The Creation of the English Nation: Alfred the Great as Role Model

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1. Introduction

Despite the fact that comparisons "count as one of the most basic intellectual operations" (Eggers 2019: 33), practices of comparisons do also constitute a social activity. For Willibald Steinmetz, "comparisons are an important social practice that leads to changes in behaviour and creates new routines" (2019: 2). At the same time, practices of comparing help shape group identity. As Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart show, both the assumption of comparability of the *comparata* as well as the *tertia comparationis* used in comparisons depend on social and historical contexts. For them, "comparing is not neutral or innocent, but is always interwoven with the interests and perspectives of the ones who compare and is related to the situations and contexts in which comparisons are made" (2020: 16).

This becomes evident when looking at practices of comparing in the context of encounters between different cultures. Beginning with the age of European expansion, comparisons between European and non-European cultures had become an important means to grasp reality. Epple and Erhart stress that intercultural comparisons thus contributed not only to the description of non-European cultures, but at the same time helped define European cultures (2015: 10ff.; see also Erhart 2015). Due to the fact that, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, as Michael Eggers has shown, practices of comparing had become an expression of rational thought, they also served as a basis for scientific depiction and classification of non-European cultures. Eggers further demonstrates that, simultaneously, comparisons played an important role in temporalizing human experiences. Natural histories as those written by Linné used comparisons in order to establish a progressive timeline of before and after (Eggers 2019: 37-38; see Epple/Erhart 2015: 12).

With a reference to Benedict Anderson's *The Spectre of Comparison*, Epple and Erhart point out that practices of comparing were not only used in an intercultural context but also served processes of nation-building (2015: 24). For the British context, this means that, in the eighteenth century, British national history began to be conceived of as a narrative of success which started with the Anglo-Saxon period. Comparisons with Alfred the Great played a decisive role within such narratives.[1] As Alfred was soon conceived of as an epitome of 'Englishness', politicians also referred to him in order to justify their positions. In this context, comparisons with Alfred the Great were used either to foster change or to defend the *status quo*.

Referring to Epple and Erhart, the following essay assumes that comparing as a practice is a "part of a frame-work of comparative practices that have been established through repetition and routines, cultural habits, and historical patterns" (2020: 18). By means of practices of comparing, different effects may be achieved. According to Angelika Epple, comparisons help organize the world by putting two entities into a relation. This organization may be hierarchical, and in fact, in the context of European encounters with non-European cultures, this has often been the case. However, by being put into a new context or by using a different kind of *tertium*, comparisons may also provoke change or stimulate new dynamics. This is due to the fact that a third characteristic of comparisons is that, although they are socially framed, they are still individual practices. Individual actors thus may put comparisons into different contexts, a process which Epple calls 'de- and recontextualization'. As a result, whether they foster change or contribute to traditional concepts, comparisons create seemingly coherent entities. Last but not least, comparisons legitimate specific actions or practices (Epple 2015: 165-170).

By considering these aspects, the following article will focus on comparisons with Alfred within the political context of the eighteenth century. In doing so, the essay will point to the eclectic use of these practices of comparing. Finally, the article will discuss how practices of comparing were crucial in establishing a cultural memory which was then pertinent to a definition of an imagined Anglo-Saxon community.

1 For the eighteenth century, see Keynes (1999). However, he does not concentrate on Alfred's role in political discourses. For the nineteenth century, see Parker (2007).

2. The Creation of the 'English' Nation

As Linda Colley and others in her wake have shown, after the Act of Union in 1707, which had united the Scottish and English parliaments, the long eighteenth century was characterized by a negotiation of 'national' identity.[2] While Colley focuses on the creation of a British 'national' identity, other scholars, like Stephen Conway, point to the fact that there is evidence for a "persistence of localism and the continuing appeal of older national loyalties", such as Englishness.[3] Although the two crowns of the Scottish and English kingdoms had been united since 1603 through James VI (Scotland) / I (England), the formal union of the Scottish and English parliaments took it one step further – a step which was not welcomed by all.[4]

One of the early supporters, however, was Daniel Defoe who wrote lengthy pamphlets on the advantages of this union, showing a sympathetic understanding towards the Scottish people, as can be seen in his *Union and No Union* (1713). In this pamphlet, as in others, Defoe stresses the necessity of a real union among the people, not only on a political level, but also on an emotional one (see 1713: 3-4). For this purpose, he recurrently pointed to the fact that the Scottish and English shared many characteristics, that they were "Natives of the same Island, ally'd by Intermarriage, both in Kings, Nobility, and Common People, and live among one another, trade together, speak the same

2 In her pioneering study *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1836* (1992), Colley uses the expression 'the long eighteenth century' for the timespan between the Act of Union and the beginning of the Victorian era, Colley (2009). Following this, Evan Gottlieb concentrates on the era between the Act of Union in 1707 and the death of Walter Scott in 1832 (Gottlieb 2007: 15).

