A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLAND'S AND AMERICA'S LITERATURE

Geoffrey Chaucer

A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLAND'S AND AMERICA'S LITERATURE

by

Eva March Tappan

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PREFACE

This book is based upon the following convictions:—

1. That the prime object of studying literature is to develop the ability to enjoy it.

2. That in every work of literary merit there is something to enjoy.

3. That it is less important to know the list of an author's works than to feel the impulse to read one of them.

4. That it is better to know a few authors well than to learn the names of many.

To select those few authors with due regard to what is good in itself and what is historically of value, to choose from the hundreds whose writings have made for literary excellence, is under no circumstances an easy task. It is especially difficult—and especially delightful—for one who can echo most honestly the words of the French critic, "En litterature j'aime tout."

EVA MARCH TAPPAN.

Worcester, Massachusetts,

January, 1905.

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SIGNIFICANT DATES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

680. Death of Cædmon.

735. Death of Bede.

901. Death of Alfred.

1066. Norman Conquest.

1154. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* ends; death of Geoffrey of Monmouth.

1205-25. Layamon's *Brut,* the *Ormulum,* the *Ancren Riwle.*

1346. Battle of Crécy.

1362. *Piers Plowman.* English becomes the official language of the courts.

1380. Wyclif's translation of the Bible.

1400. Death of Chaucer.

1453. Capture of Constantinople by the Turks.

1470. Malory's *Morte d'Arthur.*

1476. Printing introduced into England.

1525. Tyndale's translation of the New Testament.

Before 1547. Blank verse introduced by Surrey, the Sonnet and Italian attention to form introduced by Surrey and Wyatt.

1552 or 53(?). *Ralph Roister Doister,* the first English comedy.

1564. Birth of Shakespeare.

1579. *Euphues; The Shepherd's Calendar.*

1587-93. Marlowe shows the power of blank verse.

1590. *Arcadia;* Books I-III of the *Faerie Queene.*

1590-99. Decade of the Sonnet.

1594. Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity,* Books I-IV.

1611. "King James version" of the *Bible.*

1616. Death of Shakespeare.

1623. *First Folio.*

1632-38. Milton's *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, Comus,* and *Lycidas.*

1642. Closing of the theatres.

1660. The Restoration.

1662. *Hudibras.*

1667. *Paradise Lost.*

1678. *The Pilgrim's Progress.*

1700. Death of Dryden.

1709-11. *The Tatler.*

1711-13. *The Spectator.*

1740. *Pamela,* the first English novel.

1751. Gray's Elegy.

1765. Percy's *Reliques.*

1798. *Lyrical Ballads,* by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

1802-17. *Reviews* established.

1811. Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility.*

1812. First part of Byron's *Childe Harold.*

1814. Scott's *Waverley.*

1819-21. Best work of Keats and Shelley.

1830. Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical.*

1836-37. Dickens's *Pickwick Papers.*

1843. First volume of Ruskin's *Modern Painters.*

1848. First volume of Macaulay's *History of England*.

1857. "George Eliot's" first fiction.

1868-69. Browning's *The Ring and the Book.*

SIGNIFICANT DATES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

1640. *The Bay Psalm Book,* the first book printed in America.

1678. *Anne Bradstreet's poems,* the best American verse of the seventeenth century.

1704. *The Boston News-Letter,* the first American newspaper.

1754. Edwards's *Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will,* the first great American metaphysical book.

1786. Freneau's poems, the best American poetry of the eighteenth century.

1788-89. *The Federalist,* the strongest literary influence in favor of adopting the Constitution.

1798. Brown's *Wieland,* the first American romance.

1817. Bryant's *Thanatopsis,* the first great American poem.

1819. Irving's *Sketch Book,* the first American book to win European fame.

1821. Cooper's *Spy,* the first important American novel.

1827. *The Youth's Companion* founded, the pioneer paper for young people.

1834-38. Sparks's *Life and Writings of George Washington,* the first of the American school of history.

1837. Emerson's *American Scholar,* "our intellectual Declaration of Independence."

1840. *The Dial,* the organ of transcendentalism.

1848. *The Biglow Papers,* the first literary use of dialect in American literature.

1849. Ticknor's *History of Spanish Literature,* a strong influence toward the study of European literature.

1849. Thoreau's *Week,* the first American book of "nature literature."

1850. Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter,* the greatest American novel.

1852. Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* the first American novel of purpose.

CHAPTER I

Centuries V–XI

THE EARLY ENGLISH PERIOD

1. Poetry

1. Our English Ancestors

About fifteen hundred years ago, our English ancestors were living in Jutland and the northern part of what is now Germany. They were known as Saxons, Angles, and Jutes, all different tribes of Teutons. They were bold and daring, and delighted in dashing through the waves wherever the tempest might carry them, burning and plundering on whatever coast they landed. If a man died fighting bravely in battle, they believed that the Valkyries bore him to the Valhalla of Odin and Thor, where the joys of fighting and feasting would never end. Yet these savage warriors loved music; they were devoted to their homes and their families; and, independent as they were, they would yield to any one whom they believed to be their rightful ruler. They were honest in their religion, and they thought seriously about the puzzling questions of life and death. They were sturdy in body and mind, the best of material to found a nation. About the middle of the fifth century, they began to go in large numbers to Britain, and there they remained, either slaying or driving to the west

and north the Celts who had previously occupied the country. The Angles were one of the strongest Teutonic tribes, and gradually the island became known as the land of the Angles, then Angleland, then England.

