Medieval Philology and Nationalism: The British and German Editors of *Thomas of Erceldoune*

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A December 2005 search of the on-line version of the Modern Language Association's *International Bibliography* confirmed the expectation many scholars have when considering which medieval English texts yield, or do not yield, considerable academic cultural capital. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* holds an impressive lead with 3,900 entries; Gower's *Confessio Amantis* achieves 266; *The Book of Margery Kempe* 199; Julian of Norwich's *Showings* 48; and Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* 27. All the way at the end of this list appear titles such as the late fourteenth-century *Thomas of Erceldoune*.[1] While there are ten entries on this text, five are by the same author, E[mily] B[uchanan] Lyle, of the University of Edinburgh — not a surprise considering that the alleged author of the medieval text, Thomas the Rhymer, predicted certain significant events during the Scottish wars of independence;[2] another two entries are by Ingeborg Nixon of the University of Copenhagen (who, it is worth noting, received her doctoral degree from the University

1 Although the *MLA International Bibliography* can only provide a relative idea of scholarly interest in *Thomas of Erceldoune*, it remains the most easily accessible database in language and literature studies worldwide. As such, whatever it contains or lacks, lends or denies cultural capital to topics, texts, and authors.

2 Lyle's mostly short studies are as follows: "The Relationship Between *Thomas the Rhymer* and *Thomas of Erceldoune*" (1970), "Sir Landevale and the Fairy-Mistress Theme in *Thomas of Erceldoune*" (1973), "The Celtic Affinities of the Gift in *Thomas of Erceldoune*" (1971), "*The Turk and Gawain* as a Source of *Thomas of Erceldoune*" (1970), and "*Thomas of Erceldoune*: The Prophet and the Prophesied" (1968).

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of Edinburgh);[3] of the three remaining titles, one appeared in *Unisa English Studies*, a journal published by the English Department at the University of Pretoria, South Africa,[4] and the other two are doctoral dissertations from the United States of America, neither of which has appeared in print as a published monograph.[5]

The relative scarcity of publications on *Thomas of Erceldoune* since the 1950s as well as their geographical distribution may have several reasons. First of all, there is the curious structure of the poem: the 700 lines of rhyming quatrains are divided into three 'fyttes,' of which the first (ll. 25-308) is narrative, and the second and third consist of a series of political prophecies. This structure has led to an aporia among editors and literary historians as to the relationship between the narrative and the prophecies, and scholars variously refer to the text as a romance, a *lai*, or a ballad.[6] Secondly, the corrupt

3 Nixon, "Thomas of Erceldoune: Digt og overlevering" (1984) and "Thomas and the Lady: Some Aspects of the Narrative Element in Thomas of Erceldoune" (1988). Nixon's Edinburgh doctoral dissertation, entitled *Thomas of Erceldoune*, was completed in 1947, before the period indexed by the *MLA Bibliography*. However, even the revised and expanded version of that dissertation, *Thomas of Erceldoune*, published by the University of Copenhagen's Akademisk Forlag (1980-1983), is not listed by the *MLA Bibliography*, perhaps also an indication of the status of the topic.

4 Goedhals, "The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune" (1972).

5 Margaritis, "Thomas of Erceldoune: Critical Edition" (1983), and Miller, "A Study of Thomas Erceldoune" (1966). Because there is the possibility that Thomas was also the author of the Middle English *Tristrem*, there is a good number of additional publications which contain short discussions of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, for example, Angus McIntosh's "Is *Sir Tristrem* an English or a Scottish Poem?" (1989). The theory of Thomas's authorship of *Tristrem* was advanced by Sir Walter Scott in his edition *Sir Tristrem: A Metrical Romance of the Thirteenth Century, by Thomas of Ercildoune, Called the Rhymer* (1804) and later confirmed by McNeill in his edition for the Scottish Text Society, *Sir Tristrem. A Scottish Metrical Romance* (1886), xxxii-xlv. However, it was rejected by Kölbing, ed., *Sir Tristrem* (1882), reprinted as *Die englische Version der Tristansage* (1885), xxvi-xxxii. For a survey of more recent voices on this issue, see Hafner, "Die Tristan-Versionen" (1989), 31-40. The *MLA International Bibliography* is, of course, far from comprehensive in their list of publications on *Thomas of Erceldoune*. For example, it does not contain Lyle's "A Comment on the Rhyme-Scheme of Two Stanzas in *Thomas of Erceldoune*" (1969) or her "The Visions in St. Patrick's Purgatory, Thomas of Erceldoune, Thomas the Rhymer and The Dæmon Lover" (1971); or Nelson's "The Origin and Tradition of the Ballad of 'Thomas Rhymer'" (1966). Finally, the figure of Robert Thornton, whose name appears in the Thornton MS. containing *Thomas of Erceldoune*, has received considerable scholarly attention. See, for example, *The Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral MS. 91)*, edited by Brewer and Owen (1975); Thompson, "Robert Thornton and his Book-Producing Activities" (1983); Keiser, "Lincoln Cathedral Library MS. 91: Life and Milieu of the Scribe" (1979) and "More Light on the Life and Milieu of Robert Thornton" (1983).

