

## Placing the English Language on the World Map

Bill Lucas and Christopher Mulvey, *A History of the English Language in 100 Places*. London: Hale, 2013. Pp. 256. £25, Hardback, £65.00, ISBN 9780709095705

Reviewed by Edward Fennell

The English Project was established in 2007 to explore new ways in which the extraordinary evolution of the English language could be understood. Based in Winchester, the principal city of King Alfred the Great, the project has always had a strong feel for the importance of place in the way language develops. This not only applies to accent and dialect but also to key events which for political or cultural reasons then impact on the way the language changes.

*A History of the English Language in 100 Places* aims to pinpoint, as the title suggests, one hundred places around the world which have played an important role in shaping the language into today's global *lingua franca*. (Is 'lingua franca' now an English expression? Probably.) Obviously there is a somewhat contrived or fortuitous element to this but, even so, the book serves up a fascinating collection of anecdotes about the story of English. As Philip Pullman comments on the cover, 'I love this book. Its structure is ingenious, its content endlessly fascinating.'

Certainly the round-the-world tour takes the reader to some unexpected places. It opens, for example, at Undley Common near Lakenheath in Suffolk. This was where the Undley *bracteate* was found, a fifth century pendant on which the first written English has been discerned. Admittedly it would barely be recognizable as English today. Written in runes it would transliterate as 'Gaegogae Maegae Medu' – roughly translated as 'A reward for a kinsman'. 'This writing is so ancient that we cannot be certain that we know what it really does mean', comment the joint authors Bill Lucas and Christopher Mulvey (both academics from the University of Winchester), 'but we can be sure that it is English' (p. 17).

The transformation from runic English to the Latin alphabet version can be attributed to the leadership of the Christian scribes who settled at Canterbury following the arrival from Rome of Saint Augustine.

'With the adoption of the Roman alphabet, we have the beginning of the means of standardizing the way we render speech and sounds as writing' (p. 20).

London, not surprisingly, became a dominant force with one fifth of the entries relating to the English capital. These range from Westminster where the Statute of Pleadings in 1362 permitted the use of English in Parliament (post-1066 the language of law and justice had been entirely French) through to Windrush Square in Brixton which represents the influence on English of immigrants from the West Indies.

What is remarkable in this story is that English had survived as a popular language from the mid-11th to the mid-14th century despite the fact that French had become predominant as the language of the ruling class. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written in English towards the end of Edward III's reign, marks perhaps the definitive turning of the tide and the resurrection of English as a cultural force at the highest level of society. Chaucer himself is represented in the story by his home in Aldgate, quite probably the place where the tales were written in Middle English.

Further evidence of the importance of this period comes in from Kilkenny in Ireland where in 1366 the eponymous statutes, paradoxically written in French, required English people to speak their home language and not 'go native' by speaking Irish. Meanwhile, Wales appears on the scene in the shape of Pembroke where Henry Tudor was born in 1457. Ironically, the fact that this Welshman was to take the throne in 1485 proved to be bad news for the Welsh language. In their zeal to be kings of England the Tudors cracked down on the use of Welsh with Henry VIII being especially insistent that English should be the language of the courts and administration in Wales. It was to take



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half a millennium before Welsh could get a proper foothold back in the system of government.

Interestingly it was in this same Tudor period that the first attempts were made to standardize English grammar through the publication of Lily's Royal Grammar for use in all grammar schools as directed by Henry VIII. The success of this initiative – or rather lack of it – can be seen in the diverse usages of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

A little later in the Tudor period we see the first evidence of English on its way to becoming a world language of business with the establishment under Elizabeth the First of the Muscovy Company which traded into Russia. From then on there was no stopping the ambitions of the English to travel the world in search of trade. The Virginia Company and the East India Company were to follow creating the commercial bridge over which English was to flow in succeeding centuries.

By 1712 there were demands made (by Jonathan Swift amongst others) at Middle Temple Gate for the foundation of an English Academy to govern the language along the same lines of the Academie Francaise. Significantly, the idea won little support. By this time English was already being used all over the world – often as a result of military conquest – and other leading

centres of the language were starting to emerge. Canada appears on the scene as a major presence from 1763 and New Zealand in 1840. And increasingly, of course, America makes its presence felt with contributions from New Orleans – a focus for African American English – to Beverley Hills and its teenspeak.

So where does it all end? Somewhat unexpectedly in Vienna where, as the 100th place, the Vienna–Oxford International Corpus of English has been established as the base for the first computer-searchable structured collection of 'English as a Foreign Language' data. Just before that, however, at 99th is Beijing where the Chinese authorities seem to be content for the time being to promote the wide-scale learning of English. It has come a long way from Lakenheath. But nothing lasts for ever. Where the language goes next – or where it will be overtaken by something else currently incubating in a computer in Beijing or Tallinn – remains to be seen and guessed at. So for anyone who is fascinated by where our language has, literally, 'come from' this book will be full of interest. It should also do something for the tourist trade, too. As a very accessible read you do not have to be a student or teacher but merely a user of the language which has been such a tremendous vehicle for global communication. Next stop? Probably Mars.

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