

METHODS IN THE STUDY OF OLD ENGLISH
IN
THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

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The study of Old English began in the sixteenth century. This well known fact gives rise to the question as to how the earliest scholars of that period attained their knowledge of this “dead” language without the aid of grammars, dictionaries or readers. Laurence Nowell (c. 1514-76) who seems to have been the earliest pioneer in the study of OE, has left no account of his method of learning the language, or of the reasons that prompted him to take it up; but his assiduity in the study is attested by the fact that at one time or another he had in his hands a sizeable number of OE prose manuscripts and about half the total extant corpus of OE poetry.¹ Moreover he made his own glossary in the course of his studies, and a small part of it was published by his friend William Lambarde as a glossary to the latter’s book *Archaionomia* (1568), a collection of Anglo-Saxon laws, which Nowell had also given him. The words in the *Archaionomia* were largely confined to terms of legal interest, and the rest of Nowell’s glossary remained in manuscript.²

¹ For details of his biography see Robin Flower, “Laurence Nowell and the Discovery of England in Tudor Times,” *Proc. of Brit. Acad.* 21(1935), 47-73, and the introduction to A. H. Marekwardt’s edition of *Laurence Nowell’s Vocabularium Saxonicum* (Ann Arbor, 1952).

² R. J. Schoeck points out that more than two thirds of the Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries were lawyers; that a good deal of interest in OE (especially OE law) was generated in the Inns of Court by the *Archaionomia*, and that Lambarde was made an honorary bencher of Lincoln’s Inn (1579) for his work. That the Inns were probably instrumental in interesting some members in the study of OE is suggested by the presence there in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries of such men as Sir Henry and Sir John Spelman,

Contemporary with Lambarde and Nowell were two other prominent students of OE: Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, and his secretary John Joscelyn. Together these two men edited a number of books in OE, or with sizeable OE extracts. One of these was *A Testimonie of Antiquitie* (1566), the first book ever printed in OE; it contained a homily and pastoral letters by Aelfric, for which the editors provided a translation. Another of their books was *The Gospels of the fower Evangelistes* (1571) in OE, accompanied by a translation from the recent Bishops' Bible. It had a preface by John Foxe the martyrologist, and was generally referred to as his edition, though Foxe acknowledges in the preface that it came from Parker. But much of the work for the antiquarian books published under Parker's aegis was done

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by his secretary, who also compiled his own dictionary, and on a much larger scale than Nowell's.

The study of OE was continued into the seventeenth century by Richard Verstegan and William L'Isle. Verstegan's book, *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* (1605) pleaded for a return to the use of a "pure" English, and offered lists of "Saxon" words with etymologies which showed a considerable if imperfect knowledge of OE

More important for the present discussion is L'Isle who published an edition of two Aelfrician prefaces together with his own translation: *A Saxon Treatise Concerning the Old and New Testament* (1623). It is in the preface to this book that we come for the first time upon an extensive piece of evidence which sheds direct light on the question at issue. L'Isle gives an account of the way in which he became interested in OE, and of the remarkable method he followed in order to

Camden, Twysden, D'Ewes, all of whom developed a keen interest in OE. See R.J. Schoeck, "Early Anglo-Saxon Studies and Legal Scholarship in the Renaissance," *Studies in the Renaissance*, V (1958), 102-110; and "The Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries and Men of Law," *N&Q*, n.s. I (1954), 417-421, and 544.

learn it. He became aware, he says, of the great monastic learning in the time of Bede and Alcuin:

The due consideration hereof first stirred up in me an earnest desire to know what learning lay hid in this old English tongue: for which I found out this uneasie way, first to acquaint my selfe a little with the Dutch both high and low; the one by originale, the other by commerce allied: then to read a while for recreation all the old English I coulde finde, poetry or prose, of what matter soever. And divers good bookes of this kinde I got, that were never yet published in print; which ever the more ancient they were, I perceived they came neerer the Saxon: But the Saxon (as a bird, flying in the aire farther and farther, seems lesse and lesse;) the older it was, became harder to bee understood. At length I lighted on Virgil Scotished by the Reverend Gawin Dowglas Bishop of Dunkell, and uncle to the Earle of Angus; the best translation of that poet that I ever read: And though I found that dialect more hard than any of the former (as neerer the Saxon, because farther from the Norman) yet with help of the Latin I made shift to under stand it, and read the booke more than once from the beginning to the end. Whereby I must confesse I got more knowledge of that I sought than by any of the other. For as at the Saxon Invasion many of the Britans, so at the Norman many of the Saxons fled into Scotland, preserving in that Realme unconquered, as the line Royale, so also the language, better than the Inhabitants here, under conqueror's law and custome, were able. Next then I read the decalogue &c. set out by Fraerus in common character, and so prepared came to the proper Saxon; which differeth but in seven or eight letters from the Pica Roman: and therein reading certaine sermons, and the foure Evangelists set out and Englished by Mr. Fox, so increased my skill, that at length (I thanke God) I found my selfe able (as it were to swimme without bladders) to understand the untranslated fragments of the tongue scattered in Master Cambden and others, by him some, and some by Sir Henry Savill set forth: as also those in Tho: of Walsingham, Caius and Lambard; with certaine old charters that I met with among the Kings Records, and in the Couch-

