# From The Conqueror to The Bruce:
# The Impact of the Norman Conquest



In the year 1314 at Bannochburn, Robert the Bruce, Earl of Carrick, Lord Brusse, King of Scots defeated the army of King Edward II ("The Longshanks") of England to secure independence for Scotland. This liberation would not have been possible, however, had it not been for another man with a shaky claim to a throne defeating another English king's army. Almost 300 years before Robert the Bruce took the field at Bannochburn, his ancestor, Robert de Brusse II came to England with Duke William I of Normandy, also known as *William the Conqueror*. To see the lasting impact on England made by the Norman invasion, a historical background to both England and William is necessary, along with an examination of the Domesday Book and laws of William, followed by a look at the continued resistance to the Norman invaders which would grow through three centuries.

Trying to define a true "Briton" is problematic. One could define them as the indigenous Celts who tried to defend the British Isles from Roman invaders in the 1st through 5th Centuries. Of course, after the Roman empire pulled their troops out of Britain, one could consider those who had intermarried with the Celts and chose to remain "true Britons." The truth is that with the different cultures who invaded and settled into the land, it is hard to come up with a plain, simple definition. By the 11th Century, most of modern-day England had been populated by Jutes, Saxons, Picts, Angles, Vikings, and other cultures who had come in and conquered or settled. The predominant language spoken throughout most of this region was Old English, with variations existing between the different kingdoms (Wessex, Mercia, and Northumbria).

Normandy had a similar history to England's, having been originally settled by ancient Celts, who were overrun by Romans, who then eventually left. After the Roman power was gone from the area, the Vikings invaded. The area called "Normandy" was given as part of the treaty of *Clair sur Epte* in 911 to a Viking warrior named Rollo. This land was fertile and was made into a prosperous duchy by Rollo and his descendents. The Normans adopted the French language and culture to a point – they seemed to hold on to the Viking lust for conquest. By the time of William's invasion into England in 1066, Normans had strongholds in many countries including Spain and Italy. William was a direct descendent of Rollo.

Thirteen kings ruled England between Alfred the Great (871-899) and Edward the Confessor (1042-1066). Alfred's line continued uninterrupted until the reign of Aethelred the Unready, who after a disastrous battle to oust the Vikings was replaced by the Witan – the government body which could elect the King in an emergency situation. He was replaced by Swegn Forkbeard, a Viking. After Swegn's death, Aethelred was reinstated and died two years later. His son, Edmund II, ascended the throne and showed signs of being an even greater king than Alfred. Unfortunately, he died after only a few months on the throne. Edmund had been a much heralded warrior and his arch nemesis Canute (Cnut, Knut) was elected to the throne by the Witan after Edmund's death. England made such an impact on this pagan Viking king that he would be converted to Christianity and eventually make a pilgrimage to Rome to pay a tribute to St. Peter. Canute built churches and slowly started rebuilding all that the Vikings had destroyed over many years of pillaging and plundering. He also married Emma of Normandy, widow of Aethelred.

Emma was the sister of Richard, King of Normandy. After her marriage to Aethelred, she brought over many of her Norman friends and introduced them to the court, as well as replacing

the English servants with her own Norman servants. She had two sons with Aethelred – Edward and Alfred. When the Vikings invaded in 1013, Emma sent her children to Normandy to her brother for their protection. She married Canute after Aethelred died. They had a son together named Harthacanute.

When Canute died in 1035, the inheritance of the throne was again in question. The rightful heir, Harthacanute, was destined to be the king of Denmark *and* England. However, threats to Denmark by invading Norwegians kept Harthacanute in Denmark. Godwin, Earl of Wessex, the most powerful Earl in England, persuaded the Witan to appoint Harold "Harefoot," illegitimate son of Canute, King of England. In 1036, Emma's younger son Alfred left the safety of Normandy to visit his mother in England. Immediately upon his arrival, Godwin had him arrested and killed. After this, Emma left England and sought refuge in Flanders.

Harold died childless in 1040 shortly before his half brother Harthacanute had been preparing to invade, having settled his affairs in Denmark. Harthacanute was welcomed and readily accepted as king, especially because he returned with Emma who was reinstated as Queen. Godwin was called in to account not for supporting Harold, but for having Alfred killed. Godwin saved himself by giving Harthacanute a very expensive ship, complete with crew, and swore that Harold alone had been responsible for Alfred's arrest and death. Most of Harthacanute's reign was spent ferreting out and putting to death all of the supporters of Harold. He reigned only two years before he died. Harthacanute was to be the last Danish king of England.

