

Book Reviews

Altman, Rochelle. *Absent Voices: The Story of Writing Systems in the West.* New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll, 2004, 364p. \$59.95 (ISBN 1584561084). LC 2003-050627.

In the past decade or so, Oak Knoll Press has emerged as the primary publisher of books about books in the United States. It is a position the company has admirably filled with a large backlist of well-written, excellently produced, and well-conceived contributions to the literature of publishing and printing history. Rochelle Altman's *Absent Voices* is a handsome and modestly priced addition to the publisher's contributions to the field.

The book is the distillation of separately published monographs that have been stripped of the scholarly apparatus and rewritten for a lay audience. The richness and diversity of the appended bibliography of sources, a *practical* bibliography as opposed to any futile effort at comprehensiveness, is to be lauded, though the simple alphabetical listing of items by author could be arrayed in a more useful manner than the almost one thousand unsorted entries presented here.

The author describes this as an "interdisciplinary" study, bringing together the separate knowledge of many fields. It is, perhaps, to be lamented that among these disciplines, none has corrected what has become a grating point in any discussion of the history of writing: clay tablets were not "baked." Cookies are baked. Pies are baked. If clay is baked, it suffers the same fate as a cookie or pie when dropped into a pool of water—eventually it dissolves. Clay tablets were vitrified by a process that is normally called *firing*, where the clay is subjected to temperatures high enough to change the crystalline structure of the clay body itself. This is why ceramic pots hold water and clay tablets do not return to mud when wet. This happens in most clay bodies, including those from

which the tablets were made, at temperatures in excess of 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit, a process vastly different from baking.

The structure of the book is such that the first five chapters set the stage and the final eight chapters develop the author's central thesis that in the mid-seventh century, a system of recording the spoken word was designed in Northumbria, the Anglo-Saxon Comprehensive Writing System or *stæfwritung*, that gave scribes the ability to record not only the words, but also the suprasegmentals necessary for the direct recording of speech. It was a symbol structure designed to capture the phonetic character of the language, as opposed to the semantic content, and was carried to the continent by Irish missionaries. It was an innovation that was successful in both written texts and music notation until destroyed by Alcuin of York in his attempt to install a new scribal tradition through the Carolingian miniscule.

The attempt of Alfred the Great (849–899) to devise written fonts for various types of documents in the tenth century and to standardize a national English hand began the demise of the Anglo-Saxon Comprehensive Writing System. *Stæfwritung* forms persisted in England until the seventeenth century, long after the systematized whole had fallen into decline and only the vestiges of the letter forms were left.

This is, in essence, the case that Rochelle Altman makes in this book, and she marshals impressive detail in support of her assertions and conclusions. The effort suffers, however, from a somewhat muddled text in which the evidence overwhelms the thesis and her explanations of the texts she describes obscure the points she is trying to make. She has consciously defaulted in providing examples of the



texts and the phenomenon she uses as demonstration to “generally available facsimile sources,” without giving the reader direct reference to these in the text, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to follow the logic under which her exposition progresses. Her attempts to rectify this in the narrative is sometimes forced, frequently obscure, and always less satisfactory than a graphic example of the object under examination.

Further, the evident discontinuity among the various chapters leads to an inconsistent labeling of some of the major concepts with which she is working. *Stæfwritung* (a term obviously constructed by her) is a shorthand form of her central concept that is variously called in the text “the Anglo-Saxon Phonetic-Based Comprehensive Writing System,” “the Anglo-Saxon Comprehensive Writing System,” or more simply, “the Anglo-Saxon Phonetic Alphabet.”

The attempt to appeal to the general reader rather than to the specialist fails on several fronts. Paragraphs and pages read at a super-simplified level reminiscent of the text of *Cobblestone: The History Magazine for Young People* and merge into lengthy passages of such technical complexity that any reader will be almost guaranteed to get lost in the maze. The frequent use of *Alice in Wonderland* to open chapters, the somewhat bizarre analogies (modern writing systems are like jet airplanes?), and the redundancy throughout the text all serve to retard the progress of the narrative flow.

Moreover, there is a persistent thematic element coursing throughout the chapters that is disquieting. Early on, she establishes a framework of analysis in the deposition of an old order by a new one that almost invariably means linguistic change and always a change in the appearance of the script in which documents of varying degrees of authority are produced. Once would suffice, but here it is a refrain with continued reference to “The Winner’s Standard Operating Procedure” (always given the authority

of capitalization) throughout the text. Having an ideological peg upon which to hang one’s mortarboard is useful, but here the persistence of the phrase and its variants becomes almost obsessive.

Altman’s attempt to trace written Anglo-Saxon of the ninth century directly back to the Phoenician settlements in Cornwall in the pre-Roman era of British history is not compelling. Her assertion that the romance languages arose from misapplication of *stæfwritung* on the continent needs much more support to even make it comprehensible in the context of linguistic change. Both of these points need either documentation, which she does not provide given the stated purpose of the work, or more lucid explanation of the phenomena under examination to make them comprehensible or plausible to the average reader.

This is a work that undoubtedly needed a good editorial hand to make it succeed. There is an interesting thesis underlying the book, and the author apparently has a solid grasp of the nuances of evidence she presents in support of her points, but *Absent Voices* ultimately suffers from an absent editor. —Lee Shiflett, *The University of North Carolina at Greensboro*.

Eriksson-Backa, Kristina. *In Sickness and in Health: How Information and Knowledge Are Related to Health Behaviour.* Åbo: Åbo Akademis Förlag, 2003. 205p. 22 Euro (ISBN 951765152X; digital 9517651538). LC 2004-436241.

The information explosion of the late twentieth century has affected all individuals, perhaps most personally in the field of health. Technological innovations and biochemical discoveries have led to many new health care options, often costly and requiring extensive explanation to be adequately understood by the general public. Rising costs have precipitated changes in the health care system, leaving health care providers with less time and financial incentive for patient education. Meanwhile, the extension of life expectancy has forced patients, espe-