However rough the Teutons might be, there was one person whom they never forgot to treat with special honor, and that was the "scop," the maker, or former. It was his noble office to chant the achievements of heroes at the feasts of which the Teutons were so fond. Imagine a rude hall with a raised platform at one end. A line of stone hearths with blazing fires runs down the room from door to door. Between the hearths and the side walls are places for the sleeping-benches of the warriors. In the fires great joints of meat are roasting, and on either side of the hearths are long, rude tables. On the walls are shields and breastplates and helmets, and coats of mail made of rings curiously fastened together. Here and there are clusters of spears standing against the wall. The burnished mail flashes back the blazing of the fires, and trembles with the heavy tread of the thegns, with their merriment and their laughter, for the battle or the voyage is over, and the time of feasting has come. On the platform is the table of the chief, and with him sit the women of his family, and any warriors to whom he wishes to show special honor. After the feasting and the drinking of mighty cups of "mead," gifts are presented to those who have been bravest, sometimes by the chief, and sometimes—an even greater honor—by the wife of the chief herself. These gifts are horses, jewelled chains for the neck or golden bracelets for the arms, brightly polished swords, and coats of mail and helmets. The

scop sits on the platform by the side of the chief. When the feasting is ended, he strikes a heavy chord on his harp and begins his song with "Hwæt!" that is, "Lo!" or "Listen!"

2. Growth of the Epic—Beowulf

These songs chanted by the scops were composed many years before they were written, and probably no two singers ever sang them exactly alike. One scop would sing some exploit of a hero; another would sing it differently, and perhaps add a second exploit greater than the first. Little by little the poem grew longer. Little by little it became more united. The heroic deeds grew more and more marvellous, they became achievements that affected the welfare of a whole people; the poem had a hero, a beginning, and an end. The simple tale of a single adventure had become an epic. After a while it was written; and the manuscript of one of these epics has come down to us, though after passing through the perils of fire, and is now in the British Museum. It is called *Beowulf* because it is the story of the exploits of a hero by that name. The scene is apparently laid in Denmark and southern Sweden, and it is probable that bits of the poem were chanted at feasts long before the Teutons set sail for the shores of England. The story of the poem is as follows:—

> *Hrothgar, king of the Danes, built a more beautiful hall than men had ever heard of before. There he and his thegns enjoyed music and feasting, and divided the treasures that they had won in many a hard-fought battle. They were very happy together; but down in the marshes by the ocean was a monster named Grendel,*

who envied them and hated them. One night, when the thegns were sleeping, he came up stealthily through the mists and the darkness and dragged away thirty of the men and devoured them.

Night after night the slaughter went on, for Hrothgar was feeble with age and none of his thegns were strong enough to take vengeance. At length the young hero, Beowulf, heard of the monster, and offered to attack it. When night came, Grendel stalked up through the darkness, seized a warrior, and devoured him. He grasped another, but that other was Beowulf; and then came a struggle, for the monster felt such a clutch as he had never known. No sword could harm Grendel. Whoever overcame him must win by the strength of his own right arm. Benches were torn from their places, and the very hall trembled with the contest. At last Grendel tore himself away and fled to the marshes, but he left his arm in the unyielding grasp of the hero.

Then was there great rejoicing with Hrothgar and his thegns. A lordly feast was given to the champion; horses and jewels and armor and weapons were presented to him, while scops sang of his glory. The joy was soon turned into sorrow, however, for on the following night, another monster, as horrible as the first, came into the hall. It was the mother of Grendel come to avenge her son, and she carried away one of Hrothgar's favorite liegemen.

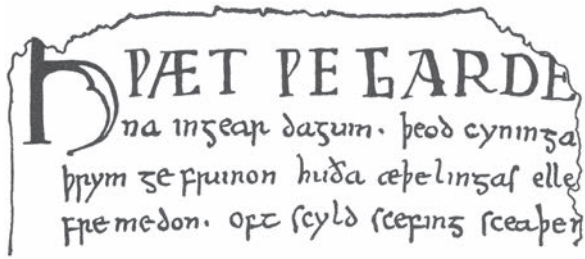
When Beowulf was told of this, he set out to punish the murderer. He followed the footprints of the fiend through the wood-paths, over the swamps, the cliffs, and the fens; and at last he came to a precipice overhanging water that was swarming with dragons and sea serpents. Deep down among them was the den of Grendel and his mother. Beowulf put on his best armor and dived down among the horrible creatures,

while his men kept an almost hopeless watch on the cliff above him. All day long he sank, down, down, until he came to the bottom of the sea. There was Grendel's mother, and she dragged him into her den. Then there was another terrible struggle, and as the blood burst up through the water, the companions of Beowulf were sad indeed, for they felt sure that they should never again see the face of their beloved leader. While they were gazing sorrowfully at the water, the hero appeared, bearing through the waves the head of Grendel. He had killed the mother and cut off the head from Grendel's body, which lay in the cavern.

Beowulf's third exploit took place many years later, after he had ruled his people for fifty years. He heard of a vast treasure of gold and jewels hidden away in the earth, and although it was guarded by a fire-breathing dragon, he determined to win it for his followers. There was a fearful encounter, and his thegns, all save one, proved to be cowards and deserted him. He won the victory, but the dragon had wounded him, and the poison of the wound soon ended his life. Then the thegns built up a pyre, hung with helmets and coats of mail; and on it they burned the body of their dead leader. After this, they raised a mighty mound in his honor, and placed in it a store of rings and of jewels. Slowly the greatest among them rode around it, mourning for their leader and speaking words of love and praise,—

Said he was mightiest of all the great world-kings,
Mildest of rulers, most gentle in manner,
Most kind to his liegemen, most eager for honor.

This is the story of Beowulf as it has come down to us in a single ragged and smoke-stained manuscript. This manuscript was probably written in the eighth or ninth century, and the poem must differ greatly from



A Portion of the First Page of the Beowulf Manuscript

the original version, especially in its religious allusions. In earlier times, the Celts had learned the Christian faith from the Irish; but it was not preached to the Teutons in southern England until 597, when missionaries from Rome made their way to Kent. At first they were allowed to preach on the little island of Thanet only and in the open air; for the wary Teutons had no idea of hearing strange teachings under roofs where magic might easily overpower them. Soon, however, large numbers became earnest converts. Bits of the teachings of the missionaries were dropped into *Beowulf.* Instead of "Fate," the poets said "God;" Grendel is declared to be a descendant of Cain; and the scop interrupts his story of Grendel's envious hatred by singing of the days when God made the heavens and the earth; the ceremonies at the burning of Beowulf are heathen, but the poem says that it was God, the true King of Victory, who led him to the fire-dragon's treasures.

