

*The Life & Travels
of Saint Cuthwin*

By

IRVING WARNER



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*The image to represent Cwenburh's 'clasp' on the cover,
and metaphorically as a clasp to open the book, is a medieval Anglo-Saxon
Gold belt buckle from the ship-burial at Sutton Hoo:
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Preface

The inclusion of a fictional introduction was done from the very first days of my composition of *The Life & Travels of Saint Cuthwin*. At that time, as I do now, I wanted an Edwardian tone to the text to add the luster of reality to my text, plus make reasonable the full range of our story-teller's language.


Since I was not a specialist in eleventh-century England, but wanted historical accuracy, I had much research to do. I knew I would not deceive the specialist, but wanted to appear that I respected the period, which I do.

The noted exception to historical accuracy is there was never a Cuthwin; he is completely my invention. However, he was real to me at the end, and now. I hope he will be to the reader as well. I do reaffirm that beyond this point, this is a work of historical fiction.

IRVING WARNER, 2018

*The wicked in his pride persecutes the poor;
let them be caught in the plots which they have devised.
For the wicked boasts his heart's desire; he blesses
the greedy and renounces the Lord.*

Psalm 10, ii-iii.



INTRODUCTION
The Life & Travels of Saint Cuthwin
R. AUBREY RICHARDS

THE TEXT YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ WAS DICTATED TO THE MONKS of St. Kea Monastery in modern Cornwall between about 1105 to 1107 by Cuthwin the Fencebuilder, born Cuthwin-of-Alnwick, around 1015 in the village of that name. He was Saxon and became fluent in reading and writing that language. However, he had ruined his hands after years of arduous work constructing stone fences.

This necessitated his dictating his story between the ages of 85 and 90 years. His stated point—knowing he was venerated and possibly would become acclaimed a Saint on death—was to dash any notion that he become acclaimed a Saint on death. Instead he steadfastly set out to communicate that he was an ordinary Saxon who had seen an entire swath of history and had a unique life and travels. He starts at his earliest memory, and ends—we assume—not too long before his death. All the words are his, *save the summaries of individual books* which were posthumous additions by his devoted followers who, contrary to his wishes, acclaimed him Saint anyway.

Enough said about that—the rest you will glean serendipitously from Cuthwin as he allows his story to unfold.

As for my role, I was contacted by the publishers to revise this translation done directly from Old English to Edwardian-era English—to make it more “comfortable” for the modern reader. The translation was originally done by my grandfather, Edward L. Sutherland, between 1906-1909.

My grandfather’s translation, as stated, was made directly from Old English. I advised the current publishers that to revise it would be to alter artistry of a manuscript just for the sake of modern tone and diction. The open translation of Old English’s earthier words and expressions no longer hinders publication as they did in 1910.

The provenance of the extant manuscript is excellent. It was sold along with other medieval manuscripts in a revision of all Vatican Library inventory ordered by Pope Pius VII in 1822. It is supposed that the purged manuscripts were sold for containing material negative to the Church, possibly even heretical.

“The Life & Travels of Saint Cuthwin” was one of these manuscripts, and the oldest. It is now—and since 1822 has been—in possession of a private collector in England. This family has generously given me free access throughout this process, as they did my grandfather. Why the manuscript would be felt “negative” by the Church, I will leave to the modern reader.

r.a.r. 2018



*The Life & Travels
of Saint Cuthwin*

Introduction to the
OVERALL PROCEEDINGS

I NARRATE MY LIFE AND TRAVELS IN THIS YEAR 1097 TO GOOD ISWHL-of-Ilchester with modest aims. At onset I remind all that I am Cuthwin the Fencebuilder, who has striven to build and mend fences along the boisterous coast of Kernowec these past thirty-odd years. I am nothing more than most hard-working freedmen, and certainly not a holy man, never having taken tonsure. I am an honest keeper of our Savior's words, like most Saxon folk.

And I am indeed Saxon both in kind and tongue which these last nearly forty years diminishes at court, in market, and croft. Fence-building has ruined my hands for writing or much else; hence Iswhl takes my words spoken, and commits them to writing, but admonishes me to read them over carefully, and I do.