6 For example, while about half of the studies mentioned in the preceding footnotes, including those by the poem's most recent editor, Ingeborg Nixon, call *Thomas of Erceldoune* a "romance," important reference guides to the Middle English romances, such as volume 1 of Severs's *Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500* (1967), or survey volumes like Hibbard's *Mediæval Romance in England* (1924) and Mehl's *The Middle English Romances* (1968) do not include the text.

and incomplete nature of the surviving manuscript versions (there are five imperfect manuscripts and one printed version dating from 1652) has rendered a variety of textual matters difficult, and as a result, there is no readily available edition of *Thomas of Erceldoune*.[7] Finally, the highest praise of the text's aesthetic and literary qualities by one of the poem's few fans is somewhat qualified: "metrically it tends to lapse into the jog-trot to which the quatrain lends itself all too easily, and stylistically it falls back on linefilling stock phrases."[8] A less favourably disposed critic adds, "The work is, at best, undistinguished. […] The prophecies are guaranteed to put anyone to sleep."[9]

If these conditions have rendered *Thomas of Erceldoune* unattractive to the vast majority of medieval scholars since the 1960s, they certainly did not have the same effect on their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessors.[10] During this earlier period, two modes of reception can be identified among a fairly large number of readers. A first group includes representatives of romantic enthusiasm and antiquarianism, notably Sir Walter Scott, in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803) and *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830), but also Robert Jamieson's *Popular Ballads and Songs from Tradition, Manuscripts and Scarce Editions* (1806), David Laing's *Select Remains of the Early Popular Poetry of Scotland* (1822), and Robert Chambers's *The Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (1826).[11] Among the driving forces for their work was often a vague anti-utilitarian yearning for the pre-modern or a desire for origins and concomitant national and regional identity formation. A second group, whose members often built their work on the basis of the first group's results, academized and systematized the first group's efforts as collectors, antiquarians, and comparative and scientistic philologists. Among these investigations are Francis James Child's work on the ballad versions of Thomas's prophecies (1861), James A. H. Murray's 1875 edition of the five Erceldoune manuscripts, Alois Brandl's 1880 post-doctoral dissertation ("Habilitation"), Josephine Burnham's 45-page essay in the 1908 volume of *PMLA*, Arthur Saalbach's 1913 doctoral dissertation on the origins of the ballad "Tom the Rhymer," James Geddie's 1920 *Thomas*

7 Only a few lines of the prophecy (based on British Library MS Harley 2253 fol. 127r) have recently been included by James Dean in his *Middle English Political Writings* (1996).

8 Nixon, "Thomas and the Lady," 53.

9 Margaritis, *Thomas of Erceldoune*, iii. It should also be noted that even the most recent monograph on medieval English prophetic literature, Coote's *Prophecy and Public Affairs* (2000), excludes *Thomas of Erceldoune* from its list of prophetic writings whose meanings were obvious to their intended audiences.

10 Perhaps surprisingly, not even Laura Loomis's claim ("Sir Thopas" [1941], 516) that Chaucer used *Thomas of Erceldoune* when writing his "Sir Thopas" channeled more interest toward the text.

11 For a complete history of enthusiastic and critical reception until 1875, see James Murray, ed., *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune* (1875), vi, and Nixon, ed., *Thomas of Erceldoune* (1980), 1:21-22.

the Rhymer and his Rhymes (published for the Edinburgh 'Rhymer Club'), Hermann Flasdieck's 1934 study *Tom der Reimer*, and an essay by Wolfgang Schmidt in the 1937 volume of *Anglia*.[12]

Thus, not only was there conspicuously more academic interest in *Thomas of Erceldoune* in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century than between 1950 and the present, but in the earlier period even some of the best-known scholars in the field of Middle English studies thought the text worthy of their attention: Francis James Child (1825-1915), the famous Harvard Professor of Rhetoric and Literature; James A. H. Murray (1837-1915), editor of the *New English Dictionary* (later, the *Oxford English Dictionary*); Alois Brandl, who would go on to become chair of English Philology in Göttingen, Strasbourg, and Berlin; and Hermann Flasdieck, chair of English Philology in Jena, Leipzig, and Heidelberg and editor of *Anglia* from 1930 to 1944. Among them, again, two subgroups can be identified. Those interested in preserving and making available to a larger readership the respective national literary heritage, usually scholars whose native language was English and whose formal training in philological matters was sometimes limited; and those — most often German-speaking university professors — who practised a positivistic late-nineteenth-century philology and to whom work on *Thomas of Erceldoune* offered the kind of achievement that would bring recognition within their academic system.[13] In fact, these two groups and their contrasting foci coincide very neatly with the distinction which Eugen Kölbing, the founding editor of *Englische Studien*, the first journal exclusively concentrating on the subject of English Philology, made in 1879:

