A Desert-Island History

Fran Colman
University of Edinburgh


1. Introduction

The General Editor's Preface to The Cambridge History of the English Language (I and II) states an aim to 'provide a solid discussion of the full range of the history of English both to the anglist who does not specialise in the particular area to hand and to the general linguist who has no specialised knowledge of the history of English', and, in addition, to be of use to anyone with any reason to be interested in the history of English—i.e. what is commonly known as 'the general reader'. The difficulties of addressing a mixed audience need not be dwelt on; and the general editor of a multi-authored work has the difficulties multiplied by a further mixture: that of different theoretical frameworks in which the authors feel comfortable. The decision to avoid a 'party line' on linguistic theory, resulting at times in 'contrasting views of the same topic' is aptly justified by the success with which contrasts and contradictions emerge as 'stimulating and fruitful' (I, xviii), and by the rigorous cross-referencing between contributions to the volumes.

If there is such a thing as the 'general reader', I cannot, however, pretend to be a 'general reviewer'. What follows reflects the expectations of one of only one (the anglist) camp of the intended audience as to the nature of a 'solid discussion covering the full range of the history of English'.

I will take a 'solid' account of a language as one that makes strong (testable) claims about the systematic structure of the various levels of the grammar (phonology, morphology, syntax), in terms of the contrastive units or categories, their possible combinations (sequential
or componential), and their means of expression, or exponents. It will also describe the orthographic system(s) in which early stages of the language are recorded. Descriptions of languages no longer spoken are susceptible to different analyses depending on theory, in the same way as even directly observable present-day languages (e.g., vocalic length in Received Pronunciation may be treated as phonemic or subphonemic).1 In addition, even an account of early orthographies as primary potential evidence for stages of the language rests on reconstruction. A 'solid' account will therefore acknowledge controversial or alternative analyses that may impinge on the picture presented.

The 'full range' of the history of a language invites expectation of coverage of all recorded diachronic variation (Cambridge History, I and II, from the beginnings of English to 1476). And the treatment of this type of range is appropriately guided by the principle that 'synchrony and diachrony are intertwined'. Most chapters in Cambridge History I and II overtly offer synchronic accounts for earlier and later stages as bases for reconstructing the types of changes that occurred between them. This relates to other aspects in which 'range' is to be expected: observations, or claims, about what changes have occurred naturally invite observations or theories about why languages change. Answers to this invite, among other topics (such as perceptual and/or auditory factors in language acquisition), reconstructions of variation other than diachronic: the volumes recurrently focus in particular on regional and social variation. Each chapter is concluded by suggestions for further reading on the topic. A full bibliography is supplied at the end of each volume, along with a Glossary of Linguistic Terms.

What follows offers summaries of the import of each of the non-onomastic chapters, before turning more detailed attention to the treatment of Old and Middle English proper names.

2. Non-Onomastic Chapters

Volume I.

Chapter 1, 'Introduction' (Richard Hogg), is important not merely as a 'scene-setter', but for information that underpins and informs reconstructions of the language offered in the ensuing chapters. Chapter 2, 'The Place of English in Germanic and Indo-European' (Alfred Bammeesberger), offers, in the traditional presentation of italicised and asterisked forms, the time-honoured Neogrammarian concepts of 'regularity of sound-change and the systematic character of diachronic change in general' (p. 27). The treatment of inflectional morphology focuses on the noun, adjective, and verb. That of word order (under syntax) prompts some quibbles about the types of evidence invoked by Bammeesberger (e.g. the order of elements in the first line of a poem—Aeneid, 'Arma virumque cano'—may not be universally accepted as evidence of Latin as a language with 'object–verb' word-order). The lexicon is discussed in the context of rigorous search for cognates. Chapter 3, 'Phonology and Morphology' (Richard Hogg), offers precise claims and precise notation about systematic changes from pre-OE to late OE, with admirable information on and evaluation of sources of evidence. Particularly welcome (and notably absent from existing reference works) is the evidence for the paradigm as 'the dominant feature of inflexional morphology' in OE, summarised as: 'the paradigm . . . was able to control, cause or restrict particular instances of linguistic change during the period' (pp. 123–24). Honours students have found this chapter irresistible, along with Chapter 5, 'Semantics and Vocabulary' (Dieter Kastovsk). Here, again, are strong claims: about the preservation of ablaut (resulting in stem-variability) as a feature of the OE derivational morphological system, and the transition from 'stem-based to word-based inflexion and derivation' (p. 397) in ME, brought about by the 'collapse of the OE morphophonemic system because of its rapidly growing opacity' (p. 298).

