



TOEBI Newsletter

TEACHERS OF OLD ENGLISH IN BRITAIN AND
IRELAND

TOEBI Conference and AGM 2000

TOEBI met at the University of Nottingham on Saturday 18 November 2000. There was a diversity of papers, representing new research, different teaching environments and challenges, cultural contextualisation, place-name analysis, and the role of Viking Studies with English. The speakers were Dr Susan Irvine, 'Repunctuating Old English Poetry with special reference to *Beowulf*'; Dr Stuart Lee, 'Old English in Continuing Education: Satisfying All the People All the Time'; Dr Gale Owen-Crocker, 'What did Cups and Dishes Mean to the Anglo-Saxons'; Professor Paul Szarmach, 'A View from Across the Atlantic'; Victor Watts, 'Old English and Place-Names'; and Dr Judith Jesch, 'Viking Studies in an English Department'.

Very warm thanks were given to Paul Cavill for the organisation of an excellent and stimulating annual conference, and to the university for its marvellous hospitality.

Elections

Professor Eric Stanley was elected to the role of President for a period of two years. Elisabeth Okasha is the new Secretary from 2000-03, on the retirement of Ann Squires. Mary Swan and Don Scragg came to the end of their terms, to be replaced by Richard Dance and Carole Hough as committee members from 2000-03. The full list of committee members is given at the end of this issue.

All retiring members of the committee were thanked for their work on TOEBI's behalf. Ann Squires, in particular, has undertaken a tremendous amount of hard work as Secretary, and her dedication and enthusiasm is greatly appreciated. Bruce Mitchell has been a wonderful President, and the Society thanks him very warmly for his work.

Message from the new secretary

I should like to take this opportunity of introducing myself as your secretary for the next three years. I am uneasily aware of how difficult it will be to follow in the footsteps of

Ann Squires, but she has done an enormous amount to ensure a smooth take-over, for which I am very grateful. I look forward to hearing from anyone who would like to contact me. My address is Department of English, University College Cork; my direct telephone, with voicemail, is 00 353 21 490 2635; my e-mail is e.okasha@ucc.ie

One of the aims of TOEBI that interests me particularly is that of raising the profile of Old English studies. This includes its profile within English Studies, within universities in general, and with the wider public. My own experience this last year suggests that more has been done by Seamus Heaney to raise the public image of Old English than by the combined membership of TOEBI. This is not intended as criticism of TOEBI members, still less of Seamus Heaney. However it does seem to me that we now have an opportunity to build on some of the interest and goodwill that has been generated. I look forward to hearing from you as to where you think we should go next.

AGM 2001

The next AGM will be held at the University of Leeds on Saturday 17 November. Dr Mary Swan will be the lead organiser, and colleagues are invited to offer assistance and papers for this event. Themes will include the issue of what TOEBI can do to encourage a love of Old English among different audiences. Mary Swan's address is the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT; email m.t.swan@leeds.ac.uk

Society for the Study of Medieval Christianity and Culture (Christianity in the Humanities Project)

The Christianity in the Humanities Project was set up in March 1999 to examine and seek to bridge the cultural gap between contemporary students and areas of literature and history which have been shaped by Christian thought and experience. The Project has now given

birth to the Society for the Study of Medieval Christianity and Culture, which is sponsoring a range of initiatives including the recent conference on 'The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Issues in Teaching and Research' held at the University of Nottingham, 6-7 January 2001. A linked book on exploring and teaching the Christian aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture is in preparation under the editorship of Paul Cavill, together with a CD Rom for students which will combine texts, images, music and liturgy. We would like this CD to be a really useful resource for students and teachers, and would welcome suggestions of material which could be included. We are bidding for funding to cover costs.

Conferences on exploring and teaching topics such as anchorites and mystics, saints and their lives, pilgrimage, monasticism, Chaucer, and sin and penance are being planned. If you would like to join the Project mailing list or suggest material that could be included on the CD Rom please contact Dr Dee Dyas (St John's College, Bramcote, Nottingham, NG9 3DS. Tel. 0115 925 5388. Email. d.dyas@stjohns-nottm.ac.uk).