3 Conway (2001: 863). For Colley, exterior influences such as the rivalry with France are among the main reasons for an attempt to define Britishness (2009: 4 ff.). Gottlieb, on the other hand, focuses on interior forces, thereby concentrating on the contribution of Scottish Enlightenment authors. He also states that "Britishness was often in productive tension with these competitors [i.e. other forms of identification such as gender, rank, religion and region] for people's attention and loyalty" (2007: 14). In this context, the main competitor to Britishness is the notion of Englishness.

4 This was also connected to the religious conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism, which resulted in a series of upheavals, generally known under the term 'Jacobite rebellions', in the years between 1689 and 1746. As Stephen Conway demonstrates, it was the English and the Catholic Irish who strongly opposed the idea of 'Britishness' (2001: 870 ff.).

Language, profess the same Protestant Religion".[5] In his satirical poem *A True-Born Englishman* (1701), Defoe had already emphasized that the idea of a 'true Englishness' was misleading since the Englishman represented "a het'rogenous thing", a "mixture of all kinds" (1835: 7). Referring to the Anglo-Saxon times, Defoe makes clear, that it was the "Western Angles" who had 'united' the different people on the British Isle by force:

> The Western Angles all the rest subdu'd,
> A bloody nation, barbarous and rude,
> Who, by the tenure of the sword, possest
> One part of Britain, and subdu'd the rest.
> And, as great things denominate the small,
> The conqu'ring part gave title to the whole.
> The Scot, Pict, Briton, Roman, Dane, submit,
> And with the English-Saxon all unite;
> And these the mixture have so close pursu'd,
> The very name and memory's subdu'd;
> No Roman now, no Briton does remain;
> Wales strove to separate, but strove in vain.
> The silent nations undistinguished fall,
> And Englishman's the common name for all.
> Fate jumbled them together, Gods [sic!] knows how,
> Whate'er they were, they're *True-Born English* now.[6]

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Defoe did neither celebrate an assumed superiority of Englishness nor link this ideal to specific historical figures. In his *A True-Born Englishman*, Defoe thus deconstructs the idea of aetiological myths. In his *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (1982), American historian Hugh A. MacDougall has shown that many eighteenth-century writers, however, did refer to one of two story cycles which have served as aetiological myths for Great Britain: the Arthurian legends

5 Defoe (1706a: 11-12). Therein, Defoe furthermore mentions that a union would be of advantage for the British Isles in their dealings with other European nations (1706a: 3-4, 26-27).

6 Defoe (1835: 8) (original emphasis). As can also be seen in his *Jure Divino* (1706), Defoe attacks all kinds of 'racial' belongings. Therein, he further points out that it was not only the Normans but also the Saxons who proved to be violent conquerors. Defoe adds that all property and all government stems from violence: "The longest Sword the longest Scepter brings" (1706b: 217). See Hill (1958: 92-93).

and the Anglo-Saxon narratives (see MacDougall 1982). Although in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many writers related to King Arthur, others focused on later – Saxon – figures and used them as role models for kings, politicians and common people alike. While during the Stuart reign, it had been customary to refer to the saintly king Edward the Confessor in a laudatory manner,[7] this ceased to be appropriate with the accession of the House of Hanover in 1714, represented by George I. In order to fill this void of a heroic model, Alfred the Great became increasingly popular (see Pratt 2000: 140). Thus, according to Simon Keynes, it was during the eighteenth century that Alfred developed into "the archetypal symbol of the nation's perception of itself" (1999: 225). Despite the fact that the Anglo-Saxon past could be made use of in order to justify the union and thus to serve as a basis for "Britishness", Alfred and the emerging study of Anglo-Saxonism was more closely connected to notions of "Englishness". This becomes obvious when looking at the radical discourse of the mid-eighteenth century. In the 1790s, however, when political discussions focused on an assumed French threat, Alfred and Anglo-Saxonism began to be more closely related to ideas of "Britishness". Before discussing these discourses in more detail, however, the essay will concentrate on the formation of the Alfredian myth.

