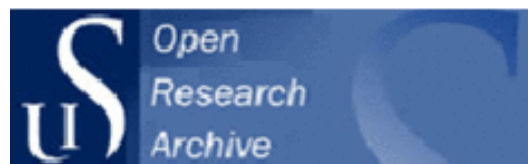




University of
Stavanger

Thaisen, J. (2013) Obituary: Norman Francis Blake (1934–2012).
English studies, 94(1), pp. 120-122

Link to published article DOI : [10.1080/08039410.2013.795454](https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2013.795454)
(Access to content may be restricted)



UiS Brage
<http://brage.bibsys.no/uis/>

This version is made available in accordance with publisher policies. It is the authors' last version of the article after peer review, usually referred to as postprint. Please cite only the published version using the reference above.



Obituary: Norman Francis Blake (1934–2012)

Jacob Thaisen

“Norman F. Blake, University of Sheffield”. Students of English around the world will have come across title pages and article headers with this name and affiliation, for Blake’s academic output was extensive and varied. It included some thirty authored or edited volumes, not to mention around 200 articles and an even larger number of reviews; many of the latter in particular appeared in *English Studies* where Blake also served on the International Advisory Board. He held the Chair in English Language at Sheffield for a generation and several senior administrative posts there, including Head of Department, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and eventually Pro-Vice Chancellor. Prior to his arrival at Sheffield in 1973, he lectured in English at the University of Liverpool for just over a decade. After retiring, he first stayed on at Sheffield as Director of the Humanities Research Institute but later took a Research Professorship at Leicester’s De Montfort University.

Blake was born in Brazil on 19 April 1934 to an English father (a banker) and a half-Brazilian, half-German mother. He was sent to boarding school in Surrey at the age of four together with his older brother, spending school holidays with relatives and only seeing his parents again when World War II was over. The involuntary separation from family members has made many assume that Blake had an unhappy childhood. The adjective he himself applied was “wonderful”, although the death of his brother in a freak accident in the summer of 1947 must have been a devastating event. From Surrey, Blake went on to Magdalen College School, Brackley (1944), and Magdalen College, Oxford (1953). There Blake was trained by scholars of considerable standing: C. S. Lewis and J. A. W. Bennett for medieval English and Gabriel Turville-Petre for Old Norse. He earned a Bachelor of Letters in 1959 by editing the Old Norse *Saga of the Jomsvikings*, which became his first book (1962). It may have been the boarding school years that instilled in Blake the work ethic that characterised his working life.

To give an example, admittedly based on hearsay, in 1997, Blake served on a committee to assess the teaching quality of university-level English studies in Denmark. (He had spent the academic year 1956–57 at the then newly established Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen studying Icelandic manuscripts, where he had grown fond of Scandinavia and become proficient in Danish, a proficiency he

actively nurtured throughout his life.) The assessors travelled between universities, visiting a different English department every day and eventually concluded their travels with a pleasurable dinner out on the last evening. When they reconvened the following morning to compare notes and discuss what recommendations their official report was to contain, Blake kicked off by handing out a first version of the report and everyone was baffled as to when he could possibly have typed it out. The answer is straightforward to those who had the privilege of knowing him: an acute mind coupled with a concentrated stint of disciplined writing every morning before breakfast.

Stirring the pot, so to speak, was something Blake took pleasure in. His nonconformist stance, always supported by arguments ironclad in logic, on the primacy of the Hengwrt manuscript challenged scholars to justify authenticating as Chaucerian any text not present in it, such as the “Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale” and the “Tale of Gamelyn”. With encouragement from Derek Pearsall, he based his edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (1980) on this manuscript, and caused another stir by suggesting Chaucerian involvement in its production at the 1997 conference of the Early Book Society. This theory rejected the firmly entrenched chronology of Manly and Rickert (1940) which he had himself accepted for the manuscripts in his book *The Textual Tradition of the “Canterbury Tales”* (1985). When reminded of this by professorial peers, a characteristically unperturbed Blake is said simply to have declared that he had changed his mind.

Just as one cannot offer more than a few snapshots of Blake’s character in a few insufficient paragraphs, one also cannot possibly do justice to his academic achievements in them. His *Caxton and his World* (1969), today a classic biography, portrayed England’s first printer as primarily a merchant, out to capture the home market, rather than a craftsman. Aside from Chaucer and Caxton, a third area of especial interest was the history of the English language, especially the language and style of Shakespeare. Pinnacles here were the editorship of the Middle English volume in the *Cambridge History of the English Language* series (1992) and his level-headed *A History of the English Language* (1996), which usefully abandoned the traditional periodisation in favour of viewing extant texts as fixed points in a multidimensional space.

Blake demanded excellence from his research students, like me, and whenever you failed to submit your chapter on time, he always saw through your excuse before you had finished making it. In supervising, as in his other professional activities, he put on a strict face when necessary. Behind the facade, however, was a man who assessed you fairly and had your best interests at heart. He always had a moment to spare and rarely appeared to be pressed for time, although he usually had several other appointments to make before his return train, for Blake was an avid user of public transport.

In May 2004, Blake suffered a massive stroke which left him without speech or movement, save for his one arm. He had been complaining of severe stomach pains for some weeks prior and was in line for tests but had received no diagnosis. It is especially unfair that fate dealt Blake such a harsh blow, since he kept very fit. He

enjoyed the outdoors, and at retirement age still hiked in the Peak District or up the hill from Sheffield railway station at such a pace that we research students could barely keep up. It was only a few years earlier that he had stopped taking us on at squash. It is heartbreaking to imagine the frustration and anguish of the last bedridden years of such an active, resourceful and sociable man. It brings some consolation to know that Blake spent long stretches of this period in his own home or in the Royal Hallamshire Hospital, which overlooks the campus of the University of Sheffield, which played such a significant part in his life.

Blake passed away on 29 July 2012. He is survived by his wife Valerie, daughter Dorinda (born 1973), and several grandchildren, as well as a significant body of scholarship of lasting value.