bookes of Monasteries; Yet still ventring not far from the shore. At last waxing more able through use, I tooke heart to put forth and dive into the deep among the meere Saxon monuments of my worthily respected kinsman Sir. H. Spelman, my honourable friend Sir. Rob. Cotton & of our Libraries in Cambridge. So far about went I for want of a guide, who now (Thanks be to God) am able to lead others a neerer way (Sign. c4v- d1r).³

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A little later in the preface L'Isle understandably complains that “*We lacke but a Grammar which our Saxon ancestors neglected not, as appears by that of this Aelfricus yet extant in many faire-written copies. The like if we had for the language of our time, it would give us occasion either in wording or in sentensing, the principale parts thereof, to looke backe a little into this outworne dialect of our forbeers; which England hath kept best in writing, Scotland in speech*” (Sign. e4^v).

Allowing for quirks peculiar to L'Isle's own experience, this account should permit us to infer how earlier students acquired their knowledge of the language. It is certainly true that L'Isle is standing on the shoulders of his predecessors, but it seems fair to deduce that they pursued a method very similar to his, though they worked with MSS, while he had the benefit of some of their printed books; and they probably did not take such a remarkably circuitous route to their goal.

The investigations of Marckwardt and Rosier have unearthed the sources of the Nowell and Joscelyn dictionaries, and shown that these sources were very much the same: biblical translations and glosses, homilies, the Chronicle, Aelfric's grammar, Alfredian translations, the laws, and some separate Latin-

³ Fraerus or Marquand Freher published *Decalogi, Orationes, Symboli* (1619); William Camden, *Remaines Concerning Britain* (1605); Henry Savile, *Rerum Anglicarum Scriptores* ((1596); Thomas of Walsingham author aof a number of medieval histories; John Caius, *De Antiquitate Cantbrigiensis* (1568 and 1574).

Old English glosses.⁴ What should be noticed here is that, leaving out of consideration even the special cases of Aelfric's grammar and the glosses, almost all of these texts had versions available in the sixteenth century, either in Latin or in English, in manuscript or in print. The homilies constitute the most notable exception; the Latin originals of the Aelfrician homilies had perished had indeed been destroyed, the editors of *A Testimonie* claimed, by post-Conquest Roman Catholics who "coulede not well broke" some of the doctrine contained in them.⁵

Such very paraphrastic OE translations as the Alfredian versions of Bede and Orosius, or Aelfric's version of the Old Testament could, of course, be extremely treacherous for a beginner. But a glossed Psalter or Gospel was somewhat safer, as the glossing form gives less scope for paraphrase, although these also would have to be used with care as they were not always literally word for word either.⁶ Certainly some application with these biblical texts would have yielded enough knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to make an observant sixteenth century student aware of gaps and paraphrases.⁷ He would note, without needing King Alfred's specific warning, that Anglo-Saxon

⁴ A. H. Marckwardt, "The Sources of Laurence Nowell's *Vocabularium Saxonicum*," *SP*, 45 (1948), 36; and J. L. Rosier, "The Sources of John Joscelyn's Old English-Latin Dictionary," *Anglia*, 78 (1960), 39. See also Rosier's "Lexicographical Genealogy in Old English," *JEGP*, 65, (1966), 295-302.

⁵ *A Testimonie*, fol. 5 (Huntington Library copy); for differences in the various "issues" of this book, and for some reference to its polemical motivation, see J. Bromwich, "The First Book Printed in Anglo-Saxon Types," *Trans. of Cambridge Biblio. Soc.*, Vol. 3, Pt. iv (1962), 265-291.