3. "[O]ne of the wisest and best that has ever adorned the annals of any nation": The Alfredian Myth[8]

Alfred the Great was King of Wessex from 871 to 886, Wessex being one of the most important Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.[9] His reign was characterized by enduring battles with Danish invaders. These disputes led to a co-operation

7 Edward was the second to last Anglo-Saxon king and considered to be the last Anglo-Saxon king of the house of Wessex. He was praised, for example in John Hare's *St. Edwards* [sic!] *Ghost, or, Anti-Normanisme* (1647) (see Hill 1958: 73 and 57-58).

8 Hume (1854: 76). David Hume's *History of England* (1754), which also dedicated some space to Alfred the Great, will not be considered in this essay.

9 When the Romans left the British Isles, members of the Jutes, the Angles and the Saxons came from North Germany and Denmark to Britain where they settled and finally founded several kingdoms. The crucial kingdoms were Wessex, Sussex, Kent, East Anglia, Essex, Mercia and Northumbria (nowadays also known as the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy).

and finally a union of several Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, making Alfred king of the Anglo-Saxons from 886 until his death in 899.

According to Simon Keynes, who published a detailed study on the eighteenth-century "cult of Alfred", the creation of the Alfredian myth had already begun during Alfred's lifetime. As Keynes further demonstrates, most of the stereotypes used in the eighteenth century had already been developed by the end of the fourteenth century; however, it was only in the first half of the seventeenth century that Alfred turned into a national idol (1999: 227-237, 246). Despite the fact that Alfred had been part of the English, or British, cultural memory since the Middle Ages, it is due to de- and recontextualisations that comparisons with Alfred played an important role in eighteenth-century political discourses.

Apart from the notion that Alfred was a great warrior, who defended his home from the 'barbaric' Danish invaders, one of the most relevant stereotypes created during the Middle Ages was the idea of Alfred being the founder of the English nation, uniting the several Anglo-Saxon kingdoms against the Danes. According to Keynes, this idea spread due to *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, which was written by a Norman monk in the middle of the twelfth century (1999: 231). Together with the notion of Alfred being a lawmaker, this was what would later lead to the idea that Alfred's reign represented an early version of a constitutional monarchy.[10] This was mainly propagated by the anonymously published *Historical Essay on the English Constitution* (1771), which had a great impact on writers of the radical wing (see Hill 1958: 95-96). Another feature which was mirrored in the eighteenth-century radical discourse and which had been linked to Alfred since the Middle Ages was the ideal of liberty. As can be seen when looking at radical authors, such as John Wilkes and Catherine Macaulay, this ideal and its connection to the Alfredian myth became prevalent.

It was not only the notions of constitutional monarchy and of liberty, which were of special relevance for the formation of a British or English identity in the eighteenth century, but also the navy. During this century, the navy became crucial in conflicts with other imperial powers, especially Spain and France. It was at this time that the idea spread that Alfred was the founder

10 According to Parker, this has already been suggested by John Spelman's biography of Alfred (written in the 1640s and published in 1678) (2007: 58, 118). For the image of Alfred as law-maker, see Keynes (1999: 234-235).

of the navy – an idea which was mainly inspired by John Spelman's *Life of Alfred the Great* (1678), as Joanne Parker argues (2007: 58). Spelman's biography was dedicated to the Prince of Wales, the later king Charles II, and, as Joanne Parker stresses, "the earliest serious attempt to enlist Alfred for political ends" (2007: 57).

However, Alfred was not praised for his military and political successes alone. One other important feature in the idealization of the Saxon king was his interest in learning and his support of the arts and the sciences. Closely connected to this idealization of Alfred as philosopher-king, was the assumption that he founded the University of Oxford, a legend which came up in the middle of the fourteenth century (Keynes 1999: 235ff.).

