

Jorge Luis Bueno Alonso 2007: *La épica de la Inglaterra anglosajona. Historia y textos desde el auge de Mercia al declive de la monarquía (750-1016)*. Foreword by Santiago Corugedo. Vigo: Universidade de Vigo, Servizo de Publicacións. vi + 157 pp. ISBN: 978-84-8158-348-9 pb

Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre
Universidad de Murcia
jcconde@um.es

The rise of English studies in Spain over the last thirty years has yielded a score of publications by Spanish scholars on the various fields of the discipline. The domain of English medieval studies at large and, in particular, that of Old English or Anglo-Saxon are no exception. A survey of bibliographical repertoires evinces that both have been extraordinarily attractive to experts in English philology trained in Spain. For instance, the monograph *Old and Middle English Studies in Spain. A Bibliography* (Bravo, Galván and González 1994) includes over 800 entries, covering publications from the late 1970s. A recent, more specific, overview on 'Old English Studies in Spain: Past, Present and Future?', especially commissioned for the *Old English Newsletter* (Conde-Silvestre and Salvador 2006), consists of over 250 selected bibliographical items on Old English language and literature published by nearly one hundred different Spanish scholars.¹

This triumphant note should, however, be tempered concerning the Spanish-authored articles and textbooks on the history of the English Middle Ages and, in particular, of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms before the Norman conquest. With the exception of some translations into Spanish of general histories of England and the European Middle Ages, the majority of the publications by Spanish authors on the so-called Germanic 'dark ages' refer to the Franks, the Vikings or, in more general terms, to the 'barbarian invasions'. Early exceptions were Vicente Clavel's *Historia de Inglaterra desde los orígenes hasta el fin de la Edad Media* (1948), Micaela Misiego Llagostera's *Los orígenes de la civilización anglo-sajona: Desde el siglo VI hasta la batalla de Hastings* (1970) and, more recently, *Historia del pensamiento anglosajón. Edad Media*, by Bonnín Aguiló (1996), which, despite its title, covers the whole span of the English Middle Ages. An additional constraint comes from the relatively scant attention given to the translation of the original texts informing the history of Anglo-Saxon England. Indeed, with the exception of *Beowulf*, with four translations published since 1962 (Vera Pérez 1962; Bravo García 1981; Lerate 1986; Cañete Álvarez Torrijos 1991)² and

¹ Numbers illustrating this wealth of interest would have undoubtedly increased if the papers delivered at the twenty conferences held since 1988 by the Spanish Society for Mediaeval English Language and Literature (SELIM) had been counted.

² *Beowulf* has also been translated into Catalan (Campos 1998) and a Galician version is now being prepared by Bueno Alonso and Fernández Soneira (2005). The latest Spanish version of the poem (Roa Vial 2007) was published in 2007 following the tracks of the Hollywood movie *Beowulf*. The translator, however, does not explain his technique in adapting the Old English original, or even acknowledges whether he has followed it at all.

some excerpts of Anglo-Saxon heroic verse translated by Bravo (1998), attention has hardly been paid to the translation of other texts, such as *The Dream of the Rood* (Fernández Nistal 1992), the so-called elegies (Rivero Taravillo 1988; Conde-Silvestre 1994) and some riddles from the Exeter Book (Santano and Britwistle 1992). Regarding prose, a general selection was translated by de la Cruz in his *La prosa de los anglo-sajones* (1983), and some hagiographic texts from Ælfric in *Héroes y santos en la literatura anglo-sajona* by Bravo and Gonzalo Abascal (1994). Worthy of special attention is the general introduction to Old English literature with a selection of texts in translation *Literatura anglo-sajona y antología bilingüe del inglés antiguo* by Antonio Bravo (1982).

