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Edited by Clare A. Lees

Excerpt

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Introduction: literature in Britain and Ireland to 1150

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Taking to sea

The Parker Manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 891 records that Dub Sláine, Mac Bethad and Máel Inmain crossed the Irish Sea in a rudderless boat, without sails and with little food. The three risk-takers did not care whether or not their food ran out or where their journey or pilgrimage ‘for Godes lufan’ took them, yet they landed in Cornwall and travelled on to the Anglo-Saxon court of King Alfred the Great. Immediately after this, the annal notes the death of the best teacher among the Scotti at that time, Suibhne (Swifneh in Old English).¹ These celebrated stories of three men in a boat and of the excellence of Irish scholarship are not without precedent in the history of early medieval travel and cultural exchange. In the seventh century, the scholar-poet Aldhelm, bishop of Malmesbury, who may himself have benefited from Irish training, describes the English as travelling to Ireland like swarms of bees to learn from its scholars. The Chronicle entry for 891 opens, however, with an update on the activities of the Viking forces on the continent and the battle at Louvain (now in modern Belgium) between the Vikings, the East Franks, the Saxons and the Bavarians. The cultural world of the Anglo-Saxons, the earliest people to call themselves English, was informed as much by its interests and relations with the continental kingdoms as with its neighbours.

In the history of English literature the entry for 891 in the Parker Chronicle (manuscript A of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) is also noteworthy because it provides remarkable insight into how writing, as the technology of script and manuscript production, is a dimension of the broader conceptualization of history as written record in the early Middle Ages. Visible in the Chronicle entry is the moment when the second scribe of the manuscript takes over from the first and, with this transfer of hands, comes a new series of annals

1 Bately (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, pp. 54–5 (p. 54).

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recording the final years of the reign of Alfred the Great. The evidence brings us close to the moment when the Chronicle was assembled in the late ninth or very early tenth century. The second scribe continues the reportage of events with an account of the sighting of a comet on or about the time of the liturgical season of Rogation, after Easter. The annal gives the Latin term for the comet ('cometa') but proffers too an English etymology for the long-tailed or haired star or 'feaxede steorra'.² Natural phenomena, wars with the Vikings, pilgrimage, knowledge and learning are of equal interest in this account of what was deemed memorable in one year in the ninth century. Informed by the tremendous surge of interest in English literature generated by Alfredian court culture more generally, the Parker Chronicle entry for 891 offers us a glimpse into the making of literary history.

It is because of its evidence for the writing and composition of the past as historical annal, its interest in pilgrimage as well as the nitty-gritty of Irish boat construction and travel, its terse account of the trajectory of Viking raids on the continent, its casual references to Irish, English and Latin learning, its recording of time by liturgical season as well as chronological year and its emphasis on the science of observed phenomena that the Parker Chronicle entry for 891 serves so well as an introduction to the multicultural, multi-disciplinary, trans-temporal perspectives which inform *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*. Taking as its generous remit the earliest centuries of the medieval era up to and well beyond the traditional end of the period with the Norman Conquest in 1066, this volume brings together the literary histories of Britain and Ireland, the two islands of what is sometimes known as the Atlantic Archipelago, from the fifth and sixth centuries to the mid-twelfth century. Consonant with this revision of traditional chronologies and disciplines, *Early Medieval English Literature* is divided into three sections, each of which deals with such evidence as there is for the dating of textual production in the various literary cultures that make up the early medieval – some texts, *Beowulf* is a good example, are notoriously difficult to date – but also discusses the evidence thematically and interpretively. Part I, 'Word, script and image', begins with the history of writing itself in the earliest centuries, after which follow chapters on the early literary languages and cultures of the period in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and on the powerful role of Latin literary culture in northern as well as southern England up to, roughly speaking, the end of the ninth century. Part II, 'Early English literature', explores the vernacular literature of the Anglo-Saxons, paying particular

² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

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attention to its literary, linguistic and cultural relationships, illustrating just how various and expansive are the forms of textual production throughout the early medieval centuries. This section of the book moves forward from the ninth century but it is also alert to the necessarily different chronologies suggested, for example, by the genre of history writing or by women's history, much as the account of art and writing in Part I demands a broader and more flexible approach to period and date. Part III, 'Latin learning and the literary vernaculars', begins similarly, with discussions of science and law which are relevant to the whole of the early medieval period. Other chapters, however, address the rich literary cultures of, for example, later Latin, Gaelic, Welsh, English and Anglo-Scandinavian, and again move from 900 to, roughly speaking, 1150. Literary chronologies, this book suggests, are not uniform or readily mapped one onto another. Those suggested by an expansive eleventh century characterized by its European contexts, for example, need to be set against the more detailed particularities of literary production in English in the later years of the ninth and early tenth centuries. This book makes use of resonances of theme and literary culture in its response to the historical evidence for literary production, and thereby facilitates an understanding of the mobile currents of literary interest throughout the early medieval centuries. Its chapters, therefore, can be read sequentially in terms of chronology and date (from earlier to later), but they can also be grouped differently, with reference to place and region, or to thematic, cultural and literary import.

Indeed, this introduction takes up the annalist's themes for the year 891, using them to suggest a number of routes through the early medieval centuries other than those outlined by section and chapter titles. This flexibility to read across different chapters and sections can similarly deepen our insight into the early medieval multicultural literary world. Chapter 4, for example, addresses the earliest writings from Ireland, Scotland and Wales (granting that these regions map only very roughly onto medieval territories and regions) and Chapter 5 the tremendous breadth of Anglo-Latin literature to the end of the ninth century. Chapter 8 explores English learning and literature in the ninth century, a century very much identified with King Alfred, while Chapter 9, aware of the different traditions for writing history in Britain and Ireland, assesses its cultivation in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Chapter 17 examines the productive and often innovative relationship between what we now think of as Latin and English liturgical and devotional literature. Chapters 18 and 19, with their examination of the poetics of wonder, on the one hand, and the workings of time, the body and science, on the other, demonstrate the centrality of the perceptual world and the production of

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knowledge in Latin and English literary and learned discourse. Chapter 23 brings together the evidence for Anglo-Scandinavian language and literature by focusing both on particular regions such as York and London and by examining contacts across the sea. The complex hybridities of later Latin literary styles are the subject of Chapter 21, and Chapters 24 to 26 trace European literature in the English eleventh century as well as later Gaelic and Welsh writings.

The ecclesiastical history of the English people, the *Historia ecclesiastica* written by the churchman and scholar Bede in the early eighth century, offers a slightly different entry into our understanding of literary history from that offered by the English Chronicle. Bede was assiduous in documenting wherever possible the development of English Christianity across the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and their contacts with other Christian communities in Hibernia and Britannia. His perspective, framed by an understanding of salvation history, is informed by the politics of his own Church and people, by Northumbrian deference to the metropolitan of Rome and by connections with influential ecclesiastical centres on the continent. Bede was capable of paying scant and occasionally slighting attention to neighbouring kingdoms in Britain and Ireland even as he recognized their profound importance. Chapter 7 notes, for example, that the famous account of the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, the *Adventus Saxonum*, which Bede takes over from the sixth-century British monk Gildas's *De excidio Britannia* [*The Ruin of Britain*], is reoriented to be more accommodating of Anglo-Saxon perspectives. Bede, of course, was fully aware of learned resources and repertoire of styles and genres offered by Latin literature, whether those produced in Britain, the English kingdoms, Ireland or on the continent, as Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate. He knew enough too to be alert to the importance of early English vernacular culture. The significance of the so-called first English poem, Cædmon's *Hymn*, is explored in further detail in Chapter 10, and the fuller range of the poetic corpus after Cædmon is charted in Chapter 11. Bede's knowledge of other literary languages in Britain and Ireland, however, could be less well informed. The range and linguistic virtuosity of literary production in Britain and Ireland conveyed by this book puts into focus the limits of even Bede's engagement with these other literary cultures, and it demonstrates just how varied is the story of early medieval literary history.

