CHAPTER 4

CITY OF CATASTROPHES

Postcolonial England

A poignant scene in Beowulf depicts the last survivor of a forgotten race constructing a burial mound or beorh (2241). Within its earthen walls he inters the leavings of his people: swords, goblets, gold jewelry, the detritus of a vanished nation. Ages later a dragon arrives to claim for himself this memorial that no longer retains memory, guarding for dozy centuries its lifeless wealth. When some wretch plunders the hoard and awakens its guardian, Beowulf is forced to battle the monster in its adopted home. The poem concludes with the dead king interred with the same treasure inside another barrow, Biowulfes biorh (2807), while the enemies of his people gather to obliterate his realm.

The beorh constructed by forgotten hands was a familiar sight in the Beowulf-poet’s day. Some of these mounds were contemporary, such as the Sutton Hoo burials of East Anglia. Others were the remnants of Roman chambered tombs or the funereal structures of Britons. Most of Britain’s barrows, however, are the work of prehistoric peoples who enclosed their bones and precious objects but were unable to bequeath to the future more than the barest indication that they had once walked the land. As writers like Bede, William of Malmesbury, and Gerald of Wales knew, the long history of the British Isles consists of repeated migration, invasion, resettlement, fading, commingling. Flows of languages, religion, cultures, and genes washed an archipelago where disparate peoples coexisted, conflicted, and changed. Many of their histories linger now only in tantalizing material fragments. Others achieved consolidations still well known: Roman Britannia, Dal Ríata, changing constellations of petty Welsh and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the Mercian hegemony, King Alfred’s omnivorous Wessex, the Danelaw, Athelstan’s united England. Each of these collectives was eventually displaced or transformed by the advent of some new power with its own vision of community and dominion.

Because they unfolded over long spans, few of the major shifts in insular power are attached to specific dates. Even when precise years are known, none exude the same gravitas as 1066, a date every student of insular history can recite, “the year of the Conquest,” of the Battle of Hastings and of William’s Christmas coronation in Westminster, a year so profoundly transformative that (according to William of Poitiers, Henry of Huntingdon, and the Bayeux Tapestry) Halley’s comet streaked across the firmament to announce the profundity of the coming changes.¹ The year retains such demarcative force in part because, compared to previous conquests or invasions, the Norman campaign was meticulously documented. Why 1066 should have immediately attracted a vast historiography is not difficult to explain: growing literacy, the widespread existence of fairly efficient apparatuses for the dissemination of texts, a burgeoning interest in secular history. The arrival of the Normans was also inherently more narratable than, say, the Anglo-Saxon migration, an “event” of protracted duration accomplished through waves of peoples not acting under a single leader or even as a collective. With a charismatic leader, swift denouement, and sheer geographic spread, the Conquest was readymade epic. Yet that so much historiography arose in the wake of 1066 is probably due less to the fact that the Conquest could be efficiently narrated so much as that the subjugation of England effected such profound change that its story needed to be told, over and over again, to make sense of an altered world.

The arrival of those peoples who became the Irish, the Britons, the Picts, and the English unfolded slowly, fostering gradual displacement and absorption of indigenous populations rather than wholesale subjugation. Most insular polities were as a result predicated on continuity between rulers and governed. The swift Norman Conquest, on the other hand, engendered a bifurcated society, the effects of which could clearly be discerned for at least a century thereafter. Whereas the earlier Danish capture of the monarchy had not excluded the kingdom’s native residents from positions of power, William purged secular and ecclesiastical institutions of their indigenous elite. He made it amply evident that the English had become something they were not under the Danes: a subaltern population, inferior to the internationally minded aristocracy who now connected the British Islands with far-flung holdings in France, the Mediterranean, the Holy Land.

The achievement of the Conquest is especially impressive considering that England had been powerfully united from at least the tenth century onwards. Although the English, Danish, and Norman co-claimants to the throne at Edward the Confessor’s death make clear that no country’s future is as stable as its people might desire, England on the eve of Hastings had enjoyed a lengthy reign as western Europe’s earliest, largest, and most