

Son of Charlemagne

By
BARBARA WILLARD



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*With love to my godson,
Timothy Marlow—
who will read it
when the time comes,
I hope*

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Introduction

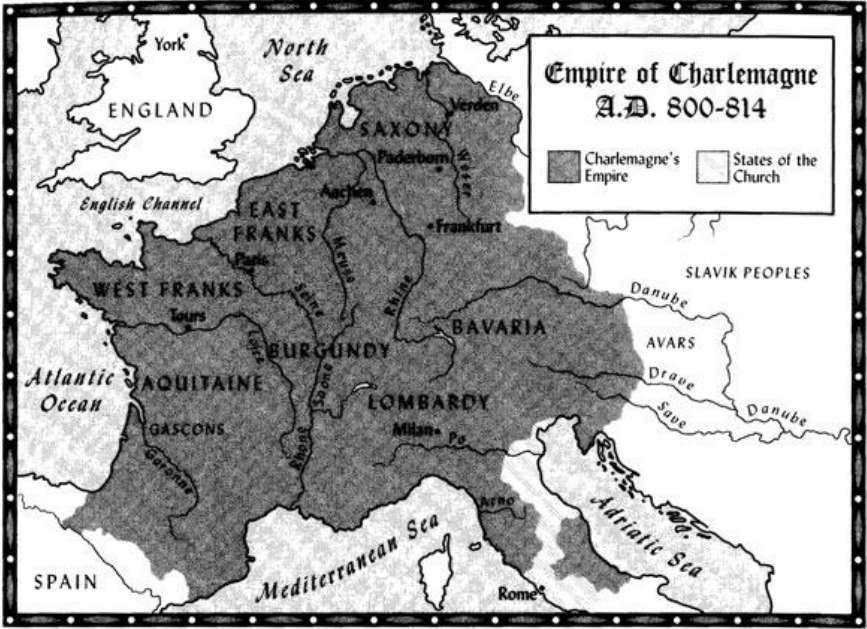
TO OPEN THIS book is to break through many layers of what we call Europe—and to stand once again among the foundations. And there we find Charlemagne, who himself is standing on Roman stones. Charles the Great is making a new political beginning which will give shape and sense and spirit to Europe—in some ways right down to our day. Barbara Willard allows us to make acquaintance with this king up close, by way of his children. One great man, willing great good and doing it, and sometimes trespassing hugely—this was Charlemagne, perceived here through the devoted, sometimes pained eyes of Carl, his vigorous young son and namesake.

History shows the indisputable impact of Charlemagne, the only man who succeeded in building an empire in the West in those centuries after Rome fell to the barbarians. Charlemagne's grandsons couldn't keep his edifice; yet there remained for the next thousand years common concepts of justice and a vision of the state in close alliance with the Church. Medieval Europe took shape from those concepts; that vision inspired the Holy Roman Empire, which lasted until 1806. Through hundreds of years when wars, language, and religious quarrels insured a disunited Europe, Charlemagne's brief realization of a Christian empire remained as backdrop—a fact, an ideal, and a hidden unifying force of immense strength. A Christian empire? That was Charlemagne's dream. His own faults seriously betrayed his ideal at times—once slaughtering thousands of Saxons, in an excessive punishment; imposing the Faith by coercion; manipulating control of power—while meanwhile sometimes subject to the wiles of a woman's power. Charlemagne's own harshness, imposed when he thought it was necessary to obtain rightful ends, fell short of a truly Christian policy—as the renowned scholar and cleric Alcuin and others of his advisors reminded him. Yet despite faults, Charlemagne retained enormous esteem in his day and the centuries that followed as “the King father of Europe.”

Son of Charlemagne gives us an intimate view of this man of history, such as will otherwise be known to only a few scholars. Here is a reconstruction for young people that depicts the human,

developing life of the man and his sons and daughters. As Barbara Willard points out in her Author's Note, we are introduced not only to a person, but to an entire age, the Carolingian Europe of the 8th and 9th centuries. It is a fully researched picture, in the setting of his day, of the man whose name is attached to the "Carolingian Period." The customs and outward form of that age may be unlike our own. However, the inner struggle of a king's conscience is much like our own—wrestling between Christian standards and the temptation to use brute force, between an ideal of civilization and the solution of imposing it by shortcuts. Touching, exciting, thought-provoking, this book brings an early century back to life.

LYDIA REYNOLDS,
Bethlehem Books



Author's Note

WHEN YOU READ this book remember that *Charlemagne* is the name given by posterity to more than just one man. Basically, Charlemagne is indeed Charles the Great, Carlus Magnus, Charles le Magnifique. But the legend which grew up around him over the following centuries has come to stand for a whole age, an entire way of life and thought.

