THE BIRTH OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

BY

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The Birth of English Literature.

In studying the origin of a language we must not imagine that a national literature springs up as a result of the efforts of any one man or school of thinkers, but we must rather consider literature as being produced by certain guiding influences which must be sought for in the very physical and mental makeup of the race itself. The whole literary complexion of a nation may be changed by that people being either conquered by or victorious over, some other nation of different characteristics. The human mind, and its outward workings, are curiously changed by environment and inbred tendencies. So, in this thesis, we shall find that the study of the origin of English literature is a study of racial development.

The formation of the English people and language might be compared in its present state to a great river, the product of the flowing together and commingling of the waters of many feeding streams. These tributaries, flowing into the old stream of a prehistoric people, have at last formed a mighty river. We may characterize the old Celtic stock as the main stream; into this, at widely separated intervals, came the
waters of Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Danish, and Norman life and characteristics. The result has been a well balanced compound the English people. I might say, without fear of contradiction, that every one of the five formative elements which I have mentioned, has influenced directly the composition of English literature. This inter-race amalgamation has made possible a literature broad in its extent, deep and learned in its philosophy, entertaining and ennobling in its poetry, varied and pleasing in its fiction.

In the following short treatise, attention will be given to the various elements making up the English people, their first appearance in literature and the works which were produced. These, followed up to the final initiation of true English literature by Chaucer, constitutes the birth of English literature.

Of the old Celtic literature our knowledge is necessarily limited. As far back as history or legend takes us, we see a semi-barbarous people, with few thoughts save those of war and the chase. Still, among this old people, we can distinguish a learned class. This class was composed largely of the Druids or priests, who were considerably in advance of the other classes in regard to letters.
The Scots, Irish, Welsh, Maux, and other Celtic peoples should not be considered at this time as separate and distinct, but rather as parts of the same people. We find that the first signs of literary activity appeared in Ireland; this may be accounted for when we remember that Ireland offered more advantages to the incomer than did any other part of the British Isles. Here was a land, fruitful and productive, abounding in all that would be pleasing to the colonist. Here, in the earliest times, tribal chiefs built up strong clannish organizations and established powerful courts. To these courts were attracted the best soldiers and scholars of the land, two classes which are always drawn to a seat of power and affluence.

The first literature of the Gaels was, as one can naturally suppose, recitals of such tales as a warlike tribe would delight in --- rude poetical legends, stories of brave deeds, fierce battles, strong kings. There appears to have been so much method in this court story-telling as to bring about a classification of the reciters, individuals, in certain classes being allowed to tell a certain number of stories in certain ways. Several of these stories have come down to us, thanks to the thorough researches of students,
and are interesting as showing the stage of development of this primitive people. On a critical examination of the existing manuscripts, we find a remarkable resemblance to some other classical literary antiquities. Read the "Annals of Münster", "The Kalevada", "Homer's Iliad", "The Niebelungen Lied", and we can imagine peoples with a great similarity of customs and habits as producing these works, and undoubtedly such is the case. The principal manuscripts which are now accessible to the student are the "Psalter of Cashel" The Book of Leinster, The Annals of Münster of the Four Masters and of Ulster. The first named is the oldest existing manuscript of Irish literature. It is a collection of metrical legends by different bards, compiled towards the end of the ninth century by Comac MacCulinian, Bishop of Cashels and King of Münster. These legends are not satisfactory to the historical student, as they are plainly nothing but myths. The Book of Leinster was compiled by the Bishop of Kildan, Finn M'Corman in the 12th century, and contains historical narrations, old chronicles, and traces the lives of some early Irish saints. The Annals, however, are the most important of all these manuscripts. Most valuable remnants are the Annals of Tigernach first published in the original
with Latin translations in 1814 in O'Connor's "Rerum Hiberniacarum Scriptores Veteres". Tigernach, the oldest annalist, lived in the latter half of the eleventh century, but his works we may safely say were compilations from ancient records. The general tenor of these annals differs from that in the Psalter of Cashel. The accounts of events which are given have all the outward appearance of being truthful and not overdrawn. Events are here chronicled in regular order as regards time and dates are carefully noted. Still more complete are the "Annals of the Four Masters", first compiled in the 17th century and reproduced in later times by Dr. O'Donovan, Professor in Celtic Languages in Queens' College, Belfast. Those annals are a complete annotation of all events from the Creation to 1616 A.D. Other fragments of this ancient literature of Ireland remain, but are not so important as those we have mentioned. Here, in these ancient remnants of almost forgotten times, we see the stragglings of a primitive people to lift its head above the widely extending sea of barbarism. It was the first promise of a literary harvest to come. Those who are interested to learn something further concerning this old Gaelic literature, will find in the first volume of Morley's English Writers most...
interesting extracts from several authors.

