MACMILLAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

Michael Alexander

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For notes on the plates see page 240.

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Editor's Preface

THE study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote? What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time, or developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expression? Are there interactions between literature and the art, music or architecture of its period? Was the writer affected by contemporaries or isolated?

Such questions stress the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts, to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology, of action and reaction, and of the varying relationships between writers and society.

Histories of literature can encourage students to make comparisons, can aid in understanding the purposes of individual authors and in assessing the totality of their achievements. Their development can be better understood and appreciated with some knowledge of the background of their time. And histories of literature, apart from their valuable function as reference books, can demonstrate the great wealth of writing in English that there is to be enjoyed. They can guide the reader who wishes to explore it more fully and to gain in the process deeper insights into the rich diversity not only of literature but of human life itself.

A. NORMAN JEFFARES

For Arthur and Diana Cooper
at Haregrove

Preface

THE literature of the Anglo-Saxons has not always been included in histories of English literature, because Old English, the language in which it is written, cannot be read today but has to be learned. Likewise, the ethos of Anglo-Saxon culture between the seventh and the eleventh centuries, although it has strong elements of Christianity and some classical culture, differs considerably from that of the high and late middle ages; familiarity with it has, like the language, to be acquired. Yet this literature, language and culture are of the greatest interest, not only as ancestral to our own, but intrinsically.

To most of us the dark ages are dark not because we feel confident of our superior enlightenment but because we know so little about them. Ignorance should not lead us to condescend to the men who produced the Sutton Hoo treasure, the Lindisfarne Gospels, *Beowulf*, the poetic Elegies or *The Dream of the Rood*. Nor can we neglect the story told in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: the foundation and defence of a Christian kingdom, of which the survival of the Alfred Jewel (see plates) is an emblem. Most students of the matter recognise that the civilised ways and arts of the Anglo-Saxons were superior, except in war, administration and architecture, to those of the Normans.

This book hopes to remove one reason for the neglect of Anglo-Saxon England by a simple historical presentation of the main elements in Anglo-Saxon literature, and especially its poetry, in translation. Although its intentions are scholarly, this history of Old English literature is also an illustrative introduction, assuming little knowledge of this period or its surviving products and none of its language. Literary history should be reasonably inclusive, but in this field even specialist studies have to proceed without the usual dense grid of

authors, titles, dates and places. In the present volume, writings without literary interest which happen to have survived, such as charms, wills and recipes, are not discussed. The emphasis falls less upon history than on literature, taken as a qualitative rather than merely a descriptive term.

Most of the learned literature of the Anglo-Saxons was, naturally, written in Latin, the language of literacy and of the Church. While such writings in the international language are part of the story, this account focuses on the vernacular, and particularly upon Old English verse, which is of greater artistic interest than the prose, and owes less to Latin. The bulk of Old English literary prose consists of sermons and lives of the saints, which gave precious example to the Anglo-Saxons, both to the monks who wrote the manuscripts and to their patrons. The monks who brought letters and learning as well as Christianity to the English themselves contributed much to the poetry of the native tradition. One of the pleasures of writing this book has been to discover the extent of the variety and interest of Old English religious verse.

I should like to record my gratitude to predecessors more learned than I, especially Margaret Williams, W. P. Ker, J. R. R. Tolkien, R. W. Chambers, C. L. Wrenn, Barbara Raw, Stanley B. Greenfield, T. A. Shippey and C. W. Kennedy, together with the translators, editors and scholars listed in the bibliography. I would like to thank my admired colleague Mrs Felicity Riddy for having generously read much of the manuscript at a busy time; her suggestions have improved it. I am also much obliged to the Editor of this series, Professor A. N. Jeffares, for his editorial faith and vigilance; and to Elspeth McLellan, Katherine McKenzie, Olwen Peel and Mamie Prentice for their much tried reading and typing skills. Last but not least, my wife, who has rescued me from various follies, deserves more gratitude than I am able to express.

