

STEPHEN R.
LAWHEAD

Scarlet



THE LEGEND LIVES

Scarlet

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KING RAVEN: BOOK 2



STEPHEN R.
LAWHEAD



NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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To the dedicated
men and women at
UWMC and SCCA,
without whom . . .



PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Many of the old Celtic words and names are strange to modern eyes, but they are not as difficult to pronounce as they might seem at first glance. A little effort—and the following rough guide—will help you enjoy the sound of these ancient words.

Consonants – As in English, but with the following exceptions:

c: hard – as in *cat* (never soft, as in *cent*)

ch: hard – as in *Bach* (never soft, as in *church*)

dd: a hard *th* sound, as in *then*

f: a hard *v* sound, as in *of*

ff: a soft *f* sound, as in *off*

g: hard – as in *girl* (never soft, as in *George*)

ll: a Gaelic distinctive, sounded as *tl* or *hl* on the sides of the tongue

r: rolled or slightly trilled, especially at the beginning of a word

rh: breathed out as if *h-r* and heavy on the *h* sound

s: soft – as in *sin* (never hard, as in *his*); when followed by a vowel it takes on the *sh* sound

th: soft – as in *thistle* (never hard, as in *then*)

Vowels – As in English, but generally with the lightness of short vowel sounds:

a: short, as in *can*

á: slightly softer than above, as in *awe*

e: usually short, as in *met*

é: long *a* sound, as in *hey*

i: usually short, as in *pin*

í: long *e* sound, as in *see*

o: usually short, as in *hot*

ó: long *o* sound, as in *woe*

ô: long *o* sound, as in *go*

u: usually sounded as a short *i* , as in *pin*

ú: long *u* sound, as in *sue*

ù: short *u* sound, as in *muck*

w: sounded as a long *u*, as in *hu* e; before vowels often becomes a soft consonant as in

the name *Gwen*

y: usually short, as in *pin*; sometimes *u* as in *pun*; when long, sounded *e* as in *see*; rarely, *y* as in *why*

The careful reader will have noted that there is very little difference between *i*, *u*, and *y*—they are almost identical to non-Celts and modern readers.

Most Celtic words are stressed on the next to the last syllable. For example, the personal name *Gofannon* is stressed *go-FAN-non*, and the place name *Penderwydd* is pronounced *pen-DER-width*, and so on.

CHAPTER 1

So, now. One day soon they hang me for a rogue. Fair enough. I have earned it a hundred times over, I reckon, and that's leaving a lot of acreage unexplored. The jest of it is, the crime for which I swing is the one offence I never did do. The sheriff will have it that I raised rebellion against the king.

I didn't.

Oh, there's much I've done that some would as soon count treason. For a fact, I eat more of the king's venison than the king has eat bread, and good men have lost their heads to royal pikes for far less; but in all my frolics I never breathed a disloyal word against the crown, nor tried to convince any man, boy, horse, or dog to match his deeds to mine. Ah, but dainties such as these are of no concern when princes have their tender feelings ruffled. It is a traitor they want to punish, not a thief. The eatin' o' Red William's game is a matter too trifling—more insult than crime—and it's a red-handed rebel they need. Too much has happened in the forests of the March and too much princely pride hangs in the balance to be mincing fair about a rascal poaching a few soft-eyed deer.

Until that ill-fated night, Will Scarlet ran with King Raven and his band of merry thieves. Ran fast and far, I did, let me tell you. Faster and farther than all the rest, and that's saying something. Here's the gist: it's the Raven Hood they want and cannot get. So, ol' Will is for the jump.

Poor luck, that. No less, no more.

They caught me crest and colours. My own bloody fault. There's none to blame but the hunter when he's caught in his own snare. I ask no pardon. A willing soul, I flew field and forest with King Raven and his flock. Fine fun it was, too, until they nabbed me in the pinch. Even so, if it hadn't a' been for a spear through my leg bone they would not a' got me either.

So, here we sit, my leg and me, in a dank pit beneath Count de Braose's keep. I have a cell—four walls of stone and a damp dirt floor covered with rotting straw and rancid rushes. I have a warden named Guibert, or Gulbert or some such, who brings me food and water when he can be bothered to remember, and unchains me from time to time so I can stretch the cramps a bit and wash my wound. I also have my very own priest, a young laggard of a scribe who comes to catch my wild tales and pin them to the pages of a book to doom us all.

