

REVIEW ESSAY

The Society and Art of Early Icelanders: Two Recent Works by Jesse L. Byock

Jennifer Livesay
Indiana University

Jesse L. Byock. **Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. Pp. 276, 8 maps. \$10.95 paper.

Jesse L. Byock, trans. **The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. Pp. x + 145. \$8.95 paper, \$30 cloth.

With the publication of his translation of *Volsunga saga* and the paperback printing of his 1988 book *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*, Jesse L. Byock has given us two useful books priced to become popular as textbooks in a variety of courses in such areas as medieval history and literature, anthropology, and folklore.

In *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*, Byock continues the mission he set out on in his earlier book, *Feud in the Icelandic Sagas*, to understand "how feud worked in the society and in the literature" (1982). In the first book, Byock concentrated on the role of feud as a structuring principle in the literature. In *Medieval Iceland*, he focuses on the society, trying to explain the contradiction summed up by James Bryce, whom Byock quotes on the first page of his introduction: that medieval Iceland produced "a body of law so elaborate and complex that it is hard to believe that it existed among men whose chief occupation was to kill one another" (1988:1).

Byock is concerned with understanding how this body of law, and social order in general, developed in a society made up primarily of free,

land-owning farmers and lacking a centralized, executive branch of government. He borrows the concept of "cultural focus" from anthropology to explain the Icelanders' fascination with law and legal processes, and he sets out to explore "the course of legal and political decision making, especially from the tenth through the twelfth century, the formative period of the Old Icelandic Free State" (7-8). Here, as in his previous works, Byock is particularly interested in the complex relationship of interdependency between the farmers (*bændr*) and the chieftains (*goðar*), and how this relationship maintained its equilibrium for three centuries before it ultimately led to concentrating more and more power in the hands of fewer and fewer families in the mid-thirteenth century. Byock concentrates on this system in balance, although his study does suggest ways in which the ultimate disequilibrium was contained within the system from the outset. He further asserts that we need to understand how chieftains got their power, and what the relationship between chieftains and farmers was, in order to comprehend Icelandic social history, "how the different elements in Iceland's complex medieval society operated as a cohesive body politic" (12). The study of the sagas and the society, Byock argues, can be mutually illuminating.

A major difficulty that faces anyone seeking to study the social history of medieval Iceland is what kind of use, if any, to make of the Icelandic family sagas and *Sturlunga saga* as historical sources. Part of the controversy over this issue stems from how these sagas (the family sagas in particular) are viewed. The family sagas are narratives written in the thirteenth century describing events set primarily in the tenth; the *Sturlunga saga* is a collection of accounts written in the thirteenth century about more nearly contemporaneous events. Two major schools of thought have emerged over the past century concerning the origin and nature of the family sagas; their arguments are known as the freeprose-bookprose debate. The freeprose position maintained that these stories were more-or-less faithful accounts of tenth century events, preserved in the oral tradition until they were written down, starting at the end of the twelfth century. The bookprose side saw these stories as consciously crafted works, which grew out of both oral tradition and the influence of literature, and had more to do with the artistic devices of their twelfth and thirteenth century creators than with the real lives of their tenth century characters.

Byock argues for the origin of the sagas in an oral storytelling tradition, and in his previous book he drew on the Parry-Lord thesis and his own concept of "feudemes" (structuring elements based on the social practice of feud) to develop his theory of the grammar behind this storytelling tradition (1982). To Byock, the oral origin of the sagas is a vital prerequisite to viewing them as faithful reflections of their society, for, if

not factually true, such oral stories would nonetheless have to be credible, since he sees them functioning as a "literature of social instruction" for the medieval Icelanders (1988:36).

Related to this freeprose-bookprose debate is the question of the relative importance of continuity and change in the first four centuries of Iceland's history. Some hold that religious, climatic, and political events wrought extreme change on Icelandic society in the course of the thirteenth century, and the sagas represent a nostalgic and idealized look back at a vanished way of life. Byock argues that continuity was more important than change in medieval Iceland, and that the changes that did take place were "evolutionary rather than revolutionary" (72). Thus, according to Byock, much of the "social instruction" of the oral sagas would still be valid when the sagas were written down.

A problem with this debate and Byock's discussion of it is that most folklorists and literary scholars have moved beyond the questions that motivated the freeprose-bookprose debate, and no longer assume that an oral narrative tradition is any less reflexive or more *true* than a written one. Thus, Byock's devotion of nearly half of Chapter Three to a discussion of this debate seems somewhat anachronistic and not particularly useful to the main thread of his argument throughout the book. Nonetheless, his discussion of this debate will be appreciated by beginning students of the Icelandic sagas. Folklorists, too, will be interested in his discussion of the relationship between the bookprose argument and Icelandic nationalism, perhaps even wishing he had devoted more space to it.

A major shortcoming of this book is that Byock never clearly identifies the audience to whom it is addressed. In certain areas it is too basic for the specialist (who will be irritated by many of the footnotes describing items which are of common knowledge to anyone who has taken an introductory course on the sagas, and who will want more documentation of some of Byock's claims), yet it assumes a familiarity with the sagas which may confuse a beginner. One detail (admittedly a picky one) exemplifies Byock's lack of a clearly defined audience: his compromise on orthography—"for the convenience of readers unfamiliar with these characters" (xi)—which changes the þ (thorn) to *th* while retaining the ð (eth), the nominative endings, and long and short vowels. This gives us hybrid words such as "*fjórðungathing*" (66), likely to be equally distracting to the reader and nonreader of Old Norse. I would have preferred Byock to have chosen either an Anglicized orthography or an Old or Modern Icelandic one, and to have used it consistently.