Indeed, Bueno Alonso's book, with his twofold aim, makes a lot of sense in this context. Firstly, the author engages with a narrative account of the main events in the history of Anglo-Saxon England and, secondly, he supplements this presentation with the translation into Spanish of the main primary sources – the cultural products – that have informed the previous task. Thus, he manages to present before the reader the close connections between history and literature in the early English Middle Ages (4). In accordance with this pattern, the book has two main parts respectively devoted to 'The Epic of History' (*La épica de la historia*, 8-108) and 'The Epic of Texts' (*La épica de los textos*, 109-145).

In his epic narration of the history of the Anglo-Saxons, Bueno skips the so-called 'settlement period' (mid-5th to early 7th century) and starts with a section (11-17) on the rise of Mercia during the reigns of Penda (632-655) and Æthelbald (716-757). This decision seems to be grounded in the privilege of textual sources in his account, disregarding the field of archaeology. The account of the origins of Mercia is followed by ten pages (18-27) on the flourishing reign of Offa (757-796), the leading monarch who extended the realm northwards and southwards, kept the kingdom peaceful after digging a ditch along the Welsh border and stimulated trade on an international scale, establishing connections with the Franks and Charlemagne on an equal, friendly footing. The main sources that Bueno Alonso uses in his account are manuscripts A and E of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (the *Parker* and *Laud* chronicles), as well as the classical handbooks by Stenton (1943), Blair (1956), Campbell *et al.* (1991) and Whitelock (1952). In my opinion, the exclusive use of these (by now) traditional materials is problematic, in so far as the propagandistic aim of the *Chronicle* is not sufficiently emphasized, to the extent that some of them have tended to insist on the construction of Anglo-Saxon identity in parallel with political unity and 'nationhood'. This slight drawback persists in section 1.3. (27-36) which tackles the reigns of kings of Wessex, like Egbert (802-839), Æthelberht (860-865) and Æthelred (865-871), as well as dealing with the arrival of the Danes. At this stage, traditional historiography, relying on the *Parker Chronicle*, had aimed at drawing a 'Viking other' against which English identity was constructed, so that the battles and strifes between both communities were often interpreted as trials necessary for the formation of a unified kingdom (see, among others, Frantzen 1990; Nelson 2003). Indeed, Bueno Alonso, following this traditional trails, is not oblivious to the approach; accordingly, Egbert's kingdom is said to have established "*las bases de la resistencia inglesa a las invasiones danesas*" (31) ('the foundations for the English resistance against the viking invasion'), or, in general, to be "[*crucial*] *en el avance de los pueblos ingleses hacia la unidad política*" (29) ('basic for the advance of the English

people towards political unity’); similarly, Alfred the Great appears in the horizon as the only leader with the necessary expertise to lead the defence of the Anglo-Saxons against the encroaching enemy: “*un hombre experto [...] a cargo del mando supremo de las tropas anglosajonas [...] que consiguió que defendiesen la tierra y se enfrentasen a los daneses*” (36).

Interestingly, this tone is sensibly moderated when the settlement of the Scandinavians in the Danelaw is dealt with in sections 1.4. (36-55) and 1.5. (55-86). On the one hand, the author relies on a variety of primary sources, like manuscripts C and D of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (*Abingdon* and *Worcester*), as well as on some recent studies, like Smyth (1995; see also Horspool 2007), which have questioned many of the accepted assumptions about the nationalistic motives behind king Alfred’s achievements, as propagandistically expressed by Victorian historiography. Additionally, these sections also benefit from the necessary reference to aspects of cultural and socio-economic history, which go beyond the chronological description of political events. Thus, the program to encourage cultural revival by promoting translation is given extensive treatment – incidentally introducing some of the texts appended at the end of the volume – and similar heed is paid to the economic benefits derived from the peaceful coexistence of Danes and Anglo-Saxons and their trading contacts in the territory of the ‘five boroughs’ (Lincoln, Leicester, Derby, Nottingham and Stamford) as attested in other, less official, sources.³ This perspective allows Bueno Alonso to moderate the view that had guided previous sections and accept that “*las relaciones entre ambos bandos no eran tan hostiles como nos hacen pensar las continuas referencias militares de los documentos históricos que poseemos*” (59) (‘the relationship between both parties was not as hostile as the military references in historical written documents seem to imply’). The wealth of information gathered on this period also allows the author to deal more extensively with aspects of the reigns of king Edward of Wessex (899-924) and queen Æthelflæd of Mercia (911-918), as well as with the settlement of York by Norwegians in the early 10th century. The same extensive, unbiased treatment is given to the reign of Athelstan (927-939) and the events leading to the celebrated battle of Brunanburh (937), and Edmund (939-946) who gradually conquered York and the five boroughs, as celebrated in the battle poem from the *Chronicle* ‘The Conquest of the Five Boroughs’ (942).

