



TOEBI Newsletter

TEACHERS OF OLD ENGLISH IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

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<http://info.ox.ac.uk/depts/humanities/toebi/>

TOEBI Conference and AGM 1999

TOEBI met at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, on 14 November 1999. Among the presentations were papers on canonicity by Ivan Herbison, Don Scragg, William Marx, Paul Cavill, and James Weale. Elisabeth Okasha discussed language reception in Anglo-Saxon England and Phillipa Semper talked about 'Computing and *Beowulf*'. A panel discussed the Seamus Heaney translation of *Beowulf*, and a review of this book, together with two other recent translations of the poem, appear later in this newsletter.

Very warm thanks were given to Margaret Locherbie-Cameron for the organisation of an excellent and interesting annual conference, and to the university for its hospitality.

Elections

No proposals had been received by the committee for new committee members or for a new President. At the request of the AGM, Dr Bruce Mitchell very kindly agreed to continue as President for a further year until a new President could be elected. Dr Andy Orchard and Dr Margaret Locherbie-Cameron reached the end of their three years on the committee and were thanked for their work. Dr Paul Cavill of the University of Nottingham was elected for three years. The secretary apologised, and apologises, for some confusion concerning the current composition of the committee. This will be clarified for the 2000 AGM.

Heaney's *Beowulf* Translation

The interest which the Heaney translation of *Beowulf* generated at the 1988 AGM had unfortunately not resulted in very positive action. The Secretary had written several times to the publishers, Faber and Faber, but they had shown no interest at all in involving TOEBI or its members in the promotion of the work.

NEW SECRETARY REQUIRED

Ann Squires, the Secretary and Treasurer, reaches the end of a second three-year term in November 2000, and does not wish to stand for re-election. If the society is to continue, it is essential that there is a volunteer for this position. It is not particularly onerous and really only requires a short burst of activity about three times a year (for circulation of the two Newsletters, and for the November meeting). If anyone is prepared to take it on, please would they get in touch with the Secretary or any other committee member as soon as possible.

AGM 2000

The annual meeting will be held on Saturday, 18 November at the University of Nottingham. It will be organised by Dr Paul Cavill and a call for papers will be circulated shortly. Any member who wishes to be involved or who wishes to suggest particular topics or areas of interest for the conference should get in touch with Paul Cavill as soon as possible. Some suggested themes include Gender Studies and Cultural Studies within the teaching of Old English; Artifacts and Language; World Wide Web Sites; and Place Names. Details will appear on the Oxford TOEBI website.

BEOWULF: THREE TRANSLATIONS

Seamus Heaney, trans., *Beowulf* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), ISBN 0 571 20113 X, £14.99

Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* has long been anticipated by general readers and Old English specialists alike, and it has been worth waiting for. For the former, Heaney has rescued the poem from obscurity and neglect, and allowed them to enter a dark hostile world whose society is in crisis. For the latter, he has successfully re-fashioned the complexity of the original's narrative style and diction.

Heaney achieves a contemporary relevance through his emphasis on the struggle

for survival. Civilisation is constantly threatened and defended in a world where violent hatreds and desire for vengeance push societies close to the edge. The implicit parallels with Northern Ireland are never forced, but are nonetheless palpable.

For the Anglo-Saxonist, however, the most remarkable feature of this version of *Beowulf* is Heaney's sensitivity to the linguistic texture of the poem. In Heaney's view 'proper translation exists half-way between a crib and an appropriation' (*TLS*, November 12 1999, p. 16). He is not content merely with a faithful rendering of the narrative; he seeks to recreate, as far as possible, the poetic style of the original, with its use of alliteration, variation, and diction.

Like Stanley B. Greenfield, Heaney prefers 'equivalency' to 'imitation'. His greater freedom in alliteration and variation contribute to a strong narrative advancement. Yet Heaney is bold enough to use his own patterns of variation as an equivalent to those of the original. Heorot is represented as 'stockade', 'bawn', 'castle', 'fort', 'keep': terms which convey the idea of a society under siege.

His choice of diction also demonstrates his respect for the poem's elaborate formality and decorum. He preserves a number of kennings ('whale-road', 'swan's road') and employs elevated literary language ('wax', 'bid', 'wallstead', 'that doom abided', 'shadow-bourne'). Heaney also brings to the poem a large number of familiar colloquialisms ('hard times', 'gumption', 'under a cloud' 'gave as good as I got', 'every bone in his body', 'his days were numbered'). These may have the ring of cliché, but are revitalised by their context. Their formulaic nature reproduces the formulaic diction of the original. The most daring feature of Heaney's translation is his use of Ulster dialect. Some have found terms such as 'cub', 'thole', 'bawn', 'hoke', 'hirple' disconcerting in an Old English poem. Heaney reminds us that Old English is the ancestor of Ulster English and Ulster Scots as well as Standard English. Moreover, *Beowulf* is written, not in standard West Saxon, but in a *koine* heavily influenced by the Mercian dialect. Thus the use of Ulster dialect creates a perfect poetic 'equivalency' for the language of the original.

