

**Carole Cusack**

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**Supervisor:** Professor Eric J. Sharpe

## Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: The Role of Religion in Viking Society .....	7
Chapter Two: Research Undertaken Outside England.....	17
Chapter Three: Anglo-Saxon Studies.....	30
Chapter Four: Viking Studies in England.....	39
Chapter Five: William Morris and the Viking Age.....	54
Chapter Six: Aryanism, The Vikings and Racial Discrimination .....	69
Conclusion .....	77
Bibliography .....	80

## Introduction

It is often the case with scholarly works that they tell the reader as much about the society which produced the scholar, as about the society being studied. This is, perhaps, inevitable; to approach a subject completely free from prejudices, and from almost unconscious preconceptions, is difficult to say the least. But it should not be assumed that the author always seeks to be unbiased; the past can be used to illuminate, or even legitimate, the present, through deliberate manipulation of data.

This thesis concerns the (more or less) systematic rehabilitation of the Viking Period, which was undertaken by a collection of poets and philologists, scholars and amateurs, from the latter half of the eighteenth century through the Victorian Era into the twentieth century. The reasons underlying their efforts were, in both the broad and the narrow sense, political. For example, William Morris was a Socialist, and he employed his knowledge of pre-Christian Scandinavian society in the development of a Socialist Utopia. Similarly, William Stubbs was an authority on the Anglo-Saxon legal system, and this enabled him to convincingly argue for the Germanic origin of the English democratic institutions. The works discussed range from crude propaganda to painstakingly accurate translations, and as such there are varying levels of subtlety in their ideological messages.

It is not unreasonable to inquire whether such a study is relevant: when placed in the context of world history, the period known as the Viking Age, covering from the mid-eighth to the mid-eleventh centuries CE<sup>1</sup> appears both brief, and without appeal for modern society. Many factors contribute to this impression: culture, for the Western world, has historically meant “Classical culture”, the heritage of ancient Greece and Rome, in art, politics, law and philosophy. Since the Renaissance, the European system of education has (in the main) proceeded according to the principles of Classicism. Latin and Greek are still taught in all academically respectable boys’ schools; Medieval history is still neglected until the tertiary level of education, being pushed aside in favour of the history of Greece and Rome.

Northern culture is available for study only in very few British (or British derived) curricula, usually in the fields of archaeology, Religious Studies, and Early English

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<sup>1</sup> E. V. Gordon, *Introduction to Old Norse*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1957, p. Xviii.

Literature and Language. This means that Viking history, culture, religion and language are not widely studied, even among “educated” people. This contributes to the suspicion lurking in many minds, that there is really nothing of value to be gained from such a study. The ancient Norsemen are still popularly believed to have done nothing of a constructive nature, having spent their time raping and plundering, gratuitously destroying the achievements of more civilised nations.

This picture of the Vikings has been popularly accepted for many years: George Stephens, in the 1880’s, reflected that his contemporaries were generally convinced that:

they (the Vikings) were no better than all other buccaneers and pirates and daredevils elsewhere....the Vikings were the scourge of God, an intolerable plague and calamity, bloody barbarians, sparing neither age nor sex, mainsworn oath-breakers of their own holiest heathen oaths, living only for plunder and desolation, till at last they seized lands instead of harrying them.<sup>2</sup>

It was against this stereotype that the rehabilitators of the Vikings battled; the North was not entirely unknown to English scholars, or to German and Scandinavian scholars. Works about the history and folklore of Germany and Scandinavia had been produced in those countries from the mid-seventeenth century, and valuable research on Northern subjects commenced in England in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The main problem was that the North was viewed as being of interest to the eccentric, or the enthusiast; the proper field for the scholar was Classics.

Yet the Germanic people were, undeniably, the direct ancestors of many of the Northern European political entities, so it appeared that the people of those countries had:

largely neglected....the mythology of (their) own forebears, the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings who settled in the British Isles and worshipped their gods there before Christianity came.<sup>3</sup>

Despite general apathy, and the misleading popular image of the Vikings, the nineteenth century saw a flowering of interest in Northern mythology, Anglo-Saxon history and other related topics. As common sense would suggest, the increased interest was not entirely due to the innate virtues of the subject.

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<sup>2</sup> G. Stephens, *Professor S. Bugge’s “Studies on Northern Mythology” Shortly Examined*, Edinburgh, 1883, p. 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, Harmondsworth, 1964, p. 10.

Many of the authors involved had a particular theory to support, or ideology to justify, and their works were coloured accordingly. Numerous works written by Germans were concerned with providing Germany (which was at the time a collection of some thirty independent and unsettled states) with a unified history and a national memory. To achieve the latter, they emphasised the universality (among the Teutonic races) of the Germanic/Scandinavian mythology, and the immense importance of the epic poem *Nibelungenlied* (which tells in essence the same story as the Icelandic *Volsunga Saga*) as their national epic. This was part of a cultural unification of Germany, which assisted the political unification completed under Bismarck, by encouraging the people to think of themselves as a racial and historical whole.

The English, naturally, had other purposes for the Northern material. Several broad themes were pursued, including the Anglo-Saxon influence on the modern British Parliament, the Scandinavian contribution to English democratic institutions, and the example of Medieval Iceland as a co-operative, agricultural society, a template for nineteenth century socialist projects.

Another area of interest was tracing the history of the Aryans or Indo-Europeans, a study which often had curious results. The Germanic peoples were one branch of the Indo-European family, and it was accepted that:

before the Germans and Goths parted from the many other tribes who, like themselves, had come into Europe from one common home in Asia, they had also had one common language, for they were all of one race, which we call Aryan, from Arya or Iran, the old name of Persia, and sometimes Indo-European....Nearly all the present nations of Europe and some of the people of Asia are descended from the Aryan Stock, and, in times so long past that there is no certain record of their date, our common forefathers lived together in their Asiatic valley – homes beyond the Black Sea, and spoke a language which was perhaps more like the present Indian written language, Sanskrit, than any other that we know of. But when these Aryan races began to wander westward in search of new homes and came into Europe, they separated into different nations, and by degrees came to speak different dialects, until at last distinct languages were formed among them, which varied so much from one another, that it requires great learning to be able to trace them back to one common tongue.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> E. C. Otté, *Scandinavian History*, London, 1874, p. 13-14.

Originally, the Aryan theory was merely one of origins, to trace the ancestry of certain of the modern nations. Various aspects of the Aryan question were fixated upon by interested parties, and efforts were made to prove that any one of half-a-dozen places was the true Aryan homeland. Later the Aryan theory became attached to claims of racial superiority, when assertions were made to the effect that the Germanic race was the only Indo-European tribe to have remained pure and untainted. It was then claimed that the Aryans were superior (ie. conquerors) and the Germans were the only true Aryans left, which eventually led to the notion of a race of supermen, which was to be so successfully exploited by Adolf Hitler during the years of the Third Reich.

This thesis is written under the auspices of Religious Studies, and despite the importance of the political motivations of the authors involved, the culture and religion of the Vikings are of vital importance to the arguments presented in the following pages.

When seeking information about the Vikings there are two main sources, texts and archaeological evidence. Of the texts which contain pre-Christian material, a good number are mythological, but most of what is known about the practice of Viking religion is culled from archaeology. The sagas, some of which have fictional elements, give only faint indications as to the religious life of the people, and retell very little mythology. However, the everyday life of the Old Northmen is delineated with great accuracy. Their legal system, marital customs, crafts and skills, as well as the private affairs of the protagonists, are presented vividly.

Chapter One will attempt to establish a connection between the values advocated by the mythological material (chiefly the *Prose Edda*) and the lifestyle pursued by the Vikings. Despite the fact that “Vikings” lived in several countries (which include all the Scandinavian countries with the exception of Finland, which is racially different, and their colonies), one can speak of a uniformity of culture, in respect of mythology, and of political organisation. Except for Iceland, which was settled towards the end of the ninth century by Norwegian exiles who were disenchanted with the political developments in their homeland, all of the Scandinavian countries, and their colonies, were governed by a form of constitutional monarchy.

The Scandinavian kings:

like all other Teutonic kings, were anything but absolute rulers; the nation chose them and the nation could depose them; they could do no important act in peace or war without the national assent; yet still the king, as the king, was felt to hold a rank differing in kind from the rank held by the highest of his subjects.<sup>5</sup>

The king was the first among equals, a position which could be seen as the natural outcome of a world view which emphasised the inevitability of fate, and the personal responsibility of each man for his own immortality. What might be called “theological immortality”, an afterlife in Valhalla, was particularly limited. It was available only to the warriors who died bravely in battle, and were chosen by the Valkyries. This excluded the great majority of the population. But one could still obtain “mortal immortality”, for:

out of this negative background comes the noblest of Northern thoughts of death. Death is the greatest evil known to man, but yet it can be overcome. Live well and die bravely and your repute will live after you. Fate will decide the moment and manner of your death, but fate will not decide how you will face it. A brave death will be rewarded, not with pork and mead as in Valhöll, but with the esteem of your friends, kinsmen and even your enemies. They will tell how you lived and how you died.<sup>6</sup>

When modern Scandinavians, Germans and Englishmen began to relate their contemporary national institutions and racial characteristics to their Viking ancestors, they were claiming for themselves a share in that spirit of independence, that inflexible code of loyalty and honour, and the mythology of Ragnarök;

the awful consummation towards which all things incessantly tend; which the vigilance of the gods and the piety of men may, indeed, put off indefinitely, but cannot prevent. For Destiny, or Cause and Consequence, pressing inexorably upon gods and men, moves ever onward<sup>7</sup>

This does not mean that nineteenth century gentlemen believed in Odin and Thor; rather, the general drift of Northern mythology accorded well with an age where Christianity was declining because of its inability to satisfactorily answer challenges from science (for example, the debate concerning evolution) and economics (such as Marx’s analysis of

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<sup>5</sup> E. A. Freeman, *The Growth of the English Constitution: from the earliest times*, London, 1898, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, London, 1964, p. 274.

<sup>7</sup> “The Odin Religion”, *Westminster Review*, New Series 6, (July-Oct. 1854), pp. 311-344, p340.

society and history, in which the sense of inevitability squares quite closely with Ragnarök).

Many of the men who espoused the Northern Renaissance were not Christians; indeed, William Morris, whose work is the single most significant contribution from England, announced for all and sundry to hear, “In religion, I am a pagan”.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously it was impossible to recreate the world of the ancient Northmen, but by using Viking Society as a yardstick, many scholars came to a clearer appreciation of their own historical context. It is unfortunately true that some of their efforts led to racial discrimination, and even to genocide; during the 1930’ and 40’s:

the Nazis tried to revive the myths of ancient Germany in their ideology, but such an attempt could only lead to sterility and moral suicide<sup>9</sup>

This does not devalue the study of Northern culture; Nazi Germany is not the inevitable result of delving into the pagan North. It is basically true to say that the lessons to be learned from Scandinavian mythology are much the same as those gleaned from Classical lore; but there are advantages in studying the former. The field is relatively young, and as such the material is fresh, and there are still new discoveries to be made. Also there is the opportunity to appreciate a more popular approach, because Northern culture is not bound up with the aristocratic idea of a “Classical education”.

The history and mythology of the North are as innately worthy of attention as those of the South; and the insights and theories of nineteenth century research into the Vikings remain interesting and inspirational to the Australian student of the 1980’s. Australia shares the democratic institutions of England, and (although reduced somewhat by immigration) has a large Anglo-Saxon population. It is now possible to have more accurate knowledge of the North, due to increasing sophistication of archaeology, and more accurate translations of the necessary texts; but for enthusiasm it would be difficult to match the scholars and dilettantes of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>8</sup> W. Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art and Lectures on Art and Industry*, edited by May Morris, Volume XXII in “The Collected Works of William Morris”, London, 1915, p. xxxi.

<sup>9</sup> H. R. Ellis Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 9.



## Chapter One: The Role of Religion in Viking Society

The *Poetic Edda* (also called *Elder* or *Sæmund's Edda*) is a collection of mythological and heroic poems which became available for study in 1643, when Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson discovered the thirteenth-century parchment which is now called the *Codex Regius*. It was some time, however, before anyone did attempt such a study. The authority of Classical texts was felt even in the far North; Snorri Sturluson, when he authored the *Prose Edda* in the early thirteenth century, traced the origin of the Norse gods back to the heroes of the Trojan War. Snorri knew the myths and legends well, and retold them with wit and liveliness, but he did not estimate their religious value very highly. His book was written as a manual for young poets who, having been educated in the new Christian learning, were in danger of forgetting the older poetic techniques; so Snorri approached the mythology “primarily as a literary artist, not an anthropologist or a religious historian”<sup>10</sup>

From readings of the *Poetic Edda*, the retellings of Snorri's *Edda*, and the collection of family histories called *Sagas*, much can be deduced concerning the lifestyle of the Vikings, and the place of religion in their social organisation.

It is not particularly relevant to engage in arguments about whether the social organisation of Asgard was developed to legitimate a pre-existing social order, or whether the mythology preceded the earthly society. It is sufficient to note the parallels between the society of the gods, and the society of men; and it is quite reasonable to assert that such parallels are not coincidental.

The Eddic poem *Rígsthula* explains the social structure of Viking society as the outcome of the god Heimdall sojourning on earth. Heimdall, calling himself Ríg, visits in turn Great-Grandmother and Great-Grandfather, Grandmother and Grandfather, and Mother and Father; and each household is blessed with the birth of a son.

The home of Great-Grandmother and Great-Grandfather is rude and rustic, and their diet is coarse but satisfying:

Then took Edda a thick loaf heavy  
of bread hard-baked      and full of bran;  
a bowl then bore      on the board Edda,

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<sup>10</sup> H. R. Ellis Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

filled with the broth of boiled calf-meat.<sup>11</sup>

The child Edda bears is the eponymous ancestor of the Thralls, the servile class of Northern society. The poem stresses the ugliness of Thrall, and his ability to labour;

Great-Grandmother bore a swarthy boy;  
with water they sprinkled him, and called him Thrall.  
Forthwith he grew and well he throve,  
But rough were his hands with wrinkled skin,  
With knuckles knotty and fingers thick;  
His face was ugly, his back was humpy,  
His heels were long.<sup>12</sup>

When Thrall is grown he marries a woman called Drudge, as lacking in personal attractiveness as himself, and they spend their life in hard physical labour. They have a brood of strong children, virtually all of which have pejorative names (for example Stumpy, Stinker, Swarthy, Slatern, Serving Maid and Cinder Wench) who join their parents in herding animals, fertilising fields and digging peat. The thrall was particularly important in Viking society. A large percentage of the upper-class men were away for the summer months, whether trading or pirating, leaving their wives in charge of their homesteads.

Most of the labouring on these farms was performed by thralls. The approximate meaning of “thrall” is serf, or slave; and the thralls were a class with no legal existence. They could be bought and sold, had no access to licit marriage, and thus had only illegitimate children over which they had no legal control or authority. Thralls spent their lives doing the hardest and least savoury of tasks, and could be killed without fear of legal sanctions.

The plethora of references to the swarthiness of the thralls’ skins have given rise to speculation about their racial origin. It has been argued that if the thralls were dark-haired, dark-eyed and dark-skinned, they could not possibly be Indo-European. It is true that some members of the slave class of Viking Scandinavia would have been descended from the indigenous population which had been conquered by the migrating Aryans; other thralls

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<sup>11</sup> L. Hollander, *The Poetic Edda: translated with an Introduction and explanatory notes*, second edition, Austin, 1962, p. 121, paragraph 4.

<sup>12</sup> O. Bray, *The Elder or Poetic Edda*, volume 1, “The Mythological Poems”, London, 1908, p. 205, paragraph 6. Hollander’s translation runs: “Gave Edda birth to a boy child then, (in clouts she swathed) the swarthy skinned one. Thrall they called him, and cast on water (dark was his hair and dull his eyes).” And so on. L. Hollander, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

were hostages captured in war and on raids, and were therefore likely to have been non-Teutonic (but not necessarily non-Indo-European). We have no way of knowing whether the “darkness” assigned to the thralls was a widespread characteristic. It may merely have been a literary device; if fairness was considered aesthetically pleasing by the aristocracy, then naturally the despised people at the bottom of the social ladder would be depicted lacking that attribute.

Ríg’s second stop is at the house of Grandmother and Grandfather. Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother were unskilled labourers; these people are skilled in crafts and trades:

A weaver’s beam out of wood he shaped –  
his beard was brushed, and banged, his hair –  
in kirtle tight-fitting; were planks on the floor.  
The good wife sate and swayed her distaff,  
Braided her yarn to use for weaving,  
With a snood on her head and a smock on her breast,  
On her neck, a kerchief, and clasps on her shoulders.  
Afi and Amma owned that house.<sup>13</sup>

The staple class of Viking society was that of the free peasants, or yeomanry. The singular term was “*karl*”, the plural “*karlar*”. The economy of medieval Scandinavia consisted of fishing, hunting and farming. Trade took place, both internally and externally, but the majority of the middle class were on the land.