3. Form of Early English Poetry

Many words in Old English are like words in present use, but Old English poetry was different in several

respects from the poetry of to-day. The following lines from Beowulf are a good illustration:—

Tha com of more under mist-hleothum
Then came from the moor under the misty-hillside

Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bær;
Grendel going, God's wrath he bore;

mynte se man-scatha manna cynnes
intended the deadly foe of men to the race

sumne besyrwan in sele tham hean.
some one to ensnare in hall that lofty.

To-day we like to hear rhyme at the end of our lines; our ancestors enjoyed not rhyme, but alliteration. In every line there were four accented syllables. The third, the "rime-giver," gave the keynote, for with whatever letter that began, one of the preceding accented syllables must begin and both might begin. The fourth never alliterated with the other three. In the first line quoted, the accented syllables are *com, mor, mist,* and *hle. Mist* is the rime-giver. In the second line, *God* is the rime-giver, while *Gren, gon,* and *bær* are the other accented syllables. The Teutons were very fond of compound words. Some of these words are simple and childlike, such as ban-hus (bone-house), body; ban-loca (bonelocker), flesh. Some, especially those pertaining to the ocean, are poetical, such as mere-stræt (sea-street), way over the sea; yth-lida (wave-sailer) and famig-heals (foamy-necked), vessel.

4. Other Old English Poems

A number of shorter poems have come down to us from the Old English. Among them are two that

are of special interest. One of these is *Widsith* (the far-wanderer), and this is probably our earliest English poem. It pictures the life of the scop, who roams about from one great chief to another, everywhere made welcome, everywhere rewarded for his song by kindness and presents. The poem ends:—

Wandering thus, there roam over many a country
The gleemen of heroes, mindful of songs for the chanting,
Telling their needs, their heartfelt thankfulness speaking.
Southward or northward, wherever they go, there is some one
Who values their song and is liberal to them in his presents,
One who before his retainers would gladly exalt
His achievements, would show forth his honors. Till all this is vanished,
Till life and light disappear, who of praise is deserving
Has ever throughout the wide earth a glory unchanging.

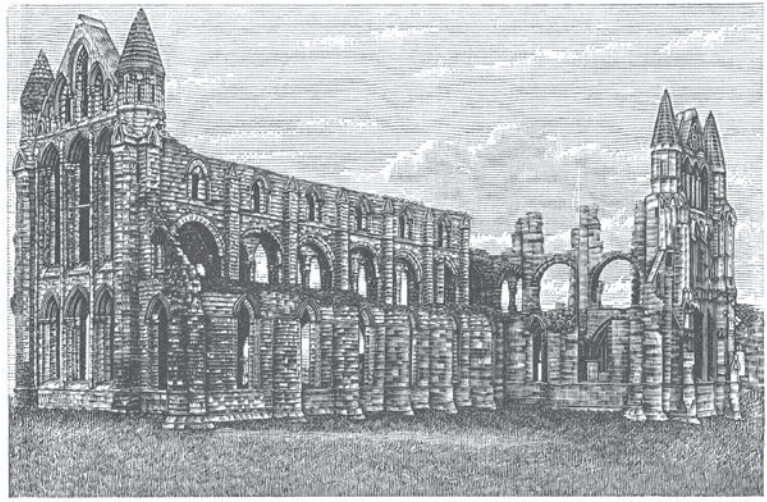
The second of these songs is *Deor's Lament.* Deor is in sorrow, for another scop has become his lord's favorite. The neglected singer comforts himself by recalling the troubles that others have met. Each stanza ends with the refrain,—

That he endured; this, too, can I.

Widsith and *Deor's Lament* were found in a manuscript volume of poems collected and copied more than eight hundred years ago. It is known as the Exeter Book because it belongs to the cathedral at Exeter. Another volume, containing both poetry and prose was discovered at the Monastery of Vercelli in Italy. These two volumes and the manuscript of *Beowulf* contain almost all that is left to us of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

5. Cædmon [d. 680]

The happy scop and the unhappy scop are both forgotten. No one knows who wrote either the rejoicing or the lament. The first English poet that we know by name is the monk Cædmon, who died in 680. The introduction of Christianity made great changes in the country, for though the sturdy Englishmen could not lay aside in one century, or two, or three, all their confidence in charms and magic verses, and in runic letters cut into the posts of their doors and engraved on their swords and their battle-axes, yet they were honest believers in the God of whom they had learned. Churches and convents rose throughout the land, and one of these convents was the home of Cædmon. It was founded by Irish missionaries, and was built at what is now called Whitby, on a lofty cliff overlooking the German Ocean. There men and women prayed and worked and sought to live lives of holiness. At one



The Ruins of Whitby Abbey

of their feasts the harp passed from one to another, that each might sing in turn. Cædmon had not been educated as a monk, and therefore he had never learned to make songs. As the harp came near him, he was glad to slip out of the room with the excuse that he must care for the cattle. In the stable he fell asleep; and as he slept a vision appeared to him and said, "Cædmon, sing some song to me." "I cannot sing," he replied, "and that is why I left the feasting." "But you shall sing," declared the vision. "Sing the beginning of created beings." Then Cædmon sang. He sang of the power of the Creator, of his glory, and of how He made the heavens and the earth. In the morning he told the steward of the mysterious gift that had come to him while he slept, and the steward led him joyfully to Hilda, the royal maiden who was their abbess. Many learned men came together, and Cædmon told them his dream and repeated his verses. Another subject was given him, and he made verses on that also. "It is the grace of God," said the council reverently. The habit of a monk was put upon him, he was carefully taught the word of God, and as he learned, he composed poem after poem, following the Bible story from the creation to the coming of Christ, his resurrection and his ascension.

6. Cynewulf, born about 750

The name of one more poet, Cynewulf, is that of the greatest of the authors whose words have come down to us from the early days of England. He, too, was probably of Northumbria, and he must have written about a century after the time of Cædmon. Hardly anything is known of him except his name; but he interwove

that in some of his poems in such a way that it could never be forgotten. For this purpose he made use of runes, the earliest of the northern alphabets. Each rune represented not only a letter, but also the word of which it was the initial; for instance:—

C = Cene, the courageful warrior.
Y = Yfel, wretched.
N = Nyd, necessity.
W = Wyn, joy.
U = Ur, our.
L = Lagu, water.
F = Feoh, wealth.

