The HISTORY *of* ENGLISH

By W. NELSON FRANCIS

A concise introduction to the development of our written and spoken language

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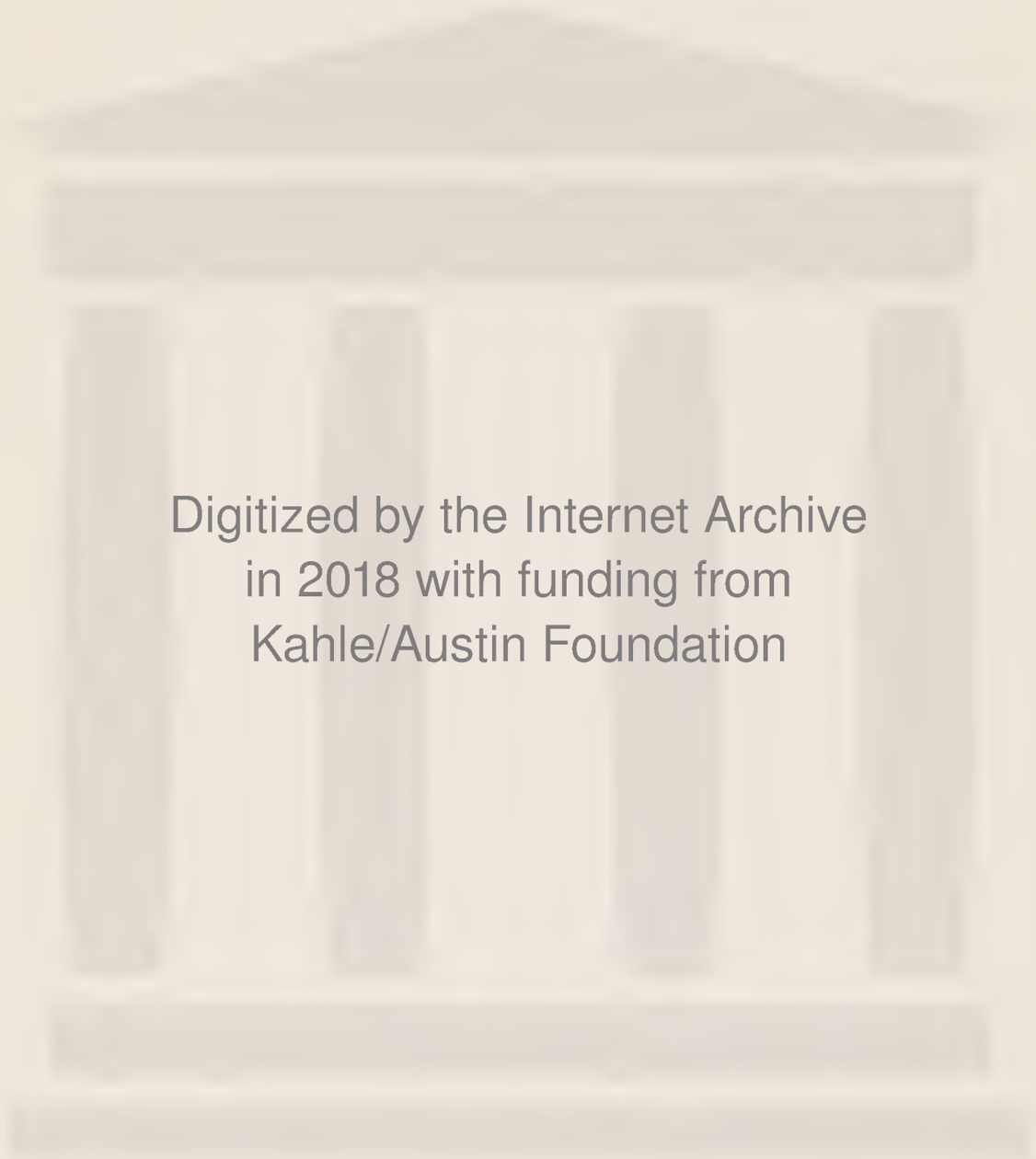

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PREFACE

This little book is written in the belief that some knowledge of the history of his native language should be part of everyone's education. Much of the time spent in our schools and colleges on the study of English is concerned with training in the practical skills of its use. Rightly enough, no doubt; but there should be room as well as for some attention to our language in and for itself, since our speech is a distinguishing mark of our humanity and the vehicle of much of our culture. I hope that this brief and inevitably incomplete sketch of the history of English will both direct and stimulate the interest in language which comes naturally to every inquiring mind. It is a book not for specialists, but for anyone who is curious enough about his language to want to know where it came from and what happened to it along the way.

Popular treatments of language history often concentrate on the vocabulary almost to the exclusion of everything else. It is true that etymology, whether as an exact science or as the study of curious word lore, is a fascinating subject. But a language is not only a collection of words, it is also a set of ways of using them. Therefore the emphasis in the second part of this book, which deals with changes in the language itself, is on grammar, pronunciation, and writing, rather than on vocabulary. Here, the student is referred to his dictionary, for any dictionary that furnishes etymologies is a mine of interesting information about words.

In conclusion I should like to remind student and teacher alike that knowledge of the past should not lead to undue discontent with the present, nor to undue pride either. The language of

King Alfred, of Chaucer, of Shakespeare, and of Dr. Johnson has now become our own. As times have changed, language too has changed to meet the needs of each generation. It is just as wrong to speak of "decay" of language as to see in it an inevitable progress. Language is what people make it. In every generation there are those who use it skillfully and those who use it clumsily; those who use it honestly and those who use it corruptly. The final lesson of its history is that not only poets and scholars, but ordinary citizens as well have a hand in shaping the language of their own time. This is our privilege and our responsibility.

W. N. F.

THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH

1. Language and History

The essence of history is change taking place in time. Anything which endures in time has a history, because in this world of flux anything which endures in time suffers change. But if history is to be meaningful, there must also be continuity. A people, a nation, or a language may change over a long period so greatly as to become something vastly different from what it was at the beginning. But this great change is the cumulation of many small changes. At any stage in its history, the people, nation, or language is fundamentally the same entity that it was in the immediately preceding stage, albeit changed in detail. It has preserved its identity.

The preservation of identity through continuity of change, then, characterizes things which have a history. It is easier to see this in the case of concrete objects, like the Great Pyramid or Keats's Grecian urn. Their continuity is physical; the actual stuff of which they are made has endured through centuries. Their history is primarily what has happened to them and around them; the change they have suffered has chiefly been change of environment, rather than change of their own nature. Indeed, what fascinated Keats about the urn was its placid unchangingness in the midst of changing generations of men. Its history is entirely what can be called "outer history."

But what do we mean by "preservation of identity" when we are speaking of peoples, institutions, organizations? Unlike the pyramid and the urn, they usually do not preserve physical identity. But we can still speak, for example, of "the history of the United States Senate," even though there is nothing physical to

link the people who now comprise that body with the Senate of 1790. What does link them is a continuity of function and purpose, an orderly progression of change. One Senator replaces another, the numbers change, the mode of election changes, the place of meeting changes, but still from year to year it is the same institution.

The history of a language is of this latter sort. At any given moment, the identity of a language is the sum total of the speaking habits of all the people who use it. But these habits change from year to year, even from day to day, and therefore the language also changes. But the people still know they are speaking "the same language." Its identity persists in spite of change through the generations. After a while the accumulated changes may become so great that it almost seems like a wholly new language. But the continuity is such that very few people are aware of the changes that occur even in their own speech from year to year. During the fifteen hundred or so years of its recorded history, English has changed so greatly that its earliest form is unintelligible to modern speakers of English. But at no time was the language of the father unintelligible to the son. There has been unbroken continuity from generation to generation.

To the linguist, the most important aspect of the history of English is its "inner history": the succession of gradual changes over the years which have brought about the great differences between our speech and that of King Alfred. But English has had an interesting outer history as well. It has been uprooted and transplanted; it has had to compete with other languages, once or twice for its very existence; it has been carried all over the world and has taken root in lands and climates very far and very different from its original home. Let us first survey this outer history before we come to consider the nature and order of the changes which constitute its inner history.

2. *The Outer History: Indo-European, Germanic, and Old English*

English belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, as do most of the languages of modern Europe. A fam-

ily of languages is a group of languages which have enough in common in their grammar, sound structure, and vocabulary to support the belief that they all are divergent variants of the same original language. The continuous but gradual changes which constitute the inner history of a language may proceed in various directions. Therefore, if two groups of speakers of a single language are separated and kept from communicating with one another, each group will eventually develop its own distinctive version of the language. Each version will preserve its identity through continuity of change, but after a sufficient time has gone by, the two versions will be so different from each other that they will be for all practical purposes separate languages. By this time each will usually have acquired a name of its own, and the original language will no longer exist. The process is like the division by which one-celled organisms multiply. When an amoeba has split into two, each of the resulting amoebas continues the original, but neither can claim to *be* the original. It is in this sense, rather than the genealogical one, that we can say that one language is "descended" from another. It is in this sense that English—as well as German, French, Russian, Greek, Persian, Hindi, and many other languages—is descended from a hypothetical Proto-Indo-European language, spoken some four or five thousand years ago in north-central Europe.

Since the people who spoke Proto-Indo-European, whoever they may have been, had no writing system, there are no records of what the language was like. But scholars have been able to reconstruct many of its features by studying and comparing the oldest surviving records of the various languages making up the Indo-European family. This laborious and painstaking task of **comparative reconstruction** is one of the great accomplishments of nineteenth and twentieth century linguistics. It is still continuing, as new evidence comes in from the decipherment of hitherto unreadable writing systems like Hittite and Minoan. But it is certain that we will never have direct evidence of Proto-Indo-European itself.

