Alfred Bowker’s Alfred The Great: Reimagining an Anglo-Saxon King

Wednesday 4 April 2012 4:15-5:30pm

School of History Seminar Series
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McDonald Room Menzies Library, ANU

1901. The year Queen Victoria died and the millenary of the death of Ælfred of Wessex, a king that the English have come to call ‘Alfred the Great’. Ælfred’s twentieth-century transition from obscure West-Saxon warlord to ancestral ‘King of Britain’ was due, in large part, to the efforts of Alfred Bowker, the young, ambitious Mayor of Winchester.

At the turn of the century, Bowker organised a nationwide commemoration of Ælfred’s achievements, commissioned Hamo Thornycroft to cast a colossal statue in bronze, and edited several books detailing both the millenary celebrations and the achievements of the king himself.

In Bowker’s (re)construction, Alfred became the progenitor of a staggering array of national innovations: it was Ælfred who had established the monarchy; the national school system; the English language; English literature; public libraries; the British navy; the British Empire; even the eight-hour day. Bowker’s Ælfred, however, was far less history than projection and in his biography of ‘Alfred the Great’, as in the careful choreography of the mayor’s millenary celebrations, we witness complex interconnections of nationalism, medievalism and British imperialism.