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A SHORT HISTORY

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OF

ENGLISH LITERATURE

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GEORGE SAINTSBURY 外文书库

LATE PROFESSOR OF RHETORIC AND ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH



"But it needs happy moments for this skill." — THE SCHOLAR GIPSY



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PREFACE

THE object of this book, which was undertaken more than four years ago, is to give, from the literary point of view only, and from direct reading of the literature itself, as full, as well supplied, and as conveniently arranged a storehouse of facts as the writer could provide. The substitution of bird's-eye views and sweeping generalisations for positive knowledge has been very sedulously avoided; but it is hoped that the system of Inter-chapters will provide a sufficient chain of historical summary as to general points, such as, for instance, the nature and progress of English prosody and the periods of prose style. No part of the book has been delivered as lectures; and the sections of it concerning the Elizabethan period and the Nineteenth Century are not replicas of previous work on those subjects.

None but a charlatan will pretend that he has himself written, and none but a very unreasonable person will expect any one else to write, a history of the kind free from blunders. The sincerest thanks are owed to Mr. W. P. Ker, Fellow of All Souls and Quain Professor of English Literature in University College, London, and to Mr. G. Gregory Smith, Lecturer in English in the University of Edinburgh, for their great kindness in reading the proofs of the book, and for their most valuable suggestions. But the author is wholly responsible, not merely for all the errors

BOOK II

THE MAKING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

THE TRANSITION

The sleep of English—Awakening influences—Latin—French influence—Geoffrey of Monmouth—Latin prosody in the Early Middle Ages—The Hymns—Alliteration and rhyme—Rhythm and metre—French prosody—Syllabic equivalence in English—Helped by Anglo-Saxon—Law of pause in English Page 39

CHAPTER II

FIRST MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

1200-1250

Layamon's *Brut*—The *Ormulum*—Its spelling—Its metre—The *Ancren Riwele*—The *Moral Ode*—*Genesis and Exodus*—The *Bestiary*—The *Orison of our Lady*—Proverbs of *Alfred* and *Hendyng*—*The Owl and the Nightingale* Page 48

CHAPTER III

SECOND MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

1300-1360

Robert of Gloucester—Robert Manning—Lyrics—The *Ayenbite of Inwyrt*—The Northern Psalter—Manning—William of Shoreham—The *Cursor Mundi*—Hampole—Adam Davy—Laurence Minot—*Cleanness* and *Patience*—*The Pearl* Page 62

CHAPTER IV

EARLY ROMANCES—METRICAL

Sir Tristrem—*Havelok the Dane*—*King Horn*—*King Alisaunder*—*Arthour and Merlin*—*Richard Cœur de Lion*—The *Seven Sages*—*Bevis of Hampton*—*Guy of Warwick*—*Ywain and Gawain*—*Lybeaus Desconus*—The *King of Tars*—*Emarè*—*Sir Orpheo*—*Florence of Rome*—*The Earl of Toulouse*—The *Squire of Low Degree*—*Sir Cleges* and *Le Fraine*—*Ipomydon*—*Amis and Amiloun*—*Sir Amadas*—*Sir Triamour*—*King Athelstone*, etc.—The Thornton Romances—Charlemagne Romances Page 82

CHAPTER V

EARLY ROMANCES—ALLITERATIVE

Gawain and the Green Knight—The Awntyrs of Arthur—William of Palerne—Joseph of Arimathea—The Thornton Morte d'Arthure—The Destruction of Troy—The Pistyl of Susan Page 102

INTERCHAPTER II Page 109

BOOK III

CHAUCER AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

CHAPTER I

CHAUCER'S LIFE AND POEMS

Life—Probably spurious Tales—Other questioned work—The arguments for and against it—Admittedly genuine work—The three periods—The *Romaunt of the Rose*—The Minor Poems—*Troilus and Cressid*—The *House of Fame*—The *Legend of Good Women*—The *Canterbury Tales* Page 115

