

THE
CONCISE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE

The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature

BY
GEORGE SAMPSON



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PREFACE

This book is based on the fourteen volumes of *The Cambridge History of English Literature*. Each chapter (except the last) takes for its subject-matter the volume that bears its title, and reference to the parent work is therefore easy. Paragraphs and sentences in their original form have been incorporated into the narrative when such treatment seemed desirable and practicable. Naturally, much that appeared in the large-scale *History* finds no place in the present limited survey. The matter most generally left undiscussed is that relating to sources and foreign affiliations. In a first sketch this is not important. The reader must begin to know famous books themselves before he begins to acquire information about their supposed ancestry. The assumption that, in any region of literature, we should begin at "the beginning" is quite wrong, if only because we do not know where or what the beginning is. We should begin at the end—our end. Thus, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is our end of several old stories, and we must know *Hamlet* itself before we can examine theories about it. The frequent practice of lecturing pupils, still children in experience, on such vast abstractions as "the Epic", "the Drama", "the Novel" is bad, both as a method of education and as an approach to literature. Many ill-founded judgments in criticism can be traced to the effect of generalities upon minds unprepared by particulars. The whole process is literally preposterous and creates a body of readers predisposed to superstition—readers, for instance, who accept easy generalizations about "the Victorian period", without reflecting that the long stretch of time between *Oliver Twist* and *Three Plays for Puritans* contains as many different periods as the similar stretch of time between Dekker's *Wonderful Year* and Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis*; or readers who accept quasi-scientific definitions and theories of what is, and what is not, literature, without reflecting that though Dickens could no more have written *A Sportsman's Sketches* than Turgenev could have written *Pickwick*, the plain human, historical fact is that we want both. There is always an appeal from criticism to history, which is the record, not of suppositions, but of achievements. The main purpose of this volume, therefore, is to exhibit "the progress of poesy" as something that really happened and interested many generations. The book does not offer a collection of opinions that a reader can take over ready-made. It is a guide to reading, not a substitute for reading. It represents, in the main, the general consensus of opinion. No one is required to accept without question the general consensus of opinion—indeed, every book must be reinterpreted by ourselves for ourselves; but if

we are unable to accept the common view we should consider carefully whether the fault is in the general opinion or in ourselves. Literature can instruct only as it delights. If a book does not delight us, we must honestly recognize the fact and make no pretences; but we should not assume that there is some special merit in a disability. The fame of great books has been honestly won, and indignant rejection of it as a conspiracy of humbug proves either that we are insensitive to certain kinds of appeal or that our minds are narrowly provincial. Nothing else is proved. History will help us—if we are willing to be helped, and are not consumed by the lust of dissidence and the vanity of cleverness.

The disposition of matter in this volume is that of the original *History*, in which the treatment is sometimes chronological, sometimes topical and sometimes personal. The major authors are usually discussed fully at once; but a lesser writer may be considered in one place as a dramatist, in another as a poet and in another as an essayist. There is profit rather than loss in this diffusion. The various methods of approach have their natural disadvantages, when pursued exclusively; the use of all has no more disadvantages and offers some compensations.

The writer of an epitome must respect his terms of reference, but he is entitled to move freely within them. He may not transform his matter, but he may add or amend; and so, while this volume presents, in the main, the views of the parent *History*, it includes certain modifications necessitated by the fact that some of the original chapters were written over thirty years ago. In one respect there is a definite change. The *History* refused admission to any writer then living (though one actually got in). The application of this rule, which favoured premature death against longevity, had some curious results. For instance, the Irish literary revival could not be discussed, for its makers were all living, except Synge, who, having died young, appeared as a solitary phenomenon. Some of the original chapters showed, therefore, not a few gaps that needed repair. Further, as the final volume was published as long ago as 1916, an extension of the survey was necessary. Accordingly, the present work attempts a discussion of later authors, including some still alive at the moment of writing, though, as a rule, those born after 1890 are not regarded as having passed into history. But even this rule is not strictly kept. Some of the additions have been made at appropriate places in the original scheme; others have needed a chapter of their own. This supplementary chapter (xv), while seeking mainly to record facts, occasionally ventures into criticism. Current preferences have been noted, but are not always regarded as ultimate valuations. The inclusion of living writers is dangerous, and may be resented, especially by those not included; but a historian

must be prepared to run a few risks. Exclusion should not be interpreted unfavourably. Rigid limits of space compelled the selection of writers who seemed typical of their kind. That the living are sometimes referred to in the past tense means, simply, that they are regarded historically, not that they are regarded as having finished their work.

