



# Alfred the Great

*Thomas Hughes*

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‘In all history it would be hard to find a more striking example of what one man may do for a nation in the course of a short lifetime.’

Thomas Hughes, the author of *Tom Brown’s School Days*, was fascinated by the early middle ages of English history. Writing as much as a concerned citizen as an historian, Hughes believes that King Alfred the Great was ‘the true representative of the nation’.

A very Christian country at the time, England was set up in a feudal world of Saxon knights and noblemen. Alfred had to fight pagan warriors who came from Denmark, in battles which are described in detail by Hughes. One such battle killed his brother Ethelred, which placed Alfred on the throne at the age of twenty-three in the year 871.

‘Patience, humility, and utter forgetfulness of self, the true royal qualities, shine out through every word and act of his life wherever we can get at them,’ Hughes writes, using many first-hand sources to construct a portrait of the king. He includes an account of the famous story of the burning of the cakes.

In 886 Alfred took London, and set about bringing peace to the country as a whole. He created a series of ‘dooms’ based on Old Testament scriptures that formed the basis of his law and judiciary system. He also built up the navy and adapted the existing organisation of the various parts of England, and worked on several translations of philosophical texts.

Ultimately it was the Church which still held authority to punish the wicked, rather than the courts. This made the people more pious and helped make the England of the late ninth century great, led by their dutiful king.

Hughes stops to meditate on the universal nature of Christianity, kingship and morality, comparing his own late Victorian era with those Anglo-Saxon times of Alfred. This makes for personal and interesting commentary on the times Hughes was writing.

Thomas Hughes (1822-1896) is most famous for his novel *Tom Brown’s School Days*. He was an MP, judge and author of many works of non-fiction.

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