Earl Godwin was, next to the king, the most powerful man in England. After Harthacanute's death, he was gravely concerned at the prospect of Emma's son Edward becoming the next King of England. After Aethelred's death in 1016, Edward, only 13 years old,

had been sent to Normandy. The year was now 1042. Edward had spent 26 years learning the Norman way of life. A king with strong ties to Normandy would threaten Godwin's power. To secure his place of authority with the new king, Godwin arranged a marriage between his daughter Edith and Edward in 1045.

Edward "the Confessor" is the only English king to ever be canonized. He was responsible for the building of the *Church of St. Peter* which is now called Westminster Abbey. Like his mother, Edward introduced Norman nobles and servants into his court. After Godwin disobeyed an order from Edward to burn down Dover, where Edward's cousin William of Normandy's brother-in-law Eustace had been involved in an incident in which several of Eustace's men were killed, Godwin and his family were exiled.

It was about this time that William, Duke of Normandy, was coming into his own power. Born in 1028, the illegitimate child of Robert I "the magnificent," Duke of Normandy, and Herleva (Arletta) a servant girl, William lived with his father until he was eight years old. In 1036, Robert left for the Holy Land, leaving William in the care of guardians. When word reached Normandy that Robert had died, a power struggle began for the Dukedom. William's guardian, tutor, and seneschal were all murdered. After this, William disappeared for about six years. It is popularly believed that he was sent to live with a common family to be raised in obscurity – but raised to know who he was.

In 1045, at the age of 17, William decided it was time to claim the Dukedom for himself. With his own private army, he returned home, appealed to the general populace, reminded them of who his father was, and gained their support. He ousted the Dane Toustain who had come in and taken the castle, and also, through a sharp-eared court jester, escaped an assassination plotted by his own cousin.

William of Normandy and Edward the Confessor were cousins through Edward's mother Emma who was the sister of William's grandfather, Richard of Normandy. Because Emma had sent Edward to Normandy to stay with Richard during Canute's and Harthacanute's reigns, it is conjectured that Edward knew William quite well and that they were on good terms with each other, if not close. There is some controversy as to exactly what happened in 1051. Some histories record that William took advantage of Godwin's exile to travel to England to visit Edward. It was during this visit that later William claimed Edward named him heir to the throne of England. Other histories point to a power struggle William was dealing with in Normandy which would have made it impossible for him to travel to England. Edward had appointed Robert of Jumièges, a Norman, as Archbishop of Canterbury that year, and these histories report that the Archbishop was sent to Normandy to appoint William as heir to the throne. Whichever way it happened, William had been told that upon Edward's death, he would be the successor.

In 1052, Godwin's sons, who had fled to Ireland instead of Flanders with their father, devised a plan to attack England by sea. The campaign was very successful and Edward was forced to relent and allow Godwin and his family to return to England where Godwin immediately regained the power he'd had before the exile. Robert of Jumièges was exiled and was replaced by Stigand, Bishop of Winchester, and a strong supporter of Godwin. Because Jumièges had not been either removed canonically or replaced posthumously, Stigand was excommunicated by the Pope; but Godwin had proven that he was as powerful – if not more so – as the king.

Even though Edward was struggling for power with his father-in-law, he was very close to his wife's brothers, especially her brother Harold. As Edward continued to import Norman advisers and officials, the people of England became increasingly unhappy and support for the

Godwins began to grow. Earl Godwin did not get to enjoy this new power very long. He died in 1053. Harold was now Earl of Wessex. His brothers succeeded to the earldoms in Mercia and East Anglia, securing those provinces for the Godwins.

Against papal orders, in 1053, William married Matilda, daughter of his cousin, who was also a direct descendent of Alfred the Great. In 1054 and 1058, fearing William's growing power, Henry I, King of France sent armies against William to try to kill him. William was victorious in both battles. In 1064, after two years of war, William expanded his realm to include the province of Maine, securing William's power in France. During the same year, Harold was sent by Edward to William to confirm the plan of William's succession to the English throne. Harold, however, had designs on being the successor himself. William held two of Harold's brothers prisoner and used them as leverage against Harold, releasing one after Harold swore a pledge of fealty to William, and telling Harold that the other would be released when William ascended the English throne after Edward's death.

Edward the Confessor, with no direct heirs, died on January 5, 1066. Legend has it that on his deathbed, he named Harold his successor. So, on that day, with the support of local magistrates, Harold had himself crowned King of England.

