

## *The Genesis of Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*

ANGUS WILSON

*Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* has been, broadly speaking, the most popular of the eight novels I have published since I began in early middle age to write fiction. For this reason, perhaps, it has tended to be little in my mind, as a successful and dependable daughter or son tends to be left to herself or himself. In addition, my novels have become increasingly unorthodox in form and I have found it aggravating that the usual response of literate strangers to meeting me has been praise for *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, my most conventional, traditional creation. So *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, so far as its author is concerned, has tended to be left to look after itself, which, I must say, it has done very well.

In the last ten years, however, I have accepted a number of teaching posts in the United States which have involved, besides the teaching of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, seminars in creative writing. My first experience of this was at The University of Iowa in 1971 and I like doing it more and more. My instruction, which is always subordinate to reception of the creations I am offered, is based not upon any general rule, but upon my own writing experience, and I have written a book and a lecture on the subject.

Two things about my creative process that have seemed most marked is the long period that I spend upon bringing the book to life and the mass of notes that I write in the process. My novels are written in longhand, in ink, in school exercise books, and, broadly speaking, it would be true, I think, to say that at least a quarter or over of these books contain preliminary notes, in which the novel as it finally emerges may be seen coming to life. Characters, interaction, basic plot, outline narrative, sample dialogues, above all, genealogy, chronology, and other aspects of the interrelation of characters, subplots, and disclosure of mystery—all these are set out in these preliminary notes. The novel is “there,” so to speak, before I start to write it. Yet my memory tells me that seldom have I referred to these

notes once I have begun the process of writing the novel itself. The whole thing has been worked out on paper in argument with myself, I have been convinced by the results of the argument, and I have no longer need to refer to it. This is the reason, perhaps, why I have seldom made changes to my novels when they were completed. And editors have, happily, not demanded major changes. Indeed, in recent years, I have wondered whether I should not amend more the final versions of my novels. And, for the first time, with my latest novel, *Setting the World on Fire*, I rejected a whole section that I had written in Sri Lanka.

This fall, when teaching at the University of Delaware, I decided that I should discuss with my creative writing students the genesis of *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*. I chose the novel for three reasons: it is the most easily available in the U.S.A. in paperback (unlike England, where all my books are in paperback); it is the novel which marked my first months of commitment to the life of a professional writer; I felt that I had unduly neglected my most successful child. To make this study possible I asked for (and was most courteously granted) a photostat of the preliminary notes for the novel which, with many of my other manuscripts, belong to The University of Iowa. These notes comprise in all 91 pages.

The result was a revelation to me. I had to my pleasure remembered a great deal of the creative process that had taken place in the making of the novel; but I had also, to my chagrin, forgotten a good deal. It may be of interest to those concerned with fiction writers and their imagination to set out here what I have remembered of the genesis of the novel besides what the notebooks reveal of how it came to being. I am also adding an account of the attendant circumstances of the writing of the book as I remember them, although I am somewhat chastened by the discovery among my notes of things I had not remembered, or, happily, only very rarely, remembered wrongly.

The remote genesis of *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, which of course is not included in the manuscript notes, lies back in my early years of work on the staff of the British Museum. I was engaged there on coming down from Oxford as a temporary assistant cataloger in 1936. The decision had been made to recatalog the vast B.M. library. The treasury agreed to the library's hiring of 20 extra young men and women from Oxford and Cambridge for this purpose. In part because of the intervention of the war and, in part, I suppose, because of postwar economic conditions in the U.K., the scheme came to an end in the fifties at an early stage of its proposed course. This was, in fact, shortly after I had left to become a full-time writer. Many

others of the 20 had also gone off to other more satisfactory jobs, although the temporary status had been converted to permanent staff after the war. The truth was the cataloging work was not very engrossing—indeed when I returned there after the war, I was gratified to be employed in other library fields. But the late thirties were economically as hard a time for graduates as the early eighties appear likely to be, and I was glad of the job. It was enormously exciting to work in so famous an institution and, among the colleagues of my own age, I found many fascinating and delightful people who have remained friends. In addition, I quickly got to know scholars from the other museum departments—antiquarians, archaeologists, ethnographers, and art historians. We met in a common canteen. It was the gossip of that canteen that, I feel sure, sowed the seeds from which *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* was born, although it was over 15 years before the creation began to flower.

It was from this general museum talk that came the novel's story of archaeological fraud and its effect upon the morale and the creative powers of the hero, an eminent historian, Gerald Middleton who, in his youth, had sensed forgery in the air. I must note here that of the events in the archaeological field which I believe influenced me in imagining the novel, none is mentioned in the preliminary notes for the book. I have only, therefore, my memory to rely on for the conviction that they played the part I shall now suggest. My memory and, I must say, my conviction.

First in time, but very important in overall effect, was the rumor that the Elgin marbles had been overcleaned. Most of this incident remains wholly obscure to me, but I do clearly remember that a well-known newspaper columnist showed great interest in the rumor but that the events of the Munich crisis swallowed it all up. A number of my senior colleagues gossiped to me about it. I had no memory of it all, I am sure, when I was writing *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* 17 years later or composing it 16 years later. Nor, of course, was there any falsification of history involved. But the general air of academic scandal must, I think, have sunk into my imagination.