Nor will we ever know very much about its speakers. But we do know that the language came to be spoken over an area too large to permit close intercommunication among all its speakers.

There resulted regional variations, local dialects, and eventually distinctive languages, many of which themselves split up into language families. There are eight principal language families within the larger Indo-European family, all of them represented by living languages. They are the following:

1. **Indo-Iranian,** which includes the classical Vedic and Sanskrit literary languages, as well as many of the living languages of Persia and India. Another large and important group of languages spoken in India, the **Dravidian** family, are not Indo-European in origin, but represent a survival of languages spoken before the Indic version of Indo-European spread to India.

2. **Hellenic,** which includes the ancient and modern languages and dialects of the Greek mainland, Crete, Rhodes, the islands of the Aegean sea, and Greek-settled areas of southern Italy and Sicily.

3. **Italic,** whose principal member is Latin and the family of languages, called the **Romance** languages, which have developed from the spoken Latin of various parts of the Roman empire.

4. **Celtic,** whose modern members are the non-English languages of Ireland, Wales, and the Highlands of Scotland, and the non-French language of Brittany. Gallic, the language of Caesar's Gaul, was a Celtic language which has no modern descendant.

5. **Balto-Slavic,** including the Baltic languages of Latvia and Lithuania, and the Slavic group of Polish, Czech, Russian, Bulgarian, and Serbo-Croatian.

6. **Germanic,** the family to which English belongs, as well as standard German, Dutch, Flemish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Swedish, and many local dialects spoken in Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, and the German-speaking part of Switzerland.

7. **Armenian,** a language and group of dialects spoken in what is now a part of the Soviet Union.

8. **Albanian,** the language of Albania and of small groups or pockets in southern Italy.

In addition to these languages and families which survive into modern times, many have died out altogether: their continuity has been broken, and their identity has perished. Some of these, such as Tocharian (apparently a separate family), the Oscan and Umbrian members of the Italic family, and the Gothic member

of the Germanic family, we know about from written records that have survived. A few names of persons and places are all that is known about others, like Gallic. Doubtless many others have perished without a trace, either because their speakers were annihilated by war or other calamity, or because they abandoned their native language in favor of another, as many American Indian tribes are doing today.

Our concern here is with the Germanic family, which includes English and its nearest relatives. The hypothetical source language from which the various Germanic languages have developed is called **Proto-Germanic,** or simply **Germanic.** Since its speakers had no writing system, we know nothing directly about Proto-Germanic. But by the first century after Christ, when the Germanic tribes touched the fringes of the Roman empire, we begin to get historical information about them. By this time their different dialects had begun the divergent change which was ultimately to produce the contrasting Germanic languages of our time. About this time, too, Germanic people in northern Italy, far from their north European homeland, came in contact with alphabets and devised the earliest Germanic writing system, the **futhork,** or **runic alphabet.** Unfortunately for linguistic history, they used it very sparingly, mostly for ritual and magical purposes, so that only small inscriptions on stone monuments and metal weapons survive from as early as the third century after Christ. Germanic languages did not adopt writing in the usual sense until Christianity introduced them to Latin and the Roman alphabet.

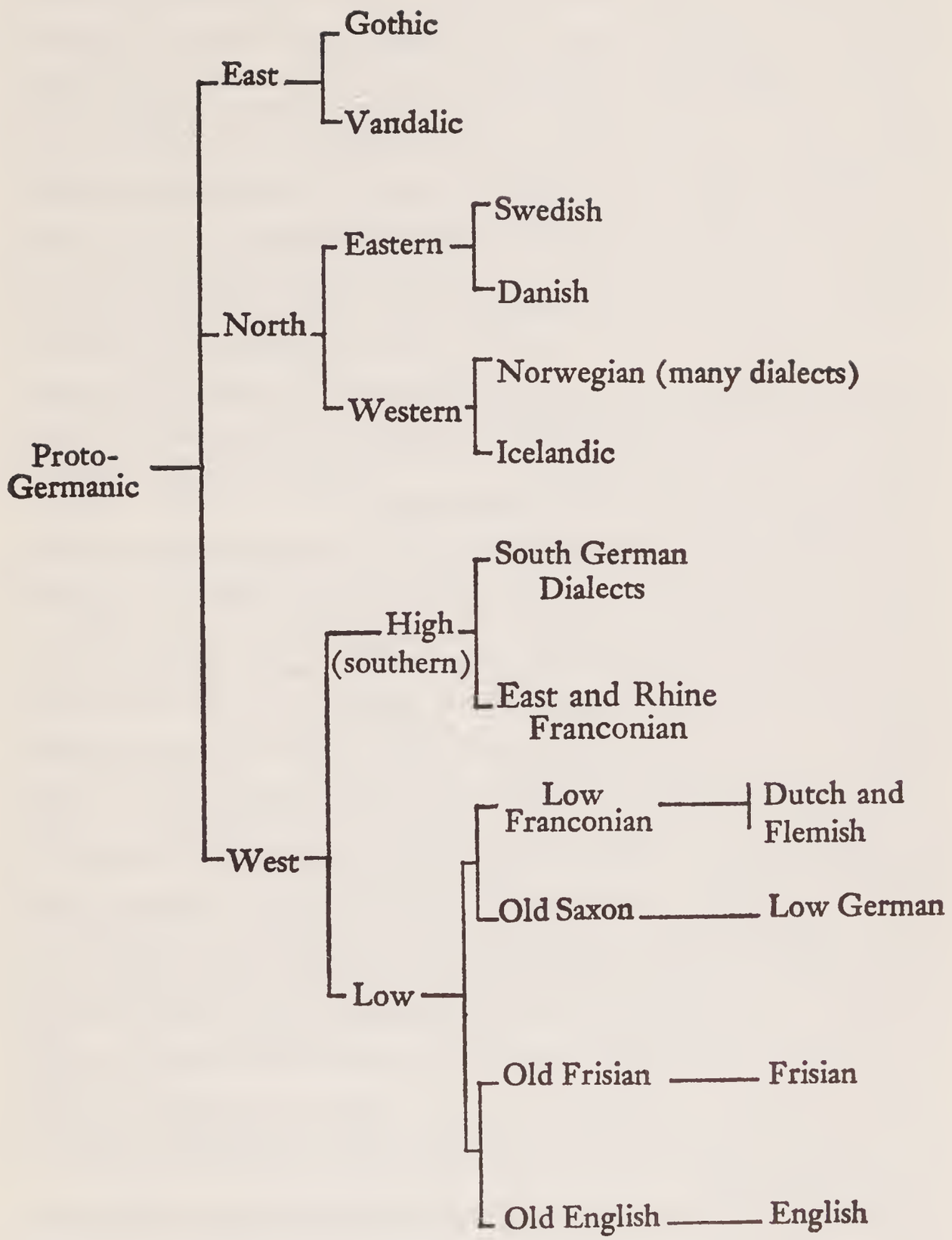
The first extensive written record of a Germanic language is the translation of part of the New Testament into Gothic by Bishop Ulfilas in the middle of the fourth century. By this date, the original Proto-Germanic had divided into three sub-families, each itself in the process of differentiating into distinct languages and dialects. Gothic belonged to the East Germanic family, now extinct. A North Germanic group, derived from a parent Old Norse, now includes the Scandinavian languages. The rest of the Germanic languages—notably English, Dutch, and German—belong to the West Germanic sub-family. The various branches of Germanic are shown in their family relationships in the chart on page 7.

At the time that Ulfilas was carrying out the notably Christian task of translating the Bible into his native East Germanic tongue, the speakers of the language which was to be English were living beyond the farthest reach of the Roman dominion in what is now Denmark and northern Germany. They were rugged seafaring folk, pagan in their religion, having no political organization larger than the large tribe or small kingdom. For some reason—most likely because they were themselves being pushed from the east—they were restless and unstable. The green island of Britain across the North Sea, the farthest outpost of Roman conquest and settlement, attracted them. Their ships had been there, and some of their warriors had fought there. Finally, some time in the latter half of the fifth century, they began to go there in large numbers to stay. The first major event in the outer history of the English language was under way.

The Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain was one phase of the barbarian invasions that brought about the downfall of the Roman empire. The island had been scouted by Julius Caesar in 55 and 54 B.C., but his rather ambitious efforts at military conquest were frustrated by the fierce resistance of the inhabitants and by a rebellion in recently conquered Gaul, which drew Caesar back to the continent. It was not until a hundred years later, in A.D. 43, that Britain was successfully annexed to Rome by the Emperor Claudius.

The inhabitants of Great Britain at the time the Romans took it over were of various Celtic strains, who had themselves invaded and conquered the island at an earlier date. During the four centuries that separated the Roman conquest from the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, the Celtic Britons adopted Roman civilization and eventually Christianity. Even today, towns like Bath and St. Albans preserve extensive Roman ruins, and the many English towns whose names end in *-chester*, *-cester*, and *-caster* remind us of the ubiquitous posts or camps (Latin *castra*) of the legionaries. When the legions were withdrawn to meet invaders nearer home, the untrained British were at first no match for the rugged Germanic invaders.

