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**THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

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**Introduction**

In order that we may set a just value upon the literary labours of those who, in former times, gave particular attention to the culture of the English language, and that we may the better judge of the credibility of modern pretensions to further improvements, it seems necessary that we should know something of the course of events through which its acknowledged melioration in earlier days took place. For, in this case, the extent of a man's knowledge is the strength of his argument. As Bacon quotes Aristotle, "Qui respiciunt ad pauca, de facili pronunciant." He that takes a narrow view, easily makes up his mind. But what is any opinion worth, if further knowledge of facts can confute it?

Whatsoever is successively varied, or has such a manner of existence as time can affect, must have had both an origin and a progress; and may have also its particular *history,* if the opportunity for writing it be not neglected. But such is the levity of mankind, that things of great moment are often left without memorial, while the hand of Literature is busy to beguile the world with trifles or with fictions, with fancies or with lies. The rude and cursory languages of barbarous nations, till the genius of Grammar arise to their rescue, are among those transitory things which unsparing time is ever hurrying away, irrecoverably, to oblivion. Tradition knows not what they were; for of their changes she takes no account. Philosophy tells us, they are resolved into the variable, fleeting breath of the successive generations of those by whom they were spoken; whose kindred fate it was, to pass away unnoticed and nameless, lost in the elements from which they sprung.

Upon the history of the English language, darkness thickens as we tread back the course of time. The subject of our inquiry becomes, at every step, more difficult and less worthy. We have now a tract of English literature, both extensive and luminous; and though many modern writers, and no few even of our writers on grammar, are comparatively very deficient in style, it is safe to affirm that the English language in general has never been written or spoken with more propriety and elegance, than it is at the present day. Modern English we read with facility; and that which was good two centuries ago, though considerably antiquated, is still easily understood. The best way, therefore, to gain a practical knowledge of the changes which our language has undergone, is, to read some of our older authors in retrograde order, till the style employed at times more and more remote, becomes in some degree familiar. Pursued in this manner, the study will be less difficult, and the labour of the curious inquirer, which may be suspended or resumed at pleasure, will be better repaid, than if he proceed in the order of history, and attempt at first the Saxon remains.

**1. Origin of English language**

The value of a language as an object of study, depends chiefly on the character of the *books* which it contains; and, secondarily, on its connexion with others more worthy to be thoroughly known. In this instance, there are several circumstances which are calculated soon to discourage research. As our language took its rise during the barbarism of the dark ages, the books through which its early history must be traced, are not only few and meagre, but, in respect to grammar, unsettled and diverse. It is not to be expected that inquiries of this kind will ever engage the attention of any very considerable number of persons. Over the minds of the reading public, the attractions of novelty hold a much greater influence, than any thing that is to be discovered in the dusk of antiquity. All old books contain a greater or less number of obsolete words, and antiquated modes of expression, which puzzle the reader, and call him too frequently to his glossary. And even the most common terms, when they appear in their ancient, unsettled orthography, are often so disguised as not to be readily recognized.

