

IN OCTOBER 1066 WHAT WAS THE MATTER?  
WHY WAS ENGLAND SERVED FOR CONQUEST ON A PLATTER?

# The Rhyme of King Harold

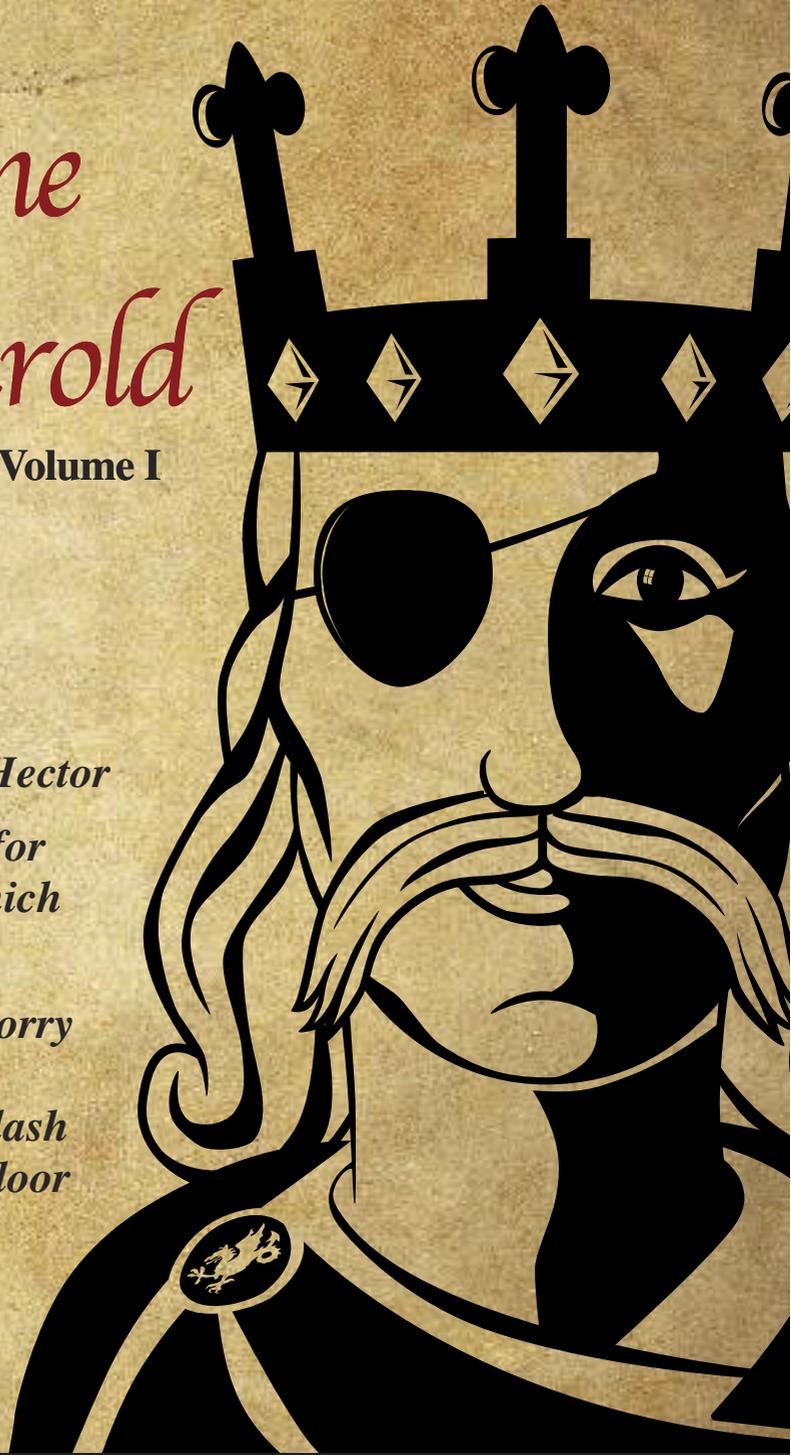
Volume I

*Tonight you glimpse your  
king as a ghastly spectre*

*Yet once I was a greater  
warrior than Achilles or Hector*

*Here's what I'm praying for  
- an Anglo-Saxon epic which  
will rip and roar*

*Yees! Louder than that sorry  
saga of The Trojan War,  
because my story shall splash  
so much blood upon the floor  
it will make men  
tremble for evermore*



