

Institution: University of St Andrews



Unit of Assessment: 29 - English Language and Literature

Title of case study: Medieval Poetry in the Modern World

1. Summary of the impact

St Andrews has, for several decades, been a centre of critical and editing work on medieval poetry, which has enabled unusually broad cultural dissemination, facilitating for example, Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*. Working within this tradition, Chris Jones' research on the uses of Old English in contemporary poetry, in conjunction with colleague Jacob Polley's practice-led research in the form of medieval-inspired poetry has (1) raised public awareness of an historically remote and linguistically difficult area of English literary heritage often thought to be obscure or inaccessible; (2) inspired new forms of interdisciplinary artistic expression; (3) contributed to economic prosperity in the creative sector. The users of the research outlined in this case study include: a publishing company; a museum visitor centre; a visual artist and other craftspeople and designers; an independent literary festival; the reading, listening and museum-going public.



2. Underpinning research

Old English at St Andrews is not simply a philological discipline, but part of the living poetic tradition. An illustration of this is that two of the most important and popular *Beowulf* translations of the twentieth century were produced or enabled by the community of medieval researchers at the School of English in St Andrews: the best-selling Penguin Classics *Beowulf*, also used by Neil Gaiman when he was working on the script for Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf* film, was produced by Michael Alexander (Professor at St Andrews until his retirement in 2003, now Emeritus status); Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney made extensive use of the Oxford University Press edition of *Beowulf*, produced by George Jack (researcher at St Andrews until his death in 1999), when Heaney worked on his own translation of the poem.

Chris Jones came to this research community in 1997 to carry out work into the uses of Old English literature in modern culture, first as a postgraduate student of Alexander's from 1997 (when Jones was also mentored by Jack), and from 2002 to the present as a lecturer on a permanent contract, working in the Medieval and Renaissance Research Group. Jones's research documents the ways in which Old English literature continues to have creative application in the work of a considerable number of practicing writers. This had previously received little scholarly attention and no sustained study of this intersection of medieval and modern poetry existed beforehand. Jones studied sources for analogues, allusions and formal improvisations based on Old English in a range of twentieth- and twenty-first century poets including W. H. Auden, Edwin Morgan, Seamus Heaney and John Haynes. This research, as well as work on the use of Old English in contemporary film, was conducted between 1997 and the present day, and has been published in several articles and chapters (some of which are detailed below: R2-R4) and in the Oxford University Press monograph *Strange Likeness* (2006). [R1]

Having documented the practical application of Old English in the work of modern poets, an obvious extension of this research was to effect further new writing through collaboration with a practising poet. When Jacob Polley was appointed to permanent post as lecturer in creative writing at St Andrews in 2010, Jones was made Polley's professional mentor in keeping with the School's mentorship policy of pairing writers and academics. Poet and scholar began to have conversations about medieval poetry, and about the research of Jack, Alexander and Jones. These conversations led to Polley reading Jones's research and working on Old English literature with Jones's support, in order to produce several translations of, and new poems in dialogue with, Old English literature: in the first instance [Livings](#), several newly composed riddles in response to those in the

Impact case study (REF3b)

Old English *Exeter Book*, followed by a poetic translation of the Old English *Ruin*, made not literally, but freely in a manner that imaginatively restores the damaged, fragmentary nature of this poem ([one reviewer](#) called it 'a sensitive, fragile reworking of his Old English source material'). Several of these new poems were later published as part of *The Havocs* (Picador, 2012), an award-winning collection that also forms part of Polley's REF 2014 output. [R5]

Thus Jones inherits the St Andrews tradition of putting medieval poetry into dialogue with contemporary culture, started by Alexander and Jack, and extends it to involve recently appointed colleague working in the Creative Writing Research Group, Polley. Jones's research generated new ways of thinking for Polley's literary practice (in itself a form of impact as defined by REF guidelines), which in turn generates wider impact in the creative industries (see section 4 below). *The Havocs* therefore occupies a double position in this case study, being both a practice-led research output (a poetry volume) and also a vehicle for impact (a new mode of literary expression) arising partly from the research environment at St Andrews. This collaboration has also fed back into our research environment; as a direct result Polley now co-supervises, with a medievalist colleague, a PhD student working on medieval motifs in contemporary fiction.