4. "Make former days in future ages live": Alfred as Ideal King[11]

One of the first to promote Alfred as the new role model was Richard Blackmore in his epic poem *Alfred*, published in 1723 and dedicated to "the Illustrious Prince Frederick of Hanover" (1723). Almost thirty years earlier, in his *Prince Arthur* (1695), Blackmore had depicted the Saxons as "fierce" and "warlike" (3, 101); at the same time, however, he had praised Alfred as a "pious Souldier" (sic!), "humble King", "*Hero*" and "*Bard*"[12] and even included him in a future vision of "Britannia"[13]. As an open supporter of the Glorious Revolution, Blackmore had celebrated the virtues of William III with this poem, presenting him as being of equal rank to both Arthur and Alfred.[14]

In the preface to *Alfred*, Blackmore stresses the fact that it is the combination of historical truth with poetical fancy, which has a special appeal for future kings in guiding them in their behaviour:

> Besides living Examples, the Histories of excellent Kings, published by celebrated Authors, have great Influence in kindling a warm Desire in young

11 This line is taken from "Britannia's Reward – A Vision", an ode written in honour of the historian Catherine Macaulay, see later in this article.

12 Blackmore (1695: 147) (original emphasis). Note that Arthur is also described as "pious" (ibid.: 281).

13 Note that, throughout the poem, Blackmore refers to the British Isles either as "Britannia" or as "Albion".

14 See Liss (1911: 11, 24). Blackmore is hardly read nowadays, and was despised by his contemporaries such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope. See also Solomon (1980: 165).

> Princes, to resemble them in their admirable Virtues and glorious Actions; And not only true Histories of applauded Monarchs transmitted to Posterity, but likewise those, that are partly real and partly extended by a copious Variety of invented Incidents, and the Embellishments of a fertile Imagination, that by conveying Instruction in a delightful Manner, facilitate its Admission to the Mind, may much conduce to the Accomplishment of young Princes, and prepare them for the Exercise of imperial Authority. (1723: Preface)

Thus, with the example of Alfred, whom he described as "one of the greatest Monarchs, that ever ruled this or any foreign Nation" (ibid.), Blackmore hoped to inspire Prince Frederick in his future government of "Great Britain".[15] As the Hanoverian House was rather unpopular among the British people (Colley 2009: 205-206), Blackmore likewise intended to enhance Frederick's esteem. In order to achieve this, he presented Frederick as a descendant of Alfred and as a representative of "Hope [for] fair *Britannia's* Land" (1723: 292; original emphasis; see Keynes 1999: 275).

Prince Frederick readily accepted this example. Frederick, grandson of George I, had remained in Hanover during his grandfather's reign and only came to England in 1728. A year later, he was granted the title Prince of Wales. He was strongly opposed to his father George II and the then Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, criticizing both for subjugating Britain to foreign interests and for fostering domestic disharmony. For his supporters, he became himself a symbol for constitutional kingship and the representation of a 'patriot king'.[16] Frederick, thus, was well aware of the problems the dynasty of the Hanoverians faced as British rulers. Just as Blackmore suggested in his epic poem *Alfred*, Frederick invested in the arts, planning to create a national academy of art, which could take care of "patriotic culture". However, as he died in 1751, it was up to his son, George III, to accomplish such goals (Colley 2009: 210).

In order to visualize his link with the Anglo-Saxon past, Frederick commissioned a statue of Alfred, the "Founder of the Liberties and Commonwealth of England" (qtd. after Pratt 2000: 141). This stress on the 'Englishness' of Alfred is also taken up in *Alfred – A Masque* (1740), written by David Mallet and James Thomson on behalf of Frederick (Parker 2007: 63-64). Although,

15 Blackmore (1723: Dedication). In this context, Blackmore also points to Frederick's descent from "the ancient *Saxon* Race" (original emphasis).

16 This becomes obvious in Bolingbroke's *The Idea of a Patriot King* (1738). For Frederick's opposition to his father and his connection to the Tories, see Glickman (2011).

throughout the masque, they only refer to 'England' and call Alfred "England's king", it is in a future vision presented at the end (when Alfred has successfully defeated the Danes) that they use the term "BRITANNIA" in order to refer to the British Isles.[17] Likewise, in the still famous patriotic song "Rule Britannia", there is only talk of "Britons" and "Britannia" (Mallet/Thomson 1751: 64-65). As both authors were Scottish, it is hardly astonishing that they would finally refer to a broader concept of nationality.[18]

5. "[T]he most sacred regard to the liberty of his people": Alfred in Eighteenth-Century Politics[19]