We talk and talk. God knows we've got time to kill before the killing time. It pleases me now to think on the dizzy chase we led. I was taken in the most daring and outrageous scheme to come out of the forest yet. It was a plan as desperate as death, but light and lark-some as a maiden's flirting glance. At a blow, we aimed to douse the sheriff's ardour and kindle a little righteous wrath in lorn Britannia. We aimed to cock a snook at the crown, sure, and mayhap draw the king's attention to our sore plight, embarrass his sheriff, and show him and his mutton-headed soldiers for fools on

parade—all in one fell swoop. Sweet it was and, save for my piddling difficulties, flawless as a flower until the walls of the world came crashing down around our ears.

Truth is, I can't help thinking that if we only knew what it was that had fallen plump into our fists, none of this would have happened and I would not be here now with a leg on fire and fit to kill me if the sheriff don't. Oh, but that is ranging too far afield, and there is ground closer to home needs ploughing first.

Ah, but see the monk here! Asleep with his nose in his inkhorn.

"Odo, you dunce! Wake up! You're dozing again. It ill becomes you to catch a wink on a dying man's last words. Prick up your ears, priest. Pare your quill, and tell me the last you remember."

"Sorry, Will," he says. He's always ever so sorry, rubbing sleep from his dreamy brown eyes. And it is sorry he should be—sorry for himself and all his dreary ilk, but not for Will.

"Never feel sorry for Will, lad," I tell him. "Will en't sorry for nothing."

Brother Odo is my scribe, decent enough for a Norman in his simpering, damp-handed way. He does not wish me harm. I think he does not even know why he has been sent down here amongst the gallows birds to listen to the ramblings of a dangerous scofflaw like myself.

Why should he?

Abbot Hugo is behind this wheeze to scribble down all my doings. To what purpose? Plain as daylight in Dunholme, he means to scry out a way to catch King Raven. Hugo imagines languishing in the shadow of the noose for a spell will sober me enough to grow a tongue of truth in my head and sing like a bird for freedom.

So, I sing and sing, if only to keep Jack o'Ladder at arm's length a little longer. Our larcenous abbot will learn summat to his profit, as may be, but more to his regret. He'll learn much of that mysterious phantom of the greenwood, to be sure. But for all his listening he'll hear naught from me to catch so much as a mayfly. He'll not get the bolt he desires to bring King Raven down.

"So, now," I say, "pick up your pen, Brother Odo. We'll begin again. What was the last you remember?"

Odo scans his chicken tracks a moment, scratches his shaved pate and says, "When Thane Aelred's lands were confiscated for his part in the Uprising, I was thrown onto my own resources . . ."

Odo speaks his English with the strange flat tongue of the Frank outlanders. That he speaks English at all is a wonder, I suppose, and the reason why Hugo chose him. Poor Odo is a pudgy pudding of a man, young enough, and earnest in faith and practice, but pale and only too ready to retire, claiming cramp or cold or fatigue. He is always fatigued, and for no good reason it seems to me. He makes as if chasing a leaking nib across fresh-scraped vellum is as mighty a labour as toting the carcass of a fat hind through the greenwood on your back with the sheriff's men on your tail.

All saints bear witness! If pushing a pen across parchment taxes a man as much as Odo claims, we should honour as heroes all who ply the quill, amen.

I am of the opinion that unless he grows a backbone, and right soon, Brother Odo will be nothing more in this life than another weak-eyed scribbler squinting down his long French nose at the undiluted drivel his hand has perpetrated. By Blessed Cuthbert's thumb, I swear I would rather end my days in Baron de Braose's pit than face eternity with a blot like that on my soul.

Perhaps, in God's dark plan, friend Will is here to instruct this indolent youth in a better lesson, thinks I. Well, we will do what can be done to save him.

When Thane Aelred's lands were confiscated for his part in the Uprising, I was thrown onto my own resources, and like to have died they were that thin."

This I tell him, repeating the words to buy a little time while I cast my net into streams gone by to catch another gleaming memory for our proud abbot's feast. May he choke on the bones! With this blessing between my teeth, I rumble on . . .

CHAPTER 2

Thane Aelred was as fair-minded as the Tyne is wide, and solid as the three-hundred-year-old oak that grew beside his barn. A bull-necked man with the shaggy brown mane of a lion and a roar to match as may be, but he treated his people right and well. Never one to come all high and mighty with his minions, he was always ready enough to put hand to plough or scythe. Bless the man, he never shirked the shearing or slaughtering, and all the grunt and sweat that work requires. For though we have lived a thousand years and more since Our Sweet Jesus came and went, it is a sad, sad truth that sheep will still not shear themselves, nor hogs make hams.