The only other Celtic tribes which had a literature worth recording was the Cymric, and this did not spring up until Roman influence had come and gone and hordes of fierce Teuton tribes were covering the coast of England. There appears to have been something in the war which the Cymric Celts were waging with the Angles and Saxons which awakened the dormant powers of a poetical class, the bards of the Cymrys. The first of these Kings of Bards became prominent in the unsuccessful war which the Cymric Urien waged with Ida and his followers. Here we find Llywarch Hen Aneurin and Taliesin the latter being commonly accepted as the leader in ability; he was educated at the School of Cattwg and was, for his time, an excellent scholar. Being introduced at the court of Urien he soon became famous as a bard, reciting the praises of Urien and his son Owain or describing their battles. Many remnants of this bard's work will be found in certain works since compiled, especially the "Myvrian Archaeology of Wales" published in 1801. Llywarch Hen of whom we have spoken, was born about 490. Tradition has it that he was connected with the fabled court of King Arthur. However this may be, there is still a certain tinge of the romance of the Arthurian
legend about his writings. In some of the pathetic songs which he chants over the dead body of his friend and patron Urion, we cannot fail to mark the resemblance in form and thought to that far famed lament of David over Jonathan.

From the literature of this shadowy people, let us turn our attention to that later people, the Anglo-Saxons. When the Gmryc bards were wailing their sad lament over the tribes that were scattered and defeated by the incoming Teutons, they little dreamed that the savage victors had come for the final asgrandizement of their island home, and that from the Angles and Saxons, the barbarians and oppressors, would come a literature pure and ennobling. In the year 449 A.D., the Saxons first came and in fifty years the land was theirs. No sooner had their lives become fixed in the routine of their new homes, than we hear again the triangling of harps, the Anglo-Saxon minstrel takes up the song again where it died on the lips of the Celtic bard. But the minstrel no longer wanders from castle to castle, entertaining as he goes. The profession, if we may call it such, of reciting has become more and more stable and correspondingly more honorable. Minstrels are now attached to courts and kingly life and the singer has a place among princes. This elevated position of
the minstrel is considered a birthright resulting from his genius and his place is coveted by all. There is here a great advance toward an ultimate point where a true literature may appear. The moment any line of work is especially honored there are many standing ready to follow this vocation. And so it was with minstrelsy. Poetry and reciting were beginning to be held in high repute. What remnants remain of this earlier Saxon literature are tales of ancestors, praising the great deeds of a successful leader or vilifying his enemies.

In this period of which we have spoken appeared the first work of the Anglo-Saxons which possesses any great merit to us of to-day. This is the great poetic legend "Beowulf". It is probable that there has been quite as much discussion as to the authorship, time of writing, and meaning of this old work as any other extant. Common consent of the best critics places its date as the latter part of the fifth or the first part of the sixth century. Various commentators have claimed it to be of Danish origin, others of Swedish, while others, to whose opinions we prefer to give credence, affirm that it is Anglo-Saxon. Accepting this view, the poem itself is in perfect harmony with what might be expected
from such a people. However, this would not uphold the state-
ment that "Beowulf" was an Anglo-Saxon production. There are
two theories generally held: That this poem is a production
of some Anglo-Saxon minstrel who was well acquainted with the
scenes of Danish life which he portrays; the other opinion
is that the poem is a Danish production, carried across to
the Angles and Saxons in their new home. Whichever view may
be correct, the work itself is an apt illustration of the
condition of literature in Britain at that time. Tales of
wild sea rovers, fierce battles, and struggles with unheard
of dragons and hob-gobblins crowd this specimen of early
verse. In its legend of the hidden treasure, the voyage of
the Athelings and a few other points, the reader is reminded
strongly of the Finnish Kalevala and the Niebelungen Lied;
it is barely possible there is a similarity of origin, or
perhaps, the same legend, changed a little by different
peoples. This poem stands out as a landmark in the course of
the student of English literature.

Next in the quite lengthy list of the literary remnants
of the Anglo-Saxon period is Cardmon's "Paraphrase". The
story of Cardmon has been told and retold until the whole
world knows it; How he a poor cowherd living near Whitby was
commanded to sing by angelic visitors, of his inspiration, and after life in a convent. His Paraphrase is a metrical recital of the Creation and Fall of Man and the life of the Savior. As Caedmon died in 680, it is very probable that this work was written soon after the "Beowulf". The work, although crude in many respects, yet bears many of the marks of true genius - in fact, some critics have made bold enough to say that the immortal Milton was guilty of plagiarism from this source. There is a different ring about the Paraphrase from the literary productions which we have heretofore noticed; there is more of the Christian, less of the wild barbarian spirit. There is little doubt that this poem was the product of a monastery - an ecclesiastical spirit pervades it. The fable of the sudden inspiration of Caedmon smacks too much of the mythical to be literally believed by the literary student.