Only a poet of Heaney's stature could essay the epic with such confidence and courage. Like Douglas's *Aeneid*, Heaney's *Beowulf* is in the best sense translation by original composition.

Ivan Herbison, School of English
The Queen's University of Belfast

Beowulf: A Verse Translation, by Kevin Crossley-Holland, World's Classics (Oxford: OUP, 1999), £5.99

This translation of *Beowulf* is essentially the same as that contained within the editor's *The Anglo-Saxon World*; the only variation is the substitution of the indefinite 'an' for the definite 'the' in line 2446. The minute emendation is, however, significant; it disentangles the identification of the 'gomelum ceorle' from Hrethel, thus enlarging to a more universal scale the consideration of personal grief for which there is no revenge. The alteration is a characteristic demonstration of the translator's empathetic response to his subject.

The text includes a useful introduction by Heather O'Donoghue which, though necessarily brief, amply covers the traditional critical concerns with context, date, Christian influence, history, myth, and the dichotomy between personal and corporate heroism. Her consideration of the poet's use of oral tradition suggests convincingly that his narrative method becomes one of his themes. The time chart, genealogical tables, map, select bibliography and explanatory notes are helpful to those unfamiliar with the poem.

A translation of *The Fight at Finnsburgh* is a welcome addition; its more regular rhythms and dignified tone are appropriately closer to those of the *Beowulf* translation than the translator's earlier and more flamboyant version which appears in his *The Battle of Maldon and other Old English Poems*, though both versions retain 'dusky, dark brown' for the Old English oxymoronic 'sealobrun'. But this is hair-splitting. In general, Crossley-Holland's translation of both poems is a masterly rendition of the complex spirit of the originals, with their formalised interlace of narrative and mood, into a deceptively simple and uncluttered idiom which unobtrusively recalls the rhythms and alliterative patterns of their originals. His modifications of the opening lines of 'Beowulf' from the active to the passive voice thus becomes a modest shift from the poet as constructor to the poet as receptor of previous glory, an eminently appropriate assessment of the translator's role.

Margaret Locherbie-Cameron
Department of English
University College of North Wales, Bangor

Beowulf: a new verse translation, by R.M. Liuzza, Broadview Literary Texts (Broadview Press, Peterborough, Ont., 1999), ISBN 1551111896, £3.95

The title *Beowulf: a new verse translation* is somewhat over-modest since this volume also includes complete translations of *The Fight at Finnsburh*, *Widsith*, *Vainglory*, Wulfstan's *De Falsis Diis* and *Sermo Lupi*, Ælfric's *Life of St Edmund*, Boniface's Letters 46 and 73, Gregory the Great's letter to Abbot Melitus, Bede's story of the conversion of Northumbria, relevant parts of *Grettissaga* as well as a variety of short extracts from other primary material. Each piece is briefly but adequately identified and placed. A thirty-seven page introduction offers the reader a wide-ranging but succinct and well-balanced survey of the poem and its concerns and problems. Frequent reference is made to the ten-page bibliography which would permit any interested student to develop her or his own view of the questions raised. Appendix E offers twenty translations (from Sharon Turner to Frederick Rebsamen) of lines 229-257 - very convenient (and time-saving) material for a class or classes on the history and problems of translating *Beowulf*.

Within the translation itself footnotes permit the use of close translations which are not necessarily self-explanatory: e.g. "the whale's-riding" - "A condensed descriptive image of the sea - the riding-place of whales. Elsewhere the sea is the 'gannet's bath' and the 'swan's-riding'". Similarly the obsolete "byrnies" used to give an alliterative phrase 1.40 "blades and byrnies" is footnoted "A 'byrnie' is a coat of ring-mail". Footnotes are also used to illuminate elliptical references (such as ll.82-5 to the destruction of Heorot in the Dane-Heathobard feud) or references to characters by alternative epithets or periphrases, as well to indicate some (but by no means all) disputed or difficult textual readings, disputed semantics (e.g. 1.739 "æglæca" as "monster") and even to offer background information e.g. 1.78 "Heorot" has the footnote "'Hart'. An object recovered from the burial-mound at Sutton Hoo, perhaps a royal insignia, is surmounted by the image of a hart." In other words this is not a translation which attempts to stand as a poem in its own right.

