen, which she had yoked to the wain, shook off the yoke and disappeared, and could no more be found.

It is widely known in Hereford that a hammer and a pincers stuck to the right and left hands of a smith who worked on the same day, and they could not be loosed even with wedges. But when he had called upon Kenelm, the hardened hands, with the nails forced into the flesh, were restored whole.

Again, on Kenelm's natal day, when the whole of England was celebrating his feast, a man born blind, by the name Lifai, asked grace of the martyr; he, falling into a trance, cried out, "O holy Kenelm, spare me! Why do you torment me?" Afterward he said he saw a most glorious boy stand by him, carrying in his hands two glowing stars, which he placed on his eyes. And at once his eyes were restored, and he wondered at the brightness of the day, and the size of the world. For this Abbot Godwin gave praise to God.

In the same way there came the Dog-keeper, who was the companion of the huntsmen belonging to Alfric, a great man who dwelt in the town at Stertel. In a trance he saw a glorious child coming to him with a burning coal, which he put on his mouth, and immediately he could speak. His master, who had known him from child, said he had never before spoken, and the dogs obeyed the sound of his lips, though it was not formed into words.

Another dumb man, who came to the steps of the presbytery as if out of his mind, and was being cast about hither and thither, miserably invoked Kenelm to pity him. And the return of his speech, in the presence of the aforesaid Abbot and the crowd of priests and people, caused all to praise God. And when he was questioned by the Abbot, he said that he felt and knew nothing, but that his speech returned.

A certain man came crawling on the ground, who had hollowed blocks of wood bound to his knees like shoes, and wooden greaves on his thighs, and supported his hands with sticks, being more like a reptile than one who should be able to gaze up into heaven. He had bowed himself before Kenelm for a whole day, and giving up hope, prepared to go away, when a sudden miracle happened. His strings were broken, the wood-shells shaken off, and the man rose up erect, and all sang a hymn of praise to the Lord.

At another time, a certain Saxon, bound round his midst with iron, had for fifteen days anticipated Kenelm's natal feast, hoping for pardon, and as the day came near, was more instant in watching and prayer. As the feast day drew on to dark, giving up hope, he prepared to depart in the morning. But as he bewailed himself, forthwith the iron band was broken, and he fell down in grateful thanks.

In the next village of Southam, a father brought his son and laid him down before the altar of Kenelm. His heels were fixed to his thighs, and his hands were stuck to his sides, so that he could only move from his place by being carried. But while the Abbot who succeeded Godric was beginning the evening hymn, the boy stood on his feet, and in the sight of all stretched out his hands in grateful praise.

In the past year it seemed good to the Abbot that the holy Kenelm should be borne to the place of his passion. While they were lodging in the village of Wic, the son of Osbern, a well known man, had the pupils of his eyes turned up under his eyebrows, and hidden like stars under a cloud. So he prayed to the holy Kenelm, and each of his eyes turned to its right direction, and he enjoyed the blessing of light.

On the same night, when all were overcome by sleep, a candle that burnt on the altar opposite the saint fell from its candlestick and burnt for a long time on the altar coverings, as if it had been upon dry stone. And when the monks arose, and rushed to repair their negligence, they found the ash of the candle a cubit in length, shewing where it had burnt. But when the ash was removed, they found neither mark of burning nor spot of wax remained. Who could keep silence in view of such a mark of the favour of God to the blessed martyr?

When he had been brought to Clent, the place was celebrated by a third miracle, for a girl bowed to the ground stood erect by the grace of God.

A certain man was a cripple from his birth, so that his heels were pressed to his thighs, and his fingers were turned back and stuck to his arms. His brother had taken him to many churches, and with great labour had reached Rome. He was told in a dream to return to his country and go to Winchcombe, when his brother would be healed by the blessed Kenelm. So he brought his brother and laid him before the altar. And the cripple in his sleep, as he afterwards said, saw a precious boy come down from the altar, with a golden rod in his hand, with which he touched him, and told him to rise. Then the man who had never moved except with the help of others, rose and stretched forth his hands, as if to embrace his saviour. But after he had touched him with the rod, the boy seemed quickly to reascend the altar, and to enter the shrine which held his holy bones. And the man remained here for many years, shewing the marks on his thighs where his heels had been fixed.

Since present miracles, as well as past, rejoice the lovers of truth, let this writing record what has recently happened. For the voice passes away, but writing illumines those that come after.

So in the year 1149, when the monastery and all the building had been burned and reduced to ashes, the neighbours took counsel with the bishop, the abbot, and other wise men, as to rebuilding it. And at length it seemed good to the prelate that two or three monks, with the body of the blessed Kenelm, should journey through neighbouring provinces, carrying with them a letter from the Bishop of Worcester and others of the province, stating the need in which the church of the blessed martyr lay.