The child born to Grandmother and Grandfather differs greatly from the first child, Thrall:

A child had Grandmother, Churl they called him,  
and sprinkled with water and swathed in linen,  
rosy and ruddy, with sparkling eyes.  
He grew and throve, and forthwith ‘gan he  
to break in oxen, to shape the harrow,  
to build him houses and barns to raise him,  
to fashion carts and follow the plough.<sup>14</sup>

Churl (or Karl) is married to a woman called Daughter-in-law, and the names of their children include Husbandman, Crofter, Smith, Bride and Dame.<sup>15</sup> As the names indicate,

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<sup>13</sup> L. Hollander, op. cit., p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> O. Bray, op. cit., p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> L. Hollander, op. cit., p. 124.

the *karlar* are mainly occupied on the land, although some of them take up crafts or trades, such as blacksmithing.

The social status of the free peasant farmer varied a little in the different Scandinavian countries. In Norway

there is the 'lineage born householder' (*ár-or ætt-borinn bóndi*), the freeborn head of an independent establishment not on inherited land, and the *hauldr*, who is *óðalsbóndi*, the free farmer on inalienable ancestral land. The distinction between these two is made explicit in the scale of atonement values; the *hauldr* is worth double the ordinary freeborn farmer.<sup>16</sup>

This distinction, however, was not recognised outside of Norway. The *Rígsthula* describes the *karlar* as "ruddy", or red-haired and of high complexion. The god who specifically protects the peasantry is similarly described; Thor, son of Odin. He fights the *jotuns* with his hammer, Mjölnir, and thus keeps back the ice of winter, enabling the crofters to farm successfully.

A member of the yeoman class had a full legal existence, and was fundamentally distinguished from members of the *jarlar* (class of earls) only by the price of his wergild, the money owing as compensation for a man's death.

The last of Ríg's earthly children is the progenitor of the upper class, Jarl (Earl). His parents, Mother and Father, live an elegant and leisurely life. When Ríg enters their house, father is fashioning a bow and arrows, signifying that he is a warrior; and Mother sits:

smoothing her linen, stretching her sleeves.  
A high-peaked coif and a breast-brooch wore she,  
trailing robes and a blue-tinged sark.  
Her brow was brighter, her breast was fairer,  
Her throat was whiter than any driven snow.<sup>17</sup>

Mother and Father live in a comfortable home, and eat of the very choicest foods; the poem mentions that they have wine with their meal, and wine in the Viking Era was a rare and expensive beverage, which had to be imported.

Mother's child is christened Jarl, and is fair of skin and hair, and wrapped in silk. When he is grown, he learns all the skills of the warrior; to throw spears, to shoot arrows, to

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<sup>16</sup> P. G. Foote and D. M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement: the society and culture of early Medieval Scandinavia*, London, 1970, pp. 84-85.

<sup>17</sup> O. Bray, op. cit., p. 211.

wield a sword and hunt with hounds. Of all the children born of Ríg's journey on Earth, Jarl alone is nurtured by Ríg; for he returns when Jarl is grown:

Came Ríg walking, and taught him runes;  
his own name gave him as heir and son,  
bade him make his own the udal lands,  
the udal lands and olden manors.<sup>18</sup>

Jarl is the acknowledged son of a god, and the youngest of Jarl's children, Kon, becomes the first king of the newly created society. Runes, the alphabet which was used by the Northmen only for religious inscriptions, are known only to the upper class, and a special knowledge of these runes contributes to Kon's power, enabling him to rule the other *jarlar*.

The relationship between the social structure described in the *Rígsthula* and the reality of life in Viking society is easily established. The dilemma which besets this chapter is that with which Emile Durkheim wrestled in his analysis of the relationship between religion and society. Is the society a product of the religious beliefs, or is the religion developed to suit the pre-existing society? It is, of course, likeliest that the *Rígsthula* was composed to assist in the legitimisation of an existing social order. However, this does not entirely discredit the claim that the political and social institution, and the religious sentiments of the Norsemen are interdependent expressions of the same human spirit.

There are further parallels between the activities of the Norse gods and the lifestyle of their adherents. The *Hávamál*, another of the poems contained in the *Poetic Edda*, is a collection of pieces of good advice, much in the style of the Biblical Wisdom literature. The title is translated as "The sayings of the High One", the High One being Odin, ruler of the *Æsir*, the tribe/family of the Norse gods. The poem falls into several sections, ranging from practical and everyday suggestions, to the obscure and magnificent "Rune Poem", beginning at stanza 138.

Many of the values of the society are enunciated by Odin; he encourages loyalty in friendships, counsels against adultery, and values a philosophical acceptance of death:

If faithful friend thou hast found for thee  
then fare thou to find him full oft;  
overgrown is soon with tall grass and bush  
the trail which is trod by no-one<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> L. Hollander, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

Beware lest the wedded wife of a man  
Thou lure to love with thee.<sup>20</sup>

Cattle die and kinsmen die,  
Thyself eke soon will die;  
But fair fame will fade never,  
I ween, for him who wins it.<sup>21</sup>

These and other concerns are emphasised in both the lives of the Norsemen, and in their mythology.

The Æsir are not immortal, and the unfolding mythology of the North is a story of how oaths were made and broken; and Odin (with his ability to see into the future) watches the cosmos hurtling toward Ragnarök, unable to prevent disaster because of the corruption which has gnawed at the system from within.

In the early days when the world began, Odin, the wisest of the Æsir, entered into a blood-brotherhood with Loki, a *jotun*. Loki was beautiful and quick-witted, unlike most of his palpably evil race. Odin was deceived by Loki's exterior; actually he was possessed of an almost limitless capacity for evil, and after those first idyllic days, he turned his talents to the destruction of the present order. The *Lokasenna* sees Loki reminiscing:

Mindest thou, O Odin, how we twain of old  
like brothers mingled our blood?  
Then saidst thou that never was ale-cup sweet  
Unless 'twere borne to us both.<sup>22</sup>

Although Loki was evil, Odin swore an oath to him, and his subsequent withdrawal of friendship from Loki hastens the approach of Ragnarök. Other oath-breakings happened; the Æsir tricked Fenris-wolf (one of the monstrous children of Loki and the ogress Angrboða) into imprisonment. Tyr, god of war, placed his right hand between the wolf's jaws as a pledge of the gods' good faith, but the cord was enchanted, the wolf was cheated, and Tyr lost his hand.

Thus, through mythology, the dire consequences of oath-breaking were impressed upon the medieval Scandinavians, and

great stress was laid upon the sanctity of the oath, which, like a vow, was considered most binding. No other literature points out so clearly and so often the sacredness of an oath and the loathing in which oath-breakers were

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> O. Bray, op. cit., p. 249.

held....No-one could absolve a man for breaking his oath, no matter how great might have been the splendour of his achievements. The higher born the man was, the more did he consider himself bound to keep his oath.<sup>23</sup>

Loyalty counted for a great deal among the Æsir. When an insult is done to a god, or goddess, there is a concerted effort to redeem the person in question, and to punish the offender. When Iðunn, keeper of the golden apples of youth, is abducted by the *jotun* Thjazi, even Loki forgets his quarrel with the gods in order to rescue her. Thjazi is killed in the course of this rescue, and the gods offer his daughter Skaði a place among their own number, and a husband of her choice from their ranks, as compensation for the loss of her father.

Such were the rules operating in human society also. Every individual belonged to at least two groups which commanded his or her loyalty; the family, and the entourage of the local leader. The legal system provided that when a person was killed, the person or persons responsible should pay compensation (*wergild*) to the deceased's relatives. Unfortunately, relatives often preferred to avenge their dead kinsman, rather than tamely accept payment in money or in kind.

Revenge played a conspicuous part in the daily life of the Norsemen, and it was the duty of the nearest relative to avenge the death of a kinsman. This duty first belonged to the brother of the deceased, and, if he had no brother, to his next of kin. Relatives as far as the fourth degree were obliged, if there was no-one nearer, to undertake the duty. If the relative could not find the murderer, his revenge fell upon the innocent kinsmen, or upon the servants of the latter.<sup>24</sup>

There are also definite parallels between the roles played by women in Viking culture, and the roles played by the goddesses in the affairs of Asgard. The female deities rarely take the lead in any of the mythological stories, but they do perform a wide variety of supporting functions. Skaði journeys from Jotunheim to Asgard to exact payment for the death of her father; Gefjon and Frigg share with Odin the ability to see into the future;<sup>25</sup> the Valkyries, warlike maidens attendant upon Odin, go onto the battlefields and choose those of the slain who are to enjoy eternal life in Valhalla; Freyja herself takes charge of half of

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<sup>23</sup> P. B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, vol. 1, London, 1889, p. 553.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 584.

<sup>25</sup> O. Bray, *op. cit.*, pp. 253, 257. *Lokasenna* paragraph 21 refers to Gefjon and paragraph 29 to Frigg's ability to see the future.

the chosen slain in her own palace; and the three Norns, who are not of the Æsir, but infinitely older, control the fate of every human and every god in the world.

Mortal women, it must be owned, were not genuinely the equals of men, legally or socially; for the Viking world was essentially a warrior's world, with the male viewpoint predominating

but there is also much evidence to show that in general they (women) were respected and might have much personal freedom. This was probably more so in pagan than in Christian times, and it was likely to be more marked in a new settlement like Iceland, and in Viking colonies abroad, than in the settled farming society at home.<sup>26</sup>

Stories told in the *Sagas* remind the reader of the goddesses of Asgard. Gudrun and Brynhild, the two central female characters in the *Volsunga Saga*, are as relentless and pitiless as Valkyries, exacting revenge for insults done to their families. These are the qualities which made Icelandic literature heroic:

most of the sagas are tragedies, because a good death was the greatest triumph of heroic character, and only in defeat and death was all the hero's power of resistance called into play.<sup>27</sup>

The *Landnámabók* gives the particulars of the settlers who made their home in Iceland, after fleeing from the uncongenial political climate of Norway. A number of women are mentioned as landowners, the most influential of which appears to have been Aud the Deep Minded. Of her it is written

Aud took possession of the entire Dales district at the head of the fjord, between the Dogurdar and Skraumuhlaups Rivers. She made her home at Hvamm near Aurrida River estuary, at a place now called Audartoft. She used to say prayers at Kross Hills; she had crosses erected there, for she'd been baptised and was a devout Christian.<sup>28</sup>

This reminds one of the mythological tale of Gefjon, the goddess who desired some land for herself, and received a promise from a king that she could claim as her own as much land as she could plough in a day.

Gefjon raced to Jotunheim and bore four enormously strong sons which she turned into oxen, hitched them to her plough, and in a day's ploughing she had separated the

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<sup>26</sup> P. G. Foote and D. M. Wilson, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>27</sup> E. V. Gordon, op. cit., p. xxxi.



island of Sjælland (Zealand) from the mainland. Norse women were not frail and overprotected.

The Scandinavian climate, while pleasant in the summer, is harsh in the cold season; and the Viking women were used to the long absences of their husbands. They too were independent and spirited, capable of managing their own estates and administering their own fortunes. Women also played an important part in the popular, shamanic level of religion; they were often shamanesses and seeresses, and practised magic. In the myths it is Freyja, one of the Vanir hostages, who brings knowledge of magic to Asgard.

Viking religion did not encourage its adherents to place their trust in any particular god, but ultimately to rely on themselves. It is stressed that Odin himself, the king of the gods, is unreliable and an oath-breaker.<sup>29</sup> Also, the gods, while able to assist humans, are themselves not immortal, and have their own interests to protect. This emphasis on independence, and lack of palliative reassurance in Northern religious thought, no doubt influenced the political institutions which developed in Viking society.

The country was divided into areas, and in each area a local assembly was held, called a *thing*. The *thing* was both legislative and judicial, and people could bring their complaints and causes of action to be publicly debated and decided. From these decisions a corpus of common law was built up, and cases could be settled according to precedents. If one was dissatisfied with the ruling of the local thing, appeals could be made to higher authorities, culminating with the king himself.

Iceland, being settled later, and not having a monarchy, developed along slightly different lines. The settlers brought with them the traditions of Norway, but within a short time Iceland had outstripped her fellow Scandinavian countries, by becoming, essentially, a unified state.

in accordance with the Norse tradition, the national assembly in Iceland derived its name Althing from its function as a public forum for all free men in the country. Having found their national assembly, the citizens of Iceland became united by one code of laws. As a result of this, Iceland now attained the status of a unified state, even though it lacked an executive body. One notes,

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<sup>28</sup> H. Pálsson and P. Edwards, *The Book of Settlements (Landnámabók)*, University of Manitoba Press, 1972, p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> H. R. Ellis Davidson, op. cit., p. 50. "Balder's father has broken faith – it is unwise to trust him" (from *Ketils Saga Hængs*) and "I suspect indeed, that it is Odin who comes against us here, the foul and untrue" (from *Hrólfs Kraka Saga*).

however, that the Icelanders never referred to their society as a state; instead they spoke of ‘our laws’ (*vár lög*).<sup>30</sup>

When nineteenth century Englishmen, Germans and Scandinavians claimed the Viking as their ancestors, and traced the development of democratic institutions from the *things* of the Northmen and the *witenagemots* of the Anglo-Saxons; they were claiming a share in the spiritual ethos of the pre-Christian Scandinavians. This is not to say that there was a revival of Odin worship among the Victorian intelligentsia; although there was a movement away from the unquestioning acceptance of the truth of Biblical Christianity.

Charles Darwin and his evolutionist followers, with their theory of the origin of species; and the Socialist movement, with its insistence on man’s responsibility for his own destiny and the futility of relying on a supernatural solution for the world’s problems, are both symptomatic of, and contributions to, the change in attitudes towards religion and the accepted ways of life which took place for the duration of the nineteenth century. It can be argued that looking back to pagan Scandinavia as the land of one’s origins, and bypassing the Christianisation of Britain, is an indication of the decline (however slight) of the dominance of the Christian interpretation of history.

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<sup>30</sup> J. Johannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth (Islendinga Saga)*, University of Manitoba Press, 1974, p. 40.

## Chapter Two: Research Undertaken Outside England

### The Vikings and Nationalism

The earliest mention of Scandinavia occurs in Classical literature; Diodorus Siculus wrote of the Hyperboreans, an idyllic people living in the far North, who took their name from the North Wind (Boreas). The most interesting and important aspect of this anecdote is that it indicates that Apollo came to Delphi from the North, bringing civilisation from the Hyperborean regions to Greece. This notion was later adopted by various Swedish authors of the seventeenth century, during the time of Sweden's greatest political power, from the reign of Gustavus Adolphus (1611-32) to Charles XII (1697-1718). These works are not important here, as they do not deal with the Viking period specifically.

Interest in Scandinavian archaeology dates back to the Early Renaissance. Megaliths were examined and documents were collected, and 1666

saw the creation of the Antiquities College, which being an affiliate body of Uppsala University, effectively brought the office of Royal Antiquary under University auspices.<sup>31</sup>

The laws governing archaeological finds were not especially strict, so many private collections grew up.

Paul-Henri Mallet, a Swiss born historian, appears to have been the first non-Scandinavian to demonstrate an interest in the Northern peoples. He also held rather high opinions of the Vikings, at a time when the Savage stereotype was at its most powerful. His *Northern Antiquities*, translated into English in 1770 by Bishop Thomas Percy (the author of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*), presents the Vikings as a highly-disciplined society of warriors, hardened by the severe climate, and proud of their pirate lifestyle. Mallet included in his work translations of sections of the *Völuspá* and the *Hávamál*, and of Snorri's *Edda*. There are several important things to note when reading Mallet; the first is his knowledge of, and adherence to, a theory of Aryan migration. He sees the Aryans as the natural rulers in world affairs, and their heritage as more or less intact in the modern Teutonic people:

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<sup>31</sup> O. Klindt-Jensen, *A History of Scandinavian Archaeology*, London, 1975, p. 26.

we have seen how five cognate races have successfully been the rulers, if not always physically, at least intellectually, and the civilisers of mankind, and how the civilisation that germinated on the plains of the Ganges some forty centuries ago, has been transmitted westward from race to race, until we now find it in the North-West of Europe, with the Germans in possession of the more practical, elements that constitute its essence.<sup>32</sup>

Mallet is more openly admiring of the English, and appears to believe that every civilised institution in Europe owes its existence to the example of the northernmost nations. Mallet uses a rhetoric of “freedom” to justify what might appear excessive in the conduct and government of the Northern nations. He also believes that by the time of Tacitus, the classic form of Teutonic government was already in operation, and that it changed very little in the centuries following, even up to the nineteenth century. On Tacitus’ *Germania*, Mallet comments

all the most distinguished circumstances which characterise the ancient Teutonic form of government are contained in this remarkable passage. Here we see kings, who owe their advancement to an illustrious extraction, presiding, rather than ruling, over a free people. Here we see the nation assembling at certain stated times and making resolutions in their own persons on all affairs of importance, as to enact laws, to choose peace or war, to conclude alliances, to distribute justice in the last resort, and to elect magistrates. Here also we distinguish a body of the chiefs of the nation, who prepare and propose the important matters, the decision of which is reserved for the general assembly of all the free men.<sup>33</sup>

Mallet dismisses the religion of the ancient Northmen in a rather cavalier fashion. He regards it as of little spiritual worth, and fundamentally to be merely an expedient and elementary code of ethics for a warrior people. The *Eddas* and other “mythological” documents are, however, able to be used as source books for the historian. It is noted that to discredit Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* because the opening section is of dubious historical value

would be equally as absurd as to impeach the veracity of Livy because he begins his Roman history by the legend of Romulus, which Niebuhr has shown to be equally as devoid of foundation as that of the historical Odin.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> P.-H. Mallet, *Northern Antiquities*, trans. Bishop Thomas Percy, 1770, London, p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Classical and Northern mythology are placed on a par with one another, and therefore the same critical methods apply when approaching both.

