University of Groningen

Review

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Published in:
Anglia-Zeitschrift für englische philologie

DOI:
[10.1515/ang-2016-0056](https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2016-0056)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Dekker, K. (2016). Review: John Niles, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066–1901: Remembering, Forgetting, Deciphering and Renewing the Past* (Oxford, 2015). *Anglia-Zeitschrift für englische philologie*, 134(3), 536-539. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2016-0056>

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John D. Niles. *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066–1901: Remembering, Forgetting, Deciphering, and Renewing the Past.* Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015, xvii + 425 pp., 55 figures, £ 60.00/€ 81.00.

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DOI 10.1515/anglia-2016-0056

The history of Old English studies is almost as old as the study of Old English itself. As early as 1549, John Bale's Preface to *The Laborious Journey and Serche of Johan Leylande* describes the plight of English (including Old English) manuscripts and the efforts made by the antiquarian John Leland in finding and identifying them. Abraham Wheelock, the first lecturer in Anglo-Saxon antiquities at the University of Cambridge, outlines the early history of Old English scholarship in his *Address to the Reader* of his 1643 edition of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* in Old English (B1r–2r). Wheelock's idea to give a survey of Old English scholarship at the beginning of his edition was copied by Robert Meadows White, Rawlinson Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, whose introduction to his *Ormulum* edition of 1852 likewise begins with a lengthy account of the history of Old English studies. Remarkably, White makes no references to John Peterham's *Historical Sketch of the Progress and Present State of Anglo-Saxon Literature in England* (1840), the first book-length study of this subject, which started a tradition that includes well-known works such as Eleanor Adams's *Old English Scholarship in England from 1566–1800* (1917), and, lesser known studies, such as J. A. W. Bennett's Oxford PhD thesis entitled *The History of Old English and Old Norse Studies in England from the Time of Francis Junius till the End of the Eighteenth Century* (1938).

It is in this long and rich tradition that we have to consider John D. Niles's *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066–1901*, which presents in xvii + 425 pages a history of Old English scholarship up to and including the King Alfred centenary celebrations in 1901. This book is the result of Niles's profound interest in all matters Anglo-Saxon for over forty years, and provides a reflection of his wide-ranging knowledge and engaging insights. It is important from the start to bear in mind what Niles says about the book's intended audience: "younger scholars who are [...] staking out a place in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies", "scholars who wish to situate their research in relation to that of their predecessors", and "readers who know very little about the Anglo-Saxon period and its modern recovery, and who doubt that they need to know more" (x). This statement of purpose by implication also makes clear what the book is not, and is not intended to be: a

comprehensive history or encyclopaedic survey of the history of Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) scholarship. Its title, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066–1901*, connects Niles's study with recent seminal works such as Allen Frantzen's *Desire for Origins* (1997), as well as post-Frantzen publications that focused on the history of ideas in relation to identity, but also indicates the direction in which Niles invites his readers to think: Anglo-Saxon England as a literary, historical, social, and perhaps also a philological idea. This invitation is precisely the core of the book's major challenge: how to distil the ever-changing idea of Anglo-Saxon England from the factual history of scholarship.

The book's nine chapters discuss 'the study of Anglo-Saxon England' in a chronological order, from "The Impact of the Norman Conquest" (ch. 1) to "Anglo-Saxon England and the Empire" (ch. 9), with one geographical excursion to "Old English Studies in North America" (ch. 8) which concentrated in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Each chapter is divided into bite-size subsections with convenient titles which reflect the author's selections of what he considers relevant topics within the period under discussion. The number of notes at the end of each chapter has been kept limited, but each block of footnotes ends with a list of references to works that offer further reading specific to the chapter's themes. In addition, each chapter concludes with a selection of one to four 'vignettes': additional short essays on particular topics or people discussed in the chapter. The advantage of these vignettes is that they prevent long digressions in the chapters, while allowing space for particular issues. Some vignettes are, however, more self-contained than others. With an entire section on John Milton (92–96), a vignette on Milton at the end of the chapter seems an unnecessary break-up, and the same can be said for the section and vignette on William L'Isle's *Saxon Treatise*. Others, however, direct the attention to overarching problems, such as Vignettes 1 and 2 on the use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' as opposed to 'Old English', or to interesting side issues such as the names of the runes in the *Rune Poem* (Vignette 10), as published in George Hickes's *Thesaurus* (1703–1705). Most importantly, the vignettes enable Niles to trace the textual analysis of earlier scholars (e.g. Henry of Huntingdon's translation of the *Battle of Brunanburh*) or compare editions (such as Thorkelin's and Kemble's versions of *Beowulf*), thereby allowing the readers to experience how earlier generations struggled with Old English and how, e.g. in the case of the American founding father Thomas Jefferson, they came up with ingenious solutions to overcome these problems.

