



**ANGLO-SAXON STUDIES  
TODAY:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH  
PETER CLEMONS**

**Pablo Domínguez**

—The International Society of Anglo-Saxonists was founded only some four or five years ago. What prompted this sudden new interest in Anglo-Saxon studies? In what sense are the concerns different from those of the XIX century anglo-saxonists? And another thing: Has the present-day popularity of medieval literature propitiated an interest in Anglo-Saxon studies? I'm of course referring to the work of people like Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Umberto Eco, etc., whose books have a strong medieval flavour.

—Yes. Well, I should not say they've had much impact on Anglo-Saxon studies as such. No, I wouldn't say so. To what extent there's a new interest in Anglo-Saxon studies as against the 19th century? I think, perhaps one of the most growth areas, in Anglo-Saxon only, is Archaeology these days. This, of course, is capable of visual presentation through such media as television indeed. And I think this has stimulated quite a curiosity about the Anglo-Saxon period. You know, there are some very fine objects that have been found, such as the golden jewelry at Sutton Hoo and so on, and these I think are splendid objects visually and make an impact on television, and I think as often as not they arouse an initial interest in this period —curiosity apparently stimulated by having seen some of these archaeological objects. So that is perhaps a point of connection with the general public and school children and such like which didn't exist really in the 19th century. But in its international aspects I think it is partly a product of the ease of travel, of contact, since the last war; people travel much more, and there was the feeling that those

that have this interest in Anglo-Saxon England all over the world have a common purpose and ought to get together. I think this feeling has been around for twenty years maybe. Two previous manifestations of this have been the founding of *Anglo-Saxon England*, which was a deliberately international based project, and the dictionary at Toronto. And again, that was set up after an initial international conference. You see, there has always been the feeling in the background that we ought to have a society that arranged regular conferences as well, and this became possible really just by a series of almost accidental circumstances, four or five years ago, and then the ISAS society was founded. But it has not sort of sprung out of nothing. It's been a desired organization for fifteen, twenty years.

— **Fifteen, twenty years?**

— That's right.

— **Now, you mentioned the dictionary, this new Old English Dictionary which is being compiled in Canada.**

— Yes, in Toronto.

— **With the help of modern technology.**

— Yes, indeed.

— **How far do you think that will contribute to better the existing Old English Dictionaries?**

— Well, it will be far more comprehensive in its coverage than any previous dictionary. You see, that's the great advantage of modern compilation by computers; you can deal with a great deal more material and be much more comprehensive in your coverage. The quality of understanding that goes into the making of a dictionary, the comprehension of the materials, computers do not bring that about, except that they allow much more material to be taken into account. In recognizing the meaning, if you like, of a word, if you base your interpretation of the meaning of a word on pretty well all its uses that survive, obviously you are likely to get a better definition than if you are only dealing with two thirds of that material, not knowing about the other third. So there is an advantage in the thoroughness of the computer, in its display of the materials. But it still depends on the quality of scholarly interpretation that can be applied, and that of course is not advanced as such by modern methods. It depends on the quality of the minds that are dealing with this material, and that is still no better, but I hope no worse, than it was in the 19th century.

**—Do you think that the early stages of a language should always be studied in conjunction with the life and culture of the period? In other words, is there any justification in having a separate subject such as Old English or Middle English in the curriculum?**

—You mean in a curriculum which is, let us say, a course in English?

—Yes.

—Yes, well, ideally, of course, you need to understand the language within the society and culture in which it is used and therefore you need to know as much about the life and thought of the period to which the language belongs as possible, but that's only an ideal. Now, here in Cambridge, we place that in the forefront. We do make it an interdisciplinary study so that students learning the languages also learn the history, the arts, the archaeology of the period and relate one to the other. But this is rarely possible because most students are, let us say, learning Old English as part of their course in English. As a whole, they can only give a fraction of their time to it for they are taken up with just the mechanics of learning the language of Old English, of being able to read it. But all the same, I think, as far as possible, that needs to be accompanied by some kind of introductory course in the background of Anglo-Saxon England, ways of thinking and feeling, the kind of artefacts that were valued in the period, etc.

So I suppose what most universities end up by doing is really teaching a course in Old English language and a course in the background.