Quite different are the two following events. In the late spring of 1939 the Anglo-Saxon burial ship was discovered at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia (a part of England I had not then visited, but where, by chance, I wrote my novel and have lived for the last 25 years). Although the extreme importance of this discovery was fully grasped at the time, the evermore certain approach of war meant that it was clear that no serious excavation could go on until the war was ended. As I had studied medieval history at Oxford—indeed had specialized in the Anglo-Saxon field—I was peculiarly interested in this event

and listened avidly to all that I could hear about it. And I do remember that I was struck by how strongly the prestige, learning, experience, and historical integrity of the principal archaeologists involved counted in the assessment of any theories put forward.

The work at Sutton Hoo, of course, was resumed after the war, and although, after 1947, I was deeply taken up in my spare time with writing my two books of short stories which led me into absorption with my own past life, I did often lend a very interested ear to the conversations about Sutton Hoo. By this time the great Anglo-Saxon discovery had been joined by the wonder of the Mildenhall treasure, discovered in 1942, also in East Anglia: a great silver hoard buried by a Romano-British landlord after the Anglo-Saxon invasion. This has historically less interest for me, but its aesthetic beauty, when it appeared on show, entranced me. Neither of these two great finds appears in my preliminary notes for the novel. But I remember, extremely clearly, that after I had published *Hemlock and After* (1952), I did spend some time (I imagine it was in late 1953 or early 1954) questioning some archaeological colleagues about the two finds, especially Sutton Hoo. And I also know that I had a novel in mind when I did so, indeed, that I told one eminent archaeologist of my idea for such a novel and that he was interested, for my reputation as a fiction writer had by then become established.

I am also fairly sure that the character of Gerald Middleton must very broadly have played around the figure of the brilliant, very delightful yet complex character of Sir Thomas Kendrick, the Anglo-Saxon archaeologist associated with the discovery of Sutton Hoo: He was, in fact, director of the museum when I resigned in 1955 to become a full-time writer.

Neither Sutton Hoo nor Mildenhall appears in my notes at Iowa, far less the buried scandal of the Elgin marbles. But what does appear there, but not until page 59 of the 91 pages of my notes, is the Piltdown affair. In 1953, when I must have first been receiving glimmers of the novel to come, the Piltdown man, a supposed vital link in man's evolution, was revealed to have been forged by his discoverer in 1912. The affair had reached me, although I had no special knowledge of prehistory, because the staff of the British Museum Library and that of the Natural History Museum in South Kensington had interchanged a number of social receptions, and this giant fraud of prehistory was inevitably an important subject of discussion at that time. However, in 1953 I was primarily taken up with writing *The Mulberry Bush*, my play that ultimately in 1956 got to London, where it didn't do well although having been a big success at Bristol. Nevertheless I am sure that I stored up the giant hoax of Piltdown

for future reference. The fact that it doesn't turn up in the notes until page 59 doesn't surprise me. I was well into the construction of the novel, had left the museum, and established myself at my present cottage. I remember now that a book about Piltdown along with Bede's history served as my evening reading for many weeks when I was already writing the novel. But, then, early on I had acquired the habit of leaving the verification of factual details until late in the gestation of a novel for fear that mere fact should impede the flow of imagination.

These four events in archaeology are, then, the background for my choosing the subject of the novel. The rereading of my preliminary notes has also been a revelation to me—and a confirmation, luckily—of my method of work and the shape of my imagination. Here are some of the things that particularly struck me in reading those 91 pages this fall.

First, I was amazed to discover that my original idea on page one was for a novel about groups of professional forgers who were involved in an archaeological fraud and their blackmail of the guilty professor to whom each was attached by some personal tie. It could have made a successful crime story, but I was ill equipped to write it and wise to relinquish the idea. However, I find it interesting to note that from the start the interplay of professional and private life, particularly family life, which had already marked *Hemlock and After* and was to continue in all my work, was there from page one of the notes for *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*.

