MITCHELL, B. 1995: *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford: Blackwell. xx + 424 pp.

These are "hard times" for the study of the so-called "dead languages". While Greek and Latin struggle for survival in Spanish Secondary schools, in British universities Old English (henceforth OE) is not in very good health either. As a result, the most immediate aim of Bruce Mitchell's book, *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England* is, as he himself states in the foreword, "to increase the popularity of Old English, to make it, in the dictionary sense of the word, both 'of or carried on by people' and 'liked and admired by people', people including university students and general readers." (viii). As will be seen, this does not intend to be a new handbook on OE grammar for university students, since the classic Mitchell & Robinson's *A Guide to Old English* (henceforth *Guide*) serves this function perfectly. It is much more than that. Dr. Mitchell's new publication approaches the study of Old English from a totally different perspective, in a way that the student of the history of English will have her/his attention drawn from the language of the period to the people who spoke it, and, conversely, the reader interested in the literature, history, and culture of the OE period will be naturally drawn to the study of the language of the time. In fact, as the author himself admits, it is precisely to the latter that the book is chiefly geared: "here I am more concerned with helping those who do not know OE than with pleasing those who do" (ix). With this in mind, grammar (whose 'difficulty' frequently deters literary or historical students from diving into the original) has been reduced to a minimum. However, despite the divulgative style of the work, the book turns out to be a very interesting tool for the OE scholar as well.

In the initial pages of the book ("How to use this book") Bruce Mitchell invites us to what "may turn out to be either a splendid banquet or a cheese-and wine-tasting party," depending basically on the reader's interests (p. 1). We readers are offered, and I will go on using Mitchell's gastronomic image, a menu consisting of five different courses preceded by an appetiser, the introduction. The introduction takes us from Indo-European to the dawn of the

English language, using vocabulary as a guideline. This is a recognition that the reader will be more familiar with the vocabulary of Present-day English than with the grammar. In these first pages we find brief mentions, among other topics, of the reconstruction methods of comparative linguistics, and even a very simplified and clear account of Grimm's Law (p. 11).

Part I briefly deals with spelling, pronunciation and punctuation. Paragraphs §1-8, on spelling and pronunciation, are parallel to ##5-9 in *Guide*. Given that the book intends to be "an invitation," there is no room here for a detailed account of OE phonology, which is a deterrent, for instance, for literature students. In fact, the only two sound-changes mentioned in the book are Grimm's Law and *i*-mutation. However, and in contrast to *Guide,* some space is devoted to the subject of punctuation. Paragraphs §10 and 11 set out the punctuation system which will be used in the OE fragments reproduced in the book. Of particular interest is Dr. Mitchell's decision to avoid strong punctuation in the case of adverbs/conjunctions like *pa* or *ponne*, preserving the potential ambiguity and thus enabling the literary scholar to grasp the richness of interpretation in the original text.

The description of the language in the Anglo-Saxon period can be found in Part II, which is entitled "Other differences between Old and Modern English." The account of the structure of OE starts with the lexis since, in Mitchell's opinion, "the factor which above all makes OE seem a foreign language to those trying to read it today is neither its inflections nor its word-orders nor its syntax but its vocabulary" (p. 25). The following pages offer, in a most didactic and divulgative tone, a description of the structure of OE vocabulary, with a mention of all the methods of vocabulary enlargement. The subsequent sections, C to J, are devoted to morphology and syntax and follow the general outline of *Guide*, except for the presentation of paradigms. These are left for Part V and are only meant "for those who would like them." The main concern of Part II is to acquaint the reader with morphological notions such as case, synthetic vs. analytic devices, weak and strong verbs, among others, as well as with syntactic topics like word-order. Likewise, we find here a presentation of every part of speech. The clarification of such basic concepts as S, O, Oi, etc. -done in a most humorous way in ##29 ff. - may seem somewhat simplistic to the linguistics scholar, but clearly responds to a reality in British universities, and increasingly also in ours, where there

are students taking a degree in English who lack the most basic grammatical concepts.

In Part III, "An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England," which is the longest section in the book, the reader is offered a comprehensive account of various aspects of the life in the England of the period. Section A, Literature, provides a catalogue of OE poetry and prose which would fit much better, in my opinion, in Part IV. Section B presents the major historical events from the arrival of the Romans to the Norman Conquest by means of seven annotated extracts from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Alongside the notes on the text, the reader may find explanatory commentaries on history in the footnotes. Section D gives a detailed account of place names.