M. J. Alexander
Stirling
January 1982

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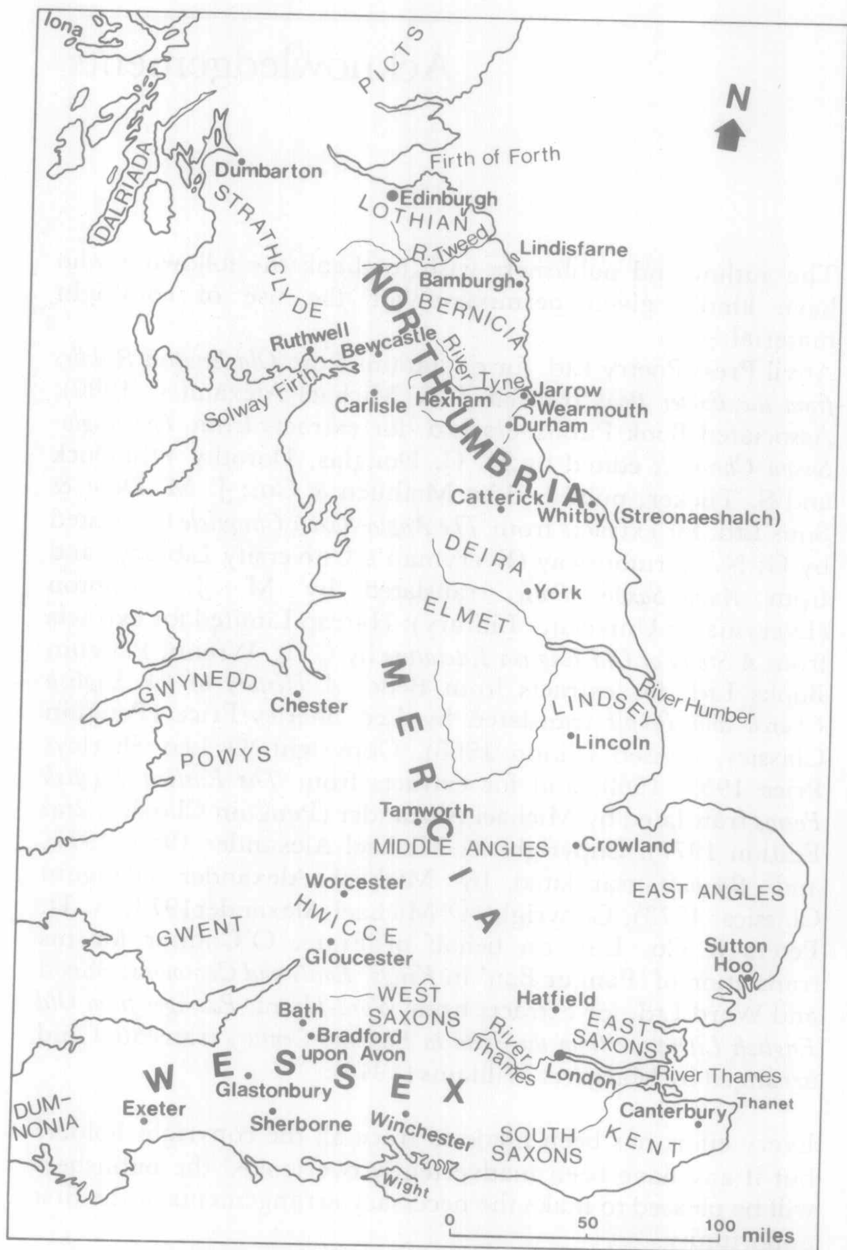
Mrs Mary Smith of the University of Stirling drew the maps.



Anglo-Saxon Britain to 871

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Anglo-Saxon England: Alfred and After

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1
Perspectives

I What has survived

IF literary criticism is concerned with texts, literary history with contexts, Old English poetry has very little history. There is much difficulty in documenting the context of an Old English poetic text. The prose, by contrast, presents less of a problem: prose texts can often be dated, located, even attributed to a specific author, including such well-known figures from Anglo-Saxon history as King Alfred and the leaders of the Benedictine Revival of the late tenth century such as Aelfric and Wulfstan. In his *Martyrdom of Saint Edmund*, for instance, Aelfric tells us that he is translating the account of a named monk of the abbey of Fleury (in France), who had it from St Dunstan, the Archbishop of Canterbury; who had it from King Athelstan; who had it from Edmund's swordbearer, a witness of the events. Where such precise claims or indications are missing, there is often comparative material, especially for homilies and saints' lives. For documentary prose, such as historical records, the context can be clear, as with charters and wills, or ascertainable, as with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.* Old English prose writing was called into being by King Alfred as an act of policy to fill the gap caused by the Viking destruction of the Latin culture of the kingdoms north of the Thames (see pp xiv and xv). In the first place most Old English prose consisted of translations or adaptations from Latin. Most of the rest had an explicitly stated practical purpose, as in the case of the most celebrated piece of Old English prose, King Alfred's Preface to the *Pastoral Care* of Gregory the Great. Among the many things Alfred writes to the bishop of Worcester, for example, is that he does not think that when he came to the throne (in 871) there was a single man living south of the Thames who could read Latin. This sort of precise and positive information is not to be found in

