

PRIMER OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Primer of English Literature by Stopford Brooke

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STOPFORD BROOKE

**PRIMER OF ENGLISH
LITERATURE**

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by JOHN RICHARD GREEN, M. A.

ENGLISH.

Literature Primer.

Edited by JOHN RICHARD GREEN, M.A.

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BY THE
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PRIMER

OF

ENGLISH LITERATURE.

CHAPTER I.

WRITERS BEFORE THE NORMAN CONQUEST, 870—1066.

1. English Literature begins in England about 670.
2. War Poems.—*Beowulf*, and *Fight at Finnsburg* before 800. *Song of Brunanburh*, 937. *Fight at Maldon*, 991. Odes in A. S. Chronicle.
3. Religious Poems.—*Cædmon's Paraphrase of the Bible*, 670. Poems in the Exeter and the Vercelli book.
4. *The Traveller's Song—the Lament of Deor*—inserted into Exeter book from pagan MSS.
5. PROSE.—*Bæda's translation of St. John*, 735. King *Ælfred's literary and historical work during his two times of peace*, 880—893 and 897—901. *Ælfric's Translations*, 990—995. *The English Chronicle*, ends 1154.

1. **What Literature is.**—Before we can enter on the story of our English Literature we must try to understand what literature itself is. By literature we mean the written thoughts and feelings of intelligent men and women arranged in a way which will give pleasure to the reader. Literature has to do therefore, so far as its subject goes, with all the things about which we learn, and think, and feel. As to its form, it has two large divisions—one of which is called Prose Literature and the other Poetical Literature.

2. **Prose Literature.**—There are many kinds of prose literature. Men write in prose about philosophy, or history, or art, or religion, or science, or manners, or the lives of men. Prose literature then means the written thoughts, learning, and feelings of men on all these subjects. Everything in fact that is written of any kind, except poetry, may be called prose. But we must not think that everything that is called prose is literature. We cannot say, for instance, that a ship's log, or a catalogue, or the daily journal of a traveller, is to be called literature simply because it is written in prose. Writing is not literature unless it gives to the reader a pleasure which arises, not only from the things said, but from the way in which they are said, and that pleasure is only given when the words are carefully or curiously or beautifully put together into sentences. To do this in a special way is to have what we call style. As much art must be used in building sentences up out of words as in building houses, if we wish the prose we write to be worthy of the name of literature. And just as in looking at different kinds of houses, we say that one is built in a strong way, another in a simple way, another in an ornamental way, so we say in reading books written by different men that one is in a simple style, another in a grand, another in an eloquent style. Again, in looking at a large building, we see not only the way in which it is built, but also the character and the mind of the builder. So also in a prose book which is fit to belong to literature we ought to feel that there is a distinct mind and character who is speaking to us through the style, that is, through the way in which the words are put together. Prose then is not literature unless it have *style* and *character*, and be written with *curious care*.

3. **Of Poetical Literature** we may say the same thing. Poetry must be tried by rules more severe even than those by which we judge prose, and

unless it satisfies those rules it does not take rank as literature. There must be more care taken, more beauty, more musical movement in the arrangement of the words than in prose; and the way in which the thoughts and feelings of the poet are put together into words will always be, in true poetry, wholly different from the way in which they would be put together by a prose writer. Poetry speaks to us of all that belongs to Man, and of all that man feels or sees when he is delighted with the beauty or grandeur of the Natural World. These are its two chief subjects in literature; and it writes of them in different kinds of poetry, in all of which we English have done well. There is *epic* poetry, like Milton's great poem *Paradise Lost*, *dramatic* poetry, like Shakespeare's plays; *lyric* poetry, or short pieces on one subject, like the songs in his plays; *narrative* poetry, like Scott's *Lady of the Lake*; *descriptive* poetry, like Thomson's *Seasons*, which describes nature; and *allegorical* poetry, which tells a story with a hidden meaning in it. Of this last the best example is Spenser's *Fairie Queen*. These, then, are the two main divisions of literature.

4. **The History of English Literature**, then, is the story of what great English men and women thought and felt, and then wrote down in good prose or beautiful poetry in the English language. The story is a long one. It begins about the year 670, and it is still going on in the year 1875. Into this little book then is to be put the story of 1,200 years. No people that have ever been in the world can look back so far as we English can to the beginnings of our literature; no people can point to so long and splendid a train of poets and prose writers; no nation has on the whole written so much and so well. Every English man and woman has good reason to be proud of the work done by their forefathers in prose and poetry. Every one who can write a good book or a good song may say to himself, "I belong