

KING OSWIN—A FORGOTTEN RULER OF KENT

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THE name of King Oswin will not be found in the published pedigrees of the royal family of Kent. Those few historians who mention him find it difficult to separate his individuality from that of his contemporary King Oswy of Northumberland. Nevertheless, he was of the true blood of Hengest and Aethilberht and there remain to us copies of three charters which suffice to restore to him his proper place in our local history.

1. THE DATE OF HIS REIGN.

Of these three the last is in some ways the most important for it is the only one which is fully dated. It is a gift of land in Sturry to the Abbess Aebba and was made in the second year of his reign, in the third indiction and "sub die vi kalend Februarii," that is, on January 17th, A.D. 675. Oswin was then at Canterbury ("in hunc locum qui dicitur Dorovernis"). His predecessor Egbert had died in July 673 and his successor Suabheard gave a charter on March 1st, 675. From this it seems reasonable to assume that he began his reign in July 673, reigned a full year up to July 674, in which month another charter is dated, but did not complete his second year. During this time he was acknowledged as rightful king by Archbishop Theodore (668-690) and his coadjutor Abbot Adrian of St. Augustine's (668-708) as well as by his supplanter Suabheard, by Acca a prominent thane and by many others.

2. WHO WAS KING OSWIN ?

No doubt all these dignitaries knew quite well who he was and how he came to have a good claim to the throne. But for evidence of these facts we have to go to the charters

themselves, assisted from other sources. Even then we are left with a margin of doubt as will presently be seen.

The charter which I take to be the first (Birch, 40) can be translated as follows :

“ In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

I, Oswin, king of the men of Kent (Cantuariorum), humbly return thanks to Almighty God who has confirmed me in the kingdom of my fathers and vouchsafed to me the inheritance of my family. Wherefore, lest I should seem ungrateful for the favours of the Lord, it has seemed good to me to devote to monastic uses both the land which is situated in the island of Thanet, that is, 18 manentes which Eormenred (‘ Yrminred ’) once possessed, and also another part which belonged to the Archbishop himself, who has nevertheless agreed, accepting from us other land.

And now, at this time, by God’s help, I have put this for ever in the hands of Christ’s servants ; I have rendered it as a permanent gift to the Abbess Aebba, that she may hold and possess it, that she and her successors may answer for it by immutable decree. And in confirmation of this charter I have placed a turf from that same land upon the holy altar, so that any person who shall dare to dishonour it, lessen it or even alter it without leave of the owners, may know that by his action he is cut off from a place in the kingdom of heaven and set aside from the congregation of the faithful, unless he shall satisfactorily mend his fault.

+The sign of the Holy Cross by my own hand
I have portrayed.

+The sign made by the hand of Oswin the
king.

+I Suebhard have consented and subscribed.

+The sign made by the hand of Acce.

The copyist has omitted the name of the first signatory. It can hardly have been other than Archbishop Theodore. There are many points of interest in this, one of our earliest charters. At the moment we are only concerned with the fact that Oswin claims to have returned to the throne of his fathers and to have acquired “ *donum cognacionis meae* ” which I have translated rather freely as “ the inheritance of

my family". It is possible that this is not mere reiteration, but has direct reference to his family estate "which Eormenred formerly possessed". We shall see presently that he probably claimed as a grandson of this Eormenred, who was once Atheling or, as we might now say, Crown Prince of Kent, and would no doubt have succeeded to the throne had he not died before his father.

In another charter (Birch, 73) Oswin speaks of land near Lyminge as "*terra juris mei quae mihi ex propinquitate parentum meorum venit*"—land of my right which came to me from the relationship of my predecessors. In the third charter we have a more direct hint. This is another gift to the Abbess Aebba (Birch, 35) and he speaks of her as "the gentle abbess and my near relative in the flesh and mother in God" (for which translation I am indebted to Professor A. G. Little). Aebba was a daughter of Eormenred.

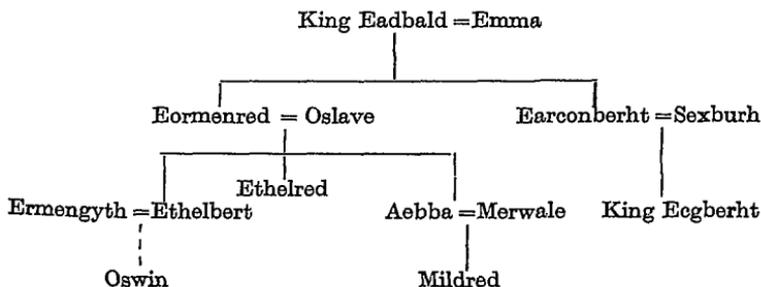
We have, therefore, the following items of evidence to consider: (1) Oswin claims as one having hereditary rights to the throne; (2) he mentions Eormenred as if he belonged to his branch of the royal family; and (3) he claims the Abbess Aebba, who was a member of that branch, as a near relative in the flesh.