A NOVEL ABOUT THE NORMAN CURSE  
ENTIRELY IN VERSE



FROM THE QUILL OF  
IAN MACGILL



*King Harold  
Wishes It Known  
That Any Errors Herein  
Are Entirely His Own*



*The Rhyme  
of  
King Harold*  
Volume I

A Novel About The Norman Curse  
Entirely In Verse

From The Quill  
of  
**Ian Macgill**

The Only Chronicler Ever Beckoned  
By The Ghost of King Harold The Second

# Chapter 1

**T**his history of the English was revealed to me in colourful dreams, recounted by the ghost of King Harold – or so it now seems – who told me to fill your eyes with surprise by banishing all chroniclers’ lies. His story unfolds as a mystery play, spoken by the voices that did gently sway through every poetic Anglo-Saxon day, until Duke William The Bastard came to stay, inflicting endless woes, and shoving his brutish Norman prose up our every nose.

Listen carefully to each lilting phrase, especially those spoken in God’s praise, and you will hear the cadence of old England’s ways, when our sun had a kinder gaze, though – as you will learn – it was King Harold who caused our realm to burn.

He was born beneath the Venus star, but rebelled against true love with his coup d’état, which allowed him to steal this nation’s crown, and turn history upside down by becoming a unique and disturbing thing – our first, and last, commoner king, who married England as choirs did sing, but only nine months later threw away her ring.

I am a newspaper reporter by trade, and still dismayed by my role in this poetic escapade, so a few words must be said on how I came to write what amounts to a tale of dread, after my features editor – a lady entirely demented – caused my skull to be dented (during a dispute about expenses), and for several hours deprived me of my senses.

In hospital that night the pain could not have been worse, as I shouted: “Nurse! Nurse!” The reply was a man’s voice – quite terse – telling me something perverse. “Your misfortune, your brain’s reverse, means you will now speak and write only in verse, which will seem a mystery, as will your sudden vast knowledge of English history.”

Near my bedside chair I became aware of a warrior, with a moustache and long blond hair. I murmured (my head still sore): “Doctor, why are you dressed like Thor?” His eyes did not seem to match, then I saw the right one was covered by a black patch.

After a long pause – a minute, I reckoned – the figure said: “I’m King Harold the Second. My coronation and subsequent feast were held on a day numbered for The Beast, and His fiendish tricks – January sixth, of that violent year ten-sixty-six. Chronicler, there is no time to rest. You must explain England’s Norman Conquest, by uncovering facts everyone seeks about a trio of battles fought in just over three weeks – Hastings, Stamford Bridge, and Fulford Gate – which sealed mine and my people’s fate.

“Excuse my scent – death’s aroma – but I believe you can now write better than Homer, which makes my heart glad, for I could not make head nor tail of his Iliad. Tonight your king is a ghastly spectre, yet once I was greater than Achilles or Hector. Here’s what I’m praying for – an Anglo-Saxon epic, which will rip and roar. Yeees! Louder than that sorry saga of The Trojan War – and with far more gore – for I shall splash so much blood upon the floor that men will tremble for evermore.”

This caused my voice to squeak: “Sire, I cannot be the chronicler you seek, as I’m unable to compose verses in Ancient Greek, or whatever Trojans used to speak.”

His Majesty gave a gracious and happy reply: “You won’t even have to try. The King’s English will certainly do, which I assume is all right with you. Set your own poetic parameters. No need to worry about Homeric hexameters. Thy style must be sad, cheeky, ribald, amusing – but at no time confusing. Also breezy, though that won’t be easy, for many passages will not be for the queasy.”

“Sire, my verse would be doggerel, in the style of the mad Scotsman, William McGonagall, whose poems everyone spurns, despite each being better than those of Rabbin Burns. I’m not one who wails, but your travails need that author of The Canterbury Tales. His language could not be coarser – but why not have a word with Geoffrey Chaucer?”

