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**Bibliotheca Anglo-Saxonica.
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Most Valuable
Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts,
Illustrative of the
Early Poetry and Literature of Our Language.
Most of Which Have Never Yet Been Printed.**

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Prospectus,

&c.

²¹If the only merit which the Anglo-Saxons could claim, rested upon their good fortune to be the ancestors of a nation so highly gifted, so renowned, and so wealthy as the English, we might expect, that in no country would the antiquities connected with such a people be more industriously and more zealously cultivated than in England. And yet nothing is more true, and at the same time more surprising, than that they have been nowhere more neglected throughout the civilized world. The slightest reflection will teach us, that, without a due attention to Anglo-Saxon literature, we can neither estimate nor understand the importance or the progress of that of the present day; since the first perceptible links in the long chain of improvements, both of the English language and its literature, are to be found in this neglected lore of their forefathers. But this seems to have been altogether overlooked, and this ancient treasury has been regarded as a dunghill, where, because the pearls did not lie exposed and obvious to every passing eye, they have been thought not worth seeking.

If, however, it should appear—as experience will clearly prove—that these very Anglo-Saxons have exercised a far greater influence over the modern ²² civilized world, than even their illustrious descendants; and if the literary relics of this people form some of the most invaluable documents and records we possess for the Universal History of mankind—then, I say, it will be still more astonishing that a nation, so acute and so enlightened as the English, should have chanced to overlook a source from whence they might have derived both credit and profit to themselves. And if, again, this ⁴Anglo-Saxon literature, far from being the dull and stupid trash which some English writers of no small name have chosen to suppose, should of itself make up a body of amusement and instruction, deserving, on its own account, the attention and admiration of cultivated minds, it may be no fantastic hope of mine, perhaps, that England will one day regret the neglect and unkindness she has shown to her high-

born and honourable kinsmen, and atone for it by 'one stride equal to many mincing steps.'

It would, however, be a vain endeavour on my part to oppose the high opinion I entertain of the Anglo-Saxon remains to the very low one which has been formed by those gentlemen to whom I have referred, if the English Public were not familiar with the well-known truth, that facts are stubborn things, which can never be made to bend to the finest abstract reasoning in the world. I shall, therefore, only ask for the reader's attention to the facts I am about to submit, and which, once perused, I have no doubt that we shall at least agree upon this point—that the most astonishing and most interesting marvel in the whole of history being the creation of the modern civilized world, this great event will never be understood nor duly explained without a familiar acquaintance with those very Anglo-Saxons of whom it has hitherto been held, that no gentleman could wish to be introduced to them. For the fact, that there once existed a civilized world limited to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, is as unquestionable as that a new one arose out of the chaos of those barbarous tribes who destroyed the Western Empire; and it is equally well known, that at the very time when civilization expired in Italy under

Those rods of scorpions and those whips of steel

which the Lombards did not fail to apply, it sprang into existence in England. There is, therefore, no fact more pregnant of events in the whole of modern history, than the mission of Austin to this country, where Christianity, learning, and, in a word, all that was once expressed by the term 'humanity,' found not only a shelter but a nursing-school, and from whence, in the process of time, it was to spread round the Baltic and the Scackerak. With Theodore of Greece and Adrian of Africa, classical literature, in the full extent to which it was then cultivated, was introduced into England; and from the beginning of the eighth century to the end of the eleventh she appears—not even excluding a comparison with the Eastern Empire—to have been the most truly civilized country on the globe. It was here that a whole nation listened to the songs of Caedmon and of Alcuin in their mother tongue, while in France and Italy nothing was heard but a jargon of barbarous sounds. It was here that, in the eighth century, Beda and Alcuin shed a lustre, by their classical attainments, over the whole of Europe; and it was from hence that Charlemagne, the sovereign of the greater portion of the Western World, was compelled to seek for an instructor. Even in these facts there is something dazzling, something which arrests the attention, and demands the homage of our respect; but, what is far more memorable and important in its consequences, it was Anglo-Saxon missionaries who carried Christianity to Germany and the North of Europe—missionaries from a country which, having a literature of its own, in a language akin to that of Germany and Scandinavia, made that literature the example, and that school the pattern, of all the early literary attempts of those parts of the world. Even in Denmark, notwithstanding the Gospel was first preached there as early as the beginning of the ninth century, it is clear, that it was only when a close connexion with England took place under Canute, that Christianity began generally and publicly to exert those humanizing powers which it has shed wherever it has been duly planted; and equally clear it is, that the literature of Iceland, which principally flourished during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is a pupil of the Anglo-Saxon school.

