Contents

Robin of … Barnsdale?
Lawrence of Eastwood
A Mousetrap at Nottingham
Larkin in Loughborough
God's Gift to Coventry
Warwickshire … Somewhere
The Woman from Stratford
The Bird and Baby of Oxford
Binsey Treacle Mine
Dr Fell of Longworth
Britannia of Cliveden
Bletchley's Major Claim to Fame
A Cottage in Chalfont St Giles
Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire
Old Etonians
Lost in Windsor
Dark and Stormy at Knebworth
The Book of St Albans
A Pilgrimage to Bedford Jail
Norfolk's Beauty
The Dunwich Horror
The Wise Man of Manningtree
Letters from Mayfair
The Lion of Fleet Street
The Poet of Newgate
A Coward at Hatchards
A Corner of Westminster Abbey
Browning in Berkeley Square
Building Brick Lane
Dawn at Billingsgate
A Book on Trial at Bow Street
Shere Folly

About the Author

Oliver Tearle is a lecturer in English at Loughborough University and the founder of the popular blog *Interesting Literature: A Library of Literary Interestingness.* He is the author of two academic books, *Bewilderments of Vision: Hallucination and Literature, 1880-1914* and *T. E. Hulme and Modernism*, as well as the co-editor of *Crrritic!* His proudest achievement is coining the word ‘bibliosmia’ to describe the smell of old books, although his suggested neologism for writer’s block, ‘colygraphia’, is yet to take the world by storm.

Also by Oliver Tearle

The Secret Library

Britain by the Book

A Curious Tour of Our Literary Landscape

OLIVER TEARLE

JOHN MURRAY

www.johnmurray.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by John Murray (Publishers)
An Hachette UK company

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-47366-602-3

John Murray (Publishers)
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.johnmurray.co.uk

Preface

Britain is teeming with interesting literary stories. Take just one road in central London, Wimpole Street in Marylebone. At number 50 lived a poet, Elizabeth Barrett, whose correspondence – and subsequent elopement – with fellow poet Robert Browning in the 1840s inspired a play, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. At number 67 we find the childhood home of Arthur Hallam, Tennyson's university friend whose sudden death in 1833 inspired his great poem *In Memoriam*; Tennyson referred to it as a 'dark house' in an 'unlovely street'. Up the road, at 2 Upper Wimpole Street, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle set up his ophthalmology surgery in 1891, not far from Baker Street where he would locate Sherlock Holmes's iconic home. (According to his autobiography, Conan Doyle never had a single patient while he was there; luckily, 1891 was also the year that the first hugely popular Sherlock Holmes short story appeared in the *Strand* magazine, so this didn't matter.) Wilkie Collins moved to number 82 Wimpole Street in 1888, a year before he died. And this is just Victorian literary history we're talking about, all found on one London street.

The more I've studied and written about English literature – which is my day job as a lecturer in English at Loughborough University – the more interested I've become in the curious ways in which the paths of writers have crossed in a particular town, or on a specific street, or even in the same house. Staying in London, for instance, I was surprised to learn that Sylvia Plath took her life in a flat that W. B. Yeats had once lived in. On a slightly less gloomy note, it's nice to reflect that when a young George Orwell, who was then still plain old Eric Blair, attended Eton, one of his teachers was Aldous Huxley.

This book is a curious literary tour of Britain, taking in the colourful characters and surprising stories from the country's rich literary history. *Britain by the Book* covers the Northumbrian goatherd at Whitby Abbey who composed one of the first English

poems, England's first modern biographer and his pioneering exploration of Stonehenge, and how the world's longest-running play had a rather muted premiere in Nottingham. The book considers the role of the British landscape in inspiring classic works of literature and the ways writers have used, and even helped to create, British landmarks.

The meandering journey that follows has a point, of sorts. Chiefly, of course, the aim is to go in search of the most interesting stories to be found on this most literary of isles, but there is another objective, in that I have endeavoured wherever possible to unearth the more surprising and lesser-known links between authors and locations. Are we right to associate Wordsworth and the Romantic movement so closely with the Lake District? What about the significant time Wordsworth and Coleridge spent in Somerset, where they wrote much of *Lyrical Ballads* and were investigated for spying? Conversely, in our rush to associate Stratford-upon-Avon with Shakespeare, we overlook the fact that other writers of note lived in that town – including the bestselling novelist of the late nineteenth century, a woman whose name is now hardly known.