> Bei der herausgabe mittelenglischer denkmäler stehen sich gegenwärtig noch zwei methoden schroff gegenüber, einerseits das bestreben, diplomatisch genaue textabdrücke zu liefern, also wo möglich jede nur einigermassen wichtige hs. jedes werkes für

12 Child, ed., *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1861, 1882-98); James Murray, ed., *The Romance and Prophecies* (1875); Brandl, ed., *Thomas of Erceldoune* (1880); Burnham, "A Study of Thomas of Erceldoune" (1908); Saalbach, "Enstehungsgeschichte der schottischen Volksballade 'Thomas Rhymer'" (1913); Geddie, *Thomas the Rhymer and his Rhymes* (1920); Flasdieck, *Tom der Reimer: Von keltischen Feen und politischen Propheten — ein Streifzug* (1934); Schmidt, "Die Volksballaden von Tom dem Reimer" (1937). William P. Albrecht's investigation and edition of the 1652 version of the poem, *The Loathly Lady in "Thomas of Erceldoune," with a Text of the Poem Printed in 1652* (1954), should be considered part of the *translatio* of medieval studies to North America, a process that was signalled by the founding of the Medieval Academy of America in 1925 and received final public confirmation with the founding of the International Medieval Congress at Western Michigan University in 1965.

13 The area of fairy material may be an exception to the general tendency of recent interest in *Thomas of Erceldoune*. See, for example, its discussion in Henderson and Cowan's *Scottish Fairy Belief* (2001), *passim*.

> sich gesondert zu publiciren, um dann erst einmal auf grund derselben weitere schritte zu thun, andererseits die absicht, hier, wie auf anderen gebieten der neueren philologie, möglichst rasch kritische ausgaben herzustellen. Die erstere tendenz verfolgen vorwiegend die englischen herausgeber […]; ein specimen der zweiten methode liefert uns Schipper.[14]
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> [For the editing of Middle English [textual] monuments there currently still exist two glaringly contrasting positions: on the one hand, there is the desire to print exact diplomatic offprints of texts, i.e., to publish any somehow important manuscript of each work individually and only then to proceed with these as a foundation; on the other hand, there is the aim to produce — as is being done in other areas of the New Philology — critical editions as quickly as possible. English editors […] predominantly pursue the former solution; Schipper's text provides us with an example of the latter.]

A comparison between the two contributions which best illuminate the difference between these two approaches in the editing history of *Thomas of Erceldoune* — Murray's edition of 1875 and Brandl's of 1880 — is revealing. Since there is significantly more information about Brandl's intentions and motivations, I shall first look at both publications from his perspective.

In his 1936 autobiography, *Zwischen Inn und Themse*, Brandl recounts his first visit to England. There, in the British Museum, "headquarters" ("Hauptquartier") to Julius Zupitza, the first chair of English philology at the University of Berlin (whom Brandl honours with the epithet "der Fleißige" ["the Industrious"]), he receives the following career advice to select a topic for his postdoctoral dissertation, the "Habilitation." Zupitza's idea was for Brandl

> durch eine Ausgabe mich wissenschaftlich hervorzutun. Auf seinen Rat machte ich mich an eine uralte Schlachtenromanze, die zwar schon gedruckt, aber nicht verständlich war; Worte und Sinn sollte ich ins klare bringen, zunächst durch Vergleichung aller erhaltenen Handschriften. Kurz und bündig lautete hierzu die Anweisung: 'Beginnnen Sie die Handschriften miteinander zu vergleichen, und Sie werden schon selber lernen, sie zu lesen und zu durchschauen.' Ich war entlassen.[15]
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> [to make a name for myself in the field through the scholarly editing of a text. On his advice I began working on a very old battle romance which already existed in print but was incomprehensible. I was supposed to clarify words and meaning, first via a

14 Kölbing, Review of *Englische Alexiuslegenden*, 489. All English translations from German originals in this essay are my own.

15 Brandl, *Zwischen Inn und Themse*, 134-35.

comparison of all existing manuscripts. His instructions were short and clear: 'Start comparing the manuscripts with one another and you will learn yourself how to read and look through them.' I was dismissed.]

