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# Bjork, Robert E. 2024. *Old English Studies and its Scandinavian Practitioners: Nationalism, Aesthetics, and Spirituality in the Nordic Countries, 1733 to 2023*. Anglo-Saxon Studies 50. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. Pp. xv + 336. ISBN 9781843847274.

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In 1885, Henry Sweet voiced a bitter complaint against the "parasite philology" practised within the field of Old English Studies at German universities, which left no room for an English dilettante except if he were to resort to "Germanizing himself and losing all his nationality" (Sweet 1885, v). Fortunately for Sweet, the need to Germanize oneself dissipated not long after he voiced these concerns, as Old English scholars were increasingly affiliated with English and American (though still German-influenced) research institutions. The idea of scholarship being shaped by local or national traditions is an important one to bear in mind. A monoculture is not only harmful to an ecological climate, but to a scholarly one as well. Academic disciplines are enriched when they possess a variety of different schools and traditions. Robert E. Bjork, in his *Old English Studies and Its Scandinavian Practitioners*, highlights one such tradition: that of Danes, Norwegians and Swedes—and to a less extent Saami and Fins—forming a shared, yet internally differentiated, cultural engagement with Old English language and literature. This long-standing engagement has stressed the historical affinities between Scandinavia and early medieval England, generating "a distinctive view of OE literature" which "every scholar of early medieval England should apprehend" (3). But this "distinctive view" has been sidelined, internationally, due to a language barrier. In order to bring it to the attention of an international scholarly audience, Bjork has pooled his combined long-honed expertise in both Scandinavian and Old English Studies into this comprehensive chronological overview of Scandinavian scholarship on the literary heritage of Anglo-Saxon England. Key works and scholars languishing in relative obscurity have now been made more accessible to a largely anglophone field through Bjork's copious translations, contextual information and bibliographical compilations. In this sense, the book pleasantly complements other historical overviews of the field, such as John D. Niles' *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England, 1066–1901* (2015), Rebecca Brackmann's *Old English Scholarship in the Seventeenth Century*

(2023) and Kees Dekker's *Recovering Old English* (2024), which lean more strongly towards the anglophone world and cover time spans of differing lengths.

Of central importance to the Scandinavian branch of Old English Studies, as Bjork makes clear, is the legacy of one Danish scholar in particular: N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872). Grundtvig's deep involvement in the field has already been persuasively documented by the likes of S. A. J. Bradley (Bradley 1994, 45–72) and Bent Noack (Noack 1994, 33–44) for an English-speaking audience. Bjork, likewise, places the person and outlook of Grundtvig at the heart of his receptional history, and for good reason. One of Bjork's main purposes is to trace the guiding influence of Grundtvig's *nationalism*, *aesthetics* and *spirituality*—the concepts referred to in the book's subtitle—in forming the scholarly culture of the generations after him. It is not so much in the interpretations of Grundtvig's individual works, or the historical context in which he lived and wrote, where Bjork breaks any fundamental new ground: the three chapters on Grundtvig (making up Part 1 of the book) are mostly reworkings of previous publications by Bjork. It is rather in the cultural shock waves emanating out of a Grundtvigian epicentre where this book shines forth most as a reference work. Grundtvig's indelible mark can be detected throughout Scandinavia's long and idiosyncratic commitment to Old English Studies.

In many ways, what Bjork has attempted, and largely accomplished, is a merger of genres: a disciplinary history of Old English Studies in Scandinavia that combines detailed character studies and close readings of individual texts with the purely utilitarian rigour of bibliographical list-making. The merger is not complete, however. One can still recognize quite clearly where the character study ends (Part 1) and the chronological bibliography begins (Parts 2–3). This minor break in the narrative flow of the book will facilitate the varying research foci of scholars. For the Grundtvig scholar, Part 1 of the book, consisting of three chapters, should be the first avenue explored. After a brief eighteenth-century prelude in the first chapter, explaining the historical and intellectual background to Grundtvig's work, the second and third chapters delve increasingly deeper into Grundtvig's Old English philology, peeling off layer after layer to get at its aesthetic and spiritual foundations. Chapter 3 discusses Grundtvig's edition and translation of the Old English *Phoenix*, showcasing the full depth and comprehensiveness of his vision. Here, Bjork argues, Grundtvig creates something "more than just scholarship," forming an "intricate blending" of his "nationalistic, aesthetic, religious, and scholarly interests" (77). After this theologically dense exploration of Grundtvig's Old English philology, Part 2 zooms out by giving a general overview of Old English scholarship produced in Scandinavian countries in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It makes use of the structuring principles found in Greenfield and Robinson's (1980) bibliography, ordering publications from general studies in historical, linguistic

and cultural subjects to progressively more narrow topics such as surveys of Old English literature, poetry and, eventually, analyses of individual texts. Bjork narrows down his discussion of Scandinavian contributions even further in the next part by focussing on "Scandinavian approaches to *Beowulf*" in chapter 5, followed by "Scandinavian translations of *Beowulf*" in chapter 6 and "Scandinavian translations of Old English literature other than *Beowulf*" in chapter 7. Throughout, the presence of Grundtvig remains a constant. Without the groundwork laid by him and other Scandinavian pioneers such as Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin (1752–1829) and Rasmus Rask (1787–1832), Old English scholarship in Scandinavia would not have set out on its unique path. Through Bjork's book, the broad stretch of this path has now been charted for an international audience.

*Old English Studies and Its Scandinavian Practitioners* stands out as a remarkable achievement which will serve as a welcome research aid for both scholars working on primary Old English material, as well as those researching the history of their discipline. Even researchers with a focus on modern Scandinavian history and intellectual culture will find in it a mass of valuable information, as many of the philologists and translators examined by Bjork were leading figures in the society and culture of their day. The richly detailed and up-to-date bibliographical appendices which close off the book, structured in the familiar format of Greenfield and Robinson, will be eagerly mined by future scholars interested in exploring further the particularly Scandinavian style of interpreting and translating Old English literature. In a way, Bjork's efforts have a certain Grundtvigian quality to them. Reading through the listed scholarly contributions and translations, one is struck by the wealth of scholarly output which had hitherto remained under the radar for most scholars outside Scandinavia. The skewed balance in present-day Old English Studies at times leads Bjork to stray a bit too far into a paean chronicling the Scandinavian *Sonderweg*—which left the "ungrateful English" (245) lagging far behind—but nowhere does this stylistic choice harm academic rigour. It brings to life the "dead letter," to use a Grundtvigian phrase (Grundtvig 1840), and acts as a necessary corrective to a tendency in anglophone spheres to trace modern, aesthetic appraisals of Old English literature back exclusively to Tolkien's (1936) *Beowulf* lecture. Scholars no longer have to Germanize themselves to make their mark in Old English Studies, but perhaps it would not hurt to look beyond the international bubble of Global English and to see what happened, and is happening, elsewhere in the world.

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