1. These circumstances (the last of which should be a caution to us against innovations in spelling) retard the progress of the reader, impose a labour too great for the ardour of his curiosity, and soon dispose him to rest satisfied with an ignorance, which, being general, is not likely to expose him to censure. For these reasons, ancient authors are little read; and the real antiquary is considered a man of odd habits, who, by a singular propensity, is led into studies both unfashionable and fruitless-- a man who ought to have been born in the days of old, that he might have spoken the language he is so curious to know, and have appeared in the costume of an age better suited to his taste.
2. But *Learning* is ever curious to explore the records of time, as well as the regions of space; and wherever her institutions flourish, she will amass her treasures, and spread them before her votaries. Difference of languages she easily overcomes; but the leaden reign of unlettered Ignorance defies her scrutiny. Hence, of one period of the world's history, she ever speaks with horror--that "long night of apostasy," during which, like a lone Sibyl, she hid her precious relics in solitary cells, and fleeing from degraded Christendom, sought refuge with the eastern caliphs. "This awful decline of true religion in the world carried with it almost every vestige of civil liberty, of classical literature, and of scientific knowledge; and it will generally be found in experience that they must all stand or fall together."--*Hints on Toleration,* p. 263. In the tenth century, beyond which we find nothing that bears much resemblance to the English language as now written, this mental darkness appears to have gathered to its deepest obscuration; and, at that period, England was sunk as low in ignorance, superstition, and depravity, as any other part of Europe.
3. The English language gradually varies as we trace it back, and becomes at length identified with the Anglo-Saxon; that is, with the dialect spoken by the Saxons after their settlement in England. These Saxons were a fierce, warlike, unlettered people from Germany; whom the ancient Britons had invited to their assistance against the Picts and Scots. Cruel and ignorant, like their Gothic kindred, who had but lately overrun the Roman empire, they came, not for the good of others, but to accommodate themselves. They accordingly seized the country; destroyed or enslaved the ancient inhabitants; or, more probably, drove the remnant of them into the mountains of Wales. Of Welsh or ancient British words, Charles Bucke, who says in his grammar that he took great pains to be accurate in his scale of derivation, enumerates but one hundred and eleven, as now found in our language; and Dr. Johnson, who makes them but ninety-five, argues from their paucity, or almost total absence, that the Saxons could not have mingled at all with these people, or even have retained them in vassalage.
4. The ancient languages of France and of the British isles are said to have proceeded from an other language yet more ancient, called the \_Celtic\_; so that, from one common source, are supposed to have sprung the present Welsh, the present Irish, and the present Highland Scotch.[46] The term *Celtic* Dr. Webster defines, as a noun, "The language of the Celts;" and, as an adjective, "Pertaining to the primitive inhabitants of the south and west of Europe, or to the early inhabitants of Italy, Gaul, Spain, and Britain." What *unity,* according to this, there was, or could have been, in the ancient Celtic tongue, does not appear from books, nor is it easy to be conjectured.[47] Many ancient writers sustain this broad application of the term \_Celtae\_ or \_Celts\_; which, according to Strabo's etymology of it, means horsemen, and seems to have been almost as general asour word *Indians.* But Casar informs us that the name was more particularly claimed by the people who, in his day, lived in France between the Seine and the Garonne, and who by the Romans were called *Galli,* or *Gauls.*

5. The *Celtic* tribes are said to have been the descendants of Gomer, the son of Japhet. The English historians agree that the first inhabitants of their island owed their origin and their language to the \_Celta\_, or Gauls, who settled on the opposite shore. Julius Casar, who invaded Britain about half a century before the Christian era, found the inhabitants ignorant of letters, and destitute of any history but oral tradition. To this, however, they paid great attention, teaching every thing in verse. Some of the Druids, it is said in Casar's Commentaries, spent twenty years in learning to repeat songs and hymns that were never committed to writing. These ancient priests, or diviners, are represented as having great power, and as exercising it in some respects beneficially; but their horrid rites, with human sacrifices, provoked the Romans to destroy them.

Smollett says, "Tiberius suppressed those human sacrifices in Gaul; and Claudius destroyed the Druids of that country; but they subsisted in Britain till the reign of Nero, when Paulus Suetonius reduced the island of Anglesey, which was the place of their retreat, and overwhelmed them with such unexpected and sudden destruction, that all their knowledge and tradition, conveyed to them in the songs of their predecessors, perished at once."--\_Smollett's Hist. of Eng.\_, 4to, B. i, Ch. i.

**2. History of English language**

The Romans considered Britain a province of their empire, for a period of about five hundred years; but the northern part of the island was never entirely subdued by them, and not till Anno Domini 78, a hundred and thirty-three years after their first invasion of the country, had they completed their conquest of England. Letters and arts, so far at least as these are necessary to the purposes of war or government, the victors carried with them; and under their auspices some knowledge of Christianity was, at a very early period, introduced into Britain. But it seems strange, that after all that is related of their conquests, settlements, cities, fortifications, buildings, seminaries, churches, laws, &c., they should at last have left the Britons in so helpless, degraded, and forlorn a condition. They *did not sow among them the seeds* of any permanent improvement.

