

POLLINGTON, STEPHEN 1997: *First Steps in Old English*. Norfolk: Anglo-Saxon Books.

Pollington's *First Steps in Old English* was inspired by Macrae-Gibson's course *Learning Old English*. This work, similar to other valuable booklets prepared by university teachers but, unfortunately, unavailable in bookshops, marked a route followed by *First Steps*, though the latter has developed and extended the seminal idea leading to a complete book.

First Steps in Old English is addressed to absolute beginners with no or little knowledge of linguistics and Old English who want to follow a self-study approach to Old English literature. With this reader in mind, Pollington has avoided those linguistic matters that are not really fundamental for an immediate translation and understanding of Old English prose texts. Theoretical discussion on linguistic topics concerning Old English sound changes, semantics or lexicon are absent from this volume, and syntax and spelling are reduced to a minimum, being morphology the core of the book.

The first part of *First Steps*, the Old English course itself, is divided into eighteen lessons which the author refers to as sections. Each section follows a similar layout: presentation of the topics, questions for comprehension, practical exercises, vocabulary and translations. The understanding of the topics, presented in an accessible way, is regularly tested by the use of certain questions that invite the reader to think about the text. Apart from these comprehension questions, Pollington inserts what he calls "Practice", a subsection to drill the reader in the constructions just studied in the relevant lesson. Two parts called "Vocabulary" and "Exercises" are also included at the end of each section. The latter consists in translations from and into Old English, graded according to difficulty, which can be corrected with the key in the fourth part of the book.

Contents are introduced gradually and they remain unexhausted in one section. In this way, different grammatical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.) are dealt with simultaneously, making it possible for the reader to have at her/his disposal the necessary elements to understand and construct sentences in Old English from the very beginning. Pollington has, in fact,

adopted the system used in handbooks for modern languages which allows the reader to become familiar with the language in a natural way. The reader does not only study the forms in isolation but also observes how they interrelate with other elements in the sentence. The combination of words in sentences gives the author the opportunity to mention topics such as word order, impersonal constructions, negation or subordination.

In this part – “Old English Course”-, Pollington has been quite consistent with the initial idea of designing a basic handbook, restricting to the notes any additional information on semantic issues, paleographical data, sound changes or dialectal forms other than West Saxon. However, I think some phenomena could be better understood if they were described in detail, or otherwise the reader might get the impression that these phenomena occur arbitrarily. This is the case of *i*-mutation or *i*-umlaut. Pollington mentions forms affected by *i*-mutation just as deviations from the rule, without presenting explanations as to why this is so. If, on the contrary, the sound change were explained in plain terms, these forms would immediately become understood by the student.

In the second part of this book, “Old English Grammar”, Pollington offers information on pronunciation,¹ and a glossary of grammar terms which, according to the author himself, will help the reader to approach other traditional handbooks. Besides, under the name “Accidence” he presents tables with the paradigms already described in the previous part.

If the reader has reached this point successfully, s/he will be ready to face the Old English prose texts selected for her/him in the third part. To guide her/his first steps, Pollington parses the text identifying the form and syntactic function of the elements. This process helps to understand the structure of the text but will be dropped gradually at the same time as the reader becomes more confident.

Two glossaries close this book; the first one includes the words in the selected prose texts, and the second one makes reference to the words used in the translations at the end of each section. The dispersal of words in three different places –let’s remember that after each section there is a

¹ The selected texts are included in an audiotape cassette (*Ærgeweorc*) which can be used in conjunction with *First Steps in Old English*.

“Vocabulary” where other words are listed- is one of the drawbacks of this volume. It seems more convenient and timesaving to have just one glossary at the end of the book with all the words used in the translation exercises and in the selected texts.

All in all, the author is successful in providing a self-study handbook addressed to a reader whose main concern is to manage the necessary tools to read Old English prose texts at her/his own pace. Through Pollington’s book, solid foundations are set so that the student can move on to other handbooks suggested by Pollington, such as Mitchell and Robinson’s *Guide to Old English* or Sweet’s *Reader*. For students who feel unconfident about their translation abilities and want to read original Old English texts, the author recommends parallel texts in Modern English. However, he warns of the danger cast by translations, since great reliance on them may lead to missing the taste of genuine Old English prose. A last piece of advice put forward by Pollington is directed to practised readers who want to continue with Old English: they will need a deeper knowledge of the language and pursue higher courses on Old English.

Pollington’s main contribution is to have widened a limited range of published handbooks on Old English for beginners, such as Blakeley’s *Teach Yourself Old English* or Magennis and Herbison’s *Discovering Old English*. Pollington’s achievement, however, is not only quantitative but also qualitative, as I will try to show below.

Blakeley (1964) offers basic notions on Old English. Methodology followed in her book, though, is different from Pollington’s. It is more traditional in its conception and gives more information on changes affecting Old English, especially phonological changes. Besides, it seems to address a student with linguistic background and concern.

A more recent book for self-study is Magennis and Herbison’s (1990). Their point of departure is similar to that of Pollington, as stated in the preface to their work:

The aim of this book is to enable the modern reader who has little or no previous knowledge about the earlier stages of English and little formal knowledge about language in general, to experience a number of short Old English texts in the original language. (Magennis & Herbison 1990: v)

The layout of the book, however, is also different from Pollington's *First Steps*. The authors do not include practice, questions or translations in the middle of the theoretical component of the course, but follow a conventional thematic organization, i.e., to study every grammatical category separately, and postpone translation exercises to the end of the course, which, in my opinion, is less attractive to the beginner. Besides both books focus on different aspects. Whereas Pollington devotes most of his book to explain the language (the exercises show his interest to check the reader's comprehension), Magennis and Herbison are more concerned with the guided readings/texts.

A similar work directed to a student with no linguistic knowledge, but more interested in the language rather than in the literature, is an electronic guide available in the web which "... will provide a basic introduction to Old English with exercises" (Jebson 1997). This guide, still under construction, is similar to Pollington's in the way it includes exercises in the middle of sections or at the end of each lesson.

Altogether, *First Steps in Old English* is good and comprehensive, and at the same time entertaining and user-friendly, a combination difficult to find in works of this sort. Indeed, there is no need to struggle on the way to enjoy Old English literature!

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