You can meet the Charlemagne of legend in the famous *Song of Roland*, the great French epic that was sung by the poetic storytellers of the Middle Ages.

Charles the King, the family man, scholarly and devout, full of little human foibles, comes nearest to us in the *Life of Charles* that was written by the devoted Einhard, while in the *Annals* of the time we learn of his battles and his decrees and so on.

When I call young Carl the *Son of Charlemagne*, I call him also the son of his day and age, when there was almost a new dawn for the Church, and when the seeds of chivalry were sown.

One more thing: there were many minor orders existing within the framework of the Church at that time. To avoid any confusion it is as well to recall that a *cleric* was not necessarily a professed priest or monk, but often just a scholar or *clerk*, employed on the sort of jobs that have occupied clerks ever since.

B. W.



1. Family Journey, A.D. 781

DUSK WAS coming down as the head of the long train of men and horses and baggage mules reached the summit of the pass. A strong wind blew up there, whistling across the roof of Europe, whirling the sudden snow into blinding spirals that powdered the thick fur cloaks and hoods of the travelers, lay upon their shoulders, and whitened even their eyelashes. The King's fair beard sparkled where the snowy particles had frozen diamond-hard.

Everyone had dismounted long ago. The horses had to be cajoled along the narrow slippery tracks that were barely tracks at all. Only the mules went blithely; many had had their packs removed

because the bulk was too great, and these were being manhandled over this worst section of the mountain journey. There was a great deal of shouting and swearing and praying among the men. But the end of the journey was in sight. Soon they would be dropping down into the plain of Lombardy. The last part of the route would be child's play. By the time the return journey was made flowers would have replaced the snow.

Carl found it difficult to walk, the snow was so deep here at the head of the pass. He would have liked to catch hold of his father's cloak to help himself along, but he was ashamed to appear so babyish. He glanced back over his shoulder, his breath making a thick misty cloud about his head, and saw that his sister Bertha was being carried by Anghilbert; they were laughing and talking together and Bertha's cheeks, whipped by the cold air, shone like apples. Behind them strode the tall Duke Eric, the King's close friend, with Carloman held high against his shoulder. Carl waved to his brother, and young Carloman waved back. There was no sign of Rhotrud, the elder sister. She was probably much farther back, helping their mother with Lewis, the youngest child, who was only three years old. Pepin would be there too; he was the eldest of all, half brother to the rest, but he never managed very well on journeys of this kind.

Just before the summit was reached the King looked back to Carl, who was panting a bit as he plowed along. The tall, striding man paused and held out his hand.

"We'll do better if we give one another a hand, my son," he said, smiling over his frosty beard. "This is enough to tax the strongest of us."

Carl said nothing, but he glanced up gratefully at his father, then clasped his hand in its great fur mitt.

"We shall soon be in shelter," the King said. "Below that great mound of stones the ground drops away and we shall be out of the wind. We will camp there for the night."

Still breathless, young Carl only nodded. He looked toward the pile of stones that reared up out of the snowy twilight, standing harsh and black against the purple sky.

"Look the other way as you pass," his father told Carl. "This is where men once worshiped Jupiter, the pagan god of the ancient Romans. That mound of stones is a place of prayer and sacrifice.

One day we will come here in fair weather and scatter the stones and we will raise the Cross in its place.”

As they skirted the mighty pile, the King drew Carl within the shelter of his blue cloak, holding its folds against his cheek, as though he would protect his son against an evil which might still linger in that desolate place.

Soon, as the King had promised, they came to shelter. A score of men were there already, knowing the camping ground of old. They were preparing a resting place and they had fires burning. In the increasing dusk the flames leaped comfortingly against the snow. The cold wind, the threatening stone mound, the sinister crags of the mountain’s head were left behind. Gradually the whole party assembled. More and more fires sprang into life and the air hummed with the cheerful sound of men busy about making themselves secure against the night. Soon the smell of roasting meat added to the feeling of rest and relaxation.

Against the convenient shelter of rocks six or seven feet high, a tent of skins had been pitched for the King’s wife and children; he himself would sleep outside, rolled in his cloak by the fire, a soldier among soldiers. Carl, who had been dodging about among the men and amusing himself with the idea that he, too, was one of them, went at last to find his mother and his brothers and sisters.

“We thought you were lost,” his mother said as he strode in and stamped his feet boldly, scattering the snow, so that Rhotrud shrieked and drew aside her skirts. “Come into the warm, my darling. We shall soon have our supper.”

