JOHN MULGAN
AND D.M.DAVIN

An Introduction to English Literature

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AN INTRODUCTION
TO
ENGLISH LITERATURE

BY

JOHN MULGAN

AND

D. M. DAVIN

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PREFACE

THIS work is largely based on the late Professor Émile Legouis's *A Short History of English Literature*, which was first published in 1934 and which has established itself as a standard work. There has, however, been some slight expansion: the final chapter of the present book attempts to carry the history of English literature up to the beginning of the second world war; and an appendix of important dates has been added.

The greater part of the work was done by the late John Mulgan, whose death on active service prevented him from carrying it to a conclusion. The present editor's task has been merely to revise what was already done and to supply the final chapter.

The firm pattern provided by Professor Legouis's book was absent for the final chapter: any faults it may have, therefore, must be thought even less to derive from him than those elsewhere. The editor's method in this chapter requires, perhaps, a word of explanation: no attempt was made at completeness, and the authors treated were selected chiefly for their influence on contemporary standards. Thus, for example, the novelists discussed are rather those who have influenced the novel towards change than those who have excelled in the form as already accepted. And the editor hopes for the indulgence of all those who realize that the discussion of contemporary literature is valuable rather for the criticism it challenges than for any dogmatic judgements it may try to impose.

The editors' debt to the late Professor Émile Legouis will be everywhere visible. But thanks are due also to his family and in particular to his son, Professor Pierre Legouis, for their permission to make the abridgement.

The editor wishes to thank also Sir Humphrey Milford, till 1945 Publisher to the University of Oxford, and Mr. J. A. W. Bennett of Magdalen College, Oxford, for the contributions they have made to the volume's accuracy.

D. M. D.

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I

ENGLISH LITERATURE TO THE TIME OF CHAUCER

1. *To the Norman Conquest*

ENGLISH literature began long before the fourteenth century. But it was not till then that its language became one which could be readily understood by a present-day reader without special training. Although the poems of Chaucer, who lived from 1340 to 1400, are not written in modern English, it is always possible to understand the general sense of what is being said; and the people he describes and his outlook on life seem remarkably close to ourselves. The literature before his time, on the other hand, is written in a language which has to be learnt and deals with customs and a way of life a long way from our own. To go back to this literature, back to the writings of the early Middle Ages or, farther still, to those of Anglo-Saxon times, is to journey to strange, distant, and half-forgotten countries.

Yet the language and the kind of poetry which Chaucer wrote were not things which he had newly invented. A great many of his stories and the forms he used in telling them came from the Continent, from the rich sources of French, Italian, and classical literature. But his language was English and his art rose at the merging of two traditions, the Continental and the Anglo-Saxon. The latter may be less conspicuous in the form of his poetry than in that of a poet like William Langland, whose rhythms and alliterations echo the older poetry. But the influence is there. And whoever seeks to learn something of the poetry and prose of the Anglo-Saxons is likely to find a literature which is interesting not only for its effects on writers of a later day but for some of those qualities which we look for in the writers of all time.

The literature called Anglo-Saxon was that of the Teutonic tribes which from the middle of the fifth century invaded Britain from the Continent. These invaders were fierce, warlike, and pagan. But two centuries later, when their writings began to

appear, they were partly civilized, had ceased to be pirates, and had become settlers and tillers of the soil. They were Christianized and enjoyed the protection of law. Most of the civilization which shows in their literature came to them through the Church, and its monasteries nurtured learned men. **Aldhelm** (640–709) and the **Venerable Bede** (673–735), monk of Jarrow, theologian, and historian, the most learned man of his day, were famous throughout Europe for their scholarship. They wrote chiefly in Latin, but later monks wrote also in English, and so preserved for us the fragments of Anglo-Saxon prose and poetry which have survived.

