

REVIEWS

Murray McGillivray. *A Gentle Introduction to Old English*. London: Broadview, 2011. Pp. 206. £23.50.

Murray McGillivray (ed.). *Old English Reader*. London: Broadview, 2011. Pp. 340. £23.95.

With the wealth of Old English textbooks and readers available on the market, one must wonder why we might need to add yet another of each to our groaning bookshelves. However, as a teacher of Old English — and someone who was a student of Old English not so long ago — I can see that McGillivray's reader and textbook would be a boon for any student. The primary reason for this is the lack of frightening terminology that characterises the more intensive grammars, such as Mitchell and Robinson's classic *A Guide to Old English*. The first chapter of *A Gentle Introduction* eases the reader in with clear explanations of key grammatical terms which are supported by plenty of examples. The first chapter ends with two exercises to cement the terminology in the reader's mind before moving on to a description of pronunciation and spelling in Chapter Two. Although McGillivray introduces uncertainty by reminding the reader that no-one actually knows what Old English sounded like, he balances this caveat with a thorough discussion of punctuation and spelling. He covers tricky exceptions (like *iscald*, 'ice-cold') and reminds the reader to make use of the supporting website (<http://www.OEgrammar.ca>), which makes available a wide variety of resources, including sound files which would be invaluable to the student outside of the classroom.

The discussion of grammar, which begins in Chapter Three, starts with strong nouns. In keeping with its 'gentle' nature, this chapter allows the reader to explore the key features of Old English morphology without actually seeing the word 'morphology', and there is nary a paradigm in sight. The case system is introduced in this chapter, along with the concept of gender, and the possibilities of word order in Old English. Again, the chapter concludes with a selection of exercises that test the knowledge learned. Chapter Four is dedicated to demonstratives and the nominative and genitive cases. Some readers might find it frustrating that McGillivray does not provide one section — perhaps in an appendix — in which all the paradigms are listed. However, encountering the cases in a few stages certainly lessens the shock which students using more traditional textbooks often face.

Chapter Five extends the discussion of grammar to a few of the most common verbs, and, in the discussion of transitive verbs, covers the

accusative and dative cases of nouns. This chapter also presents the first extended excerpt of real Old English for the reader to translate (from the voyage of *Ohthere*, which is included in its entirety in the back of the book). A helpful list of vocabulary is provided. The other exercises are relatively complex, testing not only the knowledge learned in the current chapter, but also testing nouns, case and vocabulary from previous chapters. It is at this point that an appendix containing a key to the exercises might be useful to the student who is trying to learn Old English on their own, and therefore are unable to check with a teacher or his/her fellow students if their answers are correct. However, a key is not provided. Chapter Six discusses weak verbs, focusing in particular on the subjunctive, participles and infinitives. McGillivray explains the subjunctive and imperative mood briefly, as Chapter Eleven elaborates on the topic of mood; but his brief discussion of the subjunctive, in which he points out that in a subjunctive utterance, it is ‘as if each verb were preceded by a statement of belief’ (52), is succinct and helpful (and, of course, makes use of a subjunctive in the explanation itself). Chapter Six concludes with a brief extract from Luke 2 (a fuller version of which appears in the back of the book), as well as exercises testing the reader’s understanding of weak verb conjugations and how to translate them.

In Chapter Seven there is a shift back to nouns, which some readers might find jarring. However, as McGillivray points out in the introduction, the textbook explains features as they are encountered; thus, once the basics of case have been explained, it makes sense to move on to verbs so that the student can begin ‘reading’ Old English as soon as possible. Chapter Seven, then, covers strong nouns in more detail, explaining variations and instances in which verbs dictate the case of nouns. The exercise helps the reader understand how to find nouns in an Old English dictionary. Chapter Eight concerns itself with strong verbs and personal pronouns; there is quite a lot of detail here, represented by the table in which McGillivray presents the vowel progressions in strong verb conjugations. Full declensions of personal pronouns are provided, along with the dual. Most helpful here is the explanation of genitive pronouns and possessive adjectives, which can be a difficult aspect of Old English language to grasp. The exercise requires the reader to create their own table of vowel progressions, as well as translating out of and composing into Old English. Chapter Eight covers weak and unusual nouns (i–mutated nouns and family terms). Some readers might feel that an explanation of i–mutation would be helpful here; McGillivray simply states that some nouns that change their vowel ‘are known as i–mutated nouns for historical reasons’ (72).