Only several days later, Brandl encountered James Murray. When asked by Murray about his scholarly agenda during his stay in England, he explained his intentions and was thoroughly embarrassed when Murray identified himself as the editor of that already existing edition of *Thomas of Erceldoune*. Brandl reports on the rest of their conversation as follows:

Er hielt sie für ein Produkt seiner schottischen Heimat und erzählte mir von der Hauptperson, dem sagenhaften tannhäuserartigen Sünder und Seher Thomas of Erceldoune, wie viel er von Jugend auf über ihn gehört hatte. 'Ich bin nun begierig,' schloß er, 'was Sie vom tirolischen Standpunkt aus zu ergänzen und zu bessern finden werden.' Also sagte ich etwas über deutsche Methoden und bat um ein Jahr Zeit. Er begriff, verzieh und schüttelte mir die Hand. Übelnehmen gab es bei Murray nicht, er lebte als heiterer Vater im Kreise seiner rasch wachsenden Familie und holte sich jeden Sommer erneute Frische in seiner schottischen Bergheimat. Als endlich meine Ausgabe erschien, enthüllte sich die vermeintliche Schlachtenromanze als eine politische Weissagung auf einen Adelsaufstand; auch war sie nicht schottisch, sondern rein englisch; die Vorrede rühmte gebührenderweise Murrays Wegbereitung; alles war in Ordnung. Murray aber war inzwischen seiner Lebensaufgabe nähergetreten, das große etymologische Nationalwörterbuch der englischen Sprache zu schreiben.][16]

[He considered [the text] a product of his Scottish homeland and told me about the protagonist, the Tannhäuser-like sinner and seer, Thomas of Erceldoune — how much he had heard about him in his childhood and youth. 'Now I would really like to know,' he concluded, 'what you will have to add and improve from your Tyrolian perspective.' I quickly said something about German methods and asked for one year's time. He understood, forgave me, and shook my hand. Murray was completely without rancour; he lived as a happy father surrounded by a quickly growing family and rejuvenated himself every summer in his Scottish mountains. When finally my edition appeared in print, the alleged battle romance revealed itself as a political prophecy about an uprising by the nobility; and it was not Scottish at all, but English through and through. My introduction duly praised Murray's foundational role, and all was well. By that time, Murray had taken on the task of his lifetime, to write the great etymological national dictionary of the English language.]

16 Brandl, *Zwischen Inn und Themse*, 141.

Let me contextualize these events, which Brandl recalls more than forty years after they happened. Like most German Anglicists of his generation, Brandl had begun his education in German studies, had been trained by professors like Zupitza, whose own background was in Classical and Germanic philology and who had the support of Karl Victor Müllenhoff, a fellow practitioner of Karl Lachmann's 'Berlin School' of textual criticism. Zupitza advised his student to follow exactly the academic path which had led to his own success, namely, strict specialization on premodern texts and on what had become, by this time, the calling card of German philologists: to produce comprehensive textual editions which compared all existing manuscripts of a previously unedited or otherwise difficult historical text. Zupitza himself had begun his career with two textual editions for his doctoral dissertation and post-doctoral dissertation ("Habilitation") in German studies and went on to concentrate on the same matters in early English studies in his famous editions of Cynewulf's *Elene* (1877), *Beowulf* (1882), *Guy of Warwick* (1883), and the *Pardoner's Prologue and Tale* (1890).[17]

The exclusive concentration on Old and Middle English texts by German Anglicists of this period had to do with their alleged degree of difficulty. In order to find acceptance among the emulated Classical philologists, with whom all Anglicists shared manifold direct academic filiations, only texts approaching the linguistic and editorial complexity of the classical literatures were deserving of the attention by the representatives of a relatively young discipline like English philology. The narrow methodological focus on producing the first comprehensive textual edition had at least two major motivations. For one thing, instead of exploring and colonizing hitherto unknown regions of the world or finding and naming thus far unknown species of animals, the philologist memorialized himself in the history of his field of study by inscribing his name on the same page with the title of a hitherto unedited manuscript. Being first and concatenating one's name forever with that of a unique literary monument would immortalize the editor's name. Secondly, far from being a simple act of disinterested scholarship, the editing of a medieval English text by a German scholar had an unmistakable political dimension in the 1870s and thereafter. At the time when Brandl travelled to London, the subject of English philology was still generally understood to be a subfield of Germanic philology, a terminological move that intrinsically ranked German Anglicists

17 For a full bibliography of Zupitza, see Kölbing, "Julius Zupitza" (1895); for a recent bio-bibliographic entry, see Haenicke and Finkenstaedt, *Anglistenlexikon*; and for a critical assessment of Zupitza's role in early English philology, see Utz, *Chaucer and the Discourse*, 73-102.