This turn of events did not go unnoticed by the rest of the world. The Norwegian king Harold Hardrada took great interest in this and prepared to strike. Hardrada struck in mid-September 1066 from the north with Harold's brother Tostig at his side. They destroyed a couple of coastal villages before marching toward York. A quick march with Harold at the head of his army took the Vikings by surprise and after a bloody battle on September 25 in which Hardrada and Tostig fell, Harold was victorious. The march and the battle had sapped him and his troops of their strength, so they rested at York. They would only have three days, however.

After learning of Harold's coronation, William took the time to not only build his army and a fleet of ships, but to receive Papal authority to invade England and claim the throne for himself. His fleet and troops were ready to go in July, but the elements did not cooperate. Storms and high winds kept William on the beaches of Normandy for six weeks. Finally, on September 27, the weather abated and the invasion force of William the Conqueror left for England. They made landfall the next day at Pevensey and marched toward Hastings.

Harold immediately roused his troops and began a double-time march toward Hastings. Unopposed for the next two weeks, William used his time wisely, deposing local leaders and strengthening his position. On October 14, 1066, the armies of Harold and William met. The English army was exhausted from the previous battle and the two long marches and after hours of fierce fighting, fell to the Norman forces. Harold and all of his brothers were killed, effectively removing the strongest English leaders.

After burying his dead, William returned to Hastings where he and his troops waited for a week, expecting England's surrender, but not receiving it. His ships returned with fresh supplies, and William and his rested troops marched toward Dover, from where he would have an easy march to London along the old Roman road. Along the way, he destroyed the town of Old Romney, where two boats stolen from his fleet were hidden. At Dover, he met no resistance. Later, he would build a castle atop the white cliffs.

In fear, the inhabitants of London elected Edgar Aetheling king in hopes that he would be able to repel William. It turned out to be a useless gesture. At the end of October, with reinforcements arriving from Normandy, Archbishop of Canterbury Stigand, who had escaped London before William laid siege, surrendered to William. This gave William even more power in England – he now had free reign to name whomever he wanted to the post of Archbishop.

Throughout November, William's growing army marched through England, quelling any resistance and killing or removing those in positions of power – including in the church. Finally, in December, he controlled England from the coast in the south to Scotland in the north and from the coast in the East to Wales in the west. He was coronated King of England on Christmas Day, 1066. By 1070, William had conquered Scotland and Wales. His control was complete.

Because of the underlying animosity between England and Normandy/France, William knew that he could not put the English nobles back into positions of power if he expected to hold his power long. Their lands were confiscated and awarded to Normans William knew would be loyal to him. He dealt severely and decisively with all rebellions, using them as opportunities to put more Normans in places of power. About 25% of the total land in England was William's alone. Another 25% was given to the church. The remaining 50% was given over to a dozen Tenants in Chief. The Tenants were responsible for making sure that England was prepared to defend itself against rebellion from within or invasion from without. Their holdings were subdivided to vassals who had sworn an oath of fealty to the Tenants. The size of the holding determined how many knights each vassal was responsible for providing for the defense of England, as well as the defense of their own lands. William set up a pyramid of power in which each level was ultimately loyal to him.

His conquest now complete, William's influence was next felt in his laws and policies. The laws of William the Conqueror first and foremost proclaimed Christianity as the only acceptable religion in England. He decreed that every freeman must swear an oath of fealty to William and by so doing would receive the protection of the King; any man who killed a Norman would be immediately put to death or his lands and properties confiscated; cattle had to be sold within a city in front of three witnesses; if an Englishman was accused of slander by a

Norman, the Englishman had a choice of ways to defend himself – by the "hot iron" or in personal battle – whereas a Frenchman accused of the same would be acquitted by oath to the King; the laws of Edward would be upheld for the good of the English people; the selling of any person as a slave outside the country was prohibited; and William forbade that anyone be killed or hanged for any fault, but commanded that the offender have his eyes put out and be castrated. He also established that the language of the government and the church would be French.

William's next step was the commissioning of the Domesday Book – commonly called the "Doomsday" book in reference to the Book of Life which would be opened in heaven on doomsday. This work was commissioned in 1085 to record land ownership for the establishment of a property tax. The Domesday book showed how successful William had been in his conquest: of all the English barons who had held land prior to 1066, only two were listed as landowners in 1085.