With these runes Cynewulf spelled out his name:—

Then the Courage-hearted *cowers when the King he hears*
Speak the words of wrath—Him the wielder of the heavens
Speak to those who once on earth but obeyed him weakly,
While as yet their Yearning pain, *and their* Need, *most easily*
Comfort might discover.
. . . . . .
Gone is then the Winsomeness
Of the earth's adornments! What to Us *as men belonged*
Of the joys of life was locked, long ago in Lake-floods,
All the Fee *on earth.*[*]

Cynewulf has many beautiful descriptions of nature, sometimes of nature calm and quiet and peaceful; for instance:—

When the winds are lulled and the weather is fair,
When the sun shines bright, holy jewel of heaven,
When the clouds are scattered, the waters subdued,
When no stormwind is heard, and the candle of nature
Shines warm from the south, giving light to the many.

[*] Stopford Brooke's translation, in *English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest.*

Cynewulf loved tranquil days and peaceful scenes; but if he wrote the riddles which are often thought to be his, he had not lost sympathy with the wild life of his ancestors on the stormy ocean. The English liked riddles, and this one must have been repeated over and over again at convent feasts and in halls at times of rejoicing:—

Sometimes I come down from above and stir up the storm-waves;
The surges, gray as the flint-stone, I hurl on the sea-banks,
The foaming waters I dash on the rock-wall. Gloomily
Moves from the deep a mountain billow; darkening,
Onward it sweeps o'er the turbulent wild of the ocean.
Another comes forth and, commingling, they meet at the mainland
In high, towering ridges. Loud is the call from the vessel,
Loud is the sailors' appeal; but the rock-masses lofty
Stand unmoved by the seafarers' cries or the waters.

The answer to this is "The hurricane."

An especially beautiful poem of Cynewulf's is called the *Dream of the Rood*. The cross appeared to the poet in a dream,—"the choicest dream," he calls it. It was "circled with light," it was glittering with gems and with gold, and around it stood the angels of God. From it there flowed forth a stream of blood; and while the dreamer gazed in wonder, the cross spoke to him. It told him of the tree being cut from the edge of the forest and made into the cross. Then followed the story of the crucifixion, of the three crosses that stood long on Calvary sorrowing, of the burial of the cross of Christ deep down in the earth, of its being found by servants of God, who adorned it with silver and with gold that it might bring healing to all who should pay it their reverence.

7. Early English Poetry as a Whole

Such was the Early English poetry, beginning with wild exploits of half-fabulous heroes and gradually changing under the touch of Christianity into paraphrases of the Bible story, into legends of saints, and accounts of heavenly visions. It contains bold descriptions of sea and tempest, intermingling, as the years passed, with pictures of more quiet and peaceful scenes. The names of but two poets, Cædmon and Cynewulf, are known to us; but throughout all these early poems there is an earnestness, an appealing sincerity, and an honest, childlike love of nature, that bring the writers very near to us, and make them no unworthy predecessors of the poets that have followed them.

2. Prose

8. Bede, 673–735

About the time of the death of Cædmon, a boy was born in Northumbria who was to write one of the most famous pieces of Early English prose. His name was Bede, or Bæda, and he is often called the Venerable Bede, venerable being the title next below that of saint. When he was a little child, he was taken to the convent of Jarrow, and there he remained all his life. A busy life it was. The many hours of prayer must be observed; the land must be cultivated; guests must be entertained, no small interruption as the fame of the convent and of Bede himself increased. Moreover, this convent was a great school, to which some six hundred pupils, not

only from England but from various parts of Europe, came for instruction.

Bede enjoyed it all. He was happy in his religious duties. He "always took delight," as he says, "in learning, teaching, and writing." He found real pleasure in the outdoor work; and, little as he tells us of his own life, he does not forget to say that he especially liked winnowing and threshing the grain and giving milk to the young lambs and calves. He was keenly alive to the affairs of the world, and though libraries were his special delight, he was as ready to talk with his stranger guests of distant kingdoms as of books. In the different monasteries of England there were collections of valuable manuscripts, and Jarrow had one of the most famous of these collections. The abbot loved books, and from each one of his numerous journeys to Rome he returned with a rich store of volumes.

Monk at Work on Book of Kildare

Much of Bede's time must have been given to teaching, and yet, in the midst of all his varied occupations, this first English scholar found leisure to write an enormous amount. Forty-five different works he produced, and they were really a summary of the knowledge of his day. He wrote of grammar, rhetoric, music, medicine; he wrote lives of saints and commentaries on the Bible,—indeed, there is hardly a subject that he did not touch. He even wrote a volume

of poems, including a dainty little pastoral, resembling the Latin pastorals, a contest of song between summer and winter, which closes with a pretty picture of the coming of springtime and the cuckoo. "When the cuckoo comes," he says, "the hills are covered with happy blossoms, the flocks find pasture, the meadows are full of repose, the spreading branches of the trees give shade to the weary, and the many-colored birds sing their joyful greeting to the sunshine."

One day the king of Northumbria asked Bede to write a history of England, and the busy monk began the work as simply as if he were about to prepare a lesson for his pupils. He sent to Rome for copies of letters and reports written in the early days when the Romans ruled the land; he borrowed from various convents their treasures of old manuscripts pertaining to the early times; and he talked with men who had preserved the ancient traditions and legends. So it was that Bede's *Ecclesiastical History,* the first history of England, was written. When it was done, he sent it to the king, together with a sincere and dignified little preface, in which he asked for the prayers of whoever should read the book,—a much larger number than the quiet monk expected.

With the difficulty of collecting information, no one could expect Bede's work to be free from mistakes, although he was careful from whom his information came, and he often gives the name of his authority. Bede knew well how to tell a story, and the *Ecclesiastical History,* sober and grave as its title sounds, is full of tales of visions of angels, lights from heaven, mysterious

voices, and tempests that were stilled and fires that were quenched at the prayers of holy men. Here is the legend of Cædmon and his gift of song. Here, too, is the famous statement that there are no snakes in Ireland. "Even if they are carried thither from Britain," says Bede, "as soon as the ship comes near the shore and the scent of the air reaches them, they die."