⁶ For a convenient account of the varying degrees of care taken, and the amount of liberty allowed themselves, by the different Anglo-Saxon glossators of biblical books see M. K. Morrell, *A Manual of Old English Biblical Materials* (Knoxville, 1965) and the important bibliographies in this invaluable work.

⁷ It is interesting to note the suggestion of Kenneth Sisam that the OE biblical glosses were originally intended as "one practical way of helping the clergy to understand the [Latin] psalms that were so constantly on their lips," *RES*, 7 (1956), 128 — the precise reverse of the process which I try to outline in this paper.

translators sometimes rendered their originals literally, sometimes according to the general sense. Relieved of such uncertainties and the awkwardness of working with manuscripts, the method still holds good. Any modern

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student who has begun with the most frequently used reader-grammars has also probably started his reading of genuine OE with Bible texts.

Although by the early seventeenth century there was a certain amount of printed material which could be used by students to learn OE, the process was still an “uneasy” one, for neither of the dictionaries compiled by Nowell and Joscelyn had been printed and, as L’Isle had complained, there was still no grammar. In spite of these difficulties some determined scholars persisted with such success that several other books in or about OE were published before the mid-century. Besides the books by Lambarde, Parker and Joscelyn, and L’Isle there were now Sir Henry Spelman’s *Archaeologus* (1626), a glossary of OE law terms; an OE Psalter by Spelman’s son John (1640); another and better edition of the Gospels by Junius and Marshall (1665); and Abraham Wheloc’s (or Wheelock’s) edition of the OE version of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* with the Latin in parallel columns (1643). In a second edition of the *Ecclesiastical History* (1644) Wheloc (Wheelock) incorporated a second issue of *Archaionomia*, as well as an edition of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle with a Latin translation. Finally William Somner’s *Dictionarium Saxonico-Latino-Anglicurn* (1659) provided the first major help in reducing the labor of learning OE by the old method.

That these and later scholars used the texts of their predecessors to learn OE, as L’Isle had done with both manuscripts and books, is put beyond conjecture by an interesting study plan suggested by George Hickes, the greatest OE scholar of his day. In the preface to his *Institutiones Grammaticae Anglo-Saxonicae* (1689), the first OE grammar, he outlined a course of study for beginners (sign. C2^v) which he updated in his *Thesaurus* (1705). One should first read the grammar, and then:

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As soon as possible take up the reading of the Saxon Gospels which Thomas Marshall published at Dordrecht and which are more correct than those of Foxe, as well as being much more appropriate for students. When these have been easily mastered you may proceed to the Saxon Psalms published by John Spelman. When you have construed a considerable part of this you can go on with hope and courage to the Saxon Heptateuch which my friend Edward Thwaites published in a faultless edition at Oxford. After that you may proceed in due order to reading the short dissertation by Aelfric on the Old and New Testaments, and the same author's Paschal Homily. Then you can set out to read King Alfred's paraphrase version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History than which neither Caesar nor Cicero, in their more muted manner, ever wrote anything more perfect. From this you may go on without fear to that other paraphrastic translation done by the same king or by bishop Werferth of Worcester: I refer to the books on the Consolation of Philosophy by An. Man. Sev. Boethius, which Christopher Rawlinson, a scion of the Plantagenets, published most accurately at Oxford. When you have read this you can easily run through the Canons and Laws which Henry Spelman published in the first volume of Councils. From there you can proceed with the highest expectations to the *Archaionomia* which Lambarde published or preferably to the edition of it which Wheloc republished (Pref. Sign. *p2*""). My translation).

All of the works mentioned here were in print, not in some crabbed MS hand, and all had translations available. The most noticeable omission is any reference to Somner's *Dictionarium*, though Hickes must have been assuming its use. Even with Somner's dictionary a beginner without the prodigious energy and enthusiasm of Hickes might well have found his program less than seductive;⁸ but it must represent

⁸ See W. B. Gardner, "George Hickes" (unpublished dissertation, Harvard, 1946), 155-156 and 407 for references to the remarkable speed with which Hickes mastered OE.

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fairly well the kind of system that Hicke himself followed, though he, of course, had no grammar provided for him.

Further corroborative evidence of this method of learning OE is provided in a short autobiographical statement by Elizabeth Elstob, a friend and protege of Hicke, who herself published work in OE, including a shorter version of Hicke's *Institutiones*, translated into English, and adapted, rather optimistically, for the use of young ladies.⁹ Having shown an interest, she says, in the Alfredian *Orosius* which her brother William intended to publish, she learned the alphabet, and noticed similarities between OE and modern English, particularly the resemblance of some OE forms to terms still in use when she was a child in Northumberland.