The Roman government, being unable to sustain itself at home, withdrew its forces finally from Britain in the year 446, leaving the wretched inhabitants almost as savage as it found them, and in a situation even less desirable. Deprived of their native resources, their ancient independence of spirit, as well as of the laws, customs, institutions, and leaders, that had kept them together under their old dynasties, and now deserted by their foreign protectors, they were apparently left at the mercy of blind fortune, the wretched vicissitudes of which there was none to foresee, none to resist. The glory of the Romans now passed away. The mighty fabric of their own proud empire crumbled into ruins. Civil liberty gave place to barbarism; Christian truth, to papal superstition; and the lights of science were put out by both. The shades of night gathered over all; settling and condensing, "till almost every point of that wide horizon, over which the Sun of Righteousness had diffused his cheering rays, was enveloped in a darkness more awful and more portentous than that which of old descended upon rebellious Pharaoh and the callous sons of Ham."--Hints *on Toleration,* p. 310.

The Saxons entered Britain in the year 449. But what was the form of their language at that time, cannot now be known. It was a dialect of the *Gothic* or \_Teutonic\_; which is considered the parent of all the northern tongues of Europe, except some few of Sclavonian origin. The only remaining monument of the Gothic language is a copy of the Gospels, translated by Ulphilas; which is preserved at Upsal, and called, from its embellishments, *the Silver Book.* This old work has been three times printed in England. We possess not yet in America all the advantages which may be enjoyed by literary men in the land of our ancestors; but the stores of literature, both ancient and modern, are somewhat more familiar to us, than is there supposed; and the art of printing is fast equalizing, to all nations that cultivate learning, the privilege of drinking at its ancient fountains.

It is neither liberal nor just to argue unfavourably of the intellectual or the moral condition of any remote age or country, merely from our own ignorance of it. It is true, we can derive from no quarter a favourable opinion of the state of England after the Saxon invasion, and during the tumultuous and bloody government of the heptarchy. But I will not darken the picture through design. If justice were done to the few names--to Gildas the wise, the memorialist of his country's sufferings and censor of the nation's depravity, who appears a solitary star in the night of the sixth century--to the venerable Bede, the greatest theologian, best scholar, and only historian of the seventh--to Alcuin, the abbot of Canterbury, the luminary of the eighth--to Alfred the great, the glory of the ninth, great as a prince, and greater as a scholar, seen in the evening twilight of an age in which the clergy could not read;--if justice were done to all such, we might find something, even in these dark and rugged times, if not to soften the grimness of the portrait, at least to give greater distinctness of feature.

In tracing the history of our language, Dr. Johnson, who does little more than give examples, cites as his first specimen of ancient English, a portion of king [sic--KTH] Alfred's paraphrase in imitation of Boethius. But this language of Alfred's is not English; but rather, as the learned doctor himself considered it, an example of the Anglo-Saxon in its highest state of purity. This dialect was first changed by admixture with words derived from the Danish and the Norman; and, still being comparatively rude and meagre, afterwards received large accessions from the Latin, the French, the Greek, the Dutch--till, by gradual changes, which the etymologist may exhibit, there was at length produced a language bearing a sufficient resemblance to the present English, to deserve to be called English at this day.

The formation of our language cannot with propriety be dated earlier than the thirteenth century. It was then that a free and voluntary amalgamation of its chief constituent materials took place; and this was somewhat earlier than we date the revival of learning. The English of the thirteenth century is scarcely intelligible to the modern reader. Dr. Johnson calls it "a kind of intermediate diction, neither Saxon nor English;" and says, that Sir John Gower, who wrote in the latter part of the fourteenth century, was "the first of our authors who can be properly said to have written English." Contemporary with Gower, the father of English poetry, was the still greater poet, his disciple Chaucer; who embraced many of the tenets of Wickliffe, and imbibed something of the spirit of the reformation, which was now begun.