Another theme of *Northern Antiquities* (which surfaces in several later works) is the effect which climate has on national character. This theory was significantly expressed for the first time in *De L'esprit des lois* by Montesquieu, published in 1748. Olaus Magnus, two centuries earlier, in his *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalis* had applied the same idea to the history of Scandinavia. Mallet considers that the liberty of the Northern nations was preserved

because hunters and shepherds, who wander about in woods through inclination or necessity, are not so easily oppressed as the timorous inhabitants of enclosed towns, who are there chained down to the fate of their houses; and because a wandering people, if deprived of their liberty in one place, easily find it in another, as well as their subsistence. Lastly, they were free because, knowing not the use of money, there could not be employed against them that instrument of slavery and corruption, which enables the ambitious to collect and distribute at will the signs of riches.<sup>35</sup>

Reading forward to the eighteenth century, this passage is a condemnation of the growth of cities, and the beginnings of the rise of industrialism.

One further point of interest concerning Mallet is that he regarded the Scandinavians as a sub-group of the Celtic family. This is understandable, as comparative Indo-European philology was as yet in embryonic form. This identification tended to leave the Vikings trailing behind the Druids; but it gave the poets the opportunity to exploit both the Celtic and the Scandinavian mythological material, which, because of its strangeness, appealed to the new spirit of Romanticism which was gathering strength at the close of the eighteenth century.

This spirit was represented in Scandinavia by a number of poets and novelists. Esaias Tegnér (1782-1846) was educated at Lund, and was a noted Swedish poet in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Particularly after 1808-9 he became a nationalist in the Northern mode; believing that a national poetry could be built up on the foundation of Norse mythology. During the next few years he wrote many poems on themes taken from the old myths. The most important of these, and the one for which he was best known, was

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

*Frithiof's Saga*, which was his first large-scale work, and was written between 1820 and 1825.

This was translated into English in 1841 by George Stephens. After 1825, Tegnér's poetry declined in quality. An American edition of *Frithiof's Saga* was prepared and edited by Bayard Taylor (1825-1878), an American journalist and man of letters, who was a great lover of all things Scandinavian.

Romanticism in Scandinavia was heralded by the publication in 1802 of *Guldenhornene*, a poem by Adam Dehlenschläger (1779-1850), Danish poet and dramatist. The poem mourned the loss of two Viking drinking horns, which had been stolen and melted down.

This work marked the inception of the Romantic movement in the North. It was a bitter and courageous denunciation, a crusade against apathy and against his country's decline from a glorious past.<sup>36</sup>

Most of the Romanticists were not historians or scientists. As the nineteenth century progressed there was an increased awareness of the need for accuracy, and the importance of classification and preservation of historical finds.

Though at the time quite unheralded, a new science had come into being, a science whose principles were observation and classification. It relied on excavation and chance discovery for its resources, not on literary theories or classical tradition.<sup>37</sup>

This was the science of archaeology.

Two people who contributed to the advance of the scientific method were the Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. They grew up amid the Romantic tradition, but later turned their hands to the systematic and scholarly cataloging of German folktales and legends. Of the two, Jacob's contribution was the more valuable and enduring. He was born in 1785, and studied law at Marburg, later becoming interested in grammatical studies. His *Deutsche Grammatik* was published in 1819, and he introduced the comparative method in the study of both Teutonic mythology, and the German language.

His chief thesis was that all the families of German speech were closely related and that the present forms were unintelligible without reference to the oldest.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Klindt-Jensen, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>38</sup> G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1913, p. 58.

It is for his *Teutonic Mythology* (1835) that Jacob Grimm is principally remembered. This work is basically a collection of Scandinavian and German myths and folktales, catalogued according to type. Grimm emphasised the relationship between the German and Scandinavian myths, and made a claim for the uniformity of culture, stretching from (at least) the second century AD account of Tacitus, to the present time. The account in the *Germania* was vital to Grimm, because it dated from the time when he believed German mythology was at its most developed. From this he argued that

pictures of heathenism in its debasement and decay have no right to be placed on a level with the report of it given by Tacitus from five to eight centuries before, when it was yet in the fullness of its strength.<sup>39</sup>

Grimm believed that Tacitus' evidence had been overlooked or devalued by many, and encouraged others to assist him in the task of piecing together what was left of German mythology. As to the antiquity of German mythology, Grimm argues by analogy:

One may fairly say, that to deny the reality of this mythology is as much to impugn the high antiquity and the continuity of our language; to every nation a belief in gods was as necessary as language.<sup>40</sup>

The importance of this statement is more fully articulated later in the *Preface*:

if the heathens already possessed a finely articulated language, and if we concede to them an abundant stock of religious myths, then song and story would not fail to lay hold of these, and to interweave themselves with the rites and customs.<sup>41</sup>

Jacob Grimm viewed the material he collected as a part of the German national mind, and collective memory. In collecting the myths he was assisting the modern Germans by enabling them to link up with their rightful heritage. Christianity was an intrusion in the German history, which had prevented the development of Germanic paganism, which Grimm asserted would have improved;

the grossness that I spoke of would have disappeared from the heathen faith had it lasted longer, though much of the ruggedness would have remained, as there is in our language something rough-hewn and unpolished, which does not unfit it for all purposes, and qualifies it for some, there goes with the German

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<sup>39</sup> J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. from the 4<sup>th</sup> edition by James Stevens Stallybrass, 4 volumes, London, 1883, vol. 1, p. 102.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. vi.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. vii.

character a thoughtful earnestness, that leads it away from vanity and brings it on the track of the sublime.<sup>42</sup>

When paganism is regarded in such favourable light, Christianity can only be regarded as an unwanted intrusion, which perverted and eventually defeated paganism, and introduced the North to the passionless moderation of the South.<sup>43</sup> The ultimate effect of Christianity was the separation of the German people from their traditions, and the breaking of the religious bond between the people and their land.

Christianity was not popular. It came from abroad, it aimed at supplanting the time-honoured indigenous gods whom the country revered and loved. These gods and their worship were part and parcel of the people's traditions, customs and constitution... the new faith came in escorted by a foreign language, which the missionaries imparted to their disciples and thus exalted into a sacred language, which excluded the slighted mother-tongue from almost all share in public worship.<sup>44</sup>

Grimm's achievement is undeniable, but his work is tainted by a too-rosy view of the pagan Germans and their society. It has also been argued that Grimm "credits early times with many customs and beliefs of subsequent growth."<sup>45</sup> Despite this, his work is the foundation upon which all later works on Germanic folklore and mythology rest. He introduced the scientific method into the study of folklore; and the comparative method which he employed became the predominant tool used by nineteenth and twentieth century folklorists and anthropologists.

The achievement of the Brothers Grimm can be properly appreciated only when it is seen in comparison to other, similar works of the period. Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, published in the second half of the eighteenth century, was an attempt in a similar mould. Percy tried to publish English folk poetry with some critical apparatus; but he treated the manuscript sources badly. Many passages were omitted, and in some cases passages were inserted; and in the final publishing, hardly a poem appeared in its original form. With the emergence of the Grimms, as

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, p. xlix.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 5. "the triumph of Christianity was that of a mild, simple, spiritual doctrine over sensuous, cruel, barbarising Paganism. In exchange for peace of spirit and the promise of heaven, a man gave his earthly joys and the memory of his ancestors".

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Gooch, op. cit., p. 60.



collectors, editors and publishers of folklore material, the study of folk memories is lifted onto the level of science and the foundations of folklore as a scientific discipline are laid.<sup>46</sup>

In the field of history, as well as folklore, there was a resurgence of interest in the Viking period. J. A. Lappenberg, a German Professor, wrote two two-volume works, *England under the Anglo-Saxon Kings* and *England under the Norman Kings*, which were translated into English by Benjamin Thorpe in the 1850's. The Anglo-Saxons were a German people who had conquered England in the fifth and sixth centuries, and interest in the Anglo-Saxons increased parallel to interest in the Vikings. Eventually efforts were made to unify the two strands of research, by regarding the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England as a first wave, which was followed by the Danish and Norwegian raids and settlements, and finally the Norman Conquest. The result was the cultural conquest of Celtic Britain by Teutonic people; and the establishment of democratic Teutonic institutions.

The fact that Lappenberg, a German, wished to write a history of England is explicable only when one realises that he is retelling the glorious deeds of his own ancestors. Never is it forgotten that the Anglo-Saxons were German, and Lappenberg is asserting the role of the Teutonic pagans in the development of the powerful English nation.

Lappenberg belonged to a school of thought which saw the Germans of Mainland Europe as civilised, and the Northmen of Scandinavia as unmitigated barbarians. He believed that the settlement of the Anglo-Saxons in England did not in any way weaken their "Germanness"; he notes

the agreement between the public and private legal institutions of the Germans and those of the English Saxons, which abundantly manifests itself as well in their general characteristics.<sup>47</sup>

While in England the Anglo-Saxons were threatened by subtle peril; one of these dangers was Christianity. Lappenberg, from his nationalistic standpoint, regards Christianity, not as having entered a society where paganism was on the decline and having provided a new

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<sup>46</sup> D. Strömback, "The Brothers Grimm and the Scientific Foundations of Folklore", *Folkdikt och Folkstro*, Anna Birgitta Rooth (ed.), Lund, 1971, pp. 19-32.

<sup>47</sup> J. A. Lappenberg, *A History of England under the Anglo-Saxon Kings*, London, 1884, p. 110.

and strong faith to people disillusioned with the old gods; but as an intrusion which weakened the strength of the German people.

The Saxons must, however, have brought with them to Britain a greater treasure in language and in political and legal institutions and ideas, and a more advanced mental and civic development than the ordinarily accepted view would lead us to infer... Yet Germanism was threatened by many grave perils in England for, as we have already seen, the glory of the old royal races had departed with the ancient faith; and Christianity lent support to the exercise of the supreme power in its outward manifestations, but it deprived it of the sacred origin on which its inner strength had been based.<sup>48</sup>

Lappenberg is inclined to dislike the Normans and to distrust their influence on the development of England. As a German, he acknowledges only the virtues of the Anglo-Saxons; he regards the Normans to be much the same as the Danes, who even after their conversion to Christianity, the Normans found great difficulty to get rid of the bad reputation they were in as destroyers, although they caused an incredible number of churches and chapels to be erected.<sup>49</sup>

In the field of archaeology, the next significant figure is Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae (1821-1885). He showed an interest in archaeology from his schoolboy days, and for a while worked under Christian Jurgenson Thomsen (1788-1865) at the Museum of Antiquities in Christiania. When Thomsen died, Worsaae became the leading figure in Danish archaeology.

Worsaae was a fluent and versatile writer, qualities which made *The Primeval Antiquities of Denmark* (1849) a great success. He employed the stringently accurate method of Thomsen, but was more topical, and his material was more compellingly presented. The book was brilliant propaganda for archaeology, as Worsaae asserted that it is evident that with us Danes, as well as other races, it must be an object to obtain, as far as possible, a thorough knowledge of the immigration, origin, manners, customs and achievements of our forefathers.<sup>50</sup>

The most heavily propagandist of Worsaae's works was written as a commission to King Christian VIII of Denmark, who in 1846 decided that an enquiry should be made into the monuments and memorials of the Danes and Norwegians which were still extant in Britain. In this endeavor His Majesty was encouraged by the Duke of Sutherland, and his brother

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 452-453.

<sup>49</sup> J. A. Lappenberg, *A History of England under the Norman Kings*, London, 1857, p. 69.

Lord Francis Egerton, in correspondence with the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries. Worsaae was sent by Frederick VII and produced *An Account of the Danes and Norwegians in England, Scotland and Ireland* (London, 1852).

This archaeological and environmental study was designed to correct the impression that the Vikings had been intent on only plunder, during their visits to England. Worsaae compares the Northern and southern temperaments, and reiterates the point about the influence on climate and geography on national character: he says

a comparison with other European nations will more clearly show how great an influence the climate of the North, and especially the Northern Sea, must have had upon the development of navigation among the Danes and Norwegians, and on their whole maritime life. With the exception of England, which, in a still higher degree than Scandinavia, swims in the open sea, and of Holland, which lies as it were half under water, no country in Europe has produced a seafaring people which can at all be compared to the Northmen.<sup>51</sup>

Worsaae argues cogently that the influence of the Danish and Norwegian settlers in the British Isles has been grossly underrated. English historians tended to trace their customs and institutions to the period of Roman rule in Britain, or (less frequently) to the Normans, or possibly the Anglo-Saxons. Worsaae insists that in

the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries the Anglo-Saxons had greatly degenerated from their forefathers. Relatives sold one another into thralldom; lewdness and ungodliness had become habitual; and cowardice had increased to such a degree, that, according to the old chroniclers, one Dane would often put ten Anglo-Saxons to flight. Before such a people could be conducted to the freedom and greatness it was necessary that an entirely new vigour be infused into the decayed stock. This vigour was derived from the Scandinavian North, where neither Romans nor any other conquerers had domineered over the people, and where heathenism with all its roughness, and all its love of freedom and bravery, still held absolute sway.<sup>52</sup>

Worsaae's main propagandist thrust is directed to prove that all the liberal and democratic institutions of nineteenth century England are the direct legacy of the medieval Danish and Norwegian settlers. His approval does not extend to the Swedes, whom he considered to be but poor sailors. It is slightly galling that he seems unwilling to allow the modern English to take any credit for their empire; saying

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<sup>50</sup> J. J. A. Worsaae, *The Primeval Antiquities of Denmark*, trans. by William J. Thoms, London, 1849, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> J. J. A. Worsaae, *An Account of the Danes and Norwegians in England, Scotland and Ireland*, London, 1852, p. xviii.

it is, on the whole, obvious that the ancient Northmen possessed a very great talent for colonisation, which their kinsmen, the English of modern times, seem to have inherited from them.<sup>53</sup>

The principal intention of *An Account of the Danes and Norwegians in England* appears to be the glorification of the Viking settlers in England; in fact, a total rehabilitation of their character, and the presentation of a new image of the Vikings to the public.

One review of this work, published in *Fraser's Magazine*, objected to the cavalier fashion in which Worsaae dismissed the contributions of the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans to England, praised his rigorous method. The anonymous author also claims that

the same eager enquiry after truth, the same cautious sifting of authorities and love of minute accuracy which characterise every branch of modern science, have at last been applied to a study which has no small claim to be regarded as a science in its turn, and one of no inconsiderable importance.<sup>54</sup>

It was this strict, scientific attitude which made the work of Worsaae particularly respected and reliable. His other works include *The Industrial Arts of Denmark* and *The Pre-History of the North* (published respectively in 1882 and 1886) mainly reiterate the concerns and conclusions of the books already discussed. Worsaae's main propagandist purpose was to, with the scientific use of data, prove

that the pre-historic Scandinavians were not barbaric savages but an artistically and culturally advanced people.<sup>55</sup>

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw many people enthusiastically engaged in this remoulding of the image of the Vikings. The use of archaeological material became more common, and English translations of German and Scandinavian texts were readily available. Rudolph Keyser's little book *The Private Life of the Old Northmen* (1868), was a reconstruction of daily life in pre-Christian Scandinavia, using archaeological material. Keyser is not particularly nationalistic, and approves of the changes brought by Christianity, which he regards as a civilising influence. He appears not to find the beauty and grandeur which others had discovered in Scandinavian paganism.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>54</sup> "The Northmen in Britain", *Fraser's Magazine*, 46 (July-December 1852), p. 525.