The response was a sneer: “He’s busy, it would appear. So is that inkspill Shakespeare. Though I never thought much to the man’s rhymes. And his tragedies are all pantomimes. His absurd play – Macbeth – ignores my role in that lord’s overthrow and death. Chronicler! Open thy peepers! You are surely aware of The Battle of the Seven Sleepers, when Scotland’s tragic king was given his greatest fright, and put to inglorious flight.”

“Macbeth, Your Majesty, was indeed a travesty – a silly epistle of gristle and thistle. But Shakespeare’s grasp of history was never strong. He made it up as he went along. And yes, that battle is familiar to me – fought not far from the sea, near the port of Dundee.”

Harold’s reply was full of glee: “Then all that remains is to agree thy generous fee. You’ll be richly rewarded from the royal purse – a silver penny for each chapter of verse.”

“Sire, one hates to whittle and whine, but usually I’m paid for stories by the line. I’ve been a reporter many years, and have often suffered payment arrears, so if I relate Your Majesty’s fate, I’ll expect to be paid the union rate – at an agreed date.”

The reply was prefaced by a mild curse. “But there are many volumes of verse. I’ll be paying for ages and ages – the work runs to well over a thousand pages.”

I raised my head higher: “Sire, before your servant’s ignoble nib is given for hire, let me enquire – exactly what is this lyrical story to which it must aspire?”

“Your king will disclose what no chronicler in the modern world knows – or so I suppose – that the English of my day never, ever, spoke in prose. Our Anglo-Saxon times were known as The Great Age of Rhymes, when every conversation was blessed with the beauty of poetic translation. However, Danes and Normans considered such speech trite, and it incited many a fight. They would ask: ‘What’s wrong? Why must every sentence be a sing-song? If you don’t start speaking in prose, we’ll come to blows – and you’ll get a bloody nose. That isn’t an idle threat! England has no right to derange God’s alphabet.’

“Chronicler, it will now be obvious to you, from a poet’s rhyming point of view, that the Normans’ and Vikings’ rude diction afflicts thy quill with a restriction.”

My tongue gave three clicks: “Sire, it puts your saga in a fix. Rhyme and prose cannot mix. They are water and oil, and both did loudly recoil when spoken on English soil.”

Harold now offered an idea for my benediction – an outrageous historical fiction. “Chronicler, combining prose and verse would lead to calamity, and your insanity, so let us flatter Danish and Norman linguistic vanity while also muting their profanity. The literary mountain you must climb is to make them also speak beautifully in rhyme, which will take a great deal of time, but I believe the outcome will be sublime.”

I gasped – my mind on fire: “Sire, any chronicler who was not a self-deluding liar would immediately retire when realising what Your Majesty does require. I must express my fears that compiling this legend is a labour of many years – I suppose – and that’s if I compose it in the most pedestrian of prose. Writing the epic in sentences that rhyme will entirely drain my calendar of time. I’m not about to shudder and sob, but please be aware that I have a day job.”

He replied, with a raised chin: “Then pack it in, because your world is about to spin, causing you to whoop! – and grin – when seeing England long before the Norman days of sin.”

His Majesty’s voice began to fade away, and within an hour it was break of day, when in the hospital I heard a clanking tray, and my doctor say in a soothing way: “We won’t be sending you off in a hearse. Your brain injury could have been far worse, though for a while you will speak and write entirely in verse – won’t he, nurse?”

My reply caused them to give me the strangest of looks: “That’s a turn up for the books.”

# Chapter 2

At home I fell into a deep sleep, and heard King Harold's warriors weep.  
They rattled their weapons, and cried: "Chronicler, rally to our side!  
Please help us try, after these thousand years have gone floating by,  
to explain why our bravery didn't matter – why England was served for conquest on a platter."

Next morning I arose from bed, having completely forgotten those men long dead,  
and began writing in my usual journalistic way (for that is how I earn my pay),  
but was reminded what the doctor did say – that tuneful sentences would come out to play.  
Everything I wrote appeared in verse, but of a kind even a mad bard could not rehearse.  
For hours and hours I did persevere, yet an end to my first page never came near.  
It was obvious that writing in rhyme was a complete and utter waste of time,  
so after dinner, and brief repose, I loudly declared: "Tomorrow it's back to prose."