higher in expertise and authority than their English counterparts.[18] The processes of exploring, uncovering, transcribing, and editing heretofore unknown original sources in the British libraries occurred coevally with the hoisting of the German flag in newly annexed lands during the late-imperialist competition with Britain for colonial expansion. Being first in the editorial process diminished the advantage British Anglicists had for their work through their easy and direct access to the manuscripts. As soon as such an edition existed, German Anglicists could work with it at home and use it as the foundation for all the other branches of philological endeavour: critical bibliography, etymology, linguistic and literary history, motif and source studies etc. Moreover, as the edition had been conceived according to their preferred practices, they controlled the methodologies, the critical terminology and, thus, the discursive acceptability of other editorial and interpretive efforts. Brandl's condescending declaration of the ease with which he, a relative newcomer to textual criticism, disproved some of Murray's most important results, apparently simply by applying "German methods," demonstrates the confidence in editorial positivism, especially when one considers that Brandl must have been aware of Murray's 1873 monograph on *The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland*, a study which would definitely have prepared him for an authoritative investigation of *Thomas of Erceldoune*. Not only did Brandl colonize an English historical text, but he would outdo and replace an existing edition and study of that text prepared by a British scholar who had an established reputation as one of the most thorough linguists and perhaps the most painstaking English editor for the Early English Text Society.[19] Thus, like Arnold Schröer, Bernhard ten Brink, Julius Zupitza, Ewald Flügel, and John Koch, Brandl considers his colleagues in the British Isles mere enthusiasts and kindly amateurs whose lack of formal philological training often limits their role to providing access to English manuscript collections, to teaching foreign visitors contemporary English and, more generally, "lend[ing] a hand" ("gingen […] an die Hand") to

18 See, for example, von Raumer's *Geschichte der germanischen Philologie* (1870), in which the discussion of the not yet fully institutionalized field of English philology occupies only half a page (p. 695) of the final, 53-page chapter entitled "Der Fortbau der germanischen Philologie in den neusten Jahrzehnden" (The Continual Expansion of Germanic Philology in the Most Recent Decades). One example of the way in which the German(ic) background was asserted so as to include *Thomas of Erceldoune* under the broad ideological umbrella of German(ic) mythology is Karl Simrock's impression that the German place name "Hörselberg" (which he derives from "Asenberge," i.e., "dwelling place of the Gods") reminded him of "Ercildoune"; see Simrock, *Handbuch der deutschen Mythologie* (1874), 387, see also 330-32.

19 K. M. Elisabeth Murray's *Caught in the Web of Words* (1977) provides ample evidence for James Murray's outstanding expertise and reputation.

the serious and scientific efforts of the German academic specialists, while being "hocherfreut, dass die 'learned Doctors' ihre alten Handschriften abschrieben und herausgaben" [20] (delighted that the 'learned doctors' copied and edited their old manuscripts).

If Brandl's nationalist philological professionalism appears to supersede Murray's work due to a comfortably internalized national methodological hubris, Murray, at least according to Brandl's narrative, suffers from the wide-spread conviction that an expert on any given national and regional literature would somehow naturally have to originate from among that nation's or region's natives. When he baits Brandl to add a "Tyrolian perspective" on *Thomas of Erceldoune* to his own Scottish one, he shows that he is unaware of the central role philology and philolologists played as part of the nineteenth-century German bourgeoisie's efforts to do away with regionalist voices for the sake of unifying the country and to hide their newly gained nationalist bias by constructing philology as disinterested, and disinterestedness as particularly German. Brandl's narrative intimates that Murray's research is compromised by his enthusiasm for popular stories from his childhood and youth and perhaps even his continued attachment to the Scottish mountains, only to confront it with his own, distanced philological practice, one allegedly free from such unprofessional and emotional concerns.[21] "Quickly" saying "something about German methods" will be enough to explain his position to the German readers of his autobiography even as late as 1936. Other British scholars agree with Murray's opinion. Walter W. Skeat, for example, in desperation about the manifold incursions by the "inevitable German" on English national textual terrain, once deplored that being a Londoner, like Chaucer, might actually disqualify him from producing scholarship on the English national poet.[22] And Henry Sweet resignedly described the situation as follows:

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20 Since Brandl, like most nineteenth-century German Anglicists, was trained in (early) English philology but did not speak contemporary English, Henry Sweet took it upon himself to teach him the basics (Brandl, *Zwischen Inn und Themse*, 137-38). The arrogant description of the relationship between German and English medievalists was written by Arnold Schröer in his memoir of the profession, "Aus der Frühzeit der englischen Philologie" (1925), 34.

21 Schröer, for example, praises the geographical and, therefore, intellectual "distance" which German Anglicists have from across the Channel and declares that this very distance "facilitates the necessary impartiality in assessing" the texts ("wo gerade ihre Distanz ihnen die nötige Unbefangenheit des Urteils erleichtert"); Schröer, "Aus der Frühzeit der englischen Philologie," 35.

22 Skeat, ed., *Chaucer: The Minor Poems* (1888), vii. Skeat repeats the epithet of the "inevitable German" coined by Henry Sweet, who had expressed his own dismay at the German philological invasion in the Preface to *The Oldest English Texts* (1885), v-vi.

