

Wild Edric

As an island nation, we are less accustomed to being conquered than most of our continental neighbours. The coastal defences were breached four times – beginning with the Romans - in the First Millennium AD, and we have never let them in again. When it does happen, then, the sense of resentment can linger on for centuries. Take the Norman Conquest, for example. This was as complete a take-over as it's possible to imagine: change of king, change of owner, change of language. Yet even in Victorian times – 900 years later - there was a feeling that it had been a regrettable and retrograde step, and a loss of good old Anglo-Saxon values. Those who had resisted the invasion in the years after 1066, therefore, had a certain heroic cache. There was Hereward the Wake, whose exploits were the subject of a Charles Kingsley novel, Edwin, the ill-fated Earl of Mercia, and his brother, Morcar, who plays a part in a novel by Henry Treece. And then there was Wild Edric. Edric is a more than fleeting presence in a number of contemporary accounts of the post-Conquest years. He appears as a landowner in Herefordshire and Shropshire, and perhaps was related to the aforesaid Earls of Mercia. After Hastings, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Edric allied himself to the Welsh kings and posed a serious threat to the Norman strongholds in the Marches. He unsuccessfully laid siege to Hereford Castle and rather more successfully burnt down the town of Shrewsbury.

Only in 1069, at the Battle of Stafford, was Edric finally neutralised. Sources differ as to his fate after that defeat. One says that he was killed in battle, another that he was enlisted into the service of King William, and a third that he was imprisoned for the rest of his life.

As for that off-putting nickname, don't feel you need to cross Wild Edric off your dinner party invites. The title was probably applied to him when Edric and his band of supporters were on the run from the Norman invaders. One of the chroniclers - Orderic Vitalis - says that the rebels lived in tents in the woods and marshes, refusing to sleep in houses in case they became soft. The Normans called them *silvatici*, meaning men of the woods or wild men. And thus he became Edric le Sauvage or Edric the Wild.

It is at this point that the real Edric merges into something much more mythic. Perhaps this comes with the territory, when you hold land in the Marches. Border folklore declares that Edric did not die at all, but continues to roam free. One popular belief, attested in Shropshire until well into the 19th Century, has it that Edric will not finally go to his rest until all the wrongs wrought by the Norman conquerors are righted.

And with that Edric joins the exalted circle of larger-than-life Saxon heroes like Hereward and Morcar. Indeed, you could also put him in the same company as Robin Hood, the legendary righter-of-wrongs who also fought against Norman injustice. And that unwillingness to go to his bed also puts Edric alongside other British heroes (such as Francis Drake and King Arthur), said to be ready to return when their country needs them.

One such Shropshire legend sees Edric in similar light. When war threatens these shores, goes the tale, a ghostly band of hunters, led by Edric, will be seen streaming

across the dark sky. One such sighting is claimed before the Crimean War, and another in August 1914.

In folkloric terms these harbingers of doom are referred to as the "Wild Hunt", with origins in Viking mythology or even earlier. What's unusual is to see the tale attached to a named individual, or to be linked quite so specifically to national history.

Interestingly, similar associations are made with Edric's compatriot, Hereward the Wake.

Once Edric was established in this landscape – a wild man of the woods – other folk stories seem to have coalesced around him. Perhaps the best known is the one reported by the medieval writer and cleric, Walter Map, who was collecting his tall tales in the late 12th century.

According to Map, Edric was returning one night through the woods after a hunting expedition, when he came across an enchanted mansion, full of ladies dancing. With the lack of delicacy you might expect of him, Wild Edric snatches one of the women away to be his wife, to which rough wooing she succumbs remarkably amicably.

There is, of course, a catch to this arrangement. Should Edric ever mention his wife's magical origins, or her sisters in the fairy palace, she will disappear from his sight.

Some years later, when his wife is not at home to greet him, he upbraids her on her return, suggesting that she has been away meeting her sisters. And immediately the lady vanishes, "and neither her husband's self-reproaches," concludes Walter Map, "nor his tears, nor any search, could ever find her again."

And with that Edric the Wild rides off into the distance. He may never get to be appear in feature films like his green countryman from Nottinghamshire, but Edric is most definitely in the same section of the Yellow Pages. With any luck you'll never have need to call him.