**—Some people in my country claim that a good knowledge of Latin is basic to understanding, and even using appropriately, present-day Spanish. Can this also be said of Old English?**

—No, I suppose if you are talking about the strictly practical process you can really deal with the business of learning modern present-day English without going back to its earlier history in Old and Middle English. But if you are wanting to study the language —modern English or Shakespeare's English, or Middle English— if you are wanting to understand them rather than just have a sort of facility in using them, then I think you do need to understand the very significant part of the language that comes through from Old English. I mean, Old English has stamped its character on all later English, including the English you and I are using now. So it depends. It is the quality of your understanding or the richness of your understanding that depends on your knowing some Old English as well. But for all practical purposes, we could be talking without either of us understanding a word of it.

**—In spite of the fact that new manuals and anthologies to learn Old English have appeared recently, old texts written by Henry Sweet in the XIX century still continue to be reprinted. What is the reason in your opinion for this unwavering support of his books? A guilty conscience, perhaps?**

—Not a guilty conscience. No, I do not think most people are aware of him except as a name. But I suppose you are thinking, are you, of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Readers* and the *Primer*? Yes, well, they have been very substantially revised, of course, by modern scholars; the *Reader*, by Dorothy Whitelock; the *Primer*, by Norman Davis. So, of course, they wouldn't have stood just as Henry Sweet did them. But he had a real flare and imagination, as well as rather being a very gifted scholar.

His selection of the literature and so on proved to be a very sound one for it stood the test of time and new readers end up with very much the same core of selective texts as he had put in. But, of course, in a number of ways the notes and such like that he supplied have had to be revised, really. So it is a question of updating.

**—Let's now talk about you and your work. When and why did you decide to be a specialist in Anglo-Saxon?**

—Well, I was 26 by the end of the last war and I'd never been to a university. But I'd always had a personal interest in English Literature, so I thought, well, here it goes, I'll read English at a university. I got accepted by a London College and started off, but I did not know that there was such a thing as Old English; I simply didn't know of anything being earlier than Chaucer. So this was the one thing that was entirely new to me and unexpected in the English courses. And it gripped my enthusiasm and imagination and I enjoyed it so much though I had no plans, really, beyond what I was doing. But then I got a good enough result to be able to go on to do research, so I started off in a research course in Old English and then —that was AElfric—, and that's how I really came to be interested in it.

**—You seem to have been particularly interested in AElfric. Why?**

—What had attracted me in his prose was its clarity and its elegance; intellectual clarity, elegance, economy of style... It reminded me of the sort of virtues of, well, in a very, very broad analogy, somebody like Swift. Not his sharp mind, but that sort of plain writing that was the plainness of art rather than plainness because you could not write any better, you know? The art that conceals art, that you write lucidly, simply and plainly and easily because you are trained, because you can see that's got the quality of

really good writing. Now, I saw this also in AElfric. This is the sort of man who is not verbose —he is not a windbag, or anything like that— and he appealed to me, so that's how I got on to AElfric. I did the doctorate in that, and then it became possible for me to get a university teaching post. And one thing led to another.

—Your monograph «The Chronology of AElfric's Works» has, in general been highly praised by reviewers. However, Norman E. Eliason, while admitting that your «handling of the detailed evidence is masterly», also has this to say: «...broader matters are not always clear. His conception of AElfric's overall plan remains nebulous, and the precise nature and contents of what he labels TH<sub>1</sub> and TH<sub>2</sub> (.....) is not adequately explained.» Do you agree with him?

—Well, I suppose I have to. If he thinks so, there must be some truth in it. I was the first to try and sketch out the overall aims that AElfric had in writing so much. Broadly speaking, I think it was an aim to put all the essentials of the Christian faith and knowledge to support faith into the vernacular, so that ordinary people who did not know Latin for themselves could possess that understanding; that was his motive for writing simply and illusively, but effectively. I therefore do not think that he had a plan, a complete scheme from the start which he then filled out step by step. I think his plan evolved as he went along, really. So partly I think it is true that... yes, perhaps my conception was, and is I suppose, still nebulous to the extent that I don't think it was ever quite a tidy plan. It also evolved owing to circumstances, I think. Somebody asked him for something and he wrote it. It sort of grew in a way, so I think in some ways it wasn't a completely systematic plan. If I don't make it absolutely cut and dry that's because I don't think it was itself. And then he mentions two series of formulas which I didn't adequately explain there. I think that's because I was really the first to realize that he had organized subseries.