An understanding of literary production in the early Middle Ages, however, needs to take into account not merely where cultural engagement takes place but when and how it is situated. In this respect, some understanding of time, not merely in the sense of chronology, but of how medieval literature itself

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understands time, is crucial. Dating early medieval texts is notoriously difficult and the chronologies of literary production can be surveyed only in the broadest terms. The literature itself, however, has a finely nuanced sense of past, present and future, finding ways to think about this world and its temporalities as well as to glimpse eternity in the next world. Put another way, taking to sea in order to capture something about the spirit ('for Godes lufan') was of interest to more than just three Irish travellers in the ninth century. Eorcengota, a member of the seventh-century Kentish royal family, for example, was one of several religious women who travelled to Francia to take advantage of the new Christian learning there. Such insights into the energy and dynamism that new knowledge generates can lead to different ways to think about the literary history of women's writing, as Chapter 14 points out. Chapter 15 explores further how, in the Lives of the holy, women and men, friendship and gender, as well as sexuality and sanctity, form the co-ordinates of a life worth narrating. Later in the eighth century, to take the case of another Anglo-Saxon abroad, Wynfrith, an English monk from Wessex, led a series of conversionary missions within the Frankish empire. As the saintly Boniface, Wynfrith later became known as the apostle of the Germans and their patron saint. He died in an attempt to convert the Frisians and left an extensive correspondence, with women as well as men, as another of his legacies, discussed in Chapter 5. The writing of the Life of Boniface, however, was left to another Anglo-Saxon at work on the continent, Willibald of Mainz. By contrast, the earliest known version of the Life of the sixth-century pope, Gregory the Great, who prompted the mission to convert the Kentish Anglo-Saxons in the first place according to Bede, and who was later known as the apostle of the English, was written in the north of England at Whitby (now in North Yorkshire), perhaps by a female member of the double monastery there. The Life of Gregory is a subtle reminder of the reach and ambition of the writing of hagiography in Northumbria, charted in greater detail in Chapter 6; the saintly Gregory, however, never came to Britain.

Small wonder, then, that so much early medieval literature is interested in ideas about home and abroad, travel and exile, places near and far, whether of this world or the next – poems like *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer* (see Chapter 18), or works like *Immram Brain* [*The Voyage of Bran*] (Chapter 4), *The Wonders of the East* (Chapter 19) or Willibald's travels to the Holy Land as reported by the English nun Hugeburc of Heidenheim (Chapter 5). Knowledge of time itself and its workings in the world was big business, Chapter 19 points out. Early medieval scholars were much exercised by its calculation (whether in the form of the computus or in that of the measures of poetry) and by attempts

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to describe and hence explore the natural, created world. The point is further underlined by Chapter 16's adoption of the Christian topos of the six ages of the world – a topos used by the ninth-century Cambro-Latin *Historia Brittonum* – to explore the great sequence of Old English religious poems of the Junius manuscript. Early medieval apprehensions of the shape of time are ways to understand its poetry as well as the Lives of its saints.

The exhilarating geography of peoples and places, the sheer vitality and interconnectedness, as well as difference and dissonance, of early medieval literary communities, together with their investment in this world and in the next, are central to early medieval literary history. Contemporary knowledge of the world forged by trade and travel is a dimension of much longer-standing inquiries into history made by late classical and medieval cultures. The intellectual frisson generated by the knowledge that the history of the world can be brought right up to date is palpable in, for example, the famous ninth-century report to the Alfredian court about the voyages in northern Scandinavia made by Ohthere, a Norwegian, and Wulfstan, who was possibly English or perhaps Frankish. In much the same way as the Irish pilgrims in the Parker Chronicle, these travellers too have made their mark on literary history, and the implications of their story are explored further in Chapters 7 and 10.

Anglo-Saxon contacts with the continent have been famously studied by Wilhelm Levison in his *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*. As important for literary historians as for other historians, cultural exchange is just as significant for the tenth century as it is for the ninth as well as the eighth. The tenth century saw a determined (though not necessarily widespread or particularly successful) English effort to tidy up its ecclesiastical practices and monastic culture under the guiding spirit of the earlier reforms of the Carolingians. The so-called Benedictine Revival is coterminous with a period of West Saxon consolidation after the reconquest of the Anglo-Scandinavian territories early in the tenth century, and is complemented by new interests in Latin literature and in compositions associated with the liturgy and devotion, explored in Chapters 17 and 21. The second half of the century saw prolonged Scandinavian 'piracy' as the Anglo-Saxons tended to put it but also, as Chapter 23 stresses, Scandinavian poets at the court of Æthelred II. The period witnessed as well the production of virtually all the major manuscripts of English poetry, whose richness of genre, form and style is the subject of Chapter 11.