Such acts of displacement are designed to question the long-standing associations between writer and place and to examine the alternative lives led by writers, often in very different and surprising parts of the country. After all, one of the things that will soon emerge before we've got very far on our literary tour is that many authors known for writing about a particular place did so only after they had stopped living there. George Eliot wrote beautifully about the Midlands, but only once she had moved down to London and Surrey, where she took up tennis lessons. Sticking with Surrey and games, it was here that the first celebrity cricket team was formed by the creator of Peter Pan, J. M. Barrie – a Scotsman who embraced one of England's most popular sports more fervently than most Englishmen do. Such unusual associations are to be found all over our British landscape.

I'm also interested in the surprising connections between different writers or literary works in a particular location. For instance, to many readers Binsey in Oxfordshire will immediately suggest Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem 'Binsey Poplars', but this small village also has a very sweet link (and 'sweet' in more ways than one) to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in*

Wonderland. Indeed, sometimes the journey will be a bit of a zigzag rather than a straight line. But then, that's the beauty of a journey by book – a few bumpy roads won't inconvenience anyone.

This book is a distillation of a great deal of reading and research. I read a whole book on the history of Hay-on-Wye, and now know far more about that tiny town on the Welsh borders than I ever thought I'd need to. But first and foremost I'm indebted to the vast reference work that is *The Oxford Guide to Literary Britain and Ireland*, which contains a raft of information about the literary associations of towns, cities, and villages throughout the British Isles. (At the end of this book you'll find a selected bibliography containing some of the other books I've found particularly useful in the course of researching it.) What has made writing this book a continual joy is the number of things I discovered that I never knew before, but thought I did. So if, like me, you are confident you know which Dorset-based writer resurrected the term 'Wessex', or can name King Arthur's court, or know the original location of Robin Hood's forest, then read on and prepare to be surprised. I was. But then I'm surprised I've still got my own hair.

Oliver Tearle
Loughborough, 2017

The Disappearing 'Round Table' of John O'Groats

It is traditional to cycle from Land's End to John O'Groats. At least, it is if you're intending to travel from one end of Britain to the other; that sort of thing would probably get you disqualified from the Tour de France. But our bookish tour begins at John O'Groats and will meander down the country towards Land's End at the other … well, the other end.

And John O'Groats has been seen as the most northerly point of the British mainland for a while. This is odd, given that it's not: that title goes instead to Dunnet Head, a few miles west of John O'Groats and several miles north of it, no matter how you view it. John O'Groats isn't even the most north-easterly point of the country, with Duncansby Head snatching that honour. But John O'Groats *is* the most north-easterly settlement, and that's what matters, especially when you're attempting to traverse Britain from one end to the other and want to ensure you have a bed for the night and somewhere to get some bacon and eggs to eat after what is, let's face it, a pretty long bike ride.

The tiny village of John O'Groats is named after a Dutchman, Jan de Groot, who began operating a ferry service out to the Orkneys at the end of the fifteenth century. The story goes that members of the family ended up falling out, with de Groot's children squabbling over who would inherit the ferrying business when their father died; de Groot senior promptly built an eight-sided house containing an octagonal table, as a way of resolving this dispute and ensuring that none of his family members might be viewed as the 'favourite'. Like King Arthur's round table, this tale of octagonal furniture is probably nothing more than legend. But in any case, the John O' Groats House Hotel, which is still open for business, includes an octagonal tower as a tribute to de Groot's original dwelling.

People have been walking from Land's End to John O'Groats, and vice versa, since at least 1871, when two brothers named John and Robert Naylor decided to saunter all the way from Scotland's most north-easterly mainland settlement down to south-west Cornwall, going the entire way on foot, at the height of the railway boom. In 1916 they published a book recounting their journey, *From John O' Groat's to Land's End; Or, 1372 Miles on Foot*. They, too, had difficulty finding Jan de Groot's original house, though they found 'a few mounds of earth covered with grass', which were all that was left of the structure; it had apparently been dismantled in order to build a granary. While staying at the Huna Inn a few miles west of John O'Groats, the brothers were handed an 1839 book by the house's landlady. In it they learned they weren't the first tourists to be thwarted in their quest to find de Groot's house:

> I went in a boat
> To see John o' Groat,
> The place where his home doth lie;
> But when I got there,
> The hill was all bare,
> And the devil a stone saw I.

