

Paul Kingsnorth: *The Wake*. (2013)

The 2013 historical novel *The Wake* by Paul Kingsnorth follows its protagonist through the Norman conquest of England in 1066 and its immediate aftermath. Rather than an account of the political history of these years, it is a study of one man's experience of the end of the world as he knows it and his struggle to keep his identity (and his sanity) in a rapidly changing environment.

The novel is written in the first person from the point of view of Buccmaster, a wealthy farmer in the Lincolnshire Fens, who enjoys all the trappings of a comfortable existence: he has a wife and sons, owns a respectable amount of land (with a bondman to help him work it), and has significant status in his community. The story begins early in 1066 and follows its protagonist until summer 1068. As events unfold, seen through Buccmaster's eyes, his memories, too, are explored, and his backstory, told in flashbacks interspersed throughout the narrative, concludes as the climax of the main plot is reached. Much of the politics of these years happen off the page and in the distance, with rumours and opinions reaching the protagonist more or less randomly from various angles, and the reader shares the limited information available in his relatively isolated rural world. So the first call to arms is no more than an inconvenience which interferes with the harvest, and when his sons do not return from Hastings, this is primarily a cause for personal grief. The scale of the disaster only becomes apparent when the village is destroyed by the new lords in retribution for not paying their taxes, and Buccmaster, surviving by accident, has to flee into the even greater isolation of the wilderness. Life continues slowly from this point as Buccmaster talks about raising an army of resistance fighters, but in reality only has a few followers and some difficulty getting through the winter. The story proceeds slowly through 1067, only to pick up pace in 1068, in parallel with the political developments happening in the background, genuine historical events such as the uprising of the northern earls with the support of Malcolm of Scotland and the muster of a rebel army at Ely by Hereward (more of whom shortly). At this point, Kingsnorth engages in a certain amount of dramatic licence, bringing forward some events of 1069, thus heightening the dramatic impact and forming a contrast with the long wait of 1067. The characters spend their time in an environment that is believable for the period, with much of the physical detail accurate, or accurate enough for the purposes of fiction. One scene showing a castle being built is particularly evocative and calls to mind the images of the Bayeux tapestry, but with more of the details filled in.

The title of the novel invites comparisons with Hereward 'the Wake', a local resistance fighter from the Fens active in the aftermath of 1066, of whom stories have been told since at least the 12th century¹. Hereward indeed features in the novel, but

¹ For a discussion of the sources, surviving and surmised, Bremmer, Rolf. H. 'The *Gesta Herewardi*: Transforming an Anglo-Saxon into an Englishman'[online facsimile], in *People and Texts: Relationships in Medieval Literature*, edd. Thea Summerfield and Keith Busby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 30–1, 33–4
<<https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/17601/BremmerGesta%2BHerewardi%2B1%5B2%5D.pdf>> [all URLs accessed 10 Dec. 2015]. For the *Gesta Herewardi* compare 'Hereward the Wake', tr. Michael Swanton [online facsimile], in Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds. *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications 1997)
<<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hereward-the-wake>>

(like so many political events) his activities and his growing army remain at the fringes of the story; he is talked about, envied, rejected, even accepted, but never seen.

Hereward's nickname is said to describe him as watchful, always awake, and similarly a theme of awakening runs through Kingsnorth's novel. Other echoes are found in themes of exile, resistance, and revenge, and also in a few plot points (which may be best left under wraps); but for Buccmaster, events tend to play out quite differently, and he almost seems a kind of anti-Hereward at times. The greatest difference between the two is in their characters. While the Hereward of the medieval tales is an angry young man turning into a heroic figure, Buccmaster remains a disaffected, self-centred, and ultimately unsympathetic character, and where Hereward's journey leads initially to victory over the new order and eventually to acceptance into it, Buccmaster's leads to delusion, defeat, and isolation.

By calling his story "a post-apocalyptic novel set a thousand years ago"², Kingsnorth explicitly places it into a literary tradition, which appears in different guises in times of uncertainty, often overtly mirroring the (real or perceived) problems of its period. The story of Buccmaster is one of the dissolution of society and the loss of identity, issues that Kingsnorth himself has explored at length in his non-fiction writing on the western world of the early 21st century.