CHAPTER II

LANGLAND AND GOWER

Piers Plowman—Argument of the B Poem—Gower—The *Confessio Amantis*—Gower's reputation Page 131

CHAPTER III

CHAUCER'S PROSE—WYCLIF, TREVISA, MANDEVILLE

Turning-point in prose—Chaucer's prose tales—His *Boethius*—The *Astrolabe*—Wyclif—John of Trevisa—Sir John Mandeville—The first prose style Page 143

INTERCHAPTER III Page 152

BOOK IV

THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

CHAPTER I

THE ENGLISH CHAUCERIANS—LYDGATE TO SKELTON

Contempt for fifteenth-century literature—Lydgate—Occleve—Bokenam—Audelay and Minors—Hawes—*The Pastime of Pleasure*—*The Example of Virtue*—Barclay—*The Ship of Fools*—The Eclogues—Skelton—His life—His poems Page 157

CHAPTER II

THE SCOTTISH POETS—HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, AND MINOR

Lateness of Scottish Literature—Barbour—Wyntoun—Blind Harry—Minors—Lyndsay—His life—His works—*The Satire of the Three Estates*—Minor poems Page 171

CHAPTER III

THE FOUR GREAT SCOTTISH POETS

The *King's Quair*—Henryson—*The Testament and Complaint of Creseide*—*The Fables—Robene and Makyne*—Minor poems—Dunbar—*The Tua Maryit Wemen and the Wedo*—Other large poems—Gawain Douglas—His life—His original poems—His *Aeneid* Page 180

CHAPTER IV

LATER ROMANCES IN PROSE AND VERSE

Sir Generydes, etc.—*Sir Launfal*—The verse *Morte Arthur*—*Golagros and Gawane and Rauf Coilyear*—Malory—Lord Berners—Caxton's translated romances Page 193

CHAPTER V

MINOR POETRY AND BALLADS

Date of Ballads—*The Nut-browne Mayde*—"I sing of a maiden"—The Percy Folio—*Graysteel* Page 200

CHAPTER VI

MISCELLANEOUS PROSE

Importance of fifteenth-century prose—Pecock—His style and vocabulary—Fortescue, Capgrave, Fabyan—Caxton—Fisher—His advances in style—More—Latimer—Coverdale—Cranmer Page 205

INTERCHAPTER IV Page 215

BOOK V

ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE TO THE DEATH
OF SPENSER

CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARIES—DRAMA

Unbroken development of Drama from Miracle Plays—Origin of these—The Miracle-Play cycles, etc.—Non-sacred episodes—Moralities—*The Four Elements*—Other Interludes—John Heywood and *The Four PP*—*Thersites*—Other Interludes—Their drift—Bale's *King John*—*Ralph Roister Doister*—*Gammer Gurton's Needle*—*Gorboduc*—Other early attempts—The demand and the supply—Early plays by Gascoigne and others—Disputes as to plays—Difficulties in their way Page 219

CHAPTER II

PRELIMINARIES—PROSE

Elyot—The *Governour*—Cavendish—Leland—Cheke—Wilson—Ascham—His *Letters*—*Toxophilus*—The *Schoolmaster*—Their characteristics Page 234

CHAPTER III

PRELIMINARIES—VERSE

The state of poetry c. 1530—Good effect of Italian—Wyatt's life—Surrey's—Wyatt's forms and subjects—Those of Surrey—The main characteristics of the pair—Wyatt's rhyme and rhythm—Surrey's metrical advance—*Tottel's Miscellany*—Other miscellanies—Verse translations—Churchyard—Whetstone—Tusser—Turberville—Googe—Gascoigne—His *Instructions*—His poems—The *Mirror for Magistrates*—Sackville's part in it Page 242

CHAPTER IV

SPENSER AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

The Leicester House circle—Sidney—His life—The sonnets—The *Defence of Poesy*—The *Arcadia*—Spenser—The "classical metre" craze—Other poets of Sidney's circle—Watson—Greville—Warner—The sonneteers of 1592-96—Constable—The satirists Page 260