John O'Groats is iconic as the end – or the beginning – of a journey that crosses Britain from one side to the other. Yet in 2010, it received the dubious accolade of 'Scotland's most dismal town'. This is inaccurate for at least one reason, namely that John O'Groats is a village rather than a town (we'll come to the UK's smallest town later on). But then isn't its dismalness the point? It's the end of the earth – well, all right, the end of Britain – and its bleakness is part of its odd charm.

But look at it how you will, there isn't much going on this far north, so perhaps we should venture a little further south, to the lake where a Victorian poet became the victim of a rather cruel joke …

A Bad Poet at Loch Ericht

We begin in the Highlands of Scotland, on the shores of Loch Ericht, where the Victorian poet Arthur Hugh Clough and his friends Tom Arnold and John Campbell Shairp (a young Scotsman who would later be Professor of Poetry at Oxford) stayed in September 1847. Their visit to Loch Ericht inspired Clough's long narrative poem *The Bothie*.

Not everyone liked *The Bothie*. In some quarters it was condemned as 'indecent and profane, immoral and communistic'. And indeed Clough wasn't greatly liked by many of his contemporaries: Tennyson called him 'good man Dull', while Algernon Charles Swinburne, not one to mince his words, declared Clough 'a bad poet'. Now, Clough's poetry is not read much, aside from the anthology favourite 'Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth'. But in 1848, *The Bothie* attracted a fair number of readers and quite a lot of attention.

Unfortunately, this would not be an entirely good thing. The full title of Clough's poem is *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich*. What does it mean? A 'bothie' is a local word for a forester's hut, but what about the rest of it? Loch Ericht is sometimes assumed to be the location (though precisely where on the loch nobody knows) of Toper-na-Fuosich, which Clough namechecks in the title of his poem. But it was pointed out that the name of the location his poem mentions, Toper-na-Fuosich, is, as a reviewer in the *Literary Gazette* observed, from 'an ancient Highland toast to the female genital organs'. The reviewer remarked, 'the author ought to have been more guarded against the malicious Gael who imposed it on the inquisitive Sassenach [English person]'. A Scottish local, it would seem, had been pulling Clough's leg.

When Clough discovered his error, he was mortified. In February 1849, he wrote to Tom Arnold, who had accompanied him on the highland camping trip but was now living in New Zealand: 'It is too ludicrous not to tell someone, but too appallingly awkward to tell anyone on this side of the globe: – in

the Gath and Ascalon of the Antipodes you may talk of it, and laugh at your pleasure.' In 1855, he wrote to a friend about his poem: 'I was so disgusted with the mishap of the name, that I have never had pleasure in it since.' Clough quietly altered the title of his poem to the more innocent (if entirely nonsensical and made-up) *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich* for further editions, but it didn't help. His great work was, in his head, tarnished forever.

He could have consoled himself that he was not the only Victorian poet to have made such an embarrassing error. Indeed, others had made distinctly more blush-inducing ones. Consider poor Robert Browning, whose dramatic work, *Pippa Passes* (1841), inadvertently contained a word you wouldn't expect to find gracing the lines of a Victorian poem: mistakenly thinking the word 'twats' referred to a nun's hat, Browning innocently used the word in his verse drama. When James Murray and the other early editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* later approached Browning to enquire about the source of the poet's knowledge of this indelicate word, Browning directed them to the little-known 1660 poem *Vanity of Vanities*:

> They talk't of his having a Cardinalls Hat:
> They'd send him as soon an Old Nuns Twat.

None of Browning's friends appears to have been brave enough to point out his mistake.

The Bard of Dundee

Arthur Hugh Clough may have been a bad poet, as Swinburne asserted, but he was not the worst poet of the nineteenth century by any means. The poet who is widely regarded as the worst of all is so bad that he is, in fact, really quite good.