Liuzza offers his own apologia for his translation pp.45-8 of the Introduction and, almost inevitably, other potential translators are unlikely to agree in all respects with the choices he has made and the compromises he has favoured. On the whole it seems to me a

stylistically consistent translation although not stylish. It is a little unfortunate that this verse translation has appeared at almost the same time as Heaney's since, to my mind, they illustrate the difference between verse and poetry. That, however, is perhaps a somewhat unfair judgement. Heaney is recreating a poem for a universal readership for whom the original is likely to remain totally alien, Liuzza is attempting through a variety of means, translation, background, context, further reading etc. to make the original as accessible as possible to the serious student. If one compares the following typical passage the difference of approach is obvious:

Scyld passed away at his appointed hour,
the mighty lord went into the Lord's keeping;
they bore him down to the brimming sea,
his dear comrades, as he himself had
commanded
while the friend of the Scyldings¹ wielded
speech -
the dear land-ruler had long held power.

(Liuzza)

Shield was still thriving when his time came
and he crossed over into the Lord's keeping.
His warrior band did what he bade them
when he laid down the law among the Danes:
they shouldered him out to the sea's flood,
the chief they revered who had long ruled
them.

(Heaney)

Liuzza's is undoubtedly the more "accurate" in that it is closer to the syntactic phrasing, vocabulary and line divisions of the original but it consequently has a clumsiness which the freer Heaney avoids (and I would also want to argue that by his rephrasing Heaney has possibly suggested more of the contextual implications of "felahror" than Liuzza's unexceptional "mighty").

Overall, the Liuzza volume offers exceptional value for money. The Broadview Press website (www.broadviewpress.com) prices it at £3.95 UK and it gives the beginner or the student taking a course which treats the poem in translation an excellent introduction. As indicated above, its range of supporting material is substantial, as is its bibliography, and its translation should make it possible for a student to approach the original with a little effort.

However, and this is not meant as an adverse criticism of this volume, it would be interesting to discuss the implications for teaching complex texts such as *Beowulf* of this type of "translated text + packaged context" volume. In the past the canon of texts included

in basic courses seems to have, at least in part, been determined by the selection offered in influential *Readers*. One could see a very successful 10-12 week modular course on "*Beowulf* and its context/background/society" built on this book. Is there a danger that this type of pre-digested selection (in both the textual difficulties and uncertainties that are noted and the material supplied for comparison) could produce a new sort of conformity of approach or orthodoxy of interpretation which could stifle new insight? It would be interesting to hear what other readers think.

Ann Squires
University of Durham

SEAMUS HEANEY IN MANCHESTER

On 6 October 1999 Seamus Heaney came to Manchester to read from his much-publicised new translation of *Beowulf* at the invitation of Don Scragg (Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies) and Michael Schmidt (Carcant Press and MMU Writing School). He spoke to a packed auditorium of both medievalists and contemporary poetry enthusiasts, staff and students from all the Manchester universities and beyond. In fact so many wanted to attend this exciting event that a live television link to a second lecture theatre was also provided. Signed copies of the Faber hardback edition of the Heaney translation were available to buy.

Heaney began his talk by explaining how he had come to undertake the task of translating the most famous of pre-Conquest poems. The translation had been commissioned for a student anthology of English literature of all periods and the publisher wanted to include a new version of *Beowulf* which would excite student interest but which would also accurately reproduce the meaning of the original text. Heaney said that filled with enthusiasm for this project he had attempted the opening section of the poem before soon becoming discouraged by the difficulty of reconciling the need to translate faithfully and his desire to convey the feeling and music of the original work. But he said that his love for the poem had later drawn him back to this task again, which nevertheless had taken many years to complete.

Heaney then read several passages from his translation. He seemed to choose those passages which are best known or perhaps most likely to be studied by undergraduate students, beginning with Scyld

Scefing's funeral, moving on to the fights with Grendel and the dragon, and ending with *Beowulf*'s own funeral. Read aloud his words certainly seemed to capture much of the spirit of the Old English poem.

Heaney gave a concise but admirably clear description of Old English poetic conventions and form for the benefit of those in the audience who had never read or heard Anglo-Saxon poetry before. He also explained how his introduction to Old English language and literature as an undergraduate student in Belfast had inspired and influenced much of his later work. He said that he saw Old English as an underlying base note in the language and more importantly in the English literary tradition too and he read extracts from a couple of his earlier poems to show how he had incorporated Old English alliterative effects and metre into his own work.

TOEBI members will be particularly pleased to learn that Heaney clearly voiced his view of the importance of Old English studies in the university English syllabus. It is to be hoped that his new translation and the great media interest that has surrounded its publication will help to attract a wider audience to *Beowulf* and Old English literature generally. Perhaps some will even be inspired to seek out the original poem, the opening lines of which are printed opposite the Heaney translation in the Faber edition.

USING AN ELECTRONIC BULLETIN BOARD IN TEACHING OLD ENGLISH

In an attempt to promote discussion among our second-year undergraduates at the University of Leicester, all of whom are studying compulsory Old English for one semester, the course requirement for a non-assessed essay has been replaced with a series of contributions to an electronic bulletin board. To give the students more scope for discussion, we require them to read a number of texts in translation in addition to those that they are translating.