Although Frederick and his supporters had tried to disentangle Alfred from the Whig tenure, Alfredianism and Anglo-Saxonism still played a considerable role in what has been termed the 'Whig interpretation of history'. This version of history has regularly traced the common law, the constitutional monarchy and the ideal of liberty back to the times of the Anglo-Saxon society ruled by Alfred the Great (Hill 1958: 87-88; Keynes 1999: 246-247). While Alfred starred in the radical discourse of the 1760s,[20] in which he was often used in order to criticize parliament and king, at the end of the century, he was referred to either to combat revolutionary developments in Great Britain or to stimulate anti-French sentiments. Thus, following Linda Pratt, the essay argues that the figure of Alfred was used in order to support a wide variety of political stances.[21] The subsequent paragraphs will trace this development by

17 Mallet/Thomson (1751: 16, 63). The vision of a Hermit who serves as a spiritual guidance for Alfred in this play is meant to illustrate the future greatness of the navy serving as a "bulwark of [the] separate world [i.e., England]" (Mallet/Thomson 1751: 63). This depiction of England as a "separate world" points to the conviction that its insular character distinguishes the nation from most of the other European countries, a notion which is still expressed (see Lowenthal 1991: 214).

18 It is Stephen Conway who also points to the Scottish nationality of Thomson (2001: 869).

19 Hume (1854: 79).

20 As Amanda Goodrich explains, "[t]he term 'radicalism' had been applied retrospectively to construct a collective English political movement oppositional to loyalism". She further argues that "English radicalism extended beyond Englishness and incorporated people and ideas from beyond the shores of the British Isles" (2019: 9).

21 Pratt (2000: 141 ff.). However, Pratt does not offer detailed information on this topic.

referring to John Wilkes, Catherine Macaulay, Henry Redhead Yorke, James Bland Burges and John Bowles.[22]

The political career of the radical John Wilkes (1727-1797) may be taken to express the "acute sense of crisis" which prevailed in the 1760s. As Kathleen Wilson has demonstrated, this sense of crisis was fuelled, on the one hand, by a rivalry with France and, on the other, by a government that tried to control the press and violently suppressed any revolt. The demonstration for "Wilkes and Liberty" of May 1768, later known as the St. George's Field Massacre, is a case in point (Wilson 1998: 213-214, 201ff.). The protest was aimed against the imprisonment of Wilkes, at that time Member of Parliament,[23] who strongly criticized George III in one of his articles published in *The North Briton*.

On June 5, 1762, the first issue of *The North Briton* was published. This radical newspaper was begun by John Wilkes in order to disparage the newly elected Prime Minister John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute, the first Scotsman to be announced prime minister. The anti-Scottish stance was revealed in the very title of the newspaper, which responded to the pro-governmental newspaper *The Briton*, edited by Tobias Smollett and considered to function as a mouthpiece for the whole nation. However, Wilkes accused him of selling Scottishness in the name of Britishness (see Gottlieb 2007:75). To balance this, *The North Briton* was dedicated "To the English Nation, the Glorious Protectors of CIVIL and RELIGIOUS LIBERTY".[24] The open Scottophobia was accompanied by an anti-French stance, assuming that the Scottish prime minister would rather turn to France than to defend 'England'.[25] As his letters reveal, Wilkes also looked disparagingly to Ireland (1804: 327). His "cult of *England*", as Linda Colley has called it (2009: 109; original emphasis), thus led to a conception of the nation, which excluded all Scottish and Irish traits. Naturally enough, Wilkes preferred the expression "England" over "Great Britain".[26] Furthermore, he ascribed the creation of the English nation and legitimate rule to

22 Keynes mentions Catherine Macaulay in his work only briefly, see Keynes (1999: 286).

23 Wilkes was excluded from parliament twice in his career.

24 See dedication in Wilkes (1764).

25 See Wilkes (1764: 30), No. 6 (published on July 10, 1762): "[...] with what unfeigned rapture will France receive the news, that there is no longer a first minister in this island from their ancient enemy England, but from their firm and unshaken ally, SCOTLAND." He also assumes that other European powers, such as Russia and Prussia, would be on good terms with this British government.

26 Colley (2009: 116). During his exile, he even started to write a three-volume history of England, of which he only completed the first volume (2009: 110). Colley further points

Alfred's reign. Thus, in a letter written in 1762, where he praises the achievements of Prime Minister William Pitt, he uses the image of the passing of "the sceptre of Alfred" from one king to the next in order to describe legitimate rule (see Wilkes 1767: 272).

