

## Shakespeare & St George

“Shopping go all right, Mary?” asked Ted as he brought in their afternoon tea and biscuits.

“Oh yes, Ted, thank you,” replied his wife. “Lots of St George's flags about.”

“Oh well,” said Ted, “it's coming up to April the 23rd, St George's day.”

“I know, Ted,” she replied. “But St George wasn't English, was he?”

“Goodness me, no,” laughed Ted. “His origins are a bit obscure but what is certain is that he was born in Asia Minor or the Levant. He was executed, possibly under the Emperor Diocletian, near the city of Lydda, or Lod as it's now called, just south of Tel Aviv; and his reputed tomb may be found in a church there.”

“Oh,” said Mary. “Do we know where he was born? Who his parents were or anything about him?”

“Nothing really certain,” replied Ted. “But the tradition that he was a soldier in the Roman army is ancient and there is no good reason to doubt it. Most traditions say he was born in Cappadocia in what is now south eastern Turkey. His mother is said to have come from Lydda, then in Syrian Palestine, and his father was probably a Cappadocian Greek. One tradition is that his father was martyred for his faith when George was fourteen and that his mother then moved with him back to her native Lydda and that after his mother's death he joined the Roman army.”

“A bit odd, isn't it?” questioned Mary, “joining the Roman army.”

“Not really, Mary,” mused Ted. “He would have been a Roman citizen since in AD 212 the Emperor Caracalla declared that all free men in the Roman Empire were to be given full Roman citizenship, and by this time the army was seen basically as a force keeping peace in the Empire; besides it was generally a good career with a pension at the end.”

“I see,” said Mary. “But wasn't it – er – unsafe to be Christian *and* in the army?”

“Not generally, said Ted. “The Romans were fairly tolerant about what a person's private religion was. We certainly have records of Christians serving in the Roman army from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century onwards.”

“But I thought Romans persecuted Christians!” exclaimed Mary.

“Not Romans generally,” said Ted. “Persecutions occurred intermittently on an *ad hoc* basis, usually at the whims of local communities and local authorities. The first state sanctioned persecution was under Nero who blamed Christians for the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD. The next Empire wide persecution was not till the reign of the Emperor Decius who issued an edict in 250 AD which required everyone in the Empire, except Jews, to perform a sacrifice to the gods in the presence of a Roman magistrate and to obtain a signed and witnessed certificate to that effect.”

“Gosh, Ted,” exclaimed Mary, “you're like a living encyclopedia!”

“Well it helps, I think,” chuckled Ted, “that I've got tablet here.”

“Ah,” said Mary. “But why were Jews exempt?”

“Because,” answered Ted, “they had long been recognized as an ancient ethnic religion; whereas Christianity was a relative newcomer and did not have any specific ethnic identity. Decius, however, probably did not intend to direct this edict specifically against Christians but rather he wished to restore traditional Roman piety throughout the Empire. But the effect, of course, was that Christians were faced with a choice whether to abandon their religion and obey the edict or to face death.”

“Why death?” asked Mary.

“Because,” answered Ted, “refusal was seen as an act of treason; and whatever Decius' intentions may have been, the effect of his edict on Christian communities was traumatic. But the

last and most severe Empire wide persecution, under the joint Emperors Diocletian and Galerius at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, was specifically aimed at Christians. All the legal rights of Christians were rescinded and Christians were compelled to comply with traditional Roman religious practices. The Emperors particularly wanted to purge the Roman army of all Christians, hence it is likely that St George was martyred at this time.”

“I see,” said Mary. “But I was thinking if St George was of mixed Cappadocian and Syrian parentage, it's a bit of an irony that English nationalists and many Brexiters like to drape themselves in his flag.”

“Yes, it is,” laughed Ted. “It rather shows how very little they know about the saint. Nor is he the patron of just England. He's patron of Portugal and of Catalonia ...”

“Both in the European Union,” laughed Mary. “Not very bright of Brexiters to claim his flag.”

“No,” laughed Ted. “But you know what I think of Brexiters. To go back to St George; he shares the patronage of Canada with St Anne and long before all these he was, and still is, the patron of Georgia. Why! We name the country after him!”

“So quite an international saint, then,” said Mary. “How on earth did he ever become the patron of *England*?”

“The cult of St George,” said Ted, “was brought here by crusaders returning from the east. But he didn't become patron of England until the 14<sup>th</sup> century when King Edward III founded the Order of the Garter and placed it under the patronage of St George. Before that, Edmund the Martyr had been patron of England. But the Normans had never been keen on that, as Edmund had been the *Saxon* king of East Anglia; they had been trying to supplant him with St Edward the Confessor. But George won out in the end.”

“But what about the dragon?” asked Mary, sipping her tea, “where did that come from?”

“No one really knows,” said Ted, “though there many theories. What we do know is that no record of St George and the dragon is found anywhere before the 11<sup>th</sup> century and that comes from a Georgian source. The story wasn't known in *Europe* before the 12<sup>th</sup> century.”

“It's caught on since then,” laughed Mary. “But wasn't Shakespeare born on St George's day?”

“Um, maybe,” said Ted, “but as that tradition doesn't seem to be known before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, I'm a bit dubious. What we do know is that he was baptized on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 1564 and that he died on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1616.”

“So he may have been,” said Mary.

“Yes,” agreed Ted, “but in those days of high infant mortality, it was usual to baptize infants as soon as possible after birth, most often on the next day. It seems that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century someone thought it neat to actually have Shakespeare born on the same day of the month as his death, rather than a day or so different; and the fact that it was St George's Day as well, rather clinched it.”

“Ah yes,” said Mary. “Cry 'God for Harry, England and St George!”

“Ah,” laughed Ted, “Henry V at the siege of Harfleur. Quite patriotic it sounds. But though Shakespeare was a Tudor apologist, he was hardly a xenophobic English nationalist.”

“Yes,” laughed Mary, “we have the *Scottish* play, as actors call it.”

“And,” added Ted, “think of how many of his plays are set abroad: the Merchant of Venice, Two Gentlemen of Verona, also in Verona we have Romeo and Juliet, Midsummer Night's dream is about about events surrounding the Duke of Athens' marriage to Hippolyta, Twelfth Night is set in Illyria ...”

“OK,” interrupted Mary, “don't go through all his plays. But his histories were mostly about England, weren't they?”

“Many were,” agreed Ted, “but we also have Pericles, Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, Anthony and Cleopatra, Timon of Athens, and several others from the ancient Graeco-Roman world as well as

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.”

“So, Ted,” said Mary, “though Shakespeare undoubtedly loved England, he was no Little Englander.”

“No, indeed,” said Ted, “and though he has some fine phrases for St George, he happily slips back and forth between English and universal with ease. No Little Englander indeed.”

“So,” mused Mary, as she helped herself to another biscuit, “April 23<sup>rd</sup> is not such a meaningful day for Little Englanders and Brexiters if they really know their Shakespeare and realize who St George really was.”

“Certainly not!” said Ted firmly, “rather Shakespeare and the saint from Syrian Palestine should make us think about Syrian refugees, our place in Europe and how England, and indeed Britain, has been shaped over the centuries by wave after wave of immigration.”

“Amen to that,” said Mary.

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