Chapter 4, 'Syntax' (Elizabeth Closs Traugott), primarily compares ninth-century Ælfredian with tenth- and eleventh-century Ælfrikan syntax, offering in conclusion a summary of diachronic differences in term of 'tendencies rather than radical changes' (p. 281), in an approach acknowledged as 'relatively informal' (p. 286). Chapter 6, 'Old English Dialects' (Thomas Toon), rather belies the implied scope of its title. Some of the information on origins of OE dialects overlaps with that in the more critical survey in Hogg's 'Introduction', and not all dialects are treated in equal detail. The focus, as in Toon's Politics,2


2 Thomas Toon, The Politics of Early Old English Sound Change (New York, 1983).
is on the period of the Mercian hegemony, in an interpretation of
spelling variation as direct evidence of phonetic change. While 'a
review and re-evaluation of the methodological assumptions that
determined the direction of previous studies of the earliest Old English
dialects' (p. 434) is welcome (although I miss any reference to de
Camp's work on socio-economic factors in putative spreads of dialect
features), admonitions about taking manuscript spelling variation
'seriously' (p. 445) seem at odds with some of the interpretations of
OE spellings. For instance, back-spellings such as blæf for laf
'remainder' are more plausibly interpreted as evidence of the
development of a phonotactic constraint on initial /h/ + /l/ (despite
the resulting loss of a minimal pair with blæf 'leaf') than of the scribe's
representation of a 'sub-phonemic level in his orthographic habits' (p.
443; see further Colman, 'What is in a Name?', on 'overliteral'
interpretations of spelling variation). (A sense of unease is encouraged
by the repeated reference to 'Anderson' 1972 (p. 436, and
Bibliography) for 'Andersen.') Chapter 8, 'Literary Language'
(Malcolm Godden), discusses both verse (including a description of
metrical patterns and alliteration, and the associated use of lexical
variation and repetition, as well as collocation) and prose (again dealing
with vocabulary as well as grammar, as well as the role of rhythm and
alliteration in the prose of, for instance, Ælfric), and assesses possible
evidence from translations from Latin, as well as from prose into verse
(e.g. by Ælfric), and the influence of classical rhetoric. Evidence is
offered 'both of individual experimentation and of individual concern
about language choice' (p. 491). Interesting questions are sometimes
unanswerable: for instance, the interpretation of the preface to
Ælfric's Latin Grammar as evidence that 'literary prose was quite
distinct from the ordinary spoken language'.

Volume 2

Limitations of space restrict the following to a simple list of contents.
Chapter 1, 'Introduction' (Norman Blake), includes a survey of the
history of ME studies. Chapter 2, 'Phonology and Morphology'

(Roger Lass), takes a reconstructed late OE phonological system as the
input to the various ME systems. Inflectional morphology embraces
identification of major syntactic classes. Chapter 3, 'Middle English
Dialectology' (James Milroy) offers, as the title promises, discussion of
alternative theories and methodologies, with sections on geographical
variation and on variation-theory invoking the role of individual
speakers in language variety. Chapter 4, 'Syntax' (Olga Fischer), relates
changes in ME syntax to, among other things, changes in inflexional
morphology, dealing with phrases within the clause, as well as with
various types of sentences (including composite ones). Chapter 5,
'Lexis and Semantics' (David Burnley), deals with types of
word-formation (including loan-words) and semantic change. Chapter
6, 'The Literary Language' (Norman Blake), covers early and later ME
literature, with a section devoted to selected features of the literary
language.