Countrymen throughout the hills and shores come to my hermitage and, due to my travels and age, have sought advice on many topics. Since I have knowledge of letters and words, I do my best to share that God-given fortune. Hence, over the years good people have mistakenly attributed age, experience, perhaps wisdom—for holiness. Too often of late I have heard my name uttered in the context of religious gift.

So I write this to impart to all, for I will soon be gone: That I began life as a poor man who lived honestly, and will be taken by God in the same humble circumstances. This is what I desire to pass on to those reading of my life and travels.

Book 1

St. Cuthwin commences the telling of his early life, including his place of birth, and the circumstances of how he came to Peterborough Abby; his youthful education and subsequent departure from Peterborough to commence his early wanderings.



In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I,
Cuthwin-of-Alnwick, a simple child subject no more nor less to the baser nature of all men, begin the story of my long travels. I do so on this year of the tragic death of King William Rufus of England and the accession of his brother Henry.¹ I was born a freedman on the Nativity of Saint Mary², and thanks to a generous Creator have thus far seen eighty-nine winters. Possessing clear memory and present mind, after long urging from my more learned and reverend brethren, I proceed with the story of my humble but wide-ranging life.

At the beginning of King Cnut's long reign,³ God keep his soul, I was born to a house scull belonging to the Manor of Pilson-of-Withernsea, then an under-tenant to a thane of a Great Lord. There is nothing known of my father, save he was one of many pitiless Danes who ravaged Withernsea. The woman violated was Sarah, keen for the joys of fellowship and good ale, and much less for the hard work of kitchen and hearth. For these trespasses, I was told later, she was oft punished. Because of her ill-balanced humors, I had many brothers and sisters, for I was the eleventh of fourteen. Most of my siblings were rescued in early infancy from this troubled world by merciful God.

It was aired even in my person that my father, the Dane, violated territory oft yielded voluntarily or secured trespass in less-than-bad spirited circumstances. It was some weeks after being delivered of her fourteenth child that my mother departed this earth. I was told she died shriven, for her ways oft had been contrary to one of steady faith. I have only vague memory of this poor woman, my mother, but to this day pray for her soul as any true son would.

¹ King of England, 1100-1135.

² September 9th.

³ King of England, 1016-1035.

I was raised at commonality in the Manor of Pilson-of-Withernsea until not yet a stripling. I do remember the Lord of the Manor as a largish Saxon with great strands of red hair. He often drank to excess, falling off his horse onto whatever earthly circumstances lay beneath.

Working at livery, I would greet the animal as it arrived without its besotted rider. Joined by the Master of Horse's boy and others, we would search in all directions until we found our Lord. The lad finding him was rewarded with a ha'pence, after which we struggled at litter returning Pilson-of-Withernsea to the Manor proper. This Manor was meager, unlike Norman manors current, though boards always were sufficient of necessity for keeping body and spirit served.

At about the time a lad begins finding his staff, I and several serfs were transacted to Gilbert-of-Wharram Percy by our previous master to satisfy debt.

Wharram Percy was several leagues⁴ from my birthplace and upon soks much different. The Manor House of Gilbert was larger, and I was put in service to one of his trusted housecarls named Alwystle. He was a harsh master for any lad, of loutish nature, quick with cruel hand and foot, a man of colic temper. Thankfully he was slow of wit and easily hooded even by young boys.

Furthermore, he was plagued with badly portioned humors, and given to base excesses common to those not thoroughly of Christian virtue, which he was not. Alwystle was not of Saxon blood or natural tongue, and what little Christian goodness he practiced or espoused was different than most. He mocked the local clerics, refusing them entry upon his lands, and claimed it was because they celebrated Roman Easter rather than of the True Faith. Lastly, he claimed it was because of these Roman blasphemies that beasts and gorgons plagued the country.

Alwystle's household was both of village and field. I was given to the fields, and saw little of the village. Mostly I stayed in a cottage distant and labored for various bondsmen long in Alwystle's service. These all despised him, cheating his offices whenever possible to increase their lot, but if caught were whipped severely at post, summer or winter.

⁴ League. In 11th century England, a league was 1.4 miles or 2.2 km.

