BRITAIN: or a chorographical description of the most flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland and Ireland, and the Islands adjoyning; out of the depth of Antiquitie: beautified with Mappes of the severall Shires of England; Written first in Latine by William Camden, Clarenceux K. of A. Translated newly into English by Philémon Holland. Londini, Impensis Georgii Bishop & Joannis Norton, M.DC.X.

There is no more remarkable example of the difference between the readers of our light and hurrying age and those who obeyed "Eliza and our James," than the fact that the book we have before us at this moment, a folio of some eleven hundred pages, adorned, like a fighting elephant, with all the weightiest panoply of learning, was one of the most popular works of its time. It went through six editions, this vast antiquarian itinerary, before the natural demand of the vulgar released it from its Latin austerity; and the title-page we have quoted is that of the earliest English edition, specially translated, under the author's eye, by Dr. Philémon Holland, a laborious schoolmaster of Coventry. Once open to the general public, although then at the close of its first quarter of a century, the Britannia flourished with a new lease of life, and continued to bloom, like a literary magnolia, all down the seventeenth century. It is now as little read as other famous books of uncompromising size. The bookshelves of to-day are not fitted for the reception of these heroic folios, and if we want British antiquities now, we find them in terser form and more accurately, or at least more plausibly, annotated in the writings of later antiquaries. Giant Camden moulders at his cave's mouth, a huge and reverend form seldom disturbed by puny passers-by. But his once popular folio was the life work of a particularly interesting and human person; and without affecting to penetrate to the darkest corners of the cavern, it may be instructive to stand a little while on the threshold.

When this first English edition of the Britannia was published, Camden was one of the most famous of living English writers. For one man of position who had heard of Shakespeare, there would be twenty, at least, who were quite familiar with the claims of the Head-master of Westminster and Clarenceux King-of-Arms. Camden was in his sixtieth year, in 1610; he had enjoyed slow success, violent detraction, and final triumph. His health was poor, but he continued to write history, eager, as he says, to show that "though I have been a studious admirer of venerable antiquity, yet have I not been altogether an inconstant spectator of modern occurrences." He stood easily first among the historians of his time; he was respected and adored by the Court and by the Universities, and that his fame might be completed by the chrism of detraction, his popularity was assured from year to year by the dropping fire of obloquy which the Papists scattered from their secret presses. It had not been without a struggle that Camden had attained this pinnacle; and the Britannia had been his alpenstock.

This first English edition has the special interest of representing Camden's last thoughts. It is nominally a translation of the sixth Latin edition, but it has a good deal of additional matter supplied to Philémon Holland by the author, whereas later English issues containing fresh material are believed to be so far spurious. The Britannia grew with the life of Camden. He tells us that it was when he was a young man of six-and-twenty, lately started on his professional career as second master in Westminster School, that the famous Dutch geographer, Abraham Ortelius, "dealt earnestly with me that I would illustrate this isle of Britain." This was no light task to undertake in 1577. The authorities were few, and
these in the highest degree occasional or fragmentary. It was not a question of compiling a collection of topographical antiquities. The whole process had to be gone through "from the egg."

As a youth at Oxford, Camden had turned all his best attention to this branch of study, and what the ancients had written about England was intimately known to him. Any one who looks at his book will see that the first 180 pages of the Britannia could be written by a scholar without stirring from his chair at Westminster. But when it came to the minute description of the counties there was nothing for it but personal travel; and accordingly Camden spent what holidays he could snatch from his labours as a schoolmaster in making a deliberate survey of the divisions of England. We possess some particulars of one of these journeys, that which occupied 1582, in which he started by Suffolk, through Yorkshire, and returned through Lancashire. He was a very rapid worker, he spared no pains, and in 1586, nine years after Ortelius set him going, his first draft was issued from the press. In later times, and when his accuracy had been cruelly impeached, he set forth his claims to attention with dignity. He said: "I have in no wise neglected such things as are most material to search and sift out the truth. I have attained to some skill of the most ancient British and Anglo-Saxon tongues; I have travelled over all England for the most part, I have conferred with most skilful observers in each county.... I have been diligent in the records of this realm. I have looked into most libraries, registers and memorials of churches, cities and corporations, I have pored upon many an old roll and evidence ... that the honour of verity might in no wise be impeached."

It was no slight task to undertake such a work on such a scale. And when the first Latin edition appeared, it was hailed as a first glory in the diadem of Elizabeth. Specialists in particular counties found that Camden knew more about their little circle than they themselves had taken all their lives to learn. Lombard, the great Kentish antiquary, said that he never knew Kent properly, till he read of it in the Britannia. But Camden was not content to rest on his laurels. Still, year by year, he made his painful journeys through the length and breadth of the land, and still, as new editions were called forth, the book grew from octavo into folio. Suddenly, about twelve years after its first unchallenged appearance, there was issued, like a bolt out of the blue, a very nasty pamphlet, called Discovery of certain Errors Published in the much-commended Britannia, which created a fine storm in the antiquarian teapot. This attack was the work of a man who would otherwise be forgotten, Ralph Brooke, the York Herald. He had formerly been an admirer of Camden's, his "humble friend," he called himself; but when Camden was promoted over his head to be Clarenceux King-of-Arms, it seemed to Ralph Brooke that it became his duty to denounce the too successful antiquary as a charlatan. He accordingly fired off the unpleasant little gun already mentioned, and, for the moment, he hit Camden rather hard.