Now, unless I am strangely mistaken, these facts would account for a much higher interest in Anglo-Saxon literature than either the Germans or we Hyperboreans have hitherto taken in it; for who would not wish to know how these patriarchs of the new Christian world preached and reasoned, what lessons they taught, what examples they referred to, in what manner they attuned the minds of their heathen converts to the doctrines they communicated, whether these doctrines were instilled in humble prose, or, to gain their holy ends, they thought it needful to 'build the lofty rhyme,' or called in the aid of 'music married to immortal verse.'

But perhaps it will be said,—this question we grant,—the facts adduced undoubtedly prove the importance of Anglo-Saxon literature in illustration of modern history; but how can these facts be made available to cultivated minds, who, contented with existing things, care little for history in general, even for that of their mother tongue, or for those first childish steps towards civilization attempted by their ancestors?

In Denmark, and in Germany, we should certainly feel disposed to answer such a question as this with something not unlike a sarcasm; but I shall content myself with the simple observation, that there can be no guarantee for the intrinsic value of a book except the book itself, and, consequently, that we can only establish the fact in question by the publication of the book referred to. On this account it would be always desirable that the posthumous works of generations past should be published at the expense of those acquainted with them, or, at their request, by the government of the country; and it is in this way that the Icelandic literature of olden time has been treated in Denmark, till, at length, from the use which our poets and historians have made of these treasures, the public has been taught that these ancient books, though read by but a few, may thus indirectly, and by secondary means, prove both useful and entertaining to the many. In England such a custom has never prevailed, and hence it happens that the choicest relics of Anglo-Saxon literature, both in prose and verse, still remain, in one sense, unpublished; for they are either not printed at all, or, being so, they are such bare and meagre copies of the manuscripts, that, even if they were correct, they could only be considered in the light of transcripts. It is, therefore, only by the aid of those who are not insensible to the merits of these remains, and by the revival of a custom which appears now to have

grown out of date,—a publication by subscription,—that any hope remains of accomplishing an end so desirable both for England in particular, and Europe at large.

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And here a question arises as to an editor, who, conversant with the subject, might so far acquire the confidence of the public as to be deemed fitted for the task. When Messrs. Black, Young, and Young unexpectedly applied to me on the subject, notwithstanding the interest I have long felt in everything connected with it, I could not but hesitate to engage in it, both from the circumstance of my being a foreigner, and the calls of duty which bind me to my own country. But I have since thought there would be an idle and affected modesty in seeming to hesitate from any doubts I entertained of my relative fitness for the task; and yet, whatever I may be, or may presume of myself, at home, I am very sensible that I am but an obscure individual to the English public, and without this application I should never have ventured to come before them in the capacity of an advocate, as it were, for my poor unhappy brethren, those early Anglo-Saxon poets and divines who, for more than a thousand years, have been confined in those dark prison-houses which in this country I understand are so expressively termed *Presses*. But, during the two last summers, which, by the liberal support of the Danish government, I have spent in England, engaged in the examination of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, it has been my good fortune to become acquainted with the most eminent native Anglo-Saxon scholars; and though I could not but regret that they were no way likely to engage in any edition of these works themselves, I take a pride in stating that they are willing and eager to recommend an edition undertaken by me. Under these circumstances I am not unwilling to try my chance of success, even though I should fail in exciting that interest for the subject which I desire. I shall, at least, have this satisfaction—that I have addressed the English public previous to any attempt I may make out of England, where, as one not altogether unknown, and an author of rather long standing, I might hope for a certain degree of success, though I could not but also feel myself in the ungracious situation of casting a reflection upon a country where I am satisfied no foreigner has ever been allowed a more liberal access to its unparalleled stores of ancient manuscripts. If I were an English and not a Danish poet and historian, I should apply to my country these striking lines of the immortal bard:

8— Duller should'st thou be than the fat weed
That rots itself in ease on Lethe's wharf,
Would'st thou not stir in this?

but, unable as I am to express my thoughts in the English language with even that energy which might prepossess the public in my favour, I shall have no reason to complain of my services being rejected if it shall appear that this indifference on their part is not to the subject, but to me as the Editor.

I will now submit an outline of the publication projected, with my own opinion of the intrinsic merit of the respective compositions, leaving it to the public to decide whether any reasonable confidence can be put in my statement.

The Anglo-Saxon translation of Beda, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Anglo-Saxon laws, and all that comes under the denomination of public records, we leave out of the question, as these will all find a place in the 'Corpus Historicum,' now happily printing at the expense of the Government; and the work could never have fallen into better hands than those of Mr. Petrie and Mr. Price.