That decision was impossible to keep, because again Harold disturbed my sleep,  
though now he was old, forlorn, scarred and torn, grey with guilt – his crown at a tilt.  
He scowled as I unleashed the anger that had built: "It's your fault I'm writing with a lilt."

His voice was much deeper than mine: "Your reporter's style remains fine.  
It's tight and terse, perfect for writing my history of the English entirely in verse."  
He then spoke with a hand held in mid-air, as if about to pluck a juicy pear.  
"You are giving me a curious stare, and seem worried by this literary affair.  
Yet you are being beckoned to be the chronicler of King Harrrold the Second."

"Sire, mine is not an expression of curiosity that is lit by your luminosity,  
rather a look of fear that my verses may not please Your Majesty's ear."

He replied in a kindly way: "Write what I say, and all will be clear as day.  
I have descended from on high, where men are forbidden to deceive or lie,  
so every word revealed to you about my astonishing royal coup will be true.  
But that episode's vainglory cannot mask the great tragedy of this story,  
which is so moving and magnificent in scope, that it will – I hope –  
allow voices in Heaven, and beyond the River Styx, to tell the drama of ten-sixty-six."

His ravaged face now filled with pride, not fear, as he spoke of that terrible year.  
“During those twelve months – I swear on my one eye – five kings stood beneath our sky,  
and three of us realised it was time to wave the world a melancholy goodbye.  
We went into eternal night along with a mysterious hairy light that at Easter shone bright,  
swishing over dark hills and valleys – the notorious comet you know as Halley’s.”

He patiently began to set the scene: “Today, whether England has king or queen,  
neither would behave in a way constitutionally obscene. You know what I mean  
– expressing a wish wholly sinister to their puzzled prime minister,  
and saying, with a solemn stare: ‘We command that you declare yourself our royal heir.’

I agreed: “Sire, yes indeed. An impossible thing – no commoner could become king.  
Everyone would stop and glare if a politician stepped anywhere near the royal chair.”

“Chronicler, in my day it was the same. So how did I – chief minister – achieve majestic fame?  
The rules of royal succession were clear, and I should have been thrown out on my rear  
– knocked off the palace perch. Yet I enjoyed full support from Mother Church.  
Our two archbishops – of Canterbury, and York – were beside me on the coronation walk,  
and not one person did falter in acclaiming me as king before England’s highest altar.  
Earl Harold was a lord of great renown, but I had no right to wear this crown.”

I now spoke with urgency: “Sire, it was a time of great peril – national emergency.  
Viking and Norman invasions were on the way, so you had to be crowned without delay  
when England began to pray, after King Edward the Confessor’s death on January’s fifth day.  
Your coronation was what all did seek – a leader who was strong, not weak.  
You were hardened by war, and could lead England through the storms all foresaw.  
Cometh the man, cometh the hour. It was right you were elected to power.”

His Majesty was angrily affected. “If all our Saxon kings were today resurrected  
you could not find a single one who had been elected, so let that idea be rejected.  
Lords had a vote – a voice – only when between princely brothers there was a choice,  
but let it be comprehended that the prejudice against commoners was never suspended.  
For generation after generation only one Saxon royal family ruled this nation.  
My predecessor – Edward the Confessor – could state that his regal line of fate  
stretched back to a distant date beyond the heroic reign of King Alfred the Great.  
Chronicler, I don’t seem to be getting through – I seized the throne in a political coup.”

“Sire, that’s not true. The Confessor died without issue. The only possible king was you.”

Harold's face gave a wince: "I had to convince everyone to ignore a perfect prince. He was Edgar, who might not be known to you – The Confessor's great-nephew, who was in the next room when His Majesty's soul rose in a ghostly plume. That lad rightly expected to make the throne his own, even though he was not fully grown. But he was fifteen, and certainly old enough to rule, and bed a queen. Children had to grow up quickly back then. The Confessor's father had been king, aged ten."

His Majesty's face began to glow as he slowly shook his head to and fro, then said, with hate: "The Bastard was Normandy's duke when only eight."

