

● “十一五”国家重点图书出版规划项目

# 英国文学史

A History  
of British Literature

索金梅 著

南开大学出版社

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# Preface

This book intends to give the students and readers a general knowledge of the development of British literature since Anglo-Saxon period to the present day and a critical examination of the representative works of major English literary men and women. I call this book *A History of British Literature* instead of *English Literature* because it includes the literature of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland as well as of England. It was in 1920 that Ireland became partitioned from the United Kingdom when the southern twenty-six counties seceded from the country.

A history of British literature may well be thought too large a venture for one volume. However, this book may partly excuse itself by providing a general outline of the development of British literature. Besides, it is intended to be used as a textbook for English majors in Chinese colleges and universities. Due to the limit of teaching time, it can not contain the works of minor or even some major writers. Nevertheless, it provides sufficient materials for the course. Teachers in various colleges and universities can choose what to teach at their will and the students can read the rest of the book.

While reading this book, you may notice that there have been great changes in contents and forms of British literature. The gulf between the literature of medieval romance and the absurd theatre in the 1950s can be a striking example. Sometimes these changes had social, cultural and economic causes. Sometimes they were the developments internal to literature—shifts of fashion, movements and growth cycles and influence of different writers. So in every chapter, we have an introduction to the

literature of the period. The introduction includes political, economic, cultural changes and the then crucially important philosophical ideas.

In this book I try to be specific in the introduction and interpretations. To realize this goal, I have focused not only on the detailed interpretation of the major works of the major writers but also on how to lead the reader to have critical reading themselves.

In writing this book I have profited profusely from people, books and Internet. Among those who have influenced me most is Professor Chang Yaixin. He gave me encouragement and spiritual support when I found it difficult to continue. He advised me to be specific and have detailed interpretations instead of merely giving general statements and juggling with abstractions. I also want to thank the students who attended the course of a history of British literature from 1998 to 2008, whose response and discussion with me have inspired me a lot in writing this book. Here I also want to give special thanks to Mr. Wang Bing, who is very kind and patient with me and helps publish this book. Finally I am very grateful to General Administration of Press and Publication of the People's Republic of China for helping publish the book.

Suo Jinmei  
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August 19, 2008

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# **The Anglo-Saxon Period**

## **449-1066**

### *Introduction*

British literary history began with the Anglo-Saxons. But the Anglo-Saxons were not the first people living in the British Isles. The first British were the Celts, and from them came the name Briton and British. They also contributed to English language some words like dun and river names like Avon and Thames.

In 55 B.C., Julius Caesar led his army across the English Channel and conquered the land. He brought to England its first touch of Roman civilization. Caesar remained there only a short time. In A.D. 43, the Romans returned to Britain and stayed there for more than three hundred years. They brought the Christian religion and constructed monasteries and cathedrals. They also built roads, towns and the city London.

During A.D. 401-410, the Roman legion gradually withdrew to protect Rome from foreign attacks. Finally in 410 Emperor Honorius gave up Rome's sovereignty of the land over to Britain.

449 was a significant year. In that year the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons invaded Britain from the European continent. All of the tribes were of German origin. They drove the Christianized Celts westward toward what became known as Cornwall and Wales and northward into the Highlands of Scotland. From the Angles, who were the most numerous, the country became known as Angle-land, which later evolved into England, the land of the Angles, and the language was at first called Engleish and later English. Later when the Angles united with the Saxons, they called their language Anglo-Saxon.

Under the pressure from the new invaders, the old Roman order gradually disintegrated. In the late sixth century, the process of re-Christianization began. In 596 Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine to renew the work. The missionary work was undertaken in the north and in Scotland by Celtic monks and in the south by some Benedictines. Augustine later became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. By the end of the seventh century, all Anglo-Saxon England had accepted Christianity. This was of great importance to the future development of English culture. The chain of monasteries served to link Britain both to the Latin civilization of Roman Church and to the newly germinating Christian national cultures of Western Europe.

