

TOEBI, Annual Meeting 2009

Saturday 24 October, School of English, University of St Andrews

'Learning Old English Past and Present'

Some 30 university teachers of Old English met in St Andrews on Saturday 24 October 2009 to discuss teaching methods for Old English, past and present.

The morning session, concentrating on 'Learning Old English: Earlier Traditions', explored the lives of three individuals and their efforts in the teaching of Old English: the seventeenth-century Thomas Marshall, the nineteenth-century John Josias Conybeare, and the nineteenth-century William Barnes. Papers given by Kees Dekker, Robyn Bray and Chris Jones charted the difficulties these individuals faced, both in learning the Old English language themselves, and also in dealing with the deficient linguistic experience of their pupils. The seventeenth-century tradition of Old English learning showed itself much indebted to the study of Latin, whereas nineteenth-century efforts were shown to have attempted linkage with the study and knowledge of modern English. Whereas the seventeenth-century study of Old English was shown to have taken place mainly in the circles of university-educated philologists and theologians, the nineteenth-century effort also stretched into schools (including primary schools) and working men's clubs.

The following session concentrated on presenting the results of an online survey, taken amongst TOEBI members over the previous six months. The survey, prepared and introduced by Erika Corradini, charted the learning of Old English over the last 20-30 years (the decades in which most TOEBI members would have been learning Old English). Knowledge of classical languages (Latin, Greek), related Germanic languages (Old Norse, Gothic, Old High German and Old Frisian) and modern languages was shown to have accompanied most learners of Old English during their education. In terms of learning tools, grammars, primers and dictionaries were found to have been the main source of language acquisition; the internet, on the other hand, was shown to have played a surprisingly inconspicuous role. The survey (the second in the history of TOEBI, after an earlier one undertaken in the 1990s) demonstrated the need for a regular surveying of language learning among TOEBI members. A future survey could be able to chart the decline of modern language learning in the schools and universities of the United Kingdom and its possible effects on the study of Old English, and the possible effects of electronic tools on the study of Old English. It seems likely that electronic tools will displace more traditional book-based language learning at least to some extent.

The third session, presented by Tom Duncan, Don Scragg and Hugh Magennis, consisted of three personal testimonies of Old English language learning, as gained over the course of an academic career. Again the difficulty of dealing with linguistically inexperienced pupils was discussed, as was the general decline of language learning in the universities of the United Kingdom. The discussion also covered the question as to whether the study of dead languages should be compulsory at any stage during an individual's education. Old English was said to thrive more in English departments with a period-based structure, rather than a theory- or theme-based structure. In the departments offering period-oriented degrees, Old English was in many cases said to be a compulsory element in the early stages of a degree, which was then shown to lead to greater uptake of optional Old English modules at a later stage. Conversely, merely optional Old English provision in the earlier stages of a degree seemed to be connected with failing Old English modules at a later point during a degree programme. There was also discussion of whether large-scale research projects with a focus on Old English, funded by public bodies, were in fact diverting the more experienced staff away from undergraduate Old English teaching, which was instead left to be undertaken by postgraduate students. This in turn was said to have led, in some cases, to a disappointing undergraduate uptake of Old English precisely in those university departments which were at the forefront of research in Old English.

The Annual General Meeting of TOEBI, which followed the three sessions, demonstrated a concern for the representation of Old English and TOEBI in the public eye. There was some discussion of a possible re-distribution of roles among the committee members, which, after further consultation, could eventually lead to the appointment of a patron-like figure for TOEBI.

Overall, the sense was that the study of Old English was vigorous and thriving in the English departments of the United Kingdom. A larger number of students than ever in the past were shown to have some exposure to the study of Old English. At the same time, however, a lack in prior linguistic awareness and linguistic education in the students also meant that the study of Old English rarely went beyond the level of beginners' classes.

In an adjoining room, a book exhibition included samples of nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century language learning materials. A further exhibit explained aspects of the work of SALTIRE, an organisation based at the University of St Andrews which promotes excellence in learning and teaching through innovation, review and enhancement. SALTIRE kindly offered to sponsor the warm buffet lunch at the Byre Theatre Bistro, which divided the day into two halves and which was much appreciated by the conference participants, and not only because of the truly hideous weather conditions — horizontal rain.

The organiser of the Annual Meeting 2009 would like to thank all participants for making the long journey to St Andrews, and for their help in turning the day into a fruitful and interesting TOEBI meeting!

Christine Rauer, University of St Andrews

Programme

10.00-10.30 Registration and Tea, Coffee

10.30-12.00 Learning Old English: Earlier Traditions

- Kees Dekker (Groningen), 'Stæfcræft is seo cæg': Old English Grammar in the Works of Thomas Marshall (1621–1685)'
- Robyn Bray (Glasgow), 'John Josias Conybeare (1779-1824) and the Curious Case of his *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (1826)'
- Chris Jones (St Andrews), 'Teaching Old English in the Nineteenth Century'

12.00-12.30 The TOEBI Survey

- Erika Corradini, 'Learning Practices in Old English: 2009': Results of the TOEBI Language Survey

12.30-2.00 Lunch at The Byre Theatre

2.00-3.30 Learning Old English: Personal Experiences and the Age of TOEBI

- Tom Duncan (St Andrews), 'Learning Old English in the twentieth century: à la recherche du temps perdu'
- Donald Scragg (Manchester), 'Fifty Years on: The Old English Phoenix'
- Hugh Magennis (Belfast), 'Learning Old English and TOEBI: TOEBI 1989-2009, and Going Strong'

3.30-3.45 Tea, Coffee

3.45-4.30 AGM, Conclusion

List of Participants: Robyn Bray (Glasgow), Megan Cavell (Cambridge), Marilina Cesario (Oxford), Margaret Connolly (St Andrews), Erika Corradini (Southampton), Kees Dekker (Groningen), Laura Digan (Glasgow), Tom Duncan (St Andrews), Chris Jones (St Andrews), Carole Hough (Glasgow), Peter Jackson (Oxford), Pirkko Koppinen (London), Kathryn Lowe (Glasgow), Richard Marsden (Nottingham), Meredith Martindale (St Andrews), Ayumi Miura (Manchester), Jennifer Neville (London), Gale Owen-Crocker (Manchester), Christine Rauer (St Andrews), Diane Scott (Glasgow), Donald Scragg (Manchester), Philip Shaw (Sheffield), Mary Swan (Leeds), Andrea Waldrep (St Andrews).