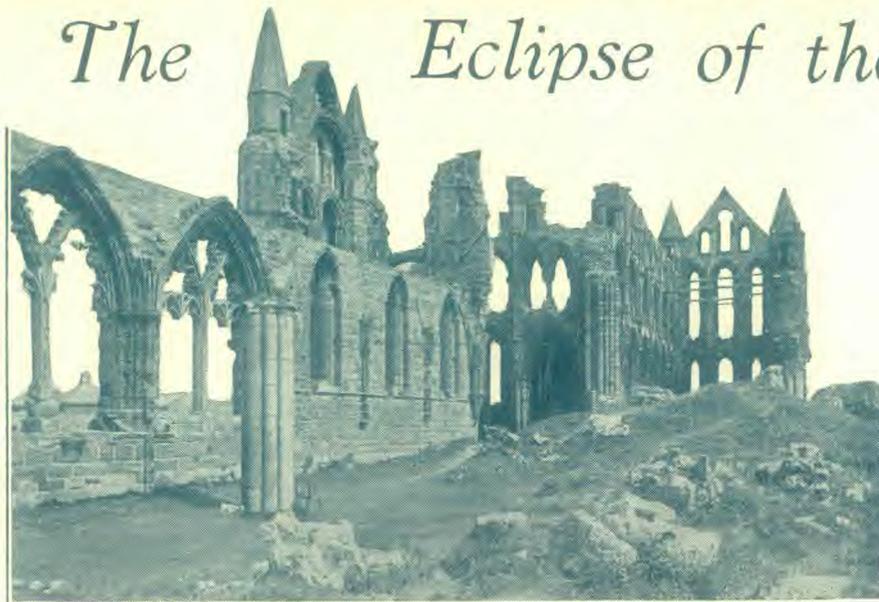


# The Eclipse of the Early British Church



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*Ruins of Whitby Abbey where the fateful conference was held which resulted in the eclipse of the early British church and the triumph of Rome.*

Concluding Article in the Series

Did Rome Convert Britain?

By W. L. EMMERSON

SIXTY or seventy years after the landing of Augustine the Roman mission was still confined within the narrow limits of Kent. For a short time they had gained a slight hold in Yorkshire and perhaps in one or two other places, but these were very soon lost. The British church, which was to have been brought into submission to the papal See, was still independent and had actually effected the evangelization of the Angles and Saxons, where the Latin church had so signally failed.

But Rome was not beaten. She would await her opportunity; sometime and somehow the independence of the British church would be broken, and these isles would be brought to the feet of the sovereign pontiff.

At last the tide began to turn. Oswy succeeded his brother, Oswald, in the north and extended his rule over the whole of Northumbria and Mercia, thus becoming by far the most powerful king in the land. He married a Kentish princess, Eanfleda, who brought with her to York a Roman priest, Romanus. Together

they succeeded in winning over an ambitious young nobleman of the Northumbrian court, Wilfrid by name, who visited Rome and became imbued with ideas of Roman supremacy. Returning he was given charge of the young prince Alcfrid, whom he subverted from loyalty to the British church. Through Alcfrid, Oswy was persuaded to convene a conference at the great monastery of Whitby to give consideration to the case for Roman primacy. Bishop Colman appeared on behalf of the native church and Wilfrid took the side of Rome.

### *Peter's Keys*

Subtly Wilfrid presented his case, asserting that Peter, the head of the Roman church, had been given the keys of the kingdom by Christ Himself, and therefore was able to open or close heaven to whom he would. Colman could produce no such tangible evidence of authority, and Oswy, swayed by the fallacious plausibility of Wilfrid's argument, decided to throw in his lot on the side of the church of Peter, lest, he said, "When I

shall appear at the gate of heaven, peradventure there may be no one to open to me."

But it was not a complete victory for Wilfrid, for the king could not escape from his lingering respect for the old church. Colman was assured that the monastery of Lindisfarne would be in no way interfered with and would be free to continue independent of Rome.

Oswy's fateful decision, however, set the Roman party upon the first rung of the ladder to supremacy.

A few years later Theodore of Tarsus was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury by Pope Vitalian, and arrived in England to take over the leadership of the Roman party. A diplomatist to the core Theodore realized that a frontal attack upon the native church would be futile. Victory would be possible only by subtle allurements and intrigue. So he set to work to beguile the English people by emotional appeal. Beautiful churches were built with the aid of Wilfrid at York, Ripon, and Hexham, the magnificence of which

completely eclipsed the simple structures of the British church. Vestments, holy vessels, and pictures were brought over from Rome, and a special teacher arrived to instruct the choirs in chanting. Educational establishments were also settled at Canterbury and Jarrow to disseminate Roman influence and to counteract the work of Lindisfarne, Iona, and the Irish schools.