English literary culture is shot through with evidence of its international contacts and sources and this is an important aspect of its pre-eminence as a

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literary language in the later tenth and eleventh centuries, a case argued vigorously by Chapter 22. The extent to which multilingualism and interlingualism as well as vernacular consolidation are central to periods of raiding, social disruption and warfare is evident too when we consider the cultural networks of the powerful elites, the ruling families, of the long eleventh century. Queen Edith, for example, wife of Edward the Confessor and patron of his Life, spoke English, French, Danish and Irish; she also had access to Latin, whether she read it herself or had it translated for her. The Confessor's court, like that of Cnut's earlier in the eleventh century, Chapter 24 points out, was international through and through. But this book demonstrates that internationalism was not a feature only of these later centuries, being rather a characteristic of the whole literary period.

Faced with such evidence, a history predicated on post-medieval ideas about national literary traditions, on the English literature of Anglo-Saxon England, for example, could achieve only so much. The Cambridge History of English Literature, and the volume in the series with which this volume is most closely associated, *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, edited by David Wallace, does not, however, commit us to such an account because the literary and linguistic culture of the English is not synonymous with its written vernacular. Some of Anglo-Saxon England's greatest literary achievements are written in Latin – Bede's work is the most obvious example, though that of Aldhelm's runs a close second – and, as we have already seen, the culture of the Anglo-Saxons is deeply connected to that of other early medieval kingdoms, near and far. Like *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, this volume attempts to include something of the many literary stories of the two islands of Britain and Ireland in this early period. Something, in other words, of the five languages and four nations or peoples that Bede described in the first chapter of the first book of his *Historia*: English, British, Irish, Pictish and Latin, the language of the universal Church (in so far as it was understood in the West).

Encountering the past

Chapter 25 draws our attention to a praise poem by Cinaed ua hArtacáin, chief poet of Ireland in the later tenth century, about the Scandinavian king of Dublin and the Hebrides, Amlaíb Cuarán or Óláfr Sigtryggsson, who had earlier been ruler of Scandinavian York. The ninth-century history of the Britons, *Historia Brittonum*, which was translated into Middle Irish or Gaelic in the eleventh century, notes that poetry apparently flourished at the court of

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King Ida of Northumbria in the sixth century, naming the celebrated Welsh poets, Taliesin and Aneirin. Both are examples of the sustained reach of early medieval literature into its own past, whether that of living memory or of rehearsed, recited and sometimes recorded memory. The same tendency is evident in works as differently conceived as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle or, indeed, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*: both demonstrate the importance of the historical imaginary in the earlier medieval period. The *Beowulf* manuscript can be dated, broadly speaking, to the very end of the tenth century or the very beginning of the early eleventh, yet the poem is set in the migration age of the fourth to the sixth centuries in an almost mythical Scandinavia – almost mythical because, as is well known, the poem maintains an uncanny relation to the physical geography and history of the region. Composed in Old English and copied by two English scribes (although scribal identity or ethnicity cannot be easily read off script, Chapter 2 reminds us), the poem makes no explicit reference at all to the Anglo-Saxons, or English as they were calling themselves by the later tenth century. Perhaps we should not be surprised that two of the poem's best translations in the twentieth century were made by Scottish and Irish poets well versed in the poetry of the north: Edwin Morgan and Seamus Heaney.

Remembering the poets and the ancestors is an aspect of a widespread cultural investment in exploring how the past might be anchored in the present. And the present can have a long reach too, as Chapter 12 stresses. *Beowulf* – the best-known Anglo-Saxon poem – continues to call on its readers, to challenge us with its intricate poetics that renders its cultural world immediate, present and implicated in our own. Chapter 13, on such celebrated shorter Old English poems as *The Wanderer*, assesses the temporal dimensions of experience central to a group of poems still known, somewhat nostalgically, as the Old English elegies. What a poem makes possible in terms of experience, what it perceives and knows, together with the responses it tries to elicit, is central also to Chapter 18's account of Old English riddles and the literature of wonder.