> Meanwhile, my interest in the work [i.e., the *Oldest English Texts*] had been flagging more and more. When I first began it, I had some hopes of myself being able to found an independent school of English philology in this country. But as time went on it became too evident that the historical study of English was being rapidly annexed by the Germans, and that English editors would have to abandon all hopes of working up their materials themselves, and resign themselves to the more humble rôle of purveyors to the swarms of young program-mongers turned out every year by the German universities, so thoroughly trained in all the mechanical details of what may be called 'parasite philology' that no English dilettante can hope to compete with them — except by Germanizing himself and losing all his nationality. All this is of course inevitable — the result of our own neglect, and of the unhealthy over-production of the German universities — but it is not encouraging for those who, like myself, have had the mortification of seeing their favourite investigations forestalled one after another, while they are laboriously collecting their materials. […] I may also remind my critics that I am not paid for my work, that I have no official position to make me responsible to any one, and that all my scientific work is a free gift to my countrymen — or rather to the Germans.[23]

While Murray appears to have interpreted Brandl's revisionist plans to re-edit *Thomas of Erceldoune* in the most conciliatory manner imaginable, Skeat and Sweet unquestionably understood German scholarship on early English literature as a fiendish attempt to annex the British national heritage. And the invasive weapon wielded by the German "program-mongers" in their work of annexation was, in Sweet's words, "parasite philology."

After this glance at the historical context for these two scholars' reception of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, I shall now examine their actual philological practice in the editions they produced. Murray's main achievement is that he provides a description of the existing five manuscripts, textual and explanatory notes, and an extensive introduction which mostly concerns itself with the historicity of the text and its presumed author, Thomas, as well as his ties to Scotland. Thus, Murray goes well beyond the mere diplomatic reprinting of texts which German scholars tend to attribute to their British colleagues and demonstrates how a good number of German philological practices had influenced the academic study of English historical texts in Britain. Brandl, while acknowledging the foundational character of Murray's work in these areas — he calls it "meticulous" ("sorgfältig") and "a sedulous collection" ("fleißige Sammlung"),[24] two essential complimentary terms German reviews apply to philological scholarship — concentrates on

23 Sweet, "Preface" to his *Oldest English Texts*, v-vi.

24 Brandl, *Thomas of Erceldoune*, x.

the text's metrical, dialectal, and orthographic features, researches the origins of its motifs, and strives to reconstruct the elusive archetype by illustrating the interrelationship of the manuscripts through the use of a diagrammatic representation of manuscript filiation, the famed *Stammbaum*. While for Murray the study of the text and its words serves to illuminate the history and biography of Thomas (he spends nine pages on the biography and links as many details as possible to the author), Brandl discusses history and biography (less than three pages) mostly when they serve to illuminate the meaning of individual words, expressions, or metrical or dialectal inferences. Both scholars take a "philological" appoach, desirous to explain individual words as well as the entire text. However, if one applied Jacob Grimm's famous 1851 distinction between the two basic kinds of philology to Murray and Brandl, it becomes apparent that the first investigates "words for the sake of subjects" (i.e., practises "Sachphilologie") while the latter is much more interested in researching "subjects for the sake of words" (i.e., practises "Wortphilologie").[25] Grimm counted himself among the "material philologists," proclaimed that the editorial practices of Karl Lachmann and the *Wortphilologen*, who were "immer raubend und tilgend" (always robbing and deleting),[26] gave him no pleasure.[27] Such formalized, scientific work can "die interpolationen fort, das weggefallene echte nimmer herbeischaffen […]; man läuft gefahr durch critisches ausscheiden, das gar kein ende hat, […] zu zerreissen was […] verbunden wurde" (undo interpolations, but never reconstruct the lost archetype […]; through unlimited critical deletion one is in danger of tearing apart […] that which was meant to be connected).[28] However, it would not be Grimm's innovative, comparative, and broadly conceived philology but Lachmann's overly formalistic, anti-enthusiastic, and somewhat unambitious kind that would implant itself in the German academy, because it is this kind of philology that fulfilled the ideological conditions for the ostensibly disinterested, serious, hence academic study of texts in Imperial Germany.

Brandl, who had learned conjugations, declensions, and dialect traits of early English as drill exercises in university seminars and who had naturalized his teachers' "Eifer […] für das gereinigte Wort"[29] (zeal […] for the cleansed word) revels in applying his scientistic method to his revisionist critique of many of Murray's results. Not historical interpretation or aesthetic appreciation are his goals, but comprehensive textual

25 Grimm, "Rede auf Lachmann," 150.
26 Grimm, "Rede auf Lachmann," 156.
27 Grimm, "Rede auf Wilhelm Grimm," *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. I, 174.
28 Grimm, "Rede auf Lachmann," 156-57.
29 Brandl, *Zwischen Inn und Themse*, 123.

collation, linguistic categorization, and textual authentication and attribution. It is this philological "zeal for the cleansed word" which James Geddie, in his 1920 book on Thomas the Rhymer, terms the "hypercritical doubts of German [...] commentators" and which Frederick James Furnivall deemed at the heart of the "doctored editions" produced by the various German editors he enlisted for work on the publications of the Chaucer Society.[30]

It is the same German insistence on an overly rigid and narrowly defined philology which contributed, especially after World War I, to the partial Anglo-American rejection of philology as an alien and inimical academic practice.[31] And it is this very narrow definition of philology that, over and over again, has led New Critics, structuralists, poststructuralists, and "New Philologists" to blame on late nineteenth-century philological practices everything they find wrong with the study of language and literature before the advent of their own, allegedly superior work, though a discussion of the specific reasons for these post-philological scholars' wholesale attacks on their predecessors' practices is beyond the scope of the present investigation.[32] The question I would like to attempt to answer is whose philological practice received the more impressive stamps of approval by those specialists who have negotiated *Thomas of Erceldoune* since the late nineteenth century.