This was in an article that dealt with the whole of AElfric's work, but unfortunately I didn't spend more than a few sentences defining those particular items, those two series which I labelled TH<sub>1</sub> and TH<sub>2</sub>. So yes, I probably didn't explain them very well. Yes, that's partly true.

—Coming back to your career, your predecessor in the Chair of Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge was the late Dorothy Whitelock, a person you rightly admire and to whom you pay due homage in your *England before the Conquest*. Now, she, in her turn, had some laudatory words for her predecessors, Prof. Chadwick and Prof. Dickins, to whom she said (I quote) «in no small measure do I owe my presence here». My question is this: how far do good personal relations with former professors influence the decision of the electors at Cambridge University?

—No, I don't think that's a factor at all, really. I think they just choose the scholar and teacher whom they consider to be best suited for the post. As you probably know, it's not the Department, and certainly not the previous professor, but an independent body of scholars, drawn from —these days from Germany, the States, as well as other universities here in England—, who form a body of about eight or ten electors and choose the best person as the next professor. But they would do it on grounds of scholarship, on an outlook that would be in sympathy with the interdisciplinary nature of this particular school. So, you see, it's an open thing. Naturally, the person who is in a better position to be a strong candidate for the chair is likely to be somebody who's had to do with the school before, but that is not the decisive matter at all.

—In her inaugural lecture «**Changing Currents in Anglo-Saxon Studies**», from where the above quote was taken, Dorothy Whitelock talks of the influence Anglo-Saxon civilization has exerted abroad, and she gives three examples, viz.: manuscript illumination, initial ornament (decorated initials in English MSS) and outline drawing. Are there any other Anglo-Saxon influences to be found abroad?

—Yes, I think so. It's a two-way thing, of course. There's a very great deal of Anglo-Saxon England owed to the continent, but here you are referring to influence back again from England to continent. Well, I suppose the most basic influence of all was the missionary work by Anglo-Saxons —in the Low Countries and Germany in particular— because just as the Anglo-Saxons had been converted earlier, they were now converting their Germanic cousins on the continent in the 8th century, and a whole range of English influence was being introduced there.

—Incidentally, did you know that Borges was an enthusiast of Anglo-Saxon and Old Germanic literatures?

—Oh, that's new to me.

—Yes, he even wrote poems of Anglo-Saxon content, such as «**Brunanburgh, A. D. 937**», «**Hengist wants men, A.D. 449**», etc.

—Very interesting. I did not know he had composed these poems. I would be very interested to read them.

—*Old English Newsletter Subsidia* recently reprinted two of your early works. What explains their reappearance?

—One is the chronology of AElfric's works; it's simply still wanted as a sort of standard account. There's been another one written by a very eminent American scholar, John Pope, who includes a similar sort of general account about AElfric's writings in the introduction to an edition which he has done of some of AElfric's homilies. His and mine are still the two accounts that anyone starts from in dealing with AElfric's work. So that's why that's been republished.

**—It was a question of availability, then?**

—Yes, because the chronology of AElfric's works was originally part of the *Festschrift* for Bruce Dickins, and that's out of print. So that's simply to keep it in circulation. The other one was a much more experimental thing that I did while I was still a research student. There's a very interesting type of punctuation that you find in manuscripts of AElfric's works and it becomes much more widespread in the 12th century, in Europe generally. The use of it in his manuscripts is rather early, and I was exploring an interpretation of this as marks of intonation to indicate whether the voice rises or falls at the end of a clause or sentence.

I think the punctuation was a formal way of indicating these patterns. I certainly made mistakes —I would in that— but it still remains the one piece where this explanation of this punctuation is explored. It was a sort of pioneering thing, really, and so that still remains something that people want to read. It's never been followed up by anything better, I don't think.