In the novel, the initial catastrophe breaks down the constraints of the established social order, freeing the narrator to reconnect with what he feels is the essence of being English and to uphold it in the face of chaos. Buccmaster is fiercely independent: not only does he resent the authority of the Norman invaders, but he already resented that of the reeve who called his sons away from his fields and to their deaths, and that of the church and of its "white Christ". While he could tolerate the structures of the old order, which ensured his place in society, his true loyalty is to the land, to the Fens, and to the people he tries to lead. The fall of the old order presents him with the opportunity of opposing the invaders not with attempts to restore the previous regime, but with what he holds to be the true values of England. Central to this is his religion: seeing the defeat at Hastings as the ultimate evidence that his people's trust in Christ was misplaced, Buccmaster openly returns to the "old gods". He carries a rune-inscribed sword, an heirloom which according to his grandfather was forged by the mythical smith Weland, and throughout the book, he communes (or thinks he communes) with its maker. The gods he talks about - and occasionally encounters - are explicitly pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon deities, referred to by with their Old English names (not their Scandinavian equivalents), and they are presented as part of a living, if disparaged tradition, passed on to Buccmaster by his grandfather, not just gathered from old stories and artificially revived in a time of need. In reality, however, the survival of such a tradition into the 11th century seems unlikely. Pagan Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity from the late 6th century, and although the process would have taken some generations to be completed, the influence of the church was powerful (as is well recorded), and by the 11th century, there is no evidence for any survival of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon religion³. Indeed, when earlier in that century churchmen preach against paganism, they only cite names of Scandinavian deities – suggesting that the

For later reception compare Charles Kingsley's novel *Hereward the Wake: last of the English* (London 1866).

² *The Wake*, back cover.

³ Hutton, Ronald, *Pagan Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 341.

English names were either deemed irrelevant or forgotten⁴. By contrast, as their homilies show, paganism survived considerably longer in Scandinavia, and although Scandinavian settlers in Britain were apparently assimilated, the suggestion of some underground survival would have been more credible in a Scandinavian context. This could easily have been an option, given that the story is set in the territory of the old Danelaw, an area of long-standing Scandinavian settlement, but Buccmaster is repeatedly shown distancing himself from anything that is not originally English in his narrow view, which regards even the settled Scandinavians as incomers and inherently suspect.

There are a number of mystical scenes illustrating Buccmaster's beliefs, but in each of these cases, the line between dream and reality are fluid. In other cases, however, the discussion of religion is more tangible, for example the flashback in which he remembers his grandfather introducing him to the "old house" of the gods, submerged in one of the fenland lakes, likely to be the author's nod to much earlier pre-Christian places of worship found in North European wetlands. A key scene concerns the May festivities in an isolated village in 1068, in which he contrasts the supposed pagan origin of the villagers' seasonal traditions (greenery, sex, and a may-pole) with the Christianity of the village's inhabitants. Some of these traditions are indeed based on later medieval practises, which are likely to be much older and may or may not go back to the Anglo-Saxon period. As the central feature of the village's festivities, the maypole is explained by Buccmaster as a representation of the world tree - a 20th century interpretation which cannot be backed up historically.⁵

In short, the portrayal of Buccmaster as an Anglo-Saxon pagan stretches credibility even within the bounds of dramatic licence and seems to say more about the author's view of the past than it does about 11th-century England. One of his sources on Anglo-Saxon paganism which Kingsnorth explicitly mentions is explicitly about religious contact in the 7th century⁶, centuries before Buccmaster's time. It seems as if pre-Conquest England, the history of which spanned more than half a millennium, is seen here as a single unit, a fantasy of a better time to oppose the evils of modernity, not only for the protagonist, but for the author himself.

Finally, what sets the book apart most visibly and immediately from other historical novels is the language it is written in. In his 'note on Language', the author refers to it as a "shadow tongue"⁷, a deliberate hybrid of Old English (the language of the Anglo-Saxons) and modern English, intended to convey the spirit of the Anglo-Saxon period while remaining intelligible to the modern reader. This is problematic in itself, as it is unclear whether the use of authentic or quasi-authentic language in a historical novel really does bring the reader closer to an understanding of the period in which it is set. While it is true, as Kingsnorth notes, that "the way we speak is specific to our time and

⁴ Compare homily *De Falsis Diis* by Ælfric of Evesham (c.955-c.1010), in *Homilies of Ælfric*, ii, ed. John Collins Pope, Early English Text Society, 260 (Oxford University Press 1968), 684, 686 (a translation, by P. Baker, can be found at <<http://faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/aelfric/defalsis.html>>); compare also (directly based on this) the homily *The False Gods* by Wulfstan (d.1023), in Dorothy Bethurum, ed., *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford: OUP, 1957; repr. 1998), 223.

