Reversing Babel: translation among the English during an age of conquests, by Bruce O'Brien (Newark: U. of Delaware P., 2011; pp. xix + 287. $75).

Conceptualizing Multilingualism in England, c. 800-c. 1250, ed. Elizabeth M. Tyler (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011; pp. xi + 368. €80).

According to Bruce O'Brien's new monograph on translators and translation, an intrepid visitor to London around 1150 might have heard as many as fifteen languages: English predominantly, but also French, German, Flemish, Danish, Genoese, Spanish, Breton, Welsh, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Hebrew, Arabic and Greek. His book claims to cover fourteen languages; the new collection of essays edited by Elizabeth M. Tyler examines nearly as many. As the example of the hypothetical visitor suggests, studying medieval multilingualism requires a formidable knowledge of languages. Also desirable is a historian's ability to analyse primary sources, a critic's skill at close-reading literary texts, a knowledge of linguistics, and a grasp of cultural theory, particularly analyses of the interaction of language and power. Considering these demands, it is not surprising both books occasionally disappoint.

The papers in *Conceptualizing Multilingualism*, all originally presented at the third Alcuin Conference held in York in the summer of 2006, are collected as a contribution to the historical study of multilingualism in England between 800 and 1250. The *longue durée* periodisation works well, highlighting that England was multilingual long before the arrival of the Vikings and the Normans, and the majority of the seventeen contributors confine themselves within these chronological and geographical parameters. Literary approaches predominate (Bredehoft; Zacher; Townend; Taylor), but a variety of other methodologies are used, from the linguistic (Conde-Silvestre & Pérez-Raja; Trotter) to the historical (Baxter; Mortensen); other essays are indebted to translation studies (O'Brien) and manuscript studies (da Rold & Swan).

The most successful essays combine a variety of disciplinary approaches: Bruce O'Brien on twelfth-century translations of the Old English laws, Elizabeth Tyler on the polyglot literary patronage of eleventh-century royal women, Julia Crick on the linguistic interface between England and Ireland, and Stephen Baxter on the vocabulary of lordship in the Domesday Book. Several other essays also stand out, including a brilliant close reading of multilingual puns in several Latin and English poems from Æthelstan's court by Samantha Zacher and a sophisticated study of twelfth-century literary vernacularity by Thomas O'Donnell. The weaker essays have a number of methodological flaws in common. Many (including Zacher's otherwise fine essay) use multiethnicity as a proxy for multilingualism, yet the presence of a number of individuals with different mother tongues in a given location need not have made that location multilingual; speakers might have adopted a lingua franca like Latin, or not interacted at all (as Julia Crick recognises, 'contact must not be mistaken for communication'). A related problem is the modish, glib use of 'multicultural'

as a synonym for 'multiethnic': a society is multicultural not only because it contains individuals from a variety of cultural groups, but because it is also politically committed to maintaining the individual identity of those groups; no evidence for such a commitment in medieval England is forthcoming in any of the essays. While ostensibly warning scholars of the dangers of projecting modern attitudes to linguistic diversity into the past, Elizabeth Tyler's introductory chapter teeters towards the very trap it signposts.

Some of the contributions would undoubtedly have benefited from more extensive editorial guidance in eliminating factual errors, and, more importantly, in moving beyond the narrow concerns of their home discipline. The shelfmark of the manuscript of ''Archalis' clamare, triumuir' is Rawlinson C. 697 not Rawlinson C. 677 (p. 86); Ramsey was not the only Benedictine abbey in England in 985 (p. 105); and the diagram on p. 360 makes sense only if one assumes the definitions of B and C have been transposed in the key. These concerns, the lack of an index, and the serious delay between writing and publication, make this a book for scholars to consult selectively in their university library rather than buy for themselves.

O'Brien's *Reversing Babel*, inspired by the challenge of explaining the production after the Norman Conquest of numerous translations of the Old English laws, offers itself to historians as a synthesis of existing scholarship on multilingualism and translation in England between 800 and 1200. The book begins with two long chapters describing multilingual Britain: the first outlines medieval attitudes to language difference and theories of translation, while the second describes patterns of language contact in a chronological survey from Cnut to Henry II and in case studies of five urban centres (Gloucester, Lincoln, Nottingham, Canterbury and Worcester). Three shorter chapters follow: Chapter 3 offers a typology of the motives given by medieval translators for their work (teaching basic skills, instructing the clergy, administering and defending property and rights, understanding the world, edifying the laity, and entertaining the elite); Chapter 4 describes the practicalities of translation (how translators were taught, where they worked and how they worked); and Chapter 5 examines the process of translation, beginning with a typology of three possible approaches to word-level translation (finding a cultural equivalent, constructing an etymological equivalent, or transcribing the original term) and ending with brief case studies of the West Saxon Gospels, the Gospel of Nichodemus and an Old French translation of the Old Testament. Some 'Final Observations' reflect on the efflorescence of French as a literary language in England in the later twelfth century. There follow an appendix selectively listing translations in fourteen categories that range from 'administrative records' to 'visions and voyages', an extensive bibliography and an index. The book also contains nearly thirty plates and over ten maps and diagrams.

Reversing Babel is a helpful even necessary book and deserves a wide audience. The synthesis it presents is the product of an eye-watering quantity of reading across a mind-numbing number of disciplines. O'Brien's examples from the twelfth-century translations of

the Old English laws represent significant original research, and his typologies will undoubtedly prove useful to future scholars. This said, it is a flawed book which must be used with caution.

