MAGENNIS, Hugh 2011: *The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 217 pp. ISBN: 978-0-521-73465-3. £15.99.

A BELFAST PROFESSOR HERE INFORMS BEGINNERS AND OTHERS ON England's earliest writings, both in English and in Latin. He thereby up-dates us on what is said by British, German, and North American Anglo-Saxonists, so that even experienced scholars will find much in his book that is new.

The volume's format is novel. The first of its five chapters offers us 'approaches', starting with Bede's famous story of Caedmon the poet, and thereafter outlining England's first six centuries as concerns the writing of texts. Chapter two, on the developing tradition, presents us with Germanic backgrounds, Latin learning, vernacular prose, and Christian verse. The first brings us to orality and the alliterative line; the second, to Bede, Alcuin, and Aldhelm; the third, to King Alfred's circle and the late homilists; the last, to what England took from Latin Christianity, especialy as regards lives of saints. Chapter three turns to narrative. We start with ancient heroism, involving a natural consideration of Beowulf. Then come Christian vision (*The Dream of the Rood*) and Old Testament epic (*Judith*); attitudes to the past in Bede and the *Chronicle*; and finally two martyrs, with Juliana (from the Black Sea's approaches) in verse and King Edmund (from Suffolk) in prose.

Chapter four also deals with prose and verse. It says more on the late homilies, especially Archbishop Wulfstan's sermons in evil days. It then attends to the remainings texts likely to concern us, with wisdom literature, riddles, and the Exeter Book's elegies amongst them. Chapter five brings us study in contemplation of herself, presenting centuries of shifting perceptions on England's earliest literature. It was successively a bolster for Tudor Protestants, eighteenth-century patriots, and Victorian Germanic romantics, thereafter (following a long trek) being valued for itself, as an aesthetic or purely literary entity. Alert to chill winds now blowing against Old English, Magennis closes with what has been found in it by poets: Wordsworth, Tennyson, Longfellow, Hopkins, Heaney. When many in the academy curtly dump the Anglo-Saxons out of the door, they have a habit of coming back in through the window and making

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themselves at home. So Magennis provides us not just a literary history, but a defence of poetry: Old English poetry and all that goes with it. His book is a tract for the times and a weapon, handy for Anglo-Saxonists besieged in professional *scyldburh*. One wishes him success.

Now for criticism. A strong-minded judge will find in the book much that is ephemeral and some curious errors and omissions, Magennis alludes (pp. 11–12) toTom Shippey's discussions of linguistic romanticism, sowing a harvest of intransigent nationalism, but not to *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T. A. Shippey*, ed. Andrew Wawn (Brepols, 2007), where others develop his concepts. Some will rejoice at Tolkien's remarks (p. 12) on knowledge of 'words and names', an honest and substantial entity ever at war with that flashy meretrix, opinion. Comments (p. 37) on a 'handful' of Celtic loanwords in Old English ignore the research of recent decades, summed up in Markku Filppula, Juhani Klemola, and Heli Paulasto, *English and Celtic in Contact* (Routledge, 2008). A map of early Britains (p. 38) deludes the unwary on domains of Britons, Scots, and Picts alike. Remarks on Alfred's helpers (pp. 55, 59, 97, 110) never include the unknown Cornishman who translated Orosius for him. Malcolm Godden's scepticism on Alfred's literary work is taken too seriously (p. 56), when it is easily shown as tendentious. So too, is Mechthild Gretsch's belief (p. 64) entailed Welsh and Scottish submission, where she crudely misrepresents an international congress on security. The etymology of fretsaw (p. 74) is wrong; *OED* shows its first element as French, not Germanic. Judith, a noble widow, enticed Holofernes. She did not 'seduce' (p. 93) him. If Professor Magennis tries cutting off someone's head, he will discover that to hack through raw meat in just 'two attempts' (p. 95) proves not that Judith was weak, but phenomenally strong. He errs in thinking that 'Common Era' is 'religiously neutral' (p. 100); what event does it have as origin? He rightly, if insufficiently (p. 103), doubts Alfred Smyth's absurd attempts to make Asser's life of Alfred out as a forgery by Byrhtferth of Ramsey. Describing *Brunanburh* as 'unidentified' (p. 112) flies in the face of reasoned arguments for Bromborough, Cheshire/ Merseyside. Arresting but justified remarks on Old English hagiography and 'policing gender boundaries' might bring in David Clark, *Between Medieval Men* (OUP, 2010). The translation 'shining gold' (p. 124) is wrong. The correct one is 'appled gold, apple-shaped gold'. Likewise,

Swift's *ascertain* does not mean 'improve' (p. 173) but 'fix', as with the *fijar* of Spain's *Real Academia*.

Professor Magennis has, therefore, written an interesting and even useful book. But there is a place for a similar work by a scholar of deeper learning, which will provide surer guidance, and be destined for longer life.

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