CHAPTER V

THE UNIVERSITY WITS

The general drama of 1570-90—The University Wits—Lyly—His plays—Peele—Greene—Marlowe—Kyd—Lodge—Nash—Their work—Its kind in drama—Its vehicle in blank verse—Peele's plays—Those of Greene, Lodge, Nash, and Kyd—The lyrics of the group—Marlowe's plays Page 280

CHAPTER VI

LYLY AND HOOKER—THE TRANSLATORS, PAMPHLETEERS, AND CRITICS

Ascham's prose—Defects of the type—The ebb and flow of style—Euphuism—*Euphues*—*Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*—*Euphues and his England*—Their style—Its ancient instances—Its vernacularity—Its unnatural history—Hooker—Contemporaries of Lyly and Hooker—The translators—Their characteristics—The pamphleteers—Martin Marprelate—The critics Page 294

INTERCHAPTER V Page 307

BOOK VI

LATER ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBEAN LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

SHAKESPEARE

The luck of Jacobean literature—Concentration of the great drama in it—Shakespearian chronology—The life—The work—The poems—The *Sonnets*—Their formal and spiritual suprenfacy—Probable divisions of plays: the

earlier—Their verse and phrase—Their construction—Their characters—The middle division: the *Merry Wives*—The Romantic comedies—The great tragedies, Roman and Romantic—Last plays—Doubtful plays . Page 313

CHAPTER II

SHAKESPEARE'S CONTEMPORARIES IN DRAMA

Disposition of the subject—Chronological and biographical cautions—Ben Jonson—His and other "humour"—His plays—His verse—The three master-pieces—Later plays—The *Masques*—Beaumont and Fletcher—Their lives—Their characteristics—And merits—Specimen plays—Shadowy personality of other dramatists—Sufficiency of their work—Chapman—Marston—Dekker—Middleton—Heywood—Webster—His two great plays—Day—Tourneur—Rowley Page 330

CHAPTER III

THE SCHOOLS OF JACOBEAN POETRY

Drayton—The *Polyolbion*—Other poems—Daniel—Sylvester—Sir John Davies—Minor poets—Chapman—Fairfax—Campion—The Spenserians: minor poets—The Fletchers—Giles—Phineas—W. Browne—Wither—Basse—The lyrical impulse—Jonson's poems—Donne Page 350

CHAPTER IV

JACOBEAN PROSE—SECULAR

Bacon—His life—His writings—His style—His use of figures—His rhetorical quality—Jonson's prose—The *Discoveries*—Their essay-nature—Protean appearances of essay—Overbury's *Characters*—The Character generally—Burton—The *Anatomy*—His "melancholy"—His style—Selden—The Authorised Version—Minors Page 369

CHAPTER V

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE ENGLISH PULPIT—I

Great pulpit oratory necessarily late—Function of sermons, 1600-1800—Andrewes—Ussher—Hall—Donne Page 382

INTERCHAPTER VI Page 387

BOOK VII

CAROLINE LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

BLANK VERSE AND THE NEW COUPLET

The central period of English prosody—Distribution of Caroline poetry—Milton—His life—The earlier poems—*Comus*—The blank verse—*Lycidas*—Sonnets—The longer poems—The blank verse—Their matter—Milton's place in English prosody—Cowley—His couplets—The lyrics—The *Pindarics*—Denham—Waller—The "reform of our numbers" Page 391

CHAPTER II

THE METAPHYSICALS—THE LYRIC POETS—THE MISCELLANISTS, ETC.

