

## Waikato Institute of Technology, New Zealand

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### **The ghost of Sigurd the Volsung in Eketahuna**

#### Abstract:

While William Morris was creating the narrative poem based on his translations of the Icelandic tales of Sigurd the Volsung, in the 1870's, groups of Scandinavian settlers were encouraged to come to New Zealand as part of a grand scheme of borrowing money from Britain to develop the new world country for further settlements. These immigrants were to clear and fell some of the densest bush remaining in the hinterland of the North Island for road, rail and the concomitant communications that would follow. They came willingly, anticipating better lives for themselves, although the reality was disappointing at best and devastating at worst.

While the foot print of their efforts is still evident, and the towns and even cities they created, including Palmerston North and Eketahuna, are flourishing, the immigrants have become invisible, no more remembered than the nameless chain-gangs of prisoners or the unemployed, who took over their effort and continued with progress in the early 20th Century, on land that had been bought cheaply from the indigenous Māori.

But what intellectual footprint did they leave this inhabitation? What stories and links with stories did they bring, coming from the great Viking traditions of Saga and Skald? This paper will consider the stories brought and left by the Scandinavians and their small, flickering presence in New Zealand poetry, song and story.

#### Biographical note:

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#### Keywords:

New Zealand literature — Scandinavian mythology — ethnography — 'habitus' and inhabitation

#### **Introductory note**

A note before I continue, about the title of this chapter. 'Eketahuna' is the name of a New Zealand town settled by Scandinavians in the 1870's, and is a Maori word which means 'to run aground on a sandbank' (this name originated because Maori canoes could not paddle beyond that particular part of the nearby river) (Heritage, 2014). To many New Zealanders, because of its remoteness and small size as well as its comical sound, 'Eketahuna' has been considered as a humorous name, like 'Timbuktu', or the 'back of beyond'. As a European settlement it was first named Mellemskov which is a Danish word meaning the 'heart of the forest' but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century had reverted to its original Maori name. The intention of this reference is to ask if the ghost of one of the greatest Norse warriors might be called up in the least likely of New Zealand's small towns and perhaps whether elements of saga or Norse legend might also be glimpsed in any New Zealand literary texts.

### **Who was Sigurd the Volsung?**

William Morris, that most prodigious of Victorians is now best known for his designs and works in fabric, decoration and architectural embellishment. After all, the general aim and motto of Morris and Company which he co-founded with his friends, including Edward Burne-Jones in 1861, was that we should only have in our houses those things which are useful and/or beautiful and preferably both at once (Morris, 2011). However, during the course of his life he wrote prolifically and also translated *The Odyssey* and *the Aeneid* into verse forms (McCarthy, 1994, p. 176) as well as writing utopian fiction and socialist non-fiction. In the 1860s he befriended Eiríkr Magnússon, who taught him Icelandic and with whom he translated some of the great Icelandic sagas from Magnússon's literal English translations into narrative verse. One such is the *Saga of Sigurd the Volsung* (Morris, 2004)

The epic tale of *Sigurd the Volsung* (Magnússon, 2011) covers several dynasties of Norse kings, queens, and features a magic sword, a heroic horse called Granir or Greyfell in English, trickster dwarves, deceitful Goths, a hoard of gold guarded by a dragon, Fafnir, and a great many battles and feasts. Having killed Fafnir with a sword called "the Wrath" and eaten his heart, Sigurd who equates with Wagner's Siegfried, comes upon a sleeping beauty called Brynhilde whom Odin the One-eyed god has punished by locking in a mound in deep sleep. The two fall in love but Sigurd must first return with his prized hoard to the ancestral home of his family, the Hall of the Volsungs. As he is now a supreme fighter and lord, he is asked to fight with the Nibelungs or Niblungs against invading warriors from the south and while there the witch queen of the Nibelungs gives him a potion which makes him fall in love with her daughter, Gudrun whom he marries. The story continues with betrayals, poisoning, mismatched marriages and of course heroic deaths on burning funeral pyres.

In 1876 Morris formed the Kelmscott Press and published illustrated versions of several of these tales, after which,

Morris's version of what he considered "the most glorious of stories" ... helped enthuse the English reading public with the histrionic lives and loves of Sigmund and Signy, Sigurd, Brynbuild and Gudrun, the daughter of the Nibelungs. The poem was published in 1876, the year of the first production in Bayreuth of Wagner's complete *Ring* (McCarthy, 2010).