These invaders traditionally are assigned to three groups. The Angles, whose European home was probably modern Denmark—


Proto-Germanic
East
Gothic
Vandalic
North
Eastern
Swedish
Danish
Western
Norwegian (many dialects)
Icelandic
West
High (southern)
South German Dialects
East and Rhine Franconian
Low
Low Franconian
Dutch and Flemish
Old Saxon
Low German
Old Frisian
Frisian
Old English
English

both the peninsula of Jutland and the islands to the east—eventually settled what is now northern and central England and southeastern Scotland. Their name was early extended to the whole of the island except the fringe areas—Wales, Cornwall, and the Highlands of Scotland—held by the surviving Britons, Scots, and Picts. The land was soon being called *Englalond* and its language *Englisc*. The Saxons, who came from Schleswig and Holstein in what is now West Germany, took over the southern part of the island except the extreme southeast. The counties of Essex (from East Saxon), Sussex (from South Saxon), and Middlesex, and the southwestern region of Wessex carry on their name. Finally the Jutes, originally from Jutland but more recently from the North Sea coast around the mouth of the Rhine, settled the southeastern county of Kent and parts of the central southern coast, including the Isle of Wight. Probably some of their Frisian neighbors came with them.

As the shiploads of warlike invaders continued to pour in, the British resisted as well as they could, but they missed the support of the Roman legions. At that, the conquest was not a swift or easy one. Not for two hundred years were the British, the Scots, and the Picts really subdued. For a period of some years in the middle of the sixth century, the British almost turned the tide, under the leadership of a shadowy general later to be developed by legend into the great King Arthur. But ultimately the Celtic peoples withdrew into the mountainous regions of Wales and Scotland and across the water to Ireland and to Brittany. And from fighting them, the Anglo-Saxons turned to fighting among themselves—petty kingdom against petty kingdom. Every now and then a powerful man like Penda or Offa of Mercia would succeed in establishing himself as dominant ruler over the other regional kings. But England did not begin to become a unified nation until it was faced with another powerful outside threat, the marauding Danes.

Before the coming of the Danes, however, there was another event which was of great importance to the history of the language—the Christianizing of England. As we have seen, the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians were pagans. Their kings claimed direct descent from Woden, the ruler of the Germanic

pantheon. But they had had some contact with Christianity, both on the Continent and in Britain. Some of their rulers had married Christian princesses. When the missionaries came during the latter part of the sixth century, both from Ireland in the north and from Rome in the south, many of the rulers and their people were ready for the new religion. By the middle of the seventh century the conversion was complete, superficially at least. Pagan ideas and customs survived, as some of them do to this day, but they were often incorporated into the framework of the new religion. Sometimes even the names were preserved with a new meaning: The old pagan spring festival of *Easter* gave its name to the Christian feast of the Resurrection.

But Christianity had another important linguistic effect. It brought England into an international community whose working language was Latin. From this period begins the characteristic English habit of word-borrowing. Latin *monachus* and *monasterium*, *episcopus* and *presbyter* were taken over, eventually to become our modern words *monk* and *minster*, *bishop* and *priest*.

There had undoubtedly been at least minor dialectal differences in the speech of the various tribes even before they migrated to England. After the settlement and the establishment of regional kingdoms, dialectal differences increased. We can recognize four main dialect areas, each of which undoubtedly had local variants within it, though we do not have enough material from specific localities to know what they were. The Anglian region, greatest in area, includes two dialects: Northumbrian, covering the north of England and the Lowlands of Scotland, and Mercian, spoken in a broad band across the center of the country. In the Jutish settlements in Kent, Surrey, and the southern coast, the Kentish dialect prevailed. The rest of England south of the Thames spoke West Saxon.

Survivals of these dialect differences persist to this day in the local speech of plain folk in different parts of England. What we now think of as standard British English comes primarily from the speech of London, which was just about at the meeting point of Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish, and preserves features of all three. But in the earlier part of the Old English period, especially the eighth century, the dominant language of literature and

culture was Northumbrian. The major cause of the shift from Northumbria to Wessex, which accounts for the fact that virtually all surviving Old English literature is in West Saxon, was the Danish invasions.

The Danish Vikings who began their devastating raids on Britain during the early ninth century were former neighbors of the Anglo-Saxons on the Continent. They, too, were pagan seafarers, whose long ships were capable of crossing the Atlantic. During the course of the ninth century they almost succeeded in conquering the whole island. But they were opposed by a great leader, Alfred, king of the West Saxons, who fought them to a standstill, though he could not succeed in driving them out entirely. In the treaty of Wedmore in 878, and in a subsequent agreement in 886, Alfred concluded an arrangement with Guthrum, the principal Danish leader, by which England was divided by a line running roughly from northwest to southeast across the middle of the island. This line created a southwestern English area and a northeastern Danish area, called the Danelaw.

Within the Danelaw, the new inhabitants seem to have settled down fairly peaceably alongside the English. The linguistic consequences of this invasion are important and interesting. As Scandinavians, the Danes spoke various dialects of Old Norse, the ancestor of the modern Scandinavian languages. But their language was by no means as different from Old English as modern Swedish or Danish is from modern English. The Danes seem to have adopted English, but they carried over into it many words from their native Norse. Many of these words, like *sky* and *gait*, and even the pronouns, *they*, *their*, and *them*, have since become standard English. And many **isoglosses**, lines separating dialect features, still follow closely the thousand-year-old boundary of the Danelaw.

After a century of peace, there were more Viking raids, and for a time England even had a Danish king, the famous Canute. But the next event of major influence on language was the conquest of England by William of Normandy in 1066–1069. The Normans were descendants of Vikings who had settled in Normandy, just across the English channel from the south coast of England, at about the same time that their kinfolk were settling

in Britain. They, too, had given up their native speech and adopted that of their new home, a dialect of French. By the time of William, they were thoroughly French in most ways, including at least nominal adherence to Christianity. But they also preserved the rugged fighting qualities of their Viking ancestors.

William had a very tenuous claim to the English throne, but it served him as a pretext for invading and subjugating the country. The Norman Conquest was a military and political one, like that of the Romans a thousand years before, rather than a mass invasion like those of the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes. William attacked and subdued the English ruling class and largely replaced them with Norman henchmen and allies. But there was no great influx of settlers in the wake of his armies, so that although the business of government and law was conducted in Norman French, the masses of the common people continued to speak English. In effect, the language "went underground" for about a century and a half after the Conquest. There are written records from this period, but very little literature was written in English. With the conservative forces of educated and literary usage in abeyance, the language changed more rapidly than it otherwise would have. By the time it again emerged as a literary language, about the year 1200, it was so changed that we give it a new name, Middle English. The Middle English period lasted until another time of extensive change in the fifteenth century.

3. The Outer History: Middle English

The four centuries included in what students of the English language call the Middle English period embrace the high point and subsequent decline of the Middle Ages. Politically they mark the first stages of the development of government by Parliament and law, an art which England was to perfect in subsequent centuries. In terms of social organization, this period marks the transition from the feudalism established by William the Conqueror to the combination of bourgeois town-dwellers and free tenant farmers which formed early modern society before the industrial revolution. The incessant efforts of English kings of this period to hold or regain their Continental possessions, culminating

in the intermittent warfare with France in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries known as the Hundred Years' War, failed of their objective. With the loss of their holdings in France, the English kings and great barons became English in fact. The contrast is striking between Richard I, the Lion-Hearted, ruling at the end of the twelfth century, who spent less than a year of his ten years' reign on English soil, and Elizabeth I, four hundred years later, who never left England. During that four-hundred-year period, England changed from an overseas possession of Dukes of Normandy and Anjou to an independent and fiercely patriotic nation.

It is not necessary here to trace the details of this development. Our concern is with history as it affected the English language, which means that certain aspects of English medieval history take on special prominence in our eyes. Certainly one of the most important facts about English history since the Norman Conquest is that England has never again been invaded or conquered from outside by a people speaking another tongue. There have been serious threats of such invasion at intervals of roughly one hundred and fifty to two hundred years: by the French in the reign of John (1215) and again in the reign of Richard II (1385), by the Spaniards in the reign of Elizabeth I (1588), by the French again under Napoleon (1804), and by the Germans under Hitler (1941). But all of these were either repulsed or frustrated before coming to the ultimate attempt.

English thus did not have to compete with a new invading language. But during the first two centuries of the Middle English period, it was in competition with French. During the twelfth and most of the thirteenth centuries, French was the language of the king's court—which was, in effect, the government—the schools and newly founded universities (when they did not use Latin), the magnates of the realm, both ecclesiastical and lay, and undoubtedly the well-to-do tradesmen and merchants of the towns. Even those whose native speech was English, if they were to assume a position in these circles, early had to learn French and virtually abandon English as a means of communication with their peers. Only the ordinary people, in country, village, and town, used English freely and exclusively. Since they outweighed the

French speakers in numbers, if not in wealth and power, they forced bilingualism upon their superiors. The linguistic effects of that bilingualism were far-reaching.

The causes of the ultimate emergence and total victory of English in this battle of the tongues seem obvious enough. The constant warfare with France and the ultimate total loss of French-speaking lands on the one hand encouraged a growing English nationalism and, on the other, made French less important to the magnates of the realm than it had been when half of their vassals lived in France and spoke French. National pride both fosters and is fostered by possession of a national language, as the artificial and politically stimulated revival of Erse in Ireland and Hebrew in Israel has demonstrated in our day. The beginnings, however slow, of opportunities for schooling, and the founding of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge during the thirteenth century, opened one channel through which humble folk could rise in the world to positions of power and responsibility in church and state. By the early fourteenth century, the universities were passing regulations forbidding their members to speak English—a sure sign that many university students found it easier to do so than to use French or Latin.[1]

The turning point seems to have been around the year 1300. By that date, literary works in English, many of them translated from French originals, were beginning to be produced in some numbers. Soon after the middle of the century the law courts (1362) and the Parliament (1363) were conducting their business in English. John Gower, writing during the last third of the century, played it safe (as he thought) by writing three long poems, one each in Latin, French, and English. But his great contemporaries Chaucer, Langland, and the unknown author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* staked all on English and showed that it could be the vehicle of great poetry. During this period also the followers of the reforming theologian, John Wyclif, produced the first major Bible translation since Old English times. By the time of Chaucer's death in 1400, the language of England was unquestionably English.

