

【Review】

Richard North and Joe Allard (eds), *Beowulf and Other Stories: A New Introduction to Old English, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Norman Literatures.*

Pearson Longman, 2007. xii + 525pp.

Reviewed by NAKAMURA Koichi.

1. Introduction

The subtitle says it all: it is a “new” introduction to medieval literatures. Written by fourteen scholars, it is a doorstopper divided into fifteen chapters, each of which has its own witty subtitle. On the back of the flyleaf we are a bit amused to find “To whom it may concern”, which reveals a philosophic attitude, or maybe even a sense of resignation, of the editors for those people who are not concerned with Old English (literature). In “an introduction to this book” (“Why read Old English literature?”), Richard North, David Crystal and Joe Allard tell us they “feel that the recent academic attitude that Old English no longer has the right to be considered part of the English literary canon is stupid”. “It [the study of Old English and Old Icelandic] has become marginalised”, they observe, “by its difficulty, its otherness, but also because of laziness and the ease agenda”. They conclude by saying, “We believe that this decline need not become terminal and that by halting—then reversing—the decline we will bring ourselves to a closer understanding of our shared literary and social heritage, those rituals and practices that long ago helped us on a path to becoming the people we are today”.

This is a “new” introduction not only because it is “both scholarly and accessible” but also it contains no less than three kinds of literatures in one

book, i.e. Old English, Old Norse and Anglo-Norman, which everyone will agree is really a unique feature (but the emphasis is obviously on OE literature; OE is given twelve chapters, ON three and AN one).

We feel that their attitude towards the “decline” of the study of Old English (literature) is almost heroic and sometimes even tragic, especially when we think about the situation of our own old literature. It is inconceivable that our universities don’t have (compulsory) classes where, if not for a whole term, they teach *The Tale of Genji* (c.1008) or the oldest collection of Japanese lyrical poems, *Man’yo-Shu* (8th century) for students reading Japanese literature. Some easy parts of those are taught even in secondary schools. Probably hundreds of thousands of pupils and students learn by heart (at least some part of) the anthology of one hundred lyrics, *Hyakunin-Isshū* (1235). Even if students’ interests are in modern literature, they have to read old Japanese literature, in many cases not only in printed texts but also in facsimiles. No one even dreams of hearing that studying old Japanese literature is “futile”.

2. *The Lord of the Rings and Beowulf*

In such a context, chapter 2 “Old English influence on *The Lord of the Rings*” subtitled as “Is it relevant?” seems to be a desperate effort to invite students to the world of Old English, the author taking advantage of the modern, popular books and films that were inspired by things related to Old English. Clive Tolley shows *Beowulf* and Tolkien’s work in two parallel columns, discusses their relationship and analyses Tolkien’s famous lecture “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics”. This exciting chapter consisting both of things popular and things scholarly, serves as a sort of antipasto just before Andy Orchard’s purely academic but reader-friendly chapter on *Beowulf*: “*Beowulf* and other battlers: an introduction to *Beowulf*” subtitled as “Is violence what Old English literature about?” (I believe any review of this book that does not cite its witty subtitles is not doing it justice.) Professor Orchard describes the *Beowulf* manuscript, the story and the poet’s perspective that “saves his tale from being a simple catalogue of glorious and gory

deeds of yore ... and actually delineates the human and pagan characters rather subtly". Then he cites several lines with translation and demonstrates that such a detailed, insightful analysis of even one phrase as his can dramatically change our view of the entire work. Then he analyses the style ("clashing verbs") of the battle scene from Cynewulf's *Elene* (99–152), shows us another beautiful stylistic analysis of *Judith* and finally offers historical explanation of *The Battle of Maldon* (312–16).

3. Minor heroic poems

Chapter 4 "Old English minor heroic poems" (Is there more like *Beowulf*?) is by Richard North, who "was made to read Old English at Oxford and now teaches it for a living at UCL". Comparing *The Finnsburh Fragment* with *Beowulf* and *The Lay of Bjarki*, the author makes a psychological analysis of the poem focusing on the word "injury (*gymn-*)". He offers a fuller version to every theme presented in *Deor*, citing relevant passages extensively from *Beowulf*, *The Lay of Wayland* as "a fuller version of Weland's rape of Beadohild" and *The Saga of Þiðrekr of Verona*. *Das Hildebrandslied* is juxtaposed when he discusses *Deor* poet singing of Theodric's exile, whereas Middle High German romance *Kudrun* is referred to as an explanation of the reason King Heoden needed Heorrenda.

