

Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity

Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (eds)

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"Has not every restitution of the antient Saxon laws had happy effects? Is it not better now that we return at once into that happy system of our ancestors, the wisest and most perfect ever yet devised by the wit of man, as it stood before the 8th century?"¹ These are the words, not of an obscure Home Counties medievalist, but of Thomas Jefferson, a key figure in the shaping of American national identity.

Myths of genealogical descent, as E.K. Francis aptly noted, are the defining characteristic of ethnic groups. Such groups provide an answer to mankind's quest for ontological security in space and time, and also legitimate the more pragmatic imperatives of power, wealth and status. The English and their descendants in Australasia, South Africa and North America are no exceptions to this rule, and their penchant for tracing the pedigree of their nations to the ancient Anglo-Saxons forms the core of the discipline known as "Anglo-Saxonism." This volume presents a rich study of this phenomenon that blends strong historical documentation with coherent analysis. The editors have done a commendable job in that contributors cleave to the book's theme of Anglo-Saxon identity as a construction of creative human agents responding to the exigencies of contemporary life.

The book consists of nine essays, in two parts. The first segment, "Medieval and Renaissance Anglo-Saxonism," examines the social construction of the Anglo-Saxon past in England in the medieval and early modern periods. The second section looks at the same phenomenon in Scandinavia, Britain and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Parsing the text briefly, the theme of identity construction appears front and centre. For instance, in part one, Allen Frantzen contrasts Bede's seventh century treatment of Gregory's praise of Anglian boys in a Roman market with the sixteenth century reinterpretation of the incident by the reformation historian John Bale. The Catholic Bede viewed Gregory's remarks as a hint of English election - signifying England's special relationship with Rome. By contrast, the Protestant Bale saw the pontiff's remarks as evidence of how sexual perversion, inflamed by the celibacy of Catholic priests, reached all the way to the heart of the Romish Church. (24)

In section two, the theme of a malleable past continues in Robert Bjork's outline of the seminal role played by Scandinavians in the scholarly development of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Anglo-Saxonism. He concludes with a description of how English writers appropriated this scholarship in the early nineteenth century and deleted Danish patriotic references. Later, Gregory Van Hoosier-Carey delineates the *volte-face* in southern American attitudes toward the Anglo-Saxons which came about as a

¹ See Horsman, Reginald, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.22.

consequence of the Civil War. Whereas antebellum southerners viewed themselves as aristocratic Norman civilizers and considered the "Anglo-Saxon" northerners barbarians, in the post-war period, southern intellectuals came to identify with the Anglo-Saxons as the oppressed, but valorous, upholders of liberty and democracy.

Velma Richmond's edifying account of Victorian Anglo-Saxonist children's fiction comprises the last essay, and is followed by a twenty page theoretical coda in which John Niles ties together the essays of the book under the theme of appropriation. In Niles' estimation, historical agents generally are not shaped by the past, but instead act to appropriate it for their own ends. Niles even outlines five "laws" which he claims govern the appropriation process. In the ultimate statement of radical constructionism, Niles goes so far as to assert that: "Anglo-Saxon England *is nothing other than what it has been perceived to be* by historically grounded human beings." (209)

Despite its coherence and content, there are a few chinks in this work's armor. The first consists of the paucity of references to sociological theories of ethnicity, nationalism and myth-making. The brief reference to Hobsbawm and Ranger's *Invention of Tradition* or Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in one or two of the essays is insufficient in this respect. The work of J.H. Plumb, Robert Wuthnow, Pierre Nora, Anthony Smith or Maurice Halbwachs should have been included in a stronger theoretical section. This might have situated the anthology more firmly in the sociological tradition.

Finally, the obvious could be said: that the authors overstate the case for social constructionism. As Niles admits in the last page of his footnotes, there are standards of veracity in history, hence the truth is not infinitely fungible. (228) Forms of modern reflexivity, for example, audio and videotape, DNA analysis and radio-carbon dating, increasingly constrain our capacity to shape the past. Even in pre-modern times, the "real" past constrained mythmakers. It is, for instance, striking that the more exotic English myths of origin (Trojan, Roman, Greek, Israeli) fared less well than Anglo-Saxon or Celtic interpretations. After all, no matter how advantageous, one could hardly picture the English having subscribed to a Han or Egyptian myth of genealogical descent!

On the positive side of the ledger, I would recommend this volume to any student of ethnicity and national identity. It is also apposite to the sociological study of historiography, philology and culture. The work is particularly relevant for those who seek insight into the nature of American national identity, since Anglo-Saxonism has played a role in every American nativist movement. Is it any coincidence, for instance, that John Tanton, founder of U.S. English, convened a study group in 1986 called WITAN, derived from the Old English *witenagemot*, meaning council of wise men to advise the king? He was treading a well-marked path, since less than a century earlier, the most prominent American historians were drawing analogies between the *witenagemot* and the New England town meeting to explain America's destiny as the keeper of Anglo-Saxon liberty.

To conclude: shortcomings aside, a reading of *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity* will pay handsome dividends for the scholar who wishes to inquire more deeply into the process of ethnic and national identity construction, especially in the "Anglo-Saxon" world.

Mary Richards goes on to examine the influence of successive regimes on the evolution of the Old English royal codes of law and Janet Thormann performs the same service for the historical *Chronicles*, which were reinterpreted by successive medieval transcribers in tune with the political realities of the day. Later, Suzanne Hagedorn examines the resuscitation of the Anglo-Saxon myth in the sixteenth century in response to the severing of the Roman connection.

J.R. Hall's treatment of American Anglo-Saxonism, in the following chapter, ably describes the lively debate over linguistic purity that emerged in the U.S. in the 1840s.