I chewed wax from my ear. "Sire, some things here are definitely not clear, because it does appear the behaviour of Mother Church was most queer. Our royal line – is effectively divine – because each king's glove is blessed by God above – so when push came to shove, why did the archbishops decide to endow you with love? Surely the prospect of a commoner's coronation was seen by them as an abomination. It will have yanked that sacred rope held by their lord and master, the Pope – puller of every religious string – who must have been outraged at you becoming king. Majesty, is it not so – that His Holiness would want to maintain the political status quo? Rome dictated our holy law, therefore yours was an elevation the Pope must deplore. Why didn't he put up a fight, and strive to protect Prince Edgar's divine right?"

Harold smiled, but without delight. "Because my coronation was decided overnight. Early on Thursday The Confessor passed away, and I was king by Friday, about midday. Which is why my celebration featured unsavoury treats of reheated funeral meats. The suddenness was amazing, yet true, for never did a lord's veins turn so quickly blue. Rome didn't have a clue about what the two archbishops and I had decided to do."

I waved a hand. "Prince Edgar's situation is one I find impossible to understand. Surely our own clergy did insist – loudly demand! – that he be crowned, as God planned."

"Chronicler, power is all about praying, and we had a wise saying: 'The greatest political fighter holds his friends tight, but his priests tighter.' You'll soon understand – as my writer – why I needed men who wore a mitre. The situation in England was unique, and far from bleak, in January's first week – during ten-sixty-six. Hah! At no other time could I have played my royal tricks. Never before, or since, has our church raised a commoner to be such a mighty prince. The archbishops' ambitions and mine were united. Jesus! We were all so excited!"

“Sire, I am still of the persuasion that fear of a Norse and a Norman invasion meant the entire nation had no hesitation in acclaiming your hurried coronation. Prince Edgar was a boy, so there was no generalship he could usefully employ.”

His Majesty snorted. “*Chroniclerrr!* Thy reasoning is distorted. Why should I be supported? I served The Confessor as a soldier loyal and true, and should have bowed to Edgar, too. Had that royal lad worn our crown, The Bastard would have had no cause to frown, and my traitor brother Tostig would not have visited Oslo town – to bring a Viking fury down.”

I replied, eyes swivelling from side to side: “Then your crowning could not be justified. Why should you be allowed to succeed – a man clearly not of the royal breed? The people’s overwhelming feeling must have been that Harold should be kneeling.”

My look of righteous zeal was real, but His Majesty’s reply had an intriguing appeal. “Prince Edgar’s coronation would have been ideal, and before him I was ready to kneel, but everything had taken a dangerous dive during the Christmas of ten-sixty-five, when the archbishops and I realised we had to connive if we were to survive. What occurred will be revealed in good time – and give the biggest shock of this rhyme – when you see why it was do-or-die when I took the gamble that put an arrow in my eye.”

Harold’s voice now sounded tense. “Chronicler, I mean historians no offence, but too many of them seem dense, because they fail to apply common sense. No one here believed invasions would come in ten-sixty-six. Such talk is fiddlesticks! The Normans had no realistic invasion plans, and the Norse were also-rans.”

My royal ghoul – hands on hips – now uttered his most memorable of quips: “Watch your king’s torn lips: The Norman Bastard had no fleet of military ships. I know that may be a surprise, in view of the hundreds of sails he later sent us at sunrise, but though Normandy was a Channel power, only its cavalry made enemies cower. The Bastard was inspirational in a land attack, but didn’t know a hull from a haystack. This fact left me free from care – I swear – until he conjured that vast armada from thin air.”

The room now chilled as His Majesty’s expression took on a look far from thrilled. “Chronicler, The Bastard was strong willed, but so many ships even he could not build. So I laughed when he roared, as there were no decks for his troops to step aboard. However, I reckoned without Saucy Maud, whose influence on events cannot be ignored. She was The Bastard’s wife – Matilda – and looking back, I should have quietly killed her. I knew Maud very well indeed, while filling her with buckets of prime Wessex seed – during the summer of ten-sixty-four – when I was shipwrecked near Normandy’s shore. Chronicler! You have begun to loudly snore. Wake up! There is so much more!”