4. The Riddles and the Elegies

Chapter 5 "Joyous play and bitter tears: the *Riddles* and the *Elegies*," the subtitle of which is "What else is there?" is by Jennifer Neville (Royal Holloway), who "teaches Old and Middle English literature to a more or less captive audience of students ... and maintains a fervent belief that no one can possibly function well in modern society without learning Old English" (501). First, the author challenges us to solve some of the *Riddles* (5, 12, 17, 25, 27, 45, 46, 54, 61). "Depression" is the theme when she next deals with the "Elegies" (*The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Husband's Message*). The author tries to attract students' attention by comparing *The Seafarer* with "Why does it always rain on me?"

by Travis and concludes that the seafarer “needs counselling ... or something”. She manages to keep such a humorous tone throughout the chapter that students who read this will certainly come to like, or at least become interested in, the Old English poetry of this genre.

5. *The Dream of the Rood*

Chapter 6 “*The Dream of the Rood* and Anglo-Saxon Northumbria” (How Christian is OE literature?) is by Éamonn Ó Carragáin (Cork) and Richard North. The authors describe the Vercelli Book, the rhetoric (e.g. chiasmus and prosopopoeia), the vocabulary and the style in the minutest way. On the assumption that the work was “originally a Northumbrian poem and that it was composed early, perhaps in the 680s or 690s,” they set out to explain “Christianity in Northumbria: the first 70 years,” beginning from 619 when Christianity began there. Then the authors give a description of the Ruthwell Cross (with a full colour photograph) and the poem carved on it in runes and compare it with *The Dream*. Lastly, the origin of the Vercelli Book and *The Dream* on another cross, the Brussels Cross are discussed.

6. Cædmon

Chapter 7 “Cædmon the cowherd and Old English biblical verse” (“How did OE literature start?”) is by Bryan Weston Wylie (Université de la Vallée d’Aoste). The author analyses the text of his *Hymn* from every angle imaginable, presenting “an alternative interpretation of Cædmon to add to the received view of his career”. First he describes the famous Cædmon’s story referring to Bede’s *Historia* then he goes on to discuss the plausibility of Cædmon’s sudden inspirational ability, on which he gives his verdict “believable”. In “A different view of Cædmon” he makes a splendid, sherlockian argument and concludes that Cædmon might have been one of the senior retainers of a “lord of the land-holding unit known as a ‘hide’” rather than a simple cowherd. In “Cædmon’s legacy: the Old English biblical poems” The author observes with much insight that the “topics which Cædmon was supposed to have treated is remarkably like the surviving list of Old English bibli-

cal poems”.

7. Alcuin and Offa

Professor Orchard comes back in chapter 8 with “Monasteries and courts: Alcuin and Offa” (“Were all the poets monks?”) In my view his articles are the most reader-friendly, the most delightful, the most vivid and the liveliest. In “Books and bookmen” Professor mentions the small corpus of Old English saying, “Only about 30,000 lines and 175,000 words of this [poetry] survive, equating to about six times as many words as there are in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*”. In “Alcuin of York” and “Alcuin and Offa of Mercia”, Professor talks about his life from York Minster “to which he was presumably given as a child” to the Abbey of Tours where he died and about his 300 letters and 120 poems, from which “we can create a detailed and nuanced picture, making Alcuin perhaps the most accessible and human of all the Anglo-Saxon we can name”. Then he describes the King’s bloody path to his throne, Alcuin’s praise for him, his changed view after the King’s death and the two men’s relationship with Charlemagne. Finally in “Goodbye to all that? The poetry of exiles” Professor exemplifies Alcuin’s poetic talent by quoting his poems in translation and compares them to *The Wanderer* and *The Fortunes of Men*.