3. References to the research

R1) Chris Jones, *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-century Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Research monograph. Part funded by a British Academy Small Research Grant award to carry out archival work in the New York Public Library's Berg Collection, at the Beinecke at Yale, and at Hamilton College NY (c. £1,300, awarded 2004). Shortlisted for European Society for the Study of English's best book prize 2008.

R2) Chris Jones, ' "Where now the harp?" ' Listening for the sounds of Old English verse, from *Beowulf* to the twentieth century', *Oral Tradition*, 24/2 (2009), 485-502. Peer-reviewed journal article. Available online <http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/24ii/jones>

R3) Chris Jones, 'From Heorot to Hollywood: *Beowulf* in its third Millennium', in *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination*, eds., Clark and Perkins (Brewer, 2010), pp. 13-29. Book chapter. Listed in REF 2.

R4) Chris Jones, ' "While Crowding Memories Came: Edwin Morgan, Old English and Nostalgia', *Scottish Literary Review*, 4/2 (2012), 123-44. Peer-reviewed article. Funded by the award of a Royal Society of Edinburgh Small Research Grant to carry out archival work in Glasgow University Library and the Mitchell Library, Glasgow (c. £500, awarded 2011). Listed in REF 2.

R5) Jacob Polley, *The Havocs* (Picador, 2012). Poetry volume. Shortlisted for T. S. Eliot and Forward poetry prizes. Winner of Geoffrey Faber Memorial prize. Listed in REF 2.

4. Details of the impact

i1) Polley's poetry, underpinned by Jones's research, raises awareness of an historically remote body of English poetry, and contributes to prosperity in the publishing sector

Polley's version of *The Ruin*, worked on with Jones, and his Old English-inspired riddles formed the core of *The Havocs* (the title of which comes from Polley's *Ruin*), a poetry volume published by Picador. *The Havocs* was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot and Forward poetry prizes and won the Geoffrey Faber prize. [S5] Widely praised in the non-academic press and blogosphere ('moving and memorable, *The Guardian* [S6]), with 'The Ruin' often singled out for attention, *The Havocs* has promoted knowledge and understanding of Old English poetry, as well as enriching the cultural life of readers. Picador's publishing director reports that sales to 31/07/2013 for the book were 'around 1500', 'healthy sales figures for a poetry book eight months from publication', adding that the prestigious awards garnered by *The Havocs* 'draws attention to the Picador Poetry List, and enhances its reputation as one of the UK's major poetry publishers.' [i1]

i2) Cultural heritage is curated when Polley's 'new medieval' poetry is commissioned for a cultural regeneration project. Contribution is made to prosperity of the creative sector in an economically disadvantaged part of the UK and paid employment is created.

In 2011 Polley received a commission from North Tyneside Council and their project partner New Writing North for a site-specific, multi-media poetry installation in the reconstructed Roman Bath House at Segedunum Roman Fort museum in Wallsend. The commission specified that Polley's

work should not only address the Roman ruins at Segedunum, but also the remains of the once prosperous local shipbuilding industry at Wallsend, an area that has been in economic decline since the closure of the shipyards. The installation was funded by the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive, Nexus, to the sum of £15,000 [S2]; New Writing North supplied a further £2000. [S3] Other partner organisations involved in the project included Tyne and Wear Archives & Museums, and Renaissance North East, an organisation whose [mission statement](#) is 'to establish places of learning, inspiration and enjoyment for all, and to be central to, and reflective of, the region's character, culture, economy and aspirations.' [S7] The work resulting from this commission was to provide exhibition content for Segedunum museum from 10/08 to 18/09/2011, and to form the centrepiece of Segedunum's participation in the nation-wide 'Heritage Open Days' week-end (08-11/09/2011), an initiative to attract non-traditional visitors into their local museums with free admission and newly commissioned exhibition content. [S2]

