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Michael Smith

**Maldon
&
Other Translations**

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MALDON

A Version

NOTE

The battle described in this fragment of epic took place on the 10th or 11th of August 991 at Maldon on the river Blackwater (Pante) in Essex.

A band of Vikings led by Justin and Guthmund made an incursion into the east coast of England. Having plundered Ipswich, they moved into Essex as far as Maldon. The river near this town divides into two branches. The southern branch washes the northern slope of the hill on which the town is situated. It is here that the Danish ships seem to have taken up their position. It is usually assumed that the Vikings were on Northey Island, having come upriver. The East-Saxon earl, Byrhtnoth, came down from the north with as many men as he could quickly muster and encamped on the mainland, opposite the causeway. It is on the shores of this river that the battle was fought.

It is not known who composed the verses of the fragment. Scholars are of the *opinion* that the surviving fragment constitutes as much as seventy five per cent of the original.

For its rhythm and other effects this version is heavily and shamelessly indebted to Ezra Pound ('The Seafarer') and Basil Bunting ('Briggflatts'). I found it impossible to avoid all archaisms of diction and syntax, try how I would. I can only hope that what remains of the archaic does not impede the splendid thrust and rush of the original, and that it may, in fact, contribute something to the retention of its ancient flavour. I have not attempted to replicate slavishly the original metre, which would doubtless result in literary taxidermy, but rather to suggest it, as the French poet and critic Yves Bonnefoy sagely advised modern translators of poetic texts of past times and cultures.

In the opening and closing of 'Maldon', I have consciously retained the fragmentary nature of the piece because I think it adds a sense of authenticity and realism. As regards the seemingly inconsequential detail of the young warrior releasing his hawk, I agree with the Argentinian Borges, who greatly liked the text, that 'Given the epic harshness of the poem, the phrase *lêofne ... hafoc* (literally, 'his beloved hawk') moves us extraordinarily' (*Dada la dureza épica del poema, la frase 'el querido halcón', nos conmueve singularmente*).

Many years ago when I was a student in University College, Dublin, I made a literal translation of 'The Battle of Maldon' as part of my studies at the time. Of all the Old English poems I struggled with, the two that impressed me most for their purely literary qualities were 'The Seafarer' and 'Maldon'. Pound had already definitively done 'The Seafarer' and that was that. But 'Maldon' had not been so well served so far as I knew, and I

toyed with the idea of attempting a version myself. But I did not attempt a translation then. Recently, however, having discovered by chance and read again my old student crib, I was once more enthused by the text and thought I might attempt what I had not dared to do in the past. I can only hope that my temerity at this late date has been at least partially justified.

Finally, a comment might perhaps be made on an Irish poet translating what is, among other things, an English national text. The events described in 'The Battle of Maldon' might just as easily, with a change of names of persons and places, serve essentially as a description of what took place at Dublin's Clontarf in 1014. The Argentinian Borges would assuredly appreciate this conjunction of circumstances. And on an even more personal note, I would like to thank my wife Irene and my friend and fellow poet, Trevor Joyce, for their encouragement and other helpful contributions in the making of this translation.

Michael Smith, Dublin, 2004

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Further Reading

B. Mitchell and F. C. Robinson eds., *A Guide to Old English*, 5th ed. Oxford, 1992; see pages 241-52.

D. G. Scragg ed., *The Battle of Maldon*, 1981, Manchester University Press.

E. Treharne ed., *Old and Middle English: An Anthology*. Oxford 2000, Basil Blackwell; see pages 141-55.

J. Cooper ed., *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact*. London, 1993. Hambledon.

... it was sundered.

He said to his soldiers
to set free their horses,
to drive them far off,
and on foot to fare forth,
to think of their hands
and boldness of bravery.

Then the kinsman of Offa
first found out
that the earl was unwilling
to countenance cowardice.

From his hands he let fly
his falcon, his fair one,
toward the wood in the distance,
and he went to the battle.

Thereby one might know
that the youth was unwilling
to waver in combat
when weapons he wielded.

He also desired Ealdric
to attend to his leader,
his lord, in the battle;
then forward began to bear
spear to the conflict:
and he was of hale heart
while he could bear with his hands
his buckler and broad-blade.
His pledge to his prince to fight
he upheld as he promised.

in a battle so bitter.
There's no need either
for mutual slaughter
if you have riches enough
and give up your gold
in trade for a truce.
If you who are strongest
decide to disband
and pay to the seamen
the gold they determine
as tribute for peace,
we shall take to our ships
with the coins you have yielded,
set forth on the sea
and keep peace with you.'

Byrhtnoth then spoke;
he grasped his buckler,
brandished his trim spear of ash;
angry and resolute,
made answer
as follows:
'Listen, seaman,
to what this folk tell you.
For tribute they'll give you
lances and spears
tipped with poison,
and ancient swords.
Such war-gear to you
will be useless in battle.
Viking seaman,
announce back again,
report to your people
a message more hateful,
that here stands dauntless
an earl with his troops
prepared to defend

any harm on each other;
death was delivered
by arrow's flight only.
The flood receded.
The pirates stood ready,
the host of the Vikings
eager for battle.
The hero's protector then ordered,
a battle-stern warrior,
Wulfstan by name,
to hold the causeway.
He was brave with his kinsmen,
this son of Ceola.
With his spear
he laid low
him who first boldly
stepped on the causeway.

With Wulfstan there stood
two fearless warriors,
Aelfere and Maccus,
two of the bravest.
They refused at that ford
to yield in the slightest
but boldly defended
the attack of their foemen,
while they were still able
to wield their weapons.

When the Vikings perceived
and saw keenly
that the causeway's defenders
were fierce in resistance,
they turned to deception
and sought to be granted
for their warriors a landing
over the causeway.