It was in Paton's Lane, Dundee, in June 1877 that a flash of poetic inspiration struck. The poet who experienced this lightbulb moment was William Topaz McGonagall, famed – if that is quite the word – as probably the worst poet in the English language. He was reportedly the inspiration for the name Professor McGonagall in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Rowling liked the idea that her brilliantly clever character might be a distant relative of such a buffoon.

And a buffoon he most certainly was. McGonagall was born in March 1825, though his own account of his date of birth varied from one telling to the next. Despite his reputation as a Scottish poet, he was actually born to Irish parents, though he spent much of his adult life in Dundee. When he resolved to become a poet, he wrote to Queen Victoria requesting her patronage. She sent back a polite rejection letter, which McGonagall – never one to be blighted by a lack of self-confidence – interpreted as an expression of interest. In July 1878, over the course of three days, he walked sixty miles from his home in Dundee to the Queen's castle at Balmoral, enduring violent thunderstorms and a night's sleep in a barn, in order to perform a reading of his poetry in front of her. He was refused entry and had to walk all the way home again.

Performance, it must be said, was in his blood. When he played Macbeth in an amateur production of the Scottish play, he refused to die at the end, deciding that a little revision of the Bard's great tragedy was required. He had persuaded a local theatre to let him take the title role in the production, but he was so annoyed by the actor playing Macduff, who he reckoned was trying to upstage him, that he resolved not to fall down at the end

of the play, causing consternation to the audience – and to Macduff, one suspects.

McGonagall also enjoyed performing his own poetry. Later in life he had a job giving poetry readings in a circus: he received fifteen shillings a night on condition that the crowd be allowed to pelt him with eggs and rotten food, like a minor criminal in the stocks. Surprisingly, McGonagall seemed to like this arrangement – the money came in handy – and he was annoyed when the authorities put a stop to it.

None of this perturbed him. He'd written his first poem about a reverend, George Gilfillan, himself something of a poetaster who was active in the 'Spasmodic School' of poetry, characterised by intense psychological drama and long-winded self-absorbed soliloquies. When Gilfillan read 'An Address to the Rev. George Gilfillan', he commented that 'Shakespeare never wrote anything like this' – an assessment with which, upon reading McGonagall's poem, a reader can only wholeheartedly agree. But McGonagall got a real chance to flex his poetic muscles in December 1879, when the Tay Rail Bridge in Dundee collapsed, killing everyone aboard the train crossing the bridge, reckoned to be some seventy-five people. Soon after the event, in 1880, McGonagall – regrettably – took up his pen to write an elegy for the lost souls, whose number he raised to ninety. The intention, no doubt, was to create a moving elegy for the victims and to do for the Tay Bridge what the Poet Laureate, Tennyson, had done for the Charge of the Light Brigade. Unfortunately, McGonagall's cack-handed way with rhyme had quite the opposite effect. Here's how it opens:

> Beautiful railway bridge of the silv'ry Tay
> Alas! I am very sorry to say
> That ninety lives have been taken away
> On the last sabbath day of 1879
> Which will be remember'd for a very long time.

It ends with the resounding couplet: 'For the stronger we our houses do build, / The less chance we have of being killed.'

McGonagall revealed in his autobiography the precise moment he discovered his 'genius' for poetry:

> Dame Fortune has been very kind to me by endowing me with the genius of poetry. I remember how I felt when I received the spirit of poetry. It was in the year of 1877, and in the month of June, when the flowers were in full

> bloom. Well, it being the holiday week in Dundee, I was sitting in my back room in Paton's Lane, Dundee, lamenting to myself because I couldn't get to the Highlands on holiday to see the beautiful scenery, when all of a sudden my body got inflamed, and instantly I was seized with a strong desire to write poetry, so strong, in fact, that in imagination I thought I heard a voice crying in my ears – 'Write! Write!'

Would that we were all so endowed. The titles of McGonagall's successive collections of verse – and there were a lot of them – say it all: *Poetic Gems*, *More Poetic Gems*, *Still More Poetic Gems*, *Yet More Poetic Gems*, *Further Poetic Gems*, *Yet Further Poetic Gems*, and, eventually, *Last Poetic Gems*.

It's not simply that McGonagall's poetry was bad. It was, as the phrase has it, so bad it's good. As Stephen Pile notes in his *Book of Heroic Failures*, 'He was so giftedly bad that he backed unwittingly into genius.' For all the wrong reasons, McGonagall had seized upon the right word to describe himself: he *was* a genius.