In response to this commission Polley decided to use as the centrepiece of a sequence of poems, the version of *The Ruin* (thought by most scholars to be an Anglo-Saxon meditation on ruined Roman baths) that he had produced with Jones. As Senior Manager for Culture and Commissioning at North Tyneside Council put it, Polley employed 'an unusual use of Medieval source material and inspiration in order to bring the historic site to life.' [S2] Programme Director for New Writing North also noted that Polley's involvement was conceptually 'fundamental', 'moving the project away from the Roman history of the site and towards the Medieval "afterlife" of the site'. [S3] The texts of several new supporting poems, which Polley worked around *The Ruin*, were partly 'crowd-sourced' from interviews with Wallsend residents. In this way the local community was involved in the creation of the project. As the Programme Director for New Writing North reported 'Jacob's approach meant the artwork was a critical success, but it came out of a participatory process, which had local people at its centre, and their self-expression was key to the creation of the piece. This is a model which New Writing North will draw on when developing their participatory work in the future, and promote within the arts sector as a model of good practice.' [S3]

Polley collaborated not only with Jones, but also with visual artist Imogen Cloët, who was employed for three months on the project. 'Jacob's work also contributed directly to the local economy', with fees paid to designers and printers, construction companies, sound engineers, photographers and other local craftspeople. [S2] The multi-media poetry installation that resulted, [Bathtime](#), incorporated industrial-sized text-objects from Polley's *Ruin*, as well as piped recordings of Jones reading the Old English poem, offering a unique interpretation of the long history of the site and immersing visitors in a multi-sensory experience. [S8] Other sections of Polley's sequence were specially performed for the audio recording by actors from the north-east, including *Emmerdale*'s Charlie Hardwick, a native of Wallsend. 500 copies of a 28-page pamphlet of poems were produced for sale at Segedunum, with revenue generated returning to the museum. [S2]

The *Bathtime* project was of cultural value and significance in itself, both in bringing the voices of members of the local community into poetry and in delivering a poetic revisioning of its deep history back to the community. But it was also of benefit to the local area in purely practical terms. More than 5,600 people came to Segedunum to visit the exhibition over its lifetime, generating significant revenue for the Museum (entry charges were £4.50 for adults; £2.70 concs) and for the surrounding area in general spend. [S2] Of these visitors, more than a thousand came just on the Heritage Open Days week-end, an increase of more than 50% on the visitor numbers to Segedunum for the Heritage Open Days week-end in 2009 and around 20% more than in 2010: an improvement 'directly attributable to the success of *Bathtime*'. [S2] On 25/07/2011 and 01/09/2011 an interview with Polley about *Bathtime* was broadcast on BBC Radio Newcastle (reach of 265,000 listeners) and garnered strong local press coverage as well as a [Guardian blog write-up](#), which benefited New Writing North and their strong regional mission by raising their profile locally. [S2, S3 & S9] In this way, Old English poetry was found a twenty-first century application and meaning in an area of the North East in need of regeneration, and acted as a stimulus to the local heritage and creative industries, promoting increased participation of the local community in their shared cultural heritage. As Senior Manager for Culture and Commissioning at North Tyneside Council put it: '*Bathtime* not only brought new audiences to an historic site, but also engaged the public, from an area of economic deprivation, in the creation of new work of lasting value. Jacob's contribution to the quality and success of this project was fundamental.' [S2]

i3) Digital and performance content is provided for an independent poetry festival, simultaneously developing a stimulus to local tourism. Historically remote literary heritage is presented and interpreted for the general public.