There's the pity. Toss a coin and decide which of the two is the filthier chore.

Under Aelred, God rest him, there was always a jar or three to ease our aching bones when the day's work was done. All of us tenants and vassals who owed him service—a day or two here, a week there—were treated like blood kin whenever we set foot on the steading to honour our pledge of work. In return, he gave neither man nor maid worse than he'd accept for himself or his house, and that's a right rare thane, that is. Show me another as decent and honest, and I'll drink a health to him here and now.

Not like these Norman vermin—call them what you like: Franks, Ffreinc, or Normans, they're all the same. Lords of the Earth, they trow. Lords of Perdition, more like. Hold themselves precious as stardust and fine as diamonds. Dressed in their gold-crusted rags, they flounce about the land, their bloody minds scheming mischief all the while. From the moment a Norman noble opens his eye on the day until that same eye closes at night, the highborn Frankish man is, in Aelred's words, “a walking *scittesturm*” for anyone unlucky enough to cross his path.

A Norman knight lives only for hunting and whoring, preening and warring. And their toad-licking priests are just as bad. Even the best of their clerics are no better than they should be. I wouldn't spare the contents of my nose on a rainy day to save the lot of them . . .

Sorry, Odo, but that is God's own truth, groan as you will to hear it. Write it down all the same.

“If it please you, what is *scittesturm*?” Odo wants to know.

“Ask a Saxon,” I tell him. “If bloody Baron de Braose hasn't killed them all yet, you'll learn quick enough.”

But there we are. Aelred is gone now. He had the great misfortune to believe the land his father had given him—land owned and worked by his father's father, and the father's father before that—belonged to him and his forever. A dangerous delusion, as it turns out.

For when William the Conqueror snatched the throne of England and made himself the Law of the Land, he set to work uprooting the deep-grown offices and traditions

that time and the stump-solid Saxons had planted and maintained since their arrival on these fair shores—offices and traditions which bound lord and vassal in a lockstep dance of loyalty and service, sure, but also kept the high and mighty above from devouring the weak and poorly below. This was the bedrock of Saxon law, just and good, enforcing fairness for all who sheltered under it. Like the strong timber roof of Great Alfred's hall, we all found shelter under it however hard the gales of power and privilege might blow.

The thanes—freeholders mostly, men who were neither entirely noble nor completely common . . . Willy Conqueror did not understand them at all. Never did, nor bothered to. See now, a Norman knows only two kinds of men: nobles and serfs. To a Norman, a man is either a king or a peasant, nothing else. There is black and there is white, and there is the end of it. Consequently, there is no one to stand between the two to keep them from each other's throats.

The Welshmen laugh at both camps, I know. The British have their nobility, too, but British kings and princes share the same life as the people they rule. A lord might be more esteemed by virtue of his deeds or other merits, real or imagined, but a true British prince is not too lofty to feel the pinch when drought makes a harvest thin, or a hard winter gnaws through all the provisions double-quick.

The British king will gladly drink from the same clay cup as the least of his folk, and can recite the names of each and every one of his tribesmen to the third or fourth generation. In this, King Raven was no less than the best example of his kind, and I'll wager Baron de Braose has never laid eyes on most of the wretches whose sweat and blood keep him in hunting hawks and satin breeches.

Like all Norman barons, de Braose surveys his lands from the back of a great destrier—a giant with four hooves that eats more in a day than any ten of his serfs can scrape together for the week. His knights and *vavasors*—hateful word—spill more in a night's roister than any hovel-dweller on his estate will see from Christmas Eve to Easter morn, and that's if they're lucky to see a drop o' anything cheerful at all.

Well, de Braose may never have shaken hands with one of his serfs, but he knows how much the man owes in taxes to the nearest ha'penny. That's a kind of talent, I suppose, give him that.

I give him also his shrewd, calculating mind and a farsighted sense of self-preservation. He could see, or maybe smell, the right way to jump a long way off. The old goat rarely put a foot wrong where his own vital interests were concerned. The king liked him, too, though I can't think why. Still and all, royal favour never hurts a'body while it lasts. Making it last: aye, there's the grit in the loaf.

