

"Anglo-Saxon Prose"

To have a clear-cut idea about the growth of English prose during the period we must have a rough idea of the general situation of the period. In 871 the English under their King Alfred drove the Danes out - but by that time they had succeeded in destroying much of the traces of the early Anglo-Saxon civilization. King Alfred took upon himself the task of preserving the Anglo-Saxon literature. He established schools and "household books". Scholars were brought from the continent to enrich the schools. His contact with Rome and the French King produced in him the desire to impart part of the past heritage to his people. The prose of the period was unemotional but educational. If Christianity inspired the poets of the period, it inspired prose writers as well. It created monk-scholars who did much to shape the literature of the period.

The first monk scholar was Aldhelm. He did much for the South as later Bede did for the North. He died in 709 after achieving much in prose and verse. The intellectual activity in Northumbria and the stirring of literary life owe their allegiance to the activities of Irish missionaries, cultured and imaginative people and also to the influx of Roman civilization. The first phase of the intellectual vitality can be seen in the verse of Caedmon and his successors. The second phase showed itself in the Latin prose of the monk scholar. Bede is of first importance among the monk scholars. The orphan scholar epitomises his life in the following words:-

"I wholly applied myself to the study of the Scripture, and amidst the observance of regular discipline, and the daily care of singing in the church, I always took

delight in learning, teaching and writing."

His book entitled 'Ecclesiastical History' gives us the knowledge of England of his time. He had his reputation both as a scholar and as a teacher. He had a school at Torrow which had acquired name and fame throughout the continent. He was a profound classical scholar and his writings abound in quotations from classical poets.

The coming of the Danes proved disastrous. The seat of learning came to Wexsara. The Danes plundered, destroyed and even set fire to the libraries. The man who saved middle and south England was King Alfred. He was the pioneer of popular education in England. He wanted that people not fit for anything else be put to learning. With this end in view he set upon himself the task of enriching English literature and hence, he supervised the English translation of many

Latin texts for the benefit of the people at large. He prepared a handbook for the clergy, got much of Bede's history translated and adapted the philosophy of Boethius, for general use. He took 'Meditations of Boethius' as a standard textbook of moral and religious thought. Alfred is the first man of letters who was not a churchman. He was also the first man to encourage the making of English prose. He wanted to reach it to the majority and this could not be done until and unless the things were written in Latin favoured by the church. The most important landmark of Anglo-Saxon prose is 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle' which was the work of King Alfred alone. The work owe much to the inspiration of Alfred and continued beyond the conquest down to the death of Stephen. No other English king did more for his people. He had the

genius of a King and he never put it to wrong use. We may close the brief record of Alfred's with a passage from Boethius quoted by A.C. Rickett:

"To be brief, I may say that it had never been my desire to live honourably while I was alive, and after my death to leave to them that should come after me my memory in good works!"

The greatness of Alfred is the greatness of personality than of art. He had never been a poet nor a great prose man, whatever he did, he did on account of his zeal and industry. One merit that can be seen in his writing is clarity. There is a charm also in his writing which is delightful to the readers and is taken to be his literary skill.

The successors of Alfred were not as inspired and as industrious as he was. The inspiration

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was wandly away and they needed fresh inspiration which came with the Norman invasion. Wessex was still the centre of literary activities because the North never recovered from the ravishes of the Danes. Four names - Dunstan, Abbot of Glastonbury, Ethelwold, Edgar and Elfric are remembered who contributed something to the literary activities. Of them Elfric wrote much. His important work is 'Homilies'. It is an example of Anglo-Saxon prose.

The end.

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