If Mr. Price—who, in the new edition of 'Warton's History of English Poetry,' has shown himself not only a most accomplished Anglo-Saxon scholar, but also an excellent judge of poetic merit—were likely to undertake an edition of the series I am about to mention, I should much more rejoice in giving way to him than in proceeding with it myself; but as he has been unfortunately prevented from keeping his promise of giving a new edition of Beowulf, with a literal English version, the first thing I propose to engage in is the publication and illustration of this poem, of which the merits are so great and so obvious, that it would be confessedly a disgrace to England if a tolerably good edition of it were any longer a desideratum.

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This poem, though published abroad fifteen years ago, where it has excited considerable attention, seems almost unknown to the English literary world. And yet it is the earliest known attempt, in any vernacular dialect of modern Europe, to produce an epic poem; and far from being a dull and tedious imitation of some Greek or Latin examples,—like most modern epics,—is an original Gothic performance; and if there be in me any spark of poetic feeling, I have no hesitation in affirming, that any poet, of any age, might have been proud to produce such a work, while the country which gave him birth might well be proud of him in return. I know there are tastes, called classical, which will turn away in disgust when they are told that this poem consists of two fabulous adventures, not very artificially connected, except by the person of the hero,—and that these episodes, which relate to historical traditions of the North, are rather unskillfully inserted. But I think such classical scholars as have a squeamish repugnance to all Gothic productions, should remember that, when they settle themselves down in the little circle of the ancient world, they have banished themselves from the modern, and, consequently, have made their opinions on such a subject of very little importance. Hence, without calling that artificial which is rude, or that masterly which is childish, whether of

ancient or modern date, I will merely observe that Beowulf, the Gothic hero of the poem, combats, in the prime of his life, with Grendel and his mother, two goblins, who are the foes of Hrothgar, King of Denmark; and in his old age fights with Steorc-heart, the fiery dragon, which, during a thousand years, has brooded on unprofitable gold; and in this encounter, though victorious loses his life. Now, it is evident that such a tale may be told in a very absurd manner, but it is equally clear that it may also be embodied in a very lofty and interesting strain; and for my own part I have no desire for the converse of any man who would not be delighted with the simple yet animated dialogue, the beautiful descriptions, and the noble sentiments which abound in Beowulf. When I also remember how distinctly and vividly the characters of the principal personages are drawn and supported,—of Beowulf, the hero,—of Wiglaf, his youthful and enthusiastic friend,—of Hrothgar, the royal bard and philosopher,—I cannot but feel regret that time has not spared us the name of this early Gothic Homer, and my wonder is lessened that a master-spirit like Shakspeare could arise in the country where the very children of her poetry should have attempted and achieved such master-strokes of genius.

There can be little advantage in offering reasons why this poem, though spoken highly of by Wanley, should remain unnoticed till the present age, but some account of the first and only edition of it may be necessary. In the year 1783, the late John Thorkelin was sent to England by the Danish Government, where he made a transcript of the only manuscript containing it, and which was then considerably damaged by the fire of 1731 in the Cottonian Library. At length, in the year 1815, he gave it to the world, at the recommendation and at the charge of a Danish nobleman, Count Bulow, prefixing to it a singular title, and accompanying it with an equally singular Latin version. Now, though the transcript on the whole was accurately done, yet the printed text is so erroneous, that it can only be exceeded by the translation; and the edition, therefore, reflects disgrace rather than credit on the country where it appeared. The late Count Bulow was aware of this, and having prevailed upon me to prepare a Danish translation, which has now been published some years, he was also solicitous that I should undertake a new edition of the original, which was likewise to have been published at his charge. This, at the time, I declined, chiefly because I held it necessary to collate the original. This collation I have now made; and should the poem not appear in England, I shall still feel myself called upon to publish it at home.

Beowulf, therefore, with an English introduction and translation, such as, by the assistance of my English friends, I might be able to make them, would fill two volumes of this intended series. The third would contain Caedmon's poetical paraphrase of Genesis, with the continuations or imitations that are to be found in the old edition itself, in the Heptateuch, or elsewhere.

According to Bede, in his Ecclesiastical History, there arose, at the close of the seventh century, an eminent Anglo-Saxon poet of the name of Caedmon, who confined himself to religious subjects, and in particular to a paraphrase of the historical books of Scripture. In the Junian collection at Oxford, there is still preserved an Anglo-Saxon manuscript, beautifully executed, containing a poetic paraphrase of Genesis, which, together with a continuation, was published at Amsterdam, in 1655, by the celebrated Junius himself. Hickes, indeed, in his Thesaurus, has insinuated, that the paraphrase at present extant cannot be the genuine work of Caedmon, but a spurious production, written in the dialect of a later period, and which he is pleased to call Dano-Saxon. As a native of Denmark, it would give me no small pleasure to believe, that Anglo-Saxon literature had been so considerably indebted to one of my own countrymen; but, independent of the absurd reason which is assigned for such an inference, we cannot but be startled at the circumstance of the once celebrated work of Caedmon being entirely lost; and yet, that an excellent poem on the same subject, and, with the same opening as that mentioned both by Bede and Alfred, should have been preserved. The edition, however, of the seventeenth century is almost useless, for it is not only so scarce as to be rarely met with out of some great library, but is far more difficult to understand than the manuscript itself, for, though intended to be a faithful copy, it abounds in errata, and has neither translation nor illustration. Some years ago, the Rev. Mr. Conybeare announced a new edition of this neglected but valuable book, and I understand the University of Oxford made preparations for publishing it in a splendid manner, but the scheme has been abandoned; and it therefore remains to be proved, whether this attempt will also prove abortive.