On the bulletin board, I posted a number of general questions about Old English literature, from the previous year's exam paper. From tentative beginnings, our students have engaged in heated arguments about their interpretations of Old English texts. By the eighth week of term, over 180 messages had been posted. Ten or twelve students log in each day to read what others have said and to make their own contributions. It is clear that students are learning from the postings: they are applying critical theory, arguing about

social, religious and historical contexts, and exploring the ways in which Old English texts are still relevant. They are more willing to disagree with one another and to admit difficulties with understanding than in a seminar environment. It is also less dangerous to express controversial opinions in this electronic medium. I was delighted, for example, after dozens of reverential readings on hagiography, to see a Marxist reading of *The Life of St Edmund*.

Some general observations and advice can be offered about using a bulletin board:

- It is not enough to tell students that it is there. Timetabled sessions have to be arranged, at least to start with, with someone on hand to help with technical problems.
- Unfortunately, if too many users are trying to do the same thing at once, the software cannot cope, so it is necessary to stagger the start of sessions.
- Offering the bulletin board as an optional extra in the previous academic session was a non-starter. As an alternative to a conventional essay, however, the bulletin board has proved very popular.
- As in seminars, there are students who listen in but contribute nothing. However, several students who are quiet in seminars have demonstrated (and shared) astonishing insights.
- Tutor-intervention tends to stop discussion dead. I use a pseudonym when I want to join in.

This system will continue in use for the foreseeable future. I should be delighted to see undergraduates and postgraduates from other institutions joining in. The bulletin board can be found at

<http://webboard.le.ac.uk/~medievalgroup/login>

A grammar project, designed by Julie Coleman, also operates from the Department of English at Leicester and can be found at <http://www.le.ac.uk/ee/jmc/21/legp/index.html>

I would be grateful for any feedback and suggestions for improvement.

Julie Coleman
Department of English
University of Leicester
jmc21@leicester.ac.uk

THE MANCHESTER CONFERENCE 4-6 JULY 2001

Next year the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon studies will be holding its annual conference on the subject 'Apocryphal Texts and Traditions in Anglo-Saxon England'.

If you would like to offer a paper please contact Susan Rosser as soon as possible (susan.b.rosser@man.ac.uk; tel 0161 275 3147; fax 0161 275 3256). Further details about the conference are available on our website:

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

TOEBI QUESTIONNAIRE

As many readers will be aware, a questionnaire to determine the status of Old English in HE and FE institutions was recently sent out to Departments of English. From the 110 questionnaires posted, 90 replies were received (plus 13 individual responses from Oxford colleges). The results of this questionnaire are in the (lengthy and complicated) process of being collated and statistically analysed. Preliminary findings show that just over fifty HE and FE institutions currently teach Old English in the original, eighteen of these as a compulsory course (not including Oxford, which may or may not adapt the English degree to incorporate optional Old English). Over three thousand undergraduates are studying Old English – an encouraging figure. It is less encouraging noting, however, that many Anglo-Saxonists within Departments of English are teaching Old English on their own, and that many of these anticipate the subject will cease to be taught on their retirement.

Other interesting figures are emerging about the numbers of postgraduates studying Old English; the inclusion of Old English in interdisciplinary degrees; and the predominance of women in the field (always the true scholars!). A comprehensive breakdown of the questionnaire results, together with comments, will be made available in the next Newsletter to appear before the AGM in the autumn. If, in the meantime, anyone requires specific information, please do contact Elaine Treharne (see over for address).

TOEBI COMMITTEE

Dr Bruce Mitchell (President)
Professor Peter Lucas (Chair)
Mrs Ann Squires (Secretary)
Dr Paul Cavill
Dr Bella Millett
Professor Donald Scragg
Dr Mary Swan
Dr Elaine Treharne (Newsletter Ed.)

For membership details and general enquiries contact the secretary:

Mrs Ann Squires
11, East Atherton Street
Durham,
DH1 4DG

☎ 0191 386 7480

✉ e-mail: xrb92@dial.pipex.com

Send submissions for the next Newsletter by August 31st to the editor:

Dr Elaine Treharne
Department of English
University of Leicester
Leicester
LE1 7RH

☎ 0116 252 2636

✉ e-mail: emt1@leicester.ac.uk
or (embarrassingly) elaine.treharne@tesco.net

Is there anyone out there? If so, please do one or more of the following...

- Someone please volunteer to be the new Secretary
- Send topics or proposals for the November TOEBI meeting to the Secretary
- Contribute to the Newsletter without my having to bully colleagues. For example, send responses to this issue; book reviews; short articles on your Old English courses or assessment procedures; material about professional practice
- 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 news about lecturers in your Department
 - The publication of new books or articles useful for teaching Old English