THE CONCISE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

George Sampson

THIRD EDITION

Revised throughout and with specially written chapters on American and Commonwealth Literature by
R. C. CHURCHILL

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ADDITIONAL CHAPTERS ON
THE LITERATURE OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AND THE MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY
LITERATURE OF THE
ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD
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PREFACE

The first thirteen chapters of this book are based on the corresponding volumes of *The Cambridge History of English Literature*. "Each chapter", as the late George Sampson wrote in the Preface to the First Edition, "takes for its subject matter the volume that bears its title, and reference to the parent work is therefore easy. Paragraphs and sentences in their original form have been incorporated into the narrative when such treatment seemed desirable and practicable... The writer of an epitome must respect his terms of reference, but he is entitled to move freely within them. He may not transform his matter, but he may add or amend; and so, while this volume presents, in the main, the views of the parent *History*, it includes certain modifications necessitated by the fact that some of the original chapters were written over thirty years ago."

A further period of almost the same length has now elapsed since Sampson wrote these words in 1941. Further modifications are therefore necessary. In preparing this Third Edition, I have proceeded on much the same lines as my predecessor. I have not transformed the matter, but I have added, amended or omitted, according to the literary climate of 1968, which differs from that of 1941 by as wide a margin as 1941 differed from 1907. The first thirteen chapters retain their original titles and the majority of their original text, but while not seeking to trespass on the preserves of George Watson's *Concise Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* I have borne in mind that this is an age of scholarship and education and I have therefore met the needs of students, without affecting the convenience of the general reader, by including a few of the main works of modern scholars and biographers under the authors and periods to which they belong. I have provided more cross-references than Sampson thought necessary. And I have taken the opportunity of a new edition to rewrite entirely the sixth section of chapter XIII, which Sampson had already expanded, and to put Gerard Manley Hopkins where he belongs in life, in the Victorian age, instead of placing him, as in both the First and Second Editions of this book, in the twentieth century when he was first published.

The fourteenth chapter has required more drastic revision. Sampson brought it up to date originally in 1941 by adding to "The Nineteenth Century: Part III" some further material under the heading of "Post-Victorian Literature". I have kept to the same general plan, at this further stage of literary development, but having regard to the increasing importance of the literature of the Commonwealth and other former colonial countries I have increased the length of this chapter by rewriting and expanding the sections on Indian, Canadian, Australasian and South African literature, giving the chapter the new and appropriate title of "Empire and After: From the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century in Britain and Overseas".

This is a long chapter, covering an important and revolutionary period in the development of many aspects of literature in the English language, both in the British Isles and abroad. But one omission will immediately strike the reader.

If the emphasis is now to be on "literature in the English language" rather than on "English literature" in its original national meaning, it is surely fitting that the United States of America, which has its own most vigorous and important literature, should be included. I have therefore added a new chapter, chapter XV, covering the literature of the United States from the Colonial Period to Henry James, giving particular attention to the relations between American and British literature, the way each has influenced the other.

The original chapter XV in the First Edition of this book was where George Sampson parted company with the parent *History* and added his own new chapter on "Late-Victorian and Post-Victorian Literature". It was felt in 1960 that this chapter had outlived its usefulness, that it should be replaced by a new modern chapter more in harmony with the critical opinion of the mid-twentieth century. I was commissioned to write this new modern chapter, which I entitled "The Age of T. S. Eliot" after the great Anglo-American writer who is admitted to be both the leading poet and the leading critic of the period *c.* 1920–60. This new modern chapter appeared in our Second Edition in 1961.

In this Third Edition I have retained the title for the last chapter, which is now chapter XVI, because the name of Eliot is even more appropriate than it was in 1960, now that we have decided to include the literature of his native country as well as the literature of the country of his adoption. But I have rewritten and expanded this final chapter throughout, in accordance with its new sub-title: "The Mid-Twentieth-Century Literature of the English-Speaking World". Ending with a section on the literature of the West Indies and the new African states, this final chapter closes a book which now takes the reader from early Anglo-Saxon times to the late nineteen-sixties and in terms of space from England itself to "regions" (to paraphrase Cowper) which neither Caesar nor Shakespeare ever knew. I believe that the author of *English for the English*, with his great love of English literature wherever it is found, would have welcomed this expansion of his original Cambridge plan and I hope that readers and students in all parts of the English-speaking world will welcome it too.

Sampson ended his Preface to the First Edition by paying a tribute to the work of his predecessors in the parent *History*, scholars like George Saintsbury, W. P. Ker, H. M. Chadwick, Sir Herbert Grierson, Harold Child, Charles Whibley, J. Dover Wilson, W. P. Trent, D. Nichol Smith, Émile Legouis, Pelham Edgar, and the editors Sir Adolphus Ward and A. R. Waller, many of whose original chapters are still among the best introductions to their authors and periods and still often consulted by scholars and critics. "Much learning", he wrote, "has gone into the volumes represented by the present chapters; and the author, now that his long day's task is done, turns to offer a parting salute of respect to the scholars whose work he has here sought to bring home 'to the great Variety of Readers' ".