The language which the Anglo-Saxons spoke differed in many ways from modern English. It was a language of strong stresses and many consonants. Their poetry was not rhymed but alliterative. Each line had a number of stressed syllables which began with the same consonant or vowels. Here, for example, is a passage from *Beowulf*, a famous Anglo-Saxon epic:

Sceal se hearda helm hyrstedgolde
fǣtum befeallen; feormynd swefað,
þā ðe beadogrīman bȳwan sceoldon;
gē swylce sēo herepād, sīo æt hilde gebād
ofer borda gebræc bite īrena,
brosnað æfter beorne. Ne mæg byrnan hring
æfter wīgfruman wīde fēran,
hæleðum be healfe. Næs hearpan wyn,
gomen glēobēames, nē gōd hafoc
geond sæl swingeð, nē se swifta mearh
burhstede bēateð.

The trusty helm must lose its golden ornaments and plating; the men who used to burnish the battle-visor are laid to rest; and the coat of mail, which in battle oft withstood the sword-stroke mid the clash of shields—it too will perish when its wearer's gone. The ringmail that should guard a warrior's side cannot follow him on his far journey. There comes no melody from the harp, nor pleasure from the gleewood. No more does the good hawk flap about the hall, or the swift stallion prance in the courtyard.

In addition this language was highly inflected; it depended for its Meaning on the termination of words rather than on prepositions. This meant that the order of words could be altered, and, more-

over, the Anglo-Saxons were skilled in the formation of compound words of the kind that are met with in modern German. The poetry that they fashioned with this language is sometimes monotonous. Metre and language are heavy in their effect and ill suited to deal with subjects which require delicacy or subtlety of treatment. Yet Anglo-Saxon poetry, though its matter is often dull and its manner lacks variety, is never worthless.

It is at its best in the epics and elegies with which the minstrels celebrated heroic endeavour as they sang by the fireside. *Beowulf* is the greatest of them and the most considerable Anglo-Saxon poem that has come down to us. It tells the story of the heroic warrior who first conquered in fierce hand-to-hand battle the sea-monster Grendel and Grendel's still more terrible mother; how, many years later, after a long and successful reign, Beowulf went forth to fight a dragon which was ravaging his kingdom, and vanquishing his enemy received his own death-wound from the dragon's fangs. In a famous elegiac passage which closes the poem his people mourn their king and look towards the future with melancholy foreboding now that he is dead. There is a splendid simplicity and grandeur about this old story.

Only a few of these heroic poems have survived, fragments like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, or *The Battle of Brunanburh*, a poem in praise of Athelstan who in 937 defeated the Scots and the Irish Norsemen in a battle of this name. At a later time than this poem, when Anglo-Saxon traditions were declining and about to go down before the onslaught of the Normans, an unknown writer put into verse the heroic story of the *Battle of Maldon*. The poem describes a fight, unimportant enough in itself, between a band of Anglo-Saxons under their chief Byrhtnoth and a marauding party of Norsemen who had landed on the coast of Essex (991). In the end Byrhtnoth's thanes die defending their leader. One of them, the old chief Byrhtwold, exclaims as he brandishes his ashwood spear:

> Our thoughts must be firmer, our hearts more bold, our courage greater as our force grows less. Here lies our good chief struck down in the dust. He who thinks now of leaving this fight will ever after regret it.

There is nothing ornate, nothing superhuman or extraordinary in the *Battle of Maldon*: it is simply an account of men outnumbered fighting to the last, but it is the most impressive fragment extant of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry.

Besides this kind of poem there is, however, a great mass of Anglo-Saxon poetry which is essentially religious. Much of it is merely paraphrase of parts of the Bible or of Bible legend. **Cædmon,** who began probably as a herdsman at Whitby Monastery, wrote many poems of this kind. His story is told by Bede. Because of his ignorance he could not join with the others in songs of praise to God, and stayed lonely in the stable. There an angel visited him and bade him sing of the creation. He did this and afterwards wrote down in verse all that he had sung, and later many other poems of the same kind. The poems on biblical subjects which have survived are too late in date to have been written by Cædmon, but they have a fire and earnestness and simplicity which probably belonged to his time.

The name of another religious poet, **Cynewulf,** is known to us by his signing it in 'runes', or magic letters, to certain poems that he wrote. We find in his lives of the saints, *Juliana* and *Elene*, or in the *Fates of the Apostles*, a greater elegance and smoothness, as of a more conscious literary artist.