<sup>55</sup> Klindt-Jensen, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

In 1889, Paul Du Chaillu's *The Viking Age* was published, and the "political" use of the Viking period was once again in the forefront. Du Chaillu was however, pro-English, rather than pro-German; and he sought to justify the imperialism of nineteenth century Britain by reference to the Viking expansion ten centuries earlier. He believes the conduct of the Vikings had been misinterpreted;

for centuries these people remained undisputed masters of the sea. In their case, as in that of the ruling nations of today, it was their navy that enabled them to conquer, settle and colonise other lands. If we call these men pirates, we must also apply the name to the English, French, Spaniards, Dutch, etc., because they have taken possession of countries against the will of the inhabitants, just as in the United States the land of the Indians has been gradually taken away from them. Civilisation was aggressive in ancient times, as it is today.<sup>56</sup>

Du Chaillu praises the legal codes of the Vikings, and finds much to admire in their rigid code of honour. His book appears to have been designed purely to legitimise the expansion of modern Britain, by suggesting that it is a historical necessity. His pro-British stance is evident from the *Introduction* onwards; he asks the rhetorical question "why is it that, wherever the English speaking people have settled, or are at this day found, even in small numbers, they are far more energetic, daring, adventurous and prosperous, and understand the art of self-government and of ruling alien peoples far better than other colonising nations?"<sup>57</sup>

If the English are really so gifted, what is to prevent them from ruling all people who demonstrate that they are not "capable" of ruling themselves?

Another area in which great progress had been made was textual criticism of the pre-Christian Scandinavian materials. Sophus Bugge, a Norwegian philologist, published the first critical edition of the *Poetic Edda* in 1881-9, which was published in English as *The Home of the Eddic Poems*. His theory concerning the origins of the poems brought him into sharp conflict with English scholar George Stephens. Stephens was firmly convinced of the pagan origin of the poems, while Bugge believed that they dated from the Christian era;

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<sup>56</sup> Du Chaillu, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 180.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. vii.

that at the time when the mythological Eddic stories took shape, Norwegians and Icelanders were not uninfluenced by the rest of Europe, but that they were subjected, on the contrary, to a strong and lasting influence from the Christian English and Irish.<sup>58</sup>

Bugge argued that Loki was a pagan version of the Christian Satan; and the story of Balder an adaptation of the stories of Christ, attached to a local god. In the same vein, the vision of a new heaven and a new earth which concludes the *Völuspá* is, in Bugge's opinion, due to the influence of Christian eschatological thought. Interesting though this theory is, it is largely incorrect, and has no nationalistic bias. Bugge is not interested in tracing his country's heritage to Scandinavian paganism. He believed Christian ideas dominated the Eddic poems in their earliest conception, and as such, the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity was virtually a *fait accompli*.

As the twentieth century was ushered in, Hjalmar Boyeson's *Norway*, published in the "Story of the Nations" series, concludes this chapter. This book is influenced by Aryan theories, and also seeks to prove that the Vikings were more than illiterate barbarians. Their conduct is explained by reference to the savagery of the times:

that they were fierce and brutal is credible enough. The warlike state is in itself brutalizing. It arouses all the slumbering savagery in man, and smothers his gentler impulses. But certain moral qualities even their hostile chroniclers concede to them. They admit that the Norse barbarians were, as a rule, faithful to their oaths and kept their promises.<sup>59</sup>

Boyeson stresses the legal sophistication of the Viking Age, and the fact that the fiercest warriors were often the men who became most distinguished in their retirement, for wise counsel and the administration of justice.

It is obvious, from the works discussed in this chapter, that there was a trend among Scandinavian and German authors, to use their pagan pasts for nationalistic purposes. This was deliberate, especially in Germany, where there was political agitation to unite the collection of small states into one nation. For this new country to regard itself as a single entity, the inhabitants needed to perceive themselves as having something in common. The provision of a common past, and a shared set of beliefs, aided the political union. The Vikings and pagan Germans had to be rehabilitated in the popular mind, to become

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<sup>58</sup> S. Bugge, *The Home of the Eddic Poems*, trans. William Henry Schofield, London, 1899, p. xv.

<sup>59</sup> H. Boyeson, *A History of Norway*, London, 1900, p. 28.

something infinitely more flattering to the national ego. Despite this polemical intention, much valuable research was produced, as interest in textual criticism and archaeology grew, and the scientific method was applied to both of these studies.

### **Chapter Three: Anglo-Saxon Studies**

England too was affected by the desire to rediscover her ancestry in the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings, and the origin of her governmental and legal institutions in the society of pagan Germany and Scandinavia. This trend was not independent of the research being done on the Continent; there were several strong contacts between the two groups of scholars. Many different categories of work were produced in England, including travel books and journals of residence in the Scandinavian countries; translations of the major Icelandic, Anglo-Saxon and German texts; works of history concerning the Anglo-Saxon influence on the institutions of nineteenth century England; histories detailing the heritage of pagan Scandinavia possessed by the modern British; poetry and other imaginative fiction.

The principal connection between England and Germany in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies was John Mitchell Kemble, who had been a pupil of Jacob Grimm in Germany, and who continued to correspond with Grimm on a friendly basis for some twenty years. The Kembles were a famous theatrical family in London. The older generation boasted of three celebrities; Mrs. Sarah Siddons (née Kemble) (1755-1831), and her brothers John Philip (1757-1823) and Charles (1775-1854). The younger generation (the children of Charles) possessed two celebrities; Frances Anne (Fanny) (1809-1893) and John Mitchell (1807-1857). Fanny was yet another famous actress, and John Mitchell was the outstanding Anglo-Saxon scholar of his day.

The European political scene had a great influence on the English tendency to look back to the Germanic (Anglo-Saxon) past for the affirmation of English virtues. England believed herself to be continually threatened by France. The battle of Waterloo had been fought in 1815, and Napoleon had died in exile in 1821, but the memory of the Napoleonic empire loomed large. Napoleon had had himself proclaimed Holy Roman Emperor, and had likened his French possessions to the Roman Empire. English suspicion of the French remained very much alive, and it extended to a distaste for remembering England's Roman past, and a hearkening toward the Germanic elements of English history.

The nineteenth century saw the development of a theory of history which enabled the English to downplay the influence of the Normans (French) on English history. Modern



England had little cause to be grateful to the French, for, a century previous, Bonnie Prince Charlie had created the alliance between Catholic France and the Catholic Highlands of Scotland, during the 1715 and 1745 uprisings. He had subsequently gone into exile in France. That France was Catholic, and had been at various times revolutionary, Imperial, and Napoleonic, all combined to make it anathema to the English.

This theory of history is known as the “Norman yoke” theory. A popular example of the attitudes embodied by this history is Sir Walter Scott’s novel, *Ivanhoe* (1819). In this novel the Saxon is consistently superior to the Norman; but one problem with which the adherents of this theory had to grapple was that the Normans had originally been Vikings themselves. Two approaches developed as a result of this dilemma; the first was to regard the Normans as entirely French, and the oppressors of the noble Saxons. The second approach tried to prove that the Norman Conquest did not happen; that it was a non-event or *fait accompli*, in which there was no change in, or interruption of, English history. The Anglo-Saxons, the Danes and the Normans were all kinsmen whose contribution to England was virtually identical in terms of customs, laws and social structures. For the adherents to this position:

the early Victorians used the past for purposes of dramatic contrast to highlight what they thought were the failings of the present. Saxon or Norman could be portrayed with long fair hair or bows and arrows, but they were endowed with Victorian motives and values. Nor for the popular reader was there any need to choose finally between Saxon and Norman, whatever the strength of initial prejudices might be. Both Saxon and Norman had contributed to the making of England, the England that had reached a position of world dominance in the nineteenth century. In both cases, indeed, their stock was Teutonic.<sup>60</sup>

Interest in the Anglo-Saxon past of England was commenced with the mammoth work of Sharon Turner in the late eighteenth century.<sup>61</sup> During the Victorian Era, many distinguished scholars contributed to Anglo-Saxon studies; Sir Francis Palgrave, John Richard Green, Edward Freeman and others. One popular subject for research was the development of the English Constitution, and the origin of the democratic and liberal elements in the political and judicial system of nineteenth century England.

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<sup>60</sup> A. Briggs, *Saxons, Normans and Victorians*, published lecture, 1966, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> S. Turner, *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, London, 1799-1805.

In 1832, Sir Francis Palgrave published his *The Rise and Progress of the English Commonwealth*. This work advanced the proposition that there was a uniformity of legislative and judicial institutions among the Teutonic tribes; which extends to the modern nations of Teutonic origin. He is not overly idealistic about Anglo-Saxon government, although firmly convinced that it was a valuable thing; “the Anglo-Saxon commonwealth was very far from possessing that Utopian perfection which has been ascribed to it by political enthusiasts; yet we may discern the great outline of a limited monarchy, and all the germs of civilised freedom”.<sup>62</sup>

The essential features of Anglo-Saxon government were therefore present in the Victorian government; and the English Common Law was a continuation of the oral law codes of the Teutons. Palgrave regards British legal history as the key to Britain’s political position.

Indeed the history of the law affords the most satisfactory clue to the political history of England. When we peruse the annals of the Teutonic nations – the epithet, Teutonic, being used in its widest sense – the first impression which we receive results from the identity of the ancient laws and modes of government which prevailed amongst them. Like their various languages, which are in truth but dialects of one mother tongue, so their laws are but modifications of one primeval code. In all their wanderings from their parent home, the Teutons bore with them that law which was their birthright and their privilege; and even now we can mark the era when the same principles were recognised at Upsala and at Toledo, in Lombardy and in England.<sup>63</sup>

The laws of which Palgrave speaks were collected and published by Benjamin Thorpe, in his *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England* (1840). This was an extremely valuable collection of source materials, but as it offered no commentary, it is impossible to speculate on his motivations in publishing. The next few years saw the publication of *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841) and *Past and Present* (1843), both by Thomas Carlyle. The former work will be discussed in the next chapter, as it deals with Scandinavian material; the latter idealistically contrasted the attractions of life in Victorian England with life in a medieval monastery. *Past and Present* advocated a theory of government by those spiritually entitled to rule;

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<sup>62</sup> Sir F. Palgrave, *The Rise and Progress of the English Commonwealth*, 2 volumes, London, vol. 1, p. 557.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

we must have more wisdom to govern us, we must be governed by the wisest, we must have an aristocracy of talent.<sup>64</sup>

Unlike most of the scholars discussed in this chapter, Carlyle despised the Anglo-Saxons as mere yokels, and admired the Norman aristocracy. He was a forerunner of the trend in the later years of the nineteenth century, where the Saxon attractiveness waned, and the Norman Conquest came to be regarded as a boon and a blessing.<sup>65</sup> But Carlyle's contempt for Victorian England also sets him apart; his yearning for a rural, simple life is genuine. *Past and Present*

is a blistering Old Testament attack on the morality of industrial capitalism, contrasted with an idealised picture of life in the monastery of St. Edmundsbury in the twelfth century.<sup>66</sup>

Serious attacks on the Norman yoke theory of history began around 1820 with Richard Carlile, who advocated that Parliament was not a Saxon invention, but was established by Simon de Montfort in 1265.

These criticisms did not catch on for several more decades, and Kemble's *The Saxons in England* (1849) continued to extol the virtues of the Saxons, and their contribution to the institutions of liberal Victorian England. Kemble had been expected to do great things by his family, but in many ways had proved a disappointment;

he entered at the Inner Temple, but studied only those parts of English Law which illustrated history or ancient customs.<sup>67</sup>

Eventually he gave up the law, and began to study the Anglo-Saxon language, then moved to Germany to study under Jacob Grimm. Both the Grimms became extremely fond of Kemble, and of him Wilhelm wrote

he was the first really lovable Englishman I have ever seen, Young, handsome, lively, geistreich, not ceremonious, and very learned in the Anglo-Saxon tongue... He can laugh so heartily, and it is very pretty when a man who is learned can laugh heartily.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> T. Carlyle, *Past and Present*, London, 1843, p. 30.

<sup>65</sup> Briggs, op. cit., p. ?

<sup>66</sup> E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: from Romantic to Revolutionary*, London, 1955, p. 29.

<sup>67</sup> Sir L. Stephen and Sir S. Lee (eds.), *The Dictionary of National Biography*, London, 1917, p. 1257.

<sup>68</sup> B. Dickens, *Two Kembles*, Cambridge, 1974, p. 13.

Kemble corresponded for twenty years with Jacob Grimm; they discussed both personal and professional matters. Grimm was a great support to Kemble during the break-up of his marriage to Nathalie Auguste, the daughter of Professor Amadeus Wendt of Göttingen.<sup>69</sup> The influence of Grimm on Kemble was more than purely personal, because “apart from particular German contributions to the study of early English history, there is the more general question of a German intellectual influence imparted to the views and attitudes of English historians as, in professional duty, they absorbed the specific results of German historical scholarship.”<sup>70</sup>

Kemble’s publications included *Beowulf* (1833), *Soloman and Saturn* (1845), *Codex Diplomaticus* (1839-48) and *The Saxons in England*. The last work was, until the appearance of Bishop Stubbs’ *Constitutional History* in 1873, the best English treatise on the polity of the Anglo-Saxons. Kemble was particularly well-qualified to undertake such a study, and his purpose (at least partially) was to remind his contemporaries that

if we exult in the conviction that our free municipal institutions are the safeguard of some of our most cherished liberties, let us remember those to whom we owe them, and study to transmit unimpaired to our posterity an inheritance which we have derived from so remote an ancestry.<sup>71</sup>

Kemble approaches the religion of the Anglo-Saxons with some interest and enthusiasm. He believes in an environment-bound theory of spirituality. This theory was often held by urban dwellers who thought that their lack of religious belief was due to their alienation from the land. He writes

I can readily believe that the warrior and the noble were less deeply impressed with the religious idea than the simple cultivator. In the first place, the disturbed life and active habits of military adventurers are not favourable to the growth of religious convictions; again, there is no tie more potent than that which links sacred associations to particular localities, and acts, unconsciously perhaps but persuasively upon all the dwellers near the holy spots; the tribe may wander with all its wealth of thought and feeling; even the gods may accompany it to a new settlement; but the religious loci, the indefinable influence of the local association, cannot be transported.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> R. A. Wiley, *John Mitchell Kemble and Jacob Grimm: A Correspondence 1832-1852*, Leiden, 1971.

<sup>70</sup> J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 120.

<sup>71</sup> J. M. Kemble, *The Saxons in England*, 2 volumes, London, 1849, vol. 2, p. 341.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 441.

Bishop William Stubbs' *Constitutional History of England* is a work which basically takes up where Freeman left off. Stubbs was the historian of the nineteenth century, and had enormous influence of the medieval field. He is not anti-Norman; and views the Norman Conquest as the culmination of tendencies toward national unity which had been at work for many years. The advent of the Normans was merely the catalyst.

Stubbs does not, then, merely describe a strong conqueror imposing unity or discipline on a turbulent or sluggish people, any more than he offers an organic, simple teleological account of the growth of national self-government; his account is more like a Pilgrim's Progress, with dangers and vicissitudes on either hand, and a kind of self transcendence.<sup>73</sup>

Stubbs looked for the origins of the modern Parliament in the *witenagemots*, *wapentakes* and folkmoots of the Anglo-Saxons,<sup>74</sup> and he went so far as to assert that these bodies were in fact identical to the modern Parliament, rather than primitive ancestors of that institution.

To him, as to any nineteenth-century Englishman, parliament stood for democracy, and its representative element was its essential feature. He sees the Anglo-Saxon *witan* as the assembly of the people; the Anglo-Norman Curia as inheriting its traditions.<sup>75</sup>

Even though he is acknowledged to be influential, Stubbs was not always accurate, although neither were many of his contemporaries. There was an element of wish-fulfillment in many of Stubbs' claims, and the evidence which he brought forward to support them. One stock criticism of him is that he was "Victorian", too much a man of his time. He believed in making moral judgements, and he was so sure of the superiority of the English; also that he ignored, or downplayed the importance of social and economic conditions.

He did painstakingly examine the relevant documents, and contributed much valuable work, but

when Stubbs was writing, men were still looking for the origins of democratic institutions at a very early date. By his training Stubbs had a reverence for facts, but his inferences were not decided by the facts but by his inherited assumptions which arranged the facts in the traditional moulds. He committed

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<sup>73</sup> Burrow, op. cit., p. 144.

<sup>74</sup> W. Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England*, 3 volumes, Oxford, 1890, vol. 1, p. 148. "The part taken by the *witan* in the transaction of business was full and authoritative..."

