Kings & Queens

William I (1066–87)

William occupied Dover, and although London rejected his demand for its surrender, William began to devastate the surrounding countryside with great cruelty, and submission followed. William was crowned king on Christmas Day 1066.

William was a vigorous and determined man. He had never lost a battle and was the foremost general in Europe. The population of England was easily subdued, as were insurrections by Hereward the Wake, aided by the Danes, and the earls of Hereford and Norfolk, among many others. If the Anglo-Saxon hierarchy felt itself ill-used — as indeed it was — it showed it. French provinces under William's rule that had sought independence while William was elsewhere were swiftly brought to heel.

William the Conqueror was physically strong, charismatic, patient, devout, yet ruthless and cruel. He had been accompanied to England by many French nobles, who were granted estates confiscated from the Anglo-Saxons, and who were licensed to build castles. The feudal system had begun. And so did systematic rule. No one knew what England consisted of, what its wealth amounted to, what the inhabitants did and why or how many there were of them. The Domesday Book, which listed everything, even the numbers of livestock, and which covered all England except the far north (still a dangerous area), was completed shortly before William's death. It was a magnificent achievement, considering that England was a land of forests and intractable wilderness. It was not done out of love of learning, but to find out who and what to tax.

William's legacy was immense. Canterbury Cathedral was rebuilt; the White Tower of the Tower of London was begun; Scotland was invaded and the king, Malcolm III, Cannmore (1057–93), obliged to pay homage; the Pope was refused traditional homage; and the New Forest was enclosed as a royal hunting area. There has been some debate about whether William the Conqueror was a "Good Thing"; whether the culture represented by the Anglo-Saxons would have been preferable; and whether firm repression, eventually represented by 2,000 castles, is better than haphazard chaos.

The Conqueror died in 1087 when his horse stumbled as he was besieging the French city of Nantes. He left Normandy to Robert, his son, and England to William, his third son.