

ANGLO-SAXON AT TAVISTOCK ABBEY
BY
MICHAEL MURPHY

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The last entry in the *Peterborough Chronicle* (one version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) is for the year 1154. The language of this part of the *Chronicle* has already shaded into what we should now call Early Middle English rather than Old English (Anglo-Saxon). This year, nevertheless, sometimes serves as a convenient, if generously late, date for indicating the end of literature in Old English. English continued to be spoken and written, of course, side by side with the French of the Norman conquerors, but there were important and far-reaching developments, so that the language of Chaucer in the fourteenth century is very different from that of, say, Archbishop Wulfstan in the early eleventh. By the time of the Reformation English had changed almost out of all recognition; and when a revival of interest in the writings of the Anglo-Saxons took place in the sixteenth century, the pioneers of this interest had to begin learning it almost like a foreign language, though there were, of course, no grammars or dictionaries. They were obliged to use the Latin-Old English glosses surviving in MSS of pre-Conquest days, as well as Latin and Modern English versions of works which had also been translated into Old English before the Conquest—the Bible, Bede's *History*, Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy* and others. It is odd, therefore, that in the course of this renewal of interest, when scholars had to use inadequate glosses and “ponies” to acquire any knowledge of Old English, a story should have become current which held that a school had existed at Tavistock Abbey in Devonshire in which Old English had been taught almost right up to the time of the Reformation. In course of time an addendum became attached to this story to the effect that books in Old English were even *printed* at Tavistock, something that could not have taken place before 1477 when Caxton set up the first English printing press.

This combination of related and unlikely stories had a long history persisting well into the nineteenth century. About eighty years ago R. W. Wulcker felt it necessary to devote a page to scotching both elements of the legend in his *Grundriss zur Geschichte der Angelsächsischen Literatur*, where he cited the supporting opinions of prominent English scholars like Kemble, Wright, and Petheram who shared his disbelief.¹ Charles Plummer's edition of Bede in 1896, however, lent further ancillary support to the legend by calling attention to the fact that Thomas Rudborne (fl. 1460) had quoted from the Anglo-Saxon version of Bede. “This is interesting,” Plummer concludes, “as showing that Saxon studies were not extinct in the fifteenth century.” Later again Eleanor Adams in a book on the history of OE studies (1917) devoted a long note to the old tradition about Tavistock and

indicated frank disbelief. Most recently John Bromwich [120] briefly but firmly denies the legend in justification of the title of his article “The First Book Printed in Anglo-Saxon Types.”²

Wright and Petheram suggested, respectively, that the two parts of the legend owe their inception to the “indefinite manner in which some people formerly applied the term Anglo-Saxon” and to the undoubted printing at Tavistock in 1525 of an English version of Boethius translated by John Walton [*Grundriss*, pp. 3-4]. Wulcker agrees with these explanations and puts the chief onus for the creation and dissemination of the myth on Camden and Thomas Hearne, with a brief mention of Archbishop Parker.

The rumor that an Anglo-Saxon grammar had been printed at Tavistock seems to have appeared first as a hearsay statement in Edmund Gibson’s edition of Camden’s *Britannia* (1695). In the “Additions to Devonshire” which Gibson added to Camden’s original, and for which Bishop Trelawny or Dr. Musgrave seems to have been largely responsible,³ this statement appears: “Farther down the river is Tavistock, where the school in which the Saxon tongue was taught, is still in being; and (as I have heard) there was also in the beginning of the late Civil wars, a Saxon-Grammar printed in Tavistoke” [col. 38]. In his 1806 translation of the same book, Gough laconically designated the beginning of the Civil War as “a very unlikely period” for the production of a book of this kind, and felt that “such a memorial of the typographical art among us might have been expected to have escaped to the present age as well as Walton ‘s Boethius de Consolatione . . .” (pp. 44-45).

For the origin of this story about an Anglo-Saxon printing press at Tavistock three reasons has been advanced: 1) The previously mentioned translations of Boethius by Walton, completed c. 1410, *was* actually printed there in 1525. 2) Two Anglo-Saxon books were found in Tavistock in 1566, and given to Archbishop Parker (but these, of course, were manuscript books). 3) An addendum to (2) recently offered by John Bromwich: four pages of the first book known with certainty to have been printed in Anglo-Saxon type (*A Testimonie of Antiquitie*, 1566-7) were pasted into one of the MS books which had been given to Parker. This MS contained the original of the Aelfrician homily which formed the chief matter of *A Testimonie*.⁴ This conjecture seems to me the most plausible put forward so far. It is easy to see how rash conjecture could jump to conclude the existence of an Anglo-Saxon press in the monastery that had yielded the MS, when

printed pages of part of this MS were pasted into the codex itself.