<sup>75</sup> H. Cam, "Stubbs Seventy Years After", *The Cambridge Historical Journal*, vol. IX, 1948, no. 2, p. 134.

the common fault, so frequently seen in historical documentaries on television, of reading history backwards, and instead of drawing his conclusions from the evidence, he imposed his conclusions on the evidence.<sup>76</sup>

The next two scholars to be considered, Edward A. Freeman, and John Richard Green, followed very much in the footsteps of Stubbs. Neither produced a work as large, or of as lasting influence as *The Constitutional History of England*. Nevertheless, both were good scholars, and each wrote several books on the theme of the modern English debt to the Anglo-Saxons. Green's *The Making of England* (1881) and the four volume *History of the English People* (1885-6) put forward the now-familiar picture of the early English as

fighting men, venturesome, self-reliant, proud, with a dash of hardiness and cruelty.... but ennobled by the virtues which spring from war, by personal courage and loyalty to plighted word, by a high and stern sense, of manhood and the worth of man!<sup>77</sup>

However, Green believed that the Norman was an alien element in English history; and he gives the date of the origin of Parliament as the reign of Edward the First, which is considerably later than the idealistic calculations of William Stubbs. The Normans were downplayed as an influence on English history in the work of Green. He congratulates the Danes for the new influx of energy they brought

conqueror indeed, as he was, the Dane was no foreigner in the sense that the Norman was a foreigner after him. His language differed little from the English tongue, he brought in no new system of tenure or government.<sup>78</sup>

Edward Freeman's approach differed a little from that of Green. The two men were close friends, as well as working in the same field. Freeman believes that the Norman was merely a Dane who had sojourned in France for awhile, and is therefore no alien. He also attempts to introduce a philosophical element into Anglo-Saxon research; he wrote

our ancient history is the possession of the liberal, who, as being ever ready to reform, is the true Conservative, not of the self-styled conservative who, by refusing to reform, does all he can to bring on destruction.<sup>79</sup>

Freeman also adheres to Stubbs' view of the origin of Parliament, and in support of this, writes;

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<sup>76</sup> G. O. Sayles, *The King's Parliament of England*, New York, 1974, p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> J. R. Green, *Short History of the English People*, 4 volumes, London, 1885-6, vol. 1, p. 19.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 100.

<sup>79</sup> Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. x.

the House of Lords not only springs out of, it actually is, the ancient *witanagemot*. I can see no break between the two.<sup>80</sup>

The theory of Aryan superiority appears to have been slumbering throughout the previous books in this chapter. It is unlikely that the authors involved were ignorant of its existence, and more reasonable to suggest that Aryanism was not important to their work. Edward Freeman was a devotee of Aryan supremacy, and was fascinated by Indo-European philology. To Freeman

the Aryans were the free aristocracy of the world, the antitype of the slavish Asiatic, represented chiefly by the Turk.<sup>81</sup>

However, in his written work, Freeman kept the Aryan question as strictly a sideline, never a central issue.

The chief concern motivating the scholars to research the Anglo-Saxon period was nationalism. The German scholars had a more practical goal in mind, the unification of Germany which took place under the Chancellorship of Bismarck, in 1871. German research functioned to provide a national culture and a collective memory for the people of this newly created nation. The chief of the contributions was probably Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, an operatic setting of the *Nibelungenlied*. As Wagner had other political considerations, this will be discussed later. To give the fledgling Germany courage, the research concentrated on the bravery of the early Germanic tribes, and their success in overturning the Roman Empire. Any suggestion that they were barbarians was (in the main) avoided; the sophistication of their material culture and the high artistic value of their literature were all brought to the readers' attention.

The old stereotypes of the Vikings, the Huns and the Goths were inadequate as they were not something that the new Germany could be proud of. What was needed were new images which would inspire the Germans to great deeds in the modern world. The rehabilitation of the image of the early Germans and of the Vikings was for modern Germany a very practical measure. It was possible to create a new political entity, but its citizens would not feel that they were united unless they were persuaded to believe that their new status was an improvement on the old.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>81</sup> Burrow, op. cit., p. 190.

For the English, nationalistic concerns in Northern research were not quite so crude. England was firmly established as a nation, and its people were undeniably English. The movement to alter the Englishman's perception of his national heritage had several underlying reasons. Rome had conquered England, and had contributed much to her development, but Rome in nineteenth century England possessed some unattractive connotations. It was associated with Napoleonic France, the nation which had drawn England into a war in the very immediate past. Napoleon had claimed that his empire was the legitimate descendent of the Holy Roman Empire, and he had been crowned Holy Roman Emperor, by the Pope.

France was Catholic, another situation not calculated to delight the English; so they looked toward that part of their heritage which was non-Latin (Teutonic), and which, they reasoned, would have been Protestant if it had known better. This last assumption was reinforced by the fact that the Protestant Reformation had begun almost simultaneously in England (with Henry VIII) and in Germany (with Martin Luther). The history of the Anglo-Saxons was employed, not only to inspire the nation or to define national characteristics, but specifically to endorse the constitutional monarchy by which England was governed, and to legitimise the programme of ruthless colonisation upon which England had embarked.

There were other purposes which inspired research into the pagan North; most notably the socialism of William Morris, and the Aryanism which found its ultimate expression in Nazi Germany. Morris was a lone voice crying in the wilderness, and sufficiently unusual to merit a chapter to himself. Aryan theory did not find the support in England which it did in Germany. It is worth noting that the English probably believed as firmly in Aryan superiority as the Germans, using as evidence their treatment of the Indians, Chinese, Australian aborigines and all the other indigenous peoples of the lands which they colonised. However, this belief in their superiority was never intellectualised in England; this is mere speculation, but it may be that because the English were an established world power, with a long, and secure, tradition behind them, they lacked the insecurity which led the Germans to justify their programme of colonisation by reference to a philosophy of Aryan supremacy.



## Chapter Four: Viking Studies in England

The main connection between England and the Scandinavian countries in the nineteenth century was Professor George Stephens, who was Professor of English at the University of Copenhagen from 1851 onwards. Two of the Stephens brothers, George (1813-1895) and Joseph Rayner (1805-1879), took a fairly political approach to the Viking Age. Their father, John Stephens, was a Methodist preacher, and Joseph followed in his footsteps. He was appointed in 1826 to a mission station in Stockholm, and while in Scandinavia he learned Danish, Finnish and Swedish, in which he preached.

Joseph Rayner Stephens also acquired a love of Scandinavian mythology and literature, which he communicated to his younger brother George. George wrote in the *Preface* to his translation of *Frithiof's Saga*:

lastly, if this work has any merit – let the honour fall where it is due. It is to my dear and distinguished brother, the Reverend J. R. Stephens, the tribune of the poor, that I am indebted for having my attention turned ‘from sounds to things’; and it is he who recommended to my eager study the North in general, and *Frithiof's Saga* in particular – which he unrolled before me by an oral translation – at a time when far away from the shores of the North, and when the work was altogether unknown in England.<sup>82</sup>

Joseph's Wesleyan career ended in 1834 when he was forced to resign because of his involvement with the movement for the improvement of worker's conditions. Holyoake sums up the considerable confusion about Joseph's political position in this way:

Many Tories regarded him, and to this day, generally regard him, as a Chartist; while Chartists who understood their own principles regarded him as a Tory.<sup>83</sup>

He was sufficiently interested in workers' rights to be arrested in 1838 on the charge of attending unlawful meetings; he eventually served an eighteen month sentence. It is the purest speculation to suggest that the politics of the Viking Era influenced Joseph Rayner Stephens towards radicalism; it is, however, worth noting that Methodism was notoriously pacifist and conservative.

It has been generally assumed by historians of the nineteenth century that Methodism was a force which inhibited revolutionary activity in Britain, especially in the

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<sup>82</sup> G. J. Holyoake, *Life of Joseph Rayner Stephens*, London, pp. 218-9.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

years 1789-1848, when revolutions occurred in other European countries. However, the working class Methodists were less conservative than their leaders, and many of the rank and file had joined the struggle for workers' rights; the Tolpuddle Martyrs had been trade union leaders. Holyoake tries to persuade the reader that Stephens' motivations were entirely religious; he writes

he was a political preacher; his generous inspiration was religious and not political. His great conviction was that it was the duty of a minister of God to stand up like the prophets of old in defense and protection of the people against whoever might be their oppressors, masters, judges or kings. He went among politicians, but he was never of them.<sup>84</sup>

This may have been true; it would, however, explain his career rather more successfully if Stephens had been allowed some political motives.

George Stephens took up residence in Stockholm in 1834, where he worked as a teacher of English. In 1851 he took up an appointment as Professor of English at the University of Copenhagen. His chief works include *Frithiofs Saga* (1841), *Waldere* (1860), and the work on which his chief claim to be remembered rests, *The Old Northern Runic Monuments of Scandinavia and England* (1866-1884). This was published in an abridged form as *A Handbook to the Old Northern Monuments* (1884).

The conscientious labour which Stephens devoted to securing accurate copies of the inscriptions is deserving of the highest praise, and as a storehouse of materials for Runic studies, his work is invaluable.<sup>85</sup>

Stephens published articles constantly, and it is interesting to observe that his political position differed greatly from that of his brother, despite their close personal relationship.

Many of his articles and pamphlets relate to questions of political controversy, in which he was passionately interested, his antipathy to English radicalism being extremely violent.<sup>86</sup>

George Stephens was also something of an oddity in the field of Northern studies, being firmly opposed to the German scholars, and to things German generally.

In one of his books he commented acidly:

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>85</sup> Sir L. Stephen, op. cit.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

the German philological school is distinguished for knowing everything, for its arrogant and overbearing tone, and for its air of intolerable infallibility. I hope that this will never find its way into Scandinavia. I trust that men of science in all the Northern lands will hold fast that stamp of friendly candour and chivalric kindness and mutual appreciation and respect which marks so nobly 'the Scholar and the Gentleman'.<sup>87</sup>

This comment was ironic, in the light of the fact that George Stephens picked academic quarrels frequently, one of the most serious being his difference of opinion over the origin of the Norse mythology with Professor Sophus Bugge. He wrote a short book opposing Bugge's theories.<sup>88</sup> These theories were topical at the time, but are probably quite unknown now. In Stephens' words, Bugge's new theory claims

that the Northern mythology, properly so called, is for the most part or a very large part, the result of accretions and imitations in the ninth and tenth centuries after Christ, the outcome of tales, Classical and Christian, picked up chiefly in England and Ireland by Wiking adventurers, and gradually elaborated by them and their wise men and scalds at home or in their colonies.<sup>89</sup>

Against this theory, Stephens argues cogently for the independent origin and development of pagan Northern mythology.

Probably because of the great amount of work he did among the Rune-stones themselves, Stephens was deeply interested in archaeology and the preservation of archaeological discoveries. He campaigned for this cause with nationalistic fervour;

as every year, every month, every day, adds to the silent or savage, accidental or wilful, total or partial destruction of our old national monuments – which, once injured or ruined, NEVER CAN BE REPLACED – my noble countrymen should not lose a moment in obtaining those mechanical views and copies of which I have spoken above. The cost will be trifling; and even if it should not, bah! money is but rubbish, and ALL THAT WE HAVE is not too much or too good for our Fatherland. We have lost so much already, and have so little left, that we should at once grasp those leaves the Sybil yet can offer us.<sup>90</sup>

Stephens' ideology was pro-Scandinavian, and anti-German. He realised that the two were related but decided early on that English was a Scandinavian, not a Germanic language (an error which he never corrected), and henceforth treated England as a Viking

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<sup>87</sup> G. Stephens, *The Old Northern Runic Monuments of Scandinavia and England*, 1866-1884, vol. 1, p. lx.

<sup>88</sup> G. Stephens, *Professor Bugge's "Studies on Northern Mythology" Shortly Examined*, London, 1883.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>90</sup> G. Stephens, *op. cit.*, (1866-1884), vol. 2, p. 469.

settlement, a fundamentally Scandinavian product. Stephens was a firm believer in the theory that the vigorous and unconquered Northern people were the resuscitation of England, and of most of Europe, which had been burdened by the rule of the Roman Empire.<sup>91</sup> Stephens did not lack interest in the Anglo-Saxons; indeed, he published a little in that field, but he disliked German scholars so profoundly (including the Brothers Grimm) that he could not bring himself to admit the importance of Germanic studies, or the intimate relationship of these studies to his own research.

On a popular level, knowledge of the Scandinavian countries was disseminated by travel books and journals of residence. Examination of these need not be too detailed; their chief interest was generally the natural beauties of the country in question. One of the earliest of these, *Iceland* (1819) by Ebenezer Henderson, was written by a representative of the British and Foreign Bible Society, who had been sent there for two years to preach the word to the heathen. This limits Henderson's ability to appreciate the pagan heritage of the Icelandic people. Of his intentions he writes

one of the principal objects of my visit to Iceland, and of the different journeys which I undertook through the several districts, was to impress the minds of the natives with a sense of the importance of forming a Bible Society for their own island.<sup>92</sup>

Henderson considered the introduction of Christianity to Scandinavia an excellent thing (quite naturally), but he did trouble himself to know something of the old gods and culture of Iceland. Despite his religious mission, and his somewhat narrow-minded assessment of modern Iceland, he gives credit where it is due.

The government of the Old Icelandic commonwealth particularly interested Henderson, and of it he exclaimed

the existence and constitution of the Icelandic Republic exhibit an interesting phenomenon in the history of man. We here behold a number of free and independent settlers, many of whom had been accustomed to rule in their native country, establishing a government on principles of the most perfect

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<sup>91</sup> G. Stephens, op. cit., (1866-1884), vol. 1, p. xiii. "That the Runic and other oldest art remains of our Northern forefathers show that these peoples possessed not only the art of writing, in itself a great proof of power and mastership and development, but, generally (in like manner, as in all the other Scando-Gothic races) a very high degree of 'barbaric' (=not GREEK OR ROMAN) civilisation and technical skill, in some things higher than our own, even now, and this for war as for peace, for the home as for out of doors, for the family as for the commonweal. This...." and so on.

<sup>92</sup> E. Henderson, *Iceland: or the Journal of a Residence in that island during the years 1814-5*, London, 1819, p. 406.

liberty, and, with the most consummate skill, enacting laws which were admirably adapted to the peculiar circumstances of the nation. Unintimidated by any foreign power, guided solely by the love of liberty, security, and independence, they combined their interests and their energies in support of a political system, at once calculated to protect the rights of individuals, and inspire the community at large with sentiments of exalted patriotism.<sup>93</sup>

These fulsome sentiments were expressed again and again in travel books. With Henderson, there was no connection drawn between the modern English institutions; later authors informed their readers that the love of liberty and equality which had coloured the political institutions of Old Iceland is actually present in the government of nineteenth century England, and that there is a direct connection between the two societies.

Robert Bremner, an Englishman travelling in Scandinavia during the 1830's, did not visit Iceland, and makes no direct reference to Old Icelandic government. He does, however, give expression to the contrast between the culture of the North and that of the South, which is very much the same as other such comparisons.

In the South all is dim, -decaying; a sadness rests on the most glorious of its scenes and associations. Man and his work are both in their decline; the free spirit is bowed down, the tower is crumbling to its base. Except the strains which even slavery can sing, there is no song, nor voice of gladness to be heard; and the pilgrim takes his leave without one joyful remembrance of the past, without one hope for the future.

In the North, on the contrary, all is yet young and full of hope. Freedom has never yet been driven from those fastnesses, and their tenants still worship her as ardently as of old. In wandering amongst them we feel that they have the spirit and the dignity of men; and when at last we take leave of their shores, it is not with pain and sorrow, but with joy and hope – inclined to think better of our species, and cherishing high anticipation of the career which these nations will yet run.<sup>94</sup>

These ideas were powerful propaganda for the movement which was then attempting to turn the attention of Victorian England away from the heritage of Imperial Rome and toward the heritage of the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons. Travel books merit consideration, because they were not serious scholarly works but popular literature. This meant that they did not only appeal to a highly educated elite, but relied for their sales on

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>94</sup> R. Bremner, *Excursions in Denmark, Norway and Sweden*, 2 volumes, London, 1840, vol. 1, pp. 6-7.

the general literate public. That they sold well is attested by the fact that several went into second and third editions soon after being published.

Sabine Baring-Gould's *Iceland: Its Scenes and Sagas* (1863) was a more scholarly attempt at travel literature. Included are short retellings of the major Icelandic sagas, and a quite lengthy biography of Snorri Sturluson. Baring-Gould appears weary of the interest in Old Icelandic institutions, and notes wryly

Thingvellir, or the Plain of the Council, have been already described fifteen times, and, if it were not that my journal would be incomplete without some account of this remarkable spot, I should decline giving one.<sup>95</sup>

The Icelandic diaries of William Morris will not be considered here, as they may differ from ordinary travel journals in that they were written by a man with an extraordinarily specialised knowledge of pre-Christian Scandinavia. They were also written as a private diary; and as the contribution that William Morris made to the remoulding of the Vikings is the subject of the following chapter, his journals will be dealt with there.