All these books were written in Latin. That was the tongue of the church and of all scholars of the day. It was a universal language, and an educated man might be set down in any monastery in England or on the Continent, and feel perfectly at home in its book-room or in conversation with the monks. Bede was so thoroughly English, however, in his love of nature, his frankness and earnestness, and his devotion to the people of his own land that, although he wrote in Latin, most of his works have a purely English atmosphere. He did not scorn his native tongue, and even in his writing he may have used it more than once, though we know the name of one work only. This was a translation of the *Gospel of St. John,* and it was his last work. He knew that his life was near its close, but he felt that he must complete this translation for his pupils. Some one of them was always with him to write as the teacher might feel able to dictate. The last

A Mediæval Author at Work

day of his life came, and in the morning the pupil said, "Master, there is still one chapter wanting. Will it trouble you to be asked any more questions?" "It is no trouble," answered Bede. "Take your pen and write quickly." When evening had come, the boy said gently, "Dear Master, there is yet one sentence not written." "Write quickly," said Bede again. "The sentence is written," said the boy a few minutes later. "It is well," murmured Bede, and with new strength he joyfully chanted the *Gloria;* and so, in 735, he passed away, the first English scholar, scientist, and historian.

9. Alcuin, 735?–804

In the very year of Bede's death, if we may trust to tradition, Alcuin was born, the man who was to carry on English scholarship, though not on English soil. He was a monk of the convent of York, and was famous for his knowledge. Perhaps some of the English churchmen thought that he was too famous, when they knew that King Charlemagne had heard of his learning, and had persuaded him to leave his own country and come to France to teach the royal children and take charge of education in the Frankish kingdom. For fourteen years, from 782 to 796, he spent nearly all his time at the court of Charlemagne. Moreover, he persuaded many other men of York training to leave England and assist him in teaching the French. He little knew how grateful the English would be in later years that this had been done.

10. Alfred the Great, 848–901

During those years of Alcuin's absence in France, there was dire trouble in Northumbria. King after king

was slain by rebels; and finally the Danes, coming from the shores of the Baltic, made their first attacks on the coasts of Northumbria. This was the beginning. Year after year the savage pirates fell upon the land. For more than three quarters of a century the Northumbrians were either fighting or dreading the coming of their heathen foes. At the end of that time, when peace was made with the terrible invaders, Northumbria was a desert so far as literature was concerned. The Danes had struck especially at the monasteries because of the gold and silver vessels and ornaments that were collected in them; and not one monastery remained standing in all the land from the Tyne to the Humber. Libraries famous over Europe had been burned; smoked and bloodstained ruins were alone left to show where men had been taught who had become the teachers of Europe. South of the Humber matters were little better; for there, too, the heathen Danes had swept through and through the country. Priests pronounced the words in their Latin mass books, but very few could understand the language and put a Latin letter into English. The only hope of England lay in her king. It was happy for her that her king was Alfred the

King Alfred

Great, and that this sovereign who could fight battles of swords and spears was of equal courage and wisdom in the warfare against ignorance. In his childhood he had visited Rome, perhaps spent several years in that city. He had paid a long visit at the Frankish court of Charlemagne's son. He had seen what knowledge could do, and he meant that his own people should have a chance to learn. Then it was that France repaid England for the loan of Alcuin, for priests taught in the schools which he had founded were induced to cross the Channel and become the teachers of the English.

There were few English books, however, and there was no one to make them but this busy king; and just as simply as Bede had taken up his pen to write a history of the land, so Alfred set to work to translate books for his kingdom. Among the books that he translated were two that must have been of special interest to the English, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and a combined history and geography of the world, written five hundred years before Alfred's day by a Spanish monk called Orosius. The latter had long been a favorite school-book in the convents; but, naturally, a geography that was five hundred years old was in need of revision, and Alfred became not only a translator but a reviser. He never forgot that he was writing for his people, and whenever he came to an expression that would not be clear to them, he either explained it, or omitted it altogether. Whenever he could correct a mistake of Orosius's, he did so.

11. The Language of Alfred's Time

In one way Alfred had not only his translations to make, but his very language to invent. Latin is a finished, exact, accurate language; the English of the ninth century was rude, childish, and awkward, and it was no easy task to interpret the clean-cut wording of the Latin into the loose, clumsy English phrases. Nevertheless, Alfred had no thought of imitating the Latin construction. The following is a literal translation of part of the preface to one of his books that he sent to Wærferth, bishop of Worcester:—

> *Alfred the King bids to greet Wærferth the bishop with loving words and in friendly wise; and I bid this be known to thee that it very often comes into my mind what wise men there were formerly, both clergy and laymen; and what blessed times there were then throughout England; and how kings who had power over the nation in those days obeyed God and his ministers, and they both preserved peace, order, and authority at home and also increased their territory abroad; and how they throve both in war and in wisdom; and also the holy orders how zealous they were both in teaching and in learning, and in all the services that they ought to give to God; and how people from abroad sought wisdom and teaching in this land; and how we must now get them from without if we are to have them.*

Confused as this is, the king's earnestness shows in every word. He knows just what he means to say, and, language or no language, he contrives to say it. Bede's translation of the *Gospel of Saint John* disappeared centuries ago, and this preface of King Alfred's is the first bit of English prose that we possess. Literature had

vanished from the north and was making its home in the south.

12. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

Another piece of literary and historical work we owe to Alfred, and that is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In almost every convent the monks were accustomed to set down what seemed to them the most important events, such as the death of a king, an attack by the Danes, an unusually high tide, or an eclipse of the sun. One of these lists of events was kept in the convent at Winchester, Alfred's capital city, and the idea occurred to him of revising this table, adding to it from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and other sources, and making it the beginning of a progressive history of his kingdom. It is possible that Alfred himself did this revising, and it can hardly be doubted that he wrote at least the accounts of some of his own battles with the Danes.

