

## PREFACE

THE preparations for adequately commemorating the forthcoming millenary of King Alfred's death have set going a fresh wave of popular interest in that hero. Lectures have been given, committees formed, subscriptions paid and promised, and an excellent book of essays by eminent specialists has been written about Alfred considered under quite a number of aspects. That great King has himself told us that he was not indifferent to the opinion of those that should come after him, and he earnestly desired that that opinion should be a high one. We have by no means forgotten him, it is true, but yet to very many intelligent people he is, to use a paradox, a distinctly nebulous character of history. His most undying attributes in the memory of the people are not unconnected with singed cakes and romantic visits in disguise to the Danish

Danish camp. It is therefore difficult for many to realize that Alfred wrote books, copies of which, written during his lifetime, are now lying in some of our great libraries. Of these books all are interesting to us from the personal character impressed on them by the King—the *Pastoral Care*, for instance, for its admirable preface containing Alfred's observations on the state of learning in the England of his day, and the *Orosius* for the valuable geographical contributions which he inserted in his version of the once famous historian. But there is one of his books that more than the others is instinct with a certain anonymously personal note such as we look for in vain in English literature for hundreds of years after. This book is his version of the *Consolations of Philosophy* of Boethius, the making of which was to Alfred a love's labour. It satisfied his intellectual cravings and stimulated his uncultured but vigorous mind, and he resolved to give his still more unlettered lieges a share in the treat. So he turned it into his own tongue, as the King of the West Saxons might be expected to do, in a large and royal way, scattering up and down the work such notes and comments as he judged needful. His *Boethius* heads the roll of English philosophical writings; it likewise heads the roll of English translations.

lations. It is hoped that the modern English dress here given to the King's best book will help to make him less an unsubstantial shadow for Englishmen of to-day, and more a real man, practical, right-feeling, and earnest beyond his generation.

A few words on the method and aim of this modern version may be said here rather than in the Introduction. The Anglo-Saxon text followed is that edited by the translator for the Oxford University Press last year. The prose part is rendered quite literally, generally 'word by word,' as the King says of parts of his own version. Thus the simplicity and directness of the original Old English are kept. In the version of the alliterating verses, printed together after the prose, the metre of the original Old English has been retained as far as is allowed by the limitations of modern English, but literalness has not been thereby sacrificed. The result, I may hope, will give a fair idea of the original, which itself is far from echoing the hammer-and-anvil lines of the best Old English song-smiths, as we see them at work in the *Beowulf*. The Introduction is intended to give the general reader what he may like to know about Alfred's *Boethius* and his literary method in general, and the student of English literature will perhaps find interest

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in the selections from later English translations of the *Consolations*.

It is now time for me to close this preface, first expressing my heartiest thanks to Professor York Powell, who has kindly looked carefully through the proofs of the Introduction and portions of both the prose and the verse, and has helped me generally out of his mature experience.

CHRIST'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE,  
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N.B.—The passages in the prose text which do not occur in the Latin original are printed in italics, but Alfred's numerous omissions are not indicated in the text. For details, the Introduction to the Oxford edition of the Old English *Boethius* may be consulted.