We have next to see if there is any place for him in that branch and particularly any place which might explain his rather obvious surprise at having succeeded at all. We shall not be disappointed.

Eormenred had a brother, presumably a younger brother, named Erconberht. On Eormenred's death this brother came to the throne. This was in 640. He reigned until 664 and during this time, so far as we know, dealt honourably with his brother's fatherless children, named Aebba, Ethelberht and Ethelred. But on his death, his son Egbert came to the throne although his male cousins had perhaps the better claim. In any case, they had a sufficiently good claim to cause him considerable misgivings. He, therefore, had them murdered by one of his followers named Thunor. One can't help being reminded of the Princes in the Tower at a much later date and this may lead to a subconscious supposition that Ethelbert and

Ethelred were children. This was not the case. They were certainly at least twenty-four years old for they had lived throughout the reign of Erconberht, and it may be noted that their sister Aebba, later an abbess, was, at the time of their death, a widow with four children. The object of telling this tale is to suggest that one of the murdered brothers could well have been a married man and father of Oswyn. There is no direct evidence for this but it is perhaps worth noting that the mother of the brothers was named Oslave. The perpetuation of the first syllable of a name was a very common habit in the Saxon families and it would be quite likely that the son of an Oslave should call his own son Oswin.

There is one more slight hint which is worth mentioning. In the *Liber Vitae* of Hyde Monastery (Edn. Birch, pp. 83-7, of the Hyde Register) there is a copy, probably the best copy extant, of a most important document for the history of Kent. This is not so well known as it deserves to be. From this we learn that the Abbess Mildred of Minster in Thanet, who was Aebba's daughter, had with her in Thanet until her life's end an aunt named Ermengyth. She is not in any Kentish pedigree. Nothing else is known of this lady. She may well have been Oswin's mother. The pedigree which one may suggest for Oswin and his relatives may, therefore, be written as follows, the doubtful link being in interrupted lines :



No attempt has been made to include those with whom this essay does not deal, but all the known children of Eormenred and Oslave are included. Mildred had three

other sisters. Her mother Aebba was also known as Eormenburh and Domneva (i.e. Lady Eva).

3. WAS OSWIN AN INDEPENDENT KING ?

No question of this sort would arise were it not for certain words in the Lyminge charter. After saying that the land given had come to him by inheritance from his predecessors, Oswin adds "atque ex confirmatione clementissimi Aethelredi regis collata est." The two other charters contain no such words and in them the King is rather insistent on his excellent title. It is, therefore, necessary to translate these words aright. They seem to mean "and by the confirmation of the most clement Aethelred (who was King of Mercia) was added to me." The verb *confero*, *contuli collatum* (ought one perhaps to apologize for setting it out at this length ?) implies bringing together without any further implication of a gift such as our word *confer* suggests. No doubt it could and did have the latter as one of its subsidiary meanings but we are not obliged to choose this particular translation for mediæval latin such as that of the charter. In the same way, the verb *confirmo* means only to establish, strengthen, make firm, etc. It need not have the particular meaning usually given to it, namely, that he who was established might never thereafter do anything without an overlord's permission. This meaning has grown up because the relationships between some of our later kings and the monarchs of other parts of England were undoubtedly such as to deprive Kent of much independent authority.

One may, therefore, conclude that Oswin was certainly placed on the throne by the help of Aethelred of Mercia but that he was not asked to admit him as an overlord. It is probable that his mother, if she was wife to one of the murdered princes, must have fled from Kent on her husband's death. Whither might she more probably have flown than to Mercia, where her sister-in-law Aebba had long resided ?

4. THE DEATH OF OSWIN.

We have no information about this, but it should be noted that Thomas of Elmham (*Hist. Mon. St. Augustini*,

Rolls Edn., p. 226) who frankly identifies him with Oswy of Northumberland gives the date February 15th, 675. This is later than is usually given for Oswy and may possibly be that of our Oswin of Kent. In any case, it seems certain from the fact of Suabheard's first charter being dated on March 1st, 675, that Oswin must have died not long before that date.