Futuristic Golf at St Andrews

A game of golf at St Andrews may not be an obvious subject for futuristic fiction, but in 1892 that didn't stop a Scottish golfer named J. McCullough from writing a utopian novel with the glorious title *Golf in the Year 2000; or, What Are We Coming To*.

The plot of the book is relatively simple. In March 1892, Alexander John Gibson falls asleep and wakes 108 years later in the brave new world of the year 2000. He then proceeds to explore this new world, though his ambitions don't appear to extend further than seeing how much the local golf course has altered in the intervening century. Nevertheless, the book accurately predicted many things, including television (in McCullough's novel, international golf matches are televised), high-speed bullet trains, digital watches, driverless golf carts, British decimal currency, and women's liberation, although McCullough's golf jackets that yell 'Fore!' whenever the golfer swings his club remain the stuff of science fiction (though more through lack of interest than scientific impossibility, I imagine), and we haven't yet developed hairbrushes that keep hair at whatever length the owner wishes, which is more of a shame. It has even been claimed that the international golf tournament depicted in the book foreshadows the Ryder Cup, which wasn't established for another thirty-five years.

But McCullough's novel is not a wholly serious utopian novel, unlike Edward Bellamy's bestselling *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, which had been published in the US four years earlier and had been hugely influential among socialist clubs and radical political groups. The book's preface proudly states, 'I began with the intention of having a moral, but I hadn't gone very far when I forgot what the moral was, so I left it out. Of course that's not to say that the book is immoral – far from it.' In many respects, McCullough's book is closer to Jerome K. Jerome's comic fiction and might even be described as a precursor to P. G.

Wodehouse's golfing stories. Even the short chapter summaries compel you to read more:

> In a curious position – Discover I have grown a beard – Am nearly drowned – Mr. Adams, C.I.G.C. – The year 2000 – The certificate – Get my hair cut – The watch

If that whets your appetite for chapter one – as it should – you can read on to chapter seven, which treats the women of this future world:

> How they cross the Atlantic – What the ladies of 2000 do – Miss Adams – Has the female sex degenerated? – The picture gallery – Miss Adams again, a little too much of her this time

Women, who dress like men in McCullough's imagined future, have attained many of the top business roles because they can actually get things done, whereas the men, as the book's title implies, simply stand around and play golf.

As you'd expect from a book about golf written by a Scottish writer, *Golf in the Year 2000* features a trip to St Andrews, which, the narrator informs us, is 'not what it was in my day'. The course has been replanned and the time taken to traverse it has greatly increased, and the narrator becomes distinctly annoyed by the speaking jacket (the one that yells 'Fore!') which he is required, by club rules, to wear. So, more of a nightmare dystopian vision, then?

Ettrick, Scottish Borders

Let's leave St Andrews behind, but stick with the sports theme and go in search of the Scottish Olympics, which were the vision of one man, a writer whose name is not as celebrated as it should be.

For many years the Scottish author James Hogg thought he shared his birthday, 25 January, with Robert Burns, whom he believed to be thirteen years his senior. He was crestfallen to learn, later in life, that he'd been baptised over a year before he was (apparently) born – the parish register had his baptism recorded in December 1770, which would have made it difficult for him to have been born in January 1772, as he'd previously thought.

Hogg had, in fact, been born at the farm of Ettrick Hall in Selkirkshire, an area known for its sheep farming. His father had been wealthy but bankruptcy meant that young James had to scrape a living herding cattle on local farms. Having literally lost the shirt off his back, he was reduced to working topless – a sight that was rendered even more 'grotesque', in his own words, by the fact that he 'could never induce my trews, or lower vestments, to keep up to their proper sphere, there being no braces in those days'. Work among the fields of Selkirkshire must have been *very* exposing.

By the time he'd reached adulthood, Hogg had become a shepherd at the nearby Blackhouse Farm, and had ready access to a vast collection of books which he read his way through as if his life depended on it. It seems that everyone active on the literary scene at this time somehow knew each other, despite the relatively isolated nature of the rural communities in Scotland: Hogg came to know Burns's widow, Jean Armour, and was friends at Blackhouse with William Laidlaw, the man who would later manage Sir Walter Scott's estate at Abbotsford (of which more anon when we arrive there). Hogg and Scott became friends too, with the latter encouraging 'Jamie the Poeter', as he

was becoming known, to publish the writing Hogg had been working on.

