

## Anglo Saxon Prose

Prose is a later development in civilization than poetry. Thus in the Anglo-Saxon period, prose had not been cultivated as a literary form until the introduction of Latin which gave English writers sources and models for their composition. The amount of surviving Old English prose is much greater than the amount of poetry. Of the surviving prose, the majority consists of sermons and translations of religious works that were composed in Latin. Old English prose dates from the late ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries; and its writers are usually known. It is useful here to note the landmarks in the history of Old English prose.

### Alfred's contribution to English Prose

Alfred is noted for his defense of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of southern England against the Vikings. He has rightly been called the father of English prose. When he came to the throne of Wessex in 871, the English learning had been brought to a lamentable state by the repeated raids of the Danish invaders. In the tumult caused by the Danish invasions, what the Saxons had received of the Roman culture had nearly been swept away. Monasteries had been destroyed, books had been burnt and even the clerks had forgotten their Latin. After the Treaty of Wedmore concluded in 878 Alfred laid down his sword, and set about the task of restoring to his kingdom her lost learning. He attempted to bring within the range of his people the most significant aspects of Christian thoughts. And with this end in view, he undertook to translate into his own tongue some important books which, he thought, would fill up the greatest gaps in the minds of his countrymen. Alfred's important translations include: Gregory the Great's *The Pastoral Care*, a manual for priests on how to conduct their duties; *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius; *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by Bede, *Universal History and Geography* by Orosius and *The Soliloquies* of Saint Augustine. Alfred the Great was also responsible for a translation of fifty Psalms into Old English.

However, more important than any translation is the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* which was inspired though not written by Alfred, and which contains a series of annals commencing with an outline of English history from Julius Caesar's invasion to the middle of the fifth century and continues to 1154. When the chronicle touches Alfred's own reign, the dry chronicle becomes an interesting and connected story. The record of Alfred's reign, probably by himself, is a splendid bit of writing. *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle* is the best monument of the early English prose that is left to the English. It contains here and there some lovely and exiting poems like *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon*. "The Chronicle was continued for a century and is extremely valuable not only as a record of events but as a literary monument showing the development of our language." (Long)

Alfred's literary activities are of immense importance in the history of English literature. The prominence he gave to the vernacular made it possible for English prose to develop on its own. Apart from his historical importance, Alfred has some personal claim to recognition as a prose writer. And "In literature, his personality is of the utmost importance, as Alfred is one of the most personal writers of Old English period." (P.G Thomas)

**Aelfric** was an English abbot of Eynsham, and also a prolific writer in Old English prose. He wrote sermons in the vernacular, and these sermons display a great advance upon the Alfredian prose. The first two series of these sermons are known as the *Catholic Homilies* and the third as *Lives of the Saints*. Aelfric also produced an abbreviated version of the first seven books of the Old Testament. Truly the work is "done with sufficient skill to enable us to call him the first English Bible translator." (David Dachies) Aelfric took Alfred for his model, but his prose style far surpasses that of Alfred in ease and grace. Aelfric's prose is poetic in its cadence and often alliterative without being actual verse. In his hands English prose acquired a literary dignity. He also freed the English prose from the shackles of Latin syntax which characterizes the prose of Alfred.

Wulfstan was the Archbishop of York from 1002 to 1023. He is best known as a homilist and his literary fame rests mainly on a single homily- *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*. In this homily Wulfstan predicts that the world is drawing nigh to the end and he is driven to this fateful conclusion by the evils of the time. His style is much more forceful than that of Aelfric. His sentences are long. He heaps synonym on synonym and clause upon clause. In other words, his style is that of the rhetorician rather than of the philosopher.

The amount of surviving Old English prose is much greater than the amount of poetry. Truly the Anglo Saxon prose works are of historic as well as literary interest, as they provide an excellent record of the founding and early development of the church in England and also reflect the introduction and early influence of the Latin-European culture.