This Third Edition addresses an even greater Variety than the First Folio of Shakespeare whose preface Sampson was quoting or than his own First Edition. I should like to end this Preface by paying, in my turn, a respectful tribute to George Sampson himself. Anyone who doubts the great literary skill and immense scholarly patience which went into his "long day's task" has only to

read, for example, the first volume of the parent *History*, and afterwards the equivalent chapter of this book, to realize both the magnitude of the task and how admirably equipped he was to undertake it. I can only hope that I have expanded him in time and space without too much cosmopolitan deviation from his original Johnsonian virtues.

R.C.C.

St Leonards, Sussex
March 1968

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CHAPTER I

FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO THE CYCLES OF ROMANCE

I. THE BEGINNINGS

The history of a national literature, however much destined to be international, is part at first of the national story; but it is a separable part, for man is older than his songs, and passed through many stages of development before he found his way into the kind of self-expression that we call literature. Nothing definite remains of the songs or stories possessed by the Britons whom Caesar found in southern England, and next to nothing of the literature possessed by the Britons during the centuries of the Roman occupation. Though echoes from Celtic Britain must have lingered in men's minds, English literature begins, at least, by being English.

The earliest forms of English literature, like the earliest forms of other national literatures, have perished. We know nothing whatever of Old English poetry in its rudest shape. The fragments we possess are not those of a literature in the making, for the poets of *Beowulf* and *Widsith*, of *The Ruin* and *The Seafarer* knew what they wished to say, and said it without any trace of struggle for word or form. Whether what survives is the best we have no means of knowing. *Beowulf* comes down to us in a single manuscript. Three other ancient volumes, the Exeter Book, preserved in the Cathedral library at Exeter, the Vercelli Book, strangely washed up out of the wrecks of time into a Lombard haven at Vercelli, and the Junian manuscript given to Oxford by Dujon, a friend of Milton, contain nearly all the rest of the Old English poetry we know. That is to say, if four damaged or precariously preserved old books had gone with the rest into destruction, Old English poetry would have been merely something to guess at.

Our earliest literature has much to do with life and journeys that were a constant struggle against a grim and pitiless element. The shadow of long nights by waters wild with storm or fettered by frost falls darkly upon our first poems. The sea of our forefathers was not a gracious Mediterranean washing with blue water the steps of marble palaces, but an ocean grey and tumultuous beating upon dismal shores and sterile promontories. The very land seems as cruel as the sea. No song of lark or nightingale gladdens life for these shore-dwellers; their loneliness is made more terrible by the scream of sea birds crying about the cliffs or by strange sounds that mingle with the moan of the wind across the meres. With rude implements they scratch the soil, and, in hope of the harvest, greet the earth in lines like those below, perhaps some of the oldest in our language:

> Hal wes þu, folde, fira modor,
> beo þu growende on godes faeþme;
> fodre gefylled firum to nytte.

Hale be thou Earth, Mother of men!
Fruitful be thou in the arms of the god.
Be filled with thy fruit for the fare-need of man!

We quote the modern version by the Victorian scholar Stopford Brooke.

II. RUNES AND MANUSCRIPTS

When the aboriginal English still lived by the northern seas they shared with their kindred an alphabet of "runes". We need regard here only the alphabetical value of these symbols and ignore tradition that ultimately made "Runic rhyme" develop into a stock term for mystery or incomprehensibility. The runic alphabet naturally took a form that lent itself easily to rough carving, and certain famous inscriptions upon stone, metal or bone still remain. Each rune had its own name, which was also the name of some familiar thing. Thus the symbol þ, which degenerated into an initial y, was the "thorn."

Runes went out of use in the ninth and tenth centuries. Their place had, however, been usurped long before that period by the Roman alphabet which the English received from the early Irish missionaries. The missionary and the Roman alphabet travelled together, and it was the Christian scribe who first wrote down what heathen memories had preserved. A school of Roman handwriting was established in the south of England by Augustine and his missionaries; but its existence was brief, and little evidence of its activity survives. The most powerful influence came from Ireland, to which manuscripts in the Roman "half-uncial" hand had been brought by missionaries perhaps in the fifth century. When Northumbria was Christianized by the Irish, the preachers taught their disciples to write the Word in characters more pleasing to God than the runes of heathendom. Thus the English learnt the exquisite penmanship of the Irish and were soon able to give such striking evidence of their skill as the magnificent *Lindisfarne Gospels* of about 700, in the rounded half-uncial.