The literary history of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is full of interest; for it is delightful to trace the progress of great and obvious improvement. The reformation of religion and the revival of learning were nearly simultaneous. Yet individuals may have acted a conspicuous part in the latter, who had little to do with the former; for great learning does not necessarily imply great piety, though, as Dr. Johnson observes, "the Christian religion always implies or produces a certain degree of civility and learning."--\_Hist. Eng. Lang. before his 4to Dict.\_ "The ordinary instructions of the clergy, both philosophical and religious, gradually fell into contempt, as the Classics superseded the one, and the Holy Scriptures expelled the other. The first of these changes was effected by *the early grammarians* of Europe; and it gave considerable aid to the reformation, though it had no immediate connexion with that event. The revival of the English Bible, however, completed the work: and though its appearance was late, and its progress was retarded in every possible manner, yet its dispersion was at length equally rapid, extensive, and effectual."--\_Constable's Miscellany\_, Vol. xx, p. 75.

Peculiar honour is due to those who lead the way in whatever advances human happiness. And, surely, our just admiration of the character of the *reformers* must be not a little enhanced, when we consider what they did for letters as well as for the church. Learning does not consist in useless jargon, in a multitude of mere words, or in acute speculations remote from practice; else the seventeen folios of St. Thomas Aquinas, the angelical doctor of the thirteenth century, and the profound disputations of his great rival, Duns Scotus the subtle, for which they were revered in their own age, had not gained them the contempt of all posterity. From such learning the lucid reasoning of the reformers delivered the halls of instruction. The school divinity of the middle ages passed away before the presence of that which these men learned from the Bible, as did in a later age the Aristotelian philosophy before that which Bacon drew from nature.

Towards the latter part of the fourteenth century, Wickliffe furnished the first entire translation of the

Bible into English. In like manner did the Germans, a hundred and fifty years after, receive it in their tongue from the hands of Luther; who says, that at twenty years of age, he himself had not seen it in any language. Wickliffe's English style is elegant for the age in which he lived, yet very different from what is elegant now. This first English translation of the Bible, being made about a hundred years before the introduction of printing into England, could not have been very extensively circulated. A large specimen of it may be seen in Dr. Johnson's History of the English Language. Wickliffe died in 1384. The art of printing was invented about 1440, and first introduced into England, in 1468; but the first printed edition of the Bible in English, was executed in Germany. It was completed, October 5th, 1535.

"Martin Luther, about the year 1517, first introduced metrical psalmody into the service of the church, which not only kept alive the enthusiasm of the reformers, but formed a rallying point for his followers. This practice spread in all directions; and it was not long ere six thousand persons were heard singing together at St. Paul's Cross in London. Luther was a poet and musician; but the same talent existed not in his followers. Thirty years afterwards, Sternhold versified fifty-one of the Psalms; and in 1562, with the help of Hopkins, he completed the Psalter. These poetical effusions were chiefly sung to German melodies, which the good taste of Luther supplied: but the Puritans, in a subsequent age, nearly destroyed these germs of melody, assigning as a reason, that music should be so simplified as to suit all persons, and that all may join."-\_Dr. Gardiner's Music of Nature\_, p. 283.

"The schools and colleges of England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not governed by a system of education which would render their students very eminent either as scholars or as gentlemen: and the monasteries, which were used as seminaries, even until the reformation, taught only the corrupt Latin used by the ecclesiastics. The time however was approaching, when the united efforts of Stanbridge, Linacre, Sir John Cheke, Dean Colet, Erasmus, William Lily, Roger Ascham, &c., were successful in reviving the Latin tongue in all its purity; and even in exciting a taste for Greek in a nation the clergy of which opposed its introduction with the same vehemence which characterized their enmity to a reformation in religion. The very learned Erasmus, the first who undertook the teaching of the Greek language at Oxford, met with few friends to support him; notwithstanding Oxford was the seat of nearly all the learning in England."-Constable's Miscellany, Vol. xx, p. 146.