Meaning of the term "metaphysical"—Crashaw—George Herbert—Vaughan—Herrick—Carew—Randolph—Habington—Cartwright—Corbet—Suckling—Lovelace—Cleveland and others—Marvell—Bishop King—Sherburne—Godolphin, Stanley, Cotton, Brome—Quarles, More, Beaumont—Davenant—Chamberlayne—Miscellanies Page 411

CHAPTER III

THE DRAMA TILL THE CLOSING OF THE THEATRES

Massinger—Ford—Shirley—Randolph—Suckling—Davenant—Brome—Nabbes and Davenport—Glapthorne Page 432

CHAPTER IV

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE ENGLISH PULPIT—II

Jeremy Taylor—Fuller—South—Barrow—Baxter, Chillingworth, Hales, and others Page 439

CHAPTER V

MISCELLANEOUS PROSE

Milton's prose—Its faults and beauties—Sir Thomas Browne—*Religio Medici*—*Vulgar Errors*—*Urn Burial*—*The Garden of Cyrus*—Clarendon—Hobbes—Felltham—Howell—Walton Page 447

CHAPTER VI

SCOTS POETRY AND PROSE

Reformation verse—Alexander Scott—Montgomerie—Sir Robert Ayton—The Earl of Stirling—Drummond—Prose—*The Complaint of Scotland*—Knox and Buchanan—King James—Sir Thomas Urquhart Page 458

INTERCHAPTER VII Page 467

BOOK VIII

THE AUGUSTAN AGES

CHAPTER I

THE AGE OF DRYDEN—POETRY

The term "Augustan"—Its use here—Dryden—His life—His earlier poems—The satires, etc.—The *Fables*—His verse—Butler—Restoration lyric—Satires of Marvell and Oldham Page 471

CHAPTER II

THE AGE OF DRYDEN—DRAMA

The stage at the Restoration—The Heroic play—Dryden's comedies—Etherege—Shadwell—Sedley—Mrs. Behn—Wycherley—*The Rehearsal*—The great artificial comedy—Congreve—Vanbrugh—Farquhar—Cibber—Mrs. Centlivre—Restoration tragedy—Dryden's Heroic plays—His blank-verse plays—His play-songs and prologues—Crowne and Settle—Otway—Lee—Southerne and Rowe Page 483

CHAPTER III

THE AGE OF DRYDEN—PROSE

Tendency of Restoration prose—Its pioneers—Cowley's prose—Dryden—Temple—Tillotson—Halifax—Sprat—The Royal Society and style—Bunyan—His four chief things—The *English Rogue*—Thomas Burnet—Glanvill—The Diarists—Evelyn—Pepys—Roger North—Minors—Locke—Degradation of style at the close of the century—L'Estrange—Collier—Tom Brown—Dunton Page 506

Galt—Ainsworth and James—Lord Beaconsfield—Bulwer-Lytton—Others :
 Lockhart—Peacock—Lever—Marryat—Michael Scott—Hook and others
 Page 677

CHAPTER III

THE NEW ESSAY

Progress and defects of the earlier essay—Magazines and Reviews—The *Edinburgh*: Jeffrey—Its contributors: Scott's criticism—Brougham—Sydney Smith—The *Quarterly*—The new Magazine—*Blackwood's*: "Christopher North"—Lockhart—The *London*—Lamb—Leigh Hunt—Hazlitt—De Quincey—Landor's prose—Cobbett Page 691

CHAPTER IV

THE LAST GEORGIAN PROSE

Southey's prose—Historical writing: Mitford, Roscoe, and others—Hallam—Milman—Arnold, Grote, and Thirlwall—Mackintosh and Bentham—Macaulay Page 706

CHAPTER V

THE MINOR POETS OF 1800-1830

Rogers—Leigh Hunt and Hogg—A group of minors—Elliott, Mrs. Hemans, and "L. E. L."—Hood—Praed—Macaulay—Hawker and Barnes—Hartley Coleridge—Sir H. Taylor—Horne—Darley—Beddoes Page 715

INTERCHAPTER X

Page 724

BOOK XI

VICTORIAN LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

TENNYSON AND BROWNING

Tennyson: his early work and its character—The volumes of 1842—His later life and works—*The Princess*—*In Memoriam*—*Maud*—The *Idylls of the King*, etc.—Robert Browning—Periods of his work—His favourite method—His real poetical appeal—Edward FitzGerald—Elizabeth Barrett Browning
 Page 727

