Chapter Thirteen

TOWARDS A UNITED ISLAND

ALTHOUGH the waters of the English Channel were never a barrier but rather a highway, in the governing of a kingdom dramatic changes in land level most certainly were, in an age when transport was either on foot, on horseback or by cart. The realm of England which the Normans conquered consisted of the lowlands, the south-east and west and the midlands. Beyond these lay the Celtic lands, Wales, Cumberland and Scotland, all regions in the highland zone whose layers of defence depended on ranges of hills and mountainous terrain. They were inaccessible and within them lived the old British populations held together by a shared heritage of language, traditions and trade, pursuing a different, harsher life of dairy farming, sheep grazing and a lighter, scattered arable farming suitable to its soils. At the close of the thirteenth century the relationship of these peoples to the English monarchs was a distant one based on their overlordship of the Welsh princes and the Scottish kings. However, when Edward I succeeded his father Henry III in 1272 his ambition was to extend his rule to embrace the natural boundaries of the island.

What is so striking is that this had not been attempted before. Had William I conquered both Scotland and Wales the history of Britain would have been very different. Such a conquest would have imposed over the whole island at an early date a centralising uniformity in administration, law, language and commerce which knew no barriers. Leaving these regions virtually untouched for two centuries strengthened their

sense of individual identity and independence both politically and culturally. By the time that Edward I set out to subjugate them, his attack only increased regional loyalties leaving a pattern of tension which is still alive today.

By the close of the thirteenth century there was also a new sense of identity within England. The king's name, Edward, in honour of his father's favourite saint, Edward the Confessor, was making use of an English name not favoured by the Anglo-Norman aristocracy. Imperceptibly, however, since 1066 intermarriage had created a more united society no longer easily divided into French speaking nobility and Anglo-Saxon speaking middle classes and peasantry. English began to emerge as a language spoken by every class, one which took into its structure and vocabulary much Anglo-Norman French. The upper classes were bilingual and the king himself spoke French, Latin and English.

Edward was in nearly every sense of the word an ideal medieval monarch. Over six feet tall (when his tomb was opened his skeleton measured six feet two inches) he was majestic in presence, a fearless warrior both on the battlefield and in the tiltyard. His childhood had been idyllic with loving parents and to this he was to add a happy marriage to Eleanor of Castile. So devastated was he when she died in 1290 that he ordered magnificent stone crosses, three of which survive, to be built wherever her coffin had rested on its journey south from Lincoln to Westminster Abbey. Edward also inherited the full Plantagenet spleen, given to fits of rage, on one occasion tossing his daughter's coronet into the fire.

When his father died in 1272 Edward was on Crusade and, as an index of the stability of the English government, it was not until two years later that he reached England. Edward shared his father's strong belief in the sanctity of kingship and had led the royalist forces against Simon de Montfort at Evesham. When he came to the throne a new era dawned, for with him a new generation sprang into prominence. His first act was to set in motion a whole series of reforms, reached in consultation with meetings of Parlia-

Labours of the months from a calendar in a fourteenth century manuscript depicting typical events like threshing, reaping, sowing and drying off wet boots.

ment and embodied in what were called statutes which were to become a new means of making law. Through them the king was able to remedy grievances over land tenure, see to the maintenance of law and order and stem gifts of land to the church. But his major policies concerned the unification of the island under one sovereign by conquering first Wales and then Scotland.

William I had established the great border earldoms of Shrewsbury, Chester and Hereford along the Marches. There was little incentive to subject Wales because, unlike England, it was a very poor, backward coun-try geographically divided into a series of princedoms which only occasionally came together under one single ruler. The princes paid homage to the English kings or not as it politically suited them but, by the thirteenth century, the English had penetrated quite far into the principality. This was the result of an unchanging pattern of periodic campaigning in which first the English feudal force invaded, then the princes withdrew to the hills, no battle would be fought and, at the close of the season, the English returned home again.

When Eleanor of Castile died in 1290 her body was carried from Lincoln to Westminster. The king was so devoted to his wife that he commissioned twelve crosses, each erected on a site where the funeral procession rested. This elegant figure of the queen comes from the one erected at Waltham Cross and is the work of Alexander of Abingdon in 1291-92.

These spasmodic forays were now succeeded by a policy of conquest. This involved three major elements. The first was money, raised from Italian bankers and repaid out of the customs on the wool trade. Money meant that an army could be supplied and that, following conquest, massive castles could be built to subjugate the Welsh in the same way that William I had the Anglo-Saxons. Finally, following the same precedent, a new governing class had to be established. Everything connected with Edward's Welsh policy proved to be a brilliant success as much as his parallel programme for the Scots was to prove a disaster.

