

The Adventure of English: The Biography of a Language

by Melvyn Bragg

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The Great Escape (part 2)

The interesting result was that, apart from the crucial matter of grammar, their success was rather limited. In its later phases, English became a language with an immense capacity to absorb others, to convert others, certainly to take on board other languages without yielding the ground on its own basic vocabulary and meanings. Yet here at this earlier stage — four hundred years later, since the Frisian tribes and others had transported the roots of English into the people who would bear that name — it was still surprisingly obstinate. Only about a score of Celtic words had been admitted; only about two hundred Roman words and, even now, from these overwhelming Danish invaders, no more than about one hundred fifty words were added to a national word-hoard of about twenty-five thousand. This was partly because the power was at Winchester and texts from all around the country were copied into the West Saxon dialect there. But also it is as if at this stage English had dug in so very deeply that it would not be moved. And the result of this obstinacy, in my opinion, made it so powerfully earthed that later, when the Normans came with far more devastating consequences, it could still feed off its deep taproots.

Nevertheless the Vikings — Danes and Norwegians — brought words which enriched the language greatly. In northern parts of England the new invaders' words predominate much more than in the south, exposing the north-south divide; and the accents too, from what linguists tell us — the Yorkshire, the Northumbrian, the Geordie, the Cumbrian — reach back to the sounds of the men in those longships whose peerless shipbuilding crafts enabled them to launch themselves as far as America and into the Mediterranean.

The Vikings live on most strikingly in the place names which spread like a rash over what was the land of the Danelaw. Locally it struck hard and has stayed fast. There are said to be at least one thousand five hundred of these names, more than six hundred of which, for example, end in "-by," the Scandinavian word for farm or town.

I was brought up in the far north-west of England, a few miles outside the Lake District, a place of more than four hundred mountains and thirty-three lakes deeply settled by Norwegian Vikings, most of whom came across from their stronghold in Dublin. The words they brought were bedded into the local dialect for more than a thousand largely undisturbed years. To use "-by" as an example: within a few miles of the town in which I grew up, Wigton, there are Ireby, Thursby, Wiggonby, Corby, Lazenby, Thornby, Dovenby and Gamblesby; more widely known examples would be Derby, Naseby and Rugby. The "-thorpe" ending, which denotes a village, is seen in Scunthorpe, Althorp, Linthorpe. The "-thwaite" ending, which denotes a portion of land, is again all over the north, and in the Lake District alone you have Bassenthwaite, Ruthwaite, Micklethwaite and Rosthwaite; "-toft," which means a homestead (the site of a house and its outbuildings), can be seen in Lowestoft, Eastoft, Sandtoft. And there are less popular but still extant Viking names: the word "valley" was "dale" in Old Norse, and the Lake District is furrowed with them — Borrowdale (a valley with a fort), Wasdale (a valley with a lake), Langdale, Eskdale, Patterdale. Sometimes there is a blend as in the Cumbrian village of Blennerhasset, "blaen" being Celtic top of hill, and the Old Norse "heysætr" — hay pasture. And Keswick, one of the prime towns in the Lakes, is a hardened form of the Old English name "cesewic" meaning cheese farm. But without the Viking influence it would most likely be called Cheswick or Cheswich. In short, the Danes pitched camps and named them as their own and with such emphasis that they still stand today.

Similarly, many Viking family names remain today, again much more emphatically in the north. The Danish way of making a name was to add "-son" to the name of the father. If you look in the local papers inside the old Danelaw you find these sons everywhere. At my own school there were Johnsons, Pattisons, Robsons, Harrisons, Rawlinsons, Watsons, Nicholsons, Gibsons, Dickinsons,

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