

# **ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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English Literature by Stopford Brooke

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**STOPFORD BROOKE**

**ENGLISH  
LITERATURE**



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BY THE  
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## CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
WRITERS BEFORE THE NORMAN CONQUEST, 670—	
1066 . . . . .	5
CHAPTER II.	
FROM THE CONQUEST TO CHAUCER, 1066—1400 . . .	19
CHAPTER III.	
FROM CHAUCER, 1400, TO ELIZABETH, 1559 . . .	41
CHAPTER IV.	
FROM 1559 TO 1603 . . . . .	59
CHAPTER V.	
FROM ELIZABETH'S DEATH TO THE RESTORATION,	
1603—1660 . . . . .	94
CHAPTER VI.	
FROM THE RESTORATION TO GEORGE III. 1660—	
1760 . . . . .	108
CHAPTER VII.	
PROSE LITERATURE FROM GEORGE III. TO	
VICTORIA, 1760—1837 . . . . .	126
CHAPTER VIII.	
POETRY, FROM 1730—1832 . . . . .	139

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1895



PRIMER  
OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE.

CHAPTER I.

WRITERS BEFORE THE NORMAN CONQUEST, 670—1066.

1. English Literature begins in England about 670.
2. War Poems.—*Beowulf*, and *fight at Finnesburg 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.—*Beda'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*, 900—  
925. *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

to a great company, which has been teaching and delighting the world for more than 1,000 years." And that is a fact in which those who write and those who read ought to feel a noble pride.

5. **The English and the Welsh.**—This literature is written in English, the tongue of our fathers. They lived, while this island of ours was still called Britain, in Sleswick, Jutland and Holstein; but, either because they were pressed from the inland or for pure love of adventure, they took to the sea, and, landing at various parts of Britain at various times drove back, after 150 years of hard fighting, the Britons, whom they called Welsh, to the land now called Wales, and to Cornwall. It is well for those who study English literature to remember that in these two places the Britons remained as a distinct race with a distinct literature of their own, because the stories and the poetry of the Britons crept afterwards into English literature and had a great influence upon it. The whole tale of King Arthur, of which English poetry and even English prose is so full, was a British tale. Otherwise we English have nothing to do with the old dwellers in our country. We drove these Britons, as the Primer of English History will describe, utterly away.

6. **The First English Poetry.**—When we came to Britain we were great warriors and great sea pirates—"sea wolves" as a Roman poet calls us; and all our poetry down to the present day is full of war, and still more of the sea. No nation has ever written so much sea-poetry. It was in the blood of our fathers, who chanted their sea war-songs as they sailed. But we were more than mere warriors. We were a home-loving people when we got settled either in Sleswick or in England, and all our literature from the first writings to the last is full of domestic love, the dearness of home, and the ties of kinsfolk. We were a religious people, even as heathen, still more

so when we became Christian; and our poetry is as much tinged with religion as with war. Whenever literature died down in England it rose again in poetry; and the first poetry at each recovery was religious, or linked to religion. We shall soon see that our first poems were of war and religion.

7. **The English Tongue.**—Of the language in which our literature is written we can say little here; it is fully discussed in the *Primer of English Grammar*. Of course it has changed its look very much since it began to be written. The earliest form of our English tongue is very different from modern English in form, pronunciation, and appearance, and one must learn it almost as if it were a foreign tongue; but still the language written in the year 700 is the same as that in which the prose of the Bible is written just as much as the tree planted a hundred years ago is the same tree to-day. It is this sameness of language, as well as the sameness of national spirit, which makes our literature one literature for 1200 years.

8. **Old English Poetry** was also different then from what it is now. It was not written in rime, nor were its syllables counted. The lines are short; the beat of the verse depends on the emphasis given by the use of the same letter, except in the case of vowels, at the beginning of words; and the emphasis of the words depends on the thought. The lines are written in pairs; and in the best work the two chief words in the first, and the one chief word in the second, usually begin with the same letter. Here is one example from a war-song:—

"Wigw wintrum geong  
Wordum mælde."

"Warrior of winters young  
With words spake."

After the Norman Conquest there gradually crept in a French system of rimes and of metres and accent which we find full-grown in Chaucer's works.