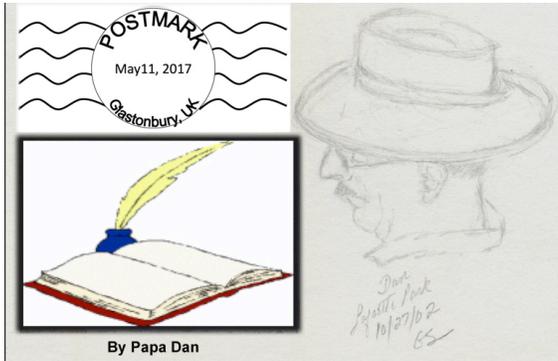


Writing Assignment: A New Take on the Arthurian Legend for 2017

By Dan Sapone



"Tell the story"
"Don't let it be forgot"
 — Arthur

...
*Yet some men say
 in many parts of England
 that King Arthur is not dead."*
 — Sir Thomas Mallory
 (of Warwick?)

=====

In dark times, we humans tend to seek assistance from some form of intervention — perhaps a knight on a horse — to save us from dangers we can't overcome on our own. History is full of examples; and my favorite example is the legend of King Arthur. At its core, the Arthurian legend promises that British greatness is secure as long as its royal heritage endures. Several ancient sources contain the prophecy that the 'Rightful King' would reveal himself by pulling an enchanted sword, named Excalibur, from a stone. In those stories, the sword had been embedded in that stone under a spell that awaited a person with enough moral courage and wisdom (and, of course, physical strength) to remove the sword and save his people at a time of great danger. In our most enduring source of Arthurian legend, *Le Morte d'Artur* (1485), Sir Thomas Mallory tells us: "*Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone, is rightwise king born of all England.*" When that 'Rightful King' shows up to remove the sword he would lead his people to victory. Arthur arrived on the scene to fulfill that prophecy. Presumably, all of Britain's history follows from that moment. For centuries, many storytellers have taken up the legend — recently Alfred Tennyson in *Idylls of the King* (in the 1860s), T.H. White in his popular book *The Once and Future King* (1958), and, of course, the Broadway musical *Camelot* by Lerner and Loewe (1960).

Most of the stories come to us from the 12th thru 15th centuries, with tales of chivalry, Knights of the Round Table, and a famous *Camelot* love triangle involving Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot; but the *real, historical* Arthur arrived on the scene to remove the sword and save his comrades at the Battle of Camlann in 560 AD. In that battle, Arthur, with the help of Excalibur, killed their enemy, Mordred, to achieve victory. Unfortunately, accounts from that time record that Arthur was mortally wounded in that battle and was taken to the Isle of Avalon to die. Historically, most believe that he was buried in the churchyard at Glastonbury Abbey (below).



Arthur's reputed 6th-century gravesite.



Arthur's 1192 reburial site within the Abbey.

BUT Arthur’s story doesn’t end there. Mallory continues: *“Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross. I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say: here in this world he changed his life.”* The legend provides further reassurance — we are told with the particular certainty of such powerful legends, that Arthur still waits at the Isle of Avalon (now known as Glastonbury Tor) for the day when his particular combination of greatness, goodness, and magic will be needed to save Britain again from great danger. Now, partial disclosure, I have visited Glastonbury Tor here in the 21st century, walked its full extent (below, that’s me on the path on the left), and I must report that I did not see him there. But, the legend has endured long enough and forcefully enough to suggest that I must have missed him. And, as you can see, there’s magic afoot; so, we can be confident.



Glastonbury Tor, 2013

So, the legend endures. (And it’s a better story, no?)

Over the centuries since that day, Britain has survived a long list of well-documented threats;
 → → BUT today, the time for his return has clearly arrived.

Without Arthur’s intervention, an election scheduled for June 8 may be a defining ‘point-of-no-return’ of Britain’s planned separation from the rest of Europe with disastrous results for the British economy and the stability of Europe and the West. The entire arc of history enfolding from the 5th to the 21st centuries has been a constant struggle to unify Europe under progressive values, new ideas that promise to provide stability. That struggle has continued through an alternating series of triumphs and setbacks over sixteen centuries of powerful obstacles, destructive wars, expansions of a vast empire, contractions back to a single small country, demonstrably less worthy kings, tasteless food, a few embarrassing prime ministers (most since Churchill), and one worthless one (the current one). Arguably, the establishment of the European Union (EU) in 1993 was the greatest single step in the progress from Arthur’s Round Table, as told to us by Sir Tom of Warwick (Thomas Mallory?) to our present day. If this election were to go the “wrong” way, and Britain shrinks from the responsibilities of its destiny, neither Britain nor the European Union are certain to recover from such a setback. The British people will need all of the wisdom and courage that Arthur, the “Once and Future King,” can provide to step back from the Brexit cliff.

The time has come, Arthur, to return and fulfill your destiny. The world still waits. I’m sure you are ready and waiting somewhere on that hill in Glastonbury. Time is running out.

Or, maybe there is another way to think about this ...

On the eve of battle, according to one version of the story, Arthur gave a gift to the future (i.e., us). Mindful that the battle was not certain to go well, that he might not survive and his Round Table could die with him, he was startled by a young boy who had come to fight in the battle. The boy told Arthur that he wanted to fight to preserve the values of the Round Table. The dejected King, feeling that his life's work was about to come to nothing, was skeptical, and asked him how he could possibly know about the Round Table. The boy told him, *"from stories people tell — stories about might for right, right for right, justice for all, a round table where all the knights would sit."*

Arthur was encouraged and, using Excalibur, knighted the boy, Tom of Warwick, and gave him some direct orders:

*"You will not fight in the battle, you will run behind the lines and hide until the battle is over; you will return home to Warwick — **ALIVE!** You will grow up and grow old. For as long as you live, will you remember what I, your King, tell you and do as I command?"*

"Yes, my Lord."

Arthur then commanded him to *"[tell the story](#) of the values of the kingdom he had hoped to create."* ([Click on the link to hear Arthur tell the story himself.](#)) As the newly knighted Tom of Warwick left to fulfill his orders, Arthur's optimism is revived that *"We will be remembered"* and THAT would be his victory.

So, perhaps between now and June 8, the story must be told, "strong and clear," again and again, that Britain has an important role to play in the future of Europe and in preserving the values for which it was founded. Maybe the story can tip the balance, even if Arthur himself does not emerge from Glastonbury Tor with his sword to save Britain from itself. Maybe the telling of the story is all that is needed. If the guys with swords let us down, let's put our faith in the storytellers.