Controversy over points of doctrine and ritual were carefully avoided and everything possible was done to lessen the gap which separated the British bishops from the followers of Rome. Some who were willing to receive reconsecration from Theodore were accepted as regular priests of Rome without complete renunciation of British practices.

#### *Submission of the British Church*

When the church had been thoroughly leavened a pan-Anglican synod was convened in A.D. 673 at Hertford in the interests of "peace and amity." Still not a word was said about Rome, nor about the Pope. Only unity with the "Catholic Church" was stressed, and the teachings of the "Fathers" held up for reverent acquiescence. All unconsciously the assembled bishops assented to the proposals Theodore made. The remnants of opposition of the native group were dispelled by his silver-tongued eloquence, and practically the whole church surrendered to him as its head.

Thus was the die cast, and the church unwittingly gave itself body and soul into the hands of Rome. How differently might the assembled British bishops have acted could they have foreseen the dire consequences of their action.

Under Theodore the now united Anglo-Saxon church was thoroughly organized and the country divided into dioceses

with Canterbury as the seat of the archbishopric.

The years which followed were marked by further vicissitudes for the Roman church, and at one time another Celtic revival appeared imminent. Romish influences were now, however, too deeply rooted to be overthrown.

Adamnan, the abbot of Iona, submitted to re-ordination during a visit to Northumbria but was deposed by his fellow-monks. Early in the eighth century the monastery was split into two rival parties, Roman and British, rival abbots holding sway until A.D. 772 when the whole monastery finally conformed. Somerset and Devon maintained their independence until early in the eighth century. North Wales followed in A.D. 768, and South Wales in A.D. 777. The Cornish bishops held out until well on into the tenth century. In parts of Scotland Celtic practices persisted until the eleventh century when they were finally suppressed by Margaret, the wife of King Malcolm. And some parts of Ireland were not completely subjugated until well on into the twelfth century.

Well says Bacon in his *Government of England* :

"The Britons told Augustine they would not be subject to him, nor let him pervert the ancient laws of their church. This was their resolution, and they were as good as their word, for they maintained the liberty of their church five hundred years after his time, and were the last of all the churches of Europe that gave up their power to the Roman Beast."

#### *Enthralled but Not Absorbed*

For the next few centuries Rome maintained a precarious hold upon the English church, but her sway was ever foreign to the feelings of the people. In the words of one commentator on this period :

"The church was . . . not absorbed, but enthralled, never a part of the church of Rome, but under her sway; ever restive under her exactions and never satisfied with a usurpation which had been gained chiefly by diplomacy, false decretals, and superior craft."—*"Modern Romanism Examined,"* page 388.

Archbishop Dunstan in A.D. 970 refused to recognize the Pope's interference in the affairs of the English church and Robert, the Norman archbishop of Canterbury in 1052, together with Ulf, another Norman bishop, were deposed for attempting to Romanize the church.

The year 1066 brought the Norman conquest, entered upon by William of Normandy, at the instigation of the Pope, to complete the subjection of the independent British spirit. A Norman archbishop and Norman bishops were installed and Roman discipline and order were rigidly enforced.

Gradually, however, the Normans seemed to catch the spirit of the conquered race and themselves became impatient of the intrusions of Rome. A new conflict thus developed between the Norman church and the papal See, which continued with varying fortunes for several centuries.

#### *Dawn of the Reformation*

Towards the close of the fourteenth century a great impetus was given to the anti-Roman movement by John Wycliffe of Oxford, the "Morning Star of the Reformation," and his Lollard successors. A Roman counter-movement followed, and so the struggle went on until the reign of Henry VIII, when the fetters of Rome were finally broken and the last church to accept the Roman yoke took the lead as the first to throw it off.

During the centuries which

followed Britain became the greatest protagonist of Reformation principles and the very keystone of the Protestant church. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the British church has led the way in giving the Gospel to the heathen world.

#### *Rome's Modern Challenge*

But the divine admonition, "Let him that standeth take heed lest he fall," was never more timely than to Protestantism today. For once more Rome is in hopes of bringing Britain to her feet, and that by the same

methods whereby the British church of the sixth century was enslaved.

There are many Theodores in the land again who by the subtleties of ritualism, are subverting the faith of many from the spiritual essentials of true worship. Anglo-Catholicism in the Anglican church and Free Catholicism among the nonconformist bodies both strenuously assert their independence of Rome, yet both are leading the British people back again along that same fatal path.

And there are Wilfrids, too, who are only waiting the opportunity to press openly for reunion with the church of the seven hills.

The present situation thus brings to all true Protestants a mighty challenge. We must be up and doing or our precious heritage of truth and freedom will again be wrested out of our hands.

The heavenly warning rings out to all in this hour of crisis: "Hold fast that thou hast, that no man take thy crown."