The fourth volume would contain a collection of miscellaneous Anglo-Saxon poems, chiefly extracted from the great book at Exeter, bequeathed to the library of that cathedral by Bishop Leofric, at the close of the eleventh century. This valuable manuscript was only slightly inspected by Wanley, and the first tolerable description of it we have was given by the late Rev. John Conybeare, by whom extracts from it were made and published in his posthumous work on Anglo-Saxon poetry. The only entire poem which he has published from it, of any length, is the 'Song of the Traveller,' a composition of small worth in a poetic sense, as it is little more than a dull register of proper names, arranged according to the rules of alliteration. In other respects it has considerable value; it illustrates many passages in Beowulf; gives us the true northern names of the Lombard kings, Alboin and his father; and, above all, affords a close parallel to some of the poems in the Icelandic Edda. But for the poetic credit of the Exeter manuscript, I could have wished that a poem hitherto altogether unnoticed had been laid before the public. It might be called the 'Last Saxon,'—for it is the lament of some aged champion who had the evil fortune to survive his royal lord—his beloved companions, the cloud-capped towers, the lofty halls, and all the glories of his country; and which, having

once more been brought before his mind in a dream, he apostrophizes on awaking, as he sits heart-sick and abandoned by the way-side, contemplating the desert before him, and listening to the howling wolves around him. In the same volume would be inserted the triumphal song of the battle of Brunanburh, and the other metrical pieces in the Saxon Chronicle; and also the funeral dirge over Brithnoth, who, during the unhappy reign of Ethelred, fell gloriously fighting in the battle of Meldun. The only known manuscript of this latter poem was destroyed in the fire of 1731; but, happily, the industrious Hearne had inserted it in the Appendix to one of his Latin chronicles, and from that copy it would be printed. Whether any addition might be made from the Red Book of Derby, preserved at Cambridge, I am doubtful, as I have hitherto had no opportunity of examining this volume.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh volumes would comprehend the Rhythmical Chronicle of Britain, supposed to have been written in the beginning of the thirteenth century, by a priest, residing near the banks of the Severn, and named Layamon. It has often been spoken of as a mere translation of Robert Wace's book; but, as the very opening of the book declares, it is no translation, strictly speaking, but a compilation from several books upon the same subject, among which was that of the French Clerk. English scholars have long been aware of the information which might be derived from this volume, wherein the written language of this country is obviously passing over from Anglo-Saxon to modern English; and yet, with respect to the contents of the book, it has lain in the Cottonian Library almost untouched and unexplored. That in a work of this kind, containing 36,000 lines, there should be much that is superfluous, needs scarcely to be mentioned; but tolerably well read as I am in the rhyming chronicles, both of this country and of others, I have found Layamons beyond comparison the most lofty and animated in its style,—at every moment reminding the reader of the splendid phraseology of Anglo-Saxon verse, and containing not a few passages which I would have been glad to have written myself.

The eighth, ninth and tenth volumes are intended to make up an Anglo-Saxon Homiliarium; and though, generally speaking, I am no great admirer of printed sermons, yet I have felt a high degree of interest in looking into this mirror of Anglo-Saxon divinity, not only because Anglo-Saxon preachers were the great instructors of the new Christian world, but also because these homilies are almost the only original performances in Anglo-Saxon prose, where we are enabled to perceive what progress they had made in the art of reasoning, as well as in the art of authorship. Hitherto only a few entire homilies have been printed, and some fragments selected, not from their historical or literary worth, but for purposes merely polemical; for though, in the last century, Mr. Elstob and his sister transcribed a large collection, which was on the eve of publication, yet the work was arrested in its progress, and nine printed folio sheets are all that remain in the libraries of the curious to attest the goodness of the intention. As far as my examination has proceeded, the most ancient of these writings are contained in the Cottonian manuscript, Faustina A. IX.; and I doubt not that many an individual, on reading them, would form quite another idea of the Anglo-Saxon clergy, than he has imbibed from the current representations of them in our civil and ecclesiastical histories.

N. F. S. Grundtvig.

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