8. King Alfred

Chapter 9 “Old English prose: King Alfred and his books” (Did the Anglo-Saxons write fiction?) is by Susan Irvine (UCL). In the very last section of her chapter she says ardently, “The challenge for today’s scholars and students is to take a leaf out of one of Alfred’s many books and re-energise the study of Old English literature” (270). The author depicts King Alfred’s character quoting Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* and the *Life of Saint Neot*. Then “his wider historical and political cultural context” is presented, without the sense of which “we cannot fully understand Alfred’s literary achievements”. In “What are Alfred’s books?” She describes the way the King and his advisers translated (and adapted) his books, explains the style and the vocabulary of Gregory’s *Pastoral Care*, Boethius’s *On the Consolation of Philosophy*

and offers her convincing conjecture on Augustine's *Soliloquies* and the first 50 psalms of the Psalter, concluding that these four works were translated by the same person ("assumed here to be Alfred"). In "A king's voice" and "The pursuit of wisdom" the author shows us Alfred's ideas about "kingship", "wisdom" and "wealth (material and spiritual)" and even his health condition, all of which are deduced from her detailed analysis of the King's prefaces, Boethius's *Consolation* and King's independent passage in Augustine's *Soliloquies*. Finally in "Alfred's story telling" Professor Irvine explores the King's "talents as a story teller" that are glimpsed in his adaptation of the works. Her explanation of the King's revision of classical mythology is very minute and intriguing indeed.

9. The language

Chapter 10 is entirely devoted to the language itself: The Old English language ("How difficult is the Old English language?") written by Peter S. Baker (Virginia). Professor begins by saying, "How hard is Old English? The short answer is 'not very'" and describes "Old English mainly in terms of its resemblance to modern English". Everything is covered admirably and succinctly: pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, inflections, word-order and rhetoric. In "Old English and modern English share many words" Professor deprives readers of the fear and anxiety they are destined to entertain by demonstrating that in the first passage of Dickens's *Great Expectations*, no less than 78% of the words are from OE. Then follows the grammar presented in a reader-friendly way. In "Old English word order is flexible, not chaotic" the author declares that "Old English is more modern than it looks," which anyone who has ever studied word order in OE prose must admit. "The pleasures of Old English" consists of subsections which "outline several pleasures that can be experienced only by one who has learned to read Old English": "'O'er the lea': poetic vocabulary", "Swords and ice: the kenning", "The braided sentence: poetic variation" and "The weirdness of *wyrd*, the moodiness of *mōd*".

10. The Vikings

Chapter 11 “Viking wars and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*” (“When were the Vikings in England?”) is by Jayne Carroll (Leicester), who “was made to read Old English by Richard North at UCL”. The author describes the history of invasions of the Vikings, using not only *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* but also *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* by Abbo, *Lives of Saints* by Ælfric and some *Sagas*. In “Vikings defeated! Alfred builds up Wessex” the author refers to a very specialised, technical document the *Burghal Hidage*, warning us that “[i]t is easy to forget, when immersed in the epic excitement of *Beowulf* ... that Old English’s capacity for literary appeal was matched by its practical functionality”. Seven pages of “Notes on the Old Norse language” by Richard North are incorporated in this chapter (323–329). They comprise a short, humorous drama between an Icelander and an Anglo-Saxon, in which some grammar, some essential paradigms and a little but useful mention of poetry are given.

11. The pantheon of the Vikings

Chapter 12 “Viking religion: Old Norse mythology” (“What gods did the Vikings worship?”) is by Terry Gunnell (University of Iceland). The author begins by explaining the materials where pagan mythology can be amassed, e.g. Tacitus’s *Germania* and four “crucial” texts, Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, the Poetic *Edda*, the skaldic poems and *Gesta Danorum*. Then he explains entire Norse gods and goddesses. The Norse cosmology is also given some share, e.g. Yggdrasill and *The Seeress’s Prophecy*. A selection of stanzas (43–45, 47, 50, 51, 53, 54) from this work concludes this chapter.

12. The Icelandic sagas

Joe Allard (Essex), one of the two editors, writes chapter 13 “Sagas of Icelanders” (“Just who were the Vikings anyway?”). First, the author gives us the definition and the classification of the sagas. One of his interesting observations is that “[i]t would never occur to a saga teller to describe what a

character might be thinking. This approach to character is perhaps the most profound literary difference with both other medieval and later European literatures”. Then the author “runs through the major events and techniques of the *Saga of the People of Laxardal (Laxdæla saga)*”. Next he talks about the Christianisation, growth of literature, *The Book of Icelanders*, its author Ari the Learned Þorgilsson, Snorri Sturluson and skaldic poetry. In “Character and action” the author comes back to the sagas and exemplifies his observation that “in most sagas we are told what characters look like but it is always their behaviour that is of most importance”. In “What the Vikings have done to us” the author challenges the conventional idea that *The Sagas of Icelanders* are “something alien to developments in Anglo-Saxon England”.