It only remains to note *Icelandic Pictures* (1895) by Frederick Howell, and *A pilgrimage to the Saga-Steeds of Iceland* (1899) by W. G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson. No doubt many more of these works exist, but the given selection are the only available in Sydney, and can probably be regarded as representative. Howell's book shows a good general knowledge of the Old Icelandic history and religion, but is notable chiefly for its beautiful illustrations. Howell notes the continuity of civilisation between Old Iceland and modern England,

among the many waves of emigration that rolled westward from the plains of Western Asia, where revelation and tradition concur in bidding us seek the cradle of our ancestry, two claim the attention of every man who bears the English name, or speaks the English tongue. The first of these, the Keltic, drifted across Central Europe and the narrow seas until it came to rest on the shores of Gaul and Britain. The second followed in its wake, but with a stronger sweep and a wider reach, till the plains of Northern Europe, from the shores of the Polar Sea to the foot of the Alps, were occupied by the Teuton or his kinsmen.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> S. Baring-Gould, *Iceland: Its Scenes and Sagas*, London, 1863, p. 67.

<sup>96</sup> F. W. W. Howell, *Icelandic Pictures*, London, 1895, p. 13.

Collingwood's book offers little new for the history of Scandinavian travel books. He also makes the requisite observations about Thingvellir, and the Old Icelandic Commonwealth.

One of the most significant advances in Northern studies was the translation of all the most important Old Norse texts. The earliest translation of the *Poetic Edda* was Amos Cottle's *Mythic Songs of the Edda* (1797), which was inadequate, because it contained inaccuracies. The first move toward accuracy and scholarly translations was Samuel Laing's *Heimskringla* (1844). This work was characterised by great accuracy in the text, and by the long and painstakingly researched *Introduction*. In this Laing provides a brief history of the Vikings, particularly their dealings with England. He attributes virtually every worthwhile element in English society to the Northern influence.

All that men hope for of good government and future improvement in their physical and moral condition – all that civilised men enjoy at this day of civil, religious and political liberty – the British constitution, representative legislature, the trial by jury, security of prosperity, freedom of mind and person, the influence of public opinion over public affairs, the Reformation, the liberty of the Press, the spirit of the age – all that is or has been of value to man in modern times as a member of society, either in Europe or in the New World, may be traced to the spark left burning upon our shores by these Northern barbarians.<sup>97</sup>

Laing emphasised the literary sophistication of the pagan Scandinavians, and the fact that their literature was a vernacular product. The Anglo-Saxons had become Latinised, something which Laing holds against them. He also likens the work of Snorri to that of Livy in establishing the history of the kings of Norway. He believes the Norse literature to be so superior to that of the Anglo-Saxons that he is moved to ask

if the Anglo-Saxons were not the barbarians of the two – a people, to judge from their history, without national feelings, interests or spirit, sunk in abject superstition, and with no literature among them but what belonged to a class of men bred in the cloister, using only the Latin language.<sup>98</sup>

A tolerant account is offered of the religion of ancient Scandinavia, along with a discussion of the euhemerism of Snorri Sturluson. Laing's understanding of the everyday life of the Vikings is comprehensive, and in his *Introduction* he does all he can to make the

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<sup>97</sup> S. Laing, *The Heimskringla: or the Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*, 3 volumes, London, 1844, vol. 1, pp. 7-8.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 33.

reader favour the Northmen. The old stereotype of the fighting and drinking Viking is never alluded to.

George Webbe Dasent, one of the more prolific translators of the nineteenth century, had met Jacob Grimm in 1840, while in Stockholm on a diplomatic mission. He subsequently took up the study of Northern history and languages and in 1842 translated the *Prose Edda*. In 1859 he translated Asbjörnsen and Moe's *Norske Folkeeventyr* under the title *Popular Tales from the Norse*. It was in fact popular – but as he offers no comment on the people who produced the folktales in the collection, it merits no discussion here. His main comment on the literature of the North came later, in the *Introduction* to his *Story of Burnt Njal* (1861).

This *Introduction* is as detailed and accurate as that of Laing's mentioned above; however, much more attention is paid to the political structure of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth, and to the problems which beset the system and eventually defeated it. Dasent's admiration for the Northmen is apparent; of them he writes

they combined in a wonderful degree, the dash, and daring, and genius of the Athenian, with the deliberate valour and mother wit of the Spartan mind... No feat was too daring for their courage to attempt, and no race in any time, whether ancient or modern, has ever shown greater aptness in suiting themselves, at the shortest notice, to the peculiar circumstances of every case.<sup>99</sup>

1866 saw the publication of Sir Edmund Head's translation of the *Viga-Glum's Saga*, and the *Edda Sæmundr* of Benjamin Thorpe. The former work was prefaced with Head's assertion that the Sagas

were composed for the men who have left their mark in every corner of Europe, and whose language and laws are at this moment important elements in the speech and institutions of England, America and Australia.<sup>100</sup>

Benjamin Thorpe (1782-1870) occupies a more important place in the history of Viking studies. His *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England* (1840) has been mentioned in Chapter Three; and he edited two collections of Anglo-Saxon poetry, the *Codex Exoniensis* (1842) and the *Analecta Anglo-Saxonica* (1834-1868). His translation of J. M. Leppenberg's two *Histories* have been discussed in Chapter Two, and he collected Norse

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<sup>99</sup> G. W. Dasent, *The Story of Burnt Njal or Life at the end of the tenth century*, Edinburgh, 1861, pp. clxxv-clxxx.

<sup>100</sup> Sir E. Head, *Viga Glum's Saga*, London, 1866, p. vii.



and German folktales, which were published as *Northern Mythology* (1851) and *Yule Tide Stories* (1853).

The *Edda Sæmundr* was his last published work before he died; and it was a reliable translation, but went out of print rather quickly. Thorpe was a friend and colleague of John Kemble and

of his own generation he probably did more than any man to refute Kemble's charge against English scholars of apathy in relation to Anglo-Saxon literature and philology.<sup>101</sup>

The next of Dasent's translations was *The Story of Gisli the Outlaw* (1866). This was a simpler form of translation, almost designed as a children's book. It has a preface stressing virtually the same points as *Burnt Njal*. Both works suggest that Dasent was an adherent of the Aryan racial theory, as were many of his contemporaries. He later became involved with editing a series of books entitled *Icelandic sagas and other historical documents relating to the settlements and descents of the Northmen on the British Isles*<sup>102</sup>, which were printed under Royal patronage.

Other valuable translations were done by two famous English/Icelandic scholarly teams, William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, and F. York Powell and Guðbrandur Vigfússon. The achievements of the former duo are discussed in the following chapter; and the latter produced the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (a massive treatise on Northern poetry, which included a translation of the *Poetic Edda*). Vigfússon alone edited the *Hakonar Saga* (1887) and the *Orkneyinga Saga* (1887) for the Rolls series.

In the area of poetry, the first Englishman to work Norse themes into a classically conceived poetical work was Thomas Gray (1716-1771). Gray was a Cambridge academic and during the last three years of his life was Professor of History and Modern Languages. One sees in him a combination of the Celtic and the Norse; the former in *The Bard* (1757) and the latter in the *Fatal Sisters* (1761) and the *Descent of Odin* (1761). Gray would seem to have been extremely influential on the Continent, and in Scandinavia itself. One of his admirers was Tegner, who featured in Chapter Two.

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<sup>101</sup> Sir L. Stephen, op. cit.

<sup>102</sup> Dasent edited and translated Volume III, *The Orkneyinger's Saga*, and Volume IV, *The Saga of Hacon and a fragment of the Saga of Magnus*.

Matthew Arnold's *Baldur Dead* (1853) was an effort along similar lines. It was a fairly accurate retelling of the Baldur myth, which however, lacked any debt to the Northern spirit in its composition. It remains essentially a classically conceived poetical work, unlike the efforts of William Morris, which were conceived as latter day manifestations of the Northern muse, or Gordon Bottomley's drama from the *Njals Saga*, *The Riding to Lithend* (1908). Ralph Berger Allen, a student of the influence of Viking literature on English literature writes

a survey of Icelandic studies in English shows that the earliest interest in Icelandic literature evidenced by both scholars and writers lay in its poetry, then in its historical significance; and finally, when the great manuscripts of the Sagas became available, in the glories of its prose.<sup>103</sup>

This is an accurate assessment; Bishop Percy, the translator of Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*, began his personal researches into Northern literature with his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.

The influence of Scandinavia upon Thomas Carlyle may well be described as philosophical. His later work, the *Early Kings of Norway* (1875) is a hotch potch of fact and fancy which is of little use to the serious scholar, his earlier *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841) affords in its first essay a fascinating study of Odin, the hero as divinity. The Englishmen of the nineteenth century greatly admired the individualism of the Old Norse way of life.

Their religion was not one which encouraged dependence upon the gods, and there were among them many who believed in their own strength and courage. The Scandinavian type of paganism bred self-reliant men, and the social system which developed was also individualistic, with each man responsible for his own destiny, and legal equality amongst those born free. Therefore

the Hero idea is in itself highly compatible with that 'worship of courage' which has been universally accepted as a basic ethical concept in the Edda.<sup>104</sup>

Carlyle regarded Norse mythology as the belief system of the forefathers of the modern English; so therefore it was significant. He did not, however, allow it any truth value. It was merely a collection of stories which had grown up around a group of persons.

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<sup>103</sup> R. B. Allen, *Old Icelandic Sources in the English Novel*, Philadelphia, 1933, p. 104.

He therefore appears to subscribe to a ‘clever man’ theory of the origin of religion. He agrees that there is no reliable record of a historical Odin, but considers the attributes given to him by Snorri;

a teacher, and a captain of soul and body; a Hero of worth immeasurable; admiration for whom, transcending the known bounds, became adoration.<sup>105</sup>

Carlyle’s Hero is a ‘superman’ figure (like the more famous supermen of Nietzsche), and according to his scale, the Hero as divinity is the Hero *par excellence*; the Hero as prophet, or poet, and so on is a lesser incarnation.

Carlyle has none of Morris’ passionate love of the religion and literature of the Viking Age, and

he was certainly not concerned with the coming of Odin as a part of Scandinavian mythology; rather, he was struck by the great usefulness of Odin as a figure for men into Hero, Hero into god. This usefulness it will be observed, is determined by the dogmatic purpose of Carlyle’s *Hero Worship*; it is not a utility inherent in the Scandinavian myths which deal with Odinic worship. Carlyle thus directs the coming of Odin into a didactic channel, with only casual regard for what Odin meant to the Norsemen as an ethical symbol.<sup>106</sup>

This chapter will conclude with a discussion of a few purely historical works relating to pre-Christian Scandinavia, and the intentions behind publication. *Scandinavia* by Andrew Crichton and Henry Wheaton (1838) is a two-volume work which commences with the Classical accounts of the Hyperboreans, and ends with a brief history of nineteenth century Scandinavia, treating each country separately. The authors are acquainted with the *Heimskringla*, and accept that Odin was a historical figure, although they conclude

nothing certain is known beyond the historical fact, that he was the author of a new religion, and the importer of arts and improvements, with which, before his arrival, the rude and primitive inhabitants of the North were altogether unacquainted.<sup>107</sup>

Like Carlyle, Crichton and Wheaton play down the religious value of Scandinavian paganism, and the abilities of Odin are explained as chicanery which was sophisticated

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<sup>104</sup> K. Litzenberg, *The Victorians and the Vikings: A Bibliographical Essay on Anglo-Norse Literary Relations*, University of Michigan Press, 1947, p. 20.

<sup>105</sup> T. Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, London, 1841, p. 29.

<sup>106</sup> K. Litzenberg, op. cit., 1947, p. 21.

<sup>107</sup> A. Crichton and H. Wheaton, *Scandinavia: Ancient and Modern*, 2 volumes, Edinburgh, 1838, vol. 1, p. 82.

enough to convince an essentially backward and credulous people. If the religion of the Vikings was valueless, what of their lifestyle? This too takes a beating; with the universal occupation of Vikings given as piracy, and their legal and moral codes reduced to a collection of rules expedient for a military society.

War was not only the ruling passion of its inhabitants, but the source of wealth, fame and honour. With them cowardice was the basest crime; and they seemed to recognise no other virtues but those of a military nature.<sup>108</sup>

This work does not seek to improve the public image of the Vikings and it is possible that this is so because it is an early work, dated 1838. Although at that time some pro-Scandinavian efforts had been published, it was later in the nineteenth century when the movement really made some headway.

The Lothian Prize-winning essay of 1877 was by C. A. Vansittart Conybeare, and entitled *The Place of Iceland in the History of European Institutions*. Of all the works discussed thus far, this is the most apposite. It is brimful of enthusiasm for all things Icelandic, and discusses in great detail the heritage of the Viking Age which is possessed by the modern English, German and French nations. Many of the ideological developments of the nineteenth century are apparent in the stance taken by Conybeare. He stresses the lack of importance of religious observance, noting

the fact that a slave could administer the temple services seems to indicate that but small consideration was in those days bestowed upon religious ceremonial.<sup>109</sup>

More importantly, he makes no comment concerning the introduction of Christianity at all. Attacks upon the general acceptance of Christianity had occurred throughout history, but the nineteenth was the century in which large sections of the public became exposed to ideas which struck at the roots of Christianity; and the seeds of agnosticism and atheism were firmly sown.

Conybeare is interested in convincing his readers that they should find much to be proud of in their Viking ancestry, and claim that

especially interesting to the Englishman, must that land be, which became the home of freedom at a time when all other nations were passing under the yoke

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 168.

<sup>109</sup> C. A. V. Conybeare, *The Place of Iceland in the History of European Institutions*, being the Lothian Prize essay, London, 1877, p. 27.

of tyranny; whose inhabitants were fired with that same spirit of independence, and enthusiastic love of liberty, which has ever since been the most marked characteristic of their latest descendents.<sup>110</sup>

The potted history of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth which forms the main body of the essay, is thorough and quite objective. The judicial and legislative processes and institutions are described with great care and accuracy; the description would stand against any twentieth century analysis. There is great admiration shown, but the ultimate lack of success in the Icelandic experiment is not disguised by Conybeare. The attempt by the refugees from Norway to build a society of equals, governed representatively and without a sovereign, is presented in all its uniqueness and its sophistication, and the sheer enormity of the venture inspires Conybeare to say

Iceland truly deserves the title of the Athens of the North; the love of law, and the litigious spirit of its inhabitants remind us of the ancient Athenians, even more than the splendour of their literature<sup>111</sup>

Despite the generous praise, the darker side of Viking life is presented uncompromisingly. Theirs was a harsh life, and their attacks on foreign lands were brutal and unprovoked, for the most part. The Icelandic Commonwealth eventually disintegrated amidst clan warfare; an oligarchy developed, and the country which so loved liberty ended subject to Norway, and later to Denmark. Most sadly the flaws which led to the decline came from within;

the very principle of individual liberty, which it had been the pride of the Northmen to maintain, itself contributed in no small degree to the destruction of the nation's freedom.<sup>112</sup>

This new realism in approaching the pre-Christian Scandinavians does not mean that there is an absence of ideological intent in the essay. Conybeare is concerned to prove the essentially Viking nature of modern England. That the English and the Vikings are the same people is his main point; they live under the same legal and political institutions. He concludes

nor can it be doubted that England inherits from the race of men who colonised Iceland, both directly through the Northmen who visited and settled on British shores, and indirectly through the Norman Conquest, those sturdy qualities

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

which have carried her sons triumphantly to every quarter of the globe; and enabled them to multiply throughout the world prosperous communities, possessing the same free and independent natures as their Scandinavian forefathers, and enjoying the blessings of those free institutions, and that ‘self government’ which seem peculiar to the Teutonic race.<sup>113</sup>

That statement not only condones, but also legitimates the programme of extensive colonisation which the English had embarked upon through the nineteenth century. This had resulted in the subjection of India, China and Japan (though only partially in the last case), the two Opium Wars, the atrocities of the British Raj; and the exploitation of countless smaller and less important colonies.

This theme of colonisation is picked up in *The Finding of Wineland the Good* (1890) by Arthur M. Reeves. This book is a translation and analysis of the Icelandic texts dealing with the discovery of Wineland (or Vinland), by Icelanders at the beginning of the eleventh century. Vinland has been reliably identified with the American continent. Though the Icelanders called it “the good”

there is no suggestion in Icelandic writings of a permanent occupation of the country, and after the exploration at the beginning of the eleventh century, it is not known that Wineland was ever again visited by Icelanders, although it would appear that a voyage thither was attempted in the year 1121, but with what results, is not known.<sup>114</sup>

What is significant about this work is that Reeves claims that the discovery of America by the Vikings has been a matter of great topicality for some time because the central question was not actually “who (which race) first discovered America?”, but “which Indo-European (Aryan) first discovered America?”. It was clear that the American continent had been inhabited by the Indians for some thousands of years; if the Vikings were the first Europeans to set foot in America, and not the Spaniards of the fifteenth century, there was another victory of the North over the South.