## *The Venerable Bede and Caedmon*

The most learned monk in Western Europe in this period was the Venerable Bede (673-735). He was born at Tyne in County Durham and was sent to the monastery of Wearmouth to study when he was seven. Shortly afterwards he became one of the first members of the monastic community he was in. At this monastery, he was ordained a deacon when he was 19 and a priest when he was 30. He mastered Latin, Greek and Hebrew and had a good knowledge of the classical scholars and early church fathers. Bede's writings cover a broad spectrum including natural history, poetry, Biblical translation and exposition of the *Bible*. But he is remembered chiefly for his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which he wrote in Latin and was completed in 731. This book led him to be called the father of



**The Venerable Bede**

English history.

Bede's *History* has five volumes. It tells the history of Britain from the raids by Julius Caesar in 55 B.C. up to A.D. 729, speaking of the Celtic peoples who were converted to Christianity during the first three centuries of the Christian era, the

invasion of the Anglo-Saxons in the fifth and sixth centuries and their subsequent conversion by Celtic missionaries from the north and west, and Roman missionaries from the south and east. It is our chief source for the history of the British Isles during this period.

According to Bede, the earliest known poet in English literature was Caedmon, a cowherd at Whitby Abbey in Northumbria. In his *History* Bede vividly records how Caedmon became a poet. Caedmon

Had never learned anything of versifying; for which reason being sometimes at entertainments, when it was agreed for the sake of mirth that all present should sing in their turns, when he saw the instrument come towards him, he rose up from table and returned home.

Having done so at a certain time, and gone out of the house where the entertainment was, to the stable, where he had to take care of the horses that night, he there composed himself to rest at the proper time; a person appeared to him in his sleep, and saluting him by his name, said, "Caedmon, sing some song to me." He answered, "I cannot sing; for that was the reason why I left the entertainment and retired to this place, because I could not sing." The other who talked to him replied, "However you shall sing." "What shall I sing?" rejoined he. "Sing the beginning of created beings," said the other. Hereupon he presently began to sing verses to the praise of God, which he had never heard" (qtd. in Kearns 22).

Since then he began to sing religious verses. As he could not write, the monks explained to him a passage in the *Bible* and he turned the stories into verse form. Thus the title of his works is *Paraphrase*, which consists of the Genesis, the Exodus and the Daniel. Caedmon's first poem, *Hymn*, written sometime between 658 and 680, is the oldest English religious poem. Hence he is called the father of English songs. But all were lost except the following hymn recorded by Bede in his *History*:

Praise we the Lord  
Of the heavenly kingdom,

God's power and wisdom,  
The works of His hand;  
As the Father of glory,  
Eternal lord,  
Wrought the beginnings  
Of all His wonders!  
Holy Creator!  
Warden of men!  
First, for a roof,  
O'er the children of earth,  
He established the heavens,  
And founded the world,  
And spread the dry land  
For the living to dwell in.  
Lord Everlasting!  
Almighty God!

—Translated by Charles W. Kennedy (Kearns 23)

Caedmon's story suggests that poetry of his day was a public and communal art and designed for public repetition, recitation and artful improvisation.

## *King Alfred the Great*

Although Bede was the first Anglo-Saxon who wrote the history in Latin and Caedmon was the father of English songs, King Alfred the Great (849-899, ruled 871-899) was the first Anglo-Saxon who commissioned the writing of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* in old English vernacular. He initiated the work in the year 892. *The Chronicles* contains seven manuscripts and two fragments written from an Anglo-Saxon perspective and recorded tradition as well as history, offering us a unique picture of Anglo-Saxons and their world. It documented events in the Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Danish and Norman eras, beginning with references to the peoples that inhabited the British Isles in Pre-Roman times and the first Roman military expeditions to Britain under Julius Caesar. It remains the primary historical source of

information on the later Anglo-Saxon period.

## *Beowulf*

While King Alfred's *Chronicles* gives us historic information, the earliest English poem we have known is *Beowulf*, composed in Anglo-Saxon or Old English about 700 by an unknown minstrel who composed poems that praised Anglo-Saxon ideals. *Beowulf* was originally oral and written down in the tenth century. It is an epic. An epic is a long narrative poem in a formal and elevated style about the achievements of a central hero who usually embodies national ideals. This great epic is 3,182 lines long and tells of the adventures of Beowulf and his victories over the monster Grendel and Grendel's mother. It ends with Beowulf's final battle with a dragon and the hero's death.