1. See A. C. Baugh, *History of the English Language*, 2nd ed., New York, 1957, pp. 165f.

But it was still several kinds of English. The dialectal divergence which we have already remarked in Old English increased during the early Middle English period, when the restraining and standardizing forces of schooling and literature in English were wellnigh nonexistent. Since most speakers of English did not often move very far beyond the villages of their birth, local dialects could develop uninhibited by the need for broad regional intercommunication. In fact, circumstances were ideal for greatly increased dialectal differentiation.

By the age of Chaucer, when English emerged as the language of literature, government, and education, five major dialect areas can be recognized, with much local variation within each of them. The Northern dialect covered about the same area as the Northumbrian dialect of Old English: England north of the Humber and the Lowlands of Scotland as far as the Firth of Forth. The Old English Mercian area was now divided into a West and an East Midland area, the latter including also East Anglia and the so-called "Home Counties" surrounding London north of the Thames. The Southern dialect covered the old West Saxon area, and Kentish carried on Kentish Old English. The major difference between the Middle English dialect pattern and that of Old English thus was the split of the Midland area. A major reason for this becomes clear when we observe that the boundary between East and West Midland runs close to the boundary of the Danelaw, which separated Danish from English territory in A.D. 900.

Even as this dialectal variation reached its peak, forces tending to counteract it were growing. The result was not so much to reduce or do away with dialectal differences—they remain strong in uneducated country speech to this day. What happened instead was that the speech of London and the London area came to be thought of as standard, or at least preferred for cultivated use. Chaucer is sometimes given credit for influencing this choice, but the truth is more likely the other way about. Chaucer was a Londoner born and bred, and he wrote the colloquial and educated speech of his native town. Modern readers, inheritors of the standard English tradition, find it much easier to read Chaucer's poetry than that of Langland, tinged with his native southern West Midland, or that of the *Gawain* poet, who, though a courtly gentle-

man, used the dialect of his native region in the extreme northern part of the West Midland area. On the other hand, the Yorkshire-born Wyclif, who lived much of his life in Oxford and London, and Kentish John Gower both wrote in the new standard dialect of London.

The reasons that London dialect became the standard are largely political and economic. As the center of government, the meeting place of Parliament, and the largest commercial center and seaport in the country, London was a center to which most people of importance found it necessary to travel and where they met others from "every shires ende of Engelond." It also happened to be on the southern edge of the Midland area, and its speech was midway in many features between the North and the South. The standard dialect that evolved there was predominantly East Midland, but it incorporated some Northern features (the pronouns *they*, *their*, and *them* and the verb form *are*, for example) and some Southern ones (such as third person singular verbs in *-eth*).

Since virtually all our evidence about dialect differences and the emergence of standard is derived from written records, it is not always easy to decide how much the standardization of written materials actually reflects the adoption of standard pronunciation as well. The great differences between regional varieties of English pronunciation in our own time are concealed by the fact that we all—Scotsman and Londoner, Bostonian and Georgian alike—use the same standard writing system. This kind of standard did not exist to so great an extent in Old English and earlier Middle English, though there is evidence to show that there were conventional standards that persisted after sound changes had taken place. There were also local standards, to which scribes more or less closely adhered, but there was still room for the individual to spell as he spoke, to some degree at least. The beginnings of the modern standard system for all writers lie in the age of Chaucer, and they were greatly strengthened by an event of major importance in the succeeding century. In 1476 William Caxton set up his press at the sign of the "Red Pale" in Westminster and began to issue the editions of late Middle English classics which were the chief product of his press. Printing,

the first industry to engage in mass production, with its ability to spread identical copies of the same text over the whole country, made a standard writing system both desirable and feasible. The English writing system used since 1500 reflects little or no regional variation (except for the special case of Scots, as written off and on since the fifteenth century). And while the pronunciation of English has changed extensively since Caxton's time, the writing system has changed very little.

4. The Outer History: Modern English

The Old English period saw the establishment of English in its new island home and its development from the language of pagan warriors and pirates to the language of a civilized and Christianized society. During the Middle English period, English, temporarily eclipsed in the upper levels of society by French, reshaped itself grammatically, enriched its vocabulary by extensive borrowings from its rival, and emerged as a national language equal to the needs of one of the greatest of poets. The next chapter, the modern English period, is marked by two major developments: (1) the continued growth of the language in versatility, variety, and wealth of vocabulary as it became the vehicle for one of the richest and most extensive of literatures, and (2) the spread of the language into many new parts of the world and the rapid growth of the English-speaking community into a position of world-wide influence and importance. These two developments are not unconnected; each reinforced the other.

During the first hundred years or so of the modern period—roughly from the establishment of Caxton's press in 1476 to the publication of Spenser's *Shepherdes Calender* in 1579—English faced in Latin another formidable rival as the language of literature, learning, and education. The Latin of this period was no longer the workaday language of the medieval church and university, but a revival of the highly cultivated language of Cicero and Virgil. The humanistic Renaissance, which had been flourishing in Italy for a century or more, reached England during the latter part of the fifteenth century. Under the patronage of the young Henry VIII, an educated man and a poet in his own right,

English scholars like John Colet and Thomas More, as well as international figures like Erasmus, encouraged the study of the "three tongues"—classical Latin, ancient Greek, and Biblical Hebrew. The language in which they wrote not only their learned works but also their private letters to one another was Latin. The best literary works of the period, such as More's *Utopia* and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, were in Latin. Children learned Latin at school, where, once they had learned to read it, English was neglected.

Once again English emerged successfully from this temporary eclipse. It had continued to be the language of government, law, and commerce, so that its position in the nation had not been threatened. Under the influence of the fierce patriotism of the Tudor age, of the powerful advocacy of scholars like Sir Thomas Elyot and Roger Ascham (the tutor of Queen Elizabeth I) and schoolmasters like Richard Mulcaster, and finally of the brilliant performance of great writers, English won a high place in the world of learning and literature. It is true that the ancient languages, especially Latin, enjoyed great prestige in educational and scholarly circles down to the nineteenth century. But the appearance of three of the greatest English poets, all of whose careers fall within less than a century, established English once and for all as a great literary language. Of the three, Spenser was the most self-conscious advocate of English. In his *Shepherdes Calender*, *Faerie Queene*, and other works, he consciously attempted to supply English with a body of poetry to rival that of Homer and Virgil. Shakespeare, writing for the popular theatre, had no alternative to English. Milton, the most scholarly and learned of the three, wrote in Latin and Italian almost as fluently as in English, but used English as the medium for his great epic. Since the work of these men, no one has questioned the suitability of English as a literary language. The subsequent tradition, carried down to our own time by Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Yeats, and Eliot, has proved again and again the versatility of English as a medium for poetry.

The expansion of English as a world language has matched its literary development. Compared with Spain and Portugal, England came late to the enterprise of exploration and discovery

which so greatly enlarged the known world in the sixteenth century. Not until the very end of the century did England turn from the piratical harassment of Spanish overseas possessions to the task of establishing some of her own. But during the seventeenth century, as every American knows, she established colonies on the eastern coast of North America so firmly that English ultimately won out as the speech of most of the middle part of the continent, between French-speaking Canada on the north and Spanish-speaking Mexico on the south. So firmly did English become entrenched in North America that it withstood peaceful "invasions" far more massive than those of the Danes or Normans had been. Dutch, Swedes, Germans, Welsh, Poles, Czechs, Russians, and many others emigrated to the New World, both before and after it became a nation. Usually they hastened to learn the language of their new home, so that within a generation or so of arriving their descendants were added to the growing number of English speakers. A few built self-centered societies that preserved the language as well as the customs of the old country. But the overwhelming majority were assimilated rapidly into the culture and speech community established by the English.

Meanwhile English was expanding elsewhere on the globe. In India the English governors, traders, and settlers were outnumbered many times by a native population speaking many languages, both Indo-European and Dravidian. English became the language of government and business, but never that of the whole people. But in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada beyond the French settlements, the situation repeated that in what became the United States: a primitive and relatively sparse native population was overwhelmed by English-speaking settlers. The result of this great expansion of English during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries has been to create two types of English-speaking areas. In countries like the United States and Australia, English is the native speech of all but a very small minority of the population. In other areas, like India, Pakistan, and the new countries being created from the former African colonies of Britain, English is a second language for all, but serves as the common medium of government and business among people whose native languages are mutually unintelligible. Finally, in countries like Japan, which

do a great deal of business with the United States and the United Kingdom, English is a second language of commercial and social usefulness and prestige.

One result of this spread of English around the world has been the establishment of various regional standards whose speakers view their own kind of English as being just as good as, if not better than, that of southern England. The Scots have always maintained their native standard, though in the eighteenth century in particular many Scotsmen, like James Boswell, labored hard to acquire the standard speech of southern England. But even in Boswell's day patriotic Scots, predecessors of the great Burns, were writing poetry in the dialect of the Lowlands. Nowadays only the most reactionary Briton questions the right of Scottish, American, Canadian, and Australian versions of English to be standard in their own lands. And as these countries become more and more involved in the vast enterprise of teaching English as a second language throughout the world, the prejudices against them as inferior forms of English are disappearing.