There is a fourth possible explanation which does not override the last-mentioned but supplements it by showing how further confusion confirmed the rumor that could have sprung from the association of MS and printed pages of it. The legend of an Anglo-Saxon press at Tavistock generally involves a reference to an Anglo-Saxon *grammar*. Now, there [121] was certainly another and more believable story that a *Latin* grammar had been printed at the abbey. Thomas Hearne, who was interested in the monastery for other reasons also, jotted down a brief note on this subject, apparently about July, 1714: "A Grammar printed at Tavistocke, commonly called the long Grammar. Mr. Bagford tells me he could never meet with it." Another note five years later yields a little more information. Hearne is reproducing a letter from Bagford who, in turn, reproduces a report from a Mr. Sandford of Thorverton: "Mr. Granger," he writes, "who was formerly Schoolmaster of Lescard saw a Latin Grammar, called the long Accidence, which was printed at Tavistocke, and was then in the possession of Mr. Piper of Lescard."⁵ Elsewhere speaking of Bagford again, Hearne declares that his friend "would have done anything to retrieve a Roman Author, and would have given any Price for so much as a single fragment . . . of the learned Commentaries, written by Agrippina, Mother of Nero as he would also have stuck at no Price for a Grammar printed at Tavistock, commonly called, The long Grammar."⁶

Now, a Latin grammar in catechetical form for schoolboys and called *The longe accydenche* was written by the schoolmaster John Stanbridge and printed by Wynkyn de Worde in London in 1513, and again about 1520. Moreover, a book called *The accidence of mayster Stanbridges owne makyng*, was published at Rouen as early as 1505.⁷ According to H. P. R. Finberg in his history of Tavistock, an edition of Stanbridge's *Vocabula* (another book for schoolboys) was printed at Rouen and published by Martin Coffin at Exeter about 1505. "At present it must remain an open question whether Mr. Granger saw the Exeter *Vocabula* or Wynkyn de Worde's *Long Accidence*, or an edition of the last named printed at Tavistock, all copies of which have disappeared."⁸ I have been unable to discover the name of the English publisher of the 1505 *Accidence* also printed at Rouen, but if this too was Coffin, one can see how the confusion might be compounded. This speculation does not, of course, rule out the possibility of an edition of the *Long Accidence* having been printed at the Abbey; since the press undoubtedly produced material as different as Boethius and the Stannary Laws (which dealt with West County tin-mining) there is nothing essentially unlikely in its having printed a popular Latin

grammar.

Nowhere before Gibson's time, however, does there seem to be any mention of a grammar, let alone an Anglo-Saxon grammar, being printed at Tavistock. Hearne, like others before and after him certainly repeats the rumor of a school at the Abbey in which Anglo-Saxon was taught, and he speculates about the amount of printing done there; but he has been unfairly made responsible for popularising the idea of *Anglo-Saxon* printing there when, as far as I can see, he never once mentions such a thing. Indeed, his reference is specifically to a *Latin* grammar, and at one point in the letter cited by Wulcker (dated 1708, though not printed

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until 1724) he even declares that he never heard "of any other Book [besides Boethius] being printed at this place."⁹ His "information" about a Latin grammar came to him later than this, of course (see p. 121 above), but some rumor of it must earlier have reached Trelawny or Musgrave who lived in the West Country. It is not, I think, difficult to see how the story of *a* grammar being printed at Tavistock could have become meshed with the earlier one about a school of Anglo-Saxon and be reproduced in the *Britannia* edited by Gibson, a contemporary of Hearne's.

But what of this earlier story that Anglo-Saxon was taught at Tavistock almost up to the Reformation, a story that is repeated through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and into the nineteenth? The origin of this myth can be traced back to an enigmatic statement by Archbishop Parker which is referred to by Wulcker [*Grundiss*, p. 3], though he does not quote it. In the preface to his edition of Asser's life of King Alfred, *Aelfredi Regis Res Gestae* (1574), Parker is urging on those who have studied the institutions of the realm the value of learning Old English — both characters and words, "*verbis et literis*" — maintaining that the study will be invaluable for understanding many of the documents of pre-Conquest and post-Conquest England, and thus for unravelling many knotty questions. "For this purpose," he says, "certain colleges of monks were established by our ancestors in earlier times. In these colleges were men who were instructed in knowledge of this language, and who in turn, by communicating it to others, passed it on to posterity. This practice was continued, I believe, up to times within our own memory at the monastery of Tavistock in Devonshire, and in many other monasteries, in order that knowledge of this tongue should not perish entirely, though it was no longer used."¹⁰ This

statement is obviously the source of the later and probably better-known one by Camden in his *Britannia*, that in Tavistock “by a laudable institution, here were lectures of our old mother tongue (I mean the Saxon-language, which is now grown into disuse) continu’d down to the last age, lest (that which hath almost now happen’d,) the knowledge of it should be quite lost.”¹¹

But where did Parker get the notion that the monks learned Old English up to times just before his own? We do not know, for he cites no source other than his own belief. We can, however, make an attempt at an explanation. I suggest that Parker or his “informant” confused Tavistock Abbey with the Abbey of Croyland, and that defective memory further read more into a passage in the Chronicle of Ingulf of Croyland than was actually there. As long ago as 1693 White Kennett drew attention to the fact that activities somewhat similar to those claimed by Camden for Tavistock had been the practice at Croyland according to the testimony of Ingulf.¹² Now an examination of the Ingulf passage shows that what the young monks were taught was not Anglo-Saxon language and literature, but Anglo-Saxon *characters*, that is, the insular characters as used by Anglo-Saxon monks or scribes even when writing Latin; or, to adapt

