

# AN ELEMENTARY HISTORY OF ENGLISH

[Third fascicle]

By Marino Castrillón

Con este último capítulo, se clausura el tríptico sobre *Una Historia de la Lengua Inglesa*. Se presentan dos importantes influencias a las que fue sometido el inglés antiguo: el latín durante la cristianización de Gran Bretaña a partir del siglo VI y las lenguas escandinavas durante la invasión de los vikingos durante los siglos VIII y IX.

Palabras claves: historia de la lengua inglesa, etimología, inglés antiguo.

C'est sur ce troisième chapitre d'*Une Histoire de la Langue Anglaise* que se referme l'"humble tryptique", comme le nomme son auteur. Il y développe comment l'ancien anglais a subi d'une part l'influence du latin au cours de la christianisation de la Grande-Bretagne, et d'autre part, l'influence scandinave lors de l'invasion des Vikings.

Mots-clés: histoire de la langue anglaise, étymologie, ancien anglais.

With this third and last chapter of *An Elementary History of English*, M. Castrillón closes his "humble opusculum". This section develops two important influences on Old English: On one hand, a new Latin influence with the christianization of Britain, on the other, the Scandinavian influence with the Norsemen's expansionistic and conquering movements.

Key words: English language history, etymology, Old English language



## INTRODUCTION

This chapter will deal with two important foreign influences on O.E. The first is a new Latin influence started in the sixth century, which eventuated in a rather complete Christianization of Britain; the second is the Scandinavian influence which followed a series of inroads from the part of the so-called Vikings or Norsemen (men from the North) which, unlike the Roman monks, aimed without success at a new paganization of the island. Neither the Christian faith nor the Latin tongue were entirely unknown to the British people. Latin had already contributed terms for the English language during the so-called period of continental influence or zero period, already referred to, and during the Roman domination after the Claudian invasion, also mentioned above; this new influx of Latin words which followed the arrival of Augustine and his monks at the British land represents the third influence of the Caesars' language upon the English word-stock.

## ST. AUGUSTINE'S COMING AND ITS AFTERMATH

As in the case of the Teutonic invasion, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* constitutes the main source of information for this event. According to this author Augustine and his forty monks arrived in Kent by the year 597, thus inaugurating an era of monastic learning which lasted until the 9th century when the Scandinavian hordes, who had little respect for things Catholic, put an end to the flourishing culture of the British cloisters. Yet a span of over three hundred years was sufficient for the agents of the Catholic Church to attempt a wholesale Christianization of Britain. Thus by the seventh century England had already been almost completely christianized. The great number of monasteries built on the island at this epoch (particularly those in Northumbria), the impressive Latin and Greek Libraries introduced into Britain by the Church, and the formation of such outstanding scholars as Bede and Alcuin bear witness to the enormous spread of the Christian culture upon the British nation. It was Alcuin himself, an English reformer, who stopped the intellectual deca-

dence of France, at the request of Charlemagne.

## THE NEW LATIN INFLUX

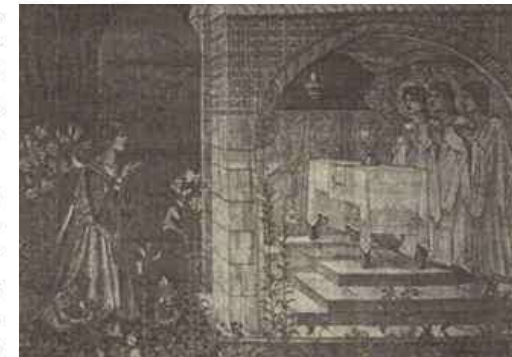
The hierarchical apparatus of the Catholic Church, together with the new Christian concepts, brought along the introduction of more Romance terms into the English word-stock. A list could include, among others, the following words: abbot, angel, anthem, ark, candle, canon, chalice, cleric, deacon, discipline, epistle, hymn, litany, martyr, mass, minister, nun, offer, organ, pall, palm, pope, priest, psalm, psalter, shrine, shrive, stole, synod, relic, rule, temple, tunic. These words bear witness to the force acquired by the Catholic creeds and organization on the British soil. Miscellaneous terms, also from Latin extraction, are the

following: cap, sock, silk, purple, lentil, pear, radish, oyster, cook, pine, balsam, lily, plant, school, master, Latin, grammatical, verse, meter, gloss, notary, anchor, fever, place, sponge, elephant, phoenix, circle, legion, giant, talent.

## THE SCANDINAVIANS

Were it not for the Norman Conquest, the Scandinavian invasions, particularly those of the 8th and 9th centuries, would stand as the most important foreign influence on English. Actually, the linguistic effects

of the Norsemen's inroads are in a way more important than the Norman influence, insofar as the latter did not affect the syntactic structure of English, whereas the Scandinavians brought along significant grammatical changes; it is enough to mention



Making of Great Britain



the fact that a common phrase like “they are ill” is from Scandinavian origin, to have an idea of the importance of the Norse influence.

The 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a tremendous expansionistic and conquering movement from the part of a group of akin races, composed mainly of Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, and referred to commonly as Norsemen, Scandinavians, or Vikings. Some entered Italy and Sicily; a few tribes under the leadership of Hrolf der Genger, or Rollo, acquired the duchy of Normandy through a treaty with the French King, Charles the Simple, in 912; other groups of Vikings landed on Ireland, Scotland, and Greenland, and eventually came to America, led by Leif Eriksson; Britain also called the attention of the fierce Northmen, who plundered and murdered without mercy. King Alfred faced the invading hordes, with only partial success; after a series of battles with various results, Alfred agreed on giving the Scandinavians more than half of present-day England, which became the district referred to as “Danelaw”.

