

# How the English Language Got Its Strange Tune

In the course of my medical career, I had many occasions to read English, speak English and even write in English, although I was rather inhibited by recurrent criticism that I was not mastering proper English — until I found out that two of my ancestors were involved in the development of this language.

It all started in 1034 when Rotherik Njalsøn Schou and his son, Erik Rotheriksøn Schou, at the request of King Knud (Canute) joined his court in Winchester. At that time King Knud governed a huge kingdom, largely consisting of Denmark, England and Norway and exerted influence on neighbouring Ireland and northern France, equally dominated by Norsemen. They had, during the Viking conquest of the British Isles over the preceding centuries, found inhabitants with whom they could speak, since these had left Scandinavia around the 6<sup>th</sup> century under the pressure of the already then terrible tax authorities. Simultaneously, Norsemen went to other parts of the world; this was the last attempt to make Danish the official language of the world (other nations have made later attempts).

After some years, Erik followed the call of his uncle, a companion of Vilhelm (William) of Normandy, to go southward to the continent. There he learned Frankish, a Germanic language mixed up with Latin and some remnants of Celtic.

At first, Rotherik stayed in southern England. There were some dialect problems, but the inhabitants soon learned to speak proper Danish. He was a calm and respected person, difficult to mislead, and having made a decision he kept to

it, even when it proved to be wrong. The death of King Knud was, however, a painful experience to Rotherik, who was also displeased by the unstable English climate. Having suffered 8 attacks of a common cold in one year — too common for his nose — he decided to go back to the Danish mainland, an event which took place in 1065.

Our family has often been twisted in verbal differences but never fought against another with weapons. Thus, only having learned about Rotherik's departure, Erik decided to support Vilhelm's planned raid against England the following year. Erik was quite different in temperament than Rotherik: he could indeed change his mind rather fast but always in accordance with the winning party. He was feared as a strong and cynical fighter. Historicians now agree (two of them, at least) that it was the presence of Erik on the one front and the absence of Rotherik on the other that was responsible for the outcome of the battle of Hastings.

It then took a couple of hundred years for the Frankish-Norman language to merge with the original Anglo-Saxon, to form the mixture we nowadays call English. Try to imagine how this language would have developed if Rotherik Njalsøn Schou and Erik Rotheriksøn Schou had behaved differently — then probably more in the direction of my daily speech.

Having proven that my ancestors were crucially involved in the development of the English language, I shall kindly ask the present-day Anglosaxons to abstain from any linguistic criticism of me or members of my family. Anyhow, they have ample occupation in editing their compatriots.