⁵ Hutton, Ronald, *The Stations of the Sun* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 233–4; *Pagan Britain*, 372.

⁶ Bates, Brian, *The Way of Wyrd* (London: Century, 1983), in which the author presents the results of his academic research on psychology of religion in the format of a novel set in 675.

⁷ 'A note on language', in *The Wake*, 353.

place”⁸, this in itself also makes it difficult for us as readers to escape from our own understanding of language. The sense of words can change over time, neutral terms may have become offensive, and strong expressions weak, and without prior knowledge of the period, it is not always easy to pick up on these differences. At the same time, obsolete grammar, syntax and turns of phrase are in danger of suggesting not that the characters speak the contemporary language of a different time, but that odd-sounding or old-fashioned speech patters are a feature of the period portrayed. In other words, making characters speak in an unfamiliar idiom may invite misunderstanding and lead to a lack of engagement rather than increasing credibility.

This of course does not mean it cannot be done, and it has been, quite successfully, for more recent periods⁹. Kingsnorth recognizes the importance of individual words for this, especially given how profoundly the Norman Conquest influenced later English vocabulary. He tells his entire story largely without using words of French origin, to such an extent that the few to which he has to concede access become noticeable in a way they would not be a modern context. In order to remain true to the cultural concepts of the time, he also introduces some Old English words without modern descendants, e.g. for concepts relating to pre-Conquest society; these are explained in a glossary.

But he does not stop here. Recognising that Old English grammar and syntax differed considerably from modern English, he attempts to recreate that aspect as well, with considerably less success. Rather than acknowledging that English inflectional grammar has become less complex over time (with the functions of inflections having been taken over by a stricter syntax), Kingsnorth appears to almost do the reverse. For example, the syllable *-an*, which is quite distinctive (and therefore useful to make a text look “Old English”), is applied indiscriminately to various grammatical forms which would be more intelligible to the modern reader if the original endings had been used: the verbal noun (Old English *-ing*, as in modern English), the present participle (Old English *-end*, *-and*, as in several modern dialects), and some types of past participles (Old English *-en*, often preserved in modern English). However, the infinitive, where Old English does have *-an*, is treated in various ways, sometimes with *-en*, and sometimes (as in modern English) without any ending at all¹⁰. A much more serious simplification is the consistent use of the third person singular verb forms in the present tense, perhaps intended to mirror the past tense, where the form is (now) the same for all persons. However, statements like “we is” or “thou does” are highly ungrammatical and always have been, as are incorrect uses of the pronouns *thou* and *thee*, which survived into Shakespeare's English and are still often correctly used in archaizing speech. Features such as these can create an overall impression that the characters are not native speakers of the complex ancestor of modern English, but that they are imperfect learners of a second language who have been denied access to its depths and riches. In this they sometimes resemble the representations of indigenous peoples speaking English found in some 19th-century colonial-age literature. It is not clear why

⁸ ‘A note on language’, in *The Wake*, 355

⁹ Compare for example the works of Susanna Clarke and Patrick O’Brien, which manage to evoke Regency English without actually being written in it by carefully adjusting the vocabulary and syntax of current English.

¹⁰ For more detail on Old English grammar, compare e.g. Mitchell, Bruce, *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

the grammar of the narrative was not adjusted by going backwards in time, using features we still recognize from Shakespeare and other early modern texts, introducing some easily construed earlier features, and otherwise letting the pre-Conquest vocabulary speak for itself. The suspicion arises that the desired effect was in fact not that of a genuine-looking form of early English, but that of a more primitive language spoken by a simpler people.