The same set of conclusions may be drawn from this chapter as were drawn from Chapter Three. The only real difference is that in this case the materials used are Scandinavian, while in Chapter Three they were Anglo-Saxon. England was trying to slough off the Roman sections of her past, and revivify the German influences, in order to

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>114</sup> A. M. Reeves, *The Finding of Wineland the Good: The History of the Icelandic Discovery of America*, London, 1890, p. 6.

disassociate herself from nineteenth century France, and all that she stood for. The success which this venture had was limited; the great majority of English and English-speaking people of the twentieth century are ignorant of it, and have mental stereotypes of the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons as crude as those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

## Chapter Five: William Morris and the Viking Age

### The Old Icelandic Commonwealth as a Prototype of the Socialist State

William Morris, the eldest son and third child of William Morris and Emma Shelton, was born at Elm House, Clay Hill, Walthamstow, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, 1834.<sup>115</sup>

In his sixty two years he made contributions to English literature and the visual arts, and was one of the most influential leaders of the British Socialist movement. He had been a sickly child, but highly intelligent; and by the age of six was reading Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels. That, and the fact that he rode around Epping Forest in a toy suit of armour are the two most famous anecdotes of his childhood, which appears to have been quiet and uneventful.

He was educated at Marlborough College, which was at that time rather more liberal and less restrictive than the more established English public schools. While he was there he cultivated his love of things medieval;

the school library was well stocked with books on archaeology and medieval architecture, and before he left school, Morris had picked up most of what there was to be known about English Gothic.<sup>116</sup>

The Romantic movement had entered its twilight during Morris' early years,

what had once been a passionate protest against an intolerable social reality was to become little more than a yearning nostalgia or a sweet complaint.<sup>117</sup>

Medievalism, as adopted by the youthful Morris, was a form of Romanticism. After leaving school he gained entrance to Exeter College, Oxford, where he roamed with Edward Burne-Jones, who was to be his lifelong friend. Both were, at that time, deeply interested in religion and Morris intended to enter the Church.

Their studies led them elsewhere; Burne-Jones drew, and shared Morris' enthusiasm for all things medieval; and together they discovered Carlyle's *Past and Present* and Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*. The latter work was an especial

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<sup>115</sup> J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 volumes, London, 1899, vol. 1, p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> P. Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends*, Harmondsworth, 1967, p. 22.

<sup>117</sup> E. P. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 1.



revelation. Morris' stories 'Lindenburg Pool' and 'Gertha's Lovers', written for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, were both based on incidents described by Thorpe in that work.

A new world opened to Morris in the pages of Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*, a world which, as he grew older, was to dominate his whole imagination.<sup>118</sup>

Dante Gabriel Rossetti contributed to Morris' magazine, a consequence of which was Morris' involvement in the little group of artists calling themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In 1856 Morris and Burne-Jones took rooms in Red Lion Square (where Rossetti had roamed five years earlier) and their involvement with the Brotherhood began in earnest. At the time John Ruskin was the great prophet of art. He introduced young men to the Pre-Raphaelite tradition, which they embraced with great fervour, admiring everything Medieval, especially to do with religion. The combination of theology and aestheticism, in a setting which could not have been more English, pointed in the direction of later Anglo-Catholicism. This however, was Southern, and Morris was already looking to the North.

The Pre-Raphaelites were genuinely free-thinking, and attempted to democratise art, by returning to the medieval (painting before Raphael Sanzio) when, they believed, art had been free from the shackles of capitalism. Some of the paintings, especially "Christ in the House of his parents" by John Everett Millais, caused scandals: Millais was castigated because he had portrayed the Holy Family as hardworking peasants, with none of the conventions considered appropriate to the depiction of divinity.

Morris and Burne-Jones decorated their apartments in an exaggeratedly Medieval fashion, and Morris worked on his poetry, which was to be published as *The Defense of Guinevere and other Poems* (1855). This was written under the influence of Jane Burden, the beautiful ostler's daughter whom Rossetti had invited to model for the Brotherhood. On April 26, 1859, Morris and Jane were married; principally, it seems because Rossetti believed it was a good idea. It is clear they were not closely acquainted; and after the first few years, in which Morris was dizzyingly in love, and their two daughters Jane Alice (Jenny) and Mary (May) were born, the marriage was unhappy.

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<sup>118</sup> P. Henderson, op. cit., p. 31.

In 1862 Morris set up his firm, which aimed to produce goods of exceptionally high quality, which were also affordable. This, unfortunately did not eventuate. Even after Morris joined the Socialist movement,

he not only spent much of his inherited wealth but devoted the greater part of his mature years to renouncing (and denouncing) the very principles that had enabled him to become a person sufficiently important for his repudiation to be worthwhile.<sup>119</sup>

The furniture produced by his firm was affordable only to the wealthy.

He continued to write, but his work was not popular, despite the fact that the *Life and Death of Jason* (1867) was critically acclaimed. He had discovered the Norse translations of George Webbe Dasent in the 1860's, and in 1868 he published the first part of *The Earthly Paradise* (a work which took five years to complete) which was also the first of his works to show a Northern influence. The intention of the work was vaguely Chaucerian, a collection of tales which covered the epic cycles of the Northern and the Classical worlds.

One of the principal reasons for the appearance of Northern elements in his work was his meeting with Eiríkr Magnússon, an Icelandic residing in England, in 1868. Of this meeting Magnússon wrote

our acquaintance began first in August 1868...his volubility of speech struck me no less than the extensive information he displayed about Iceland and Icelandic literature generally, acquired of course at second hand...I felt I had never come across a more attractive personality.<sup>120</sup>

With Magnússon, Morris threw himself into the study of the Icelandic language, and formed a partnership which was to be especially fruitful.

Morris did not wish to learn grammar, and concentrated on vocabulary, about which Magnússon notes

what charmed Morris most was the directness with which a sage man would deal with the relations of man to man...In fact, he found on every page an echo of his own buoyant, somewhat masterful mind, a marked characteristic of which was a passionate intolerance of all interference with natural right and rational freedom.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> C. Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris*, The University of Virginia Press, 1978, p. 3.

<sup>120</sup> W. Morris and E. Magnússon, *The Stories of the Kings of Norway: called the round world (Heimskringla)*, 4 volumes, London, 1893-1905, vol. 4, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. xiv.

There was a personal reason for Morris' need of a new interest; from 1867 his wife Jane and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (a widower since the suicide of his wife and model Lizzie Siddal in 1865) had been publicly linked, and there was no doubt that they were lovers. Jane seems to have been totally unsuited to Morris; he was physically vigorous, loud-voiced and enthusiastic, she was silent rather than quiet, of a retiring temperament, content to observe rather than participate, and was constantly in poor health.

Morris remained friendly with Rossetti, and appears never to have reproached his wife, but rather to have punished himself for having failed her. It is only natural, however, that at this stage he should wish to disassociate himself from Pre-Raphaelitism; Jane being its quintessential model, and Rossetti its chief painter. He wanted to escape from the enervating atmosphere of the South into something more bracing. He wrote of the Sagas

the delightful freshness and independence of thought of them, the air of freedom which breathes through them, their worship of courage (the great virtue of the human race), their utter unconventionality, took my heart by storm.<sup>122</sup>

The virtue of courage was one which he needed himself in 1868, courage, not in the presence of hope and success, but in the face of failure and defeat and hostile fate – this quality so opposed to the self-indulgent melancholy of Romanticism in its decline, was surely one of which he felt the need, not only to face the world, but in his personal life as well?<sup>123</sup>

Soon he had completed a translation of *Eyrbyggja Saga*, which he wrote out and illuminated in 1870. It was published as Volume II of The Saga Library, and many more were to follow. Their main fault is the archaic language in which they are cast. Morris had no doubt good reasons for wanting to produce a type of English which was as close as possible to the cadences of the original, and for not wanting to create the wrong atmosphere by using the wrong style. But the result was odd, and hardly easy reading. This was particularly unfortunate, because Morris' vision of Iceland came to be more and more closely related to his developing Socialism – and certainly his translations could not be read by the unprepared.

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<sup>122</sup> A. Briggs (ed.), *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, Harmondsworth, 1962, p. 31.

<sup>123</sup> E. P. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

1871 was a significant year for Morris. He purchased Kelmscott Manor, and in June made a trip to Iceland with Magnusson and some other friends, Charles Faulkner and Mr. W. H. Evans. His journals written in very plain English, and it emerges from them that Iceland was a great revelation to him. The trip took in most of the “sights” and Morris was deeply moved by them;

just as we turn out of the valley and onto the neck, we come on a knoll, the site of Swala-Stead, where Vali of the Bandamanna (saga) was murdered; Viðalin told us of it that many stories were current of it and of Swala’s witchcraft, and repeated a rhyme which says how the day will come when the big house of the Swala-Stead shall be lower than the cot of Viðidale-tongue.<sup>124</sup>

It is interesting to note in Morris’ diaries how often the words ‘dreadful’, ‘horrid’, ‘awful’, ‘savage’, ‘mournful’, ‘monstrous’, ‘dreary’ and the like occur.

the journey through Iceland in the summer of 1871 had, both before and after its occurrence, an importance in Morris’ life that can hardly be over-estimated, and which, even to those who knew him well, was not wholly intelligible...the heroic stories of Iceland stood in his mind at the head of the world’s literature; the deeds which they chronicled were the summit in their tragic force of all human achievement and the Icelandic Republic represented more nearly than any other state of things recorded in history, the political and social framework of life which satisfied his mind and imagination...with such depth of awe and prostration of spirit a pilgrim might approach the desolate and holy places of a land where gods had once walked in the likeness of men.<sup>125</sup>

He visited Iceland again in 1873, and felt once more the special qualities of the land, and he began work on *Sigurd the Volsung* which he eventually published in 1876, and became his acknowledged masterpiece. Jane’s continued affair with Rossetti has been suggested as one reason why the *Volsunga Saga* would appeal to Morris;

the great love-saga of the North, the *Volsunga* was almost bound to be the favourite of a man who tended to see life at that time (1870) in terms of blood brotherhood betrayed, of paradise ruined by something mysterious and malignant as witchcraft, of bitter resentment uncrowning a glorious soul.<sup>126</sup>

It has been claimed that *Sigurd* is really Morris’ great contribution to social philosophy, for Morris not only used the *Volsunga Saga*, he rewrote and expanded it, till it contained a great deal not present in the original. His Sigurd is a leveller of classes,

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<sup>124</sup> W. Morris, *Journals of Travel in Iceland: 1871 and 1873*, Volume VIII in the “Collected Works of William Morris”, edited by May Morris, London, 1911, p. 97.

<sup>125</sup> J. W. Mackail, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 247.

chivalrous to all manner of people, and he is “golden”, in contrast to the Niblungs, who are dark and selfish, where Sigurd is altruistic.

and thus, although in *Sigurd* Morris was working on the creation of a great epic poem for the race, designed primarily as literature and not as propaganda, and although he was following closely the Old Norse models, he could not help registering his disgust with conditions under the ‘old gods’ – with materialistic concepts – and, by the introduction of his own ideals, hinted at the nature of things as they should be.<sup>127</sup>

*Sigurd* was propaganda, not only for Morris’ view of society, but because Morris and Magnusson were deliberately attempting to get the English people to appreciate the *Volsunga Saga*. Of it they wrote

for this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks – to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been – a story too – then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.<sup>128</sup>

If Morris’ intentions were not, in 1876, entirely Socialistically propagandist, they were in a nationalist sense. He was deeply interested in Aryan theory, although this point is generally not made about him. Aryanism in the nineteenth century was quite respectable, and found in various intellectual circles.<sup>129</sup>

The influence of the world of the Vikings was felt in its utmost fullness by William Morris. He not only studied the myths and learned the language, and appreciated the political system; he believed in the world of the Vikings rather more firmly than he believed in his own society and century. When writing about gods he noted

one by one, their work accomplished, they die: till at last the great destruction breaks out all things, and the old earth and heavens are gone, and then a new heaven and earth...and what shall be our share in it? Well, sometimes we must needs think that we shall live again: yet if that were not, would it not be enough that we helped to make this unnamable glory, and lived not altogether deedless. Think of the joy we have in praising great men, and how we turn their stories over and over, and fashion their lives for our joy: and this also we ourselves may give the world.

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<sup>126</sup> R. Marshall, *William Morris and His Earthly Paradises*, Compton Press, 1979, p. 172.

<sup>127</sup> L. E. Grey, *William Morris: Prophet of England’s New Order*, Cassell and Company, 1949, p. 131.

<sup>128</sup> W. Morris and E. Magnusson, *Volsunga Saga*, London, 1876, p. xlv.

<sup>129</sup> C. Oberg, op. cit., p. 112.

This seems to me pretty much the religion of the Northmen. I think one could be a happy man if one could hold it.<sup>130</sup>

The great destruction just referred to came to hold a particular position in Morris' philosophy. On one hand it was the Ragnarök of Norse mythology; on the other it was the revolution foreseen by Marx and the Socialist movement. The relevance of *Sigurd the Volsung* was not perceived by the critics; one contemporary wrote that a

poem, therefore, which, like *Sigurd* reflects, with hard, uncompromising realism, an obsolete code of ethics, and a barbarous condition of society finds itself irreconcilably at discord with the key of nineteenth century feeling.<sup>131</sup>

Morris moved closer to Socialism in the years following the publication of *Sigurd the Volsung*, though his relationship with the actual organised Socialist movement was unusual. He was, basically, a Marxist when he died. He had only been converted to Marxism late in life, the Paris Commune and the alliance of Russia and Turkey in 1878 making him more politically aware. His disillusionment with liberalism came around 1882, and in 1883 he first read Marx. Marx impressed Morris considerably, and he was personally convinced of the reality of class struggle and the inevitability of revolution.

Aside from these political changes, Morris worked with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and continued to write and to lecture on arts and crafts. From 1878 to 1883

the transformation of the eccentric artist and romantic literary man into the Socialist agitator may be counted among the great conversions of the world.<sup>132</sup>

The change does not seem so great when one considers that Morris met Socialism, not in 1883 reading Marx, but in the late 1860's reading the sagas of the Old Icelanders. His admiration of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth was enormous, and he writes of the *Bandamanna Saga*:

the story of the legal process is, of course, dramatic rather than historical. The core of the tale, the process itself, is evidently aimed at the administration of justice in Iceland at the time: a demonstration against judicial red tape which

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<sup>130</sup> J. W. Mackail, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 344.

<sup>131</sup> H. G. Hewlett, "Mr. Morris' *Sigurd* and the *Nibelungenlied*", *Fraser's Magazine*, issue 106, July 1877, pp. 96-112.

<sup>132</sup> E. P. Thompson, op. cit., p. 243.

preserves the husk, the formality, of the law, while the kernel, substance, equity, is left to take care of itself as best it may.<sup>133</sup>

This is exactly the type of protest which Morris believed himself to be making in Victorian times. He campaigned for one legal system applicable to all people, and the ability of all people to employ the legal process if they had been wronged.

May Morris, his younger daughter, makes the comparison between Morris' activities of the law men in Iceland.

speaking to and writing for simple people in the Socialist times of the eighties in England, something is in him of the northern chief pleading his cause in the open-air parliament by the sapphire lake among the mountains of Iceland: the wide simplicity of Nature endows such men with some echo of herself, rending the complicated network of present day life to show glimpses of the common sense and logic that lie at the heart of all things.<sup>134</sup>

It is worth noting that Miss Morris should not be taken at face value. She must have been particularly aware of her role as the closer of the Canon Of William Morris. She edited her father's *Complete Works*, and later wrote his biography, which means she was in a position to present whatever picture of her father she chose.

It is also interesting that her elder sister Jenny was William's favourite of the two girls, and that, and that he had had high hopes for her before she became an invalid in her teen years due to epilepsy. Her health prevented Jenny from editing her father's writings, so the less favoured but infinitely more capable May stepped in. At least she could do something for her father that no-one else could; she could immortalise him. So May is not always to be unquestioningly accepted.

So it is fortunate that there are so many sources which speak of Morris' attachment to Iceland. He was even impressed with its political condition in the nineteenth century, the condition of society is peculiar - absence of towns, social equality, no abject poverty or great wealth, rarity of crime, making it easy for the whole country to be administered as a co-operative commonwealth without the great and striking changes rendered necessary by more complicated systems.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> W. Morris and E. Magnusson, *The Story of Howard the Halt*, vol. 1 of *The Saga Library*, London, 1891, p. xxvii.