In spite of these reservations, I found *Medieval Iceland* to be a very readable book which would be a valuable and accessible source of

information for the beginner, and which coherently presents a controversial argument that will be of interest to the specialist.

Byock's study bears comparison with another recent work in English on law and social order in medieval Icelandic society, Miller's *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* (1990) (reviewed in *Folklore Forum* vol. 23). Although the general area of focus for both authors is similar, these are two very different studies. Miller, in the first place, has fewer qualms about using sagas as historical sources, and in spite of his caveat that "the reliability of the family sagas as accurate chronicles is not seriously maintained" (1990:44), he revels in the detail of everyday life and legal processes described in the family sagas. In some ways, Miller's use of the sagas as social history resources is more problematic than Byock's because it is based to a greater extent on saga details. Miller, however, gives us a more thorough justification of his decision to use each type of detail from each type of literary source he does draw on; he seems much less ambivalent, and hence more consistent, about using the sagas in this manner. His study also pays somewhat more attention to the role of women in medieval Icelandic society than does Byock's. Miller's study, based on an assumption that both family sagas and Sturlunga saga reflected social practices of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, does not contain the element of diachronic change included by Byock, who contends the sagas are a more-or-less faithful reflection of tenth century society. The most important difference between the two books, however, is a difference of focus. Miller comes at the study of medieval Iceland from a background in law, and Byock from a background in Icelandic literature. Thus, while Miller's book is richly detailed and perhaps the more useful for students of law and social history, as well as the specialist in Old Norse-Icelandic studies, the general reader or student in an introductory course on Icelandic sagas risks getting bogged down in all this detail. For such a reader I would recommend Byock's book.

I can more enthusiastically recommend Byock's translation of *Volsunga saga*, although my initial reaction to it was "Why do we need another English translation of this saga?" This marks the fifth time the saga has been translated into English, most recently by George K. Anderson in 1982. There are several reasons to recommend Byock's edition over the previous four, particularly for use in the classroom. In the first place, it is available in a compact, inexpensive paperback; none of the others is. Secondly, Byock includes material which will be helpful for students and leaves out material less likely to be. He omits, for example, extended translation of any of the Eddas or other related literature. Most of the other editions contain related sagas (Schlauch), major portions of the Elder Edda (Morris

and Magnusson) or the Prose Edda (Anderson), or a version of the saga in Old Norse (Finch).

Byock does include an introduction that provides information on the historic background to the *Volsung* story, cognates to the saga (notably *Nibelungenlied*) and representations of the story in carvings from the Viking period, and a brief study of the use that Wagner made of the saga in writing his *Ring of the Nibelung*. His section on "History and Legend" is the longest segment of his introduction, and probably the most useful for students. His endnotes provide additional information and discuss ambiguous passages without interrupting the flow of the narrative. In this book, Byock has chosen consistently to anglicize names and terms and use the forms of names most familiar to readers of English, which also assists in making the narrative flow smoothly.

Byock includes a list of "Eddic Poems Used By the Saga Author," which, as Kennedy has pointed out, is of limited value since Byock does not discuss "the specific debts of sections of the saga to stanzas of the poems" (Kennedy 1991:540), nor does he include a bibliography for further research into these connections. His glossary will be helpful for beginning students struggling to keep characters straight, but of less value to more advanced students.

The translation itself makes for good reading; it is for the most part given in clear, contemporary English with few archaisms and no major inaccuracies. As to whether it is an improvement over earlier translations, I will quote one passage as several translators have handled it, beginning with Byock, and let the reader decide.

He did not lose his composure and bit into the wolf's tongue. She jerked and pulled back hard, thrusting her feet against the trunk so that it split apart. But Sigmund held on so tightly that the wolf's tongue was torn out by the roots, and that was her death. (Byock:41-42)

No fear he had thereof, but caught the she-wolf's tongue betwixt his teeth, and so hard she started back thereat, and pulled herself away so mightily, setting her feet against the stocks, that all was riven asunder; but he ever held so fast that the tongue came away by the roots, and thereof she had her bane. (Magnússon and Morris:14)

Sigmund took no fright, but bit hard on the tongue of the wolf. She started and pulled, and thrust her feet on the stock so that it clove all asunder; but he held so fast that the tongue was torn out of her by the roots, and of this she had her death. (Schlauch:55)

Sigmund did not let his courage fail him; rather he bit back on the she-wolf's tongue. She started back, pulling hard and bracing herself with her feet

against the stock. But then the tongue of that she-wolf came out by the roots, and from that she got her death. (Anderson:62)

References Cited

- Anderson, George K., trans. 1982. *The Saga of the Volsungs*. East Brunswick, N.J.: Associated University Presses.
- Byock, Jesse L. 1982. *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1990. *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- , trans. 1990. *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gay, David E. 1990. Review of *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Miller). *Folklore Forum* 23 (1/2):129-130.
- Kennedy, John. 1991. Review of *The Saga of the Volsungs* (Byock). *Scandinavian Studies* 63:539-540.
- Magnússon, Eiríkr and William Morris, trans. 1980. *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs*. London: George Prior Publishers.
- Miller, William Ian. 1990. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schlauch, Margaret, trans. 1930. *The Saga of the Volsungs*. New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation.