A SHORT HISTORY

OF

ENGLISH LITERATURE

BY

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"*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 Interchapters 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

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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, 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

Widsith.

[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 Book[2] 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-hoard," of which in his first line[3] the Far-Traveller declares the unlocking. Yet it shows us a language very remote indeed from English in appearance (though this same word "word-hoard," 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-hoard."

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 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

Beowulf.

[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.