Dialect, Rhyme, Vocabulary

As one might expect, scholars have not been able to settle on a "correct" answer to the question of the "Scottishness" or "Englishness" of the narrative, but among early academic

30 Geddie, *Thomas the Rhymer*, 4. On Furnivall's opposition to "doctored editions," see Munro, ed., *Frederick James Furnivall*, 14. On Furnivall and his German collaborators, see Utz, "Enthusiast or Philologist?"

31 On the British rejection of philology, especially the consequences of the so-called "Newbolt Report" (Newbolt, *The Teaching of English in England* [1938]), which demanded that English literature be taught as an art and a means of creative expression, see Matthews, *The Making of Middle English*, 187-90, and Utz, *Chaucer and the Discourse*, 177-81.

32 As the history of British, U.S., Canadian, and Austrialian medieval studies illustrates, the discrepancies regarding editorial methods between German scholars and their colleagues in Anglophone countries did not persist for long. Especially the influence of German "graduate studies" led to the philologization of medieval studies at the research institutions in these countries. As the discussions about the "New Philology" reveal, editorial practices are still at the heart of definitions of how to study medieval texts. On the "New Philologists" or "New Medievalists" (a group of North American scholars, mostly from the field of Romance literatures and languages) and their summary defamation of "old" philology, see Bloch and Nichols's Introduction to *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* (1996). For a critical evaluation of their claims, see my own 1998 review of *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* and especially William Paden's "'New Medievalism' and 'Medievalism.'"

readers such an answer depends very much on who is asking the questions. From a post-national perspective, neither Brandl's claims for the "Englishness" nor Murray's for the "Scottishness" of *Thomas of Erceldoune* (or *Sir Tristrem*) can be upheld.[33] A look at the linguistic evidence is futile since Middle Scots and the Northern dialect variants of Middle English are practically indistinguishable until the beginning of the fifteenth century, and most specialists assume that the *Urtext* dates from the second half of the fourteenth century.[34] Moreover, only one (MS Thornton) of the extant manuscript versions, all of which date from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is consistent in its use of dialect, and even there a scribe appears to have assimilated the text to his own, probably North Midlands conventions. Only Josephine Burnham, a U.S. scholar, already had enough (geographical, hence political and theoretical) distance from the question in 1908, when she commented that "the language might be that of a northern Englishman just as well as of a Scotchman."[35] Investigations of rhymes and vocabulary yield a similarly unspecific picture, pointing to a provenience "north of a line extending from the Humber in the east to the Lune in the west, taking in the greater part of Yorkshire, and extending north into Scotland."[36]

The Poem's Scottish and English Reception

A good number of early Scottish readers since Barbour's *Bruce* found some of the prophetic sections of *Thomas of Erceldoune* attractive and used them for their mostly nationalist purposes.[37] Paradoxically, however, most of the surviving versions appear in English manuscript collections and, while relating a story original to Scotland, favour a "point of view" that is "predominantly English."[38] Murray's extremely well-informed introductory essay tacitly assumes that the text is Scottish because Thomas was a Scotsman, and he stresses the connection of the poem's prophecies with local Scottish traditions.[39] Brandl rejects what he sees as a simplistic nationalist reading. He mentions that the popularity of the Scottish narrative among the southern English audience who had

33 McIntosh underlines the limited value of linguistic evidence for finding the origin of the Arthurian poem; in his carefully worded opinion, it "is unlikely to have been further north in England than Yorkshire." McIntosh, "Is *Sir Tristrem*," 92.

34 McIntosh et al., eds, *A Linguistic Atlas*.

35 Burnham, "A Study," 378.

36 Nixon, *Thomas of Erceldoune* (1983), 18.

37 See, most recently, Tim Thornton, "The Battle of Sandeford" (2005).

38 Nixon, *Thomas of Erceldoune* (1983), 46.

39 Murray, Introduction, *The Romance*, xliii-liii.

heard of Thomas the prophet as early as 1314 may have been due to the fact that English readers enjoyed hearing their final victory over the Scots predicted by a Scotsman.[40] In this area, too, current scholarship cannot attribute victory to either of the scholars.