**—In 1972, the first volume of *Anglo-Saxon England* was published and, as editor of this new journal, you stated its aims and interests in the preface. What pleased some critics, though, was not so much the «avowed cross-disciplinary eclecticism in *ASE*» as its «tacit trans-Atlantic ecumenism»: at last, the English academic establishment was beginning to take more notice of the scholarly activities of its American cousins!» But leaving aside these minutiae, what is the weight of contributions from other countries where English is not the official language?**

—Well, of course, a number of North Americans are active in literary criticism. There's a great output of articles on Old English poetry and prose, particularly in poetry, in the States, and so one tries to pick up some of the best that's going with that support. There's plenty around, lots and lots of it. It's a matter of just trying to pick the best of what comes your way. And, of course, German scholars have had a long standing stake, going right back into the 19th century, in Old English language, because of its Germanic affinities, affiliations. So there's still quite an amount of that sort of work coming out of Germany. But other than that,

there are certain forms of study, of course, that don't depend on a closeness to Old English language as such, such as Art History, or Paleography, Church History —the study of patristic writers, or studies of a scholar like Bede, or the study of, let us say, the practices of the Anglo-Saxon church as far as there is evidence for it as a branch of Catholic European church practices. These kind of studies can be done internationally; you don't have to be an English native or very close to Old English to do that type of study.

Unfortunately there is very little study, very little original contribution made to Anglo-Saxon history by Americans. Now, I always think that's a pity. It must be something to do with the way their courses are organized, because I would have thought that you could have had specialists in Anglo-Saxon history, the history of Anglo-Saxon England —political history, I mean, and such like— in America perfectly well. But you don't get them.

**—No, it's mainly the poetry, isn't it?**

—It's mainly the literature and the language, but mainly the literature, and particularly the poetry. Yes, that's attracted attention as part of English courses. And that's still going strong, yes. Quite strong, anyway.

**—What is the editorial policy regarding selection and publication of original manuscripts? Do you try to strike a balance so that there is a little of everything in each issue or, perhaps, some volumes are more specialized than others?**

—We try to strike a balance in each issue. That is one principle. We have occasionally aimed at a volume carrying some specialization in it, but on the whole, no. We go our own way, really, getting as broad a mix in each volume as we can.

**—Evidence for research in Anglo-Saxon culture and civilization is available in many fields, but which one do you think is likely to provide more information in the future? What needs to be investigated more thoroughly?**

—Oh, I think Archaeology must be the growth industry because, you see, the actual body of evidence is developing so considerably whereas, let us say, in manuscripts the corpus of evidence, primary material, is not changing much. There are items in continental libraries that are only still being realised, they have certain contents and so on, but the nature of evidence is not really changing radically. But Archaeology really is. I mean, discoveries are made which completely turn round the estimates



that were being made ten years ago, simply because of new knowledge. And that's the only field, I think, in which that kind of development is taking place.

**—I know you are very busy writing a book. What is it about?**

—Well, I'm trying to give a general account of my sense of Old English poetry. It differs, I think, from any that's been put forward by others. It's certainly different in the emphasis, and therefore I'm not able to tell you what reception it will get when it comes out. Mainly, I'm trying to recognize the characteristics of the traditional language that poets used in this period. I try and emphasize that the language, this traditional language of poetry, is a kind of organic growth, out of society and thinking and feeling of the time and its sense of continuity with what's gone before. Quite different from the sort of language any poet would use today. Then I try and examine how a poet composes a poem, tells a story. I'm really dealing primarily with narrative poetry, using this traditional language; how he combines his own narrative sense and imagination —dramatic sense, description and so forth— with using language not invented for himself. So that's the central part of the book.

Taking my cue from dear old AElfric, I'm trying to write everything as simply and plain as possible. What I'm getting at is, I hope, clear for students who don't have a very profound or long-lasting knowledge over the poetry. I'm trying to write it in a way that is not merely for people who are already learned in this poetry but also will inform beginners, I hope.

**—Finally, what advice would you give to beginners in Anglo-Saxon studies?**

—I would certainly think it is a good thing to have a go. If you have got the opportunities, have a go. As I told you, this is all I did after the last war, though of course being my own language it was easier than for foreign students. But I had no idea that I was going to be interested in Anglo-Saxon till I started it. Then I found I liked it and wanted to know more and more about it. So there is always the chance that it might appeal the beginner.

**—In that case, if ever one of our students shows a real interest in old English we will send him/her to you here in Cambridge.**

—Ah, lovely, lovely.

**—Professor Clemons, thank you very much.**

(This interview took place at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in August 1986).