

The Good Book of Oxford

Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Welsh historian, completed his “History of the Kings of Britain” in 1136, written in Latin. He claimed that it was a translation from a Welsh source called the “very ancient book”, and it became very popular throughout Europe, but it was subsequently denounced on the grounds that his source never actually existed and he had fabricated the entire history. I have dealt with this argument generally in my article entitled [Why All The Fuss About Geoffrey?](#)¹

In this article, I will deal with one specific argument in his defence, based on another historian called Geffrei Gaimar. He identifies a source known as the “Good Book of Oxford” which may have been Geoffrey of Monmouth’s “very ancient book” or an early Latin translation. At the very least, he describes a set of circumstances which confirm that Geoffrey’s “very ancient book” must have existed.

L’Estoire des Engleis

Geffrei Gaimar was a contemporary of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and he wrote a poetic book in Anglo-Norman called “L’Estoire des Engleis”.² This was published shortly after “History of the Kings of Britain”³ and is complementary to it. Gaimar ends his poem with an Epilogue as follows:

6429	Ici voil [jo] del rei finer. Ceste estorie fist translater Dame Custance la gentil.	6452	de son seignur k’ele mult amat. Geffrai Gaimar cel livre escrit [e] les transsadancess i mist
6432	Gaimar i mist marz e averil e tuz les dusze mais ainz k’il oust translaté des reis. Il purchaça maint esamplaire,	6456	k’il aveit ainz purchacé — u fust a dreit u fust a tort — le bon livre de Oxeford ki fust Walter l’arcediaen,
6436	liveres engleis e par gramaire e en romanz e en latin, ainz k’en pust traire a la fin. Si sa dame ne li aidast,	6460	si en amendat son livre bien; e de l’estorie de Wincestre fust amendé ceste geste, de Wassingburc un livre engleis
6440	ja a nul jor ne l’achevast. Ele enveiad a Helmeslac pur le livre Walter Espac. Robert li quens de Gloucestre	6464	u il trovad escrit des reis e de tuz les emperurs ke de Rome furent seignurs e de Engleterre ourent trèu,
6444	fist translater icele geste solum les liveres as Wales k’il aveient des bretons reis. Walter Espec la demandat,	6468	des reis ki d’els ourent tenu, de lur vies e de lur plaiz, des aventures e des faiz, coment chescuns maintint la terre,
6448	li quens Robert li enveiat, puis la prestat Walter Espec a Raul le fiz Gilebert. Dame Custance l’enpruntat	6472	quel amat pes e liquel guere. De tut le plus pout ci trover ki en cest livre volt esgarder; e ki ne creit ço ke jo di,

¹ Why All The Fuss About Geoffrey? www.annomundi.com/history/geoffrey.htm

² L’Estoire des Engleis. Geoffrey Gaimar, c.1140. Edited by Alexander Bell and re-published 1960 by B. Blackwell, Oxford, for the Anglo-Norman Text Society.

³ History of the Kings of Britain. Geoffrey of Monmouth, 1136. Translated by Lewis Thorpe. Penguin Classics. ISBN 0-14-044170-0.

6476	demand a Nicole de Trailli. Ore dit Gaimar, s'il ad guarant, del rei Henri dirrat avant, ke s'il en volt un poi parler		Ore dit Gaimar k'il tressailli, mes s'il uncore s'en volt pener, des plus bels faiz pot vers trover:
6480	e de sa vie translater, tels mil choses en purrad dire ke unkes Davit ne fist escrivere,	6504	ço est d'amur e dosnaier, de boscheier e del gaber e de festes e des noblesces,
6484	ne la räine de Luvain n'en tint le livere en sa main. Ele en fist fere un livere grant, le primer vers noter par chant.	6508	des largetez e des richescs e del barnage k'il mena, des larges dons k'il dona:
6488	Bien dit Davit e bien trovat e la chançon bien asemblat. Dame Custance en ad l'escrit, en sa chambre sovent le lit;	6512	d'ïço devereit hom bien chanter, nient leissir ne trespascer. Ore mand Davit ke, si li pleist, avant die si pas nel leist,
6492	e ad pur l'escire doné un marc d'argent ars e pesé. En plusurs lius est espandu del livere ço ke feit en fiu.	6516	car s'il en volt avant trover, son livere en pot mult amender; e s'il ne volt a ço entendre, pur lui irrai sil frai prendre;
6496	Mes des festes ke tint li reis, del boschaier ne del gabeis, del dounaier e de l'amur ke demenat li reis meillur	6520	jamés n'istrat de ma prison si eit parfaite la chançon. Ore avom pes e menum joie. Treske ci dit Gaima[r] de Troie:
6500	ki unkes fust ne jamés seit, e crestien fust e beneit, ne dit gueres l'escrit Davi.	6524	il començat la u Jasun ala conquere la tuisun, si l'ad definé ci endroit. De Deu seium nus beneit! Amen.

