

Editing the Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry

Bernard J. Muir writes about a consuming project

For the past six years I have been engaged in preparing a new edition of the oldest surviving collection of English poems, Exeter Dean & Chapter MS 3501, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*.

This anthology of 130 religious and secular poems, which drew upon earlier collections of vernacular poetry, was copied out *circa* 965 in southwest England and has been housed since the mid-Eleventh Century in Exeter Cathedral Library—it was left to the library by Leofric, the first Bishop of Exeter, when he died in 1072; there is a copy of his will in the first quire of the manuscript. Though not illustrated, the hand of the codex is perhaps the finest example of Anglo-Saxon minuscule script that survives.

Only four codices of poetry survive from pre-Norman Conquest England, so it is easy to understand why this collection is so highly valued—when it was sent to London to be exhibited in the mid-1980's it was insured for £1.5 million; of course, no amount of money could ever replace it, were it lost. It is now kept in a fire-proof casket in the Library of the Dean & Chapter, a space it shares with the Exon *Domesday Book*, which dates from the reign of William the Conqueror. It is today unusual for the codex to be removed from its resting place, but I was privileged to have been granted daily access to it throughout 1992 when I spent a sabbatical year working on the new edition.

The anthology has attracted enormous critical attention over the past 175 years: the exhaustive bibliography for the edition lists 2,000 editions, facsimiles,

critical studies, articles and reviews. In order to prepare the comprehensive textual and literary commentary on the poems I had to consult all this material, much of which—due to its highly specialized character—was not held in Australian collections. I say *was* because it is now available in my office here in the English Department, an archive unmatched even in the best English and North American libraries.

Needless to say, getting all this material together here in Melbourne was no

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mean undertaking, and this is where the Baillieu Library began to play its part in the project. Using funds from a large recurrent Australian Research Council grant I employed an assistant to help in the gathering and cataloguing the archive. For two years we combed every published bibliography and critical apparatus, tracing the literary and linguistic critical life of the collection. Many items were published in obscure journals with limited circulation, e.g. journals of folklore and myth which often contain off-beat articles on riddles and charms; some articles turned out to be papers from seminars offered in departments of literature, whose authors have told me that they never expected that anyone outside their own universities would

have heard of them. The staff of the Inter-library Loan section at the Baillieu were relentless and resourceful in using all the devices and technology at hand to track this material down. A few items ranged at large for nearly three years before being collared!

However, inter-library borrowing is only one aspect of the support that is offered by the library to medievalists such as myself. Collection development is terribly important and frightfully costly. But the Baillieu Library has shown keen interest in our work and houses a fine collection of high quality facsimile editions of important medieval manuscripts (as witnessed by the recent exhibition). There are also complete runs of the publications of literary and historical societies (such as The Early English Text Society), tools which medievalists take in hand on an almost daily basis.

I recently spoke in Canberra at an international conference on information technology and electronic media and the impact that developments in this area are having now and will continue to have on the research and teaching of academics—in this area too, the Baillieu Library is keeping pace of developments and is working hard to meet the needs and expectations of scholars such as myself who are constantly looking to discover in what new ways technology can serve pure and theoretical research and writing. I look forward to many more fruitful years of working collaboratively with the staff of the University Library.

Bernard J. Muir is a Reader in Medieval Language and Literature at the University of Melbourne.