Old English poetry, even in the late poems on the historical battles of Brunanburgh and Maldon. Both these poems conceive and relate their subjects according to ancient conventions of battle poetry in which the essential ethos of 'the glory-trial' is more real than documentary actualities. There may be more in common between *The Battle of Maldon*, composed some time after the battle in 991, and Aneirin's *Y Gododdin*, composed in the language of the defeated Britons some time before 600, than there is between the poetic version of the battle of Maldon and the prose entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This records that after the defeat it was agreed to pay the Vikings tribute; whereas the emphasis of the poem *The Battle of Maldon* falls upon the heroic conduct of the East Saxon warriors after their lord's death. So deeply rooted was the warrior ethos expressed in such poetry that the ideals inspiring the East Saxons at Maldon, though they have a Christian colouring, can be as well understood from the account of Germanic heroism in Tacitus' *Germania*, written in the first century AD, as from contemporary Old English prose.

Old English verse survives patchily. There are only 30,000 lines of it extant, nearly all of which are to be found in four manuscripts written towards the year 1000 in the late West Saxon dialect. These are the *Beowulf* manuscript, the Exeter Book, the Vercelli Book and the Junius Book. An examination of the language of the poems suggests that in most cases they had been composed not in Wessex but to the north of the Thames, in the quite different Anglian dialects of Mercia or Northumbria one, two or three centuries earlier, and were copied at least once before they reached their present form. Only four of these poems are signed, those by Cynewulf, a person not otherwise known to us. We also have Caedmon's *Hymn*, of nine lines, and Bede's *Death Song*, of five lines. All other poems are anonymous. Most survive in unique copies; where there are two or three copies, texts differ considerably.

We do not, therefore, know when most Old English poems were composed, nor where, nor by whom. Contexts cannot be established, even for the two most studied groups of poems, the heroic poems and the elegies. We are on firmer ground with the religious poetry, since more of it survives; and in the poems of Cynewulf and the poems formerly attributed to Caedmon, we can make comparisons within groups of poems clearly related to each other, to Latin originals, and to periods

and areas if not to dates and places. But the shortage of poems comparable with *Beowulf* is limiting. It is certain that there was a tradition of heroic poetry, of which *Beowulf* is the sole surviving substantial early example. Perhaps heroic poems of the heathen period were not often written down. Certainly there was much Old English poetry by clerics which has not survived; both Bede and Aldhelm were noted poets in their mother tongue, but of their work only the five lines of Bede survive (as against a large number of copies of his and Aldhelm's various Latin prose works). Even Caedmon, the unlettered layman who was the first to use the old Germanic alliterative verse for Christian themes, is no longer thought of as the author of the four poems which used to be ascribed to him. If the vernacular works of such revered figures did not survive, what chance of being recorded was there for works less obviously conducive to salvation? The ravages of the Norsemen destroyed many libraries, and during the centuries after the Norman Conquest surviving Old English manuscripts became unintelligible and apparently valueless. The Dissolution of the Monasteries saw merry scenes of the burning of useless monastic books by the agents of the Defender of the Faith. The dangers of accidental destruction and loss are illustrated by the disappearance of the manuscripts of *The Battle of Maldon* and *Finnsburgh* since the eighteenth century, when they had already been considered valuable enough to have been copied. Of the four major old English poetic manuscripts that survive, two are scarred by fire and one has been at Vercelli in Italy since the thirteenth century. Of the three remaining versions and part-versions of *The Dream of the Rood*, none is now in England. The Exeter Book itself, containing the best of the poetry outside *Beowulf*, has a serious burn-mark where a brand or poker rested on its back. This damage may have been accidental; but the manuscript has also been used as a cutting-board and as a beer-mat.

II Songs and scribes

The absence of a detailed historical context for Old English poetry is the result not only of the destruction and dispersal of manuscripts but also of the double distance between the profession of scribe and the old heroic poetry. The scribe's

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