Media News

There was great (short-lived) excitement in January when *The Guardian* agreed to cover the results of the recent TOEBI questionnaire that highlights the very healthy status of Old English in many British and Irish institutions. Of course, one should know better than to expect objective and positive coverage from the national press. What materialised in April was a relatively substantial article that, as usual, focused on the personal side of things Anglo-Saxon: this strange obsession that seems to motivate slightly off-kilter individual scholars working against the tide of popular undergraduate demand for Dickens, Shakespeare, and Carter. Reductivist commentary, stories of individuals overcoming prejudice to maintain their single-minded pursuit of early literature, and a bizarrely inappropriate conclusion were the order of the day. With no real evidence provided by the copy itself, and with an oft-repeated Oxford focus, the journalist concluded that: 'The tide does seem to be turning against those who insist on the vitality of Old English. "It doesn't matter how much, as long as it's there." Few who have read Heaney's [*Beowulf*] translation can question the "familiar, powerful emotions" that [Dan] Donoghue finds there. "But there are also moments when it's strange," he adds. "It's that combination that appeals to me." Too

strange, perhaps, to survive in a crowded Oxford syllabus.'

For the results of the questionnaire that illustrate the widespread teaching of Old English, see the insert in this *Newsletter*; then ask the question why Old English seems to bring out the worst in all but those who actually participate in it.

Sixth-Form Conference Proposal

By Gale Owen-Crocker, University of Manchester

It has been an issue at the last few TOEBI meetings that we should hold a sixth-form conference to raise the profile of Old English at this critical stage of students' education. If it could be held in the week before schools resume in September, for one and a half days, it might attract a significant participation rate.

Manchester would be the ideal place to hold the conference, because of the large catchment area of local schools, many of whose students would not have to be resident during the conference.

If any member of TOEBI is interested in assisting in organising such an event, or has ideas they would like to contribute, please contact any member of the committee, or Dr Gale Owen-Crocker, Department of English and American Studies, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

Reflections of a first-time Old English teacher

By Jasmine Kilburn, King's College, London

A first teaching assignment is a daunting experience for the novice teacher. However, it is possible that at the beginning of semester 1, 2000, as I stood in front of my new seminar group, they were even more terrified than I. Why was this the case? I was about to introduce the class to the delights and terrors of Old English language. In the year 2000, many students who begin a university course are not prepared by their A' Levels for the rigours of assimilating the relatively complex grammar of Old English. A result of their inexperience can be that the students feel defeated in their studies before they have even begun.

I set about reassuring my seminar group that they would be able to grasp the fundamental tenets of Old English grammar if

they were willing to put in some time, effort, and enthusiasm. Luckily, my class responded well (perhaps because my first handout included the Exeter Book's somewhat infamous 'Onion' riddle), and have continued to make steady, and sometimes, startling progress. Despite this, I am aware constantly of my duty to fire their imaginations as well as ensuring they pass the examinations. Both these aims must be achieved even though the students' linguistic knowledge is at a more basic level than that which could have been anticipated in Sweet's day. Additionally, many students have received no real grounding in the Christian religion. Consequently, the initial translation exercises in Sweet's *Primer* are not always familiar passages, increasing the students' difficulty in engaging with the text.

To combat the potential for apathy resulting from the 'alien' nature of Anglo-Saxon studies, I have striven to draw the students in by feeding them tidbits of early medieval culture and literature whenever time allows. I believe that any reasonable means must be employed so that the students can encounter at least one area of the discipline with which they can identify. This approach can, however, generate its own surprises. For example, an Anglo-Saxon spell that I expected to be an instant hit was not; yet an illustrated book about illuminated manuscripts provoked a very positive reaction.

At the risk of tempting *wyrd* I am pleased to report that my group's attendance and motivation remained high, but this heartening start to my teaching career will not lull me into complacency. Anglo-Saxon studies remain a niche subject, but I am certain that the dedication of Anglo-Saxonists shall ensure that it never becomes an obsolete one.

Beowulf at the Festival

By Margaret Connolly, University College,
Cork

Marketed as 'the whole bloody story', *Beowulf* was performed as a one-man show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 2000. It is gratifying to note that the level of public interest in the text remains high; the show ran for seven nights to full houses, with people being turned away at the door on the final two nights.

The performer, Felix Nobis, was also the translator of the text. Felix is a postgraduate student at the University College, Cork, working on medieval theatre; he is also a poet, playwright, and actor. Readers in TOEBI

may be interested to know that Felix's work has been supported by the Lynn Grundy Memorial Trust. In translating *Beowulf*, Felix aimed to recreate the storytelling experience with which the Anglo-Saxon would have been familiar. He worked on his translation for several years, abridging the poem to just over 1000 lines. He has preferred to avoid paraphrase, instead excising whole sections whilst translating others as faithfully as possible: through the translation he has striven to retain the alliterative form. In the actual sixty-five minute performance, Felix turns himself into a modern-day *scop*, reciting his translation wholly from memory. Against a sparse set he uses one or two key props – a book, candle, table and chair – in imaginative ways to make the narrative and characters come alive; his re-creation of the journey to Grendel's mother's underwater hall, with the lights dimmed to an eerie blue, was memorably atmospheric.