13. Old English prose

Chapter 14 “Prose writers of the English Benedictine Reform” (“Were there sagas in OE literature?”) is by Stewart Brookes. The author answers to this question by saying, “The Anglo-Saxons didn’t write sagas, but they were great story-tellers”. Then he goes on to discuss the Benedictine monk Ælfric and makes some analyses of his style and rhetorical skills. The author takes up Ælfric’s *Colloquy* as “the most interesting from the ‘stories’ point of view”. This is a good idea because it gives readers some idea concerning the everyday life of “unlearned children”; he says, “This cameo supplies what appears to be a relatively realistic glimpse of daily life, showing a homely, low-status character of the kind that you would never see, for instance, in *Beowulf*”. In “Repent! It’s Archbishop Wulfstan” the author cites *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* to discuss his imagery, his “less academic” alliterative style and his “racy, streetwise” English. In “Old English fantasy literature” Ælfric’s fascination for elephants, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and *Apollonius of Tyre* are discussed. The author observes that “the very existence of *Apollonius of Tyre* suggests that the Anglo-Saxons had a taste for tales of excitement, adventure and even love: escapist entertainment, in other words”.

14. Anglo-Norman and epilogue

This is the only chapter that directly deals with AN literature: “Anglo-Norman literature: the road to Middle English” by Patricia Gillies (Essex). The author begins by a purely historical account of the Conquest and then examines *The Song of Roland*, “[o]ne of the landmark texts of Anglo-Norman England”. Linking this work with *The Battle of Maldon* and comparing Roland with Churchill, she talks about this *chanson de geste* in a most exciting way. Then the author explains Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de France in a historical context, their relationship and some of the latter’s *Lays* (*Guigemar*, *Le Rossignol* and *Chevrefoil*). Then the author talks of Eleanor’s daughters Countess Marie de Champagne and Princess Matilda and the works born under their influences. In “King Arthur of the Britons” citing *Roman de Brut*, the author deals with the theme of the legendary king in Anglo-Norman literature, his humiliation in France, Chrétien de Troyes, Layamon’s *Brut*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Le Morte D’Arthur*. Then in “English in Anglo-Norman England” the author challenges the myth that the Norman period was “the new Dark Ages” and observes that “there was a good deal of interchange on both [Old English and Old French] sides by practical-minded people”. The author concludes by presenting a *raison d’être* of this book: “After getting this far, it should come as no surprise to you to find the *Gawain* poet, any English poet, drawing on a hybrid culture that can be called Anglo-Scandinavian-Norman-French”.

David Crystal, in the epilogue of the book “The end of Old English”, describes the Old English dialects, the standardisation, OE loan words and grammatical change during OE period, thus concluding the whole book with this linguistic bridge to Middle English.

Beowulf & Other Stories was first conceived in the belief that the study of Old English and its close cousins, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Norman can be a genuine delight, covering a period as replete with wonder, creativity and magic as any other in literature. Now in a fully revised second edition, the collection of essays written by leading academics in the field is set to build upon its established reputation as the standard introduction to the literatures of the time. Edited by Richard North and Joe Allard. First published 2007 by Pearson Education Limited. Second edition 2012 Published 2014 by Routledge 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN 711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business. Richard north, joe allard, and patricia gillies, eds., The Longman Anthology of Old English, Old Icelandic, and Anglo-Norman Literatures. Harlow, England: Longman, 2011. Pp. xvi, 869. isbn: 9781408247709. \$58.99. This anthology is a companion to their earlier Beowulf and Other Stories: A New Introduction to Old English, Old Icelandic, and Anglo-Norman Literatures. While the typical anthologies focus on English literature with minimal examples from other literatures-if any literature from Celtic, Anglo-Norman, or Old Norse at all-this volume then, fills a void in the field. Selections are organized according to headings such as 'Heroic Poetry,' 'Poems on the Meaning of Life,' 'Early Chivalry,' and so on.