It was snug in the tent, with skins on the snowy floor and a brazier by the door. Bertha stood warming her feet and chattering.

“Anghilbert told me a story as we came up the mountain.”

“He was lucky to have breath enough—since he was carrying you!” Carl taunted, and ducked as she kicked off one of the warm slippers she had just pulled on and sent it sailing toward his head.

“About a princess in a tower,” Bertha went on, “and how she was rescued by her bold lover. Anghilbert is a wonderful storyteller, Mother.”

“We’ll ask him for another tale presently,” their mother said.

She was busy with the two little boys. She had piled up rugs of fur to make a bed for them. Lewis, the baby, was already asleep. Carloman was protesting against being bundled in beside him, but

his mother was firm. On the far side of the tent, the half brother, Pepin, sat and watched the rest. He laughed at Carloman's antics, encouraging him in his disobedience. The child threw off the covers and rushed to Pepin. Rhotrud was after him in a flash. She dragged him back. Her patience was fast going. At last she cried out angrily and slapped Carloman, so that he shouted in fury. Lewis woke and began to cry. Bertha ran to the baby and began to croon over him extravagantly. Carl taunted Carloman for minding what Rhotrud did, and Pepin joined in. Rhotrud, her temper still high, began to cry in her turn.

The din brought the King to the tent.

"Be silent!" he said, standing tall and stern in the opening.

And they were silent, even Lewis, the baby.

"Are these my children?" the King demanded. "Or a pack of wolves?"

Their mother laughed and held out her hand to the King. His sternness left him as he went toward her.

"Hildegarde," he said, shaking his fist at her, "have you no care that your sons and daughters behave like wild animals?"

"You bring them to forage in the snow," she told him, still laughing. "They are certain to grow a little like the creatures who live in these wild places. If you prefer a tame and docile family you must leave us all behind in the palace at Aachen. I daresay we should behave ourselves better there."

"No," he said, his arm firm about her shoulders, "I shall always take my pack with me and accept the consequences. Snapping and snarling are better than separation."

"Be thankful you have a wife who is not too dainty to tramp over the mountains with you, my dear," Hildegarde said. She took his hand and held it for a moment against her cheek.

"I am thankful," he assured her seriously. "I praise God seven times a day for my Hildegarde."

At that moment the servants came in with food and wine. The family gathered round thankfully, for the cold air and the long day's journey had given them sharp appetites. Lewis sank off to sleep again, and the King took Carloman on his lap and fed him the choicest bits of meat. The other children looked a little resentful at this favoritism, but their mother watched with a soft and contented expression. This was one of the moments she most enjoyed, when

her husband forgot all the cares of his kingdom and settled down with his growing family as easily as any peasant. Charles, King of the Franks, was a great warrior, a great ruler, a great scholar, a great Christian; but it was by his simplicity that Hildegard his wife knew him to be a great man.

King Charles of the Franks was on his way to Rome. This was no military expedition, such as he had conducted for many years throughout Europe, where man was at last emerging from the dreadful night of the Dark Ages. When the Roman Empire collapsed, much of Europe slipped back into savagery and paganism. Christianity had seemed almost on the point of extinction. But in the lonely and often threatened monasteries, the monks diligently working kept a little flame of faith and learning burning steadily. Gradually the darkness lifted. And Charles of the Franks was the champion who had arisen to reawaken and restore the Church, and order in civil things, and the precious knowledge of books and the things of the mind. They had called his grandfather Charles the Hammer because of his strength and indomitable power. He it was who had founded the new line of Christian kings of whom the Frankish King Charles was the greatest yet. The greatest man, some said, who had ever ruled an earthly kingdom.

Charles of the Franks, successor and soon superior of his powerful grandfather, had thrust his way about Europe subduing race after savage race, converting them to Christianity and making them his vassals. Yearly his kingdom grew wider and more powerful, stretching from the Pyrenees toward the Baltic shore, reaching out to the Breton frontiers and the Netherlands or Frisia, and over the great Alps into Lombardy. The Saxons, under their leader Witikind, had fought the most fiercely against King Charles. They were not yet subdued, but they were quiet; and Witikind had fled into Scandinavia. So, in a period of apparent peace, the King was on his way to visit the good and noble Pope Hadrian in Rome.

King Charles had more than one reason for this journey. Ostensibly he wished to visit those lands of Lombardy which had come under his rule only a few years previously. He wished to present his sons to the Pope. But most of all he intended the visit to be a preparation for the future—a future whose ultimate aim was so great and grand he had barely dared to put it into thoughts, let alone words.