

10-7-97

The Alfred Jewel

One of the smallest things I saw in Oxford proved to be one of the most exciting. I'll have to go back to my graduate school days to explain why that small object was such a thrill.

As an English major I had to choose between a course on the Canterbury Tales or one on Beowulf. I chose the latter because I hoped it would allow me to read the earliest written English literature. I had no idea what drudgery the course would be. The language of the eighth century in what was to become England was so different from the English of today that, in order to read Beowulf, I had to learn what amounted to a new language, identified either as Old English or Anglo-Saxon. Until I entered that class, I had thought of myself as a linguist, but I soon learned otherwise. The vocabulary was mostly different from modern English; even when a word survived until today, it was spelled differently. The first semester the class was devoted entirely to learning the vocabulary and syntax of the ninth century and reading a few excerpts from the sparse literature of the day, including a passage from the New Testament book of John, translated by King Alfred. In a reign devoted to protecting midland England from raids by the Danes, Alfred, an educated man in an age when most education was confined to the church, had found time to translate a number of documents into the English of his time. I found Alfred's prose interesting and relatively easy to read. Then the second semester we were privileged to slog through the 1383 lines of the folk epic poem Beowulf which had been preserved in tenth to twelfth century English. I found that I hadn't gained a sufficiently large vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon to read with any easy understanding of the culture of the people of the poem which, like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, had been written down after centuries in the oral tradition. It was hard work, but I was impressed with the vigor and energy of the poem. The warriors in Beowulf were strong, violent men who wielded heavy iron swords and finally killed the beast Grendl which had preyed on the community. I remembered fondly King Alfred and had been impressed by the strength of the men in Beowulf, until Oxford my primary memory of my graduate course.



One of our destinations in Oxford was the Ashmolean Museum where Paul and I were eager to see the renowned collection of drawings of Michelangelo. The museum is also the repository of, among many other objects, archeological exhibits owned by Oxford University. The museum is housed in a vast neo-Grecian building dating from the mid nineteenth century, a conspicuous contrast to the medieval and Renaissance buildings we had been seeing around Oxford. The basis for the Museum began many years earlier in a building next to the Sheldonian Theatre, where an eclectic group of objects amassed by Elias Ashmole had been added in the sixteenth century to a "cabinet of natural curiosities" inherited by Ashmole from the Tradescants, father and son. Those oddities, plus some exhibits devoted to experimental science, were housed in the Old Ashmolean Museum, now called the Museum of the History of Science.

In the nineteenth century the University moved the Ashmolean collection into the current building which also houses the far vaster treasures of Oxford University. In the Museum are many rooms devoted to extensive archaeological materials, all very interesting, but the room which captured my attention contained a collection of Dark Age and early medieval material. I was fascinated with the ancient bronze and iron swords, some dating back to the time before 800 A.D. when the folk epic Beowulf was being composed and were of the type used by King Alfred's men. The swords were very large and impressive, although considerably eroded before they were unearthed and preserved. I had no difficulty imagining Beowulf's slaying of the monster about which I had so laboriously read in my Anglo-Saxon course on Beowulf. The story and the culture which produced it began to become vividly alive to me. But the most exciting cabinet was a small one in the far corner of the room. Before it I spent a long time. It contained a modest gem known as the Alfred Jewel.



This small object, no more than about three inches by five inches, was discovered in 1693 in Somerset. Gem cutting was not very advanced at that time, and the rock crystal which is the center of the jewel is rough, a crude circle about an inch in diameter. The jeweler's art of gem setting, however, was well advanced and the crystal is set in gold, using a

technique of granulating the metal which is known as niello, a treatment which requires considerable skill. The setting surrounding the rock crystal is about a half an inch on the sides and closer to an inch below the stone. Atop the jewel is an enameled, seated figure. The gold setting bears an inscription in ninth century English, "Aelfred mec heht gewyrean," ("Alfred ordered me to be made"). Scholars have identified the jewel as a pointer (the fragile point no longer exists) which was used to follow the words of a manuscript and thus help preserve the precious hand copied books from soiling by the hand of the reader.

Scholars believe that King Alfred had a number of these jewels made (some say six) to be presented as gifts, along with his translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*. For so many members of his court to be able to read during the late ninth century (he died in 901) was remarkable. Because of his translation into ninth-century English of a number of Latin religious documents, including part of the New Testament, he is acknowledged as a scholar who encouraged scholarship and who began, even before Chaucer, establishing the vernacular of his day as the literary basis of the English language we know today. That fact, along with his defense of his kingdom of Wessex, caused him to be known as Alfred the Great. I was hypnotized by such a small object which existed during Alfred's reign. It revived my memory of the pleasure of reading Alfred's ancient lines and made me appreciate anew the culture of the early English people which I had unknowingly absorbed in that long-ago difficult course in Old English.

An interesting footnote is that many years ago the University College at Oxford had sought to prove that Alfred had founded their college by forging deeds in his name, thus making it the oldest college of the University. With very red faces, the college had to relinquish its claim during Queen Victoria's time. The fact remains that many of the colleges of Oxford are venerable and that Alfred encouraged learning at the same time that he fought to keep the Danes from conquering his part of the island, although he did not found any of the colleges. The gem which is aptly named the Alfred Jewel is easily my favorite small piece of Oxford.