The last section of ‘The Epic of History’ deals with the decline of the Anglo-Saxon monarchy (86-106), although, in my opinion, this stereotyped label does not do justice to an outstanding figure from the late 10th century: Edgar of Wessex (959-975), extensively celebrated in poems from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ‘The Coronation of Edgar’ (973) and ‘The death of Edgar’ (975). During his peaceful reign the monastic reforms undertaken by Cluniac monks in France reached England, through the leadership of Dunstan (909-988), Æthelwold of Winchester (909-984) and Oswald of Worcester (died 992). This is a best-documented period, when a majority of the OE manuscripts that have been preserved were copied, and it has also attracted the attention of some scholars from Spain, like Sara Pons Sanz (2004) or Mercedes

³ In Spain, Pérez Raja has recently dealt with this issue in “The Anglo-Scandinavian connection: reading between lines and layers” (2007).

Salvador (2006), among others. In fact, as Bueno Alonso sensibly remarks, Anglo-Saxon England declined later, during the reign of Æthelred *unræd* ('ill-advised') (978-1016), when a succession of violent Viking raids and the state necessity of buying them off unchained economic and political instability which was to last until the Norman conquest.

All in all, despite the flaw of a non-independent treatment of the pre-Alfredian period, this introductory review of the history of Anglo-Saxon England fulfils the author's desideratum by showing that "*la sociedad anglosajona dista mucho de ser simple y tanto su organización político-social, como los avatares históricos por los que transcurrieron los designios de su sociedad son complejos y necesitan del análisis de diferentes perspectivas*" (107) ('Anglo-Saxon society is far from being simple; in fact it is fairly complex regarding both the historical events surrounding it and its own socio-political organization; as a result it deserves a profound analysis from different perspectives').

The second part, 'The Epic of Texts' ('La épica de los textos', 109-45) includes five Old English texts in Spanish translation which punctuate the preceding historical account. A selection of passages from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the period 675-994 opens this chapter (section 2.1, 111-26), most of them translated into Spanish for the first time. The author includes here many of the texts that have informed his account of the history of the Anglo-Saxons, rendered in the simple, repetitive and asyndetic narrative style of the original. This chapter covers certain other Old English prose texts, some translated into Spanish for the first time. Firstly, there is the complete letter by king Alfred introducing the translation of Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis* (section 2.2, 126-30), also known as 'On the State of Learning in England' (Whitelock 1983): a key text on medieval culture and language planning. Secondly, the book includes the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* by Archbishop Wulfstan of York (died 1023) (section 2.5, 138-45), highly appraised as a piece of rhetorically well-constructed prose, touching on the devastating moral effects of the Viking attacks in the late-tenth-century and interpreting them as a sign of divine punishment at the turn of the millennium. Bueno Alonso carefully manages to transmit the rhythmic prose of the original, as the following sample illustrates:

