Michael Alexander, 
*A History of Old English Literature.*

Reviewed by Gwendolyn Morgan

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Michael Alexander’s *A History of Old English Literature* lives up to its title in providing a survey of literary endeavors from the Germanic through the Norman Conquests. Indeed, the book is primarily a history, addressing the complex social fabric of Anglo-Saxon England with its Celtic and Roman legacies and its shifting focus of tribal prosperity and dominance. Not surprisingly, the various waves of religious fervor and activity, and their effect on preserving as well as producing Old English literature, receive particular attention. Thus, Alexander offers more of a context for the snippets of the period’s literary staples presented in translation rather than an in-depth analysis of specific pieces. The book may thus serve well as an undergraduate introduction to early England and its literary activity, but not to the poetry and prose itself.

Aside from providing a thorough context, Alexander’s text also succeeds in making connections, both stylistic and thematic, to English literature of the high medieval and early modern periods (e.g., to Chaucer, Gower, Milton, Shakespeare), as well as to contemporaneous continental Latin traditions. He ultimately concludes, however, that Anglo-Saxon verse died a natural if premature death, doomed by linguistic change, even had the Norman Conquest not intervened. He thus leaves it in its old niche as “relic,” to be appreciated as artifact rather than heritage, a position repeatedly refuted in recent decades. He does, however, see more of an evolution in prose patterns, which continue to develop in subsequent eras.

Also satisfying is the range of literature Alexander considers. As well as the standard genres and texts usual in introductions—epic (*Beowulf*), elegy (*The Wife’s Lament*), history (*The Battle of Maldon, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), and religious verse (*The Dream of the Rood*)—the riddles (as an offshoot of the Latin tradition), sermons, homilies, and various writings and letters of Bede and Alfred receive attention. Anglo-Latin composition is also addressed.

Nonetheless, in the strengths of *A History of Old English Literature* lie also the seeds of its weaknesses. Except for a few short verses (“Caedmon’s Hymn,” “Bede’s Death Song,” and, notably, *The Wife’s Lament*), the literature itself is presented in short excerpts, sometimes piecemeal, and thus deprived of the opportunity “to provide its own framework” (5) which Alexander himself insists it must have. Rather than offer a complete work in translation for appreciation and interpretation, the book forces the student to rely on the author’s commentary and, on occasion, summary of the text in question. Such, on the whole, are
conservative and lacking in subtlety. Moreover, Alexander continues to dismiss as unimportant the considerable body of medical texts, charms, and spells. Such are now understood to offer special insight into Anglo-Saxon thought and culture—consider that the standard legal grant or charter contained a curse in its format—and provide significant information about spiritual perceptions. Indeed, that they do so seems to be the very reason for their exclusion in favor of copious attention to the clerical world view, for throughout Alexander is intent on depicting a unified Christian wholeness in early English society.

In this conservative approach, *A History of Old English Literature* is all of a piece. Yet, such is not very surprising as the book is admittedly a revision of Alexander's 1982 text; what may have been novel then is by now frequently old hat. While some of his own translations and commentary have been somewhat updated, the text overall has not changed much. On the whole, most of the scholarly and critical advances of the last 20 years have been ignored, despite a few recent entries in the bibliography. For example, Albert Lord's landmark study remains the basis of Alexander's discussion of oral tradition and formulaic composition, while Walter Ong's work is ignored, even in addressing the transition from orality to literacy. Likewise, so-called hypermetric or unmatched half-lines continue to be considered artistic errors rather than the poet's manipulation of prosodic density.

In terms of content, too, the book maintains old interpretations with not even token recognition of many significant contemporary approaches. For instance, there is no consideration of feminist or populist interpretation and scholarship, and the brief nod to new historicism is most unsatisfying. Thus, despite his acknowledgement of the complexity of Anglo-Saxon culture and literature, Alexander's treatment of both is ultimately reductionist.

All in all, *A History of Old English Literature*, like its original version, remains a useful introduction to the subject, but it offers little new. As a survey of the history and culture of the Anglo-Saxons, it will prove helpful to students, a necessary point of reference from which to start exploring alternate approaches to their literature. However, given the richness of early prose and verse, it must remain a supplement to entire versions of individual works, perhaps including some of the less popular verse, even in translation. Frequently, and as Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* has undoubtedly proven, what appears to be the artistic and cultural inapplicability or distance of earlier literatures are merely our own shortcomings in presenting it.

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