Anglo-Saxon prose was later to appear and slower to develop than the poetry. It first becomes known to us in collections of laws and in the earlier pages of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which was kept up in various monasteries. The groundwork of some of these earlier entries may have been fragments of Old English lays; they have the force and passion of poetry. But literary prose does not begin until the ninth century when **Alfred,** King of Wessex, attempted to bring back to his kingdom her lost learning. For this he studied Latin and translated, or had translated for him, those works which he thought would be most useful to his people. He formed his prose on Latin, making his English follow Latin constructions. Either directly to him or to his encouragement we owe translations of the *Cura Pastoralis* (a volume of priestly

instruction) by Pope Gregory the Great, the *History of the World* of Orosius, the *Consolations of Philosophy* of Boethius, and Bede's *History of the English Church.* Thus he sought to enrich his countrymen with all that it was given to himself to know. If the translations we owe to him are halting, clumsy, and literal, we must remember that he stood alone and had all to do.

Towards the middle of the tenth century a noticeable advance was made in English culture by the re-establishment of the Benedictine Order of monks in southern England. The Benedictine reform brought England back into close contact with Continental learning and did much of the cultural work commonly attributed to the Conquest.

A more refined prose began with Ælfric, one of the pupils of the Benedictine school at Winchester. He introduced into his *Catholic Homilies* (991–2), compiled from the Early Fathers, and his *Lives of the Saints* (993–8) a lighter, clearer, more musical prose. His writing is poetic in its cadence and often alliterative. It tends to prove that English prose was on the way to attaining high quality before the Norman Conquest. About the same time Wulfstan, Archbishop of York (d. 1023), fired by the horrors of the Danish raids, wrote homilies of eloquence and passion, inveighing against the immorality and irreligion of the English, proclaiming the end of the world and the coming Doom.

On the whole, Anglo-Saxon prose is much nearer than the poetry to modern English. The poetry was archaic in vocabulary; the prose was either the speech in daily use or modelled on Latin, the universal language of educated Europe. When the Norman Conquest came, poetry was almost destroyed; prose, on the contrary, in spite of changes, remained recognizable and suffered no such break with the past.

2. *From the Norman Conquest to Chaucer*

The Normans who conquered England in 1066 were Norsemen in origin, but they had lived long enough in France to become French both in language and civilization. During the two centuries that followed the Conquest French literature expanded

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In the same period English existed only as the language of a conquered and illiterate people. When it emerged again as a literary language in the fourteenth century it had become deeply influenced by French forms and manners and traditions.

The contributions which this French influence made to English literature and to the English language were almost all beneficial. The heavy consonants of Anglo-Saxon were varied by the clear melodies of French vowels and diphthongs. In place of the alliterative metre which had done duty for all subjects, French poetry offered intricate patterns of rhyme and assonance. The language itself was transformed by the disappearance of the old poetic terms and the infiltration of new words imported by the Normans. Modern English was formed in this period. Its basis and the words which we use most often in ordinary speech remained Anglo-Saxon, but words of French origin or derived through French from Latin and Greek are far more numerous and form the bulk of our vocabulary. In the same period Anglo-Saxon words that were destined to survive became modified in form and pronunciation Grammatical terminations first weakened, then disappeared. Declensions vanished as there came into being a syntax which depended upon the order of words. This process of change was not ended until the sixteenth century. Meanwhile in this transitional period, to which philologists give the name of Middle English, many inflexions were reduced to a final *e* which was still sounded in Chaucer's time, though later it was to exist only as a spelling.

While these changes in the spoken English language were going on, it had almost ceased to exist as a literary medium. Latin was the language for scholars, French for the poets and chroniclers of court and castle. The few works written in English that have survived—mostly religious works, homilies, sermons in verse and prose, translations and paraphrases of the Bible, rules for monastic life and prayers—vary in value; but one, at least, the attractive *Ancrene Wisse* ('Nuns' Guide'), belongs to the great tradition of English devotional prose.

And even in this darkest period of subjection one can catch the first glimpses of later glories. The cycle of Arthurian legend,

for example, with all the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, grew up about this time. It was first written in Latin by **Geoffrey of Monmouth** in his *History of the Kings of Britain* (about 1130). **Walter Map**, an Anglo-Norman chronicler, added a little later to the story the theme of Galahad's quest for the Holy Grail.