The journey of the monks being prepared, and the peregrination of Kenelm being begun, the most holy body received hospitality at Leicester. Here God worked a most wonderful miracle of healing, in answer to the supplications of the infirm. Among them were two youths who had come to extreme want, so the bystanders said, on account of their very great infirmity. But when they had tasted the holy water in which the relics of the saint had been dipped, they at once received help from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here the manuscript suddenly ends; though probably only the last leaf is wanting.

Coming now to the question when and where the original legend was compiled, it would appear that it was written before 1118, since Florence of Worcester seems to have seen it, with the object of glorifying St Kenelm, and of embodying certain facts and traditions. It might not have been written at Winchcombe, for there is no record of any writer there at the time in question; but doubtless it was written for Winchcombe, since no other abbey then existing had any special interest in it. The abbey of Halesowen was not founded till 1215, though the chapel of St Kenelm, on the traditional spot of the murder, shows a south door, decorated with bird beak ornaments, as early as Henry II's reign, 1154 to 1189. The story may possibly belong to the series of lives compiled by Gotcelin, a monk of Canterbury, who visited several monasteries to obtain his material, and who died a little before 1100. The last miracle which is said to have occurred since the burning of the abbey in 1149, has clearly been added by a later hand, and the initials have been illuminated; and since the last leaf or leaves of the manuscript are gone, it cannot be known how many more miracles were given. "The whole matter however", says Mr Parker, "I think points to the original compilation having been made before 1100, at or for Winchcombe, and that it was much as we have it now. But the existing Winchcombe copy was made about 1150, the last miracle or two being added soon after."

There remains to consider how far the legend in its original shape fixed the martyrdom at Clent. Neither Florence of Worcester nor William of Malmesbury give any place as the scene of the murder, though the latter gives an account of the body being brought to Winchcombe.

"It appears to me," says Mr Parker, "that Matthew Paris never took the second word of the English inscribed on the scroll (transcribed by Liaru for the Rolls Series as Clenc, and not Clent) as the name of the place, for the passage goes on: 'Quod Latine sonat "in clenc cu beche," id est, in pastura vaccarum, Kenelmus, etc.' Further, he has apparently been puzzled with the word, since he has put at the bottom of the page, as if he had found a various reading, 'En clen under thorneat cu neche lith, etc.' This may be inferred from the reading 'clen' being given at the foot of the page, which would not have been done had he known Clent to be the name of the place." The translator, it will be observed above, seems to ignore the 'clenc' giving simply 'pastura vaccarum'."

It must not be overlooked that in the Douce manuscript there are several mentions of Clent; and the locality is so exactly described by "a deep valley between two hills," that these might well be the words of one well acquainted with the physical characteristics of the place! At the top of this deep valley, but over the ridge on the eastern slope, stands St Kenelm's Chapel. The story of the dispute at Pyriford is very much in favour of the fact that the body was brought from the north southwards across Worcestershire. Pyriford as a name is lost, but there is no much doubt that it lay where Pershore Bridge now is, and where the road formerly crossed the Avon by ford. The journey from Clent to Winchcombe would be nearly in a due south direction, and the Avon, the only important river on the way, would be crossed at a distance of 21½ miles from Clent. Probably the procession stopped for the night at Pershore Abbey, 11½ miles from Winchcombe, founded in the seventh century and among whose charters is a grant from Kenulph, Kenelm's father.

The monks of Worcester would have had to travel some 8 miles to cut the course of the funeral party nearly at right angles. It seems a very probable story. Finally, we are expressly told that when Kenelm was taken to the ancient place of his passion, during which journey several of the miracles occurred, Clent was the end of his journey. We are not told why the journey was undertaken. We might hazard a guess, that it had to do with either the establishment of the perpetuation of some memorial on the spot where the saint suffered; whether the present chapel marks the spot may be open to doubt, and this raises the question how far the legend follows facts, or how far imagination.

There are one or two minor difficulties in the story. One would have expected the scene of the martyrdom to be laid near Winchcombe. There is no record of kings residing near Clent, though a tradition exists at the place that Pen Orchard Farm, close to the chapel, occupies the site of a hunting place of the Mercian kings; but this might just as well spring out of the legend, as the legend out of such fact. And if a palace had existed in connection with the hunting woods, it is most probable that it was situated on lower ground. Still, if Clent were not the actual place of the murder, no reason for the choice of the spot as the scene of the legend is known or can be imagined. Again, there is a difficulty as to the Pope who received the message from the white dove. The Pope known as Pope Leo junior, was Leo IV., i.e. from 847 to 855, some years after the occurrence. Pope Leo III, ruled 795 to 816.

Mr Parker sums up the evidence thus; "There are several points which render it not improbable that the story had some facts on which it was based, and that actually bones, professing to be those of Kenelm son of Kenulph, were deposited at Winchcombe beside his father, and that these were taken from the neighbourhood of Clent."