13. Death of Alfred

In 901, it was written in the Chronicle, "This year died Alfred, the son of Ethelwulf." King Alfred left England apparently on the way to literary progress, if not greatness. The kingdom was at peace; the Danes of the north and the English of the south were under one king, and were, nominally at least, ruled by the same laws; churches had arisen over the kingdom; convents had been built and endowed; schools were increasing in number and in excellence; books of practical worth had been translated, probably more than have come down to us; the people had been encouraged to learn the language of scholars, yet their own native tongue

had not been scorned, but rather raised to the rank of a literary language. There seemed every reason to expect national progress in all directions, and especially in matters intellectual.

14. Literature during the 10th and 11th Centuries

The contrary was the fact. For this there were two reasons: 1. Alfred's rule was a one-man power. His subjects studied because the king required study. Learned men came to England because the king invited them and rewarded them. At Alfred's death a natural reaction set in. The strong will and the generous hand were gone, the watchful eye of the king was closed. 2. The Danes renewed their attacks. It almost ceased to be a question of any moment whether England should advance; far more pressing was the question whether England should exist. The church was in a low state. The monks did not obey the rules of their orders, and many of the secular clergy were not only ignorant but openly wicked. About the middle of the tenth century, the monk Dunstan became abbot of Glastonbury, and he preached reforms so earnestly that both priests and people began to mend their ways. Moreover, the year 1000 was approaching, and there was a general feeling that in that year the world would come to an end. A natural result of this feeling was that the church became more active, and that great numbers of lives of saints appeared, and sermons, or homilies, as they were called.

These homilies were not so uninteresting as their name sounds. To hold the attention of the people, the preachers were forced to be picturesque, and they gave in

Dedication of a Saxon Church
From an old manuscript

minute detail most vivid descriptions of places, saints, and demons about which they knew absolutely nothing. The saints were pictured as of fair complexion, with light hair and blue eyes. Satan was described as having dark, shaggy hair hanging down to his ankles. Sparks flew from his eyes and sulphurous flames from his mouth. The most famous writer of these homilies was Ælfric, abbot of Ensham.

In the first two centuries after Alfred, the old poems composed in the north were rewritten in the form in which they have come down to us, that is, in the language of the south, of the West Saxons; but little was produced that could be called poetry. The *Chronicle* was continued, and one or two bold battle-songs were inserted. A few rude ballads were composed, with little of the old alliteration, and with only a beginning of appreciation of rhyme. One of these was the work of a king, Canute the Dane, who became ruler of England in 1017:—

Merie sungen the munaches binnan Ely
Tha Cnut ching reuther by:
"Rotheth cnites noer the land
And here ye thes Munaches sæng."

Joyously sang the monks in Ely
When Canute the king rowed by.
"Row, knights, nearer the land,
And hear ye the song of the monks."

Glancing back over the literature of England, we can see that it had been much affected by the influence of the Celts. From the sixth century to the ninth the Christian schools of Ireland were famous throughout Europe, and the Irish missionaries taught the religion of Christ to the Northumbrians. The Teutons and the Celts were not at all alike. The Teutons thought somewhat slowly. They were given to pondering on difficult subjects and trying to explain puzzling questions. The Celts thought and felt swiftly; a word would make them smile, and a word would arouse their sympathy. The Teutons liked stories of brave chiefs who led their thegns in battle and shared with them the treasures that were won, of thegns who were faithful to their lord, and who at his death heaped up a great mound of earth to keep his name in lasting remembrance. The Celts, too, were fond of stories, but stories that were full of bright and beautiful descriptions, of birds of brilliant coloring, of marvellous secrets, and of mysterious voices. They liked battle scenes wherein strange mists floated about the warriors and weird phantoms were dimly seen in the gathering darkness.

To say just when and where the Celtic influence touched English literature is not easy; but, comparing the grave, stern resolution of *Beowulf,* with the imaginative beauty, the graceful fancy, and the tender sentiment of the *Dream of the Rood,* and the picturesque and witty

descriptions of the homilies, one can but feel that there is something in the literature of the English Teutons which did not come from themselves, and which can be accounted for in no other way than by their contact with the Celts.

15. William the Norman Conquers England

The beginnings of a noble literature had been made in England, but the inspiration had become scanty. The English writer needed not only to read something better than he had yet produced, but even more he needed to know a race to whom that "something better" was familiar. In 1066, an event occurred that brought him both men and models: William the Norman conquered England and became its king.

SUMMARY

Centuries V–XI

THE EARLY ENGLISH PERIOD

1. Poetry	2. Prose
Beowulf.	Bede.
Widsith.	Alfred.
Deor's Lament.	*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.*
Cædmon.	Lives of saints and homilies.
Cynewulf.	

1. Poetry

Our English ancestors lived in Jutland and the northern part of what is now Germany. They were savage warriors, but loved song and poetry. After

their feasts the scop, or poet, sang of the adventures of some hero. Little by little these songs were welded together and became an epic. One epic, *Beowulf,* has been preserved, though much changed by the teachings of the missionaries who came to England in 597. Anglo-Saxon verse was marked by alliteration instead of rhyme.

Besides *Beowulf,* little remains of the Anglo-Saxon poetry except what is contained in the *Exeter Book* and the *Vercelli Book.*

The first poet whom we know by name was the monk Cædmon (seventh century), whose chief work was a paraphrase of the Scriptures. The greatest of the early poets was Cynewulf (eighth century).

2. Prose

One of the most famous pieces of English prose, a translation of the *Gospel according to St. John,* was written by the monk Bede (seventh and eighth centuries). He wrote on many subjects, but his most valuable work is his *Ecclesiastical History.*

Alcuin (eighth century) carried on English scholarship in France. England was harassed by the Danes, but after King Alfred (ninth century) had brought about peace, Alcuin's pupils became teachers of the English.

King Alfred made several valuable translations. The preface of one of them is the earliest piece of English prose that we still possess. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was formally begun in his reign.