CHAPTER II

THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

Dickens—Thackeray—His early work—Charlotte Brontë—Mrs. Gaskell—Charles Reade—Anthony Trollope—George Eliot—Charles Kingsley—Others—R. L. Stevenson	Page 740
--	----------

CHAPTER III

HISTORY AND CRITICISM

Carlyle—His life and works—His genius—His style—Kinglake—Buckle—Freeman—Green—Froude—Matthew Arnold—Mr. Ruskin—Art in English literature—Symonds—Pater	Page 758
--	----------

CHAPTER IV

POETRY SINCE THE MIDDLE OF THE CENTURY

Matthew Arnold—The "Spasmodics"—Clough—Locker—The Earl of Lytton—The Pre-Raphaelites—Their preparation—Dante and Christina Rossetti—William Morris—O'Shaughnessy—Others	Page 774
---	----------

CHAPTER V

MISCELLANEOUS

J. S. Mill—Mansel—John Austin—Others—Newman—Borrow—Others—Science—Darwin—The <i>Vestiges</i> —Hugh Miller—Huxley	Page 787
--	----------

CONCLUSION	Page 795
----------------------	----------

INDEX	Page 799
-----------------	----------

BOOK I

THE PRELIMINARIES OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

THE EARLIEST ANGLO-SAXON POETRY

Widsith—Beowulf—Waldhere and the Fight at Finnsburg—Deor

THE oldest document which has a possibly authentic claim to be English Literature,¹ if but English Literature in the making and far off completion, is the poem commonly called *Widsith*, from its opening word, which some take to be a proper name.² Others simply see in it the designation of a "far-travelled" singer, *Widsith*, who here recounts his journeyings in 143 lines of no great literary beauty, and only interesting as sketching the gainful and varied life of a minstrel in the Dark Ages, were it not for the proper names which

¹ Fuller English treatments of this matter will be found in Mr. Stopford Brooke's *History of Early English Literature*; in Mr. H. Morley's *English Writers*, vols. i. and ii.; in Professor Earle's *Anglo-Saxon Literature*; and in the translation of Ten Brink's *English Literature*, vol. i. The texts discussed in this chapter form the first five numbers of Grein-Wül(c)ker's *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie*, vol. i. pp. 1-277, which gives two texts of *Beowulf*. This latter has been frequently edited and translated; Professor Earle's *Deeds of Beowulf* is a good translation without text.

² Some high authorities, looking upon *Widsith* as a "made-up" thing, hold it to be later, and would assign the priority to the *Finnsburg* fragment or others. No opinion one way or the other is expressed here; indeed, the writer holds that the evidence is insufficient for adopting any. But it may be convenient to make the point an occasion *in limine* for a respectful request to readers not to take absence of mention of theories of this kind, or statements in the text apparently antagonistic to them, as proof of ignorance on the writer's part. This book attempts to be a history, not of the latest or any opinions about literature, but of that literature itself. The practically endless questions of authenticity, integrity, date, and so forth, must be, as a rule, left to special study.

bestrew the piece. Not a few of these occur, or seem to occur, in other early verse, and have the interest of the "parallel passage." But three, are, or seem to be, those of persons well known to history—Eormanric or Hermanric,¹ King of the Goths; Ætla or Attila, the Scourge of God and the King of the Huns; and, lastly, a certain Ælfwine, whom some think identical with Alboin or Albovine, King of the Lombards, the husband, the insulter, and the victim of Rosmunda. It is, of course, obvious at once that though it is not impossible for the same man to have been contemporary with Hermanric, who died in 375, and Attila, who died in 453, no contemporary of either could have seen the days of Alboin, who felt his wife's revenge in 572. Therefore either Ælfwine must be somebody else or the poem is doubtful. Into such discussions this book will never enter, unless there is the strongest reason of a purely literary character for them, and there is none such here. It is sufficient to say that *if* Eormanric is the Hermanric known to history, and *if* "Widsith" saw his day, this document dates within the confines of the fourth century, at a time when no other modern language can show proofs of having had even a rudimentary existence.