We have been told that the history of a national literature cannot be written apart from the whole history of the nation, or, indeed, of the continent. That is true; but like most truisms it is not very important. No one can grasp the whole of everything at once, and to attempt too much is a certain way of failure. We learn much about the history of a period in considering the history of its literature. G. M. Young's *The Victorian Age* will help us to understand Victorian literature; but considerable reading in Victorian literature is necessary for an understanding of *The Victorian Age*. Dante cannot be understood without some knowledge of medieval history, theology and cosmology; yes: and one way of learning something about medieval history, theology and cosmology is to read Dante. So we may pursue the study of what people were reading in any period with a reasonable hope of getting to know what kind of people they were and what happened to them.

The present volume is offered to all readers of English. It is not designed solely or even mainly as a text-book for students, though these should find it a useful introduction to more detailed investigation. It is addressed (in the words of the preface to the First Folio) "to the great Variety of Readers", to whom, indeed, all literature belongs. Literature is not "a peculiar" of the professionally literary classes, academic, social or critical. It is not a vested interest, or the concern of cults and coteries. The repudiation of individual responsibility and obligation, so disastrously prevalent in recent years, appears to involve a belief that bright and clever ideas and theories about creative art can be acquired without effort by lazy and unexercised minds. That belief is a delusion. "Something for nothing" is not to be had from any art. Creation is personal and individual. Literature is not a product that mechanically arises from origins, influences and the spirit of the age; it is something that comes out of the heart of a man, who writes because he must, not because he chooses. As it is given, so it must be received. Heart speaks to heart, and we receive just what we give. The history of literature, with its long record of creative events, opens the mind and makes it ready to receive. We live in an age of specialism, when people are required to know more and more about less and less, or to perform an intensively mechanical and uncreative routine. We have conquered space and lost spaciousness. But there is a remedy. The mind can expatiate in history and broaden its range over a wide

field of human achievement. For this remedial liberation of the spirit the history of literature offers rich and ample scope. Literature itself has become the domain of specialists; but the study of literature by devoted scholars must serve the enjoyment of literature by the common reader, or it is labour in vain. Much learning has gone into the volumes represented by the present chapters; and the author, now that his long day's task is done, turns to offer a parting salute of respect to the scholars whose work he has here sought to bring home "to the great Variety of Readers".

G.S.

Hove, Sussex

March, 1941

It is not to be thought of that the Flood
Of British freedom, which to the open Sea
Of the world's praise from dark antiquity
Hath flowed, "with pomp of waters, unwithstood,"
Road by which all might come and go that would,
And bear out freights of worth to foreign lands;
That this most famous Stream in Bogs and Sands
Should perish; and to evil and to good
Be lost for ever. In our Halls is hung
Armoury of the invincible Knights of old:
We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held. In every thing we are sprung
Of Earth's first blood, have titles manifold.

WORDSWORTH, 1807

CHAPTER I

FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO THE CYCLES OF ROMANCE

I. THE BEGINNINGS

The history of a national literature is part of the whole national story; but it is a separable part, for man is older than his songs, and passed through many stages of development before he found his way into the kind of self-expression that we call literature. Nothing definite remains of the songs or stories possessed by the Britons whom Caesar found in southern England, and next to nothing of the literature possessed by the Britons during the centuries of the Roman occupation. Though echoes from Celtic Britain must have lingered in men's minds, English literature begins, at least, by being English.