The poem is set in what is modern Denmark and Sweden. It begins with a brief account of Danish kings down to Hrothgar. Hrothgar built a hall named Heorot. A monster named Grendel becomes angry at the sound of merrymaking that disturbs his peace. He comes out of the lair at the sea bottom, goes to the hall and eats warriors. This has been going on for twelve years. The news of the trouble in Denmark eventually reaches the land of the Geats. Hygelac, the king of this land, has a thane named Beowulf, who says that he is willing to help Denmark. Under the encouragement of the king, Beowulf picks fourteen warriors to sail with him to Denmark. When they get there, Hrothgar welcomes Beowulf and his men with a feast. At the end of the party Hrothgar promises Beowulf riches if he can defeat Grendel.

As usual, Grendel walks through the darkness heading toward Heorot for his nightly slaughter. He grips the hall door and rips it away. As he enters, his eyes fall upon the warriors sleeping. Beowulf lies among the sleeping warriors watching. Grendel reaches for and devours one of the warriors. Next the monster reaches for Beowulf. Beowulf seizes the monster all of a sudden. Grendel is at first confused, and then fearful as he tries to pull away. Still Beowulf hangs on tight. Grendel's wrenching and bellowing brings the Danes out of their sleep. He desperately wants to be free and go home but Beowulf keeps him in place. He is in such agony that he

finally rips from Beowulf's grasp and runs away leaving his arm and a bloody trail behind. Everyone gazes upon the arm and is surprised at what has happened. Hrothgar rewards the hero with rich gifts.

Grendel died in his lair. At night Grendel's mother comes to Heorot seeking revenge for her son's death. She swallows one warrior.

Beowulf decides to fight against Grendel's mother. When Beowulf arrives at the bottom of the lake, Grendel's mother waits for him. The two begin to fight, but neither gains the upper hand in this combat. Then Beowulf sees a large sword nearby. He manages to grab it and, in one mighty blow, cuts the head of Grendel's mother off.

Beowulf is further rewarded by Hrothgar. Then he and his warriors return to their homeland. In the next year King Hygelac dies and his son succeeds as king but is soon killed in a battle. Beowulf is the chosen king and rules the Geats wisely for fifty years.

In the fiftieth year of his reign, a fire-breathing dragon attacks the Geats. A slave stole a cup from this dragon's treasure trove. The treasure was left by an ancient civilization. Now the dragon realizes that the cup is missing, and he goes on angrily to find the cup.

Beowulf finds that this dragon is destroying the property of the land and terrorizing his people. Although he is now old, he has to fight against the dragon. Beowulf and a group of his warriors go to the cave of the dragon. He gives a mighty shout and charges forward. The dragon hears the shout and answers with a stream of fire. Beowulf swings at the monster with all his might. The dragon evades him. On the last try, Beowulf kills the dragon, but the dragon gives him a poisonous bite before he dies. After the dragon has been killed, Beowulf collapses. When he is dying he chooses Wiglaf, one of the warriors, as his heir.

The poem shows the qualities most admired by the Anglo-Saxons: strength, courage, wisdom and loyalty to one's lord. Because of the Anglo-Saxons' constant intertribal wars, they needed heroes who had strength, courage and wisdom. As life in this period was brief, hard and strife-ridden, the people believed in the inevitability of fate. The sense of fate is reflected in *Beowulf*. Heroes like Beowulf could attain some degree of immortality through fame—being remembered by others for the heroic deeds. Fame was the only means of transcending fate. In his farewell speech, Beowulf says:

I've never know fear; as a youth I fought  
In endless battles. I am old, now,  
But I will fight again, seek fame still,  
If the dragon hiding in his tower dares  
To face me.

...

My days  
Have gone by as fate willed, waiting  
For its word to be spoken (qtd. in Kearns 16, 19).