Indeed, it was Hogg's links with other writers of the day that led to one of the most bizarre literary anthologies Britain has ever seen. In 1816, in order to support his establishment at Eltrive Farm in Yarrow, Hogg decided to compile a collection of poems by other living poets. However, despite his friendship with writers like Scott, and initial interest in the project from many of the poets he wrote to, Hogg ultimately found his contemporaries reluctant to contribute. Wordsworth originally agreed, but then withdrew his poem. Scott, on whom Hogg thought he could rely to offer his support, refused point-blank because he lacked faith in the enterprise. Undeterred, Hogg simply sat down and wrote his fellow writers' poems for them, parodying their styles with relentless relish. The result was *The Poetic Mirror*, a collection of inspired parodies of the major poets of the age. Wordsworth features in 'The Flying Tailor' among others, while Coleridge is lampooned in 'Isabelle', a nod to his poem 'Christabel'.

The Poetic Mirror, and a string of novels – the most famous of which is *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, whose influence can be seen in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* – established Hogg as a literary star, and, after Sir Walter Scott, the most famous Scottish writer of the time. At Innerleithen, some 18 miles north of Ettrick, Hogg founded the St Ronan's Border Games in the 1820s, featuring angling, archery, athletics, curling, rifle shooting, and wrestling, among other events. The games were named after Scott's 1824 novel *St Ronan's Well*, which was set in Innerleithen, and are sometimes known as the 'Scottish Olympics'. The entry on Hogg in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* never even mentions the games or his role in establishing them. Some of his achievements, it would seem, are still little known or little appreciated.

Great Scott at Abbotsford House

Robert Burns may have more statues dedicated to him than any other writer, but he doesn't have the largest monument in his own home country. Instead, that honour goes to another giant of Scottish literature, Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), a memorial to whom stands in Princes Street Gardens in Edinburgh, a stone's throw from Waverley railway station (which is named after one of Scott's novels) and not too far from Tynecastle, the home ground of the football team Heart of Midlothian (named after another of Scott's novels). At nearly 62 metres in height, the Scott Monument is the largest monument to a writer in the whole world.

Much of Scott's work was hugely popular during his lifetime, yet he seems to have had a feeling that his writing would not necessarily last. At Abbotsford, as Stuart Kelly records in his fascinating *Scott-Land: The Man Who Invented a Nation*, the author of *Waverley* planted acres of trees. 'I promise you, my oaks will outlast my laurels,' he wrote to a friend, 'and I pique myself more upon my compositions for manure than on any other compositions whatsoever to which I was ever accessory.' Certainly, Scott seemed to view literature as a profession rather than an art, and considered military achievements far worthier of laurels than mere novels.

Scott was a sort of one-man marketing campaign for his country. With his design for his vast home, Abbotsford, near the River Tweed, he essentially invented modern-day Scottish tourism. The house was crammed full with relics from the author's own novels, as Kelly observes: a lock of Bonnie Prince Charlie's hair (a nod to *Waverley*), a fragment of a dress that had once belonged to Mary, Queen of Scots (who features in *The Abbot*), and even the doorway to the Old Tolbooth prison in Edinburgh, the jail that had housed the accused child-murderer Effie Deans in Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*. The house was like a museum to a writer who hadn't got round to dying yet.

Many high-profile visitors to Scott's mansion detested it. John Ruskin asserted that Scott had 'some confused love of Gothic architecture, because it was dark, picturesque, old, and like nature; but he could not tell the worst from the best, and built for himself perhaps the most incongruous and ugly pile that gentlemanly modernism ever designed'. The actor William Macready called it 'a monument of his vanity and indiscretion'. Scott was able to enjoy living in the finished Abbotsford for just a year, before the debts he'd accrued in building the place forced him to move out.

Despite the mixed reviews Abbotsford received, it helped to revive the architectural style known as Scottish Baronial. And Scott was in many ways the father of the Scottish tourist industry. In 1822, he masterminded King George IV's visit to Scotland, and in the process helped to create a national myth. The former Prince Regent arrived clad in a kilt and a ridiculous amount of tartan, sparking a national fad.