So, when William the Conquering Bastard got himself killed in a little foray in France—took an arrow, they say, just like poor King Harold—*that* upset the apple cart, no mistake. And Thane Aelred was one of those ruddy English pippins as got bounced from the box.

Aye, heads rolled everywhere before the dust settled on that one. Stout Aelred's lands were confiscated, and the good man himself banished from the realm. All of us

vassals were turned out, thrown off the land by the king's stinking sheriff and his bailiffs; our village was burned to the last house and pigsty. Aelred's holding was returned to forest and placed under Forest Law, devil's work.

Most of us, myself included, lingered in the area awhile. We had nowhere else to go, and no provision made for us. For, like the others in Aelred's keep, I was born on his lands, and my father served his father as I served him. The Scatlockes have been vassals ever and always, never lords . . .

Yes, Odo, that is my real name—William Scatlocke," I pause to explain. "Y'see, it's just some folk have it hard with such a ragged scrap between their teeth, and *Scarlet* has a finer sound."

"I agree," says he.

"Splendid," I tell him. "I will sleep so much better for knowing that. Now, where was I?"

Odo scans what he has written, and says, ". . . you were telling about Forest Law. You called it the devil's work."

Aye, and so it is. Forest Law—two perfectly honest and upright words as ever was, but placed together they make a mad raving monster. See now, under Forest Law the crown takes a piece of land useful and needful for all folk in common and at a stroke turns it into a private hunting park forever closed to common folk for any purpose whatsoever. Forest Law turns any land into king's land, to be used by royals only, them and their fortune-favoured friends. The keep of these so-called parks is given to agents of the crown known as sheriffs, who rule with a noose in one hand and a flamin' hot castration iron in the other for anyone who might happen to trespass however lightly on the royal preserve.

Truly, merely setting foot in a royal forest can get you maimed or blinded. Taking a single deer or pig to feed your starving children can get you hung at the crossroads alongside evil outlaws who have burned entire villages and slaughtered whole families in their sleep. A petty thing, hardly worth a morning's sweat, as it may be. Yes, that dark-eyed deer with the fine brown pelt and tasty haunches is worth more than any fifty or a hundred vassals, be they serfs or freemen, and there's a fact.

Forest Law is what happened to Thane Aelred's lands—hall, barn, sty, granary, milkhouse, and mill all burned to the last stick and stake, and the ashes ploughed under. The age-old boundary stones were pulled up, and the hides taken off the registry books, and the whole great lot joined up to the lands of other English estates to be declared king's forest. Aelred himself was hauled away in chains, leaving his poor lady wife to make her way as best she could. I heard later he and his were dumped aboard a ship bound for Daneland with other miserable exiles, but I never really knew for sure. The rest of his folk were turned out that same day and herded off the property at the point of long Norman spears.

Those of us without friends or relations we might flee to for aid and comfort took to the greenwood. We aimed to live off the land in spite of the threat of death hanging

over us if we were caught. As one of Aelred's foresters this was no great hardship for me, but others who were not used to such stark conditions suffered mightily. Cold and fever took a heavy toll, and the sheriff's men took more. They killed us whenever they could, and chased us always.

It was no kind of life, Odo lad, let me tell you." He glances up with his big dreamy eyes, his soft mouth caught in a half smile. "You would not last above three days."

"I might be stronger than I look," says he.

"And looks are ever deceiving," I reply, and we go on . . .

Eventually, with winter coming on and the sheriff and his men growing wise to our ways, the few of us that had survived those many months broke company and drifted off to other parts. Some went north where the Harrowing had desolated the land; in those empty parts it was said honest folk might begin again. Trouble there was that too many dishonest folk had gathered up there, too, and it was fast becoming a killing ground of another kind.

Me, I decided to go west, to Wales—to Wallia, land of my mother's birth.

I'd always wanted to see it, mind, but there was more to it than whim. For I had heard a tale that stirred my blood. A man, they said, had risen in defiance of the Norman overlords, a man who flew in the face of certain death to challenge King William himself, a man they called King Raven.

CHAPTER 3

Lundein

Cardinal Ranulf de Bayeux stepped from the small, flat-bottomed boat onto the landing stone set into the soft shore of the River Thames. The rank brown water was awash in dung and garbage, awaiting the estuary tide to rise and bear it away. Pressing the cloth of his wide sleeve against his nose, he motioned impatiently to his companions as they clambered from the boat.

