

Our Patron Saint

That the glory of our patron is not always realized, becomes evident from the queries one sometimes hears. Then, too, "Why was he chosen as patron of the College?" is almost eligible for the eternal "why's." We can surmise, of course, but obviously we do not know the mind of Bishop Bernard Macdonald, whose choice it was. Suffice it to say, St. Dunstan, when chosen as patron of the College, was already titular of the diocese; and before the erection of the diocese St. Dunstan was titular of the first church of Charlottetown, the choice having been made by Bishop Plessis on his pastoral visit of 1812. Tradition says that it was out of gratitude to his English hosts in Charlottetown that he chose an English saint for patron of the about-to-be-erected church. Fr. MacMillan's history of the diocese records that Bishop Plessis was entertained by Colonel Compton of the Garrison on the night he arrived; that Justice Colglough allowed him to say Mass in the Court House; that Mrs. Calbeck, a non-Catholic, gave the site for the church; and that Governor DesBarres and Ex-Governor Fanning were very kind to him: surely all these make up good cause for gratitude, and a sufficient foundation for the tradition. Be that as it may, the fact of his choice remains; and Dunstan holds for the interested reader as much biographical glamor as any saint of the distant past.

A contributing cause to the partial obscurity of Dunstan in modern times is undoubtedly the fact that historians, especially those of the 18th and 19th centuries, have either not spoken of him at all or shown him in a false light. "Since the Reformation," says Lingard speaking of St. Dunstan in his *Anglo-Saxon Church*, "it has been a favorite occupation with many writers to tear from his grave the laurels planted upon it by the gratitude of his contemporaries." The importance of monastic life in English history, and its contribution to the civilization that developed in England was not admitted by those historians: twentieth century writers are more accurate. Now, to Dunstan must be attributed the credit for the triumph of English monasticism. That triumph was delayed till after the Norman conquest, nevertheless it had its foundation in the reforms and establishments of Dunstan. Thus we can readily see that this saint might not be popular with the type of his-

torian first mentioned above. However, even Soams, usually partial in such matters, concedes him, "An extraordinary mind, clear, sound and comprehensive."

To get any adequate idea of the accomplishments of this 'warrior,' (I think the name fully justified, for he struggled against priest and king, against alderman and thane, always with the best interests of the Church at heart) one must understand the unfortunate condition of the Church in England during the tenth century. When the Viking launched his desperate attacks on England, the Church was only on fair footing. It had assimilated the Germanic tribes of previous attack, but undoubtedly many pagan propensities were still dormant. With the coming of this new tide of barbarism (Chesterton called it "a plague of seafaring savages") disaster faced the Church on every side. Historians have often overlooked the cruel devastation of the Church by these Danish and Scandinavian savages. The massacred bodies of nuns, monks and priests strewed the paths after their retreat. Churches were plundered, altars polluted, children taken captive, and ruin and misery stood in the wake of their savage attack. Each year saw the downfall of some famed monastery: now it was Lindisfarne, now Tynemouth, now Ely, and now Jarrow. The people surrounded by barbarians intermingled and intermarried with them, and adopted or resumed barbaric ways. The clergy were few and half-hearted. Indeed, to have clergy at all, those had to be ordained who were neither prepared nor fitted for the life. Consequently, a very unfortunate deterioration among their ranks was evident.

So by the beginning of the tenth century not a single monastery in England was in operation. Can we realize what this meant? Monasteries were the only centres of culture and learning in those centuries; without them the country was illiterate. Thus we see what room there was for Alfred's efforts to reestablish education and religion. But most historians do not essay to explain the reason these were lacking; viz., the previous destruction of the monasteries.

If one had the choosing of his birthplace, certainly none in all England could compare for wealth of sacred and poetic tradition with that given to Dunstan. Glastonbury!—The Glassy Isle!—Avalon! What names to conjure with! They suggest Joseph of Arimathea, the Grail, the

mysterious hawthorne, King Arthur and Guinevere; what wealth of allusion ! Near Glastonbury it was that Dunstan was born, the son of Heorstan and remotely related to the kings of Wessex. The date is uncertain. Robinson in "The Times of St. Dunstan" convinces one of the accuracy of his findings and affirms the date to be 909. Belloc claims 924, but gives no authority. Anyway it was in the early part of the tenth century. At that time a few Irish priests resided at Glastonbury, and from these did Dunstan receive his education. In fact he became known for his learning, and he was presented to the Court of King Athelstan, where he became a favorite.