The death of Alfred and the renewed attacks of the Danes retarded the literary progress of England. The preaching of Dunstan and the near approach of the year 1000 called out lives of saints, and homilies written by Ælfric and others. Old poems were rewritten, and rude ballads were composed. The influence of the Celts for beauty, fancy, and wit may be seen in both poetry and prose. English literature had made a good beginning, but needed better models.

CHAPTER II

Centuries XII and XIII

THE NORMAN-ENGLISH PERIOD

16. Advantages of the Conquest

Nothing better could have happened to England than this Norman conquest. The Englishmen of the eleventh century were courageous and persistent, but the spark of inspiration that gives a people the mastery of itself and the leadership of other nations was wanting. England was like a great vessel rolling in the trough of the sea, turning broadside to every wave. The country must fall into the hands of either the barbaric north or the civilized south. Happily for England, the victor was of the south.

The Normans were Teutons, who had fallen upon France as their kinsmen had fallen upon England; but the invaders of France had been thrown among a race superior to them in manners, language, and literature. These northern pirates gave a look about them, and straightway they began to follow the customs of the people whom they had conquered. They embraced the Christian religion and built churches and monasteries as if they had been to the manner born. They forgot their own language and adopted that of France. They intermarried with the French; and in a century and a

half a new race had arisen with the bravery and energy of the Northmen and an aptitude for even more courtly manners and even wider literary culture than the French themselves.

17. The Struggle between the French and English Languages

Such were the Norman conquerors of England. How would their coming affect the language and the literature of the subject country? It was three hundred years before the question was fully answered. At first the Norman spoke French, the Englishman spoke English, and both nations used Latin in the church service. Little by little, the Norman found it convenient to know something of the language spoken by the masses of the people around him. Little by little, the Englishman acquired some knowledge of the language of his rulers. Words that were nearly alike in both tongues were confused in pronunciation, and as for spelling,—a man's mode of spelling was his private property, and he did with his own as he would. It is hard to trace the history of the two languages in England until we reach the fourteenth century, and then there are some few landmarks. In 1300, Oxford allowed people who had suits at law to plead in "any language generally understood." Fifty years later, English was taught to some extent in the schools. In 1362, it became the official language of the courts. In 1385, John of Trevisa wrote, "In all the grammar schools of England children give up French and construe and learn in English, and have thereby advantage on one side and disadvantage on another. Their advantage is that they learn their grammar in less

time than children were wont to do; the disadvantage is that now grammar-school children know no more French than their left heel knows." In 1400, the Earl of March offered his aid to the king and wrote his letter in English, making no further apology for using his native tongue than the somewhat independent one, "It is more clear to my understanding than Latin or French."

In this contest, three centuries long, English had come off victor, but it was a different English from that of earlier times. Hundreds of new nouns, verbs, and adjectives had entered it, but they had been forced to wear the English garb. To speak broadly, verbs had adopted English endings; adjectives had adopted English comparisons; nouns had given up their case-endings and also their gender in great degree, for the simplest remedy for the frequent conflict between the English and French gender was to drop all distinctions of gender so far as inanimate objects were concerned.

How did the coming of the Norman affect the literature of England? As soon as the shock of conquest was somewhat past, the English unconsciously began, in the old Teutonic fashion, to look about them and see what ways worthier than their own they could adopt. They had refused to become a French-speaking people, but was there any thing in Norman literature and literary methods worthy of their imitation, or rather assimilation?

18. Opening of the Universities and the Crusades

The Normans had a taste for history, they were a religious people, and they thoroughly enjoyed

story-telling. Two other influences were brought to bear upon the English: the opening of the universities and the crusades. The first made it possible for a man to obtain an education even if he had no desire to become a priest. The second threw open the treasures of the world. Thousands set out on these expeditions to rescue the tomb of Christ from the power of the unbelievers. Those who returned brought with them a wealth of new ideas. They had seen new countries and new manners. They had learned to think new thoughts.

The opening of the universities made it possible for chronicles to be written, not only by monks in the monasteries, but by men who lived in the midst of the events that they described. Chronicles were no longer mere annals; they became full of detail, vivid, interesting.

19. Devotional Books

The religious energy of the Normans and the untiring zeal of the preachers strengthened the English interest in religious matters. The sacred motive of the crusades intensified it, and books of devotion appeared, not in Latin, like the chronicles, but in simple, every-day English. One of the best known of these was the *Ormulum,* a book which gives a metrical paraphrase of the Gospels as used in the church service, each portion followed by a metrical sermon. Its author kept a sturdy hold upon his future fame in his couplet,—

Thiss boc iss nemmnedd Orrmulum
Forrthi thatt Orm itt worhhte.

He was equally determined that his lines should be

pronounced properly, and so after every short vowel he doubled the consonant. He even gave advance orders to whoever should copy his work:—

> *And whoso shall will to write this book again another time, I bid him that he write it correctly, so as this book teacheth him, entirely as it is upon this first pattern, with all such rhymes as here are set with just as many words, and that he look well that he write a letter twice where it upon this book is written in that wise.*[*]

Another of these books of devotion was the *Ancren Riwle,* a little prose work whose author is unknown. Its object was to guide three sisters who wished to withdraw from the world, though without taking the vows of the convent. It is almost sternly strict, but so pure and natural and earnest that it was deeply loved and appreciated.

20. Romances

The Norman delight in stories and the new ideas given by the crusades aroused in the English a keen love of romance. The conquest itself was romantic. The chivalry introduced by the Normans was picturesque. It adorned the stern Saxon idea of duty with richness and grace. Simple old legends took form and beauty. Four great cycles of romance were produced; that is, four groups of stories told in metre, each centred about some one hero. One was about Charlemagne, one about Alexander the Great, one told the tale of the fall of Troy, and one pictured King Arthur and his knights. This last cycle had a curious history. Before the middle of the

[*]Translated in Morley's *English Writers,* iii.