Two men-at-arms had travelled down to Lundein with the cardinal and they followed his lead, remaining a few paces behind, the red pennants atop their spears fluttering in the breeze. Clutching the skirts of his scarlet satin robe to avoid the mud, Ranulf tiptoed up the embankment to the wooden walkway that led to the city street and passed the walls of the White Tower. The new stone of that magnificent fortress glowed in the full light of a warm sun, a blazing milky brilliance against the yellow leaves and dazzling blue autumn sky.

King William had returned from Normandie two days previous and had summoned his chief advisor straightaway—no doubt to review the accounts which Ranulf carried in a velvet pouch beneath his arm. It had been a good year, all things considered. The treasury was showing a small surplus, for a change, so Ranulf was to be congratulated. Thanks to his tirelessly inventive mind, the king would have money to pay his bribes and his troops, with a little more besides.

Oh, but it was becoming ever more difficult. The people were taxed to the teeth, the nobles likewise, and the chorus of grumbling was becoming a deafening din from some quarters, which is why Ranulf—a man of the cloth, after all—could no longer travel about the land alone, but went with an armed escort to protect him from any who felt themselves particularly aggrieved by his efforts on the king's behalf.

William, of course, was ultimately to blame for the resentment festering throughout his realm. It was not that the king was a spendthrift. Common opinion to the contrary, William the Red was no more wastrel than his father—a man who lived well, to be sure, although far less so than many of his barons—but war was a costly business: much expenditure for piddling little gain. Even when William won the conflict, which he usually did, he almost always came away the poorer for it. And the warring was incessant. If it wasn't the Scots, it was the Bretons; and if not foreign troublemakers it was his own brothers, Prince Henry and Duke Robert, fomenting rebellion.

Yet today, if only for today, the news from the treasury would please the king, and Ranulf was eager to share this good news and advance another step towards reaping a substantial reward for himself—the lucrative bishopric of Duresme, perhaps, which was empty now owing to the death of the previous incumbent.

Cardinal de Bayeux and his escort passed through the wide and handsome gate with but a nod to the porter. They quickly crossed the yard where the king's baggage train still waited to be unloaded. Ranulf dismissed his soldiers and commanded them to

remain ready outside, then entered the tower and climbed the stairs to the antechamber above, where he was admitted by the steward and informed that the king was at table and awaiting his arrival.

Entering silently, Ranulf took one look at his royal patron and read the king's disposition instantly. "His Majesty is displeased," declared Cardinal Ranulf from the doorway. He made a small bow and smoothed the front of his satin robe.

"Displeased?" wondered William, beckoning him in with a wave of his hand. "Why would you say displeased? Hmm?" Rising from his chair, the king began to pace along the length of the table where he had lately enjoyed a repast with his vavasours. The king's companions had gone, or been sent away, and William was alone.

"Why, indeed?" said the king, without waiting for Ranulf's reply. "My dear brother, Robert, threatens war if I do not capitulate to his ridiculous whims . . . my barons find ever more brazen excuses to reduce their tributes and taxes . . . my subjects are increasingly rebellious to my rule and rude to my person!"

The king turned on his chief counsellor and waved a parchment like a flag. "And now this!"

"Ill tidings, *mon roi*?"

"By the holy face of Lucca!" William shouted. "Is there no end to this man's demands?"

"Which man, Sire, if you please?" Ranulf moved a few paces into the room.

"This jackanapes of a pope!" roared the king. "This Urban—he says Canterbury has been vacant too long and insists we invest an archbishop at once."

"Ignore him, Sire," suggested Ranulf.

"Oh, but that is not the end of his impudence," continued the king without pausing to draw breath. "Far from it! He demands not only my seal on a letter of endorsement, but a public demonstration of my support as well."

"Which, as we have often discussed, you are understandably loath to give," sympathised the cardinal, stifling a yawn.

"Blast his eyes! I am loath to give him so much as the contents of my bowels." William, his ruddy cheeks blushing hot with anger, threw a finger in his counsellor's face. "God help me if I ever suffer one of his lick-spit legates to set foot in my kingdom. I'll boil the beggar in his own blood, and if Urban persists in these demands, I will throw my support to Clement—I swear I will."

"Tell him so," suggested Ranulf simply. "That is what the Conqueror would have done—and did, often enough."

"There! There you say it, by Judas!" crowed William. "My father had no illusions about who should rule the church in his kingdom. He would not suffer any priest to stick his nose into royal affairs."