Being of the field, I grew into young manhood with little guidance but what nature and my fellows devised. Hence young and raw boys, as they will, allowed ourselves pleasures as we might follow. For little was at hand that offered respite from hard work, the brutish kick, or the whipping piece.

From older men we were told the ways of pleasure in stable and paddock. We did not question their views, and indeed observed our diverse overseers in such acts. As boys do when learning from men, we followed their example. But when one of Alwystle's head men observed us in such an act, he became angry.

Not understanding the strange contradiction of saying one thing and doing another, we waxed truthful of what we'd seen and heard others do. Both our ill-timed behavior plus revealing what we should not against our elders promised us horrible punishment. Rather than face this, I along with a lad named Pyster ran off. This itself was a grievous offense—then as now—for lads under guardianship or bond were tethered by law to our manorial Lords.

We feared the consequences of our acts. At the very least, Pyster guessed, we would be relieved of those body parts most responsible for bringing the Evil One into the fold of Alwystle Manor.

It was late spring; we were young of body and spirit, as suited to field and copse as young hares, with little more sense than such lame-witted creatures. We spent the days venturing down the River Humber, living by our wits and avoiding people. Any soul seeing such boys at leisure, even the simplest cottar⁴, would have deduced our ill-stood status. By catching us and informing Master Alwystle, they would gain considerable reward. Therefore, elusive as young hinds, we made our way down the great river.



After much idle travel, on the morning of the fourth day we observed great amounts of smoke seaward. Since we were far distant from Wharram Percy we became more confident. The smoke caused a vast haze everywhere and smelled of autumn when fields were burned, yet it was not yet summer.

A crone happened by in a wagon drawn by a largish cottar—looking more beast than human. We knew that neither of them could catch us so risked asking her what the meaning of the fire was. She took rest, and said several dragons were loosed in the valley below and had set everything afire, being in great temper after suffering one indignity or another by haughty villagers.

My companion and I were struck with fear and were about to flee inland. She stopped us and said in thoughtful manner that she was knowledgeable about such monsters and was taking a road around the troubles on her way to a copse where she had cottage and croft. She looked us up and down, and said she had need for two lads. Her old bones made work in croft difficult, and gesturing to the lout who pulled her cart, told us, “The dumb beast you see before you is good for nothing but burden, being deficient of mind. So,” she allowed, “. . . you decide as you must. I must resume before the worms advance this way.”

Prodding the poor lout onward, she continued on her way, passing downhill into a copse of great trees where flowed a stream. We in fact had spent the night there. Pyster and I were shy of her offer, yet knew she could not catch us, so he opined that we could follow along, for smoke was thickening, making eyes smart. Pyster had heard much about dragons and knew them to be clever in pursuing and catching folk. The crone would surely know how to avoid such monsters; otherwise how might she enjoy such a long life?

We caught up with her and she was not surprised. While pulled along,

she told us of diverse wonders. She was merry and true to her word, and soon the fires were more behind us and we moved uphill, along more of a path than road, so progress was slow but of good spirit.

At midday we reached the border of a thick forest and aged stone bridge traversing a considerable stream. She ordered the lout to stop and had us help her down from the wagon where she made repast. She shared bread and a kipper with us. Having fed for days on wild fare, we fell on her victuals keenly.

We began to sup when four men appeared from the woods, and the lout for the first time became aware of events, allowed outcry, and ran into the woods like the beast he was. They made no move to pursue but closed in. Seeing his chance Pyster ran, at once pursued by two of the men—but he was so fleet he evaded them and, like the lout, was swallowed up by the thick, shadowy forest. The pursuers returned at once. I never saw Pyster nor lout again.

Two of those remaining—one seemingly in charge—were so near me I knew I would not have the success Pyster had. The crone immediately visited foul words on them, then suddenly all switched to a tongue I could not understand, though I discerned the words were wholly unpleasant.

Drawing a knife, two of the four seized the crone, lifted her up, and despite outcry and protest, threw her kicking off the bridge and into the stream, in the last moment slitting her throat. They murdered her as if doing any minor, bothersome chore.

The cart, however, drew immediate and keen inspection.

These wretches’ headman, seeing I had befouled myself in abject fright, laughed and informed me the crone was transporting the two of us to the Danes who were presently harrying. They were part of the host that was burning and looting the countryside for nearly a week.