"The priests preached against it, as a very recent invention of the arch-enemy; and confounding in their misguided zeal, the very foundation of their faith, with the object of their resentment, they represented the New Testament itself as 'an impious and dangerous book,' because it was written in that heretical language. Even after the accession of Henry VIII, when Erasmus, who had quitted Oxford in disgust, returned under his especial patronage, with the support of several eminent scholars and powerful persons, his progress was still impeded, and the language opposed. The University was divided into parties, called Greeks and Trojans, the latter being the strongest, from being favoured by the monks; and the Greeks were driven from the streets, with hisses and other expressions of contempt. It was not therefore until Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey gave it their positive and powerful protection, that this persecuted language was allowed to be quietly studied, even in the institutions dedicated to learning."-Ib., p. 147.

These curious extracts are adduced to show the *spirit of the times,* and the obstacles then to be surmounted in the cause of learning. This popular opposition to Greek, did not spring from a patriotic design to prefer and encourage English literature; for the improvement of this was still later, and the great promoters of it were all of them classical scholars. They wrote in English, not because they preferred it, but because none but those who were bred in colleges, could read any thing else; and, even to this very day, the grammatical study of the English language is shamefully neglected in what are called the higher institutions of learning. In alleging this neglect, I speak comparatively. Every student, on entering upon the practical business of life, will find it of far more importance to him, to be skillful in the language of his own country than to be distinguished for any knowledge which the learned only can appreciate. "Will the greatest Mastership in Greek and Latin, or [the] translating [of] these Languages into English, avail for the Purpose of acquiring an elegant English Style?

No - we know just the Reverse from woeful Experience! And, as Mr. Locke and the Spectator observe, Men who have threshed hard at Greek and Latin for ten or eleven years together, are very often deficient in their own Language." - Preface to the British Gram, 8vo, 1784, p. xxi.

# 3. English literature

That the progress of English literature in early times was slow, will not seem wonderful to those who consider what is affirmed of the progress of other arts, more immediately connected with the comforts of life. "Down to the reign of Elizabeth, the greater part of the houses in considerable towns, had no chimneys: the fire was kindled against the wall, and the smoke found its way out as well as it could, by the roof, the door, or the windows. The houses were mostly built of wattling, plastered over with clay; and the beds were only straw pallets, with a log of wood for a pillow. In this respect, even the king fared no better than his subjects; for, in Henry the Eighth's time, we find directions, 'to examine every night the straw of the king's bed, that no daggers might be concealed therein.' A writer in 1577, speaking of the progress of luxury, mentions three things especially, that were 'marvellously altered for the worse in England;' the multitude of chimneys lately erected, the increase of lodgings, and the exchange of treen platters into pewter, and wooden spoons into silver and tin; and he complains bitterly that oak instead of willow was employed in the building of houses."--REV. ROYAL ROBBINS: *Outlines of History,* p. 377.

Shakspeare appeared in the reign of Elizabeth; outlived her thirteen years; and died in 1616 aged 52. The English language in his hands did not lack power or compass of expression. His writings are now more extensively read, than any others of that age; nor has any very considerable part of his phraseology yet become obsolete. But it ought to be known, that the printers or editors of the editions which are now read, have taken extensive liberty in modernizing his orthography, as well as that of other old authors still popular. How far such liberty is justifiable, it is difficult to say. Modern readers doubtless find a convenience in it. It is very desirable that the orthography of our language should be made uniform, and remain permanent. Great alterations cannot be suddenly introduced; and there is, in stability, an advantage which will counterbalance that of a slow approximation to regularity. Analogy may sometimes decide the form of variable words, but the concurrent usage of the learned must ever be respected, in this, as in every other part of grammar.