The performance was directed by a fellow postgraduate student, Thomas Conway, and produced by Granary Productions. Having completed his MA thesis in the autumn of 2000, Felix hopes to take *Beowulf* on tour. If your department would be interested in hosting the show, you can contact him via the Department of English, University College, Cork (00 353 21 276871).

Reviews

Clare A. Lees, *Tradition and Belief: Religious Writing in Late Anglo-Saxon England, Medieval Cultures 19* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), 196pp.

By J. Kilburn

Anglo-Saxon religious prose is establishing itself in the register of topics which are given their due recognition in medieval circles. Historically prose was ignored in favour of the vernacular poetic corpus and at last this imbalance is being challenged. Clare A. Lees in *Tradition and Belief: Religious Writing in Late Anglo-Saxon England* demonstrates the validity of the prose corpus for scholarly research whilst applying modern critical theory to the homilies, sermons and saints' lives which comprise the lion's share of the tenth- and eleventh-century prose canon. This is an ambitious programme, and in order to fit her diverse yet detailed objectives into 155 pages of argument Lees has produced a dense study which could be difficult to digest for the newcomer.

'Tradition and Belief' is divided into five roughly equal chapters as well as a lengthy Introduction in which the author provides brief synopses of current theories relating to medieval literature, thereby framing her study within traditional and evolving practices. The chapters are divided into easily manageable sub-chapters, a structure which serves to highlight the principle points clearly without disrupting the flow of the larger argument. It would also allow the reader to 'dip into' a particular part of the study almost as an autonomous unit.

Understandably due emphasis is given to Wulfstan and Ælfric although Lees does not ignore the anonymous texts of the period, thereby challenging the hierarchies that can cause fragmentation of the vernacular corpus, such as poetry/prose, named/anonymous. The author also outlines the immediate historical and cultural background to the period under discussion, placing preaching at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon religious experience. Lees stresses the symbiotic relationship between the culture and religion of Anglo-Saxon England and argues for the recognition of the traditionality of Anglo-Saxon prose and its close relationship to Western Latin culture whilst at the same time pressing for it to be assessed in its own right.

Some of Lees' arguments might be familiar to those already engaged in researching Old English religious prose, but the importance of the monograph should not be underestimated. Drawing together the disparate threads of cultural and critical theory and more 'traditional' methods of literary criticism Lees provides a valuable contribution to Anglo-Saxon scholarship, which is entering a new phase of inclusiveness whilst at the same time arguably struggling to remain on the university syllabus.

Michael Alexander, *A History of English Literature*, Palgrave Foundations (Palgrave, 2000), 387 pp.

One would imagine that to write a history of English Literature is to engage in a thankless task. No matter how inclusive the survey, there must by necessity be omissions of texts and authors that scholars, students, and general readers would like to see in the discussion. Michael Alexander, however, deserves thanks for his *History*, and it will surely become a best-selling textbook for university undergraduates. It is a lucid, erudite, and highly accessible account of English literature from the Anglo-Saxon to the modern period

that usually stresses continuities instead of highlighting periodicities, and that seeks to place individual literary endeavours within their broader contexts.

Part 1, Medieval Literature, is of most relevance here. Divided into Old English Literature: to 1100 (pp. 11-33) and Middle English Literature (1066-1500), Alexander recognises and foregrounds the fluidity of chronological boundaries. He treats the reader to the historical and cultural settings for the creation of Heroic Poetry, Christian Literature, Alfred, *Beowulf*, Elegies, and Battle Poetry, visually enhanced by images of the Franks Casket, Sutton Hoo Sceptre, a page from Cotton Vitellius A. xv, and a Lindisfarne Gospels Carpet Page. This is no dry prose run either. In the margins, in the fashion of a typically medieval *mise-en-page*, are helpful explications of crucial terminology, the margins themselves being broad enough for the glosses of interested readers. Within a limited number of pages, the analysis is dense and full; Anglo-Latin features, and generous excerpts illuminate the discussion.

One may not always agree with Alexander's focal texts, or with aspects of his commentary, but for the undergraduate, this is a tempting start to literature that is sure to inspire; for the general reader, it provides a comprehensive overview; and for the teacher, there is much here for fruitful discussion, no matter what literary period is being studied. For TOEBI members, finally there is a general survey that provides intelligent and adequate reference to earlier medieval literature, placing it where it should be, at and as the beginning of all that followed.