Sir Launcelot and a Hermit
From an illuminated MS. of 1316

twelfth century, one Geoffrey of Monmouth, a Welsh bishop, wrote in Latin an exceedingly fanciful *History of the Kings of Britain.* It was translated into French by a clerk named Wace; was carried to France; wandered over the Continent, where it was smoothed and beautified, and gained the stories of Launcelot and the Holy Grail; then returned to England, and was put into English verse by the English priest Layamon. He called it the *Brut,* or story of Brutus, a fabled descendant of Æneas, who was claimed to have landed on the shores of England in prehistoric times. This cycle was the special favorite of the English. The marvellous adventures of King Arthur's knights interested those who had been thrilled by the stories of returning crusaders; and the quest of the knights for but one glance of that Holy Thing, the Grail, was in full accord with the spirit of the crusades, an earthly journey with a spiritual gain as its object and reward.

The *Chronicle* came to an end in 1154. The *Ormulum,*

the *Ancren Riwle,* and the *Brut* all belong to the early part of the thirteenth century. They are English in their feeling; but as the years passed, French romances were sung throughout the land,—in French where French was understood, in English translation elsewhere. One of the best liked of these was *King Horn.* Its story is:—

The kingdom of Horn's father is invaded by the Saracens, who kill the father and put Horn and his companions to sea. King Aylmar receives them, and orders them to be taught various duties. Of Horn he says:—

And tech him to harpe
With his nayles scharpe,
Bivore me to serve
And of the cupe lerve,—

the usual accomplishments of the page. The king's daughter, Rymenhild, falls in love with Horn; and no wonder, if the description of him is correct.

He was bright fo the glas,
He was whit fo the flur,
Rofe red was his colur,
In none kinge-riche
Nas non his iliche.

He goes in quest of adventures, to prove himself worthy of Rymenhild. The course of their love does not run smooth. King Aylmar presents a most eligible king as his daughter's suitor; Horn's false friend tries to win her; she is shut up in an island castle; but Horn, in the disguise of a gleeman, makes his way into the castle and wins his Rymenhild. He kills his false friend; he finds that his mother still lives; he regains his father's

kingdom; and so the tale ends. This story is thoroughly French in its treatment of woman. In *Beowulf,* the wife of the lord is respected and honored, she is her lord's friend and helpmeet; but there is no romance about the matter. To picture the smile of woman as the reward of valor, and her hand as the prize of victory, was left to the verses of those poets who were familiar with the glamour of knighthood.

21. The Norman-English Love of Nature

This new race, the Norman-English, enjoyed romance, they liked the new and the unwonted, but there was ever a warm corner in their hearts for nature. The dash of the waves, the keen breath of the northern wind, the coming of spring, the song of the cuckoo, the gleam of the daisy,—they loved them all; and in the midst of the romances of knights and Saracens and foreign countries, they felt a tenderness toward what was their very own, the world of nature. Simple, tender, graceful little lyric poems slipped in shyly among the more pretentious histories, religious handbooks, and paraphrases. Here are bits from them:—

Sumer is icumen in,
Llude sing cuccu!
Groweth sed, and bloweth med,
And springth the wude nu,
Sing, cuccu!

or this:—

Dayes-eyes in the dales,
Notes sweete of nightingales,
Each fowl song singeth,

or this, which has a touch of the French love romance:—

Blow, northern wind,
Send thou me my suetyng.
Blow, northern wind,
Blow, blow, blow!

22. The Robin Hood Ballads

Not only love of nature but love of freedom and love of justice inspired the ballads of Robin Hood, many of which must have originated during this period, though probably they did not take their present form till much later. They are crude, simple stories in rhyme of the exploits of Robin Hood and his men, and they come straight from the heart of the Englishman, that bold, defiant heart which always beat more fiercely at the thought of injustice. Robin and his friends are exiles because they have dared to shoot the king's deer, and they have taken up their abode in "merry Sherwood." There they waylay the sheriff and the "proud bishop," and force them to open their well-filled purses and

A Band of Minstrels
From a fourteenth-century MS.

count out the gold pieces that are to make life easier for many a poor man. These ballads were not for palaces or for monasteries, they were for the English people; and the ballad-singers went about from village to village, singing to one group after another, adding a rhyme, or a stanza, or an adventure at every repetition. Gradually the tales of the "courteous outlaw" were forming themselves into a cycle of romance, but the days of the printing-press came too soon for its completion. Whether Robin was ever a "real, live hero" is not of the least consequence. The point of interest is that the ballads which picture his adventures are the free, bold expression of the sincere feelings of the Englishman in the early years of his forced submission to Norman rule.

23. Value of the Norman-English Writings

The writings of the first two centuries after the Norman conquest are, as a whole, of small worth. With the increasing number of translations, such a world of literature was thrown open to the English that they were dazzled with excess of light. Daringly, but half timidly, they ventured to step forward, to try one thing after another. No one could expect finish and completeness; the most that could be looked for was some beginning of poetry that should show imagination, of prose that should show power. So ended the thirteenth century, in a kind of morning twilight of literature. The fourteenth was the time of the dawning, the century of Chaucer.

SUMMARY

Centuries XII and XIII

THE NORMAN-ENGLISH PERIOD

"Ormulum".
"Ancren Riwle".
Cycles of romance.
Charlemagne.
Alexander.
Fall of Troy.
King Arthur.
Layamon's "Brut".
French romances.
"King Horn".
Nature lyrics.
Robin Hood ballads.

The Norman Conquest affected both language and literature. English, French, and Latin were used in England; but English gradually prevailed, until in 1362 it became the official language of the courts. Many new words had been added and its grammar simplified.

The literary influence of the Normans was for history, religious writings, and story-telling. Two other influences helped to arouse the English to mental activity,—the opening of the universities and the crusades.

The chief immediate literary results of this intellectual stimulus were the chronicles, now written by men who were not monks, and books of devotion. Among the latter was the *Ormulum* and the *Ancren Riwle*.

Love of story-telling manifested itself in four cycles of romance, centring about Charlemagne, Alexander

the Great, the fall of Troy, and King Arthur. This last cycle went through the hands of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, Layamon, and others. French romances were popular, especially *King Horn*.

Love of nature inspired simple, sincere lyrics; love of freedom and justice inspired the Robin Hood ballads.

The writings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are of little intrinsic value, but foreshadow better work to come.