“Two young men sold into serfdom would have brought a month of high living for the old sow if she knew her trading. Well, one will do us. Demons and fiends will consume the other.”

They sat and partook the ill-begotten victuals, offering me none though in truth I could not have eaten. They talked in the foreign tongue and seemed cheered by their new possession, the cart.

“Who was that great gorgon of hers who ran off?” The headman asked, and I told him he drew her cart.

One of them eyed me while they talked, and since I was bound to the cart was at the mercy of the scum. Seeing what they did to the crone and how the lout had fled, I was sorrowful of my future. Though considerable daylight remained, each of them fell asleep, having consumed most the bread, ale, and all the kipper; hence, like stoats filled with ill-begotten food, they slept richly satisfied.

Though I'd been tethered skillfully to the cart, they had used the crone's old, worn lines, which were rotted. With youthful teeth sharp as a hayrake, I soon gnawed my way free and fled into the wood and away from the trail. As night approached, I was afraid and whistled for Pyster until my lips were chaffed. This was the first night I spent in my own company. The creatures that roamed in darkness, their calls and moans, caused me to tremble. This was a long night.



In the morning I awoke with a violent shaking and stout yank by my britches, and I found myself elevated and looking into the eyes of two different brutish cottars.⁵ They wrested me about, secured my elbows together and dragged me along as they might a sack of wool. When I cried out, one smote me—knocking me mute and foggy-headed.

My brainpan was just clearing when I found myself half-standing before a towering black horse. From atop this grand mount, the likes of which I had never seen, its imposing rider looked down—a man in black habit, and with his hood back, I saw he was tonsured and despite my youthful ignorance knew him to be a holy man.

My two captors presented me proudly to him, like dogs with a joint of mutton.

But there was no time to think further on this, for I was knocked

⁵ Farm laborers living in a cottage. Probably free.

down by one of them with the other brute shouting, “On your belly when you're before His Reverence, you little toad!”

One informed how they had found me in the woods having cleverly tracked me there. With this information, the Reverend thought some time, then asked, “What do they call you—who do you belong to? Now, if you lie to me, I'll know and have your tongue cut out and fed to the rooks.”

I believed him and told him everything save the reason for my fleeing Alwystle's manor. Even at this early age, craft of mind was my guardian, though later it also became my demon. But at this moment I sensed this cleric's authority, and kept mute regards reasons for running off.

This sent him into another rumination, and when my captors spoke, he ordered them silent, still considering me. Finally, “And why did you abandon rightful board which was God's place for you?”

“I unwittingly saw acts there, ungodly; also yesterday witnessed the murder of an old woman, Your Reverence, and was afraid for life and soul.”

He maintained his gaze. Finally taking a great draught of air he shook his head. “So it seems your running away led to witnessing the murder of a hag—so you have not improved your lot.”

From behind, a pair of horsemen approached. They too rode fine animals and, unlike the pair who caught me these were housecarls,⁶ so armed and dressed.

One cast a glance back, then looked with weariness to me. “Shall we hang this creature too, Your Reverence? The other four are quite cold now,” he laughed and added, “. . . but will be warmer soon enough.”

Subcellarer⁷ Eadsige—for indeed this was that holy man who later arose to great success and fame—was then young but already sure of office. In the following half-dozen years, I was to learn much indirectly from his words and ways.

Without paying any notice to his attendants' suggestion, he held up his hand—for the others had laughed. They ceased at once.

⁶ A member of household/manor troops or bodyguard.

⁷ A monk a step below the cellarer who is an officer or obedienciary in the monastery responsible for supplying food and drink. In Benedictine monasteries the cellarer's duties were expanded greatly.

“He’s young and strong, and our Gardener has work on the fens. Take him back with us. Feed him, but watch he doesn’t escape.”

So began my first long journey. In truth I’d never been more than twenty leagues from my birthplace at Withernsea, or indeed south of the Humbria. During our way south, I was kept tethered and watched by that brace of vultures who’d captured me; I was fed and treated tolerably, as I recall. During the second day I was told I was now in Bond of Default to the Abbey at Peterborough.

So this is how I first heard of such monastic offices. Furthermore, I only had vague knowledge of the great center at Peterborough, and nothing of abbeys save they were the havens of great men.

