The Development of Western Civilization

Narrative Essays in the History of Our Tradition from
Its Origins in Ancient Israel and Greece to the Present

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THE RISE OF THE
FEUDAL MONARCHIES

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Foreword

THE proposition that each generation must rewrite history is more widely quoted than practiced. In the field of college texts on western civilization, the conventional accounts have been revised, and sources and supplementary materials have been developed; but it is too long a time since the basic narrative has been rewritten to meet the rapidly changing needs of new college generations. In the mid-twentieth century such an account must be brief, well written, and based on unquestioned scholarship and must assume almost no previous historical knowledge on the part of the reader. It must provide a coherent analysis of the development of western civilization and its basic values. It must, in short, constitute a systematic introduction to the collective memory of that tradition which we are being asked to defend. This series of narrative essays was undertaken in an effort to provide such a text for an introductory history survey course and is being published in the present form in the belief that the requirements of that one course reflected a need that is coming to be widely recognized.
Now that the classic languages, the Bible, the great historical novels, even most non-American history, have dropped out of the normal college preparatory program, it is imperative that a text in the history of European civilization be fully self-explanatory. This means not only that it must begin at the beginning, with the origins of our civilization in ancient Israel and Greece, but that it must introduce every name or event that takes an integral place in the account and ruthlessly delete all others no matter how firmly embedded in historical protocol. Only thus simplified and complete will the narrative present a sufficiently clear outline of those major trends and developments that have led from the beginning of our recorded time to the most pressing of our current problems. This simplification, however, need not involve intellectual dilution or evasion. On the contrary, it can effectively raise rather than lower the level of presentation. It is on this assumption that the present series has been based, and each contributor has been urged to write for a mature and literate audience. It is hoped, therefore, that the essays may also prove profitable and rewarding to readers outside the college classroom.

The plan of the first part of the series is to sketch, in related essays, the narrative of our history from its origins to the eve of the French Revolution; each is to be written by a recognized scholar and is designed to serve as the basic reading for one week in a semester course. The developments of the nineteenth and twen-
tieth centuries will be covered in a succeeding series which will provide the same quantity of reading material for each week of the second semester. This scale of presentation has been adopted in the conviction that any understanding of the central problem of the preservation of the integrity and dignity of the individual human being depends first on an examination of the origins of our tradition in the politics and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the religion of the ancient Hebrews and then on a relatively more detailed knowledge of its recent development within our industrial urban society.

The decision to devote equal space to twenty-five centuries and to a century and a half was based on analogy with the human memory. Those events most remote tend to be remembered in least detail but often with a sense of clarity and perspective that is absent in more recent and more crowded recollections. If the roots of our tradition must be identified, their relation to the present must be carefully developed. The nearer the narrative approaches contemporary times, the more difficult and complicated this becomes. Recent experience must be worked over more carefully and in more detail if it is to contribute effectively to an understanding of the contemporary world.

It may be objected that the series attempts too much. The attempt is being made, however, on the assumption that any historical development should be susceptible of meaningful treatment on any scale and in the
realization that a very large proportion of today's college students do not have more time to invest in this part of their education. The practical alternative appears to lie between some attempt to create a new brief account of the history of our tradition and the abandonment of any serious effort to communicate the essence of that tradition to all but a handful of our students. It is the conviction of everyone contributing to this series that the second alternative must not be accepted by default.

In a series covering such a vast sweep of time, few scholars would find themselves at home thoroughly in the fields covered by more than one or two of the essays. This means, in practice, that almost every essay should be written by a different author. In spite of apparent drawbacks, this procedure promises real advantages. Each contributor will be in a position to set higher standards of accuracy and insight in an essay encompassing a major portion of the field of his life's work than could ordinarily be expected in surveys of some ten or twenty centuries. The inevitable discontinuity of style and interpretation could be modified by editorial co-ordination; but it was felt that some discontinuity was in itself desirable. No illusion is more easily acquired by the student in an elementary course, or is more prejudicial to the efficacy of such a course, than that a single smoothly articulated text represents the very substance of history itself. If the shift from author to author, week by week, raises dif-
Difficulties for the beginning student, they are difficulties that will not so much impede his progress as contribute to his growth.

This essay, *The Rise of the Feudal Monarchies* by Mr. Sidney Painter, is the third of the series to be published. It provides a rapid but careful survey of the principal events connected with the accretion of territorial bases and development of institutional foundations for three of the great political sovereignties of modern Europe. This is an early, but none the less important, chapter in the story of the growth of political units which has dominated much of European history and now in the mid-twentieth century approaches a final climax.