The author of the Britannia, to justify his new advancement, had introduced into a fresh edition of his book a good deal of information regarding the descent of barons and other noble families. This was York Herald's own subject, and he was able to convict Camden of a startling number of negligences, and what he calls "many gross mistakings." The worst part of it was that York Herald had privately pointed out these blunders to Camden, and that the latter had said it was too much trouble to alter them. This, at least, is what the enemy states in his attack, and if this be true, it can hardly be doubted that Camden had sailed too long in fair weather, or that he needed a squall to recall him to the duties of the helm. He answered Brooke, who replied with increased contemptuous tartness. It is admitted that Camden was indiscreet in his manner of reply, and that some genuine holes had been pricked in his heraldry. But the Britannia lay high out of the reach of fatal pedantic attack, and this little cloud over the reputation of the book passed entirely away, and is remembered now only as a curiosity of literature.

In the preface the author quaintly admits that "many have found a defect in this work that maps were not adjoined, which do allure the eyes by pleasant portraiture, ... yet my ability could not compass it." They must, then, have been added at the last by a generous afterthought, for this book is full of maps. The maritime ones are adorned with ships in full sail, and bold sea-monsters with curly tails; the inland ones are speckled with trees and spires and hillocks. In spite of these old-fashioned oddities, the maps are remarkably accurate. They are signed by John Norden and William Kip, the master map-makers of that reign. The book opens with an account of the first inhabitants of Britain, and their manners and customs; how the Romans fared, and what antiquities they left behind, with copious plates of Roman coins. By degrees we come down, through Saxons and Normans, to that work which was peculiarly Camden's, the topographical antiquarianism. He begins with Cornwall, "that region which, according to the geographers, is the first of all Britain," and then proceeds to what he calls "Denshire" and we Devonshire, a county, as he remarks, "barbarous on
either side."

With page 822 he finds himself at the end of his last English county, Northumberland, looking across the Tweed to Berwick, "the strongest hold in all Britain," where it is "no marvel that soldiers without other light do play here all night long at dice, considering the side light that the sunbeams cast all night long." This rather exaggerated statement is evidently that of a man accustomed to look upon Berwick as the northernmost point of his country, as we shall all do, no doubt, when Scotland has secured Home Rule. We are, therefore, not surprised to find Scotland added, in a kind of hurried appendix, in special honour to James I and VI. The introduction to the Scottish section is in a queer tone of banter; Camden knows little and cares less about the "commonwealth of the Scots," and "withall will lightly pass over it." In point of fact, he gets to Duncansby Head in fifty-two pages, and not without some considerable slips of information. Ireland interests him more, and he finally closes with a sheet of learned gossip about the outlying islands.

The scope of Camden's work did not give Philémon Holland much opportunity for spreading the wings of his style. Anxious to present Camden fairly, the translator is curiously uneven in manner, now stately, now slipshod, weaving melodious sentences, but forgetting to tie them up with a verb. He is commonly too busy with hard facts to be a Euphuist. But here is a pretty and ingenious passage about Cambridge, unusually popular in manner, and exceedingly handsome in the mouth of an Oxford man:

"On this side the bridge, where standeth the greater part by far of the City, you have a pleasant sight everywhere to the eye, what of fair streets orderly ranged, what of a number of churches, and of sixteen colleges, sacred mansions of the Muses, wherein a number of great learned men are maintained, and wherein the knowledge of the best arts, and the skill in tongues, so flourish, that they may rightly be counted the fountains of literature, religion and all knowledge whatsoever, who right sweetly bedew and sprinkle, with most wholesome waters, the gardens of the Church and Commonwealth through England. Nor is there wanting anything here, that a man may require in a most flourishing University, were it not that the air is somewhat unhealthful, arising as it doth out of a fenny ground hard by. And yet, peradventure, they that first founded a University in that place, allowed of Plato's judgment. For he, being of a very excellent and strong constitution of body, chose out the Academia, an unwholesome place of Attica, for to study in, and so the superfluous rankness of body which might overlay the mind, might be kept under by the dis-temperature of the place."

The poor scholars in the mouldering garrets of Clare, looking over waste land to the oozy Cam, no doubt wished that their foundress had been less Spartan. Very little of the domestic architecture that Camden admired in Cambridge is now left; and yet probably it and Oxford are the two places of all which he describes that it would give him least trouble to identify if he came to life again three hundred years after the first appearance of his famous Britannia.

(The end)

Edmund Gosse's essay: Camden's "Britannia"

By Edmund Gosse