### **And in Eketahuna?**

Contemporaneous with Morris's exploration in person and imagination of the world of the Skjald (poet or bard) and the sword, on the other side of the world, other Victorian businessmen were developing New Zealand into a fine opportunity for real estate developers, merchants and traders, opening new markets at home and replenishing others back in Britain. There were physical impediments to progress in the form of mountains and dense forests in the central part of each main island of New Zealand. Travel and dispatch were slow because the only means of long distance transport were steamer (or occasionally canoe) and horse and carriage or cart, apart from walking or horseback. The then Colonial Treasurer, and later Premier, Julius Vogel, believed that;

... borrowing overseas funds could pay both for building railways and roads, and for large-scale immigration. This would not only create an economic boom; the new immigrants could settle on land purchased and confiscated from Māori, to engender social order and 'British civilisation' (Phillips, 2013, p. 8).

What was needed was an army of workers, but the total population of New Zealand at this time was under half a million people, all of whom already had businesses, trades, menial employment or land to work with. Having considered the size of the forests in the North Island Vogel's agents were sent abroad to Britain, Scandinavia and North America to investigate the likelihood of finding people who were desperate and strong enough to take on this task, or for whom the incentive of their own piece of paradise might be worth the struggle.

I have written elsewhere of hardships and exploitation of the Scandinavian people (Pittaway, 2015, pp. 63-80) and it is well documented that they were a virtual slave force, with only their willingness to take on adversity to keep them going (Andresen, 2000, p. i). But they came with their memories, their cultural heritage as well and now, over one hundred years later, it is worth asking what ghosts of Sigurd the Volsung that fighting king, lord and adventurer, mighty with sword and lover of Brunhilde and husband of Gudrun, came with them to Dannevirke, Norsewood and Eketahuna (or Mellemskov), the towns that were established for them to settle. The sad truth is that, apart from the roads, railways, farms and townships, several tiny museums and of course the cemeteries, there is very little evidence of their cultural impact. Indeed, because of the dominance of British culture, only a treaty kept the indigenous culture of New Zealand alive in the first century of settlement. Over 4,000 Scandinavians settled in New Zealand in the years from 1860 – 1879, yet, as with their contemporary migrants the Germans, they appeared not to hold tightly to their old traditions and to assimilate unobtrusively:

The several thousand Scandinavian migrants who settled in the lower North Island in the late 19th century – my grandparents among them – quietly complied. They rolled their sleeves up, went to work and learned to become New Zealanders (much as Dutch immigrants did several decades later). For them, the past literally was another country – one they left behind psychologically as well as physically (du Fresne K. , 2012).

Furthermore, as the sagas attest, their nature was not to look back in regret but to confront adversity directly, not matter the outcome of a struggle.

[i]n the pitiless Old Norse universe, gods and their human allies face inevitable defeat, but there is no thought of surrender or negotiation with the monsters besieging them. In the struggle against evil, there is no shame in defeat — only in not fighting (Hart, 2003, p. 1).

### **The literary context, then and now**

The obstacles to survival in clearing dense forest while suffering famine, financial hardship, disease and even several devastating fires, left little time for reflection, although several communities did entertain bush poets – often people who had been injured in the forests or by the heavy machinery of forestry work (Petersen, pp. 120-130). As with most migrant workers from other countries, many were illiterate, even in their own language, but particularly so in English, so it was ironically the case that while their literature was being celebrated, read and embellished in glorious books by the English through Morris's efforts, very little evidence of this cultural tradition is recorded by the Norse and Danish workers, except in stories told to the children. It was largely left to William Morris, Richard Wagner and later in the 20th century, J.R.R. Tolkien to bring the mythical 'north' to the world. Equally ironically, it is Tolkien's 'interpreter', Peter Jackson, who has recreated Tolkien's mythical world using the New Zealand landscape in his two cinematic trilogies, *The Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003) and *The Hobbit* (2012, 2013, 2014).

After one hundred and twenty years of assimilation very few New Zealand fiction writers had overtly attempted to incorporate threads of Norse mythology and saga into their work although there are many non-fiction accounts of the voyages and settlement, both as folk-telling and historical texts (Pittaway, 2015). Three of these form the second half of this paper.

### Three writers

The first of these writers to mention is Joan Rosier Jones, whose 1987 novel *Voyagers* is a family saga, based on stories her parents told her about their experiences of life in New Zealand from the 1890's until the middle of World War II (Rosier-Jones, 1987), as descendants of Finnish settlers. It is interesting for its depiction of both pioneer and city life, the changing relationships of men and women and also because it shows how circumstances of the great depression and world wars bring growing political awareness to ordinary lives. As well there are many references to mythic creatures from the *Kalevala* (the national epic of Finland and Karelia) and Nordic mythology, as she fictionalises the life of her grandfather as Willi, a Finnish sailor who is shipwrecked on New Zealand's coast and decides to take residence when he cannot afford to be repatriated. Willi marries and has a family to whom he tells stories of Näkki, a sea sprite which rises from the water during Midsummer's night, to dance in the middle of the celebrating people. He has tales too of Hisii and trolls, the tricksters— who are responsible for losing items and committing little acts of malice. Willi claims that it was Näkki who brought him off the boat and into this new life and tells his children night-time stories of this figure, principally known for pulling young children into the depths if they lean over bridge railings, or look into water surfaces to see their own reflection and touch the water. During World War I Willi is interned for a while for, because of his strong accent he is suspected of being a German spy.