Sections C and E are longer than the remainder of the chapter. Section C, on archaeology, arts and crafts, occupies almost 100 pages in which Dr. Mitchell relates the information drawn from archaeological findings to passages in OE literature. Thus, we can see how archaeology may illuminate some obscure poetic passages (see, for instance, §213, in which the description of the Coppergate helmet clarifies the interpretation of *freawrasnum* 'with lordly chains' in *Beowulf* 1451) and, conversely, how literary texts may help us to fully understand some archaeological findings. Here the reader may find relevant information about most Anglo-Saxon arts and crafts (weapons and their relevance, jewellery, sculpture, shipbuilding, and a very interesting section on manuscripts). When possible, the description of all these topics is accompanied by textual evidence in which Dr. Mitchell shows us once more his erudition and his thorough knowledge of OE sources. While Section C is concerned with arts and crafts, the society of Anglo-Saxon England is depicted through the use of texts in Section E. Intimations about the warrior's life and ideals can be gathered from Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. Other records, such as wills or legal charters, provide some information about the role of women, marriage agreements, etc. Everyday life, monastic life, medicine, and other aspects of Anglo-Saxon life are also dealt with. Space in the book is limited and consequently, some topics just get a passing mention. However, the lists for further reading offered all along the book enable the reader interested in so doing to deepen her/his knowledge on a given subject. Part III as a whole, as a result of its interdisciplinary character, is very easy to read and extremely interesting, particularly for those who, like the author of this review, spend too much time in trying to unfold the intricacies of OE syntax. I especially

appreciate the fact that the writer of such scholarly work as *Old English Syntax* is able to switch to a mood and style so completely different as that suitable to a *National Geographic* reporter, thus leading us readers into a fascinating world.

If Part III is a gem for the historian, the contribution of Part IV is also remarkable, particularly for the student of OE. This chapter, "The Garden of Old English Literature," is an anthology of annotated OE texts, both from prose and poetry. One of the best points in this selection is that it contains texts which are rarely included in Readers, such as 'medical' texts about the formation of the foetus or about sex-determination during pregnancy (Texts 25 and 26 respectively), a charter forged by the monks in the early 11th century (Text 28), and a fragment of a letter from a monk to his superior (Text 30). The anthology of poetic texts is preceded by an introductory note on alliteration and the major stylistic devices of OE poetry. There follows a collection of annotated fragments from the most significant poetic pieces, some (particularly *The Wanderer, The Seafarer* and *The Dream of the Rood*) preceded by a lengthy commentary. When relevant, there are cross-references with Part III of the book.

Paradigms are presented in Part V, without any reference whatsoever to sound changes, except for *i*-mutation. This, however, may cause some confusion. For instance, in order to avoid mentioning West Saxon syncope, Dr. Mitchell states that the second and third person present indicative forms of strong verbs "are often contracted" (#520). Since the term 'contracted' is used, in the following paragraph, to allude to "contracted strong verbs," (those which "originally had a medial *h* which was lost" §521), it would be better to say, in the case of syncope, that the ending is often reduced ('reduction' being precisely the term Mitchell & Robinson use in *Guide* §112. 2). Likewise, in §524, the single <m> in *fremest* and *fremep* is attributed to *i*-mutation (even though *i*-mutation affects the whole of the paradigm) in order not to complicate things by referring to West Germanic Gemination. It would have been preferable just to note the irregularity (as he does in the case of the endings *-ap, /-iap* of weak verbs class 2 in §526), or to leave it unexplained, as in the case of the preterite system of *fremman.* We may also note some minor errata in this part. For instance §515 reads "other common strong verbs, which, like *weorpan* (§513), change a medial vowel are …" The examples that follow *-ceosan, ceas, curon, coren* and *cwepan*, *cwæp, cwædon, cweden*, together

with the later forms *frore* and *forlorn-* are illustrations of Verner's Law, with the corresponding change in a medial consonant.

Thus, after going through *hors d'ouevre* and five succulent courses, it's time for the dessert, a glossary of all forms occurring in the 51 texts reproduced in the text, preceded by a complete and up-to-date thematic bibliography, which even includes two sections on fiction and poetry about the Anglo-Saxon period. I cannot resist enlarging Dr. Mitchell's poetry list with some poems by Jorge Luis Borges, ''Un Sajón (449 A. D.)', 'Hengist cyning', ''Fragmento', 'A una espada en York' or his various pieces dedicated to 'A un poeta sajón,' all of them included in his collection, *El otro, el mismo* first published in 1964. Likewise, I am sure that, if Dr. Mitchell had known that his 'invitation' would also be accepted by Spanish and Latinoamerican readers, he would have undoubtedly included Borges's delicious *Literaturas germánicas medievales* in his bibliography. On the whole, *An Invitation to Old English* is an excellent and enjoyable book, of great value for both students of the History of English and those interested in the Anglo-Saxon period. Thank-you very much, Dr. Mitchell, for me it certainly was a banquet.

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