[P]or sus muchos pecados y fechorías éste se ha convertido en un país de pecadores. Por los pecados mortales y los crímenes, por la avaricia y la codicia, por el robo y el pillaje, por la venta de seres humanos, por los vicios infieles, por el fraude y el engaño, por el quebranto de la ley, por la sedición, por el ataque a los parientes, por las matanzas masivas, por el adulterio, por las injurias a los que profesan las órdenes sagradas, por el incesto y la fornicación. (143)

One may say that this translator is at his best with complex texts. And this idea seems to be confirmed after reading the four poetic texts from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* included in the appendices: 'The Battle of Brunanburh' (937) (in section 2.3, 130-34), 'The Conquest of the Five Boroughs' (942), 'The Coronation of Edgar' (973) and 'The Death of Edgar' (975), all of them in section 2.4 (134-37). Bueno Alonso acknowledges here previous translations into Spanish by Bravo (1998) and Lerate (1986). However, in contrast to the common practice of translating Anglo-Saxon poetry into Spanish prose,

he renders them all as proper poetry. One basic challenge, in this respect, is the four-stressed, rhythmic, alliterative patterning of the OE original, compressed into highly synthetic syntactic structures, in contrast with the expanding, analytic syntax of contemporary Spanish, which favours a syllabic organization of the speech chain, for which alliteration is uncommon. This is not the place to discuss Bueno's technique as a translator –the author himself describes it in a presentation of his own translation of *Beowulf* into Galician (Bueno Alonso y Fernández Soneira 2005). Suffice it to say that – in the opinion of this reviewer– he manages to convey the rhythmic and alliterative effects of the original by a general recourse to three or four full meaning words per line and the use of enjambment to avoid the deferring effect of Spanish syntax, as in lines 81-86 of *Brunanburh*, where the beasts of battle are depicted:

*Cadáveres y carroña para el cuervo negro
dejaron detrás, para que disfrute
el del compacto pico y negra cubierta,
también para el águila de pardo plumaje
y blanca rabadilla, belicosa ave, y para
el lobo en los bosques, bestia gris de la guerra.* (134)

The author's capacity as a translator of Old English poetry is also reflected in his gift for recreating other basic literary conventions such as *variatio*, i.e. the accumulated references to the same entities by different means of expression and with distinctive emphasis, or the special type of metaphor known as *kenning*, both reflected in the following description of the sun, from *The Battle of Brunanburh* (lines 19-22):

*[C]uerpo celeste, candela del creador eterno,
que suavemente, sobre la superficie del suelo,
se deslizó hasta desplomarse desvanecida,
preciosa criatura, al proceder a su puesta.* (132)

To round up this review I find no better way than to appropriate, with apologies, the following words from the prologue signed by Professor Santiago Corugedo. In his well-informed opinion, this book “[n]o solamente proporciona [...] una aproximación a los reinos y literatura de los anglosajones [...] sino un epítome adecuado, y en su mayoría inédito, de unas colecciones de textos que nos ayudan [...] a ser un poco partícipes de los comportamientos y hechos heroicos de un pasado relativamente remoto en el tiempo, pero relativamente contemporáneo en el sentir” (iv). [“not only does it provide [...] an account of Anglo-Saxon history and literature [...] but also a necessary epitome of texts, most of them translated into Spanish for the first time, which may allow us [...] to appreciate the heroic events and behaviours from a past, in time fairly distant, but emotionally fairly contemporary.”]

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Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre is Professor of English at the University of Murcia (Spain), where he teaches History of the English Language. His main research interests are related to the fields of Old English language and literature and English historical linguistics. He has recently published the book *Sociolinguística histórica* (Madrid: Gredos 2007) as well as articles and papers in, among others, *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, *Language in Society*, *Neophilologus*, *Studia Anglica Posnaniensa* and *International Journal of English Studies (IJES)*.

Address: Dpto de Filología Inglesa, Facultad de Letras, Universidad de Murcia, C/ Santo Cristo s/n, 30071 Murcia. Tfno: +34 968-363178. Fax: +34 968-363185 e-mail: jconde@um.es