

ARTHUR: THE ENDURING MYTH

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The dying king was placed in the dusky barge, where there were three queens in black, with crowns of gold. His sole surviving companion, Sir Bedivere, cried.

*"Ah! My Lord Arthur; whither shall I go?
Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
For now I see the true old times are dead.
When every morning brought a noble chance,
And every chance brought out a noble knight.
Such times have been not since the light that led
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
Which was an image of the mighty world;
And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken round me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds."*

And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge;

*"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfills himself in many ways.
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world
Comfort thyself; what comfort is in me?
I have lived my life and that which I have done
May He within himself make pure! But thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,*

*Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.....*

*But now farewell, I am going a long way
With these thou seest - if indeed I go -
For all my mind is clouded with a doubt -
To the island-valley of Aviron;*

*Where falls not hail, or rain or any snow
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound."*

So said he, and the barge with oar and sail
Moved from the brink, like some full-breasted swan
That, fluting a wild carol ere her death,
Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood
With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir Bedivere
Revolving many memories, till the hull
Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn.

Then from the dawn it seem'd there came, but faint
As from beyond the limit of the great world,
Like the last echo born of a great cry,
Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
Around a king returning from his wars.

Thereat once more he moved about, and clomb
Even to the highest he could climb, and saw,
Straining his eyes beneath an arch of hand,
Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King,
Down that long water opening on the deep
Somewhere far off, pass on, and on, and go
From less to less and vanish into light,
And the new sun rose bringing the new year."

Thus Alfred Lord Tenneyson ended *Idylls of the King* about the life and death of King Arthur.

Probably most of us when young read *The Boy's King Arthur* with illustrations by N.C. Wyeth, or *The Romance of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table*, illustrated by Arthur Rackham. Both books were based upon Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, a fifteenth century history of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

Tenneyson relied principally on Malory, but also upon Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th century collection of Arthurian legends, and upon old French romances as well as upon Celtic folklore. Malory, in turn, had among his sources the French *Mort Artur* and a 13th century cyclic romance known as *La Suite du Merlin*.

The legend of King Arthur was utilized by several British monarchs to identify their reign with that of Arthur. Edward I promoted pageants known as 'Round Tables' and held an elaborate tournament in Winchester in 1290 with an Arthurian

theme. He ordered construction of what is known as the Winchester Round Table which was installed in the Great Hall at Winchester.

Henry VIII, invoking his supposed descent from King Arthur, had a huge tournament at Winchester in 1511 in which he took part dressed as Arthur. The event was intended to celebrate the birth of a son to Queen Catherine, named Arthur, but the son lived only fifty-two days.

King Arthur was a mythical figure based in large part upon the Celtic legends of a leader who led the resistance of the native Britons to the Saxon invasions after the Roman legions had departed. In the course of the Briton resistance the legends tell of twelve battles with the Saxons in which King Arthur was always the victor. However, there was a thirteenth battle at a place called Camlan between Arthur and his scheming son Mordred who was attempting to seize the throne. In this final battle each was killed by the other with the Round Table being destroyed.

The gradual transformation of Arthur into a King who rules in a golden age of chivalry and who created a round table composed of noble and heroic knights was produced by the cultural need in Britain, as in other societies, to create myths embracing idealism and romance.

The hero myth, found to a varying degree in all cultures, helps satisfy the need of people to make sense of their origins and past and the worthiness of their goals. Examples are Odysseus in Greek mythology and Aeneas in Roman mythology.

Malory, however, also incorporated less attractive and less noble elements into his tales: knights who one moment rescued damsels in distress and in the next

moment became bloody marauders spoiling for a fight; Arthur fathering a child, the evil Mordred, with Morgan le Fay, his half sister; Sir Lancelot fleeing Arthur's court with Guinevere, Arthur's fickle wife; and Sir Tristram, while loving Isolde, taking an earl's wife to bed for relaxation after being wounded in battle.

As the tales proceed, Malory moves away from the adventures of the Round Table in favor of the quest for the Holy Grail, the fabled cup that supposedly held Christ's blood. Here a rather prissy Sir Galahad, whom Tennyson and many Victorians considered a bit of a "maiden Knight," plays the central role.

In contrast to the earlier tales, earthly love yields to heavenly love in the search and there is a strong New Testament tone replete with religious mysticism.

One other aspect of Malory's stories is the recurrent melancholy, evidenced in the fates of Lancelot and Guinevere after the death of King Arthur, she entering a nunnery and he becoming a monk, which can possibly be attributed to a feeling on the part of Malory that the code of chivalry and courtly love he celebrates is already on the decline.

Interest in the King Arthur legend weakened in the centuries following Malory but was strongly revived in 19th century Britain during the long reign of Queen Victoria in which the British saw a resemblance to the imagined glories of King Arthur, his Round Table, and Camelot. The concept of chivalry and duty to the nation and to those ruled by it found widespread acceptance in an empire that extended over a good part of the world.

The saga of King Arthur and his followers found expression in the paintings of the pre-Rafaelites such as William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose depictions of Arthur and the quest for the Holy Grail were major subjects of their paintings.