From the sun and stars, I reckoned we continued directly south. We were a large party all the time on the alert. Mammoth carts under burden were each towed by four braces of mighty burgundy oxen, the finest and strongest I ever saw.

All were in rich, bold array: The housecarls, a dozen of them, and several additional monks like Eadsige. These latter reverences stayed apart from the rest, but without doubt in overall command was Eadsige who devised and directed business each day.

In the party was one named Gilbert, a stableman, who was a good person. He attended the many horses and mules of our procession. On the third or fourth day he was kind enough to attend to wounds developed in my bindings—and the one upon my head where I had been smitten. Gilbert so attended despite mocking words from the cottars: “He’ll make fine sport for our Lord Gardener.”

This and many other taunts they visited on me. Yet my youthful mind was nimble—equal to the task of perceiving ‘which fowl pecked who,’ as they said in the farmyard. These cottars were of the lowest sort—not armed, and of rough garb. They hoped for great profit for my capture when they reached Peterborough.

Gilbert used few words, for he was a Welshman and not comfortable in our language, though skilled enough. Finally while attending my head wound, he said to them, “You two cotsets⁸ strike him any harder, and

⁸Lowest sort of cottar, without land and frequently bonded.

Father Abbot will have nothing but a corpse.”

Words were visited on Gilbert, the two taking exception to being called cotsets. But Gilbert ignored them. They did not press the matter further, and remained quiet if sullen.

This was the first night I spent in some peace, for Gilbert moved me to the makeshift animal shelter. He slept near his animals, and as if I were one, kept a keen eye on my head wound, which took an ill turn. While freshening a thick, pasty unguent upon the wound, he asked, “Do you know where you are being taken?”

“Peterborough.”

“Yes. But do you know what such a place is and what they do?”

“It is an abbey. They pray?”

He smiled in a manner which I learned was about the droll man’s most extreme of humor.

“No. Prayer is not all of it. So, Young Cuthwin, speak when spoken to, volunteer nothing, and know well to keep your place.”

That evening was warm for spring, and listening to the wild creatures at their songs and cries, I considered Gilbert’s words. They confused and kept me musing during the warm, strange night.

It is only frail memory and God’s grace after the passage of four-score circuits that informs me of that time so long ago. I came to the great Abbey of Peterborough; if not precise, only a little short of Abbot Elsin’s twenty-fifth year in that high office.

As our now-considerable procession trailed out upon the East Anglia fenland, our number had increased to many carts and animals destined for the Abbey at Peterborough. We had converged with other provisioning parties, and Subcellarer Eadsige rode before them on his grand animal, both as black as a raven’s mantle.

With us was a substantial group of housecarls who guarded, all owing service to the Abbey. These traveled with His Reverence Eadsige. My wounds were better thanks to Gilbert and the vigor of youth. Distant from familiar land, to attempt my escape would be folly; also, when re-captured, the result would be even more painful than the first. The same cottars who had caught me still followed closely, for I was of considerable worth to them. They bragged about their accomplishment

to any who might listen.

“A healthy, well-fed boy with so much hard work in him! He would have been the very devil to ferret from wood and hollow without the likes of us.”

When the time for their reward drew closer, they became friendlier with he who represented their increase in life. And since we traveled exclusively through hundreds or sokes⁹ belonging to the Abbey, foresters in our procession took wild game, so all ate well.

I applied Gilbert’s advice, and despite growing familiarity, answered only when asked. In fresh possession of youthful wit and cunning, I listened and measured each weave of my circumstances. At Peterborough, instruction and advice were rarely offered and never repeated.

As we approached the walls of Peterborough, it seemed to me that we were entering a county and town from great sags—the Monastery and Cathedral in the center and surrounding houses inside and outside the walls were imposing to me. In the days when the hosts frequently plagued common folk, walls were a balm, for it was better to be walled in than out.

Upon our arrival within the sanctuary of Peterborough Abbey, I stood enthralled at the sight of all the activity. For the major provisions and supplies we had carried involved all non-tonsured and tonsured in the Abbey to unload, and distribute.