One of the great admirers of Wilkes was Catherine Macaulay (1731-1791), a radical author and historian. Macaulay belonged to a group called the Real Whigs, whose members supported American independence and considered liberty the highest virtue.[27] In her *History of England* (1763-1783), which was "a best-seller among radical circles" (Hill 1958: 94), she does not pay much attention to the period covering the Saxon dominion over the British Isles. Nonetheless, she accepted Alfred as an ideal ruler, keeping a bust of the Wessex king in her study.[28] To honour her birthday in 1777, a compilation of six odes was published which included extensive references to Alfred. The first ode, entitled "Hortensia's Birth-Day", recalls a stereotypical representation of Alfred – he is called "Great patriot King" and is praised for his justice, his support of the arts and the sciences, and his assumed foundation of the University of Oxford (Anon. 1777: 17). However, it is the last ode called "Britannia's Reward – A Vision" which deserves special attention. It envisages a personified 'Britannia' who addresses herself to 'British' women in general by referring to important female writers of the eighteenth century. These include the poetess Anne Laetitia Barbauld, who is praised for her piece on the Corsican revolutionary Pasquale Paoli, Hester Chapone, a writer of conduct books for women and member of the so-called Bluestockings, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who is paid tribute for her critical mind, and Elizabeth Carter, whose translation of the *Discourses of Epictectus* are mentioned as a moral guide for the youth.[29] In the ninth stanza, it is Macaulay herself who is praised. By referring to Alfred, Macaulay is presented as the "Child of Liberty" (Anon. 1777: 44, 45). For 'Britannia', Macaulay best personifies the fight against 'tyranny' and for "Freedom" – a task which she sets for the rest of the British population as well (Anon. 1777: 43). As the poem attempts to celebrate 'British' achievements,

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out that, on several occasions, Wilkes stressed the difference of Scottish people and, at the same time, of the primacy of England within Great Britain (2009: 118).

27 Cash (2006: 234). Benjamin Franklin was also among the group's members.

28 Keynes (1999: 286). She also called her home "Alfred's House".

29 Anon. (1777: 41 ff.). Barbauld wrote a story for children entitled "King Alfred the Great", using the then already notorious myth of Alfred burning the cakes as topic, printed in *Evenings at Home* – a series of six volumes for family reading which she published together with her brother John Aikin between 1792 and 1795.

it contributes to the new sense of 'Britishness' rather than to the older concept of 'Englishness'.

One of the later radicals, who worshipped the ideal of liberty, was Henry Redhead Yorke (1772-1813). According to Amanda Goodrich, Yorke ranks among the most important radicals of the late eighteenth century (2019: 8). He led the Sheffield Constitutional Society and supported the idea of arming for insurrection. For this, he was pursued by the Home Office and finally arrested in 1794. Despite the radical ideas he had pronounced to this point, it was during his trial, as Amnon Yuval demonstrates, that he began to turn towards more moderate positions, ultimately becoming even an "ultraloyalist".[30] Attacking his former friend Thomas Paine for his criticism on the English constitution,[31] he would defend the "magnanimous government which we derived from our Saxon fathers, and from the prodigious mind of the immortal Alfred" (Yorke 1795: 128). In 1803/1804, Henry Redhead Yorke published letters in *The Star* under the pseudonym of either "Alfred" or "Galgacus". Both historical figures served as a symbol for liberty: While Alfred had defeated the Danes, Galgacus (or Calgacus) was a Caledonian chieftain who had fought against the conquering Romans in the first century A.D. In one of these letters, Alfred is characterized as the founding father of the empire and linked to the ideal of liberty, supposedly having said the words: "it is right the people of England should be as free as their own thoughts".[32] By mentioning the "patriotic King" (i.e., George III) in the same sentence, Yorke established a link between the Anglo-Saxon king and the King of the United Kingdom (1804: 70). These letters, which were later reprinted in a volume entitled *The Anti-Corsican; or, War of Liberty* (1804), were intended to arouse patriotic feelings and an anti-French sentiment among readers. It is important to note that Yorke explicitly addressed his letters "to the People of the United Empire", praising the Act of Union of 1801 and calling both the Irish and the English "a people of brethren" (1804: 24). Therefore, it is not astonishing that he preferred to speak of 'Britain' rather than of 'England'

30 Yuval (2011: 615-616). Yuval borrows the term "ultraloyalist" from Stuart Semmel, who uses this expression for the older Yorke in his *Napoleon and the British* (2004).