People and Places

Congratulations to Professor Don Scragg and Dr Alex Rumble at the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies on the award of a very significant AHRB grant for the project, 'An Inventory of Script and Spelling in Eleventh-Century England'. The project will run for three years, employing both postgraduates and research assistants.

Congratulations to Professor Clare Lees, currently at the University of Oregon, on her appointment to the Chair of Old and Middle English at King's College, London. Congratulations also to Dr Christine Rauer, who will take up a Lectureship in Medieval Literature at the University of Birmingham.

Forthcoming Conferences

Apocryphal Texts and Traditions in Anglo-Saxon England

This conference will be held at the University of Manchester from the 4th to the 6th July 2001. Speakers include Thomas Hall, Daniel Anlezark, Fred Biggs, Dorothy Haines, and a host of others. Details are available at:

<http://www.art.man.ac.uk/English>

following the thread to 'Forthcoming Events'. Alternatively, contact:

susan.b.rosser@man.ac.uk

ISAS 2001

ISAS 2001 will be held at the University of Helsinki from the 6th to 11th August 2001, followed by an excursion to St Petersburg. The conference theme is 'Anglo-Saxons and the North'. Details are available at (click ISAS):

<http://www.eng.helsinki.fi>

Sancte Crux/Halige Rod

This interdisciplinary three-year project, directed by Karen Jolly, Catherine Karkov and Sarah Keefer, is sponsoring two seminars on The Cross in Anglo-Saxon Culture. The first will be held at Durham University 3-4 August 2001, and will also honour Professor George Hardin Brown. The second is scheduled for the University of Manchester, 5-7 July 2002. Further information on both conferences and registration forms for the Durham conference can be found at

<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~kjolly/cross/crdurham.html>

or

<http://www.art.man.ac.uk/english/projects/mancass/home.htm>

or by contacting either Karen Jolly (kjolly@hawaii.edu) or Catherine Karkov (karkovc@muohio.edu).

Notices

Beowulf Repunctuated, edited by Bruce Mitchell and Susan Irvine has recently been published in the *Old English Newsletter Subsidia* series. Priced at £10, it can be ordered from the Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1903 W. Michigan, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008-3801, USA.

Michael Alexander's *Beowulf: A Glossed Text* (1995) has been published as a revised edition in 2000 (Penguin English

Poets), and recently *Beowulf: A Verse Translation* (1973) went into a second very heavily revised edition, with a new introduction, much amplified notes and an updated bibliography. Minor revisions in the text bring it into line with the text of *Beowulf: A Glossed Text*. It has been published by Penguin Classics in May 2001.

Editor's Almost-Final Word

I should like to apologise for the very significant delay in getting this Newsletter out to readers (not that anyone, other than committee members, appears to have noticed!). I shall be stepping down as editor this year, and any offers by interested parties to take over the role would be greatly welcomed. It isn't a particularly time-consuming job, though one would think it might be from the time it takes me to complete each issue, and the only skill required is the ability to cajole reluctant colleagues into writing short articles. Please do let Elisabeth Okasha know if you are interested in editing the Newsletter.

Competition

Do you recognise the manuscript from which this image is taken? If so, a copy of Michael Alexander's *A History of English Literature* could be yours. Email the editor with the manuscript shelf-mark by June 30th, and the first correct entry out of the drinking horn wins.

TOEBI committee

The dates refer to when members of the committee are due to retire or to stand for re-election.

President: Professor Eric Stanley (2003)
Chair: Professor Peter Lucas (2001)
Secretary: Dr Elisabeth Okasha (2003)
Newsletter Editor: Dr Elaine Treharne (2001)

Committee members:

Dr Mary Swan (2001)
Dr Ivan Herbison (2001)
Dr Bella Millett (2001)
Dr Paul Cavill (2002)
Dr William Marx (2002)
Dr Richard Dance (2003)
Dr Carole Hough (2003)

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Send submissions for the next Newsletter by September 28th 2001 to the editor:

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Action points for Members:

- **Send suggestions and offers of help** about the potential sixth-form conference to the Secretary or Dr Gale Owen-Crocker
- **Send topics or proposals for the November TOEBI meeting** to the Secretary or to Dr Mary Swan
- **Contribute to the Newsletter:** responses to this issue; book reviews; short articles on your Old English courses or assessment procedures; material about professional practice; student howlers
- **Please send information about the following items for inclusion in the Newsletter:**
 - Conferences on Anglo-Saxon Studies
 - Special Lectures by Anglo-Saxonists
 - News about promotions, or general (non-salacious) news about lecturers in your Department
 - The publication of new books or articles useful for teaching Old English