The language is further obscured by the deliberately altered spelling and punctuation. The spelling attempts to mimic Old English conventions, and the chapter on language gives only a small amount of guidance, incomplete enough to leave considerable stumbling blocks for a reader without prior knowledge of this system. For example, he notes that “there was...no letter ‘k’ – it is replaced by ‘c’, which is always pronounced like modern ‘k’, never like modern ‘s’”. The use of the word “always” here is misleading, as (depending on context) Old English *c* could also be pronounced as modern *tch* (IPA /tʃ/), and consequently the novel uses *cc* in the words *necc* ‘neck’ (Old English *hnecca*)¹¹ as well as *fecc* ‘fetch’ (Old English *feccan*)¹², without explanation. In addition, a number of words appear to have been deliberately changed to look more alien than their actual Old English equivalents, e.g. *anglisc* ‘English’ (Old English *englisc*, *ænglisc*)¹³ and *toc* ‘taken’ (early Middle English *takenn*)¹⁴. Then there is the form *mergen* for ‘morning’, which does exist in Old English, but so does the more recognizable *morgen*¹⁵, raising the question of why the more unfamiliar-looking form was chosen. Again some doubt is cast on the author’s motivations – does he really try to make something that feels like Old English intelligible more widely, or does deliberately do the opposite, obscuring the narrative to convey the “sheer alienness of Old England” rather than the “place at once alien and familiar” he invokes almost in the same breath¹⁶. The text is further presented with hardly any punctuation, which underlines this effect. This device has its place in a text purporting to replicate a written document. *The Wake*, however, does not evoke an Anglo-Saxon manuscript (even the basic page layout is different); it is written in the style of a spoken account, and without punctuation to signpost sentence flow and intonation on the page, the narration can come across as dull and monotonous.¹⁷

On the other hand, beneath these grammatical idiosyncrasies and alienating presentation, the language turns out to be distinctly modern, especially in its syntax, particularly as the story builds to its climax, when long passages are written in a flowing prose with a strong contemporary feel – contemporary, that is, with the 21st century. This is particularly marked when the author lapses from his “shadow tongue” into unaltered modern English in mid-sentence (before switching back to his own system of spelling and grammar), for example: “I is no gebur of thine buccmaster of holland i is a

¹¹ NECK n./1 (2003), in *Oxford English Dictionary online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125652>>

¹² DOE: *Dictionary of Old English: A to G online*, edd. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2007 <<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/>>), s.v. FECCAN

¹³ ENGLISH adj. (2008), in *OED online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/62251>>; DOE s.v. ENGLISC

¹⁴ TAKE v. (2015), in *OED online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/197158>>

¹⁵ MORN n (2002), in *OED online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/122280>>

¹⁶ ‘A note on Language’, in *The Wake*, 356

¹⁷ Carey, Peter *The True History of the Kelly Gang: A Novel* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press 2000), presented as the faithful edition of a manuscript written by an uneducated man.

free wif now and i will throw my runes where I will¹⁸. Some choices of vocabulary also stand out, especially the swearing. Its liberal use is perfectly justified, and arguably integral to the portrayal of Buccmaster's character. However, for the purpose of restoring the language of the distant past, it is also problematic, as swear words can be very specific to their time and place, more so than many other expressions. Not unsurprisingly, the word which is sometimes euphemistically described as "Anglo-Saxon" (despite being only attested from the 16th century) features prominently, but although it is fair to assume (especially with the privilege of dramatic licence) that this word does indeed go back to Old English, this is only true for its literal (sexual) sense. More generally disparaging uses only appear in writing from the 18th century, and it does not become a fully-fledged oath until the 20th¹⁹. (The intensifying use of the derivative adjective, widely deployed throughout the narrative, is first attested in 1893²⁰). So for all the adjusted spelling, the swearing in this book is fundamentally modern, and shows precisely the kind of anachronism the author sets out to avoid when he notes that "to put 21st-century sentences into the mouths of eleventh century characters would be the equivalent of giving them iPads and cappuccinos: just wrong."²¹

All in all, *The Wake* provides a fascinating insight into human psychology in the face of catastrophe. It paints a believable picture of life in 11th-century rural England in the aftermath of conquest while at the same time using its protagonist to channel a romanticising view of a more innocent Old England, where the religion of the land is never far below the surface, however far its essence may already have been eroded by a corrupt society. The book is written in an experimental language which feels essentially like modern English artificially overlaid with alienating features; these do little to convey the atmosphere and attitudes of the time, and no more than a sensitively archaizing modern English text could have. Instead, they obstruct understanding and obscure the flow of the prose, and ultimately detract from the enjoyment of the tale. So at the end of the day (and the book) a feeling remains that the narrator has a great tale to tell, but has been somewhat let down by his author.

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¹⁸ *The Wake*, 311

¹⁹ FUCK n., FUCK v., FUCK int., (all 2008) in *OED online*, respectively
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²⁰ FUCKING adj. (2008), in *OED online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/270263>>

²¹ 'A note on Language', in *The Wake*, 355