Among the earliest of the English grammarians, was Ben Jonson, the poet; who died in the year 1637, at the age of sixty-three. His grammar, (which Horne Tooke mistakingly calls "the *first* as well as the *best* English grammar,") is still extant, being published in the several editions of his works. It is a small treatise, and worthy of attention only as a matter of curiosity. It is written in prose, and designed chiefly for the aid of foreigners. Grammar is an unpoetical subject, and therefore not wisely treated, as it once very generally was, in verse. But every poet should be familiar with the art, because the formal principles of his own have always been considered as embraced in it. To its poets, too, every language must needs be particularly indebted; because their compositions, being in general more highly finished than works in prose, are supposed to present the language in its most agreeable form. In the preface to the Poems of Edmund Waller, published in 1690, the editor ventures to say, "He was, indeed, the Parent of English Verse, and the first that shewed us our Tongue had Beauty and Numbers in it. Our Language owes more to Him, than the French does to Cardinal Richelieu and the whole Academy. \* \* \* \* The Tongue came into His hands a rough diamond: he polished it first; and to *that* degree, that all artists since him have admired the workmanship, without pretending to mend it."--British *Poets,* Vol. ii, Lond., 1800: Waller's Poems, p. 4.

Dr. Johnson, however, in his Lives of the Poets, abates this praise, that he may transfer the greater part of it to Dryden and Pope. He admits that, "After about half a century of forced thoughts and rugged metre, some advances towards nature and harmony had been already made by Waller and Denham;" but, in distributing the praise of this improvement, he adds, "It may be doubted whether Waller and Denham could have over-born [overborne] the prejudices which had long prevailed, and which even then were sheltered by the protection of Cowley. The new versification, as it was called, may be considered as owing its establishment to Dryden; from whose time it is apparent that English poetry has had no tendency to relapse to its former savageness."--Johnson's Life of Dryden: Lives, p. 206. To Pope, as the translator of Homer, he gives this praise: "His version may be said to have tuned the English tongue; for since its appearance no writer, however deficient in other powers, has wanted melody."--Life of Pope: Lives, p. 567. Such was the opinion of Johnson; but there are other critics who object to the versification of Pope, that it is "monotonous and cloying." See, in Leigh Hunt's Feast of the Poets, the following couplet, and a note upon it:

"But ever since Pope spoil'd the ears of the town With his cuckoo-song verses half up and half down."

The unfortunate Charles I, as well as his father James I, was a lover and promoter of letters. He was himself a good scholar, and wrote well in English, for his time: he ascended the throne in 1625, and was beheaded in 1648. Nor was Cromwell himself, with all his religious and military enthusiasm, wholly insensible to *literary* merit. This century was distinguished by the writings of Milton, Dryden, Waller,Cowley, Denham, Locke, and others; and the reign of Charles II, which is embraced in it, has been considered by some "the Augustan age of English literature." But that honour, if it may well be bestowed on any, belongs rather to a later period. The best works produced in the eighteenth century, are so generally known and so highly esteemed, that it would be lavish of the narrow space allowed to this introduction, to speak particularly of their merits. Some grammatical errors may be found in almost all books; but our language was, in general, written with great purity and propriety by Addison, Swift, Pope, Johnson, Lowth, Hume, Horne, and many other celebrated authors who flourished in the last century. Nor was it much before this period, that the British writers took any great pains to be accurate in the use of their own language;

"Late, very late, correctness grew our care, When the tir'd nation breath'd from civil war."--Pope.

**Conclusion**

English books began to be printed in the early part of the sixteenth century; and, as soon as a taste for reading was formed, the press threw open the flood-gates of general knowledge, the streams of which are now pouring forth, in a copious, increasing, but too often turbid tide, upon all the civilized nations of the earth.

This mighty engine afforded a means by which superior minds could act more efficiently and more extensively upon society in general. And thus, by the exertions of genius adorned with learning, our native tongue has been made the polished vehicle of the most interesting truths, and of the most important discoveries; and has become a language copious, strong, refined, and capable of no inconsiderable degree of harmony. Nay, it is esteemed by some who claim to be competent judges, to be the strongest, the richest, the most elegant, and the most susceptible of sublime imagery, of all the languages in the world.

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