There were those at Court who became jealous of the new comer, and they planned and executed a rather ignominious ejection. Dunstan was still determined to follow the life of the Court, though he debated at times his inclination to embrace a religious life. A subsequent sickness determined his choice: he was tonsured and retired to Glastonbury, a religious recluse. From this retreat Dunstan was summoned by King Edmund the successor of Athelstan. He was made Abbot, and he set about re-establishing the monastery of Glastonbury. Considerable wealth came to him from his father, and from a relative of the former king. This he devoted to the work at hand. He gave his monks the rule of St. Benedict, and from this holy spot emanated the new monastic order after being extinct for almost two centuries. The next king was Edred, and he not only encouraged Dunstan, but he took him to his court as adviser. The counsel of Abbot Dunstan was wise and the reigns of the kings he advised are known for their peacefulness and sane legislation. From the influence and power he exerted over Edred and later over Edgar, Dunstan gets the appellation in our time of "The first Prime Minister of England"—an evident truth.

Dunstan fell upon evil days when, at the coronation of Edwy, he attempted to point out to that young profligate something of kingly etiquette. The incident is amusing enough, but it cost Dunstan his place and prestige. He was forced to fly from Court and from England, and took refuge in Flanders. Soon Edwy's subjects wearied of his folly and those north of the Thames chose Edgar as King. When this was effected Edgar recalled Dunstan. Very soon Edgar succeeded to the whole kingdom and the great work of Dunstan, that of the reconstruction of the Church, continued. In rapid succession he was made Bishop of Wor-

cester, then of London, and finally Archbishop of Canterbury. Edgar's reign was one of prosperity, of peace, and of lawgiving; all of Dunstan's doing. It is well-said, "The laws that bear Edgar's name bear the imprint of Dunstan's mind."

With this renowned Archbishop in his ecclesiastical reforms were associated two other saints, Oswald, Bishop of Worcester, and Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester. These latter were specially prominent in making supreme the Benedictine rule in England. St. Dunstan was long aware of the monastic reform effected at Cluny in Bergundy: he obtained personal knowledge of it during the time of his exile, and vigorously supported it in his organization of monasteries throughout England. We can judge something of the extent of this work when we know that at least forty monasteries were established in Edgar's reign alone. With these were invariably connected schools, and thus learning, particularly of Anglo-Saxon literature, was widely fostered.

It must not be thought that Dunstan was unopposed in all these activities. Indeed, his projects met with bitter resistance from lax clergy, and from laymen who could be induced to make a stand against such annoying changes. Dunstan himself was often made the butt of unjust accusation, and sinister motives were sometimes ascribed to him. These were entirely fictitious, and no proof can be brought forth to substantiate the charges. On the contrary, the meanness of these accusations have been adequately refuted.

The life of St. Dunstan abounds with legends of a supernatural character. For instance we may still see in England the tongs made by himself as a metal worker, which art he taught his people. But a nice legend grew up, that one day while he was working, the devil bothered him with some temptation, he immediately took the hot tongs and grasped the devil by the nose and dragged him to a nearby brook. This is quite fantastic, but as Henri Gheon says in *The Secret of the Cure D'Ars*, "If it is not true, it could be true." It is by these tongs that our patron is represented on the College coat of arms. Many other tales are less ludicrous and more seriously vouched for by contemporary or near-contemporary writers. Among these is the beautiful tale of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove hovering over the saint at Mass or at other times, in guidance or approval. This was specially frequent in his old age. It is by this dove that the patron of the diocese is

represented on the coat of arms of His Excellency Bishop O'Sullivan of Charlottetown.

The last years of this famed Archbishop of Canterbury were spent at his Episcopal See, and the sanctity for which he was known then and in previous years became a hallowed memory. He died in 988, and very soon his tomb at Canterbury came to be a place of pilgrimage. Until the death of Thomas A'Becket he was the favorite saint of the English, and many a pious pilgrim had recourse to his intercession.

—R. V. M.



Content

A good home and a hearty meal,
A pipe with odor sweet,
A fire that warms the drowsing man,
And brings on pleasant sleep.
And brings on pleasant sleep, my dear,
That, like some genius kind,
Settles all my cares and worries,
And soothes my tired mind.

A stout heart and a hopeful soul,
Courage 'gainst woe and strife,
A kind word for the erring one,
Will help us all through life, my dear,
And when the journey's o'er,
Bring peace and rest to spirits blest,
On God's eternal shore.

John M. Phelps in
"Canisius Quarterly."