The Goatherd-Poet of Jarrow

Let's leave Abbotsford in Scotland behind and go in search of some abbots in England. This may be trickier than it sounds. In the year 664, according to the Venerable Bede, a 'sudden pestilence' swept through Britain and Ireland, 'raging far and wide with fierce destruction'. It carried off numerous monks and abbots at monasteries in northern England, and at Bede's own monastery at Jarrow, he reports that all of the choir monks perished, with only the abbot and a small boy left alive. This plague was as devastating to the British population as the later, more famous Black Death of the fourteenth century. And, just as English poetry entered a golden age in the wake of the Black Death – Chaucer, John Gower, William Langland, and the *Gawain* poet were all writing in the decades following the most virulent epidemic – the birth of English poetry appears to have coincided with this earlier plague outbreak of the 660s.

Bede (672–735), also known as Saint Bede and the Venerable Bede, is best known for his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, or *History of the English Church and People*, which he completed in 731. The book charts the establishment of Christianity in the British Isles, particularly in England, but he was a prolific author and chronicler who wrote around sixty other books in addition to his *History*. Even more remarkably, given the Viking raids on the British Isles which followed shortly after Bede's death, most of his books have survived.

Bede is often called the father of English history, and for good reason. We use the term 'Anno Domini' or 'AD' when talking about chronology because of him – not because he devised it, but because his adoption of this system of dating, which was proposed by Dionysius Exiguus, ensured that it would be taken up by later historians, and become the standard.

It is also thanks to Bede that we have *Cædmon's Hymn*, the oldest surviving Anglo-Saxon poem and, perhaps, the very first poem composed in the English language in England. It's just

nine lines and forty-two words long, but it represents the beginning of English literature written in the vernacular:

> Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard
> metudæs maecti end his modgidanc
> uerc uuldurfadur swe he uundra gihwaes
> eci dryctin or astelidæ
> he aerist scop aelda barnum
> heben til hrofe haleg scepen.
> tha middungeard moncynnæs uard
> eci dryctin æfter tiadæ
> firum foldu frea allmectig

This might not look much like English, although several words, such as *æfter* ('after') and *allmectig* ('almighty'), are recognisable. The poem can be translated as follows: 'Now we must honour the guardian of heaven, the might of the architect, and his purpose, the work of the father of glory as he, the eternal lord, established the beginning of wonders; he first created for the children of men heaven as a roof, the holy creator then the guardian of mankind, the eternal lord, afterwards appointed the middle earth, the lands for men, the Lord almighty.' Which also tells us that Cædmon, and not Tolkien, invented 'middle earth'.

Who was Cædmon, and how did he come to write the first English poem? He was a seventh-century goatherd who, according to Bede, wrote much else besides his famous *Hymn* – though none of his other compositions has survived. Indeed, we only have the *Hymn* because of Bede, who preserved a Latin translation of the poem in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. Even then, Bede's rendering of the hymn was in Latin, but thankfully some anonymous scribe added the Anglo-Saxon version of the poem in the margins of the manuscript of Bede's book. Thanks to Bede, and the anonymous writer who translated it, we have one of the earliest works of what we can call 'English poetry'. And it really was early. The seventh-century Cædmon is more remote from Chaucer than Chaucer, in the fourteenth century, is from us. It really was a long time ago.

It's a sobering thought that if Bede had never mentioned Cædmon or written down his poem, we would never have heard of him. As it is, we know a fair bit about him. Cædmon worked at the monastery of Streonæshalch, or Whitby Abbey, during the time of St Hilda (614–680). Bede tells us that Cædmon was

ignorant of ‘the art of song’ until a dream he had one night brought him the gift. Thankfully, the ‘gift’ proved more valuable than William McGonagall’s would over a millennium later. If you want to make your pilgrimage to the birthplace of English poetry, at St Mary’s Churchyard in Whitby a memorial commemorates Cædmon’s role as the originator of English religious verse: ‘To the glory of God and in memory of Cædmon the father of English Sacred Song. Fell asleep hard by, 680.’

But, as we will see if we linger in this churchyard a while longer, not everyone who ‘falls asleep’ into death fails to wake up again.