3. Onomastics

Cecily Clark's chapters on 'Onomastics' (I, 452-489, and II, 542-606)
are full of information and critical assessment of existing views, with a
particular focus on what might be deduced about socio-economic and
political situations reflected in the types of name forms (e.g. I, 453, 456
and 461-462; II, 545 and 569). And, of course, reconstructions of such
situations in turn inform interpretation of early name-forms. On the
one hand, for instance, distribution of familial by-names, 'especially
frequent among peasants' (II, 569), may offer insights into social
stratification. On the other, hypotheses about, for instance, the
currency (or not) of French as a first or second language after the
Norman Conquest influence interpretations of spelling (and
phonological) forms of middle English personal names (II, 548; and see
further below).

An account of the major sources for OE and ME name-forms is
followed in each volume by a description of name-types relating to
anthroponymy and toponymy. Anthroponyms are subcategorised as
idioms (including 'nicknames'), bynames, and family-names, the last
of which do not become established until the ME period (see II, 567,
for criteria for classifying a name as a family one). Toponyms can be
either habitative or topographical (see I, 473, on overlap of these
categories). For OE, the corpus selected as the focus is that represen...
in Bede’s *Historia*; for ME the London Lay Subsidy Rolls are the major source used. But constant comparison is made with data from sources of other periods (see e.g. I, 461), in keeping with the concerns of the volumes with diachronic variation, and important for attempts to trace changes in fashions in types of nomenclature.

The treatment of proper names identifies two related properties of ‘Names’, both of which are significant for any assessment of the role of early English forms of proper names as potential evidence for reconstructing the history of English. In the introduction to each chapter, two crucial points are made. One is the ultimate derivation of names from common words (even if not those ‘of the language they currently grace’ II, 542), and their function as part of the everyday language (I, 452). The significance of this is worth emphasising: that OE proper names were formed from elements cognate with current common words allows the present-day linguist access to potential evidence of phonological variation, akin to that gleaned from spellings of common words. The second point concerns the specialised semantic function of proper names, specifically as ‘pointers’, which correlates with their syntactic and morphological behaviour. This function may account, too, for phonological (and concomitant orthographic) obscuration of the relationship between a proper name and its ultimate common-word cognate. (On the deictic function of personal names, and arguments against assigning ‘sense’ to them, see Colman, ‘What is in a Name?’ and *Money Talks.*  

Recognition of the specialised function of proper names hints at the concept of an onomatonic system, different from the system of common words. Such a concept presumably underlies the important suggestion (II, 593) that we ‘postulate a non-standard, indeed specifically onomatonic, branch of English phonology, compatible rather than identical with the general one and owing its more far-reaching operation to the special semantic status of names’ (see the examples of native assimilatory and reductive processes in place-names, II, 593–594). Elsewhere, too, phonological behaviour of proper names (personal and place) is attributed to ‘loss of denotation’, or ‘semantic emptying’ (e.g. II, 582). But this concept of an onomatonic system is not overt at the outset as an underlying principle: it emerges late in the discussion. So, for instance, ‘sporadic palatalisation and assimilation of *-ing* > [indo3]’, in, e.g., Wantage < OE *Waneting* is cited as a ‘complication’, open to various ‘explanations’ (I, 476), rather than as a possible clue to the independent behaviour of names. The significance of the observation that OE personal-name themes ‘were based upon roots also used for forming nouns and adjectives’ (I, 457) is twofold: it accords with an analysis of proper names as declension-class words, primarily as the most ‘basic’ type of noun (‘naming word’); and it implies an inventory of identifiable units within the onomatonic system, (in origin) overlapping with, but much more restricted than, the units within the morphological and syntactic systems in which common words function. That the system may be defined further in terms of combinatorial possibilities of the units is hinted at (I, 459) by the notice of certain forms in Bede’s *Historia* as occurring only as deuteronomes or as protothemes in dithematic names (perhaps, then, at odds with the claim in II, 554, of an ‘endless variety’ of OE personal name permutations; see further Colman, *Money Talks*, pp. 25–28, on combinatorial possibilities of themes in late OE personal names). The suggestion that, for OE personal name elements, ‘Semantic classification is revealing’ (I, 457) does not specify what might be revealed. Yet attempts at semantic classification can be vital for attempts to unravel contested etymologies. And etymology is vital for the interpretation of a spelling form of a name-element as potential evidence of phonological variation. So, for instance, Smart’s rejection of *seolc* ‘silk’, on taxonomic grounds, as an etymon for an element spelled *seolc*, supports interpretation of c as evidence of strengthening of the fricative [x] to a stop [k], in the form of an element cognate with *seolh* ‘seal’ (see further Colman, *Money Talks*, p. 112). It is, of course, important to distinguish the significance of semantic classification for present-day onomastics and linguists from any implication that proper names themselves have sense (see above); and the appropriate observation is made that ‘compounding of themes into compounds was ruled by onomatonic, not semantic choice’ (I, 458).