Editorial Practice

In the area of textual editing, the heart of German philological methodology, Brandl clearly advanced scholarly knowledge beyond Murray's results. Ingeborg Nixon, who published a revised version of her 1949 doctoral dissertation in 1980-1983, supports practically all of Brandl's findings on the interrelationship of the manuscripts. More importantly, Nicholas Stephen Margaritis, in his 1982 doctoral dissertation, written at the University of Virginia under the supervision of Hoyt Duggan, concludes the following:

> There has never been a critical edition of the poem in English. The earliest editors seem to have reconstructed the poem from the manuscripts known to them according to their fancy, without bothering to explain the grounds for their decisions. James A. H. Murray's 1875 edition came as an improvement. His discussion of the historical Thomas remains the best to date, and his detailed examination of prophetic literature — with quotations and examples — is almost as excellent. Murray's textual and explanatory notes are adequate, as is his discussion of all the MSS except Thornton, where a number of subsequent studies have superseded his. But Murray virtually ignored matters of dialect, meter, etc., and failed to provide a critical text, opting to print, instead, the MS versions in parallel columns. [...] As early as 1880, Brandl pronounced [MS] Sloane the most reliable after Thornton, and the closest to it — a judgment which William P. Albrecht confirmed much later when he printed the 1652 version (which is almost identical to Sloane), and which any careful editor would confirm. Brandl's edition, therefore, is the best to date, for he is the only editor to offer a critical text on sound and consistent principles. If he is deficient in any way, it is only in random line readings and in somewhat lean textual and explanatory notes.[41]

If we may believe these judgements, then the summarily dismissive gestures toward even the admittedly narrow philological practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveal themselves — at least for the purposes of this particular case study — as unfounded. Alois Brandl, more than 120 years ago, applied what Henry

40 Brandl, *Thomas of Erceldoune*, 41-42.

41 This quotation is taken from Margaritis's "abstract" (iii) of his dissertation *Thomas of Erceldoune: A Critical Edition*.

Sweet once denounced as the "mechanical details" of "parasite philology" to *Thomas of Erceldoune* and amended Murray with conclusions that are still considered foundational today. While we may not want to repeat Brandl's German methodological reductionism or Murray's *pro domo* enthusiasm in our own, hopefully more encompassing, interpretive and editorial practices, we should also avoid claiming that the work of those of us involved in dialect study, textual criticism, and other subfields of what was once known as "philology" amounts to little more than the erecting of a "*cordon sanitaire* to prevent the reading" of medieval literature or to the inhibiting of "dialogue between medievalists and specialists in other fields."[42] Clearly, any reading of a difficult medieval text like *Thomas of Erceldoune* will be incomplete without the observations of those Brandl's now often branded as "dinosaurs" of our discipline.[43]

Of course, the victory of Brandl's editorial practice — scientific work always wants to outdo and correct prior results — may only have lasted because it has not been itself rendered invalid by the appearance of a new manuscript or a more advanced technology that helps editors make sense of hitherto illegible and damaged manuscript passages. This intrinsic process of obsolescence is what has obfuscated the erstwhile glory of most of the early editors of Chaucer's texts, whose editions, shackled like all science to the historical moment of their invention, now only remain of interest to historians of the discipline. In comparison, the aesthetic, artistic, or cultural work of their late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century contemporaries retains an almost poetic "everlastingness" that defies the "statutory linearity" of many philological efforts.[44] Perhaps this is why Francis James Child, certainly no stranger to "philology," once said that

42 Bloch and Nichols, Introduction, *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, 3.

43 The label "dinosaur" has been used by Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant*, trans. Betsy Wing (1999), *passim*, to describe any early or contemporary scholars practising *Wortphilologie*. As a response to Cerquiglini, see my short survey, "When Dinosaurs Ruled." My longer case study, *Chaucer and the Discourse of German Philology*, comes to results similar to the ones regarding *Thomas of Erceldoune*: philological work, just like structuralist and poststructuralist work, deserves to be examined on an individual basis and with a focus on actual results. While it has its limitations, there is nothing intrinsically "wrong" with many of the insights which *Wortphilologie* provides.

44 Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 262-63. He states further that quantifiable or "profitable" studies have generally proven "ephemeral" because they are "at home in what is wordly and domesticated within their own generative mechanisms. They are, at the trivial or ostentatious level, manufactured (one recalls Stalin's 'engineers of the soul'). In contrast, serious and major work is never at ease in regard to the unclarities of inception to which it owes its necessarily incomplete, imperfect genesis and performance. It endures because it carries with it the […] lava-scars left by an inward incandescence and often self-destructive surfacing. In ways difficult to classify yet obvious to the active reader […], the ephemeral, the opportunistic in thought and the arts remains static" (309-10).

"When the charm of poetry goes […] it seems best to me not to stay. If the world is nothing but Biology and Geology, let's get quickly to some place which is more than that."[45]

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45 Child is cited by Bradford, *As God Made Them*, 223-24.

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