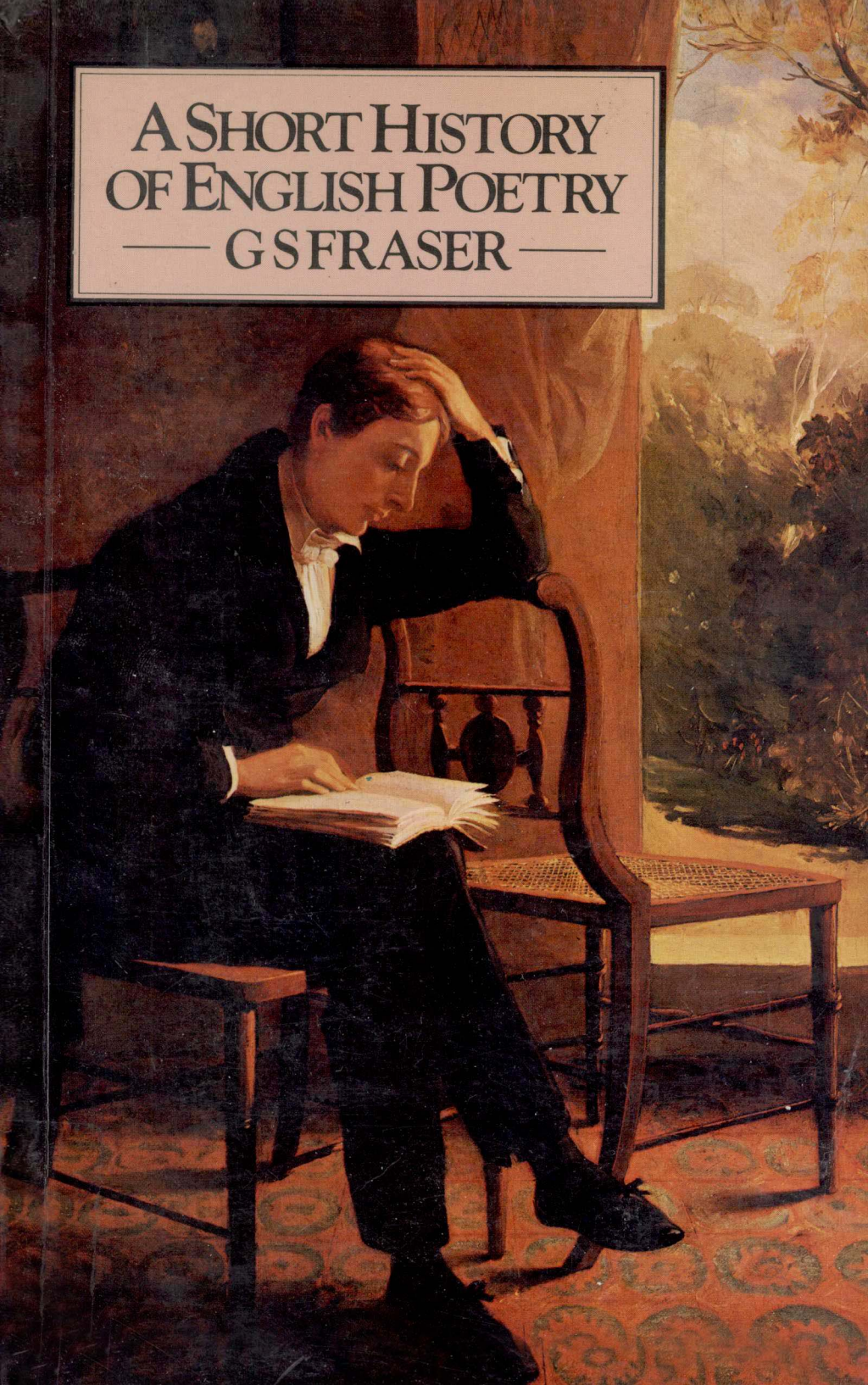
A Short History of English Poetry

G S Fraser



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Old English Poetry

I Epic Poetry

English is not of course the only language in which poetry has been written or orally composed in Great Britain and Ireland, nor is it the earliest. The Irish, for instance, were composing epic stories dealing with a past several centuries remote from them in the first century A.D. There was a class of Irish learned men, the *file*, who made it their task in life to preserve ancient stories; the most distinguished kind of *file*, the *ollamh*, was master of 250 major narratives and 100 minor ones. Ireland also developed very early lyrical nature poems of great beauty. The Welsh also developed heroic poems early, of which one of the most striking is the sixth century Aneirin's *Y Gododdin*, about a Welsh expedition from Edinburgh to Catterick to do battle with the Saxons. The Welsh are defeated. There is another celebration of heroic defeat in the much later Old English *Battle of Maldon* (which can be dated by the battle itself, recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as taking place in 991 A.D.) it is the good, the English defending themselves against Viking raiders, who are defeated.

The whole period of European history between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the beginnings of medieval civilization is sometimes called the age of migrations or folk-wanderings, sometimes the heroic age. It has, among the Germanic peoples, of whom we are one, two main characteristics: a loyalty of the retainer to his lord, which outweighs loyalty to kindred, to what we would call country (the loyalty was rather to the King's great hall, like Hroth-

gar's Heorot in *Beowulf*, and to the gifts and feasts with which it was associated); and a stoical acceptance of final defeat and death, as the lot of all men. The Old English poetry that survives is (except, sometimes, in matters like the blood feud) Christian in spirit. But it is nevertheless profoundly melancholy, and that note of melancholy, but with defiant bravery, has been a feature of English poetry ever since.