With respect to exponents of categories within a system, Clark’s treatment identifies processes of compounding and affixation in the

---


formation of personal and place-names, and raises interesting problems of potential interest for morphology and phonology. The observation that in compound personal names inflections are added only to the deuterotHEME (I, 457), true also of common-word compounds in both early and present-day English, brings to mind forms such as Burewine (BURG-AIR), cildabynde ('child minder'), and the question of the function of the medial vowel. In the latter form, a just could represent a genitive plural inflection; but e in the name form is clearly 'inorganic', suggesting that such medial vowels can be taken as 'compositional' (Colman, Money Talks, p. 43, and references there). That place-names appear with inflected first elements (e.g. Ebbes ham, 'Epsom', I, 474) is connected with observation about the blurred distinction between place-name and descriptive phrase (I, 471). There may be a clue here, that if the first element of a place-name is inflected, then that 'name' is not a compound place-name, but a syntactic phrase.

With respect to suffixes on monothematic personal names, e.g., Brovd, the problem of distinguishing inflectional from derivational status is well addressed (I, 459): does the a represent a weak feminine inflection, or a hypocoristic form? Suffixation can also be related to root modification: notably, modification of the vowel by i-mutation, as in, for instance, Sty, cognate with North Germanic styrr, noun, 'struggle'. That an element such as ing can follow theme-forms lacking i-mutation, e.g. in Duding, invites discussion of productivity of suffixes after the time of the sound-change, and, indeed, whether ing is to be taken as a suffix or a deuterotHEME in a compound structure. It would be interesting to be able to assess whether 'ablaut' was as strong a characteristic in the morphology of OE proper names as in that of common-word derivation (cf. Kastovsky, 'Semantics and Vocabulary', Cambridge History, I, chapter 5).

The two chapters cover an impressive range, charting changes in types of nomenclature (e.g. the introduction of by-names and the development of family names), with persistent critical assessment of the putative role of external influences, and attention to the problems of identifying native versus foreign names.

If not always organised in a way transparent to this reviewer, the onomastic chapters constitute a 'solid' account of early English onomastics, covering a 'full range' of types of nomenclature, and the types of variation (diachronic, socio-political, regional) to which they were (and are) susceptible.

Due attention is given to the nature of the evidence for reconstructing OE and ME onomastics: notably, problems of interpreting orthography. For example, the use of t and d for [θ] and [ð] in fourteenth-century tax rolls, seen in the light of a Latin-based orthography, may be a matter of 'graphic decorum rather than in any sense connected with pronunciation' or attributable to 'the inability of the French scribes to pronounce these sounds' (II, 548–549: and see here too, for the important warning against reliance on modern translators and indexers, rather than original texts, for attributing onomastic status to Latinate or Anglo-French forms). In particular, reconstructions of early English proper names are tested against possible present-day versions (see, e.g., II, 565), with all the appropriate consideration of possible spelling pronunciations (e.g. 'local [sauθwel] reported for the Nottinghamshire [səðəl] Southwell': II, 594), and mergers of historically discrete name-elements (e.g. -hamm and -holm: I, 487). 'Anecdotal evidence' for choices of personal names (such as the instigation of being mocked for the Northumbrian to change his name from Tosti to 'the more up-to-date William': II, 560) is aptly invoked where available.

** * * *

There are some books that anyone working on English historical linguistics has to take to that island, whether desert or Greek, or to whatever area of the house is used as a study, simply because they are there: because they provide the fullest available source of portable information, and, if in parts not consistently, a satisfying and illuminating account. Cambridge History I and II are desert-island books.