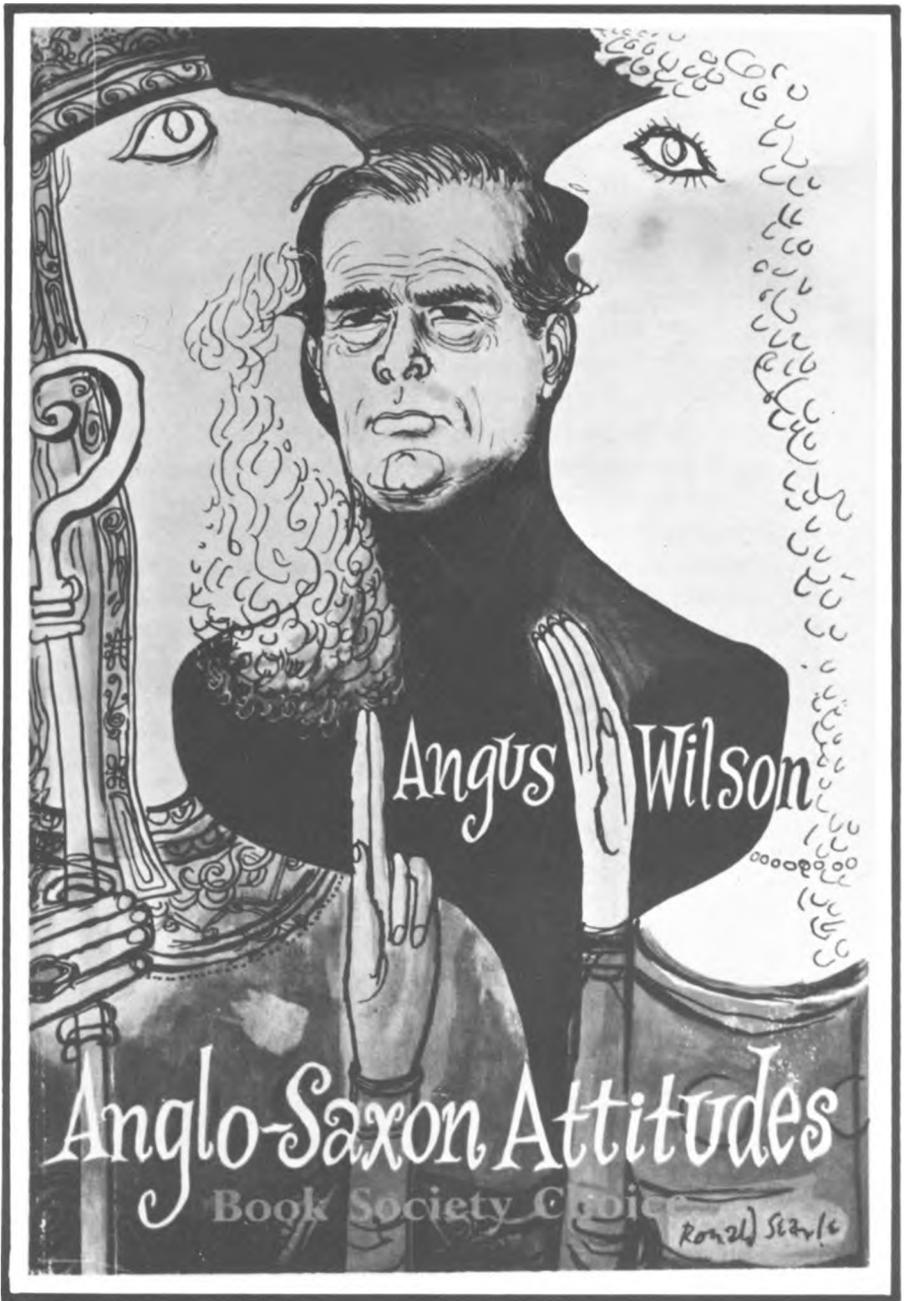
In these early stages Gerald was to be the forger himself. But this crude concept soon disappears by at least page 16. It is on that page that my biggest surprise came. I had remembered that *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* had been carried only in my head until my resignation from the British Museum in April 1955 allowed me proper time to write. But here is clearly written the date 11/9/54, seven months before my leaving the B.M. It is clear to me now that a great part of the planning on paper was made by the time that, in an unfortunately wet May and in the most primitive and isolated cottage, I began to write the book. Luckily the weather soon turned to golden and encouraged me further in the way I like to write, out-of-doors with an exercise book on my knee.

On page 13 there is a list of characters and chapters—none as they were finally to appear; but the need for detailing these two things has always remained with me, though they always change frequently before they are chosen. I see also that here and on pages 53 and 54 my short story practice is still with me, for the chapter names have

that ironic and sometimes punning reference with which I had always chosen my short story titles.

The nationality of Gerald's wife, Ingeborg, then called Trudl, so essential to the title of the book, for Gerald must be and is surrounded by all the nations important to England's history (of which Norway is almost supreme) is not chosen until page 57. And two pages later I am asking myself why Gerald has chosen this moment to investigate the historic scandal and what is the hidden horror of his *private* life that is to balance the Melpham forgery. By page 80 both these vital links are decided—Professor Pforzheim's Heligoland discoveries make confirmation or rejection of Melpham vital, Inge had pushed her little daughter onto the fire and given her a maimed hand for life. The shape was complete.

Indeed pages 81 to 91 are of quite another kind, familiar to me in all my novel writing preparation. They are mainly concerned with a calendar for the writing of the last half of the novel, setting aside so many days for each episode and estimating the number of words needed for each. I wonder how exact my forecasts were.



Jacket design for the English edition of Angus Wilson's second novel, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956).

**a novel by**

"What curious attitudes  
he goes into!"  
Alice exclaimed.

**Angus Wilson**

"Not at all," said  
the King. "...Those are  
Anglo-Saxon attitudes.  
He only does them  
when he's happy."

**Anglo-Saxon**

**Attitudes**

Jacket design for the American edition of Angus Wilson's novel *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (New York: The Viking Press, 1956).