After the Conquest the native hand disappeared, the only traces left being a few characters to express peculiarly English sounds, p (wynn) and þ (thorn), and the later symbols ȝ (yok) and ð (eth). The p was replaced in the thirteenth century by *w*, and disappeared; the French *qu* replaced cp. The two signs þ and ð were interchangeable and represented the two sounds of *th*. Of these the first long survived (later in the form of initial y) and is still met with in the semi-humorous archaism "ye" for "the". The symbol ȝ (a form of *z*) was variously used. It stood for *z*, for *y* in *ȝeer* (year) and *daȝe* (day), and in such forms as *kniȝt* and *rouȝ* represented the Old English *h* (*gh*), in *cniht* and *ruh*.

The writing materials of medieval England included the old *boc* or wooden tablet, coated with wax, and written upon with a style of bone or metal. Parchment and vellum were used for writings meant to endure. The scribes were monks or nuns who wrote with truly religious patience in the chilly cloisters or the cells of the monasteries, only the fortunate few having a special *scriptorium* or writing room for their task. Gradually, however, a professional class of scribes came into existence, working either for, or actually in, the monasteries.

III. EARLY NATIONAL POETRY

The first English poet known to us by name (or nickname) is "Widsith", the "Wide Wanderer", a *scop* or itinerant minstrel of the sixth century, who gives us glimpses of his own life in a poem of about 150 lines (Exeter Book). The many allusions in *Widsith* are as puzzling to us as a catalogue of names from some ancient gazetteer or genealogy, and arouse no emotion higher than an impulse towards research; but they had each a thrill for the primitive hearers. What the modern reader catches in *Widsith* is a glimpse of a poet's joy and grief appealing humanly across the centuries.

Deor's Lament (Exeter Book), a poem unique in its time for a strophic form with a constant refrain, "*Þæs ofereode: Þisses swa maeg*", "That was lived through, so can this be", is a song of the poet's own misfortunes, illustrated by the equally hard lot of others who once were happy. *Deor* has a lyric note.

The Wanderer (Exeter Book), a moving elegy of 115 lines, is the lament of a man who has lost his protecting lord, and wanders over the waters to find a resting place. In dreams his vanished happiness shines on him again, but day brings back the grey sea and the driving snow and the desolation of the earth. *The Seafarer* (Exeter Book) is usually read as a dialogue between an old man who knows the joyless life of the sea and a young man who will not be deterred from maritime adventure by the melancholy tale of the old seaman. But it may be the monologue of a man who, hating the hardships and cruelty of the sea, knows that for him there is no other life. Among modern versions and paraphrases, that of the American poet Ezra Pound, first published in *Ripostes* (1912), is notable:

> List how I, care-wretched, on ice-cold sea,
> Weathered the winter, wretched outcast
> Deprived of my kinsmen;
> Hung with hard ice-flakes, where hail-scur flew...

Among the fragmentary poems in the Exeter Book there is one short piece commonly called *The Ruin*, remarkable because it takes us away from the sea and describes the downfall of some great palace or rich city—possibly Bath. The imperfection of the Exeter manuscript makes this poem difficult to read and adds to the obscurity of other short pieces like *The Wife's Complaint* and *The Husband's Message*.

The fullest revelation of the hard, heroic and joyless lives led by our old English forefathers is to be found in *Beowulf*, a narrative poem of 3183 lines transmitted in a tenth-twelfth century manuscript, now safely preserved in the British Museum after many damaging adventures. Like the epics of Homer, *Beowulf* has been subjected to a close critical examination that has produced almost as many opinions as there have been critics. Some hold that its home is the Baltic shore, and that it was brought to England by the invading Northmen. Others designate England as the place of composition and the Yorkshire coast as the scene of the story. The fact should be noted that, not only in *Beowulf*, but in all our early national poetry, the allusions are Continental or Scandinavian: no reference can be found to persons who are known to have lived in Britain.