Another writer who overtly uses Nordic work as inspiration is Hone Kouka whose play *Nga Tangata toa, (the Warrior People)*, is inspired by Henrik Ibsen's 7th play, *The Vikings at Helgeland*, written in the mid-1850s, where the ghost of Sigurd the Volsung is hiding in the wings. The action of Ibsen's play takes place around the end of the first millennium at the hall of Sigurd's friend-in-arms, Gunnar, on the island of Helgeland, in the north of Norway. Hjordis is married to Gunnar, but secretly loves Sigurd and her character as a warrior woman increasingly dominates the play until she wreaks revenge on all of the men for a long kept secret about their wooing, in a finale that would rival Hamlet's for slaughter (Ibsen, 2014).

Kouka's play is set in New Zealand just after World War 1. The two main male characters, Taneatua and Wi (William) are friends who met on whaling ships and both marry women from the tribe of Paikea, the leader of a community on the North Island's east coast. The women, Rongomai and te Whai are cousins, and each has an empathy with the other's husband which goes back to the night they all first met. The young men had come to a feast at the *pa* (settlement) and boasted to their hosts that they would not leave without claiming wives for themselves. Rongomai announces they would have to get past the dogs to get to her bed and Wi, who has developed a weakness in his lungs from sailing, is afraid he might not have the strength to get to claim her, although he has fallen in love with her. Taneauta agrees to kill the guard dogs and in the darkness pretend to be Wi. The next day Rongomai proudly accedes that the warrior Wi has won her heart and Taneatua and Te Whai also marry but as time passes, Rongomai cannot understand why Wi does not live up to the prowess of their first night

together. Eventually the deception is exposed after the men return from World War 1 and Rongomai like her predecessor Hjordis, creates murderous havoc (Kouka, 1994).

The final author whom I will discuss as having awakened the ghost of Sigurd the Volsung, did so in the environs of Eketahuna where she located several of her books. Yvonne du Fresne, of Danish and French Huguenot descent, claimed in an interview shortly before she died, 'It was my Father who was the greatest influence on me. He was the most skilled storyteller I've ever heard; he had the gift of storytelling from Jutland, in Denmark, where storytellers grow on every bush' (du Fresne Y. , 2011). Her first collection of short stories *Farvel and other stories* (1980) won the PEN Best First Book Award and was read over the radio as *Astrid of the Limberlost*. Her second collection, *The growing of Astrid Westergaard and other stories*, (1985), is about the same young girl of Scandinavian origin growing up in the period between the wars in a small central North Island settlement, and makes reference to the habits of family evenings of storytelling, alluding to many mythical elements from her family's homeland, to work in the colonial experience of her parents and grandparents. For example, *The woman from Norway*, (pp 46-49) compares a woman playing a harp to a Skjald, or Mediaeval bardic storyteller. The Hans Christian Andersen story 'Elfinmount' is also cited, (p.47) in which;

The Elf King was expecting important guests, the old Troll King of Norway, and his sons, mermaids, the Hell Hounds and the Night Raven. Two of Elf King's daughters were to marry sons of the troll king. The sons were awful; they tickled the daughters who were their dinner partners, with pine cones, from their pockets, then they took off their shirts and lay down on the table to sleep, for as they said, they didn't stand on ceremony (Andersen, 2011).

Each of the stories links to the same small community and family where the visit of an outsider is a major event and each character can take on mythic qualities. In *The Loffers*, Onkel Sven turned himself into 'the One Eye'd traveller, the Beggar at the door, the Walker of the Night' (p 31). There is a poster of the Snow Queen, another Hans Christian Andersen figure, behind the kitchen door in the family home (p 136), and references to the Norns, the three fate-tellers (p 56), who, like the Greek Fates are the demi-goddesses of each person's destiny. My favourite story is about the routine for NZ primary schools from the 1940s, the *Morning Talk*, where Astrid stands up to explain to her class about the meaning of mid-winter in Norse mythology, but ends up becoming the mouthpiece of the gods herself and offers an unbroken 'fortaelling' (prophecy) – about Ragnarok, the end of the world, frightening all the other children, the teacher and herself:

When Toddyfarvid strikes his harp, the wolf children of Ferris break forth to hunt the sun and moon and Garn the Hound of Hell leaps over the earth. Nidhagger gnaws through the last root of Ysdraggil and Jormuryan the serpent that circles the void turns itself so that a wave sweeps over the earth. Sleipner bears Odin to his last battle. The sky is split by a flaming sword. Ragnarok is upon us! (p. 97-98).