“With this the kind encourager of my studies being very well pleased, recommended to me the Saxon Heptateuch, most accurately published by Mr. Thwaites [1698]. The matter of that book being very well known and familiar to me, made the reading of it very easy and agreeable: and led me on to the reading of several other treatises...”¹⁰

Elizabeth had in addition the two invaluable learning tools of grammar and dictionary which had not been available to her predecessors of the period before Hicke and Somner; these students had had to labor along with the old method if they had the tenacity. Sir Roger Twysden, for example, writing to Sir William Dugdale in 1658, confesses that he is no hand at OE, but indicates

⁹ *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English Saxon Tongue* (London, 1715).

¹⁰ *An English-Saxon Homily on the Birth-Day of St. Gregory* (London, 1709), Pref. pp. vi-vii.

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that he might learn some from missals and prayer books in OE and Latin; if not, "I will be content to stay till Mr. Somner's Dictionary come out." About ten years before this, Dugdale had made much the same confession and resolution, though he was at that time in vain hopes that Sir Symonds D'Ewes would produce a dictionary he had promised.¹¹

Somner's dictionary had been long in coming, but a satisfactory work was probably not possible sooner, though the publication of Joscelyn's dictionary would certainly have eased somewhat the labors of earlier scholars. Many of them had had to make their own glossaries, or to copy those of their predecessors. Somner was an able scholar, and had had experience helping D'Ewes with the latter's proposed dictionary; and he had the foundations of others on which to build. He frankly acknowledges his debt to the collections of earlier scholars which his contemporaries handed over to him.

If Hickeys's grammar was even later in coming, a more adequate scholar could hardly have been found for the task in the seventeenth century. His work was much more a pioneering effort than Somner's, but he too had a debt to his predecessors in the study of Old English.

In addition to these self-teaching aids some instruction in OE was available at the universities from time to time. Wheelock was the first holder of an Anglo-Saxon lectureship established at Cambridge by Sir Henry Spelman about 1639 and he is best known for the work published while he held this post, but he appears to have had some students too.¹² Somner succeeded him in the stipend from the lectureship, but did not teach at the university, and after the publication of his dictionary at Oxford, the centre of OE studies shifted there. The great philologist Francis Junius settled

¹¹ *Life, Diary and Correspondence of Sir William Dugdale*, ed. W. Hamper (London, 1827), 336-7, 195, 197.

¹² See F. L. Utley, "Two Anglo-Saxon Poems," *MLQ*, 3 (1942), 243-261.

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at Oxford a couple of years before his death, and his friend and collaborator on the OE edition of the Gospels, Thomas Marshall, had become Rector of Lincoln College where George Hickes was also a fellow. The Provost of Queen's College, Gerard Langbaine (d. 1659), and his successor, Thomas Barlow, were also interested in OE studies. It seems highly likely, therefore, that there was some unofficial teaching of OE at the university even before the establishment of a lectureship at Queen's in 1679. The founder of this lectureship, Sir Joseph Williamson, had been a student and fellow of Queen's in Langbaine's time, and had himself studied OE sufficiently to attempt writing OE verse.¹³ The first holder of the lectureship, William Nicolson, taught OE every Wednesday in term time for about three years. Even after his departure Queen's College continued to produce OE scholars, notably Edmund Gibson and Edward Thwaites. Indeed when Thwaites entered in 1689 the college was reputed to be a "nest of Saxonists."¹⁴ As well as publishing work in OE himself, and helping Hickes with his *Thesaurus*, Thwaites taught the language, and by 1698-99 was complaining about the shortage of copies of Somner's Dictionary: he had only one to go around among fifteen students, so he helped publish smaller and cheaper editions of Somner's Dictionary and Hickes's Grammar.¹⁵ It was also one of his students, Christopher Rewlinson, who published the OE version of Boethius to which Hickes refers in his study plan.

¹³ See A. Turner, "Another Anglo-Saxon Poem," *MLQ*, 9 (1948), 389-393.

¹⁴ John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1812-16), 4, 141.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 141. 146.

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Thus, in the latter half of the seventeenth century learning OE may still have been “uneasy”, but with the dictionary and a grammar, with a sizeable number of printed editions of OE works and some personal instruction, the path was not now “so far about for want of a guide.”

End