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The Cambridge Introduction to
Anglo-Saxon Literature

An approachable and stimulating introduction to Anglo-Saxon literature, this book provides indispensable guidance for students on this important and rewarding area of literary studies. The chapters are clearly organized by topic, and significant attention is paid to key individual works, including *Beowulf*, *The Seafarer* and writings by Bede. All textual quotations are translated into Modern English, with the original language texts carefully explained. The *Introduction* synthesizes and develops dominant approaches to Anglo-Saxon literature today, integrating Old English and Latin traditions, and placing the literature in larger historical and theoretical contexts. The structure, style and layout are attractive and user-friendly, including illustrative figures and textboxes, and Magennis provides guidance on resources for studying Anglo-Saxon literature, informing the reader of opportunities for investigating the subject further. Overall, the book enables a thorough understanding and appreciation of artful and eloquent works from a distant past, which still speak powerfully to people today.

Hugh Magennis is Professor of Old English Literature and Director of the Institute of Theology at Queen's University Belfast.

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Preface

This book is primarily for readers with some background in literary studies but little or no knowledge of writings produced in Anglo-Saxon England. It is hoped that the book will also have interesting things to say to more advanced students but its guiding intention, in line with that of the Cambridge University Press series to which it belongs, is to open up the subject of Anglo-Saxon literature for those approaching it for the first time – while endeavouring not to 'dumb down' that subject in the process.

The designation Anglo-Saxon literature is one that encompasses writings in 'Old English' but also includes texts in the other literary language in use in the period, Latin. Latin was always the language of a small elite in Anglo-Saxon England but as the language of learning and of the Christian church it was the medium for some of the most important writers of the period. Old English, the earliest form of the English language, was the vernacular language of the Anglo-Saxons. English has undergone such profound changes in its history that Old English is largely incomprehensible today to those who have not studied it. Hence the need for translations in this book, from both languages. Quotations from the literature are mostly given here in Modern English but some glossed words and phrases in their original language are included and some longer passages are quoted in the original, with explanatory commentary.

Old English literature has always attracted more literary critical attention than Anglo-Latin, and that balance of emphasis is reflected again in this book, but I aim to give more consideration to writings in the latter language than they have usually received in introductions to Anglo-Saxon literature in the past and to integrate treatment of Old English and Latin as much as possible. In the following pages I will also be setting out to give a sense of the issues that have particularly concerned critics, and do so especially today, providing an introduction therefore not simply to Anglo-Saxon literature but also to Anglo-Saxon literary studies.

The first chapter flags up some of the major strands to be discussed later in the book, using a passage from the great Anglo-Saxon historian Bede as a

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starting point. The chapter also presents a discussion of modern perspectives and perceptions of Anglo-Saxon literature and a concise outline of Anglo-Saxon literary, and cultural, history. Chapter 2 then offers a more detailed overview of what have been seen as the major literary traditions of the period, with sections on Old English poetry and its oral background (emanating as it does from pre-literate times), on traditions of Latin prose and poetry, on prose writings in the vernacular, and on the adaptation of Old English poetry to Christian uses.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at kinds or genres of literature produced, the former chapter treating varieties of narrative, specifically heroic poetry, translations and adaptations of the Bible, history writing, and accounts of those Christian heroes, the saints, while the latter chapter surveys some non-narrative strands – sermons, writings of wisdom and lore, including riddles, and, a particularly attractive 'kind' of Old English literature in modern critical perception, the so-called elegies.

The final chapter considers Anglo-Saxon 'afterlives', later uses and appropriations of Anglo-Saxon England and its writings, from the Middle Ages onwards, including a section on creative writers from Wordsworth and Longfellow, via Tolkien, to Heaney and the present. Each chapter also has a number of text boxes and a 'postscript' on a particular topic related to the content of the chapter. The final postscript takes the form of a new verse translation by the distinguished poet Ciaran Carson.

The volume ends with guidance on resources for studying Anglo-Saxon literature and a bibliography of works cited, both of which components offer possibilities and opportunities for taking the subject further, as I hope many readers will wish to do. In approaching Anglo-Saxon literature we come into contact with and try to understand artful and eloquent works from a distant past, which can still speak powerfully to people today. In a similar way the poet of the short Old English poem *The Ruin* considers the buildings left by a great former civilization and exclaims wonderingly that in creating these works from the past

> A mind instigated its quick-witted idea,
> ingenious in the use of ring(-pattern)s.
> [Mod monade myneswiftne gebrægd,
> hwætred in hringas.]

In the following pages, I hope to introduce readers to the mind(s) and ideas, quick-witted and otherwise, of Anglo-Saxon literature.

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I am very grateful to Ciaran Carson for producing translations of the Old English poems *The Husband's Message* and *Riddle 60* for this book. Ciaran Carson retains the copyright for these translations. I understand the quotation of other copyright material in the book to fall within the terms of 'fair dealing' for the purposes of criticism and I have limited such quotation to a small proportion of the text of any one work.

The sources of translations from Anglo-Saxon and related texts are indicated in references in parenthesis. Unattributed translations are my own.

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Abbreviations

ASPR	The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. Krapp and Dobbie
EETS	Early English Text Society
OS	Original Series
SS	Supplementary Series
MS(S)	Manuscript(s)
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*

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