The earliest forms of English literature, like the earliest forms of other national literatures, have perished. We know nothing whatever of Old English poetry in its rudest shape. The fragments we possess are not those of a literature in the making, for the poets of *Beowulf* and *Widsith*, of *The Ruin* and *The Seafarer* knew what they wished to say, and said it without any trace of struggle for word or form. Whether what survives is the best we have no means of knowing. *Beowulf* comes down to us in a single manuscript. Three other ancient volumes, the Exeter Book, preserved in the Cathedral library at Exeter, the Vercelli Book, strangely washed up out of the wrecks of time into a Lombard haven at Vercelli, and the Junian manuscript given to Oxford by Dujon, a friend of Milton, contain nearly all the rest of the Old English poetry we know. That is to say, if four damaged or precariously preserved old books had gone with the rest into destruction, Old English poetry would have been merely something to guess at.

Our earliest literature has much to do with life and journeys that were a constant struggle against a grim and pitiless element. The shadow of long nights by waters wild with storm or fettered by frost falls darkly upon our first poems. The sea of our forefathers was not a gracious Mediterranean washing with blue water the steps of marble palaces, but an ocean grey and tumultuous beating upon dismal shores and sterile promontories. The very land seems as cruel as the sea. No song of lark or nightingale gladdens life for these shore-dwellers; their loneliness is made more terrible by the scream of sea birds crying about the cliffs or by strange sounds that mingle with

the moan of the wind across the meres. With rude implements they scratch the soil, and, in hope of the harvest, greet the earth in lines like those below, perhaps some of the oldest in our language:

Hal wes þu, folde, fira modor,
beo þu growende on godes faepme;
fodre gefyllled firum to nytte.

Hale be thou Earth, Mother of men!
Fruitful be thou in the arms of the god.
Be filled with thy fruit for the fare-need of man!

II. RUNES AND MANUSCRIPTS

When the aboriginal English still lived by the northern seas they shared with their kindred an alphabet of "runes". We need regard here only the alphabetical value of these symbols and ignore tradition that ultimately made "Runic rhyme" develop into a stock term for mystery or incomprehensibility. The runic alphabet naturally took a form that lent itself easily to rough carving, and certain famous inscriptions upon stone, metal or bone still remain. Each rune had its own name, which was also the name of some familiar thing. Thus the symbol þ, which degenerated into an initial y, was the "thorn."

Runes went out of use in the ninth and tenth centuries. Their place had, however, been usurped long before that period by the Roman alphabet which the English received from the early Irish missionaries. The missionary and the Roman alphabet travelled together, and it was the Christian scribe who first wrote down what heathen memories had preserved. A school of Roman handwriting was established in the south of England by Augustine and his missionaries; but its existence was brief, and little evidence of its activity survives. The most powerful influence came from Ireland, to which manuscripts in the Roman "half-uncial" hand had been brought by missionaries perhaps in the fifth century. When Northumbria was Christianized by the Irish, the preachers taught their disciples to write the Word in characters more pleasing to God than the runes of heathendom. Thus the English learnt the exquisite penmanship of the Irish and were soon able to give such striking evidence of their skill as the magnificent *Lindisfarne Gospels* of about 700, in the rounded half-uncial.

After the Conquest the native hand disappeared, the only traces left being a few characters to express peculiarly English sounds, *ƿ* (wynn) and *þ* (thorn), and the later symbols *ȝ* (yok) and *ð* (eth). The *ƿ* was replaced in the thirteenth century by *w*, and disappeared; the French *qu* replaced *cp*. The two signs *þ* and *ð* were interchangeable and represented the two sounds of *th*. Of these the first long survived

(later in the form of initial *y*) and is still met with in the semi-humorous archaism "ye" for "the". The symbol *ȝ* (a form of *z*) was variously used. It stood for *z*, for *y* in *ȝeer* (year) and *daze* (day), and in such forms as *knizt* and *rouȝ* represented the Old English *h* (*gh*), in *cniht* and *ruh*.

The writing materials of medieval England included the old *boc* or wooden tablet, coated with wax, and written upon with a style of bone or metal. Parchment and vellum were used for writings meant to endure. The scribes were monks or nuns who wrote with truly religious patience in the chilly cloisters or the cells of the monasteries, only the fortunate few having a special *scriptorium* or writing room for their task. Gradually, however, a professional class of scribes came into existence, working either for, or actually in, the monasteries.