Beowulf is old now. His days have gone by "as fate willed," and he is now certain of death. But he will fight for his people and his kingdom. He is sure that he will be remembered. The hero's life was thus made meaningful by the vital ideas of fame.

The theme of the poem is that goodness triumphs over evil. Beowulf represents goodness for he fights for the peoples and kingdoms. Grendel and the dragon symbolize evil. The tension between goodness and evil returns again and again in the poem.

There are several devices in old English verse which help the poet make the shaping of his spoken poetry easier to remember. One is caesura, which is the pause in a line of poetry, usually near the middle of the line. For example,

Vomiting fire and smoke, // the dragon  
Burned down their homes // they watched in horror.

For another example,

"When night came on // Grande came too.

Another device is the use of alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of same consonant sounds, usually at the beginnings of words. Notice the repeated *f* sounds in the lines from *Beowulf*:

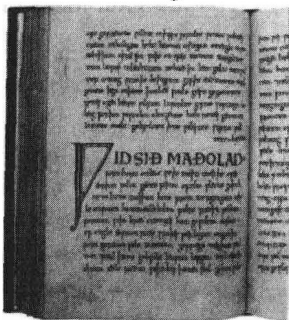
The infamous killer fought  
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat.

Still another device characteristic of *Beowulf* is the use of kenning. Kenning is a

formalized metaphorical phrase to express or describe a simple noun. In *Beowulf*, for example, the sea is referred to as the “whale-road,” the sun as “heaven’s candle,” the dragon’s cave as an “earth-hall,” and Beowulf’s wound as a “life-hurt.”

Finally, repetition is often used in the poem. It reveals the oral nature of the poem and shows that the Anglo-Saxon literature began as oral works. People learn most legends and histories of their land through these stories.

## The Exeter Book



*The Exeter Book*

In the Anglo-Saxon literature, there are about 30,000 lines of poetry survived except for *Beowulf*. Most of them are in *The Exeter Book*, a famous collection of poetry in about 975. The book contains 31 major poems and 96 riddles. The most famous are *The Wanderer*, *The Wife’s Lament*, and *The Seafarer*. These secular poems evoke a poignant sense of desolation and loneliness in their descriptions of the separation of lovers, the sorrows of exile, or the terrors and attractions of the sea. Let’s take a passage from *The Seafarer* for example:

This tale is true, and mine. It tells  
 How the sea took me, swept me back  
 And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,  
 Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,  
 In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells  
 Of smashing surf when I sweated in the cold  
 Of an anxious watch, perched in the bow  
 As it dashed under cliffs. My feet were cast  
 In icy bands, bound with frost,  
 With frozen chains, and hardship groaned  
 Around my heart. Hunger tore  
 At my sea-weary soul. No man sheltered



On the quiet fairness of earth can feel  
How wretched I was, drifting through winter  
On an ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow,  
Alone in a world blown clear of love.

...And yet my heart wanders away,  
My soul roams with the sea, the whales'  
Home, wandering to the widest corners  
Of the world, returning ravenous with desire,  
Flying solitary, screaming, exciting me  
To the open ocean, breaking oaths  
On the curve of a wave.

Thus the joys of God  
Are fervent with life, where life itself  
Fades quickly into the earth. The wealth  
Of the world neither reaches to Heaven nor remains.  
No man has ever faced the dawn  
Certain which of Fate's three threats  
Would fall: illness, or age, or an enemy's  
Sword, snatching the life from his soul.

...Fate is stronger  
And God mightier than any man's mind.  
Our thoughts should turn to where our home is,  
Consider the ways of coming there.

—Translated by Burton Raffel (Kearns 25)

The poem tells of the miseries and attractions of a sailor's life on the sea. The narrator first depicts his hardships at sea. He experiences "the suffering in a hundred ships, in a thousand ports, and in me." The phrase "in me" means in his psyche. In the bitter cold of the winter, he feels lonely and isolated on an ice-cold sea. The sea causes him many sorrows and hardships. On the other hand, he has lived his entire life facing the toils of the sea. He loves the sea and feels its beauty, mystique and other attractions so that his soul "roams with the sea."