Before concluding this hasty survey of the outer history of English, we should take account briefly of three other important trends during the modern English period. The first of these is the growth of mass education, and the consequent spread of literacy to virtually all native speakers of English. This has had profound effects on the language and its speakers. In the age of Chaucer, and even in that of Shakespeare, literacy was an attribute of a special minority. Today it is the illiterate person who is the exception, and the ability to read and write with some skill is a requisite for all but the most menial employment.

A second phenomenon of modern times which has had a great effect on the language is the accelerating revolution in all fields of knowledge, but especially in science and technology. This has affected all the languages of the civilized world, not just English. One consequence has been the building up of a large common vocabulary of science, in which the same words appear in many languages, only slightly adapted in spelling and pronunciation.

A third important development has been the extensive and intensive study of the language itself. The study of English grammar, both contemporary and of older periods, began in the six-

teenth century, but has been greatly intensified since the middle of the eighteenth. The same is true of lexicography, the making of dictionaries, which began long before the days of Samuel Johnson but received a strong impetus from his great dictionary of 1755. Our schools today universally teach facts and theories about the English language, as well as give practice in the skills of using it. This kind of study about language has considerable influence upon people's attitudes toward language and hence has a feedback effect on the language itself.

In the course of its fifteen-hundred-year history, beginning as the language of a few thousand Germanic tribesmen in northern Europe and ending as a great world language, English has passed through many phases and vicissitudes. While its circumstances were changing, its internal nature was changing as well. Let us next take a look—again inevitably hasty and superficial—at this "inner history" of English.

5. The Inner History: Indo-European to Old English

The changes which constitute the inner history of a language usually affect, in varying degrees, all three major aspects of the language: vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Evidence for all three kinds of change prior to the earliest surviving documents is entirely indirect: it is derived by reconstructing the original forms from which divergent known forms are most likely to have evolved. Since changes in grammar and pronunciation usually affect not individual items but groups of similar items, it is possible to make general statements that cover these systematic changes. Changes in vocabulary are more likely to be individual, though even here some generalizations can be made, especially about change of meaning.

After the dates when documents become available, the evidence for changes in grammar and vocabulary is direct. But the only direct evidence for pronunciation would be audible recordings of speech, which did not exist before the present century. So the reconstruction of older pronunciation must be based upon

the skillful interpretation of written evidence. As we know from the situation in the English of our own time, spelling is not always a very accurate guide to pronunciation. But combined with the evidence of comparative reconstruction and some direct comments on and descriptions of pronunciation by earlier writers, the written records can lead to at least a plausible reconstruction of older pronunciations.

Since the speakers of the Indo-European parent language had no writing system, all the evidence about its nature is indirect. The branch of linguistics which deals with the reconstruction of this language on the basis of comparative study of its descendants is known as **Indo-European Philology,** and it is highly detailed and technical. For our purposes it is enough to observe certain broad features of Proto-Indo-European, and to note how some of them became modified in the course of the development of Germanic and later of Old English.

In pronunciation, Proto-Indo-European seems to have had a system of strong accents, whose position in the word shifted when various affixes appeared, and in so doing affected the sound of vowels. This same phenomenon, known by both the German name **ablaut** and the English name **gradation,** also characterizes modern English, in contrast to a language like French or Spanish, where the vowels have the same value whether accented or not. Thus in English the syllabic of the accented first syllable of *native* is a full diphthong, /ey/, but that of the unaccented first syllable of *nativity* is a much shorter and weaker central vowel, /ə/. Similar vowel contrasts in Proto-Indo-European account for the still existing variation in some irregular verbs, such as *ride, rode, ridden.* Sets of words with similar root meanings, like *sit, sat, set, seat, settle,* also show survival of Indo-European ablaut variation in modern English.[2]

Another characteristic of the Proto-Indo-European sound-system was the existence of three sets of *stops,* the kind of consonants made by a temporary complete interruption of the air-

2. Spellings enclosed between slant lines are **phonemic**; that is, they indicate pronunciation. Thus /ey/ stands for the sound of *a* in *name* or of *ay* in *day,* and /ə/ for the sound of *u* in *but* or of *a* in *about.*

flow. In modern English the /k/ sounds at the beginning of *cat* and *quarter* and following the /s/ in *skit*, though phonetically quite a bit different, are to all significant purposes the same. But in Proto-Indo-European they were separate sounds, which had different subsequent development in different languages. Thus English *wheel* and Greek *kyklos* (from which English subsequently borrowed *cycle*), though now very different, go back to a common Proto-Indo-European original which began with a lip-rounded kind of /k^{w}/ sound. Germanic preserved only the lip-rounding, as /w/, while Greek preserved only the /k/.

The most sweeping changes in the sound-system, as one branch of Indo-European developed into Germanic and subsequently into Old English, were in the consonants. Systematic correspondences, such as the contrast of English *father* and *foot* with Latin *pater* and *pedem*, illustrate the effect of these changes, which were worked out and formulated by nineteenth-century linguists under the misleading titles of Grimm's and Verner's "Laws." They are not laws in the usual sense at all, but simply general statements describing systematic changes in pronunciation.

In its grammar, Proto-Indo-European was very much a **synthetic** language, that is, one which depended heavily on morphological markers, especially inflections, to indicate grammatical relationships and meanings. Thus its nouns seem to have had as many as eight cases to express meanings conveyed in modern English by prepositions, word order, and other devices characteristic of **analytic** languages. In the course of the development of Germanic and Old English, several of these cases (such as the **locative** and the **ablative,** both of which survived in Latin) disappeared, probably because sound changes caused their inflections to become identical with those of other cases. By Old English times only four cases—**nominative, accusative, genitive,** and **dative**—are common to all nouns, with traces of a fifth, the **instrumental,** surviving. Modern English has preserved a combined dative-accusative only in pronouns, and the genitive survives as the possessive marker, *-'s*.

Another feature of Proto-Indo-European nouns was **grammatical gender:** the assignment of nouns to different classes based originally on some aspect of meaning. In spite of the terms **mas-**

culine and **feminine** applied to two of these genders, the original distinction does not seem to have been based on sex. One theory holds that it was based on a contrast between individual (masculine) and type (feminine). In any case, grammatical gender carried with it the requirement of **agreement** between noun and adjective: adjectives had distinctive forms to be used with the different genders. Anyone who has studied Latin has become familiar with agreement in gender. Both gender and associated agreement were preserved in Germanic and Old English, and have persisted in German to the present day, though modern English has discarded them.

The verb system of Proto-Indo-European seems to have included both aspect and tense, with distinctive endings also for person. There were probably five tenses: present, imperfect, perfect, aorist, and future. In Germanic and subsequent Old English the tenses were reduced to two, the present and the past, or preterit. Proto-Indo-European had four moods: indicative (for statements), imperative (for commands), subjunctive (for unreal statements), and optative (for wishes). In Germanic the last two of these fell together (as they also did in Latin); the resulting subjunctive appears in Old English and survives in a few vestiges in modern English. But the elaborate development of modal auxiliaries, which now express many of the shades of meaning formerly expressed by moods, occurred in Germanic and later in English.

Another morphological complexity of Proto-Indo-European was an inflected passive, which almost totally disappeared in Germanic and shows only vestiges in Old English. Old English developed instead the phrasal passive (*be* with the past participle) which we use in modern English. Proto-Indo-European also had a set of dual number forms, both in nouns and verbs, which survived in Greek but disappeared in Germanic except for a few pronoun forms. In sum, the principal grammatical development as the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family diverged from the others was a tendency to reduce the number of grammatical categories marked by distinctive inflections, and thus to carry out to a considerable degree the change from a synthetic to an analytic language which has been the continuing

trend of English grammar.

Although the English vocabulary is not a major part of the present discussion, one point ought to be considered here: the distinction between **native** and **borrowed** words. Native words are those which can be shown to have come down in the direct line of descent from the oldest form of the language, which in the case of English is Proto-Indo-European. Borrowed words are those which have been adopted into the language from an outside source. A borrowed word, once it has been adapted to the uses of the borrowing language, usually becomes so thoroughly naturalized that only scholars know about its foreign origin. The notion sometimes put forward that somehow "native Anglo-Saxon" words are better than those borrowed from other languages has no basis in fact. Certainly *table* and *chair*, for all they were borrowed from French, are just as good words as the native *board* and *stool*.

To the historian of language, however, the distinction is important because he bases his inferences about earlier states of the language upon a knowledge of the sources of its words. Thus a pair of words like *chalk* and *calcium* is interesting because, while both are borrowed from Latin *calcem*, the appearance of the initial *ch*-sound in *chalk* shows that it was borrowed before the so-called palatalization of initial /k/ in early Old English. This instance also illustrates the fact that, when a borrowed word has become naturalized, it is subject to the same sound-changes which affect the pronunciation of native words.

In general a word is considered to be a native Indo-European word if it exists in two or more of the main Indo-European families, without evidence that it was borrowed from one into the other or others. Thus English *father*, which is paralleled not only by German *Vater*, but also by Latin *pater*, Sanskrit *pitā*, and others, is clearly a native word.

One use to which the study of the native Indo-European vocabulary has been put is to supply evidence for speculation about the culture of the original speakers of Proto-Indo-European and the location of their homeland. Thus the fact that there are native words for *cow* and *wheel* but not for *plow* has been taken as evidence that they were herdsmen, possibly nomadic, rather than

tillers of the soil. The existence of common words for *winter*, *snow*, *beech* (tree), and *salmon* has been considered to prove that their home was in north-central Europe. But such evidence is risky and cannot be carried too far, since even though common words may exist in several languages, their meanings may be so different as to make it impossible to be sure of the meaning of the Indo-European original.