I knew we would not see Cellarer Dagobert, for I learned he was grievously indisposed and not expected to survive long. His great office and all our procession’s efforts and material were ultimately subject to Father Abbot Elsin’s of Peterborough Abbey, the greatest man in all the country.

When Cellarer Dagobert fell deathly sick, his office was filled by Eadsige. It was assumed that Abbot Elsin would select Eadsige as the new Cellarer upon his return. Like so many great personages, the Reverend Abbot often traveled to far places on important holy missions.

⁹Hundred or soke. A large administrative unit of land, each having its own representative body from local villages. The right of local jurisdiction of a particular territory.

So it was this day that began my almost eight years of residence at Peterborough Abbey and its adjoining manors. I was to learn much between my eighth and seventeenth year that would benefit me in the travels this account will bring forth. To learn monastic ways and the Rule of St. Benedict benefited me for the entirety of my life by providing knowledge and skills. May God forgive me for applying some of that for purposes that met the afflictions of the immediate, though ignoring the consequences of the eternal.



Though my story is not of cloister, details of monastic life I should describe, however modestly. The Monastery was an ordered yet secure place as of which I had not benefit earlier. As the sages observe, you learn by what you do not have in contrast to that you come by.

A youth born and raised in meager holdings saw much to gape at in Peterborough and adjacent manors. Just the numbers of souls astounded, for I never saw so many in one place any time. On this first morning I saw over a hundred people at the Monastery within the walls and without—the two gates were maws belching people in and out. It was spring and much business was being conducted and haying was growing close. The arrival of our train carrying a bounty of feorms¹⁰ beholden to the Abbey resulted much bustle by the diverse responsibilities receiving cartage.

My anxious captors ignored this work, intent on my person, though they did offer—for the first time—an opinion of our Superior’s proven skills: “When this Subcellarer Eadsige goes afield, he milks the very trees of pith for his beloved Abbot.”

These two creatures remained at my elbows until their audience was finally at hand. I was pushed before them—presented for the second time to Eadsige and another tonsured cleric, Gardener Dundage, a Saxon of a dour nature. He looked me over, and opined aloud that I would run off at

¹⁰In kind payment, such as honey or grain, etc.

first opportunity, seeing I was a “Godless runaway born and likely bred.”

As one might barter horse or ox, the greedy cottars began to reckon the years at labor my youthful person would offer Father Abbot. Gardener Dundage cut them short with a surprising curse, causing Eadsige to hold out his hand for peace.

“See the Bursar for your coin, then leave this place.”

They frowned—the price not up to their expectations. But with a swinish glance at one another, and under the terrible eyes of Gardener Dundage, they left without further word.

“Think you, Brother, would not this lad be good for the weirs at the lake. An eel fisher?” And he offered a smile at Dundage who I was to learn never smiled.

“Perhaps. But one ill-step and the others will crack him open like a clam, even if he has cost Father Abbot coin.”

“Good!” Eadsige gestured for me to go, adding, “Wait outside for Gardener Dundage. And oh, young Cuthwin, add Father Abbot in your prayers, for you owe him your life.”

As I backed out, Gardener Dundage traced me with those baleful eyes, surmounted by vast black eyebrows, like clumps of tarry moss. The door closed behind me. For the first time since my capture, I was alone.

It was indeed a stout building; I was to learn that it served as the Cellarer’s residence. Monastery officers did not live cloistered but without for their business was with common folk. The smells of the cellar were such I never encountered: wines, cheeses, smoked and salted meats and fishes—and so many other things mixed in that my stomach growled with hunger.

I was not alone for long, for two cellar doors pivoted open, pushed by one worker in time to greet two others burdened with recently arrived goods. They descended, legs bent, carrying goods into capacious cellars beneath.

But that was not all.

Abruptly, to the opposing side of the hall, a great harangue of invective and outcry burst from within—not in the cellars, nor in the room where subcellarer Eadsige and Gardener Dundage still conferred, but yet another room. And despite the closed door of this room, the outcries

grew louder, until the door burst open violently and allowed me view of a sight still vivid and shocking this three-quarter century later: By the outcry I expected a scene of torture, but instead a massive enormity of a man—tonsured, wearing a vastness of ill-stained habit—was being held from the front by two bordars. From the rear, another unfortunate held up his robe, exposing a wide vista of bare buttocks, yet a fourth and fifth manned a stave tub into which this great leviathan of a monk was defecating.