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Parker’s phrase, they learned the Anglo-Saxon “literae,” but not necessarily the “verba.” Here is the relevant part of the Chronicle:

A few years before [the great fire of 1091] however, I had, of my own accord, taken from our muniment-room several charters written in Saxon characters, and as we had duplicates of them, and in some instances triplicates, I had put them in the hands of our chauntor, the lord Fulmar, to be kept in the cloisters, in order to instruct the juniors in the knowledge of the Saxon characters; as this kind of writing had for a long time, on account of the Normans, been utterly neglected, and was now understood by only a few of the more aged men. In so doing, my object was that the juniors, being instructed in the art of reading these characters, might, in their old age, be the better enabled to support themselves on the authority of their archives against their adversaries. These charters having been deposited in an ancient press, which was kept in the cloisters, and surrounded on every side by the wall of the church, were the only ones that were saved and preserved from the fire. These now form our principal and especial muniments, after having been long considered as of secondary value and thrown aside, neglected and despised, in consequence of the barbarous characters in which they were written¹³.

One can readily credit that such training as the Chronicle mentions was given to young monks to make them familiar with an antiquated script, so that they could read easily the *Latin* charters written in such script. The Latin in which many old charters were written would not itself, of course, offer any difficulty. But it is obvious that there is no necessity to posit from the Chronicle account the existence of any “school of Anglo-Saxon” at the Abbey.

What still remains unexplained in Parker’s statement is his phrase “nostra memoria” which I have translated “within our own memory.” Plainly this is not something that Parker is able to substantiate from his own personal knowledge, since he adds the qualification of the word “credo,” and it should, therefore, not be taken too literally. But Thomas Rudborne, as Plummer points out, quoted the Old English *Bede*, about 1454 in his *Historia Major*, and Parker was born in 1504. Parker’s statement is not, therefore, by any means outrageous. If he felt that Rudborne knew Old English well enough to quote it about 1454, he could, within reason, conjecture that the knowledge did not die with Rudborne, but that other monks of his time also knew the language, and thus that the knowledge lived on up to about the time of Parker’s own birth, certainly to within his father’s lifetime. It is a short step indeed from this to the conjecture that a school or schools for teaching the language existed. Rudborne was, however, a monk of St. Swithun’s, Winchester, not of Tavistock or Croyland, and this perhaps accounts for the “many other monasteries (multis aliis conventiculis)” in Parker’s statement.

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NOTES

- I. *Grundriss* (Leipzig, 1885), pp. 3-4.
2. Charles Plummer, *Bedae Opera Historica* (Oxford, 1896), Introd., p. cxxviii, n.2; Eleanor Adams, *Old English Scholarship in England* (New Haven, 1917), pp.21-22; John Bromwich, “The First Book Printed in Anglo-Saxon Types,” *Trans. of Cambridge Bib/log. Soc.*, Vol. III, pt. iv, (1962), p. 270, n. 1
3. See Richard Gough, *Britannia* (London, 1806), I, 44, and Edmund Gibson, *Britannia*, Pref. to Reader, p. 1^v.

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4. Bromwich, p. 270, n. 1.
5. *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne*, ad., D. W. Rannie (Oxford, 1898), IV, 378; and (Oxford, 1906), VII, 15. The latter volume was edited “Under the Superintendence of the Committee.”
6. Thomas Hearne, *Hemminge’s Cartulary* (Oxford, 1723), pp. 661-662.
7. See STC 23140 sub Stanbridge, and *Handlists of Books Printed by London Printers 1591-1556* ed. E. G. Duff at al. (London, 1913), p. 9.
8. H. P. R. Finberg, *Tavistock Abbey* (Cambridge, 1951), Appendix D, p. 292.
9. Thomas Hearne, *Robert of Gloucester’s Chronicle* (Oxford, 1724), Glossary, II, 712.
I have used the 1810 reprint.
10. “Quem in finem superioribus saeculis a majoribus nostris monialium quaedam collegia instituta sunt, in quibus essent quae [qui?] et hujus linguae scientia imbuerentur, at eandem (cum aliis communicando) ad posteros transmitterent. Quod quidem in Cenobio monialium Tavestockensi in comitatu Devoniae, et multis aliis conventiculis (nostra memoria) receptum fuit, credo, ne ejus sermonis peritia, ob lingua insolentiam penitus obsolesceret,” *Aelfredi Regis Res Geste*, end of Preface, sign.
11. This is Gibson’s translation from his edition of Camden’s *Britannia* (London, 1695), col. 26.
12. See White Kennett’s preface to William Somner’s *Treatise of The Roman Ports and Forts* (Oxford, 1693), p. 28. The chronicle referred to by Kennett has been translated by H. T. Riley as *Ingulph’s Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland*, Bohn’s Antiquarian Library (London, 1854). Much of the Chronicle is a late fabrication of the early fifteenth century by Prior Richard, who apparently had the charters forged to prove his case in a dispute with the people of Spalding. See Riley’s Introduction, pp. xi—xii.
13. *Ingulphs’s Chronicle*, p. 201.