The first English version of the legend which we have was written at the end of the twelfth century by **Layamon**, a priest of Arnley on Severn. His *Brut*, or 'History of Britain', is a long epic poem written in verse which blends the old and the new, half-way between alliteration and rhyme. His best style, swift and bare, is shown in such passages as his account of King Arthur's death, a subject which was to be made famous again in modern times by Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur*. From these beginnings there grew the wide cycle of Arthurian legend which provided inspiration for Malory three hundred years later, for Spenser, for Milton—until he turned to graver themes—and for many lesser poets and writers of prose romance.

We should remember, too, certain English lyrics of this period which have the grace of French song. Instead of the grim northern scenes which had characterized English poetry until this time they sing of spring and love and flowers. The love-songs of *Alisoun* and *Spring* are light and varied in their rhythms and marked by a quick eye for the beauties of nature. And this song is wholly English in its simplicity:

> Summer is y-comen in!
> Loud sing cuckoo!
> Groweth seed and bloweth mead,
> And springeth the wood now.
> Sing cuckoo! (Modernized spelling.)

About the beginning of the thirteenth century the English language began to reassert itself. The loss of Normandy by King John confined the Normans to England. Cut off from the Continent, they began to feel themselves as Englishmen. By the fourteenth century they had almost given up French; English in its development was no longer regarded as uncouth, and thence-

forward it triumphed. After 1350 it began to replace French in the schools; in 1362 it was used in the law courts; and in 1399 Henry IV addressed Parliament in English for the first time.

There yet remained an obstacle in the way of an English literature in the full sense. The races were intermingling and the classes drawing more closely together, but the language had not reached uniformity. Each man spoke and wrote according to the part of the country he came from and the influences that had affected him. In this confusion four main dialects of English were struggling for supremacy: North, South, East Midland, and West Midland; and each had its own literature. In the end London English, the language of the court and the learned and well-to-do classes, triumphed, but that was not until much later, and not until the sixteenth century can we say that a standard form of English has become accepted.

But by 1350, in spite of all these difficulties, the full tide of English literature was setting in. The reawakening was due in part, perhaps, to the victories of Edward III, which aroused national pride. But it became complete only afterwards when the conquests made in France were already lost and England was divided by internal strife; it was richest under Richard II, whose reign was one of the most unfortunate England has known. In fact, the life of the nation waxed more active and bolder in this time of calamity; the middle classes became wealthier and a spirit of independence gained in strength.

The prose of the time, from 1350 to 1400, is sparse and of slight literary value. There is, however, some attraction in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville.* The work was regarded for a long time as original; in reality it was a translation of an amusing fraud perpetrated by a French physician. But these tales of the adventures of an imaginary knight, Sir John Mandeville of St. Albans, in fabulous lands remain amusing even if they are not very credible. They belong, as a narration of foreign marvels, midway between Herodotus and Baron Munchausen.

The chief prose writers of the age who did more than translate

were **Walter Hilton** (d. 1396) and the great reformer, **John Wyclif** (1324–84). Hilton in his *Scale of Perfection* gave excellent examples of terse and clear devotional prose, the kind of writing that reappears at its best in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress.* Wyclif wrote at first in Latin; then, towards 1380, that he might appeal to the people in his struggle against the Pope, he used English. His most important contribution to English prose is the translation of the Bible that he initiated.

But taken as a whole, English literature at this period is noted for its poetry, not its prose. In the north and the west of England there was a return to the old alliterative line of the Anglo-Saxons. This 'revival' seems natural if we consider that the new rhymed versification, derived from France, had not yet produced a standard form of verse. At the end of the century Chaucer introduced the ten-syllable line, which was to become the 'heroic' line, the standard measure of English verse. But in the meantime it was natural that, in those parts of England where foreign influence was least felt, there should be a reappearance of the old alliterative rhythms, which had probably never been completely dormant.