The first flaw is conceptual. While translators were necessarily bi- or multilingual people, the primary *raison d'être* of translation was to transmit texts to monolingual people, yet monolingualism is totally scanted in *Reversing Babel*. A second problem is that the book fails to report the findings of other scholars accurately, the *sine qua non* of a reliable synthesis. This failure is particularly acute when it comes to linguistic evidence, where O'Brien is clearly out of his depth. The nadir is perhaps this sentence:

> A Worcester family whose grandparents had heard Bishop Wulfstan II (c. 1008-1095) preach in the cathedral, and whose children were increasingly losing case distinctions and pronouncing "lord" more like *laverd* than *hlaford*, could all have a conversation, with awareness of difference, but no unintelligibility (p. 29).

Though it is not acknowledged as such, the situation described in this sentence is entirely hypothetical: no sermons of Wulfstan II survive, and there is no evidence that the manuscript (Lambeth 487, the Lambeth Homilies) from which the spelling *laverd* is taken was preached in Worcester Cathedral. *Laverd* and *hlaford* are (semi-)conventionalised spellings not phonetic transcripts, and cannot be used unproblematically as evidence for spoken English. To judge from the corresponding footnote, these various errors originate in a constructive misreading of Roger Lass's discussion of the spelling *louerd* in one of the Lambeth Homilies as an early example of the orthographical representation of the Middle English sound change /a:/ > /ɔ:/. Unfortunately, this is by no means an isolated example: it is nonsensical to describe English as 'the mutually intelligible west Germanic language' (p. 8); to the Anglo-Saxons, their language was *Englisc* not *Anglisc* (p. 29); and Cecily Clark's pellucid description of 'Roger se Desie' as having 'a Kentish form from OE *se dysiga*' is traduced as 'Desie ... from Kentish *se dysiga*' (p. 116 n. 112). A related problem is O'Brien's near-total disregard of Middle English in a book covering the twelfth century.

A synthesis should also be free of factual errors. *Reversing Babel* is not: Eadwine was not the author of the English gloss in his eponymous psalter, and it translates the Romanum not the Hebraicum (p. 205 n. 4). Nor are the interpretations offered always convincing: one can only hold that 'vernacular glossing appears to have been something Francophones considered doing only after the Norman Conquest, probably as a result of encountering English-Latin glossaries' (p. 164) if one ignores the pre-Conquest French glosses in BNF nouv. acq. lat. 586, possibly the work of one Herebert at Abingdon during the abbacy of Wulfgar (990-1016). Elsewhere, the book is unhelpfully equivocal, with – for example – Matthew Townend's compelling arguments for the mutual comprehensibility of Old English and Old Norse rehearsed beside earlier statements to the contrary under the stultifying rubric that 'almost all these arguments have merit' (p. 75). On other occasions, unproven or unprovable statements are made without evidence or discussion. Thus we learn that, had it existed, a

thriving pre-Alfredian prose culture 'would necessarily have been a translating culture' (p. 154 n. 76); that 'there may be less difference than we think between what Ezra Pound did with the *Seafarer* and what the translators of the *Laws of William* or *Institutes of Cnut* sought to do with Cnut's laws' (p. 201); and that 'the translators at work after 1066 learned from, and participated in, the long tradition of translation work in preconquest England' (p. 218).

O'Brien's style is also occasionally troublesome. It is sometimes strikingly witty, as in his reference to 'Noah's ocean cruise' (p. 189), his translation of 'defacatum rudique' as 'raw and crappy' (p. 33) or description of Alfred 'consider[ing] the English he writes more a convalescent home for the future good health of Latin than an act of vernacular revolution' (p. 36). But elsewhere it is more problematic: to say that the book investigates 'the role played by translation *in a world* where a majority of people spoke English' (p. 8, my emphasis) is careless and, to students, potentially misleading. DNA evidence can tell us only who Viking men procreated with, not who they 'married' (p. 74). To describe Osmund as 'English-illiterate' (p. 80) or a priest as 'audibly literate in Latin' (p. 89) is at worst nonsensical, at best inelegant. Hypothetical contact situations and actual historical events are often inadequately demarked, as when O'Brien emphatically states that 'the interactions around and within such pools *created* the full spectrum of linguistic consequences, from pidgins and creoles to new language creation' (p. 82, my emphasis).

Since it may be employed widely as a handlist, O'Brien's appendix warrants separate comment. Like the book as a whole, it is useful, but must be used with caution. Though it is avowedly 'selective', the principles of selection are not always obvious: twelve more-or-less related Old English glossed psalters are listed individually, while some important texts like the Trinity and Lambeth Homilies are omitted altogether. The fourteen categories are generally well conceived, but it is surely misleading to categorise Ælfric's homily on the vision of St Fursey under 'visions and voyages' rather than 'pastoral texts and sacred biography'. While the utility of organising the members of each category chronologically is clear, the number of undated texts necessitates an awkward and misleading alternation between the date of a text's composition and its manuscript witness. Recent discussion of the dating of certain English texts like the Taunton Fragment (now known to be a witness to the Homiliary of Angers), *Of Seinte Neote* and *Peri Didaxeon* is unacknowledged.

To write an essay or a book about medieval multilingualism is a demanding undertaking, requiring expertise across multiple disciplines. *Reversing Babel* is an admirable achievement, and deserves a large readership; but peer-review by a competent philologist would have improved it immeasurably. Feedback across disciplinary boundaries would likewise have improved the contributions to *Conceptualizing Multilingualism*. A complex topic like multilingualism demands a collaborative approach.

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