The acquisition of Normandy, just

mentioned above, had its curious linguistic effects. For some strange reason the Norsemen forgot their Germanic speech and adopted French; only one century and a half after receiving Normandy, the Norsemen conquered England to where they carried their adopted language, French. As a result of these events, the English lexicon received such a tremendous flow of Romance terms as to make it look more like a Latinized speech than like a Germanic tongue. Germanic races, therefore, changed the external outlook of a Germanic language, English, which would today, had history been otherwise, look more like Modern German and less like a Romance language; there lies the paradoxicality of the whole matter.

### THE SCANDINAVIAN INFLUENCE

To start with, the governmental organization established by the Northmen in the Danelaw resulted in the borrowing of some legalistic terms, among these law, which means “that which is laid down”; and wapentake (“weapon-taking”), a judicial subdivision of English countries equivalent

to the most common term “hundred”. The word by meant in Old Norse village, town, hamlet, hence the names Derby, Whitby, Grimsby, and Rugby; the term thorp (village) appears in Linthorpe, for instance. Parts of the body are likewise named after Scandinavian terms, among which calf, leg, skin, and skull.

Names of animals derived from Old Norse are bull, kid, and rein (deer). Miscellaneous nouns include: anger, axle, bank, band, birth, boon, booth, brink, crook, dirt, dregs, egg, fellow, freckle, gait, gap, girth, guess, hap, haven, keel, knife, leg, link, loan, mire, race, rift, root, scab, scales, score, scrap, seat, sister, skill, skirt, sky, slaughter, snare, stack, steak, swain, thrift, findings, trust, want, window. A list of adjectives would include awkward, flat, happy, ill, loose, meek, muggy, odd, rotten, rugged, scant, seemly, sly, tight, ugly, weak, wrong. Among the verbs we have bask, call, cast, clasp, clip, cow, crave, crawl, cut, die, dangle, dazzle, droop, flit, gape, gasp, glitter, happen, kindle, lift, nag, rid, rive, scare, snub, sprint, take, thrive, thrust, want. At this point it is interesting to notice the fate of some Old English verbs which

were superseded by their Scandinavian counterparts; such is the case of O.E. niman (cf. German nehmen), which was ousted from the language by take, though it still survives in the colloquial form nab; warp (cf. German werfen) was replaced with cast, which in turn is now being ousted by throw; cut restricted the meaning of carve, and die did the same with starve (cf. German sterben, to die).

Old English and Old Norse had many lexical and grammatical similarities, a factor that facilitated intercourse between the Anglo-Saxons and the invading Scandinavians. In fact, several common words could be considered Scandinavian as well as English, since they were identical in form in both languages. A list would include father, mother, man, wife, town, gate, house, room, ground, land, tree, grass, life, folk, cliff, dale, summer, winter; verbs like bring, come, hear, meet, ride, see, set, sit, smile, spin, stand, think, will; adjectives like full, grey, green, white, wise; and the propositions over and under. In some cases the native and the Scandinavian words survived with different shades of meaning; in the following list we have the English word first and the





Scandinavian term to the right:

no	nay
whole	hale
rear	raise
from	fro
craft	skill
hide	skin
sick	ill

The Danish influence is responsible for the existence in Modern English of doublets in which one of the terms is from Anglo-Saxon origin and the other derived from Old Norse. In the following list the English term is given first; it is worthwhile to notice that whereas the English word shows a palatalization of the /k/ sound, the foreign term retains the original /k/ sound of Old Norse:

bench	bank
chest	kist
church	kirk
ditch	dike
( be ) seech	seek
shatter	scatter
shirt	skirt
shriek	screech
shrub	scrub

As stated above, when dealing with O.E. pronouns, the Scandinavians are

responsible for the introduction in English of th forms for the third person plural pronouns. This is perhaps the most significant contribution of the Danes to the English language, since it eliminated the ambiguity existing in the personal pronouns of Old English; besides, we must consider that when a language causes another to introduce variations on the syntactical side, the influence must needs be of remarkable importance. The pronouns they, their, and them, of Danish extraction, replaced the old forms hie, hiera, him, this being the only case

Rise of the english state



in which English has borrowed pronouns from another tongue. Apart from these pronouns, English also adopted the form aron ( are ) from Scandinavian, which gradually ousted the old form syndon ( cf. German sind ) from the language. To these we can add the terms both and same, sometimes used as pronouns, and the Scandinavian sign for the infinitive at, preserved only the word ado ( at-do, to do ), even if it was common during the Middle English period.

On the phonetic aspect, the hard sound of g in some words attests their Scandinavian origin. The graph g followed by e or i usually spells a palatal /y/ sound in English; that is not the case with the following words, in which the velar sound betrays the Norse flavor: anger, gear, geese, geld, get, gill, gimmer, girl, girth, give. Finally a quote from Jespersen's *Growth and Structure of the English Language* ( page 83 ) will help us to assess the enormous importance of the Scandinavian influence, the most remarkable upon Old English: "An Englishmen cannot thrive or be ill or die without Scandinavian words; they are to the language what bread and eggs are to the daily fare".

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**NOTAS SOBRE EL AUTOR**

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