

**LITERATURE
PRIMERS. ENGLISH
LITERATURE**

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Literature Primers. English Literature by Stopford Brooke & John Richard Green & J. Harris
Patton

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STOPFORD BROOKE & JOHN RICHARD GREEN & J. HARRIS PATTON

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REV. STOPFORD BROOKE, M.A.

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WITH AN APPENDIX ON AMERICAN LITERATURE,

By J. HARRIS PATTON, M.A.,

AUTHOR OF THE "CONCISE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE," "NATURAL RESOURCES OF THE UNITED STATES," ETC.

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PRIMER

OF

ENGLISH LITERATURE.

CHAPTER I.

WRITERS BEFORE THE NORMAN CONQUEST, 670—1066.

1. Continental Poems.—*The Traveller's Song*.—*Deor's Complaint*.—*The Fight at Finnesburg*.—*Beowulf*, before 800.
2. Poems in England.—*Cædmon's Paraphrase*, 670.—*Judith*.—*Cynewulf's Poems*, and others in Exeter and Vercelli books.—*Odes* in A. S. Chronicle.—*Song of Brunanburh*, 937.—*Fight at Maldon*, 991.
3. PROSE.—*Bæda's translation of St. John*, 735.—King *Alfred's work during his two times of peace*, 880—893 and 897—901.—*Ælfric's prose works*, 990—995.—*Wulfstan's work*, 1002—1023.—*The English Chronicle*, ends 1154.

1. **The History of English Literature** is the story of what great English men and women thought and felt, and then wrote down in good prose and beautiful poetry in the English language. The story is a long one. It begins in England about the year 670, it begins still earlier on the Continent, in the old Angle-Land, and it is still going on in the year 1879. Into this little book then is to be put the story of more than 1,200 years of the thoughts, feelings, and imagination of a great people. 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 noble 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 English literature ought to feel a noble pride.

2. **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. The imaginative work of the conquered afterwards took captive their fierce conquerors.

3. **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 1,200 years.

4. **Old English Poetry** was also different in form from what it is now. It was not written in rime, nor were its syllables counted. Its essential elements were accent and alliteration.¹ Every long verse is divided into two half verses by a pause, and has four accented syllables, while the number of unaccented syllables is indifferent. These half verses are linked together by alliteration. Two accented syllables in the first half, and one in the second, begin with vowels (generally different vowels) or with the same consonant. Here is one example from a war song:—

“ <i>Wīgu</i> wintrum geong		<i>W</i> ordum mælde.
Warrior of winters young		With words spake.”

There is often only one alliterative letter in the first half verse. Sometimes there are more accents than four, but for the most part they do not exceed five in an ordinary long line. Sometimes in subjects requiring a more solemn or a more passionate treatment a metre is used in which unaccented syllables are regularly introduced, and the number of accented syllables also increased, and there are instances in which terminal rimes are employed. The metres are therefore varied, though not arbitrarily. But however they are varied, they are built on the simple original type of four accents and three alliterative syllables.

The emphasis of the words depends on the thought. Archaic forms and words are used, and metaphorical phrases and compound words, such as *war-addr* for arrow, or the *whale's-path* for the sea, or *gold-friend of men* for king. A great deal of parallelism, such as we find in early poetry, prevails. The same statement or thought is repeated twice in different words. “Then

¹ See, for the whole of this, Mr. Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, p. xviii. Clarendon Press Series.

saw they the sea head lands, the windy walls." The poetry is nevertheless very concise and direct. Much more attention is paid to the goodness of the matter than to the form. Things are said in the shortest way; there are scarcely any similes, and the metaphorical expressions are rare. We see in this the English character.

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. But unrimed and alliterative verse lasted in poetry to the reign of John, was revived in the days of Edward III. and Richard II., and alliteration was blended with rime up to the sixteenth century. The latest form of it occurs in Scotland.

5. **The First English Poems.**—Our forefathers, while as yet they were heathen and lived on the Continent, made poems, and of this *Continental poetry* we possess a few remains. The earliest perhaps is the *Song of the Traveller*, written, it seems likely, in the fifth century by a man who had lived in the fourth. It is not much more than a catalogue of names and of the places whither the minstrel went with the Goths; but where he expands, he shows so pleasant a pride in his profession, that he wins our sympathy. *Deor's Complaint* is another of these poems. The writer is a bard at the court of the Heodenings, from whom his foe takes by craft his goods. He writes this complaint to comfort his heart. "Weland (the great smith of the Eddas) and the kings of the Goths suffered and bore their weird, and so may I. The All-wise Lord of the World worketh many changes." This is the general argument, and it is the first touch of the sad fatalism which belongs to English poetry. *The Fight at Finnesburg* is the third fragment. It tells of the attack on Fin's palace in Friesland, and the whole story of which it is a part is alluded to in *Beowulf*. Of all the Old