The MS., the famous Exeter Book² of *gehwilcum þingum* ("things of sorts"), which Bishop Leofric gave to his Cathedral some 700 years later than Hermanric's day, and which still remains there, could, of course, not be expected to give us the original form of the "word-board," of which in his first line³ the Far-Traveller declares the unlocking. Yet it shows us a language very remote indeed from English in appearance (though this same word "word-board," which appears with the omission of a single letter, shows the remoteness to be more apparent than real), but also different from Continental Old-Saxon, and from Icelandic, its nearest relations, neighbours, and contemporaries. This language—a point more important to literature—is arranged, or can be arranged, in lines of not strictly regular length, and obeying no law of rhythm that apparently resembles those of any modern or classical prosody, except that there is a sort of far-off echo of trochaic cadence, and that the lines approach the ordinary octosyllable or dimeter more than any other form. There is no rhyme, for though it is by no means uncommon for two or more adjacent lines to end in the same syllable, this syllable is one on which the voice would lay no stress. Neither is there assonance or vowel-rhyme, the preliminary

¹ See Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, chap. xxvi.

² Ed. Thorpe (London, 1842); in course of re-editing for the Early English Text Society by I. Gollancz (vol. i. London, 1895), in both cases with translations. Its contents will be noted later.

³ *Widsith matholade: word-hord onleac* = "Widsith spoke, (he) unlocked (his) word-board."

to rhyme itself in most of the Romance tongues. But there is a very curious, though, in *Widsith*, elusive and irregular, system of *alliteration*, by which certain words, often, though far from always, two in the earlier half of the line and one in the later, begin either with the same consonant or with a vowel. And it is further usually arranged that the stress, accent, length, or whatever word be preferred, shall fall on these alliterated syllables whether it falls on others or not.¹ As for the purely literary characteristics, the nature of the piece, which, as has been said, is little more than a catalogue of names, gives very small scope. Imaginative critics have, however, discovered in it that specially English delight in roving which has distinguished many of our race—as well as, for instance, such hardly English persons as Ulysses and Sindbad.

There are names in *Widsith*—Heorot, Hrothgar, and others—which connect the poem, so far as they go, with one of much greater extent, interest, and merit, though, if the furthest age which each can reasonably claim be assigned, decidedly younger. This is the famous *Beowulf*, according to some the first on the *Beowulf* beadroll of substantive and noteworthy poems in English, using that word in the most elastic sense, and according to all who have given themselves the trouble (now minimised by scholarly assistance, if the help of the scholars be taken and their snares resisted) to acquaint themselves with it, a saga of undoubted age, originality, and interest. Adopting the same system which we adopted in the case of *Widsith*, that of selecting the earliest dated name that can be reasonably identified with one mentioned in the poem, *Beowulf*, so far as subject goes, would be as old as the second decade of the sixth century, 520 or a little earlier, when a certain fairly historical Chochilaicus raided the Frisian coast, according to Gregory of Tours. This Chochilaicus is plausibly conjectured to be the Hygelac of the poem. But beyond this it will not be safe to go, for scholarly conjecture, or perhaps it were better to say conjectural scholarship, has for the better part of a century let itself loose over the date, scene, meaning, and composition of the piece. Whether it was brought from Jutland by the Saxon invaders and Anglicised or was composed in England itself; whether the scenery is that of the east or the west coasts of the North Sea; whether it is an entire poem or a congeries of ballads; whether it is a literal history embellished poetically, a deliberate romance, or a

¹ This account of prosody is based in the first place on *Widsith*, and is not intended as controversial against those who, with Dr. Sievers, insist on the exact character of the Anglo-Saxon scheme such as it was. It acquired, no doubt, a good deal of such exactness in time; though any one who will reflect on the consequences of the fact that the texts exist almost invariably in single MSS., will be slow to accept any but wide conclusions.