Professor Ian Short of the Anglo-Norman Text Society⁴ has published an article⁵ discussing this Epilogue and the sources that might have been available to Gaimar. He gives a translation of the Epilogue as follows:

6429 Here I wish to bring to a close [what I have to say] about the king [William Rufus]. The noble lady Constance had this history adapted / translated [into French]. Gaimar took March and April and a whole twelve months before finishing this [French] adaptation / translation of [the history of] the kings [of Britain]. He obtained a large number of copies of books - English books, by dint of learned reading, and [books] both in the French vernacular and in Latin - before finally managing to bring his work to a conclusion. If his lady had not helped him, he would never have completed it. She sent to Helmsley for Walter Espec's book. Robert earl of Gloucester had [had] this historical narrative adapted / translated in accordance with the books belonging to the Welsh which they had [in their possession] on the subject of the kings of Britain. Walter Espec requested this historical narrative, Earl Robert sent it to him, and then Walter Espec lent it to Ralf FitzGilbert; Lady Constance borrowed it from her husband whom she loved dearly. Geoffrey Gaimar made a written copy of this book, and added to it the supplementary material which the Welsh had omitted, for he had previously obtained, be it rightfully or wrongfully, the good book of Oxford which belonged to

⁴ Anglo-Norman Text Society, www.anglo-norman-texts.net

⁵ Gaimar's Epilogue and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Liber vetustissimus*. Ian Short, *Speculum* 69 (1994), 323-43. For online issues of *Speculum* see: www.jstor.org/journals/00387134.html

Archdeacon Walter, and with this he made considerable improvements to his [own] book; and this historical narrative was improved [also] by [reference to] the Winchester History, [that is,] a certain book of / at / from Washingborough, in which he found a written account of the kings [of Britain] and of all the emperors who had dominion over Rome and tribute from England, and of the kings who [had] held lands of these [emperors], of their lives and their affairs, what happened to them and what deeds they performed, how each one governed the land, which ones loved peace and which ones war. Anyone willing to look into this [Washingborough] book will be able to find there all this and more, and let anyone who does not believe what I say ask Nicholas de Trailly.

6477 Gaimar now declares that, provided he has a protector / patron, he will continue his narrative and deal with King Henry [I], for if he is willing to talk about the king even briefly and write an adaptation of part of his life, he will be able to recount thousands of things that David never had copied down, nor did the Queen from Louvain ever hold in her hand any book recording this sort of material. She did [however] have a large book made [of David's work], the first verse of which she had embellished / illuminated with musical notation. David is a good narrative poet, and he composed good verse and constructed his song well. Lady Constance owns a written copy of it, and she often reads it in her chamber; and for the copying of it she paid a mark of silver, [properly] refined and weighed. The material of which this book was composed has achieved some circulation and reached several [different] places. But as for the festivities that the king held, - and still today Henry, that [true] Christian of blessed memory, ranks as the best king that ever was - as for the drinking / boasting bouts, the courting and the love affairs over which he presided, David's book has hardly anything to say.

6502 Gaimar now declares that he is not [after all] going to go into any of this here, though were he willing to work hard at it, he could compose a verse account of the finest exploits [of Henry's court], namely the love affairs and the courting, the hunting and the drinking, the festivities and the pomp and ceremony, the acts of generosity and the displays of wealth, the entourage of noble and valiant knights that the king maintained, and the generous presents which he distributed. This is indeed the sort of material that should be celebrated in poetry, with nothing omitted and nothing passed over. I call on David, then, to continue his narrative if he so wishes, and not leave it [as it is], for were he willing to compose a sequel, he could greatly improve his book. And if he is unwilling to turn his mind to this, I will go and fetch him myself and have him arrested; he will never again get out of my custody until he has completed the song. Now we are at peace / reconciled, and let us be glad. Gaimar's narrative goes [all the way] from Troy as far as here; he began it at the point where Jason left in pursuit of the [Golden] Fleece, and has now, at this present moment, brought it to a close. God's blessing on us all! Amen.

Note: The line numbers from the poetic Anglo-Norman are included for easy reference, and I have added them to the beginning of each paragraph in the English translation.