Some of the best of this fourteenth-century alliterative poetry is in four poems found in a single manuscript. These have been given the titles of *Pearl, Patience, Cleanness*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* They may be by the same author, though this is disputed. The most attractive is *Sir Gawain*, which is a romance of chivalry with one of King Arthur's knights as its main character. The poem *Pearl* is a beautiful lyric which describes the dream of a poet whose daughter, not two years old, is dead. He sees her in a vision, clothed in shining white and received into Paradise. It is a moving poem and the work of a true poet and craftsman.

Again from the west of England came the most popular poem of the fourteenth century, the *Piers Plowman*, or 'Peter the Ploughman', of **William Langland.** There are three successive versions of this poem (usually called A, B, and C Texts). The first seems to have been written after 1362, the second about 1377, the third

probably towards 1398. It has been questioned whether the three versions are the work of one man. The poem was very popular. It circulated in many manuscripts and may have been added to by different hands. But all forms of it show depth of religious feeling. They reveal full knowledge of the wretchedness of the people and burn with the same anger against the vices of a society that is Christian only in name. The rude vitality and irony which run through the poem make it intensely alive and full of movement.

The poem opens with a famous passage in which the poet describes how he fell asleep one May morning by a stream on the Malvern Hills:

> In a summer season, when soft was the sun,
> I shrowded me in a smock, as if I were a sheep,
> In the habit of a hermit unholy in works,
> Went wide in this world, wonders to hear.
> But on a May morning, on Malvern hills
> There befell me a marvel, of magic, me thought.
> I was weary from wandering, and went to rest
> Under a broad bank, by a burn-side,
> And as I lay and leaned and looked on the water
> I slumbered and slept, it murmured so sweetly.
>
> (B text, modernized.)

He sees in a vision a 'field full of folk', rich and poor, workers and idlers, nobles and merchants, unworthy priests, pardoners, and jesters. The lady 'Holy Church' appears to him, exhorts him to seek the best thing—Truth. When the dreamer asks how he will recognize the false, the poem develops into a lively allegory of Lady Meed and her misdoings. In a second dream, the dreamer hears the Seven Deadly Sins—pictured as very real persons—making confession. Then Peter the Ploughman appears and explains the way to Truth, whom he has served for fifty years—and he offers to guide pilgrims in looking for Truth if they will first help him to plough his half-acre. Those who refuse to help are forced in the end to work through hunger. The poem in its first form ends shortly after this with a discussion of the value of pardons, and the relative value of faith and learning.

The length of the already long poem was more than doubled

in its later versions. The sequel is a series of visions, bewildering, sometimes chaotic; it has lost some of the earlier poem's vividness. It becomes loftier, more mystical. Peter the Ploughman reappears, but transfigured, a symbol of the true Christian and finally of Christ Himself. But however one regards this work its greatness remains, both as a social document and as a poem of sustained vigour and occasional beauty.

In the same period as *Piers Plowman* a wholly different type of literature was growing up in the north. It was the expression of the intense national feeling that had been aroused by the Scottish struggle for independence between 1286 and 1314. From it originated the 'border ballads' that were to become popular in the centuries that followed and were to inspire poets down to Walter Scott and Andrew Lang. Scotland's most famous literary figure at this time was **John Barbour**, who wrote in the eight-syllabled metre of the early chroniclers his epic *The Bruce* (1373–9). This long poem tells the story of the wanderings and struggles of the Scottish patriot Robert Bruce. There is an epic interest and excitement in this tale of a man hunted like a wild beast, escaping time and again by his bravery and cunning and returning at the head of a force which defeated Edward II at Bannockburn and secured for Scotland her independence. Barbour was only a poet in a very limited sense, but his fervent patriotism redeems the crudeness of his art.

There is one further poet of these early times to be considered before we come to Chaucer. This is **John Gower**, who was a learned man, a Londoner familiar with court society, a friend and rival indeed of Chaucer himself. He wrote at first in Anglo-Norman French and then in Latin. Only at the last and at the request of Richard II he wrote in English his *Confessio Amantis* (1390–3). This is a long compilation of 40,000 eight-syllabled lines, a collection of tales within a framework that is artificial yet effective. He told a story easily and clearly, and his work was very popular for many years. He was learned, fluent, and industrious, and his writings are what Chaucer's might have been without Chaucer's genius.

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