In these stories, as well as asserting a voice that was not British, or 'Kiwi' or even male, as opposed to the dominant New Zealand writers of her time (such as James K. Baxter, Alistair Campbell, Barry Crump, Frank Sargeson), du Fresne takes up the challenge of representing a new colonial perspective, an additional view of identity, nationality and nationhood beyond the accepted stereotypes (Holden-Ronning, 2010).

A later story makes the links between voyagers across time and seas even more explicit. In *My Bedstmoder (My grandmother)* Astrid travels with her grandmother to Eastbourne on the

Wellington Harbour for a holiday and her grandmother gets a particular look in her eye and recalls the trip to New Zealand, “The ship, our ship, that beautiful ship we came in. My brothers, my sisters, my father my mother. We have Danes and Norwegians and Germans and Poles in that ship, the *Terpsichore*” (p 99).

One further story resonates with the vigour of saga. By incorporating the conversation between two small Danish girls and a young Maori girl who is their school friend, du Fresne links together elements of Maori and Scandinavian mythology, while excluding any British perspective. In *The Mound*, Anna Friis, Astrid’s friend shows her where the dead were commemorated in the school hall in the roll of valour, ‘Where the warriors of England and of New Zealand were hailed. “It was a sad Valhalla”’(p 36). The school hall was also adorned with prints of early New Zealand paintings.

The greatest picture was of the Maori people, falling across the shores of New Zealand, ribs showing, eyes staring, mouths open A little sail in their canoe was in tatters. Some of them were already on the beach, heads down, digging for pipis and no wonder. They must have paddled all the way. ‘This is the most wonderful land for dying’ Astrid told Anna Friis mournfully (p 37).

The girls continue their conversation and Anna takes Astrid outside to show her a large mound in a paddock near the school and discuss how long ago other seafarers had come in long ships like their dragon ships; “And in her eyes I slowly recognised the blind gaze of the sea travellers, the Viking Men. Our ...people had those eyes...when they remembered other days” (p.39).

Just as Anna Friis is explaining that the mound could hold the burial site of Viking lords, with their ships and treasures, they are spotted by Rangi Katene, a tall silent Maori girl from Standard Six who identifies a prior claim to the mound for her people, as a *pa* (a Maori hilltop settlement) site. Remembering the painting of Maori migration in the school hall and their shared histories, ‘There they stood together, Rangi Katene, Anna Friis and Astrid Westergaard; the people who had ridden the endless sea, in ships with prows like dragons’ (p 40).

Finally, in *A walk by the sea*, du Fresne unites the recent voyages of Viking and historic migration of Maori to come to this land Aotearoa through an image of inhabitation;

My house, like Rangi’s reaches its roots down into the heart of this land. Our roots are the same. We have our people, living and dead, around us forever. Canoe, Viking ship, foam-necked, set out together on the last journey south over the sea-roads to world’s end (p136).

## **Conclusion**

The dominance of the sea, voyaging, exile and belonging are themes which link these small examples with each other and the literature of the Scandinavians. Although largely overlooked as inspiration for New Zealand writers in literary forms and contexts, sagas and Norse mythology have had regular hauntings in popular music (there was a heavy metal New Zealand band called *Ragnarok* in the 1970s, which still has a following) and, more recently, a popular television series called the *Almighty Johnsons* achieved a three season run, as a comedy-drama series about four brothers who just happen to be descended from Norse Gods. “Each of the Johnson boys has his own God-like power; it’s just that their powers aren’t all that powerful” (TV 3 NZ, 2015). But in all it is the spirit rather than the ghost of Sigurd which has been retained by his hardy descendants in the antipodes. Their resilience and refusal to give in, against huge odds of survival, and their willingness to work hard for little return in order to gain the *Valhalla* (heroes’ reward) of a little land for themselves and their families are hard to

fathom, without an awareness of the historical circumstances and their original poverty and desperation, to bring them in saga ships across the seas. As another descendent writes, 'On the first day they wept, on the second they started work. There could be no going back' (Flavell, 2014). Like heroes of saga on a quest, even Sigurd himself – once the voyage began there was no going back.

As a final observation, both New Zealand and Norway achieved political independence from Britain and Sweden respectively at the beginning of the twentieth century. The unofficial Norwegian national anthem, penned by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson is still sung today at public occasions. Written at the same time as William Morris was translating *Sigurd the Volsung* in 1868, it would have been known by the Vikings of the Victorian age, and might even have been sung in Eketahuna:

Norway, thine is our devotion,  
Land of hearth and home,  
Rising storm-scar'd from the ocean,  
Where the breakers foam.  
Oft to thee our thoughts are wending,  
Land that gave us birth,  
And to saga nights still sending  
Dreams upon our earth,  
And to saga nights still sending  
Dreams upon us on our earth.

(Payne, 1910)

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