From Michael Alexander's splendid translation of *The Battle of Maldon*, I quote two short passages. One expresses that desire to avenge blood with blood which Christianity, at that early stage, was unable to eradicate:

> 'A man cannot linger when his lord lies
> unavenged among Vikings, cannot value breath'.

The second passage, adapted effectively by Auden in one of the odes at the end of his early work, *The Orators*, expresses the spirit of stoicism I have spoken of and also the passionate devotion of the retainer to his lord:

> 'Courage shall grow keener, clearer the will,
> the heart fiercer, as our force faileth.
> Here our lord lies levelled in the dust,
> the man all marred: he shall mourn to the end
> who thinks to wend off from this war-play now.
> Though I am white with winters I shall not away,
> for I think to lodge me alongside my dear one,
> lay me down by my lord's right hand.'

Alfred the Great, King of Wessex 871–99, called the language in which he wrote *Englisc* and the country which he was striving to unite *Englaland*, or the land of the Angles. The term *lingua Saxonica* was also used and the language of our oldest poetry is sometimes called Old English, sometimes Anglo-Saxon. I prefer the first term, because it emphasises continuity. For instance, the metre of Michael Alexander's rendering is likely to strike most readers as easy and pleasant to read but not the metre they are most accustomed to, the metre of the five-foot stress syllable line, say, of one of Shakespeare's most famous sonnets:

> Shall Í/compaŕe/thee tó/a súm/mer's dáy?
> Thou aŕt/more loṽe/ly anḋ/more teṁp/eraŕe

These lines have five two-syllable feet each, of which the second syllable has a stronger stress than the first. An Old English line has four main stresses, and a necessary very sharp division in the middle (it consists, that is, of two two-stress half-lines). The half-lines are linked by alliteration. Either one or both of the syllables in the first half-line that have the strongest sense-stress must alliterate with the first (but *never* with the second) syllable of main stress in the second half-line: to illustrate:

Coúrage shall grow kéener : cleárer the will . . .

Lay me down by my : lord's right hand . . .