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Contents

Foreword, by Edward Whiting Fox
Introduction
I France
II England
III The Empire
Conclusion
Genealogical Tables
Chronological Summary
Suggestions for Further Reading
Index
Introduction

DURING the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries the dominant form of government in western Europe was what has come to be known as "Germanic" monarchy. There were two quite different types—the primitive and the more fully developed. From very early times the various Germanic peoples had been accustomed to choose chieftains to lead them in war. When the state of war was prolonged, these chieftains tended to become permanent and to bolster their position with mythical traditions of a divine origin. Thus the Merovingian kings and the Anglo-Saxon rulers of Wessex claimed descent from Germanic gods. These early Germanic monarchies were in theory elective, but custom usually confined eligibility for election to the members of a single family. The royal power rested on three bases. Each king had a small group of men, bound to him by special oaths of loyalty, who served as his officials and bodyguard, clearly a later form of the German chieftain's comitatus. Then, as the leader of his people in time of war,
he had the right to call every able-bodied man to military service. Finally, since there was no taxation, the king's material resources came chiefly from the land he had reserved for his own use. In time of peace his governmental functions were extremely limited. The administration of justice was carried on by the people themselves in their popular courts, and the king's local officials were mere supervisors. Outside of fighting, the chief occupations of the early Germanic kings were keeping up their supply of wine and concubines.

This simple conception of kingship began to change as soon as it came into contact with the Christian church. The political ideas of the church had their origins in Hellenistic civilization. The Hellenistic king, the *basileus*, had been a sacred person—he was not a god, but he was more nearly divine than ordinary men. In Christian thought the king became a man appointed by God to rule over his fellows. Although the Christian conception of kingship is seen most clearly in the Byzantine monarchy, it had a profound effect on the Germanic kingdoms of the West. Churchmen did not think of the king as a mere war chief with a few special privileges in time of peace. To them he had been appointed by God to keep order, protect the weak from the strong, and especially to maintain the Christian church and faith. Consistently and firmly throughout these centuries of confusion that have been called the Dark Ages, the church not only supported the kings against any forces that threatened their position but
Introduction

regularly preached the sanctity of kingly office. The later Germanic monarchs drew a large part of their resources from the lands of the church and relied heavily on ecclesiastics in the royal administration. This transformation of Germanic kings to Christian priest-kings was, of course, slow and gradual. The process began with the conversion of the Germanic peoples and was early symbolized in the crowning and anointing of Pepin as king of the Franks by the pope, even though the culmination of this alliance between church and monarchy was not reached until the early eleventh century under the Salian emperors.

In the last years of the tenth century Germanic monarchies of one or the other of these two types ruled most of Europe. The more primitive form was represented by the governments of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Kievan Russia. Anglo-Saxon England and the Holy Roman Empire that embraced Germany, Italy, and the eastern part of modern France were monarchies of the more advanced type. Although western France under the last of the Carolingians had highly developed feudal institutions, it was still in theory a Germanic monarchy.

In the course of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries the three great Germanic monarchies, England, France, and Germany, were profoundly changed by the development of the feudal institutions that have been described in an earlier essay in this series. At different times and under different circumstances they
were transformed into what historians call feudal monarchies. The term feudal monarchy has been used so loosely by many writers that it is extremely difficult to define in terms of current usage. In general, one can say that a feudal state is one in which all the members of the ruling class form a feudal hierarchy with a chief lord or suzerain at its peak. If one wants to include the crusaders' states (the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, the kingdom of Cyprus, and the Latin empire of Constantinople) among the feudal monarchies, it is necessary to say that all that is required to make a feudal state into a feudal monarchy is to have the suzerain bear the title of king. The rulers of these kingdoms had no power or resources that were not derived from their position in the feudal hierarchy. But in the three great states of western Europe the rulers retained in theory at least the authority of the Germanic kings and their power as feudal suzerains was complementary. This was also true of the Norman kingdom of Sicily even though it had not been preceded by a Germanic kingdom. Then in some states there were feudal elements but no completely organized feudal hierarchy. This situation was a stage in the development of feudal monarchy in England, France, and Germany. The Scandinavian kingdoms, Kievan Russia, and the Spanish kingdoms reached this stage but never became full feudal monarchies.

The object of this essay is to trace the development of the three great western states during the later Mid-
Introduction

dle Ages, to follow their transformation from Germanic to feudal monarchies, and to indicate the forces that were to make England a constitutional, France an absolute, and Germany a figurehead monarchy. Although the chief focus of the essay must be on the depiction of an important phase of the political history of western civilization, it should be borne in mind constantly that the subject is by no means purely academic. Many of the problems that face Europe today have their roots in the Middle Ages. And the origins of Anglo-American political ideas and institutions are deeply embedded in the history of the English feudal monarchy.