Wales was then ruled by Llywelen ap Gruffyd styled 'Prince of Wales' who gave Edward just the excuse he needed by refusing to pay him homage. In 1277 a massive force was assembled, so powerful that Llywelen submitted without even fighting. Five years later he was to lead a rebellion and be killed, the Welsh proving no match for English cavalrymen and archers. As a result, by 1295, the principality of Wales had ceased to exist. New counties were created and English administration was introduced. English people were encouraged to settle and bring with them their skills. They felt no shame in subjecting the Welsh and the idea that they embodied a civilisation would not have crossed the English minds. To them the Welsh were lawbreakers devoted to murder, robbery and rape.

Edward at this time had the resources to carry the war to its conclusion and impose his rule once and for all on a disunited and disorganised people. That took the tangible form of a massive series of castles which incorporated the latest techniques in fortification, designed to overawe the walled towns which nestled below their many towers. Ten in all were built which in their time were unrivalled in Latin Christendom as marvels of military engineering. All of them were constructed by the King's Works, the department devoted to building and maintaining royal residences, and designed by James of St. George, a Savoyard architect. Most of these castles still stand, providing a parallel series of magnificent secular buildings equal in their way to the Gothic cathedrals arising at the same time. The castles were not houses of God, but strongholds to dominate a people. Usually they were sited on inaccessible promontories or above rivers, and incorporated cunning sequences of gates, walls and passages to defy any assailant. The new means of holding off the enemy was by way of concentric defences: an outer moat, then a low wall followed by a second taller one punctuated by towers. The grandest of all the castles was Carnarfon, which was to be the king's seat of government. It was built on the site where it was believed was buried the father of the first Christian Emperor, Constantine. To emphasise this imperial legacy Edward I had its splendid polygonal walls and towers endowed with stripes of

Harlech was the most perfect of the castles built by Edward I to secure his conquest of Wales and was designed by James of St.George. Its layout represents the high-water mark of thirteenth century military architecture. Perched on a rocky outcrop overlooking the sea it was virtually unassailable from the west. A great ditch was hewn from the solid rock to secure it from the south and east, a triumph of engineering.

masonry to echo the walls of the capital of the Eastern Empire, Byzantium. The figures of three eagles, imperial symbols, were placed on the turrets of the castle's greatest tower to emphasise Edward's triumph.

Scotland, however, was to be a very different story. Unlike Wales, by the close of the thirteenth century it had already developed into a kingdom of its own, directly modelled on the Anglo-Norman one. Scotland had begun, like Wales, as a land of many kingdoms but, by the close of the eleventh century, had attained unity under kings who recognised those of England as their overlords. David I, who ruled in the middle of the twelfth century, had been brought up at the English court and set out to create a kingdom on the English model with its power base in the Lothian area of the Lowlands. During his reign castles were built, dioceses were established and north-west Scotland and the Western Isles brought under his sway. The thirteenth century was a settled period with close connections with England, for sisters of both Henry III and Edward I were queens of Scotland. But, in 1286, the opportunity to alter all that came when Alexander III died leaving no immediate heir.

Edward I saw this as a means whereby he might bend Scotland to his will and

make it share the fate of Wales. As the overlord, he was called upon to preside over the court which had to decide which out of thirteen claimants should be the next king in what was called the Great Cause. Edward only undertook this on the understanding that whoever was chosen would pay him homage along with the Scottish barons. Out of the two leading clamaints, John Balliol and Robert Bruce, Edward chose the former. At first everything went well but when it became apparent that Edward intended to reduce Scotland to utter dependency there was revolt. Edward then planned for conquest along the lines of Wales, intending to build castles and introduce English officials, administration and law. The Scots resisted but they were defeated by Edward's campaign in 1296 when he was so victorious that he was able to carry off the Stone of Destiny, on which the kings of Scotland were crowned, from Scone to Westminster Abbey.

But Edward's Scottish plan was not to succeed. The reason for this was twofold. In the first instance the Scots had a sense of collective identity and loyalty far stronger than the Welsh. More serious was the king's financial plight as successive Parliaments proved increasingly reluctant to meet his demands. He was even reduced to seizing the money in church treasuries destined for the Crusade. This lack of financial resources meant, for instance, building castles of wood and not stone.

The Scots turned to Robert Bruce as their king and found a leader in William Wallace, a brilliant and ruthless exponent of the art of guerilla warfare. The tide began to turn when he defeated the English at the Battle of Stirling Bridge. Thenceforth, year in and year out, a major campaign was fought each summer. Eventually William Wallace was captured, brought to London and barbarously executed. As the war dragged on Edward became more and more vindictive. In 1305 he abolished the kingdom of Scotland altogether and declared it merely a 'land' subject to him. In defiance the Scots crowned Robert Bruce. The year after, 1307, Edward died setting out to campaign once again. He instructed his servants not to bury him but to carry his bones with the army until such time as the Scots were defeated. His son, Edward, disregarded his father's dying commands and he was buried in Westminster Abbey.