This seems alien to our own way of writing verse (though a number of modern poets, like Auden in *The Age of Anxiety*, have attempted to revive stress metre; and Eliot uses isolated half-lines very beautifully in *Ash Wednesday*) and yet it can still be felt to underlie the stress-syllable foot measure which we borrowed from the Italians and French. Thus, if I read aloud the two famous lines of Shakespeare's I have quoted, nobody will feel anything odd about it:

Shall I compáre thée: to a súmmer's dáy?
Thou art móre lóve: ly and moře teḿperate

People may feel, even, that this reading is nearer to what one might call the rhythm of the sense. Certainly, when Shakespeare is well acted on the stage we tend, at least with our conscious ears, to be aware of four strong sense-stresses rather than five metrical stresses of varying strength: not

I coḿe/ to búr/ y Caés/ ar, noť to praíse (him)

but

I come to búry Cáesar: nót to práise him

It is perhaps the play of the Old English stress-metre, so close to the natural rhythm of our speech, against the exquisite but artificial patterning of the stress-syllable foot metre (natural to Romance languages, like Italian, one of Chaucer's sources for perfecting it in English) that gives

English verse at its best its peculiar combination of grace and strength, harsh impact and supple, sweet or smooth flexibility. There is, certainly, a surprising sense in which, unless we are familiar with Old English alliterative stress verse and its survival into the later Middle Ages (into Langland's *Piers Plowman*, for instance), we cannot appreciate fully verse divided into metrical feet. (Michael Alexander points out, what is not always noticed, that the stress pattern in Old English verse is much more important for the total effect than for the alliteration.)

Old English was the language of the Germanic peoples of this island for about 700 years. They came originally in small groups, independently, settling here and there where the ground was convenient, often in fertile river valleys, and only began to establish themselves into kingdoms and to drive the Welsh to the west after defeating them at the great battle of *Mons Badonicus* (c. 500) (the Romano-British leader may have been one of the sources of King Arthur). They were West Germans, to be distinguished both from the fierce Vikings of the North and the East Germans who turned their ambitions towards Italy, Spain, France, and North Africa. Though the different groups of these invading Germans (Angles, Saxons and Jutes) differed in dialects and customs, they understood each other as well as Yorkshiremen and Londoners do today.

One king sent home a Frankish bishop because he found it tiresome to converse with him in his Frankish dialect (a variant of German, not an ancestral form of modern French) but at least they could understand each other. After Alfred the dialect of the West Saxons became the one accepted for literary purposes, just as Tuscan is accepted in Italy, Castilian in Spain, or the dialect of educated people in London and the home counties today.

The treasures of the Sutton Hoo burial ship show that even the comparatively obscure kingdom of East Anglia had a rich trade with continental Europe, a splendid tradition of craftsmanship, and carried into the mid-seventh century the heathen custom of the burial of a king in a treasure ship with his riches around him, which is also described at the beginning of *Beowulf*. There survives, however, no mention of human or animal sacrifices.

The old pagan religion of the north lingered on quite long in England but in a manner at once unconfident and tolerant.

There were no Christian martyrs. *Beowulf* is a poem basically Christian in its spirit (the two monsters in the first part of the poem, Grendel and his mother, are accursed because they are descendants of Cain) but giving sometimes almost equal weight to the heathen idea of Wyrd or Weird (as in the Scots phrase 'to dree your weird,' to endure your fate) as to that of God.

The hero, Beowulf the Geat, has a name which means Bear (Bee-Wolf, a Bear is a wolf which likes honey) and in his original folk tale version may have been partly an animal figure. His adventures, triumph over the monster Grendel and Grendel's mother, and a battle with a dragon offended by invasion of its treasure hoard (the simple-minded dragon, with its duty of guarding an ancient hoard in which it takes no pleasure, has a certain pathos lacking to some at least in Grendel and his mother) in which he and the dragon are slain – if his twelve followers and not only the loyal Wiglaf had been brave enough he might have been saved – seem to belong to the wonders of folk tale. Yet Beowulf has the qualities of an epic hero in his dignity in hall, his shrewd reflections on how politic marriages to heal feuds never work, his loyalty to his royal wards, his courtesy, courage, and self-sacrificial readiness to accept a lonely death, he is a no doubt simply outlined but utterly noble and human figure like the great epic hero Hector in the *Iliad*. The story ends nobly with his funeral and burial, with the piling of the dead dragon's treasures round him, and the sad knowledge that (perhaps as God's punishment for the failure of courage in his retainers at the crucial moment) his Geatish Kingdom will come to an end, swept away by the Swedes.