For Bede the story of the English in the two islands of Britannia and Hibernia began with Roman Britain, however, and with the legacy of history, not poetry. Anglo-Saxon scholars tend to date the early medieval English period from the arrival of the Germanic tribes of the Angles, Saxons and so-called Jutes in the middle of the fifth century or from the conversion of Kent at the end of the sixth – both events documented by Bede. The ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* associates the beginning of history with the Christian creation and so starts with Adam; it continues by ordering time according to

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the six ages of the world – Adam to the Last Age, as noted earlier. But the *Historia Brittonum* also finds narrative space for the Trojan origins of the British and, of course, the story of Arthur, with which Chapter 26, on the literature of the Welsh, and this book ends. That the British are descended from Brutus and count Arthur as one of their heroes reminds us how mythmaking in the medieval period could gain authority by association with traditions of classical fictions. The same ‘story-world’, as Chapter 24 puts it, of the Romans and Greeks informed the history-making of the Gaels, as well as the English and the Normans in the later centuries of the early medieval period.

Using different mythologies from those of *Beowulf*, Welsh poets refined the art of revising past stories to fit present concerns to such an extent that it is virtually impossible to date their original composition: this is one of their greatest achievements, whose implications are carefully teased out in Chapter 26. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle too borrowed earlier traditions to structure its recording of the past, but the Parker Chronicle audaciously begins with the royal genealogy of the house of Alfred. In the ninth century, the West Saxons gave a big push to the recording of the annals of their history in English, as we have already seen, but the example of Æthelweard’s Latin Chronicle demonstrates that English was not the only option for a family member of a European elite engaged on the project of history in the tenth. This Chronicle was commissioned by Matilda, abbess of Essen and Æthelweard’s relative, who traced her family back to Alfred, while Æthelweard himself, ealdorman of the western provinces, was not only a member of the European elite but patron of the great English writer Ælfric (discussed further in Chapter 22). Genealogy, the history of a particular people, might be said to trump place, the history of a particular geography, in the Parker Chronicle as much as it does in Æthelweard’s Chronicle though with significantly different results in literary language and style. The efficacies of genealogy could be put to powerful vernacular use: the Preface to the laws issued in the name of King Alfred is known as the Mosaic Preface, Chapter 20 reminds us, and recounts the laws which God gave to Moses.

Beginnings and endings

The interest of early medieval cultures in their own past, including that of its laws, is a point of convergence with the interest of modern culture in early medieval literature and history. The literary stories of the peoples and kingdoms of the early medieval period are, however, as often incommensurate as they are complexly intertwined. Questions of when literary production in any

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given tradition begins and ends are difficult to answer. Early medieval evidence for Welsh writing is very thin, though skilful interpretation of it indicates deep traditions of poetry-making and storytelling as well as of scholarly learning. Evidence for Scottish and Irish literary production makes better sense when the two are viewed together, given their close socio-cultural and political relationships. English-language literature, like Anglo-Scandinavian literature, takes off in the ninth century, although the evidence of the laws starts early, but English literary production in Latin dates from the seventh century, well before Bede. A literary history that accounted only for one of these traditions would make it hard to detect and assess patterns of similarity, such as the sustained interest in classical literature in the later centuries in Ireland, Scotland and England, noted in Chapters 24 and 25. But patterns of difference and independence, indicated by choice of literary language, verse form, genre and style, are equally crucial in understanding how early medieval people negotiated their kinship and cultural practices. In this regard, poetry makes its own distinctions, marking it as belonging to the Welsh or the Anglo-Saxons, for example. Furthermore, as Chapter 1 stresses, literature in the early medieval centuries could be said to begin in an important sense with its technologies, with the resurfacing of writing and inscription in Ireland and Britain after the end of Roman Britain.

The matter of endings is even more, perhaps notoriously complex. There is considerable scholarly debate about the precise, historical nature of the relationship between Old English literature and early Middle English literature, for example, with some viewing the former as a vital cultural force in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and others seeing the latter as a new formation, foundational for the subsequent literary developments. What is clear, however, is that neither the literature of the English nor English literature ends with the Norman Conquest in 1066. The eleventh and twelfth centuries are crucial ones for Irish, English, Scandinavian and French international literary cultures. Evidence for Welsh could be said to belong neatly to the later centuries as well, if not to begin with them. By the same token, the long eleventh century acts as a precursor for the international literature of the French of England after it, and for continental developments such as the Loire School. The history of Latin literature reaches a tipping point when William of Malmesbury is able to reflect on its earlier traditions in the mid-twelfth century, by which time the production of classic Old English verse is well in the past and that of women's literary culture has shifted its dimensions and interest. Literary history in this book, therefore, looks forward from the end of Roman occupation of Britain to the mid-twelfth century, across the two