It is more than probable that Beowulf presents to us the literary aspect of the warlike-soldier, class of the community, while the Paraphrase gives an insight to the work being done in a hundred convents over the country.

About this time there comes a new influence upon literature, and this influence is that of the Roman Church working upon Anglo-Saxon minds. There appear on the stage two men
whose influence is felt even to-day - Aldhelm and the venerable Beda. Aldhelm was born in Wessex 656 and died in the year 709. The language of his writings was Latin, the spirit Teutonic. His chief works were a prose and verse treatise on Virginity, and a book of Fiddles. But far greater was Bede, the teacher, the philosopher. Born in 672 at Jarrow, he early retired to the cloisters of Wearmouth. His works, like Aldhelm's were principally in Latin, although some were in his native tongue. Chief of his works was a History of the Anglo-Saxon Church, which is to-day considered as authority on the subject of which it treats. Besides this there were some 40 volumes on other subjects. But this was not the only work of the good monk; from the school which he established there went out pupils some of whom came near to equalling their master. If literary efforts had been stimulated by the Paraphrase of Caedmon, they were set aflame by the works of "The Venerable".

Following these two notable writers, there is a long list of names which are familiar to all - King Alfred, Alfric, Alcuim, Erigena, and Dunstan. But the literary awakening which has been spoken of apparently affected but one class directly, the churchmen. Of all the authors whom we have
mentioned, there were none but were connected directly with the church. In a hundred monasteries, pens were writing, and learned men discussing weighty questions of theology and philosophy. While King Alfred was busying himself codifying laws for his subjects and translating works from other authors, monks and bishops were transcribing learned treatises on Predestination and the Eucharist. The literature of the Anglo-Saxons was at the summit of its prosperity. But afterwards, when King Alfred was dead, literary work, if it did not actually decline, advanced none. There was a dreary waste of over a hundred years, broken only by an unceasing struggle with Danish invaders. It is not surprising that at this time no especially creditable works appear; a nation cannot repel the tide of a foreign invasion and at the same time build up a literature. Eras of literary excellence, I believe, are only coexistent with national peace and happiness. The only thing to relieve the monotony from the death of Alfred to 1066 are the old Saxon chronicles.

With the Normans under William, came the last formative influence upon the English language and literature. Calamitous as the conquest may have appeared at that time, our literature would never have been so perfect as it is without
Norman influence. This Norman influence was versatility and life. Saxon monks might have gone on writing profound treatises until the present time, and yet had a comparatively poor literature without the new spirit which the incomers infused in the national blood. Almost all writings had, thus far, been confined to an educated class - now, the whole people, stirred by the Norman vivacity and Norman love of the beautiful were being brought under influences which would soon produce a national literature. But time must elapse before this result could be accomplished. For a century the incomers and the conquered must live as foes, and time alone must eradicate hostility and the animosity before there can be an English people and an English literature. This, it may be said without question was at the time, when a whole nation were common sufferers, they made common cause against the tyrant John. The date of the signing of Magna Carta denotes the time of the cementing together of the English people.

Daring the period from 1066 to 1340 the streams of Saxon and Norman thought, at first, widely separated, at length flowed together and mingled. Many names appear in this period and books are written upon every subject, fiction, science, theology. But greatest of all these names is Roger
Bacon.

He was born in 1214 and died in 1292. In the midst of this period, Bacon seems almost a part of the nineteenth century, living six hundred years before his time. His philosophy formulated in his "Opus Maius", "Opus Minus", and "Opus Tertium" is sound and ably upheld. This people which Celt Teuton, Roman and Norman had formed was bearing rich literary fruit when Roger Bacon lived and wrote.

But even while Bacon was electrifying England with his new philosophy, another upheaval in the literary crust which was forming over the civilized world, occurred. In 1265 Dante was born in Italy. Following him came a long list of authors, among them Petrarct and Boccaccio. The revival of learning was at hand. Sweeping over Europe went the influence of the Italian poets and the Italian fiction; England, with the rest, caught the contagion of this new fever for learning and in such a period Chaucer, the immortal, rose. In the author of the Canterbury tales was the culmination of the formative influences of English literature. The river was at length started on its way.