In general the vocabulary of Germanic and hence of early Old English was principally made up of native Indo-European words. Already the Germanic fondness for compounding as a source of new words was strongly in evidence. Early contact of the Germanic tribes with Roman traders had given rise to some borrowing of Latin words, such as *wine* and *kettle*, both of which go back to pre-Anglo-Saxon Germanic. But the great influx of foreign borrowings which was later to characterize the English vocabulary had not yet begun.

6. *The Inner History: Old English to Middle English*

The passage of Old English given with its translation on pages 26–27 is a sample of the language as it was at the end of the ninth century. It is the beginning of the Preface to Pope Gregory's book called *Pastoral Care* in an English translation made for or perhaps actually by the great King Alfred, about the year 890. After the devastating wars with the Danes had been halted by Alfred's agreements with Guthrum (see above, p. 10), the king set out to restore learning and culture in his kingdom. Part of his program was to prepare a translation of this manual for parish priests and to send a copy to each of the bishops in England. Our passage is quoted from the copy destined for Wærferth, Bishop of Worcester, which is now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

At first sight the passage seems so strange as not to bear any relation to English at all. But upon closer examination, especially after a few adjustments to the spelling are made, familiar words begin to appear. The character *ð* is used as we use *th* in modern English, and *æ* spells the sound of *a* in *cat*. Knowing this we can

from ALFRED'S *PREFACE* TO GREGORY'S *PASTORAL CARE* †

Ælfred kyning hatеð gretan Wærferð biscep his wordum luflice & freondlice; & ðe cyðan hate ðæt me com swiðe oft ón gemynd, hwelce wiotan iu wæron giond Angelcynn, ægðer ge godcundra hada ge worul[d]cundra; & hu gesæliglica tida ðа wæron giond Angelcynn; & hu ða kyningas ðe ðone ónwald hæfdon ðæs folces [on ðam dagum] Gode & his ærendwrecum hersumedon; & hie ægðer ge hiora sibbe ge hiora siodo ge hiora ónweald innanbordes gehioldon, & eac út hiora eðel gerymdon; & hu him ða speow ægðer ge mid wige ge mid wisdome; & eac ða godcundan hadas hu giorne hie wæron ægðer ge ymb lare ge ymb liornunga, ge ymb ealle ða ðiowotdomas ðe hie Gode [don] scoldon; & hu man utanbordes wisdom & lare hieder ón lond sohte, & hu we hie nu sceoldon ute begietan gif we hie habban sceoldon. Swæ clæne hio wæs oðfeallenu ón Angelcynne ðæt swiðe feawa wæron behionan Humbre ðe hiora ðeninga cuðen understondan ón Englisc, oððe furðum án ærendgewrit óf Lædene ón Englisc areccean; & ic wene ðæt[te] noht monige begiondan Humbre næren. Swæ feawa hiora wæron ðæt ic furðum anne ánlepne ne mæg geðencean besuðan Temese ða ða ic to rice feng. Gode ælmihtegum sie ðonc ðæt[te] we nu ænigne ón stal habbað lareowa. & forðon ic ðe bebiode ðæt ðu dó swæ ic geliefe ðæt ðu wille, ðæt ðu ðe ðissa woruldðinga to ðæm geæmetige swæ ðu oftost mæge, ðæt ðu ðone wisdom ðe ðe God sealde ðær ðær ðu hiene befæstan mæge, befæste.

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recognize *ðæt* as *that*. Other words that look much like their modern descendants are *wordum* (*word*, with dative plural ending), *freondlice* (*friendly*, with *-e* ending to mark it as adverb), *folces* (*folk*, with genitive singular ending), *wisdom*, and many others. Some have passed through sound changes which have

† MS Hatton 20, Bodleian Library, ed. H. Sweet, EETS, O.S. 45, 1871.

King Alfred bids greet bishop Wærferth with his words lovingly and friendlily; and I let thee know that it very often came to [my] mind what wise men formerly were throughout England, either of the sacred orders or the secular; and how happy times then were throughout England; and how the kings that then had rule of the folk in those days obeyed God and his ministers; and they maintained their peace, their morality, and their control within the country and also enlarged their domain outside; and how they then prospered both with war and with wisdom; and also the sacred orders how eager they were both with teaching and with learning and concerning all the services that they ought to do for God; and how people from outside [the country] sought wisdom and teaching here in this land, and how we now would have to get them from outside if we were to have them. So complete was its falling off in England that there were very few this side of Humber who could understand their liturgies in English, or translate a letter from Latin into English; and I believe that there were not many beyond Humber. So few of them there were that I cannot think of a single one south of Thames when I came to the throne. To God Almighty be thanks that we now have any teachers in the place. And therefore I bid thee that thou do as I believe thou will, separate thyself from these worldly matters as often as thou canst, that thou apply the wisdom that God gave thee wherever thou mayest.

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been reflected in altered spellings; thus the combination *æg* became in Middle English a diphthong *ay* or *ey*, which is illustrated in *mæge* (modern *may*) and *ægðer* (modern *either*). Actually more than half the words in this passage are still in use, though altered in shape, pronunciation, and sometimes in meaning.

As an illustration of some of the grammatical features which

Old English inherited from Indo-European but which have since passed out of the language, consider the clause *hu ða kyningas ðe ðone ónwald hæfdon ðæs folces on ðam dagum Gode & his ærendwrecum hersumedon*, which we may represent word for word as "how the kings that the rule had the folk's on those days God and his ministers ['errand-workers'] obeyed." The word order is clearly not that of modern English, and in the modern English rendering is ambiguous. But the Old English is not ambiguous, because the grammatical function of virtually every word is marked by inflectional endings. Even the function word that serves the purposes of both definite article and demonstrative takes on different forms—*ða, ðone, ðæs, ðam*—in agreement with the noun it modifies. *ða kyningas* could be either nominative (hence subject) or accusative (hence direct object), but since the verb *hæfdon* is plural and *ðone ónwald* is accusative singular, we know that the passage means "the kings that had the rule." The noun phrase *ðæs folces* is separated from *ónwald*, to which it is closely related, by the verb, but since it is doubly marked as a genitive, we know that this phrase is to be read "rule of the people." Following the preposition *on* we have the dative *ðam dagum* for "those days"; if it were subject or direct object, it would be *ða dagas*. *Gode & his ærendwrecum* are the nearest nouns preceding the verb *hersumedon* ("obeyed," plural), which would mark them as its subject in modern English, but because they are marked as datives by the ending *-e* (singular) and *-um* (plural) respectively, we know that they are objects (*hersumian* is one of a group of verbs whose direct objects are in the dative rather than the usual accusative). When all these markers are taken into account, there is only one thing the passage could mean: "how the kings who had the rule over the people in those days obeyed God and his ministers."

Preservation of Germanic grammatical gender is illustrated in this passage by pronoun reference. Thus in line 14 the pronoun *hio* is feminine and thus refers all the way back to the feminine noun *liornunga* in line 11. In line 24, the pronoun *hiene* is masculine singular accusative and refers back to the masculine noun *wisdom* earlier in the sentence. In modern English, which has switched from grammatical to logical gender, we would use *it*

to refer to both *learning* and *wisdom*, unless we were personifying these abstractions as feminine goddesses.

Even in this short passage there is much more to be observed. But enough has been said to illustrate the major grammatical difference between Old and Modern English—the dependence on inflectional markers rather than word order to indicate grammatical relationships. The contrast in pronunciation could only be brought out clearly by reading the passage aloud, though the spelling is often a signal that the sound was quite different. All three of these aspects—grammar, pronunciation, and spelling—underwent gradual change during the two centuries following Alfred, and more rapid and sweeping change during the two centuries following the Norman Conquest. Let us next look at a passage of Middle English from about the year 1200 to see what some of those changes were.

The brief passage printed with its translation on pages 30–31 is from the opening chapter of *Ancrene Riwle*, or *Rule for Anchoresses*, which was written sometime between 1175 and 1200, probably in the southwest of England. Our selection is taken from the manuscript known as Cotton Nero A.xiv (after its seventeenth-century owner and his shelf-mark), now in the British Museum. The manuscript was copied as much as fifty years after the book was written, and therefore may include some modernization. But it is a good sample of English of the early part of the thirteenth century. It shows some features of the dialect of its region, inherited from the West Saxon of Alfred, but not continuing in standard English, which as we have seen derives from the dialect of London.

A few points about the spelling will reduce the unfamiliar look of the text considerably. In addition to the *ð*, which we encountered in our selection from Alfred, there are two unfamiliar letters. The first of these, *ȝ* (called "yogh"), is here used where modern English uses an initial *y*, as in the pronoun *ȝe* (the old nominative form of *you*). Later this letter was also used after vowels to spell the velar spirant (like German *ch*), which even later came to be spelled *gh*. But in this manuscript the Old English spelling of this sound with *h* still persists, as in *mihte* (*might*) and *þuruh* (*through*). The runic letter "thorn", *þ*, which was also

from the *ANCRENE RIWLE* †

Nu aski ȝe hwat riwle ȝe ancren schullen holden. ȝe schullen allesweis mid alle mihte & mid alle strencðe wel witen þe inre, & te vttre vor hire sake. þe inre is euere iliche, þe vttre is misliche. vor eurich schal holden þe vttre, efter *þet* ðe licome mei best mid hire serui ðe inre. nu þeonne, is hit so *þet* alle ancren muwen wel holden one riwle? *quantum ad puritatem cordis circa quam uersatur tota religio.* *þet* is, alle muwen & owen holden one riwle, onont purte of heorte, *þet* is cleane, schir inwit, wið vte wite of sunne *þet* ne beo þuruh schrift ibet. ðis makeð ðe leafdi riwle, ðe riwleð & rihteð & smeðeð ðe heorte, & tet inwit of sunne. vor nout ne makeð hire woc, bute sunne one. Rihten hire & smeðen hire is of euch religiun, & of efrich ordre þe god & alðe strengðe. þeos riwle is imaked nout of monnes fundleas, auh is of godes hestes. for þi heo is euer on, & schal beon wið vte monglunge & wið vte chaungunge, & all owen hire in on euer to holden.

