A Short History of English Literature

Ifor Evans

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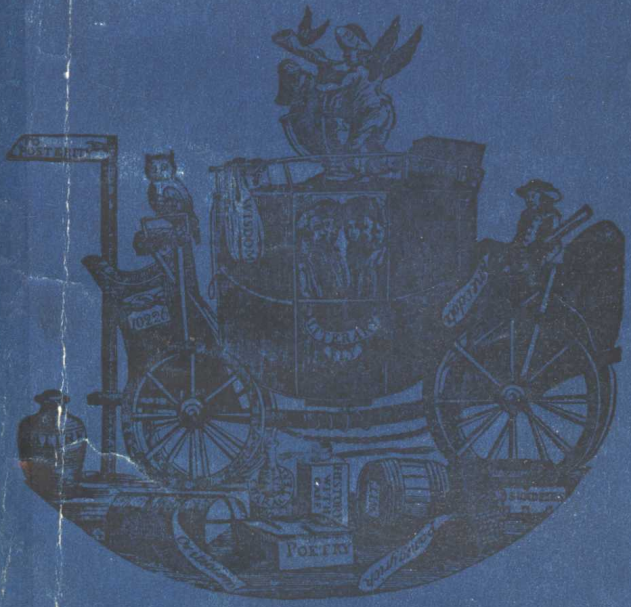

A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

IFOR EVANS

WITH ADDITIONAL MATERIAL BY
BERNARD BERGONZI

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A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Ifor Evans (now Lord Evans) was Provost of University College, London, from 1951 to 1966 Previously he was Principal of Queen Mary College and earlier still a Professor of English in the University of London. He is well known as a literary critic and historian and for his television appearances, and is Vice-President of the Royal Society of Literature His most recent works are *Science and Literature* and *English Literature: Values and Traditions*. He has written three philosophical novels. *In Search of Stephen Vane*, *The Shop on the King's Road*, and *The Church in the Markets* He has travelled widely, in the Middle and Far East, in Canada and the U S A. He has been a Vice-Chairman of the Arts Council, a Governor of the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells, a Trustee of the British Museum and Chairman of the Trustees of the *Observer*. He received the honorary degrees of Doctor of Letters from Paris in 1955 and Doctor of Laws of the University of Manchester in 1967. He is Chairman of Thames Television Educational Council and Chairman of Linguaphone Advisory Committee.

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PREFACE

WHEN a new edition of this volume was contemplated in 1970, it was decided that the text should be much expanded. A choice lay before me and the publishers. The earlier editions had consisted of an historical and critical narrative without any illustrative matter. This had been an arbitrary decision, designed to keep the text within a prescribed length. Its effect on the value of the volume was always realized and was commented on frequently. This was remedied in the Third Edition: there is extensive quotation both in the verse and prose chapters. In this larger volume the record of criticism and comment has been confirmed by a wide range of carefully chosen quotations. The total amount of this quotation amounts to almost a fifth of the original text. A glance at the chapter on 'Poetry from Chaucer to John Donne' illustrates how generously this new feature was employed. Illustration of prose writers is, in some ways, more valuable even than quotation from poets. This is particularly true of the earlier writers. Many readers will not find the prose works of Dryden and others easily accessible and quotation gives a reality to comment. Quotation from drama is more difficult but it could be advanced that the quotation of Lady Bracknell's speeches from *The Importance of Being Earnest* on page 194 is worth a whole page of criticism on Wilde.

Any brief narrative which tries to give an image of what the English-speaking people have considered for nearly a thousand years to be their literature must have grave limitations. Some imaginative writers, the late W. H. Auden among them, would abominate this wide conspectus of all that successive generations have

considered memorable, and would just let the poets, novelists, dramatists, and biographers speak for themselves. Yet many obviously are encouraged by having such a brief guide, though they intend to look at the objects themselves. This generous admission of quotation must, therefore, surely have been a step in the right direction.

The final sections of a volume of this kind have always an inevitable untidiness. One cannot easily set contemporary literature into the pattern of the centuries. The literature which is surveyed here is that which has stood the test of time, which has entered into a permanent tradition of English literature. As Dr Johnson said of Gray's *Elegy*: 'Had Gray written often thus it had been vain to blame and useless to praise him.' The judgements in this volume are not merely personal judgements, but the basically considered conclusion of generations to which a mere patina of personal predilection is added. But in the contemporary period the individual preference must be more apparent and works might be praised which, written a few decades hence, would be sunk without trace. This, as I have already conceded, leads to the untidiness of the concluding stages of the narrative. There is no attempt to assess the new movements which have begun since the fifties though some writers who began earlier and are happily still active are continued into the later stages of their career.

The problem of the treatment of the contemporary would, I think, have faced the author of a volume such as this at any period, but there are major and additional problems today. The position of literature in society is shifting in a way so fundamental that for comparisons one must go back to the invention of printing. The beginning came with film which restored the spoken

word to a new authority, and film was followed by radio and radio by television, which in a way is film initiated into a domestic atmosphere. The only way that a novelist today can hope for a big audience is by the transference of his novels into films. The most improbable writers achieve this success. One can imagine with what pleasure the ghost of Henry James, who himself had tried so hard and so unsuccessfully for stage success, would see the brilliant transference on to the small screen of *The Spoils of Poynton*, while most recently a fine novelist, L. P. Hartley, with a secure but respectable audience, found himself just before his death internationally successful on the screen with Joseph Losey's direction of *The Go-Between*. No longer will the novelist, in his own right, be a national figure.

