

Donald Scragg. *A Conspectus of Scribal Hands Writing English, 960-1100*. Publications of the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies 11. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012. Pp. xxii, 94. £75. ISBN 978-1843842866.

Reviewed by Mark Faulkner
University of Sheffield
m.faulkner@sheffield.ac.uk

Now retired, Donald Scragg has had a long, highly distinguished and extremely prolific career as an Anglo-Saxonist. Alongside his extensive work on homilies, source-study and poems like *The Battle of Maldon*, spelling has been a continuous interest throughout his career, from his *History of English Spelling* (1974) to his important article 'Spelling Variations in Eleventh-Century English' (1992) to two major-externally funded projects in the first decade of the new millennium. [1] By tabulating the stints of all the scribes at work in late Anglo-Saxon England, his new *Conspectus of Scribal Hands* makes another significant step towards his long-cherished ambition to write a history of late Old English spelling, to discover just how standardised was 'standard' late West Saxon.

The bulk of the *Conspectus* is an enormous eighty-five page table itemising the work of these scribes. The number of these scribes (over a thousand) is remarkable and constitutes one of the most striking revelations of the book. The principles of selection are clearly outlined in the introduction: the table includes all 'inked writings on parchment' (that is, no scratched glosses or inscriptions, runic or otherwise, on stone, bone or metal) which can be dated between 960 and 1100 (or in palaeographical terminology, s. x2 – s. xi/xii). The table is organised alphabetically by modern shelfmark, so the first five entries cover Antwerp, Plantin Moretus Museum, MS M 16.2. These five entries are numbered 1, 1a, 2-4 to reflect Scragg's uncertainty about whether hands 1 and 1a are the work of two separate scribes (thus making 'over a thousand' a conservative estimate for the number of scribal hands found). Hand 2 is also found in another Antwerp manuscript and a manuscript in Brussels, and these stints are listed alphabetically in Hand 2's entry. For each stint, up to ten further pieces of information are given: the manuscript's number in Ker's *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* and Gneuss's *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, or, if a single-sheet document, its number in Sawyer's *Anglo-Saxon Charters* or Pelteret's *Catalogue of English Post-Conquest Vernacular Documents*; the extent of the stint (with both folio and line number given: Scragg has examined all these manuscripts very closely); the date; the place the scribe was working; a reference to any full facsimiles available; a brief description of contents; and, occasionally, some further information in a 'notes' column. This procedure raises only two minor quibbles, both relating to the way it canonises past judgments, thereby allowing them to ossify into the status of fact. Ker was an outstanding palaeographer, but he was not infallible; to rely exclusively on his datings conceals their subjectivity. The localisation column also raises problems: localising a scribe's work is a very vexed process, contingent on the uneven survival of comparanda. While Scragg acknowledges these difficulties in his introduction, he might also have found a way to represent them in the table, perhaps by adopting the alphabetical sigla Ker used in *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* to show how he had assigned a manuscript to a particular library.

The *Conspectus* closes with indices of names, places and subjects. The index of places is particularly welcome since an index of this type is wanting in Gneuss's *Handlist*. These indices do however raise a significant question: would not this *Conspectus* be more helpfully published electronically? To publish online would have saved Scragg the labour of manually compiling the indices, and would permit much more complex searches of the data. For example, a researcher might want to know how many scribes were writing English at a particular centre in a particular quarter century; electronically, such a search is easy; in print, it necessitates repeatedly flicking backwards from the index to the *Conspectus*.

The scope and format of the *Conspectus* discussed, there remain for examination the individual entries. Here, the accuracy of Scragg's work is notable, with no typos readily apparent. There are however a few curiosities, which raise broader questions. One is that both hands of the *Beowulf*-manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, fols. 94-209) are dated s. x/xi. Famously, the dating of this manuscript depends on triangulating between a younger scribe writing round minuscule, the usual script for English texts in the eleventh century, and an older scribe writing square minuscule, which was obsolescent in the final quarter of the tenth century; while the manuscript as a whole is usually dated s. x/xi, the individual hands are usually given separate dates either side of 1000. So, while Scragg's date of s. x/xi does encode the most likely period for the scribes' collaboration in producing the manuscript, it breaks with the accepted dating for the hands, thus inadvertently raising the awkward and seldom discussed question of whether palaeographical datings refer to the period of a scribe's training (which would presumably have included not only learning to write but also learning to spell) or the period at which he was writing. In other words, does the older scribe's stint in the *Beowulf*-manuscript provide evidence of English spelling when he learned to write, when he wrote the manuscript, or both?

Another is Scragg's entry for Coleman, chancellor of Worcester Cathedral and confidant of St Wulfstan (no. 87). The entry is significant for omitting Coleman's annotation of London, British Library, Cotton Otho C. i, vol. 2, and indeed all of the other annotations newly attributed to Coleman by Winfried Rudolf and David Johnson in their important 2010 article. [2] What is significant is not Scragg's failure to take account of this discovery (indeed the *Conspectus* may well have assumed a near-final form before the article appeared), but that his decision to avoid giving any bibliographical references for the entries make it impossible to tell whether he did not know the article or knew the article but disagreed with the attributions. While the decision to eschew references is justified with reference to space constraints in the introduction, this is another case where electronic publication would have a greater and necessary freedom.

A final example of an individual entry which raises broader methodological questions is the portfolio of Eadui Basan (no. 445). This includes all three of Eadui's stints writing English, but makes no mention of his extensive Latin contributions to these and other manuscripts. A similar omission is found in Scragg's profile of the Canterbury scribe of the Domitian Bilingual (no. 78). Although a *Conspectus of Scribal Hands Writing English*, the fact that some of these scribes also wrote Latin is surely significant enough to warrant mention in the 'Notes' column. It is certainly germane to Scragg's broader interest in the history of English spelling, where the question of Latin influence is an important one.

Despite these minor limitations, the *Conspectus* is a profoundly useful and important work, that deserves to sit on an Anglo-Saxonist's shelf beside Ker's *Catalogue* and Gneuss's *Handlist*. Scragg's book will facilitate not only his eagerly-anticipated researches on late Old English spelling but also other important research on Anglo-Saxon literary culture. For this, he is to be thanked.

Notes:

1. Scragg, D. G. *A History of English Spelling* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974); Scragg, D. G., "Spelling Variations in Eleventh-Century English," in *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium* ed. C. Hicks (Stamford: Paul Tyas, 1992), 347-54. The "Inventory of Script and Spellings in Eleventh-Century English" is available at <http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/mancass/C11database/>.
2. Johnson, David F. & Winfried Rudolf, "More Notes by Coleman," *Medium Ævum* 79 (2010), 1-13.