Specimens of the manuscripts and of some of the literature discussed in Chapter I of this volume will be found in *The Cambridge Book of Prose and Verse: From the Beginnings to the Cycles of Romance*.

III. EARLY NATIONAL POETRY

The first English poet known to us by name (or nickname) is "Widsith", the "Wide Wanderer", a *scop* or itinerant minstrel of the sixth century, who gives us glimpses of his own life in a poem of about 150 lines (Exeter Book). The many allusions in *Widsith* are as puzzling to us as a catalogue of names from some ancient gazetteer or genealogy, and arouse no emotion higher than an impulse towards research; but they had each a thrill for the primitive hearers. What the modern reader catches in *Widsith* is a glimpse of a poet's joy and grief appealing humanly across the centuries.

Deor's Lament (Exeter Book), a poem unique in its time for a strophic form with a constant refrain, "*pæs ofereode : pisses swa maeg*", "That was lived through, so can this be", is a song of the poet's own misfortunes, illustrated by the equally hard lot of others who once were happy. *Deor* has a lyric note.

The Wanderer (Exeter Book), a moving elegy of 115 lines, is the lament of a man who has lost his protecting lord, and wanders over the waters to find a resting place. In dreams his vanished happiness shines on him again, but day brings back the grey sea and the driving snow and the desolation of the earth. *The Seafarer* (Exeter Book) is usually read as a dialogue between an old man who knows the joyless life of the sea and a young man who will not be deterred from maritime adventure by the melancholy tale of the old seaman. But it may be the monologue of a man who, hating the hardships and cruelty of the sea, knows that for him there is no other life. Such men can be found in every port to-day.

Among the fragmentary poems in the Exeter Book there is one short piece commonly called *The Ruin*, remarkable because it takes us away from the sea and describes the downfall of some great palace or rich city—possibly Bath. The imperfection of the Exeter manuscript makes this poem difficult to read and adds to the obscurity of other short pieces like *The Wife's Complaint* and *The Husband's Message*.

The fullest revelation of the hard, heroic and joyless lives led by our old English forefathers is to be found in *Beowulf*, a narrative poem of 3183 lines transmitted in a tenth-twelfth century manuscript, now safely preserved in the British Museum after many damaging adventures. Like the epics of Homer, *Beowulf* has been subjected to a close critical examination that has produced almost as many opinions as there have been critics. Some hold that its home is the Baltic shore, and that it was brought to England by the invading Northmen. Others designate England as the place of composition and the Yorkshire coast as the scene of the story. The fact should be noted that, not only in *Beowulf*, but in all our early national poetry, the allusions are Continental or Scandinavian: no reference can be found to persons who are known to have lived in Britain. There is general agreement that the West Saxon dialect in which *Beowulf* now exists is not that in which it was originally composed, and that the lays out of which it was fashioned belong to pre-Christian times, although in its present form it contains many passages of distinctly Christian character. What may be called the "stuff" of *Beowulf* is essentially heathen; the sentiment and reflections are Christian. The mixture indicates that the poem is a heathen legend which received its present expression from a Christian poet. The resemblance between the deeds of *Beowulf* and those of other heroes do not point to imitation, but rather to the tendency of primitive heroes to become each the centre of stock adventures. Naturally, few heroes in any early romance have escaped a combat with a monster. The story of *Beowulf* is so generally familiar that it need not be told here. The poem is interesting both as a heroic lay and as a national document. It is the earliest, as it is the finest, of the northern hero-poems, and in places it attains a very moving quality. The song of the fight at Finnsburh, the description of the monster-haunted mere, and the story of *Beowulf's* death and burial have the note of great literature. The poem gives us glimpses of the communal life of our ancestors in the hall of their lord, and tells of the emotions that moved them. They were brave; but they were terror-haunted. Against the beasts they could fight; against the dim, impalpable unknown they were helpless. The long nights of the northern winter harrowed them with fear and wonder. The Homeric heroes are the playthings of the gods; but their life is more joyous than that of the Wyrd-haunted heroes in the hall of Hrothgar. Perhaps because it has no sense of joy or light