Ian Short identifies three or possibly four books that were available to Gaimar (in addition to the French books that have not been named):

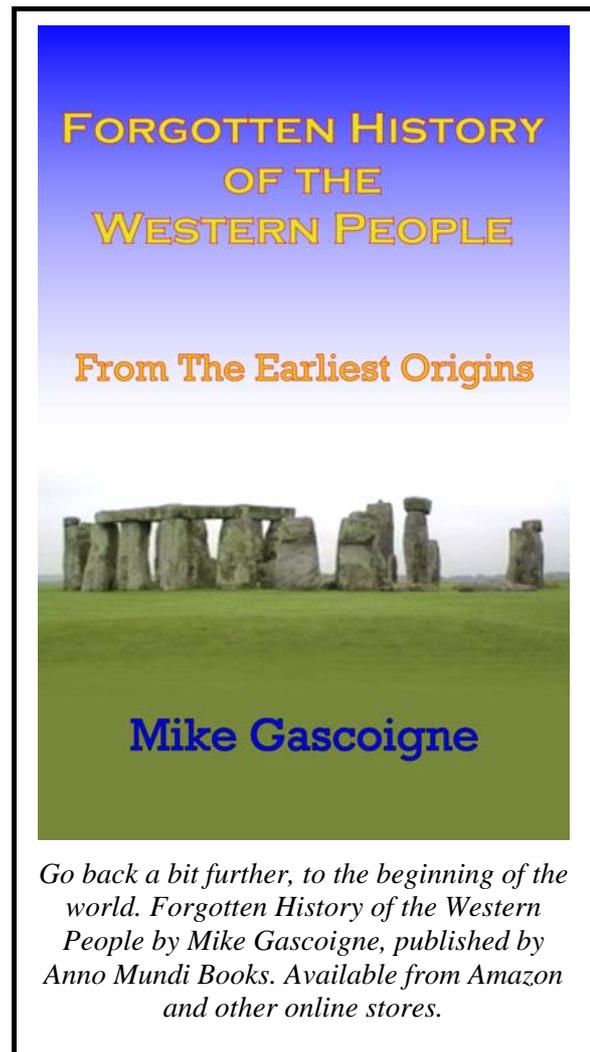
- Walter Espec's book, written in Latin and adapted or translated from the Welsh under the patronage of Robert, Earl of Gloucester. This is thought to be Geoffrey of Monmouth's "History of the Kings of Britain", or at least a draft version.

- The “Good Book of Oxford” which Gaimar had “previously” obtained from Archdeacon Walter. This is thought to be an earlier version of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s “History of the Kings of Britain”, written in Latin. It is not known for certain if it is a direct translation of Geoffrey’s “very ancient book”, but it confirms that such a book must have existed.
- The Winchester History, believed to be the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, written in English.
- The book from Washingborough. This may be a copy of the Winchester History that found its way to Washingborough, or it may be an earlier version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Washingborough is just a small town outside of Lincoln, but during the 12th century it was a place of some importance.

Ian Short points out that Gaimar would not have had much time to work on his “L’Estoire des Engleis” if the finished copy of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s “History of the Kings of Britain” had been his only Latin source. However, Gaimar already had the “Good Book of Oxford”, which would have speeded things up a bit. Gaimar never mentions Geoffrey of Monmouth, but instead he mentions Robert, Earl of Gloucester, who was Geoffrey’s patron, and Archdeacon Walter, from whom Geoffrey claims to have obtained his “very ancient book”. Geoffrey seems to have been incidental to the whole process, which suggests that Gaimar did not rely on him as a supplier of source material, but instead both Gaimar and Geoffrey were working from the same sources.

Ian short asks about the relationship between the two Latin histories, and how did Geoffrey of Monmouth get hold of his source material? He asks his readers to “provide what answers they will”, and I would suggest that the simplest answer is to believe what Geoffrey says, that he obtained his “very ancient book” from Walter the Archdeacon. What he did with it is entirely another matter. He may have faithfully translated it into Latin at some stage or he may not.

On the question of translation, we should also note that Gaimar did not necessarily produce word-for-word translations of his sources. The Anglo-Norman word “translater” becomes “adapted / translated”, as if it could mean producing a history from a collection of other histories in different languages. Geoffrey of Monmouth could have done the same thing with his “very ancient book” and any other sources that he might have possessed.



Walter's Colophon

There is a version of the Welsh history known as Tysilio's Chronicle,⁶ which has been identified by Flinders Petrie⁷ as the source used by Geoffrey of Monmouth. At the end of the document, Walter of Oxford writes his own colophon as follows:

I, Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, translated this book from the Welsh into Latin, and in my old age have again translated it from the Latin into Welsh.