31 See Hill (1958: 103-104). However, as Yuval demonstrates, it is very likely that Yorke turned against Paine in order to be acquitted of high treason (see Yuval 2011: 627-628). For the relation between Yorke and Paine see Goodrich (2019: 82 ff., 242 ff.).

32 Yorke (1804: 70). See also Yorke (1795: 104). In his *History of England*, Hume also quotes these lines, citing Asser's *Life of Alfred* as source (1854: 79).

(1804: Preface, 103). Unlike Wilkes a couple of decades earlier, Yorke was ready to embrace Britishness.

By the end of the eighteenth century, there existed a cohesive set of stereotypes about Alfred which most Britons were familiar with. This led to a couple of publications, which referred to Alfred in their titles but did not deal with the Anglo-Saxon king directly. Two interesting examples are James Bland Burges's *Alfred's letters, or a Review of the Political State of Europe to the End of Summer 1792* (1793), and the anonymously published *Letters of the Ghost of Alfred* (1798). Unlike Wilkes, Macaulay and the early Yorke, however, these two authors readily accepted the policies of their government and used Alfred primarily in order to defend the *status quo*.

Alfred's Letters by James Bland Burges (1752-1824) is an informed report about the situation in various European countries towards the end of the century, including comments on their mutual relationships. The letters were originally published in *The Sun* and read by a large part of the population (Burges 1793: Advertisement, 89). Not surprisingly, one is informed about "England['s]" virtues, a country

> which […] appeared to surrounding nations the mild but strenuous arbiter of Europe, unequalled in prosperity and resources, enjoying the purest and most perfect government which had ever blessed a people, and profiting by the arts of peace, while she possessed and knew how to use the irresistible means of war.[33]

According to Burges, England's role as leading nation and as 'saviour' of Europe is also made possible by the alliance with Prussia and Holland, founded in order to thwart the mutual plans of Russia, Austria and France to exchange territories, so that English and Prussian power would be diminished. By calling this alliance the "Germanic association" (1793: 116), Burges clearly invokes England's Anglo-Saxon past and most likely also alludes to an intrinsic link between these nations due to their common 'Germanic inheritance'.

The anonymously published *Letters of the Ghost of Alfred* consist of nine letters, four being addressed to Thomas Erskine, the rest to Charles James Fox. The author is now known to have been John Bowles, a barrister and, as Emma Vincent has put it, an ardent "'war crusading' writer" who defended the conservative politics of William Pitt the Younger (1993: 394). Both Erskine and

33 Burges (1793: 90). Although Burges sometimes makes use of the term Great Britain, he still prefers the term England (see for example 1793: 95-96).

Fox, on the other hand, opposed the politics of Pitt, prime minister from 1783 to 1806 (with a break between 1801 and 1804). In 1794, when Pitt's government decided to take action against those who supported parliamentary reform, Thomas Erskine defended Thomas Hardy, a shoemaker and secretary of the London Corresponding Society, whose trial was the first of the treason trials held in October / November 1794.[34] Charles James Fox, a Whig politician, was an opponent of George III, whom he regarded as an aspiring tyrant. Supporting both the American and the French Revolution, he was known to be an advocate of religious tolerance and individual liberty.

However, in his *A Protest Against T. Paine's 'Rights of Man'*, John Bowles could still speak of Fox as "[o]ne of the greatest Political Characters of the present age" (1995: 57). This protest was an address given in 1792 before a book society of which Bowles himself was a member and which had put Paine's work on a list of recommended books. In this address, Bowles criticized Paine for his attack on the monarchy in general, and the British Constitution in particular. He further proved to be an ardent advocate of the idea of "continuity" with the past: "There is no point, line, or boundary, at which one generation can be said to terminate and another to commece [sic]" (Bowles 1995: 47). Laws are therefore held to be eternal as well as universal. However, in his address, Bowles also suggested that this continuity had only begun with the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex and that many 'accomplishments' could be ascribed to Alfred the Great (1995: 53, 50). Furthermore, his address shows his aversion towards revolutions in general. Commenting on the passing of the new Polish constitution, Bowles stresses for instance that "all great and sudden changes are precarious in their effects, and that a gradual acquisition of advantages is alone to be depended upon for security and permanence" (1995: 59).