It can be urged that these changed conditions do, in fact, liberate the novelist to transfer the novel into new forms. This, I personally believe, is a fallacy, but I would hesitate to develop the theme in the text of this volume, for it would be speculation without the relentless winnowing processes of time to adjust it. In my view Joyce was the end of a road and not the beginning of a new era. The contemplation of the states of mind which dominated Virginia Woolf and so many who were contemporary with her or preceded her was a middle-class luxury, the conditions for which will not recur.

This changed place of literature and drama is a theme for a separate work, and one could only hope that its speculation would lead to some re-conception of a national image of literature, with a firm relation to the tradition which this volume outlines.

This book was first published in 1940 and has been frequently revised. In the review of the main text made for the Third Edition, I was much assisted by the advice of

two friends, Professor Randolph Quirk, Quain Professor at University College London, and Professor Terence Spencer, Professor at the University of Birmingham, and Director of the Shakespeare Institute. The publishers and I agreed that for this Fourth Edition it would be desirable to have an independent chapter on the current literary scene written by one who is contemporary with it. We have been fortunate enough to persuade Professor Bernard Bergonzi to write this chapter and to carry forward the narrative to 1974. As Professor Bergonzi's essay is a self-contained and independent composition, there were inevitably some overlaps with the previous text, most conspicuously perhaps in the references which both he and I make to *Look Back in Anger*. It was agreed that it would be wiser to leave this untidiness rather than to modify the text.

I. E.

CHAPTER I

Before the Conquest

ENGLISH literature is often described as beginning with Chaucer. This would give England six centuries of literature. Actually there were more than six centuries of literature before Chaucer was born. The modern reader can make out the general meaning of a page of Chaucer without difficulty, but if he looks at our earliest literature he finds that it reads like a foreign tongue. This is the reason for the neglect of our early literature, though today much of it can be obtained in translation.

The two most important events in the history of England took place before the Norman Conquest. It was in that period that the Angles and Saxons and Jutes came to England in marauding bands and made English history possible. From all accounts they were respectable gentlemen when at home, but they changed their manners when they were looking for *Lebensraum*. They were heathen, and the second great event at that time is the conversion of the English to Christianity. In 597 Augustine had come from Rome and begun to convert the Jutes in Kent, while about the same time monks from Ireland were setting up monasteries in Northumbria. Most English poetry in the early Anglo-Saxon period is associated with these two events. Either the stories are brought over by the invading tribes from their Continental Germanic homes, or they show a keen interest in Bible stories, in Christianity and in Christian values.

Literature in the Anglo-Saxon period was recorded in

manuscripts, and the life of a manuscript is a hard one. Our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon poetry depends on four groups of manuscripts. These are: the manuscripts collected by Sir Robert Cotton, which are now in the British Museum; the *Exeter Book* given to Exeter Cathedral by Bishop Leofric, sometime after 1050; the Vercelli Book, found at Vercelli near Milan in 1822 (and no one has given a satisfactory account of how it got there); and finally the manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, given by the Dutch scholar Francis Dujon or Junius, Librarian to the Earl of Arundel. In Sir Robert Cotton's collection is the manuscript of *Beowulf*, the most important poem of the Anglo-Saxon period, and its history shows how everything seems to fight against the possibilities of a manuscript surviving.

As a result one cannot assess Anglo-Saxon literature or medieval literature from the extant manuscripts. Anglo-Saxon jewellery and other objects of art testify that we are dealing with a far richer and more sophisticated civilization than the surviving remains would alone indicate. As far as medieval literature is concerned that is well illustrated in R. M. Wilson's *The Lost Literature of Medieval England* (1952) which shows how many references there are to poems no longer extant, to heroes unknown, and to stories now unrecorded. One might, not too unrashly, suppose that there was an early tradition of lyrical poetry, and yet no poems are extant before the thirteenth century, and even then most of what survives is religious verse, for religious verse, kept in monasteries, had a better chance of preservation than secular lyrics with their wayward chance of survival; yet obviously they did exist. There are twelfth-century records at Ely, suggesting that lyric poetry was extant there at that time and giving to Canute the privilege of being one of the earliest of

medieval poets. There are certainly references to very early popular lyrics, some of which scandalized the more respectable. In this lost Anglo-Saxon and medieval literature there was, to quote a single instance, Bede's vernacular lyric. We learn of this from the account which Bede's disciple Cuthbert gives of his death: 'in our language, since he was skilled in our poetry', speaking of the terrible parting of the soul and the body.

The Angles brought the story of *Beowulf* with them to England in the sixth century, and there somewhere after A.D. 700 the poem was made. This was about seventy years after the death of Mohammed and in the same age as the beginning of the great T'ang Dynasty in China. Three hundred years later, about the year 1000, the manuscript, which still survives, was written down. What happened to it for the next seven hundred years is unknown. In 1706 it was recorded as being in Sir Robert Cotton's library. Only twenty-six years later a disastrous fire broke out in the library, and the *Beowulf* manuscript narrowly escaped. The charred edges of its leaves can still be seen in the British Museum. Two fragments of another poem, *Waldere*, which may originally have been as long as *Beowulf*, were found as recently as 1860 in the binding of a book in the Royal Library at Copenhagen.

Beowulf is the first long poem in English, some three thousand lines. Yet the hero and the setting have nothing to do with England. Though the Angles brought the story to England, it is not even about the Angles, but about the Scandinavians. The German tribes, though they warred with each other, and with anyone else within reach, had a 'free trade' in stories. Their poets, at least, believed in 'Germania', the single German people. So it is that our first English poem is a Scandinavian story, brought over by Angles, and made into a