

Professor Helmut Gneuss (1927–2023)

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of Professor Helmut Gneuss on 26 February 2023, aged 95. We are mourning the loss of an eminent scholar, a devoted teacher and a great lover of manuscripts and books.

Born in Berlin on 29 October 1927, Helmut always knew his much-loved home city like the back of his hand even after his academic career had led him away from the Freie Universität Berlin to the universities of Heidelberg, Cambridge, UNC at Chapel Hill, and, finally, to the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, where he held the Chair for English Historical Linguistics and Medieval English Literature from 1965 to 1997.



© Michael Korhammer, 2017

Helmut was a “man of letters” in every sense of the term. Being passionately devoted to a wide range of research interests – encompassing historical linguistics, the history of English language scholarship, manuscript studies, Anglo-Saxon liturgy, palaeography, and medieval English literature and culture – he managed effectively to enhance students’ and scholars’ understanding of these subjects and their appreciation of interdisciplinary approaches. By generously sharing his impressive learning and his scholarly passion for the exploration of the English past, he inspired generations of students to love Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and the Old English language as much as he did. Through the substantial number of doctoral dissertations and other academic work initiated by him and supervised with utmost care, he became the head of what has been called the “Munich School”.

Helmut’s numerous publications include some of the most important scholarship in the field. With his doctoral dissertation on *Lehnbildungen und Lehnbedeutungen im Altenglischen* (1955) and his monograph on *Hymnar und Hymnen im englischen Mittelalter* (1968) he set the high standards early on that were to be characteristic of all his work. His inaugural lecture in Munich on “The Origin of Standard Old English and Æthelwold’s School at Winchester”, published in 1972, proved to be path-breaking, initiating the ongoing scholarly debate on the origins and nature of “Standard Old English” and the “Winchester vocabulary” in the context of the Benedictine reform movement – a topic that was further pursued by his beloved wife, Mechthild Gretsch, whose untimely death almost exactly ten years ago meant a great loss to him.

The “Essential Gneuss”, as Simon Keynes once called it, is contained in two volumes of collected papers with the programmatic titles *Books and Libraries in Early England* and *Language and History in Early England* (1996). Among Helmut’s enduring contributions, his manuscript catalogue stands out as an indispensable standard reference tool. It saw a successive growth from a “Preliminary List” (1980) to a *Handlist* (2001) to, finally, an impressive volume entitled *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100* (2014; together with Michael Lapidge, to whom he felt greatly indebted for his enthusiastic cooperation). This catalogue became a lifelong occupation for the fervent booklover, who painstakingly continued to collect material for updating the *Handlist* virtually up to the end of his life.

Helmut’s involvement with research and varied academic matters, such as his work for *Anglia*, the Munich monograph series *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Englischen Philologie*, and the *DOE*, did not stop with his retirement. Just as during his active years, he continued sharing his scholarly enthusiasm and his superb expertise in early English studies with all of the academic community, from undergraduate students to professional colleagues. Many a publication has profited immensely from his insightful comments and the

wealth of bibliographical information which he miraculously retrieved from his memory, from his well-ordered set of constantly updated bibliographical notebooks and from his legendary lever-arch files. His extensive personal library filled his home from floor to ceiling, and he managed to navigate between the shelves and among the books with instinctive certainty. It was only a few weeks before he passed away that his deteriorating health forced him to give up the academic work that had been his main mission and passion in life.

Helmut's great expertise and judicious advice will be deeply missed. In his seminal works – many of them being timeless – in the scholarly inspiration, guidance and support he provided for numerous students and fellow researchers over the decades, and in many grateful memories by those who have so greatly benefited from his kindness and generosity, Helmut Gneuss will live on.

Ursula Lenker and Lucia Kornexl, writing on behalf of the Chair for English Historical Linguistics and Literature of the Middle Ages (University of Munich) and Helmut's students

The funeral will take place in the most immediate circle of friends and colleagues. In lieu of flowers, you might want to consider a donation "In Memory of Helmut Gneuss" to the *Dictionary of Old English* as a tribute to Helmut's commitment to the *DOE* via

<https://engage.utoronto.ca/site/SPageServer?pagename=donate#/fund/794>