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used in Old English (though not, as it happens, in our selection from Alfred), is here used interchangeably with *ð* where we use the **digraph** *th*. The usage of *v* and *u* differs from modern practice: instead of *v* being restricted to the consonant and *u* to the vowel, both are used for both consonant and vowel, the *v* being used at the beginnings of words and the *u* elsewhere. Thus in *vttre*, *v* is the vowel, but in *vor* it is the consonant; and in *eurich*, *u* is the consonant but in *schullen* it is the vowel. This practice prevailed into the seventeenth century. We might also note that the aspirated *w*-sound is spelled *hw* as in Old English, rather than *wh* as in modern English.

In vocabulary, this passage is interesting because it shows the beginning of the influx of French words which was to become

† MS Cotton Nero A.xiv, f. 1 verso, ed. M. Day, EETS, O.S., 225, 1952.

Now you ask what rule you anchoresses shall hold. You shall always with all [your] might and with all [your] strength well keep the inner [rule] and the outer for her [*i.e.*, its] sake. The inner rule is ever alike; the outer is different, for every [one] shall hold the outer according as the body may best with it serve the inner. Now then, is it so that all anchoresses may well hold one rule? "with regard to purity of heart, about which all religion is concerned"—that is, all may and ought to hold one rule concerning purity of heart, that is clean, pure conscience, without reproach of sin that be not bettered through shrift. This the lady's rule brings about, which rules and corrects and smoothes the heart and the conscience of sin. For naught makes it crooked but sin only. To correct it and smoothe it is of each religion and of every order the good and strength of all. This rule is made not by man's invention, but is of God's commandment. Therefore it is ever one and shall be without mingling and without changing and all ought as one ever to hold it.

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a veritable flood as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries progressed. There are six words of French origin in our brief passage: *riwle*, *serui*, *purte*, *religiun*, *ordre*, and *chaungunge* (modern *rule*, *serve*, *purity*, *religion*, *order*, and *changing*). According to the Oxford Dictionary, four of these—*riwle*, *purte*, *ordre*, and *chaungunge*—make their first appearance in written English in this text. The others first appeared not long before. The word *ancre* itself (of which *ancrene* is a genitive plural) first appeared as a borrowing from Latin in Old English, but it had very little use before this very widely circulated book made it popular.

Except for these seven words, the vocabulary of this passage is all native. It is of interest to note some of the words which were later to be replaced by borrowings from French and hence to become obsolete or archaic:

witen	: obey	schrift	: confession
schire	: pure	fundleas	: invention
inwit	: conscience	hestes	: commandments
wite	: fault		

Other native words have been supplanted by words themselves native, as *licome* : *body* and *woc* : *crooked*. Even though the Norman occupation was more than a century old, the remaking of the English vocabulary which was one of its consequences had barely begun when the author of the *Ancrene Riwle* wrote.

In grammar, however, we can see many changes in the direction of modern English, particularly in word order. A word-for-word "translation" does not produce the ambiguities which resulted from a similar treatment of the Alfred passage, though in a few places the order is not that of today's English. Thus in the first sentence the inversion of verb and subject after the initial adverb (*Nu aski ze . . .*) is no longer current, and the moving of the past participle of a passive verb to the end of the clause in *þat ne beo þuruh schrift ibet*, though possible in today's English, is less common. On the other hand, verb phrases with modal auxiliaries, as in *schullen holden*, *muwen wel holden*, are in the modern order, rather than the inverted order of Alfred's *habban sceoldon* ("should have"). And since the characteristic case inflections of Old English have virtually disappeared, such grammatical functions as direct object are indicated by position, as in *alle ancren muwen holden one riwle*. But some relationships which must today be indicated wholly by order could still be indicated by inflections: the singular-plural distinction is still preserved in the auxiliaries *mei–muwen* and *schal–schullen*, where modern English has lost the distinctive plural forms.

One feature of Old English grammar that is still evident in this text is grammatical gender, as it is revealed by pronoun reference. The word *riwle* derives from Old French *reule*, which in turn comes from the Latin feminine noun *regula*. The author of the *Ancrene Riwle* regularly uses the feminine pronoun (nominative *heo*, genitive, dative, and accusative *hire*) to refer to *riwle*. But by this time the definite article has ceased to be inflected

for gender and case, and has become the unchanging *þe* (or in one case *te*) as in modern English.

Once again little can be said about pronunciation without an oral rendering. But some features of the spelling indicate changes that had occurred in pronunciation during the three centuries since Alfred. The making of new diphthongs is illustrated by *mei*, which we saw as *mæge* in the Alfred passage. Spellings like *heorte* and *beo*, though seeming to preserve Old English diphthongs, are probably here intended to represent a rounded front vowel (as in German *hören* or French *sœur*), which was a normal West Midland feature. The change of Old English *ā* to an *ō* sound (probably like the *au* of modern English *taut*) is shown in *holden* (Anglian Old English *haldan*) and *on, one* (Old English *ān*). The change of initial *f* to *v* in *vor* (*for*) and the *u*-spelling in *sunne* (*sin*), representing a rounded front vowel as in German *dünn*, are also characteristic of the southwest Midland dialect of this manuscript.

In sum, then, we may conclude that this sample of early Middle English, though it still looks very much like a foreign language at first glance, is perceptibly less so than the English of Alfred, especially in its grammar. The next two centuries, during which English re-established itself as a language of literature and culture worthy of the art of a Chaucer, were to see sweeping changes in vocabulary, and in the century following Chaucer the pronunciation was rather radically altered while the spelling remained relatively fixed. It is in this late Middle English and early modern English period that the language becomes recognizably the language we know in the literature since Shakespeare.

7. *The Inner History: Middle English to Modern English*

The passage on page 34 is from William Caxton's preface to his second edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, printed in 1484. It is obvious at once that the language has changed greatly, especially in vocabulary, during the three centuries since the *Ancrene Riwle* was written. Although the spelling is different from modern practice in minor ways and there are a few gram-

from CAXTON'S *PREFACE* TO CHAUCER'S *CANTERBURY TALES*, 2nd Ed., 1484 †

Grete thankes laude and honour / ought to be gyuen vnto the clerkes / poetes / and historiographs that haue wreton many noble bokes of wysedom of the lyues / passions / & myracles of holy sayntes of hystoryes / of noble and famous Actes / and faittes / And of the cronycles sith the begynnyng of the creacion of the world / vnto thys present tyme / by whyche we ben dayly enformed / and haue knowleche of many thynges / of whom we shold not haue knowen / yf they had not left to vs theyr monumentis wreton / Emong whom and inespecial to fore alle other we ought to gyue a synguler laude vnto that noble & grete philosopher Gefferey chaucer the whiche for his ornate wrytyng in our tongue may wel haue the name of a laureate poete / For to fore that he by hys labour enbelysshyd / ornated / and made faire our englisshe / in thys Royame was had rude speche & Incongrue / as yet it appiereth by olde bookes / whyche at thys day ought not to haue place ne be compared among ne to hys beauteuous volumes / and aournate writynges / of whom he made many bokes and treatyces of many a noble historye as wel in metre as in ryme and prose / and them so craftyly made / that he comprehended hys maters in short / quyck and hye sentences / eschewyng prolyxyte / castyng away the chaf of superfluyte / and shewyng the pyked grayn of sentence / vtteryd by crafty and sugred eloquence / of whom emonge all other of hys bokes / I purpose temprynte by the grace of god the book of the tales of cauntyrburye / in whiche I fynde many a noble hystorye / of euery astate and degre / Fyrst rehercyng the condicions / and tharraye of eche of them as properly as possyble is to be sayd / And after theyr tales whyche ben of noblesse / wysedom / gentylesse / Myrthe / and also of veray holynesse and vertue / wherin he fynysshyth thys sayd booke / whyche book I haue dylygently ouersen and duly examyned to thende that it be made acordyng vnto his owen makyng /

† Sig. a ij recto. Ed. W. J. B. Crotch, EETS, O.S. 176, 1928, p. 90.

matical differences, this is recognizably modern English. The modern reader needs no translation.

Although, as Caxton remarks in another preface, the language has changed considerably from that of Chaucer, Caxton's spelling is essentially the same as that of Chaucer's day. It is true that the alphabet has been revised by dropping *ð*, *þ*, and *ȝ* in favor of the rather more clumsy modern use of *th* and *gh*. But Caxton uses the same vowel characters as Chaucer, although his pronunciation, especially of long vowels, was probably quite different. For example, Chaucer pronounced *name* as *nahm* or *nahma*, while Caxton, although using the same spelling, probably pronounced the word to rhyme with modern *ham*. Further change since Caxton's time has produced the modern pronunciation /neym/ with the same diphthong as in *may*. This freezing of English spelling according to the conventions of the early fifteenth century in spite of subsequent changes of pronunciation is one of the principal causes of the difficulties and inconsistencies of modern English spelling.