In the Peter Roberts edition there is a footnote saying that the reason for translating the Latin back to Welsh was probably because Walter had given the original Welsh copy to Geoffrey of Monmouth. While the re-translation might seem like a lot of work, it is possible that Walter might have done it for his own pleasure, during his "old age" when he was probably retired or otherwise relieved of his duties. Whatever may have been the case, we have to consider that the earlier Latin translation, produced by Walter independently of Geoffrey of Monmouth, could be the "Good Book of Oxford" that was used by Gaimar.

Note: A "colophon" is a tailpiece that sometimes appears in old books, often ornamental, giving information that would now be placed on the title page.

Gaimar and Friends

I will now give the reasons, if it is not already obvious, why serious problems would have arisen if Geoffrey of Monmouth's "very ancient book" did not exist.

The beginning of Gaimar's Epilogue, from lines 6429 to 6460, is basically a name-dropping exercise, to show that some important people had been involved with the Latin source that he had obtained from Walter Espec.

This Latin source must have been Geoffrey of Monmouth's "History of the Kings of Britain", because Robert, Earl of Gloucester was Geoffrey's patron and appears in his Dedication as follows:

I ask you, Robert, Earl of Gloucester, to do my little book this favour. Let it be so emended by your knowledge and your advice that it must no longer be considered as the product of Geoffrey of Monmouth's small talent. Rather, with the support of your wit and wisdom, let it be accepted as the work of one descended from Henry, the famous King of the English; of one whom learning has nurtured in the liberal arts and whom his innate talent in military affairs has put in charge of our soldiers, with the result that now, in our own lifetime, our island of Britain hails you with with heartfelt affection, as if it had been granted a second Henry.

Gaimar's Epilogue describes this book as having been "translated in accordance with the books belonging to the Welsh", confirming Geoffrey's claim to have a Welsh source, which also appears in his Dedication as follows:

... Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, ... presented me with a certain very ancient book written in the British language. ... At Walter's request I have taken the trouble to translate the book into Latin, ...

⁶ Chronicle of the Kings of Britain. Translated by Peter Roberts in 1811 from the Welsh copy attributed to Tysilio. Facsimile reprint by Llanerch Publishers. ISBN 1-86143-111-2. **Note:** Walter's colophon is also in the Chronicle of the Early Britons, translated by Bill Cooper.

www.annomundi.com/history/chronicle_of_the_early_britons.htm

⁷ Neglected British History. Flinders Petrie, FRS. Proceedings of the British Academy, Volume VIII, pp 251-278. Paper presented to the Academy on November 7, 1917.

In that case, the “good book of Oxford which belonged to Archdeacon Walter” must have been the “very ancient book” that Geoffrey of Monmouth was using, or another book very closely related to it (possibly an early Latin version). In any case, we can be left in no doubt that the “very ancient book” actually existed, and Geoffrey was not making it all up.

If all of this was pure fabrication, it would have affected the reputations of the following people who were very influential:

- Robert, Earl of Gloucester was the eldest son of Henry I, and although he was illegitimate, he was one of the most powerful men in the land.
- Walter Espec was the founder of Helmsley Castle in Yorkshire. He is thought to have been given his Yorkshire estates by Henry I, to strengthen the Scottish border. He also founded monasteries at Rievaulx and Kirkham in Yorkshire, and Warden in Bedfordshire.
- Ralf FitzGilbert lived near Washingborough in Lincolnshire, and also had estates in Hampshire. He was a founder and benefactor of a number of monasteries.
- Lady Constance was the wife of Ralf FitzGilbert.
- Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, was a senior priest and well respected scholar.

According to Gaimar, all of these people, except Walter of Oxford, had been in possession of the Latin source that clearly came from Geoffrey of Monmouth. Walter himself had been in possession of the “Good Book of Oxford”, which is associated with Geoffrey’s “very ancient book”.

Gaimar was name-dropping all these people in an effort to enhance the credibility of his “L’Estoire des Engleis”, and he would have invited their certain disapproval if he had implicated them in a conspiracy to create fake histories. It is impossible to imagine that any of them would want to tarnish their reputations in that way.

How Good Was The Book?

The name “Good Book of Oxford” implies that people must have believed it, and this is certainly true because they used it to make improvements to other books. However, there could also be a linguistic meaning to the name. The following text is from in an alternative version of Geoffrey’s Dedication, which appears in the Peter Roberts edition of Tysilio’s Chronicle. He says:

. . . Walter, the Archbishop of Oxford . . . brought me a very old book, written in the Welsh language, which gives a regular chronological history of the British kings . . . and gives it in good language.

So, if the “Good Book of Oxford” was written in Welsh and not in Latin, it could have been so named because the language was good.

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