“If you two dogs drop me again, I swear upon our Savior that it’ll be the whipping house for you!!”

The two that held their tormentor in a position to best empty his bowels struggled to support his massive bulk, and yet there was a sixth man—this sad self having thrown the door open—bent over at the waist and then standing upright, he took in a vast draught of air. He looked out and to no one in particular cried, “Oh, by Saint Oswald, this stench is the devil’s work.”

“Get back in here, you pile of turds, and help hold me. And by Saint Cuthbert, close the goddamned door.”

And this he did—the thick, wood door closing, pushing out some of the fetid air of which the man had so recently complained. I was not unused to the smells of nature’s call, yet was taken unsuspecting how horribly foul a creature’s innards might become close to a time of death. I braced my arm against the wall, but at the moment caught sight of a tall heron of a man, who to the left and right of him was escorted by two monks.

This stern, stiff-necked man saw what I did within. He gazed at me, his lips curled—his two escorts covered their noses against the diminishing stench. With a gesture towards the closed door he said with a grim, almost satisfied, smile, “See you Cellarer Dagobert—and how pride and gluttony brings low the sinner. Now, who are you?”

And this was my first sight of Prior Denewulf who in absence of Father Abbot commanded all Peterborough, its demesne and soks. His two escorts were Whipmen, his enforcers. They saw I was new and didn’t know how to respond, so one strode forward and kicked me.

“Down, you mooncalf, show respect before Prior Denewulf!”

“He is Cuthwin, Brother Prior, and with us just arrived from the north.”

Subcellarer Eadsige and Gardener Dundage had opened the door and stood, bowing momentarily to Prior Denewulf. As we stood there the ruckus within not only did not cease, but increased—following a loud report of something very large meeting the floor—which I assumed was the unfortunate Cellarer Dagobert.

Reverend Eadsige described the most subtle of head motions towards Gardener Dundage who at once beckoned me to follow. We left there, me rubbing hard the place recently kicked. Frankly, despite my fright and the strangeness of everything, I was a sturdy lad used to hard goings, and had the urge to kick the blackguard back.

In a dirt-covered quadrangle yard, carts were still being unloaded—in this case, the very largest with wheels taller than a man. It carried massive barrels being so handled that I knew them empty. Gardener Dundage stopped, pointing to them.

“We will be filling those with fat, salted eels soon enough. Which will be your work, and you will serve under the master eelman Ordgar who will instruct you in the craft.”

“I’ll do my best, but if he kicks me, I’ll kick him back.”

He looked me up and down; a hand, gnarled by arthritis and rough use, pointed at me, its forefinger a warped branch.

“You will address me by my office, or I’ll kick you. Those two hounds traveling with Lord Prior are henchmen whose job it is to kick. Anyway, where you’re going, no need to worry about the likes of Brother Prior or his hounds.”

Then we turned and left the yard, and in fact the Monastery gate. Down a narrow cart road, I followed. Beyond everywhere stretched the fens, to the rim of the sky, they extended. Being spring, great flocks of ducks and geese rose and fell from the watery land in all directions.

This limitless expanse and the creatures above and on the fens became my benign taskmaster. This was a new land, one that still lives fondly within me to the time of this telling.

Whatever was to stay dry and above the spring-flooded fens either was built upon a natural sand and pebble rise in the otherwise soggy plain or had been by labor and craft elevated on same material. Some

buildings and outbuildings were even raised on wooden piles. Pathways led in several directions, and we followed along one of those that led off from the wider, more substantial cart road.

We soon came to a tiny fishing settlement, an island of houses and other such structures. It was made mostly of materials gleaned from the fens—reed houses, with thick, thatched roof—clever designs where considerable skills went into their making.

Outside the largest of these, a woman emptied a basket of leavings for pigs. They nosed them up with deep grunting, the greedy creatures begrudging nearby barn fowl food, yet who darted in stealing bits for themselves. Seeing Gardener Dundage, she bowed low—a flaxen-haired woman of some age who spoke our language with the accent of a foreigner. After her greeting Gardener Dundage directed her to speak with her husband Ordgar, explaining I was a new bondsman intended to learn the fisherman’s trade.