A recording of Polley reading his *Ruin* was incorporated in the StAnza Poetry Festival's online [Poetry Trail](#), [S10] '*the first of its kind*', [S4] developed in conjunction with the Computer Science department at St Andrews, released in March 2013 and also available as an App for iPhone and Android, as was Jones's poem 'Borges on the Wall' (*PNReview*, 34/5 (2008), 40), a poetic reimagining of Old English in a modern context. Funded by National Lottery and Creative Scotland grants totalling £5,000, and promoted by [Event Scotland](#), [S11] the poetry trail guides literary tourists around the town of St Andrews by use of QR codes at several sites (including local museums, visitor centres, and independent cafes) where the user can listen to site-appropriate poems. According to the Festival Director, StAnza events and activities such as the Poetry Trail initiative, which broaden the Festival's outreach beyond the window of the dates of the live festival (five days in March each year), '*are crucial to the success of the festival in building and maintaining its audience support base*' and '*finding ways to make poetry more accessible*'. [S4]

Further to further and develop Medieval Poetry in the Modern World, members of the School also contributed medieval programming content to StAnza, Scotland's International Poetry Festival: Jones's talk 'Old English Now and Then' 20/03/2012; Jones and colleagues Robert Crawford and Rhiannon Purdie's '*dynamic and engaging*' sell-out performance of the fifteenth-century 'Flying of Kennedy and Dunbar', garnering '*very positive feedback from the audience and reviewers*', 8/03/2013. [S4] Other public talks include Jones's inaugural Edwin Morgan lecture for the Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh, '[Here Be Dragons](#): Edwin Morgan and Old English' 25/04/2012, supported by the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

i4) Jones and Polley continue to collaborate in creating new forms of artistic expression based on their inquiries into medieval poetry.

Jones and Polley have begun to collaborate on producing translations of the Anglo-Saxon *Exeter Book* riddles in 140 or fewer characters: [tweetable riddles](#) which Polley dubs 'twiddles'. Polley and Jones appeared on BBC Radio 4's 'The Echo Chamber' reading from these twiddles as well as from *The Ruin*, both in Old English and in Polley's translation (10 & 16/03/2013). This is a recent extension of their collaborative research, and its impact has yet to be fully developed, but the fact that the 'twiddles' were picked up for national radio broadcast is an early indication of their potential impact. They are mentioned here to close this case study, as a coda to the benefit to Segedunum, StAnza and the reading public mentioned above, and as an indication of the future direction of this collaborative research and its impact, idiomatic of medieval studies at St Andrews: Anglo-Saxon poems inscribed on badly damaged vellum in the tenth century are recast in the most emblematic digital medium of twenty-first century.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1) Marketing Director, Picador Pan Macmillan. Evidence of positive effects on their company. [i1]
- S2) Senior Manager, Culture and Commissioning, North Tyneside Council. Cultural benefit and economic effect on local area. [i2]
- S3) Programme Director of New Writing North. Evidence of wide local press coverage and a model for best practice. [i2]
- S4) Artistic Director, StAnza, Scotland's International Poetry Festival. Demonstrates the positive effects of the Poetry Trail App. [i3]
- S5) Picador webpage for [The Havocs](#), listing its prizes. [i1]
- S6) Reviews of *The Havocs* in [The Guardian](#) (04/01/2013), [Tower Poetry](#), [New Writing Cumbria](#), [poor rude lines](#). Demonstrating claims about its media impact. [i1]
- S7) Website for [Renaissance North-East](#). Mission statement for Renaissance North-East, *Bathtime* partners. [i2]
- S8) New Writing North project website for [Bathtime](#). Evidence of project's dates and partners. [i2]
- S9) [Guardian blog write-up](#) of *Bathtime*. Supporting claims about its media impact. [i2]
- S10) QRAQRBOX website, hosting the StAnza Poetry Festival [Poetry Trail](#). [i3]
- S11) [Event Scotland](#) website. Demonstrating their support of the Poetry Trail. [i3]