Although William established his rule in England with Papal support, William chose an Archbishop of Canterbury who recognized the English church and established separate church courts to adjudicate matters of canonical law. No longer was the Pope allowed to dictate policy within the borders of Normandy or England.

Another impact of the Norman invasion on England was the continued resistance to this new leadership. Even with their complete conquest of England, not everyone was so willing to allow the Normans to dominate the English. The legends of *Robin Hood* date to the time of William and his descendents. Originally, Robin of Locksley was supposed to have been a Saxon lord whose lands were confiscated from him under William's rule. Outlawed, he took to the forests where he gathered other Saxons and they supported themselves along with many other repressed Saxons by striking at the purses of the Normans. Whatever the truth behind the legend

may be, one thing remained the same throughout the centuries-long "life" of Robin Hood – the "good guys" were always English (Anglo-Saxon) and the "bad guys" were always Norman.

The Norman influence continued in England through the 14th Century and into the rule of Edward II "The Longshanks" – a direct descendent of William. French was now the language that was the mark of an aristocrat. English might have become the common language of the land, but anyone who wanted to be considered well-educated learned to speak French. The business of Edward's court was still conducted in English. The Scots, mostly from Celtic heritage, had been conquered by William's army in 1070. After almost 250 years of subjugation and the death of the English-appointed Scottish king, Alexander III, Scotland was in turmoil. Robert the Bruce, Earl Carrick, Lord Brusse, was a direct descendent of a Norman conqueror on his father's side and a direct descendent of an ancient Celtic king on his mother's side. Crowned King of Scotland in 1306, Robert was answerable to the English king. Spurred on by the rebellious William Wallace, Robert finally defeated Longshank's army in 1314 at Bannochburn. Future attempts by the English to retake Scotland were also defeated, and Robert the Bruce died in 1329 as king of an independent Scotland.

Not everyone could take up arms against the ruling Normans. One of the ways that the common people under the rule of the Norman lords rebelled was by continuing to speak English. English men and women continued to be the majority of the populace, and even though some learned French to communicate with the aristocracy, English was still spoken, especially in the rural areas where there might be one French aristocratic family to hundreds of English families. Young men planning to strike at the Normans would make their plans in English. Servants complaining about their masters would complain to each other in English. Englishmen who wanted to keep Normans out of their business dealings conducted their business in English.

Because French was made the official written language of England, the English that was spoken underwent a radical change during the time of Norman rule. Grammar was simplified and word endings were dropped in order to make communication between dialects and languages easier. Norman lords who had come with William and had trouble learning English – if they tried at all – had children who grew up learning English as their first language from their English nannies and having to learn French as a second language. Many of these Lords also took English wives (many times widows of the English barons whose lands they were taking over). By 1200, books were being produced to teach French to the sons of Norman landholders. Translators were employed by the courts to translate for Barons and knights who did not speak French.

A positive influence the Norman invasion had on the English language was to vastly expand the vocabulary. Where English might have had only one word to describe something (smell) French added more options (odor, aroma, or scent) adding a connotative dimension to the language. English also incorporated French words by adding English affixes – such as taking the French "gentle" and making *gentleman* or even *ungentlemanly* (*The Effect of 1066*… Boxell).

There is no way to know for sure how the English language would have developed had the Normans not been successful in their conquest. Before they came, the language was already undergoing some evolution, but the dropping of English as the official written language of the land, as well as the influence of the French language, became an accelerator for the development of the language. A feeling of resentment toward the Norman invaders among the English which lasted several centuries kept the English language alive. The descriptive and connotative value of French was adopted into English greatly enriching the vocabulary in the now grammatically simplified language. Robert the Bruce's victory in 1314 ended the Normans' absolute hold over England and proved they were no longer invincible, opening the door for the English to once

again take control. For good and for bad, the Norman Conquest had an enormous impact on England and the English language.

**Bibliography**


Barlow, Frank. William I and the Norman Conquest. New York: Collier Books. 1967.

Boxell, Geoff. All Is The Same, All Is Changed: The Effect of 1066 on the English Language. <http://members.tripod.com/GeoffBoxell/1066.htm>

Crack, Glen Ray. Battle of Hastings 1066. <www.battle1066.com>

Douglas, David C. William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact upon England. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1964.

Hollister, C. Warren (ed.). The Impact of the Norman Conquest. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1969.

Poole, A. L. Domesday Book to Magna Carta 1087-1216. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1993.

Van Houts, Elizabeth. "The Trauma of 1066: The Norman Conquest of Anglo Saxon England." History Today. Oct. 1996: 9-16.