“I’m sorry, Master Gardener, Ordgar is within and very ill this day with the fen ague.”

There was a moment of thought, and Gardener Dundage looked back at me, giving me over to the eelman’s wife and admonished to do what she bid. Saying he would speak to Ordgar at a better time, he was gone. It was a sudden turn of circumstances from the day before.

“I am Esa, wife of Ordgar, who is your new master. You will sleep there.”

She pointed to a long, narrow building on piles, separate from our present isle. I was impressed, seeing goats upon its roof. The animals, I later learned, grazed upon grasses sprouting from the thatch. For the moment they had settled upon their hocks with full bellies.

“In fact, Ordgar is within with the apprentices and other sorts. Have you eaten?”

I was to learn good Esa’s ways, for they always hewed to the simpler things of life, for as the wife of Ordgar, hers was not easy. Inside their house I took bread and ale, then ventured to the building where Esa earlier pointed.

Entering I saw scattered in disarray nearly a dozen fellows, most snoring or grunting to besotted sleep. Propped against the wall sprawled

Eelmaster Ordgar. Though his eyes were open, he looked blankly at the floor. Mistress Esa had not gone in. I looked from Ordgar to the others—all fishermen, watermen, or eelmen—his wards. There was not a soul of them in steady mind nor awake.

The stench of spilled and sour ale prevailed, and though just a boy, I knew well the sight of men suffering the murky wake of heavy cupping. The ‘fen ague’ this day was the sturdy brand of barley ale favored upon the fens—stronger than most.

So, here were my master and new fellows.

I was as I stood—owning and carrying nothing, close to a hundred leagues from my birthplace, in possession of my life by the grace of God. Finding voice, I announced myself Cuthwin-of-Withernsea, but no one took note—least of all my new master.

Hearing a great gnashing of teeth against bone, I looked over—and in the far corner was a hound chewing a bone, the size of which looked to be from a late but great ox. Seeing me staring at his fare, the hound showed teeth, offered a low growl and continued—clearly meaning not to share his windfall.

Slipping into the opposite corner—stepping over sleeping cottars—I lowered myself to the floor. What sort of place had I come to? Outside the fens stretched towards land and sea. To run off from here was a different matter than running off from Alwystle’s croft at Wharram Percy. No copse or field offered substance here, and even the water was slow and dark.

I recall the hollowness I felt—how dark my future appeared in this new, watery land. Life at least had been providing me dry land and warm shelter. Now, I feared, I would follow the ways of stoats and water rats.

I spent a half-dozen change-of-seasons, close to two years, on the fens with Eelman Ordgar, learning the way of fisher folk. It was a life reckoned in seasons and rains, then, seaward on the River Nene, the ebbs and flows of tides. Ordgar was fair enough with his bondsmen, being himself a coilbert.¹¹ He had spent his life on the fens, mostly along the River Nene as a fisherman. Now he was Father Abbot’s master eelman, the eel being a prized trade good to the Abbey then as now. But all fisher folk being his wards fell into Master Ordgar’s duties.

Dwelling in Ordgar’s house, I lived and worked outside the walls of the Abbey except for visits on holy days and such. Yet by listening, much asking, and remembering better, I learned about Peterborough Abbey and monastery ways.

Despite being a simple eelman, I began to learn the troubled ways of great men.

Soon after my arrival at the Abbey, Cellarer Dagobert joined the souls in heaven, his excesses of food and drink hopefully forgiven. And true to prediction, Subcellarer Eadsige became Cellarer, yet Gardener Dundage declined to become Subcellarer, which caused talk.

The two fellows whom I worked with most, Efen and Siegluf, were uncomplicated eelmen of good humor and, praise God, slow to curse or kick.

Since they were keen on their ale and this loosed their tongues, I learned more than just the ways of fish and fishing. And even this early, I was curious about the ways of cloister.

I learned tonsured holders of offices of Peterborough Monastery commanded the everyday functions of the Monastery and stood in high authority over their designated domain. Father Abbot looked to these officers to oversee concerns in Monastery business. He was often quest-

¹¹ A freedman, a former slave given a bit of land.