There is general agreement that the West Saxon dialect in which *Beowulf* now exists is not that in which it was originally composed, and that the lays out of which it was fashioned belong to pre-Christian times, although in its present form it contains many passages of distinctly Christian character. What may be called the "stuff" of *Beowulf* is essentially heathen; the sentiment and reflections are Christian. The mixture indicates that the poem is a heathen legend which received its present expression from a Christian poet. The resemblance between the deeds of Beowulf and those of other heroes do not point to imitation, but rather to the tendency of primitive heroes to become each the centre of stock adventures. Naturally, few heroes in any early romance have escaped a combat with a monster. The story of *Beowulf* is so generally familiar that it need not be told here. The poem is interesting both as a heroic lay and as a national document. It is the earliest, as it is the finest, of the northern hero-poems, and in places it attains a very moving quality. The song of the fight at Finnsburh, the description of the monster-haunted mere, and the story of Beowulf's death and burial have the note of great literature. The poem gives us glimpses of the communal life of our ancestors in the hall of their lord, and tells of the emotions that moved them. They were brave; but they were terror-haunted. Against the beasts they could fight; against the dim, impalpable unknown they were helpless. The long nights of the northern winter harrowed them with fear and wonder. The Homeric heroes are the playthings of the gods; but their life is more joyous than that of the Wyrd-haunted heroes in the hall of Hrothgar. Perhaps because it has no sense of joy or light or colour, the greatest of Old English poems has never really entered into the being of the Englishman, who has turned for his heroes to the Mediterranean and not to the Baltic. We do not know who first assembled the stories of *Beowulf* into a continuous narrative, nor when they were thus assembled. There is a modern prose translation by Clark Hall and C. L. Wrenn, with an introduction by J. R. R. Tolkien.

Apart from *Beowulf*, the only surviving remains of early national epic poetry are a fragment (50 lines) of *Finnsburh* (MS. now lost) and two short fragments (63 lines together) of *Waldere* (MS. at Copenhagen). The *Finnsburh* story, though obscure to us, must have been popular, for it is the subject of a long episode in *Beowulf* (ll. 1063–1159), and three of the characters are mentioned in *Widsith*. The full story of *Waldere* is available in several other sources. The fragments begin with praise of the sword Mimming, the master-work of Weland the smith, which Waldere is to wield against Guthhere (Gunther).

Few traces remain of heathen religious poetry. What we have are popular "charms" or incantations for securing fertility of the fields or immunity from witchcraft, and even these have plainly felt the influence of later Christianity. It is probable that they were not written down until they had ceased to be part of a heathen ceremonial and had become part of peasant folk-lore.

Old English verse takes, as a rule, one general form, the particular character of which is discussed in a later section. The verses were made for oral delivery, the alliteration itself probably marking the strong chords or clashes of whatever noises accompanied the voice. Possibly the nearest approach we have to Anglo-Saxon verse is the "pointing" of the Psalms in the Church service, i.e. the fitting of verses with no fixed number of syllables to a form of chant with a fixed

number of accents. The general style of Old English verse is ejaculatory—the style of men who draw their images from the strife of the elements. Old English literature is the literature of men, not of women. We need not doubt that there were songs of other kinds—common songs and comic songs, songs about women and songs about drink; but such songs had a purely oral life and perished because they were never recorded. The Germanic tribes were decorous in their lives, but they were not unnatural ascetics and did not suffer from abnormal repressions.

The poems named in the early pages of this chapter are a selection from the pieces, not all of literary interest, that survive in Old English transcriptions made in the tenth century or later. There are no "original manuscripts". Song and saga existed before scribes and script. Some communities have regarded writing as the enemy of man's most precious possession, his memory. Law would be recorded before lyric. In Wagner's *Ring*, the pact with the giants is carved on the shaft of Wotan's spear; no one records the songs of the Rhine Daughters.

IV. OLD ENGLISH CHRISTIAN POETRY

Roman-British Christianity, which gave Britain its first martyr and its first heretic, left no recorded trace upon the course of English literature. The invading barbarians from Germany overwhelmed British religion as well as British poetry. But in Ireland the faith preached by St Patrick still held its ground. The re-Christianizing of England, first by Celtic missionaries from Ireland through the western islands of Scotland, and next by Augustine and his monks sent hither from Rome itself, changed much in the matter and feeling of English poetry, but left its form and general machinery unaltered. The bleak mists of the unknown enshrouding primitive life dissipate as light breaks into the heathen darkness. The subject of the poets' song is now the story of Christ and the deeds of saintly heroes. The dim and inexorable Wyrd gives place to an all-seeing Father; and grace, hope and mercy begin to lighten the darkness of lives once terror-haunted. The form of the verse and the shape of the poems remain unchanged. The heroism of Judith is sung in the measure that had chanted the deeds of Beowulf, and God and the angels, or Christ and the apostles, take something like the form of an English chief with a shining host of unconquerable clansmen.

The new spirit in English poetry came from Christianity, but not from that alone. English poetry did not change because a Kentish king was baptized by a Roman monk. In 597 St Augustine landed at Ebbsfleet; but St Columba was already at Iona in 563, and from Iona came St Aidan to Lindisfarne in 635. St Augustine brought a theological system to the south; St Aidan brought religious grace to the north. The missionaries who carried Christianity into the Anglian kingdoms came not merely from the island of St Patrick but from the island of Deirdre, and it was in a monastery ruled by Celtic, not Roman, usage that Caedmon found his gift of song. Thus northern English literature came to be touched by an influence that people have agreed to call Celtic. The effect was to make English poetry subjective rather than objective, lyric rather than epic.