A very popular figure was Sir Tristram of the Round Table and his illicit love for Iseult, the wife of his uncle King Mark of Cornwall. Her name was often spelled Isolde and their romance was the subject of Wagner's opera "Tristram and Isolde."

Algernon Charles Swinburne, the noted 19th century English poet, wrote a long poem about Tristram and Iseult with the ending dealing with their sad deaths, he from a wound and she from grief.

*"So came their hour on them that were in life
Tristram and Iseult: so from love and strife.
The stroke of love's own hand felt last and best
Gave them deliverance to perpetual rest.
So, crownless of the wreathes that life had wound,
They slept, with flower of tenderer comfort crowned;
From bondage and the fear of time set free,
And all the yoke of space on earth and sea.*

.....

*"For death is of an hour, and after death
Peace: nor for aught that fear or fancy saith,
Nor even for very love's own sake, shall strife
Perplex again that perfect peace with life.
And if, as men that mourn may deem or dream,
Rest haply here than there might sweeter seem.'*

A notable exception to this glorification of Arthur was Mark Twain's biting satire: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. In this novel the hero, arriving from the 19th century, uses such an unsporting device as a lasso to repeatedly dismount one of Arthur's knights when challenged by him to a joust, and then unhorsed Lancelot and Galahad in the same way.

With respect to the Holy Grail, Twain's protagonist observes that "The boys all took a flier at the Holy Grail now and then. It was a several years' cruise. They always put in the long absence snooping around, in the most conscientious way, though none of them had any idea where the Holy Grail really was, and I don't think any of them actually expected to find it, or would have known what to do with it if he *had* run across it. You see, it was just the North-west Passage of that day, as you may say; that was all. Every year expeditions went out holy grailing, and next year relief expeditions went out to hunt for *them*."

In the 20th century many poets and writers found inspiration in the tales of King Arthur and his Round Table. T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* used the search for the Holy Grail as a central theme. The American poet Edwin Robinson wrote a lengthy poem of nearly two hundred pages entitled *Tristram* describing his adventures before joining the Round Table. John Steinbeck, an avid reader of the King Arthur stories ever since boyhood, rewrote many of Malory's tales in modern English although he suffered writer's block in attempting the story of Arthur's death and never completed it.

John Masefield likewise wrote a number of poems dealing with King Arthur and his knights. He dealt with the death of Arthur in a more terse way, starting with Arthur himself hurling his sword, Excalibur, into the water.

*"He gathered up his dying strength, he swung
The weapon thrice and hurled it to the stream;
It whirled like a white gannet with a gleam.
Turning blade up in moonlight as it fell;
Bright-flying foam-drops stung
The steel, the spray leapt as it disappeared.
'No other man shall have you: all is well,'
King Arthur said; and now his moment neared;
The tide was ebbing and his heart was wrung.*

*A curlew called: he fell upon his knees,
And lo, his failing eyes beheld a ship
Burning a path athwart the water-rip;
The water gleamed about her like soft flame,
Her gear creaked in the breeze;
Towards him, nosing through the soaken sand,
To rest her at his side, the vessel came.*

.....

*Then seven queens upraised the dying King
And laid him quiet in a bed aboard,
And balmed the gashes smitten with the sword;*

Immortal life upon their faces glowed.

Then they began to sing: --

*'We bear him to the isle of Avalon,
Where everlasting summer has abode.'*

*An unheard summons bade the ship begone,
She headed seawards with a stooping wing."*

J.R.R. Tolkien, before he wrote *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, started an intended long epic poem entitled *The Fall of Arthur*, but after 40 pages it was never finished. Possibly the reason was that Tolkien finally decided that his own imaginative universe was better off standing on its own.

Tolkien's verses are very compelling as witness the following in describing the onslaught of the Saxon raiders upon Arthur's Britain:

*"The endless East in anger woke,
and black thunder born in dungeons
under mountains of menace move above them.
Halting doubtful there on high saw they
wan horsemen wild in windy clouds
gray and monstrous grimly riding
shadow-helmed to war, shapes disastrous."*

The whole poem contains a characteristic Tolkienian sadness, that sense of a golden age of magic and wonder is sliding into the sunset. Thus when Arthur

gets word that Mordred has betrayed him and seeks to seize both his Kingdom and his queen, he sits silently and reflects:

*“Now from hope’s summit headlong falling
his heart foreboded that his house was doomed,
the ancient world to its end falling,
and the tides of time turned against him.”*

T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*; and Peter Ackroyd’s *The Death of King Arthur* are recent attempts to flesh out the story of Arthur, not to mention the musical *Camelot* with its closing refrain of “one brief shining moment known as Camelot” providing for many a link to the lives of the Kennedys. Hollywood has not neglected King Arthur either, as witness *Excalibur* and other movies.

Hopefully we will never tire of the story of King Arthur and his Round Table, for however removed from modern life, the tales find resonance in our deepest dreams and aspirations for a life that, as Abraham Lincoln expressed so eloquently in his first Inaugural Address, reflects “the better angels of our nature.”