Beowulf is, indeed, a strangely moving poem. Under the outer splendours of courtesy in the hall and Beowulf's strength and courage in single combat, of the giving and graceful acceptance of great gifts, there is the constant warning of the possibility of the degeneration of the noblest and of the treachery that can underlie the warmest professions of loyalty. Hrothgar, the friend of Beowulf's father, a dignified Nestor-like figure, knows that he cannot live for ever. His gracious wife, Wealhtheow, who is presented as essentially an ideal hostess, a bringer of peace and harmony, flatters Hrothgar's nephew, the powerful Hrothulf. When Wealhtheow says

> For may I not count on my gracious Hrothulf to guard honourably
> our young ones here, if you, my lord,
> should give over this world earlier than he? I am sure that he will show to our children
> answerable kindness, if he keeps in remembrance all that we have done to indulge and advance him,
> the honours we bestowed on him when he was still a child!

we know in our bones that Hrothgar's children are doomed. Similarly, after Finn, the East Frisian King, has slain the brother of his half-Dane wife, Hildeburgh, and her son has also been killed in the combat (Hildeburgh burns her brother Hnaef, and her son on the same funeral pyre) Hnaef's successor, Hengest, swears an unwilling truce with Finn:

> But Hengest still,
> as he was constrained to do, stayed with Finn
> a death-darkened winter in dreams of his homeland.

But there are oaths that it is impossible to keep:

> So he did not decline the accustomed remedy
> when the son of Hunlaf set across his knees
> that best of blades, his battle-gleaming sword;
> the Giants were acquainted with the edges of that steel . . .

We are not, in fact, reading a fairy tale. I am not so sure about the dragon, who perhaps belongs there (the sole business of dragons is to guard treasure hoards, and the slave who stole a piece of the dragon's treasure, to placate his master and avoid a flogging, is a cowardly and thoughtless wretch). But Grendel the lonely cannibal and his vile mother – rather like Caliban's mother, the witch Sycorax, 'with age and envy bent into a hoop' – are both real and terrifying in their own right and, as children of Cain, symbols of the treachery of such men as Hrothulf and Finn, of the oath-breaking into which good men like Hengest are led by the need for revenge.

Full of exciting episodes as it is, the three main monster episodes, and the historical episodes brought in by way of

allusive parenthesis, *Beowulf* moves nevertheless with sad deliberate dignity. Its strength is a slow and struggling strength: there is something symbolic of the poem's own grip in the fact that Beowulf is so strong that swords break in his hands (except a giant's sword with which he slays Grendel's mother): he must attack his enemies – as in Hygelac's raid on the Franks, an historical episode – with his bare hands. And in the end all triumph ends in gloomy but resigned meditation, the sense that at least duty has been done: as Wiglaf, the only companion to be worthy of Beowulf, giving orders for logs for the pyre, says:

> 'Now the flames shall grow dark
> and the fire destroy the sustainer of the warriors
> who often endured the iron shower
> when, string-driven, the storm of arrows
> sand over shield-wall, and the shaft did its work
> urged on by its feathers, furthered the arrow-head.'

A poem like *Beowulf* is, like Homer's poetry, made out of formulaic phrases: but where Homer tends to stick to one formula, so that Achilles is always swift-footed, Hector the tamer of horses, and so on, the variation of phrases (*kennings*) in Old English poetry is remarkable. The sea (which haunted these West German people, island dwellers remembering the North Sea and the Baltic) is now the 'swan's path,' now the 'whale's road,' now the 'gannet's bath': phrases aiming perhaps less at vividness than, like the descriptions of armour, helmets, weapons and, above all, golden gifts, at a sense of lavishness. Compared to the swiftness of Homer *Beowulf* moves, perhaps because of the use of alternative descriptions in parallel, interspersed with cryptic allusions to myth and history unfamiliar to us, very slowly indeed; and the purely meditative passages are among the most memorable and most full of slow *gravitas*, which may explain why some critics have found in *Beowulf* strange remembrances of the tone of Virgil's *Aeneid*:

> But to elude death
> is not easy: attempt it who will,
> he shall go to the place prepared for each
> of the sons of men, the soul-bearers
> dwelling on earth, ordained them by fate:

> laid fast in that bed, the body shall sleep
> when the feast is done.

