Ælfric of Eynsham has occupied a central place in Anglo-Saxon studies throughout much of the history of the scholarship of the discipline, and his literary and intellectual significance is seen as greater than ever among Anglo-Saxonists today. Ælfric is recognized in the scholarly community as the most important writer of Old English religious prose and as the great English ‘teacher’ (in senses both broad and narrow) of his age, a teacher of those in religious life and of the laity. His writing is seen to be distinctive and highly accomplished, and the extent of his Latin learning continues to impress researchers even as they define that learning more and more sharply.

To non-specialists, perhaps understandably, given the nature of his writings, Ælfric has been of little interest as a literary and intellectual figure. He merits only two pages, for example, in the recent Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (by way of comparison, Chaucer gets twelve pages, Lydgate six, King Alfred eight, Wulfstan four, and Aldhelm five) and is confined to the most cursory of short paragraphs in the Oxford Companion to English Literature;¹ he can find no place in ‘canonical’ anthologies of literature such as the Norton,² and receives short shrift in standard literary histories.³ On the ‘religious’ side, he gets warm praise from Dom David Knowles—

¹ Godden, ‘Ælfric of Eynsham’; Drabble, ‘Ælfric’, p. 9. As a crude popularity test, I also recently googled Ælfric and some comparators: ‘Ælfric’ brought up some 131,000 hits, ‘Chaucer’ 4,470,000, ‘Lydgate’ 270,000, ‘Wulfstan’ (undifferentiated) 103,000, ‘Aldhelm’ 85,500; ‘King Alfred’ comes out at 3,360,000, without adding the additional citations that must apply to the West Saxon monarch out of the 74,400,000 hits for ‘Alfred’.
² The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 7th. ed., ed. Abrams and Greenblatt (Ælfric does not appear in earlier editions either); note also Ælfric’s absence from The Arnold Anthology of British and Irish Literature in English, ed. Clark and Healy.
³ Among fairly recent publications, it is notable that Ælfric gets only one sentence (which he shares with Wulfstan) in Andrew Sanders’ chapter ‘Old English Literature’,
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Ælfric inevitably recalls his great forerunner [Bede], and is, when all his gifts are taken into the reckoning, one of the most distinguished figures in the history of Western theological learning in the centuries immediately before the renaissance of the eleventh century—and but is rarely known by people with a general interest in religious or church history.

For Anglo-Saxonists, however, Ælfric has been and still is a key focus of study, as is testified to by the large and ever-increasing number of scholarly publications devoted to him, or including discussion of him, and by the steady flow of doctoral dissertations relating to him. Luke Reinsma listed 882 Ælfric publications for the period 1548–1982 (including the printed version of an admiring reference to Ælfric’s accomplishments by William of Malmesbury, the earliest post-Anglo-Saxon mention of him by name),5 Aaron J Kleist added another 162 publications for 1983–1996, and currently bibliographies in ASE and OEN refer to twenty or so new items on Ælfric, or mainly on Ælfric, each year.6 As the present chapter brings out, the nature of scholarly interest in Ælfric has changed down the years, in accordance with changing academic agendas and preoccupations, with Ælfric being interpreted and understood by succeeding generations in different ways, as continues to be very much the case today. Scholarly investigation of the form, function, content and context of Ælfric’s writings has gathered momentum in recent years, building on the foundational resources produced over the past centuries, and new directions and developments in research are establishing themselves, the most significant of which are highlighted

in his *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, pp. 16–27, at pp. 18–19; he does not figure at all in the chapter ‘The Beginnings of English: Old and Middle English 600–1485’, in Carter and McRae, *The Routledge History of Literature in English*, pp. 3–48; he fared better in an influential survey from an earlier generation, Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*, in which, in the chapter ‘Anglo-Saxon Literature’ (I, 3–30), there is about a page on Ælfric (including comparison with Wulfstan), praising the ‘finely chiselled urbanity’ of his style (p. 28); like most considerations of the literature of the period, Daiches’ concentrates mainly on poetry.

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7 Reinsma, *Ælfric: An Annotated Bibliography*, Kleist, ‘An Annotated Bibliography’. I have made much grateful use of these excellent bibliographies in preparing this chapter. See also the useful statistics provided by Allen Frantzen, comparing the numbers of studies of Ælfric in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in his ‘By the Numbers’, p. 482.