The exercises involve translating (and solving!) a riddle, thus allowing the reader to experience texts beyond the usual ‘training texts’. Chapter Ten moves on to adjectives, presumably saved until last because it is possible to practise whole sentences without having to use adjectives. The chapter also covers interrogatives which are tested in the final exercise: the reader is to compose questions (in Old English) based on an Old English text they are currently reading. Chapter Eleven moves on to noun phrases and sentences, discussing the basic principles of Old English word order. The subjunctive also reappears, and is explored in more detail with a range of examples: the subjunctives and participles of *beon* and *habban* are the focus of the final part of the chapter. The final chapter introduces the reader to the features of Old English poetry: metre, poetic diction, poetic syntax and poetic style (with a particular focus on apposition).

The most useful characteristic of this book is that it guides the reader through the essential aspects and quirks of Old English that they can expect to encounter in the extended extracts provided at the end of the book. The benefit of this is that, as soon as possible, the reader can try their hand at some real, live Old English. The glossing and annotation of the extracts make it possible for the reader to work their way through without resorting to a dictionary, which even the keenest student would appreciate. This helpful but unobtrusive apparatus also characterises the *Old English Reader*. Much like the textbook, the reader is linked to a sister website (www.oepoetry.ca) which includes annotated editions of the text. The reader is able to click each word to bring up a glossary entry and can access more detailed textual notes concerning editorial practices and emendations. McGillivray explains in the introduction that the reader and website are designed to be used together: the website speeds up the process of glossing, but the printed reader allows the student to think more carefully about how grammatical details combine to produce an intelligible sentence. To aid the student in independent translations, the glosses given represent several definitions so that the editor does not force the student into a particular interpretation of the text.

Aside from the helpful construction of the reader, the selection of texts also marks the reader out as a thorough collection of Old English texts. Nine prose texts (Alfred’s Preface to Gregory, *Apollonius of Tyre*, Bede’s Account of the Conversion of Edwin of Northumbria, Bede’s Account of the Poet Caedmon, Cynewulf and Cyneheard, The Great Army, *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, The Voyage of Wulfstan to Estland, and *The Wonders of the East*), fifteen verse texts (*The Battle of Maldon*, *Beowulf*, *Deor*, *The Dream of the Rood*, Exeter Book Riddles, *The*

Fortunes of Men, Judith, The Husband's Message, Metrical Charms, The Seafarer, The Story of Isaac, The Wanderer, The Whale, The Wife's Lament, and Wulf and Eadwacer) and two examples of Ælfrician verse are provided, in complete form wherever possible. Only seven of the texts are excerpted, with a full edition of *Genesis A* and *B* available via the website.

This collection goes beyond the boundaries of what is considered to be the traditional teaching corpus. Although some of the prose (such as Alfred's Preface to Gregory, or *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*) and poetry (*The Battle of Maldon, Beowulf, Deor, The Dream of the Rood, Judith, The Seafarer, The Wanderer, The Wife's Lament, Wulf and Eadwacer*) might appear relatively commonly on Old English courses, McGillivray presents a range of less widely taught prose and poetry. In particular, he goes beyond the ordinary themes of heroism and religious poetry, allowing the student to experience different genres in the form of the riddles and the charms. Each text is prefaced with a brief introduction which leaves the main task of interpretation up to the student. Some readers may feel the lack of interpretation or nudge towards other useful reading: personally, I would have found a brief description of the manuscript context of the texts to be helpful.

Taken together, both of these books will be of significant value to the student of Old English. The prose is clear and free of frightening jargon, and appeals to the students' technological savvy offering online and hard copy versions of texts, each of which have their own benefits. Each chapter progresses at a measured and steady pace, and encourages the reader to consolidate their learning through constructing their own Old English as well as translating real Old English texts for themselves. The *Gentle Introduction* lives up to its name: McGillivray does not patronise the reader, but dispels any confusion with patient and thorough explanations of modern and Old English grammatical terms. The reader's varied contents make it an engaging read: it is possible to dip in and out of the reader, and in doing so to read complete texts from beginning to end. However, taking the collection as a whole demonstrates to the reader the multi-faceted nature of the treasure that is Anglo-Saxon literature.

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