It is, of course, like all epics, an aristocratic poem: it is an objective representation of the true values of life as the retainer loyal to his lord or as the good king understands them, and those values *are* aristocratic: gaiety, courtesy, courage, self-sacrifice. The poem's outlook is also canny and fierce. Michael Alexander drily remarks of the meaning of these lines,

> 'Bear your grief, wise one! It is better for a man
> to avenge his friend than to refresh his sorrow'

that this is 'not a Christian sentiment'. These epic poems were sung or chanted in hall with an appropriate pride and clangour. In *Beowulf* there is talk of a 'harp' but the instrument discovered at Sutton Hoo was a kind of round lute. It may well have been twanged at the half-line break, to make a kind of echo, a thrilling noise, rather than a tune. The poem has the two qualities which some great English poetry is always to have: triumph and sadness.

II Elegies and Riddles

There seems to have been in the West German peoples, from whom our language and ourselves are largely descended, a constitutional streak of melancholy. The fullest surviving Germanic literature, the only one that can be called a classic one, is that of Iceland. And though the tales of the sagas are grim and bloody, they are told with a certain dry realistic relish, and though the Gods in the poems of the Elder Edda are always quarrelling with each other and are going to be destroyed in the end by the powers of evil, these Icelandic poems, in W. H. Auden's excellent version, have an odd jauntiness about them.

The North Germans, the Vikings, had something of that tough elation that goes with a conquering habit. The East Germans had a long tradition of contact with the Romans, and were all – the Longobards in Italy, the Goths in Spain and North Africa, the Franks in Gaul – very ready to drop their ancient traditions (we have no East German docu-

ments equivalent to *Beowulf*) and to adopt Romance languages, derived from popular Latin. The West Germans, from the records they have left in Old English literature, had not the jauntiness of the always ruthless and nearly always successful sea raider nor, though when they became Christian they adopted Latin for religious services and for learned writing, did they feel at home with the Roman roads, Hadrian's wall, a city like Bath, when they first saw them.

These seemed to them, to use a phrase from *The Ruin, enta geweorc*, the work of giants. The early, often quite small groups of settlers, built their byres and stockades and halls of wood, amid their fields and cattle, as they had done in north-west or mid-north-west, coastal Europe. Of the three main Germanic groups, in spite of the great future that lay ahead of those who had settled in England, the West Germans seem the most provincial: brave, but defensively rather than aggressively so: not a ruthless conquering people like the North Germans, the Scandinavians: not a receptive people, ready to plunge themselves into and dominate the older Roman civilization, like the East Germans, Goths, Longobards, Franks. Their lyrical poetry expresses their staunchness, but also their habitual sadness and uneasiness.

Here, again from Michael Alexander's *The Earliest English Poems*, is a poem about a deserted Roman city, Aquae Sulis, or Bath. Lovers of Bath will know that it contains, in the Roman baths, the strange round bearded head of Sul-Minerva, a kind of male gorgon, which is the one work of art in which the Roman and the Celtic geniuses fuse to produce a masterpiece. In the poem from which I quote a few lines, and which Michael Alexander thinks of as 'the first of many English meditations on old stones' and in no way inferior to Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, perhaps Roman and West Germanic genius fuse, at a greater distance, in the same way:

> Well-wrought the wall: Wierds broke it.
> The stronghold burst. . . .
>
> Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen,
> the work of the Giants, the stonesmiths,
> mouldereth.