But Caxton's spelling is still not as rigorously standardized as that of today. He is free to spell *book* alternatively with or without a final *-e*, and the plural appears once as *bokes* and once as *bookes*. The latter point raises the question as to whether the plural ending still had syllabic value for Caxton, or whether it had been reduced to /s/ or /z/ except after sibilants, as in present-day English. Spellings like *clerkes*, *actes*, *thynges*, and *monumentis* seem to indicate a distinct syllable, but *passions*, *maters*, and *condicions* argue for a non-syllabic ending. It is probable that his usage was about the same as ours, and that the *-es* and *-is* spellings are conventional survivals from a time when the ending was pronounced as a separate syllable.

Caxton's grammar shows further development in the direction of modern English, though in some places his word order is not ours. Where he has *monumentis wreton*, we would have *written monuments*. It is still possible for him to invert verb and subject in a statement beginning with an adverbial modifier, as in *in thys Royame was had rude speche*. In modern English if we wish to put the subject after the verb, we must supply an **expletive** or temporary subject, *it* or *there*, in the normal subject position:

"in this realm there was rude and incongruous speech." Note that we can only use the passive of *have* in some special idioms, like the traditional country newspaper expression, "a good time was had by all." In other respects Caxton's verb phrases have characteristically modern structure, as in *ought to be gyuen, shold not haue knowen.* But he still uses the *-th* form of the third person singular, which was to be largely supplanted during the next century by the *-s* form, derived from Northern dialect.

One or two other grammatical points are worthy of notice. As in Chaucer's English, Caxton commonly uses *that* with subordinating conjunctions: compare the conjunction *to fore that* ("before") with the preposition *to fore.* He uses *the whyche* as a relative pronoun referring to a personal noun and *whom* referring to an impersonal one (*writynges*). Forms like *thende, tharraye,* and *temprynte* indicate elision of the unstressed vowels of *the* and *to,* which is no longer characteristic of standard English. He uses the *th-* forms of the third plural pronoun, which were borrowed from Old Norse into the Northern dialect, in all three cases (*they, theyr, them*), in contrast to the practice of Chaucer, who uses the native English forms in *h-* in the possessive and objective cases. In general Caxton's grammar, though unmistakably of an older day, presents no problems to the modern reader.

But it is in vocabulary that Caxton's English shows the greatest change from that of the *Ancrene Riwle.* The great enrichment of the English vocabulary by borrowings from French, which took place during the period from 1250 to 1400, is very apparent in this passage. If we exclude function words, more than half the words are of French origin. Of sixty-one French words in the passage, only eleven were in the language when the *Ancrene Riwle* was written. Nine more appeared in the thirteenth century, thirty-eight during the fourteenth, and three in the fifteenth. Thus, exclusive of the function words, almost all of which are native, more than a third of the vocabulary of this passage came into the language during the two centuries before Caxton wrote. It is no wonder that he considered pre-Chaucerian English "rude and Incongrue."

The importance of this addition to the vocabulary is emphasized by the fact that almost all of the French borrowings in this

passage are still in use, though sometimes with altered meanings. A few, such as *historiograph*, *royame*, *incongrue*, and *gentylesse*, have yielded to the closely related forms *historiographer*, *realm*, *incongruous*, and *gentility*. But the rest are still with us. Nor are they all literary or high-flown words like *superfluity* and *embellish*. Many have become essential items in the workaday vocabulary, where they have replaced or supplemented Old English words of similar meaning. Such are *poet*, *saint*, *famous*, *act*, *present*, *labour*, *rude*, *appear*, *place*, *very*, *virtue*, *finish*, *duly*, and *examine*. Our vocabulary would indeed be impoverished without words of this sort. Often the retention of the Old English word alongside the French import has given us pairs of near-synonyms with delicate differences of meaning, as in

deed : act	work : labour
stead : place	seem : appear
end : finish	

Caxton, who, to judge by his prefaces, thought and worried quite a bit about the state of English in his day, was aware of this great change in its vocabulary. In the preface to one of his translations from French, he describes his effort to strike a mean between the "rude" old words of the older English and the "curious" new vocabulary borrowed from French. It is interesting to note that he describes the French words as "the comyn termes, that be dayli vsed."

One more three-hundred-year leap forward brings us to the language of the later eighteenth century. The passage on page 38 is from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, first published in 1791. Even though Boswell was a Scotsman, he had mastered standard English, and this passage may be considered a fair sample of the more formal literary English of the period.

It is apparent at once that the spelling is completely standardized and is almost exactly that of our own day. The only exception in this passage is the *-ck* ending of *characteristick*. Punctuation has changed somewhat since Boswell's time, mostly in the direction of fewer and less strong marks. We would not use the colons in lines 9 and 18, but most likely a comma in the first case and no mark at all in the second. A good many of Boswell's

from BOSWELL'S *LIFE OF JOHNSON* †

That superiority over his fellows, which he maintained with so much dignity in his march through life, was not assumed from vanity and ostentation, but was the natural and constant effect of those extraordinary powers of mind, of which he could not but be conscious by comparison; the intellectual difference, which in other cases of comparison of characters is often a matter of undecided contest, being as clear in his case as the superiority of stature in some men above others. Johnson did not strut or stand on tip-toe: He only did not stoop. From his earliest years, his superiority was perceived and acknowledged. . . . His schoolfellow, Mr. Hector, has obligingly furnished me with many particulars of his boyish days: and assured me that he never knew him corrected at school, but for talking and diverting other boys from their business. He seemed to learn by intuition; for though indolence and procrastination were inherent in his constitution, whenever he made an exertion he did more than any one else. In short, he is a memorable instance of what has been often observed, that the boy is the man in miniature: and that the distinguishing characteristicks of each individual are the same, through the whole course of life. His favourites used to receive very liberal assistance from him; and such was the submission and deference with which he was treated, such the desire to obtain his regard, that three of the boys, of whom Mr. Hector was sometimes one, used to come in the morning as his humble attendants, and carry him to school.

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commas would be omitted in modern practice. Apart from these points, however, the conventions of the writing system are modern and standardized.

Boswell's grammar, also, is little different from ours. The use of the empty auxiliary *do* in the modern way, which was worked out in the eighteenth century, is illustrated in the negative verb

† Ed. G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell, 1934, p. 47.

phrases *did not strut* and *did not stoop*. Not illustrated in this passage but occurring elsewhere in the work is the verb phrase marked for aspect (e.g., "When he and I were travelling"), which, though going back in its origins to Old English, became much more frequent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The catenative verbs, characteristic of modern English, are illustrated by *seemed to learn* and *used to come*.

Some of Boswell's turns of phrase, though perfectly in accord with modern English grammar, have an old-fashioned ring. Thus "he never knew him corrected at school, but for talking" would nowadays be something like "he never knew him to be corrected at school except for talking," and we would probably render "three of the boys, of whom Mr. Hector was sometimes one" as "three of the boys, sometimes including Mr. Hector." But these differences are more stylistic than grammatical. Perhaps the principal difference in grammar between Boswell's English and ours is the relative scarcity of the noun-adjunct construction. There is no example of it in this passage, and (excluding a few compounds) there are only three—*gunpowder plot*, *Christmas exercise*, and *college vacation*—in a ten-page passage of which this is a part. Again the noun-adjunct construction was perfectly grammatical in Boswell's day, so we must attribute its increased frequency in present-day English to a stylistic rather than a grammatical change.

Boswell's vocabulary reflects the increase in the number of words of Latin and sometimes Greek origin which was a result of the Renaissance revival of the classical languages. This passage contains twelve words which entered the language after Caxton's preface, our last sample. These words, with the dates of their earliest citation in the Oxford Dictionary, are *superiority* (1526), *obligingly* (1654), *intuition* (1497), *indolence* (1603), *procrastination* (before 1548), *inherent* (1578), *exertion* (1677), *miniature* (1586), *distinguish* (1561), *characteristic* (1664), *favourite* (1583), and *deference* (1647). In addition, five words—*character*, *particular*, *constitution*, *individual*, and *attendant*—though they were in the language in 1484, are here used in meanings or functions which they acquired later. It is interesting to note that in this passage Boswell does not use a single word which

had been in the language less than a hundred years. This is evidence of the fact that the influx of classical borrowings was a phenomenon of the period roughly from 1550 to 1675. On the whole the eighteenth century was a period of stabilization of the vocabulary—a good time for the development of lexicography, which was crowned by the publication of Johnson's great dictionary in 1755.

As we look back over the nine hundred years separating Boswell's biography from Alfred's preface, we can see that, while the English language maintained its identity unbroken throughout this long period, it underwent changes which, though gradual, were so great as to be revolutionary. In grammar, it changed from a largely synthetic language, depending principally on inflectional markers to indicate syntactic relations, to an analytic one, depending principally on word order and function words. Its pronunciation went through two periods of radical change, which would make a speaker of Old English, if one should miraculously appear, totally unable to understand the language of Boswell's or our own day. During the first half of this period, the spelling system was adjusted from time to time to reflect the changes in pronunciation. But it became virtually fixed at a point representing the pronunciation of approximately the year 1400, so that modern spelling cannot be learned by ear. Finally, its vocabulary underwent two periods of extensive borrowing, from French in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and from Latin in the sixteenth and seventeenth. And even as Boswell wrote, the third period of extensive vocabulary change, resulting from the vast scientific, intellectual, and technological revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was beginning.

For Further Reading

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