A book of this kind is by nature selective, in terms of the scholars and topics discussed, the amount of attention and detail spent on each, and the choice of secondary literature that is referred to. Such choices are, of course, always debatable, but should ideally serve the ultimate goals of the book. Positively important in light of these constraints is the considerable attention given to John

Mitchell Kemble (1807–1857), who dominates ch. 7, on “The Triumph of Philology”. Characterised as “Anglo-Saxon Meteor” (229), Kemble played a pivotal role in the transition towards modern philology in England by illuminating his discipline through his international outlook and methodological advances. By concentrating on Kemble’s attitude to philology as “a love of learning and literature” (241) that transcended the artificial and often unhelpful boundaries between linguistics, literature, history and archaeology, while never losing sight of the relevant details, Niles illustrates not only Kemble’s importance for nineteenth-century scholarship, but also holds him up as an example to us, today, rightly regretting the fact that “Kemble’s style of philology has found so few successors” (242). The downside of Niles’s focus on Kemble is that ch. 7 leaves relatively little room for those scholars who were unaffected by Kemble’s ideas or did not match his standards. Most notably this applies to Joseph Bosworth, whose work is discussed in just over a single page (246–247) and only after that of Kemble. In the context of the history of ideas, Bosworth precedes Kemble, even though he outlived him, and it would have been more logical to have discussed Bosworth first.

Despite such minor quibbles about organisation, Niles’s choices are, on the whole, expedient. Whereas most histories of Old English scholarship start with the sixteenth century, Niles begins with the post-conquest period, discussing major historians such as William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon, as well the glossing of Old English manuscripts by the ‘Worcester Tremulous Hand’ and the ‘matter of Anglo-Saxon England’ in Middle English literature. There is no room here to list all pioneers of Old English working in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, but anyone reading through chs. 2–5 has a good overview of the main players and their contributions. Important innovators such as Richard Rowlands Verstegan and Elizabeth Elstob receive extra attention. Towards the end of the book, in the chapters on “Old English Studies in North America” and “Anglo-Saxon England and the Empire”, there is more emphasis on the history of ideas and less on the methodology and output of Old English scholarship, although these aspects never disappear completely. Niles’s discussion of the distinctive role played by Old English in the USA opens up a panorama of purposes for which Old English was studied there, varying from the purely ideological to the academic. The latter purpose gave rise to a remarkable wave of books printed in the USA for the purpose of undergraduate studies, including the convenient editions of Old English texts edited by American professors in the Belles-Lettres Series of English literature from its beginnings to 1100. Even more broadly ideological are the literary and artistic applications of the idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Victorian England, culminating in the Alfred centenary celebrations of 1901.

That most readers (and reviewers) will have a wish list after reading *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England* is, no doubt, what Niles intended, and speaks for his

book. Personally, I would have appreciated more attention to lexicography and glossography, which was a very important pillar of Old English studies in the post-medieval period, not only in England but also on the Continent, where the Hamburg philologist Friedrich Lindenbrog (1573–1648) and his Dutch counterpart Johannes de Laet (1581–1649) independently worked on dictionaries of Old English. Another link that I missed is the supposed kinship between the Anglo-Saxons and the Frisians, explored, for example, by Francis Junius and Thomas Marshall in the seventeenth century and, as late as 1869, by the Dorset poet William Barnes in an essay entitled “The Frisians: The Fatherstock of the Saxon-English People”, published in his *Early England and the Saxon English* (141–178).

With its 55 illustrations, a list of landmark publications from 1549 to 1899, a substantial bibliography and an index, John Niles’s book on *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066–1901* is a welcome and valuable addition to the historiographical tradition of Old English and Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Niles has shown in an engaging way that the history of this discipline is in itself a worthy subject of study, not just by emeritus professors and professional academics, but especially by students and graduate students who played a role in the book’s inception (xi), and for whom this book is eminently suitable.