This aversion against revolutions also finds expression in his *Letters of the Ghost of Alfred*. These had originally been published in the *True Briton*, and were considered to be an important instrument in the struggle against anarchy and revolution, "the most dreadful scourge that ever afflicted the human race" as the editor put it.[35] Although these letters do not explicitly refer to Alfred, the preface presents him as the originator of the English constitution. Bowles' fear is that this constitution is now in danger to be overthrown (see Anon.

34 It is in this context that Henry Redhead Yorke's trial took place. Thomas Erskine also defended Yorke in his sentencing hearing in November 1795 (see Yuval 2011: 635).

35 Anon. (1798: vii). The fact that Yorke was part proprietor of the *True Briton* bespeaks his conservative turn.

1798: vii). By defending it, he also intends to demonstrate his support of the monarchy:

> [A]ccording to both the letter of Law, and the genuine spirit of the Constitution, all Power, Dignity, and Political Excellence, centre in the King. He is the Sun of the System, communicating light, life, motion, and energy, to every part, and maintaining the whole in order, harmony, and cohesion. (Anon. 1798: 78)

Bowles did not believe in the sovereignty of the people and in a control of the government through the people (Anon. 1798: 8). For these reasons, he interpreted the French Revolution as a "deep and vast conspiracy against all the ancient institutions of Europe, civil, political, and religious" (Anon. 1798: 49), threatening all Europe. Because both Erskine and Fox supported the Revolution, he accused them of inciting "Rebellion", "Anarchy", "the growth of Treason, and the breaking out of War" (Anon. 1798: 9, 59). In his *A Dispassionate Inquiry into the Best Means of National Safety* (1806), he even compared the rivalry of "[r]evolutionary France" and Great Britain to that of Rome and Carthage, and warned against the danger of sharing "the fate of the latter city".[36]

6. Conclusion

Beginning with the Act of Union in 1707, national debates centred around the question of how to define national identity, either pointing to a supremacy of Englishness or giving way to a new sense of Britishness. Both camps saw fit to call on Alfred, either as representing the "true English", i.e., Anglo-Saxon, spirit, or as a 'unionist' who first achieved to unite different kingdoms under one reign.

These practices of comparisons had different effects. First of all, these comparisons served the organisation of historical events and interpreted the eighteenth century as a direct consequence of the Medieval times. This created an idea of a linear development of national history. By directly linking the Saxons of the fifth to the eleventh centuries to the British population of the eigh-

36 Bowles (1806: 27-28). See Vincent (1993: 404). In a similar vein, the anonymously published *Alfred's Address to the Ladies of England* (1803) evokes the image of Carthage in order to press its appeal for "female Patriotism" against Napoleon and the French, Anon. (1803: 13, 19-20, 24).

teenth century through the comparison of contemporary politics with those of the times of Alfred, the idea of an Anglo-Saxon community was created. These "Anglo-Saxons" resembled what Benedict Anderson would later describe as an "imagined community" (1983). However, before politicians could refer to this stereotypical notion of Anglo-Saxonism and Alfredianism, it had to become part of the British cultural memory. Literary writings such as Blackmore's epic poem *Alfred* and Mallet and Thompson's play *Alfred – A Masque* certainly had a great influence on the formation of this cultural memory.

At the same time that Alfred was used as a role model, the linear conception of time was dissolved into a hierarchical relation which set the early Medieval times above the eighteenth century. This is especially true for the radical discourse. When looking at the political discourse about the ideal of liberty in connection with the reign of Alfred the Great, comparisons with the Anglo-Saxon king were used in order to foster change. Thus, the radical movement promoted the concept of 'liberty' in order to criticize governmental and royal politics and to achieve political reform. At the end of the century, the reference to Alfred rather served as a warning against a national decline which authors such as Bowles and Burges expected if the English were once more submitted to the 'French' yoke. The fear of an impending French influence, either indirectly, through revolutionary tendencies, or directly, by military force, helped evoke the idea of liberty as a traditional English concept in order to rouse patriotic feelings and anti-French sentiments. Through de- and recontextualization, the *comparatum* 'Alfred' thus served a conservative purpose. The pursuit of national reform in earlier decades was now mainly abandoned for the sake of defending the status quo. This was accompanied by a confirmation of the Hanoverian rulers, whose status had been rather precarious during the first half of the century. In the nineteenth century, comparisons with Alfred were even more common and mainly served two purposes: the legitimation of the reign of Queen Victoria (see Parker 2007: 82ff.) and the establishment of an Anglo-Saxon community which was characterized by an (aggressive) expansionism and by the idea that it would outlast all times.

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