

**SOME OLD
ENGLISH WORTHIES**

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Some old English worthies by Dorothy Senior

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DOROTHY SENIOR

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EDITED WITH NOTES
AND INTRODUCTION
BY DOROTHY SENIOR



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Methinke it is better to passe the tyme with such a merry
Jeste and laugh thereat and doo no Synne, than
for to wepe and do Synne.—*Copland.*

Introduction

LONG, long ago, when he knew nothing of an alphabet, man sought amusement for his leisure other than the slaughter of his enemies and the pursuit of game. But since these things constituted, for him, the main business of life, he could not forget them even in his hours of relaxation ; so, if he carved rude pictures on bone, they were pictures of himself engaged in these pursuits ; and if he composed chants, equally rude, they too set forth his exploits at large. With the latter mode of expressing himself he introduced, without knowing it, a great art—the art of Literature.

Ballad-making came, in time, to be the peculiar *The Bar* province of a certain class whose business it was to preserve the traditions of their race. To the oral minstrelsy of these tribal gleemen we owe our knowledge of ancient nations which had no other means of perpetuating their history. Not in Europe only, but in every inhabited quarter of the globe we find traces of the bards. They sang in verse because to 'catch the popular ear' it was necessary to adopt the fashion of rhyming. Poetry is, moreover, easier to remember than prose ; and the method has this additional recommendation, that its followers are less liable to err. The autocratic nature of metre will not suffer alterations ; whereas prose is more elastic and offers scope for the exercise of what Buckle calls the *principle of accumulation*.

With the introduction of letters, however, when

Introduction

*Metrical
Romances*

the traditions formerly entrusted to the memories of wandering minstrels were permanently preserved by means of the new art, these human repositories of history found themselves in danger of losing their occupations. The bards therefore turned their attention to entertaining their hearers rather than to instructing them as heretofore, and began to embellish their recitals with marvellous fictions, very alluring to ignorant minds. The ultimate source of these fictions is hidden by the mists which veil from us that country of immemorial antiquity which lies 'very far off.' Dr Percy believed that they were introduced into Normandy by the Scalds, whose successors, substituting heroes of Christendom for the gods of Scandinavian mythology, propagated throughout France a revised version, which reached us after the Conquest. In strong contrast to these northern sagas were the voluptuous Eastern fables collected by pilgrims during their travels in the Holy Land, and repeated to admiring and credulous audiences at home. Many of the romances of chivalry, which came into being during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were founded on Welsh and American legends, and this in spite of the fact that the Celtic dialect was unknown to those nations whose literature was strongly influenced by its traditions. The 'Brut' of Layamon (*circa* 1205) has been called 'the first metrical romance, after "Beowulf," which English literature possesses.' It is a translation of Wace's 'Brut' (1155), which in its turn was based on the *Historia Regum Britannie* of Geoffrey of Monmouth (1147), who transmitted to Europe the beginnings of its romance, but confesses that he too borrowed from another source.

Introduction

In the main, however, the early prose romances may be attributed to the fertile imaginations of their authors, who would have been the last to admit that they were not telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth. On the contrary, whilst they cast reflections on the authenticity of the metrical versions, they presented their own fictions as historical facts to a public ready to swallow anything in the shape of a 'tall' story. Possibly these narratives were founded on fact; but the facts were so lavishly embroidered that they were lost to sight. Each fresh narrator added an individual touch. It was easier to conjure up the wildest fables to explain things which, to the ignorant mind saturated with a belief in the supernatural, seemed otherwise inexplicable, than it was to accept such things as being in the ordinary course of nature. The idea of an enchanter once conceived, miraculous powers were assigned to him as a matter of course. By superstition men sought to explain 'the mysteries of existence, and the secret agencies by which the operations of nature are conducted' (Prescott).

Yet, with all their shortcomings—one might almost say, because of them—these ancient English fictions constitute a vital link with the past history of our nation. They were the novels of our forefathers, who never wearied of hearing them repeated as they sat round the fire in the long winter evenings. For us they are much more—they are pictures of the past, wherein we may see our ancestors 'in such manner and fashion as they were in when that they lived.' Some of the tales (such as 'Friar Rush,' for instance, which stands last in the present volume) belong to no particular time or place. The underlying principles of the human mind do not vary. The

*Effect of
Superstition
on Romance*

*Ancient
English
Fictions*