<sup>134</sup> M. Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, vol. 1, p. 497.

<sup>135</sup> W. Morris and E. Magnusson, *Volsunga Saga*, p. xxix.

What then, was the influence of pre-Christian Scandinavia on the Socialism of William Morris? One author has devoted his energies to this question – Karl Litzenberg. He has written a series of articles which examine various aspects of Morris’ relationship with the north, and his developing socialism.<sup>136</sup> Of this, he writes

the most amazing aspect of the Old Norse influence upon Morris is a philosophical influence. The very essence of his theory of revolution and the peace which follows, and the idea of convulsion and cataclysm as a prelude to eternal harmony, were not first discovered by Morris in his readings in European social and economic writers. In the *Völuspá* story of Balder the White God, in the legend of Ragnarök, Morris found the very words which he used to express his belief in the ethic of necessity for revolution. That his social and economic philosophy as it was ultimately developed had many connections with contemporaneous socialistic and communistic theory no-one can deny. Yet this does not obscure the fact that the ethical basis of Morris’ social philosophy was always closely related to his strange and stubborn belief in the Ragna Rök of the pagan Norsemen.<sup>137</sup>

Morris’ socialism grew out of a fundamental belief that all men were legally and socially equal. He admired the pride and independence of the Icelanders, and their collective mode of government. He also believed firmly in the class struggle, and of this he observed

this then is the first distinction between the two great classes of modern society; the upper class possesses wealth, the lower class lacks wealth; but there is another distinction to which I will now draw your attention; the class which lacks wealth is the class that produces it, and the class that possesses it does not produce it, it consumes it only.<sup>138</sup>

This is the classic view of the class struggle, with the upper class in power because of its control of the means of production, distribution and exchange.

Morris also accepts that work often is a very dull business; but he believed that work acquired a dignity when each man was working for himself and producing what he needed. His remarks in this case are made in the context of the production of art works, but they may be taken to apply to any sort of work.

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<sup>136</sup> Litzenberg’s articles include “Allusions to the *Elder Edda* in the Non-Norse poems of William Morris”, in *Scandinavian Studies and Notes*, vol. 14, 1935-37, pp. 17-24; “Tyrfing into Excalibur? A Note on William Morris’ unfinished poem *In Arthur’s House*”, in *Scandinavian Studies and Notes*, vol. 15, 1938-39, p. 81; “William Morris and the *Heimskringla*”, same reference as the first article.

<sup>137</sup> K. Litzenberg, op. cit., 1947, p. 24.

<sup>138</sup> W. Morris, *Signs of Change*, volume XXIII in the *Collected Works of William Morris*, London, 1915, p. 128.



Nevertheless there is dull work to be done, and a weary business it is, setting men about such work, and seeing them through it, and I would rather do the work twice over with my own hands than have such a job; but now only let the arts which we are talking of beautify our labour, and be widely spread, intelligent, well understood both by the maker and the user, let them grow in one word popular, and there will be pretty much an end of dull work and its wearing slavery; and no man will any longer have an excuse for evading the blessing of labour.<sup>139</sup>

This sounds particularly idealistic, and Morris was an idealist. But he was also an intensely practical man, and he threw himself vigorously into his Socialism. He was continually lecturing to, and writing for, potential converts to the cause; and he never tried to play down those aspects of his Socialism which would not appeal to his middle class audience. When discussing the necessity of revolution he remarks

even when we explain that we use the word revolution in its etymological sense, and mean by it a change in the basis of society, people are scared at the idea of such a vast change, and beg that you will speak of reform and not revolution.<sup>140</sup>

But Morris would not, and could not, speak of reform and not revolution, because he believed that revolution was a necessity, and he never strayed from that belief. In Norse mythology, Ragnarök also must happen, and the good deeds of the gods and of men might postpone it indefinitely, but eventually it would come.

The revolution may be put off by Parliamentary reform, but it too would arrive. He paralleled this revolution with events of past times, while keeping it clear that this time would be different. One of his illustrations was the Peasants' Revolt, and he likened the modern Socialists to John Ball and Wat Tyler attempting to destroy serfdom. The Peasants' Revolt appears in his lecture material, and also in the prose romance, *A Dream of John Ball*.

This is a conversation between John Ball, and a Dreamer, who gives Ball instructions; and

as the dialogue between John Ball and the Dreamer continues, Morris' polemical purpose becomes clear. The Dreamer argues that the hypothesis of the existence of an immaterial soul and a scheme of spiritual final rewards and punishments is in fact an unnecessary one, and that the true fellowship is the fellowship of man on earth. The task that John has embraced is in fact one that

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<sup>139</sup> W. Morris, op. cit., vol. XXII in the *Collected Works*, p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> W. Morris, op. cit., vol. XXIII in the *Collected Works*, p. 3.

is capable of earthly fulfillment and without this immanent hope John's social efforts are meaningless.<sup>141</sup>

The revolution that Morris believed in was different from the Peasants' Revolt and the French Revolution and countless other insurrections because it will usher in a time of perfect calm and peace. The ideal society will flourish without trouble or strife after this final conflagration. Morris makes this quite clear

now you must not suppose, therefore, that the revolutionary struggle of today, though it may be accompanied (and necessarily) by violent insurrection, is paralleled by the insurrections of past times.<sup>142</sup>

It appears naive of a highly educated man such as Morris to believe that the human condition, and human nature, would be entirely altered by a revolution. It must be remembered that Ragnarök is a spiritual revolution, one in which old gods die and the old world is obliterated, and the world and the gods which emerge from it are completely new and good. Morris' Socialist revolution has a spiritual dimension, in that the old gods (capitalism, lust for money, industrialism, and so on) will die completely, and the surviving people will no longer want them.

Holbrook Jackson, a critic, when summing up the personalities of the 1890's writes of William Morris that he

always had at the back of his mind the dream of a perfect state. Always busy in the visible world, he was still busier in the Utopia of his fantasy. The beautiful things he made were imported to this world from that Utopia, and their very importation was an act of propaganda.<sup>143</sup>

But Morris could also be realistic. He knew that any revolution would be bloody. In his Utopian fantasy *News from Nowhere* (which, though an adolescent for an elderly man, gives one a fairly clear idea of what Morris saw his ideal society to be) the traveler in the perfect land asks an old man

'Tell me one thing, if you can' said I, 'Did the change, the "Revolution" it used to be called, come peacefully?' 'Peacefully?' said he; 'What peace was there amongst those poor confused wretches of the nineteenth century? It was war from beginning to end, bitter war, till hope and pleasure put an end to it.'<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> B. J. Bono, "The prose fictions of William Morris: A Study in the literary aesthetic of a Victorian social reformer", in W. Fredeman, *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 13, nos. 3 &4, 1975, p. 55.

<sup>142</sup> W. Morris, op. cit., vol. XXIII of the *Collected Works*, p. 230.

<sup>143</sup> H. Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, London, 1922, p. 248.

<sup>144</sup> W. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, J. Redmond (ed.), London, 1970, p. 88.

What then, does the *Völuspá* say of Ragnarök? And, does this resemble Morris' vision of the Socialist revolution, and the society which will be the result of it? Ragnarök is a central part of the Old Norse world view. It is suggested in the mythological poems that knowledge of the end of the world has been with Odin from the beginning. It appears that good actions, and restraint when provoked, can put off the holocaust but it will eventually come. This is similar to Morris' view of the impending revolution.

Morris eventually lost heart with the Socialist Party, but he never lost hope in the future:

by the summer of 1888 Morris knew that somehow he and the pioneers had failed in their aim of building a revolutionary party. And from that time onward he looked increasingly across the intervening years to a future in which he never lost confidence.<sup>145</sup>

The *Völuspá* is a poem in which a *völva* (seeress or wise woman) tells of world history, beginning with the creation, and passing through the Golden Age to the time when evil and decline first came into the world. This appears to have been when there came forth three of the giant race,  
all fearful maidens, from Jotunheim.<sup>146</sup>

It could be that these maidens are the Nornir, of whom it is later said

there are the maidens, all things knowing,  
three in the hall, which stands neath the tree.  
One is named 'Weird', the second 'Being' –  
who grave on tablets – but 'Shall' the third.  
They lay down laws, they choose out life,  
they speak the doom of the sons of men.<sup>147</sup>

The world of the Old Norse mythology was one where Fate presides over all things. The world moves according to a predetermined pattern. Socialism as a philosophy subscribes to a deterministic view of the universe, with history passing through inevitable cycles.

The act which triggers the coming of Ragnarök was the unwitting slaughter of Balder, the god of goodness and justice, by his blind brother Hödr. This story ties in with

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<sup>145</sup> E. P. Thompson, op. cit., p. 511.

<sup>146</sup> O. Bray, op. cit., p. 279, paragraph 8.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 283, paragraph 20.

another of the Eddic poems, the *Balder's Dream* (*Baldrs Draumr*), where Balder is troubled by dreams, and Odin, his father, rides to Hel and summons the spirit of a witch from her grave. Reluctantly she answers Odin's questions, and tells him that Balder will die.

The death of Balder is crucial for the hastening of Ragnarök, for once he is dead, there is no justice nor goodness left in the world. Of Ragnarök itself the *Völuspá* has plenty to say. First are the signs that doom is approaching: apart from the role played by the divinities the human race disintegrates as well.

Brothers shall fight and be as murderers;  
Sisters' children shall stain their kinship.  
'Tis ill with the world; comes fearful whoredom,  
a sword-age, axe-age – shields are cloven,  
a wind-age, wolf-age, ere the world sinks.  
Never shall man then spare another.<sup>148</sup>

The enemies of the gods, all evil beings and things, will gather for the final onslaught. Morris foresees that there will be war before the Socialist state can emerge; and the divisions between families were something he had himself experienced. Jane hated his involvement with Socialism, and all his Socialist friends, as did Burne-Jones, his oldest friend. Still Morris persevered.

Eventually the whole world is destroyed in the struggle:  
the sun is darkened, the Earth sinks into the sea,  
from Heaven turn the bright stars away.  
Rages smoke with fire, the life-feeder,  
high flame plays against Heaven itself.<sup>149</sup>

From this destruction comes a new Heaven and a new Earth, and Balder returns from Hel, to rule the new universe. Morris believed that after the revolution justice would be the principle which governed society. This also happens in the Norse mythology. The only survivors of Ragnarök are the best of the gods, and the best of men.

The new age is a permanent one in the *Völuspá*, the *völva* announces  
I see yet a Hall more fair than the sun,  
roofed with gold in the Fire-sheltered realm;  
ever shall dwell there all holy beings,

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 291, paragraph 45.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 295, paragraph 57.

blest with joy through the days of time.<sup>150</sup>

The vision of Ragnarök and of the world which follows it indicates that order will depart from the world, and justice will cease to operate before the final cataclysm. When the disaster finally strikes, morality has disappeared entirely; families kill each other and wars continue purposelessly. This human disturbance is accompanied by natural disasters. After this, the world settles and a new race appears to live in the new world under the rule of justice, forever. Ragnarök is inevitable but despite the destruction it causes, it is essentially a good thing.

All these things appear to fit in very well with William Morris' notion of the coming Revolution. His depiction of the ideal new society in *News from Nowhere* also owes a great deal to the Old Icelandic commonwealth. It is a co-operatively run agricultural society, in which the women are independent and have the same legal rights as men. Everyone has adequate food and clothing, and while people still encounter adversity, there are sensible ways of dealing with it. The desire for wealth has evaporated, and there is a uniformity of living standards.

Not all of these conditions were present in the Viking Age; but there is no doubt that Morris romanticised the period, especially the government of Iceland. The Icelandic Commonwealth was not altogether admirable;

for three hundred years after its settlement Iceland was a republic, but it was not a peaceful state, and both before and after the introduction of Christianity the chiefs carried on the most deadly and cruel wars against each other, and few men living on the island were left to enjoy what they owned in quiet. This colony had been settled by men who would not bear one master nor respect the rank of king or jarl, but within a few generations the descendents of those very men were troubled by many masters, and saw their equals striving for more power than any king or jarl in the old country had ever used.<sup>151</sup>

Despite his Romanticism, Morris never gave an entirely new and ideological impetus to Scandinavian studies in the Victorian Era. To use Viking society as a model for a Socialist Utopia was indeed unusual. Perhaps the degree of influence of the *Poetic Edda* on Morris' vision of the impending revolution has hitherto been downplayed.

Unfortunately this thesis is being written without being able to locate a vital article by

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 297, paragraph 64.

<sup>151</sup> E. C. Otté, op. cit., p. 77.

Litzenberg, entitled “William Morris and the Doom of the Gods”, published in *Essays and Stories in English and Comparative Literature*. An attempt has been made to reconstruct the contents of this article by reference to other works by Karl Litzenberg.

Certainly there has been a tendency to treat Morris’ Socialist writings as something entirely separated from his Icelandic translations, and even from his poetry and prose. This is a pity, because his fiction and factual writings combine to produce a fascinating study, for, as Karl Litzenberg writes

we know now that there is a strikingly real relationship between his archaism in language, his love for the past and his strange manner of dress; and we have no difficulty in discerning that the establishment of Merton Abbey and the desire for the actuality of ragna rök were activated by a single social ideal.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> K. Litzenberg, “William Morris and the Reviews: A Study in the Fame of the Poet”, *The Review of English Studies*, XII, 48, October 1936, p. 427.

## Chapter Six: Aryanism, The Vikings and Racial Discrimination

Aryanism has been alluded to in previous chapters: it is the belief in a series of migrations from Central Asia moving westward, of a people called the Aryans, or Indo-Europeans. The name “Aryan” means noble; the Aryans were believed to have, by virtue of their intellectual superiority, conquered all the lands into which they migrated. The Indo-European migrations did take place, and the theory itself is not particularly harmful stated in this simple form.

However, it was put to use by groups of people who had wished to legitimise the purported superiority of particular races, and (in a logical, if ruthless, development) the eventual extermination of recognisably “inferior” races. Many of the scholars already discussed in this piece adhered to some form of Aryan theory: Edward Freeman, the English historian, had been fascinated by Aryan superiority, and had passionately despised non-Aryans, the archetype of which was (in his opinion) the Turk. Other scholarly works showed an increasing fondness for Aryanism throughout the nineteenth century, and others engaged in political manipulation of this theory.

Rasmus Anderson, a scholar chiefly known for his translations, which included Frederick Winkel Horn’s *History of Scandinavian Literature* (1901) and Viktor Rydberg’s *Researches in Teutonic Mythology* (1891), published his *Norse Mythology* in 1875. This work was a passionate example of Northern Aryanism. In it Anderson urges

may the youth, the vigorous man, and the grandfather with his silvery locks, forever continue to refresh their minds by looking into and drinking from the fountain that reflects the ancient history of the great Gothic race!<sup>153</sup>

One of Anderson’s chief desires was that modern Scandinavia would bear the imprint of the Germanic past in her culture. He violently disapproved of the artificial Greek and Roman past which had been introduced to Scandinavia by the bearers of Christianity. He wrote

in a previous chapter it has been claimed that the time must come when Norse mythology will be copiously reflected in our elegant literature and in our fine arts; and we must insist that we who are Goths, and branches of the noble ash Yggdrasil, ought to develop some fibre, leaves, buds and flowers, with

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<sup>153</sup> R. B. Anderson, *Norse Mythology: or the Religion of our forefathers*, London and Chicago, 1875, p. 426.

nourishment drawn from the roots of our own tree of existence, and not be constantly borrowing from our neighbours.<sup>154</sup>

The theory at this time had developed to proclaiming the Teutonic people to be the purest remaining Aryan tribe; and therefore the most superior of all the races inhabiting the earth. The Aryans had been rulers because they were more intelligent and capable than their subjects. If the Germanic race was the purest Aryan race left, they were obviously more intelligent and more fitted to rule than any other nation. Britain's success in the colonial field reinforced this idea.

A more developed piece of Aryan propaganda was Viktor Rydberg's *Researches in Teutonic Mythology* (1891). Rydberg discusses the several places suggested as the Aryan homeland. The most popular of these was the area around the Caucasus Mountains; there was however, growing support for the theory first propounded by Latham, of a European country of origin. The reasoning is thus

the mass of Mongolians dwell in Eastern Asia, and for this very reason Asia is accepted as the original home of the Mongolian race. The great mass of Aryans live in Europe, and have lived here as far back as history sheds a ray of light.<sup>155</sup>

People were trying to disassociate the Aryans from Asia, and one of the European homelands suggested was Scandinavia.

Rydberg takes his Aryanism seriously. His book contains charts of the percentages of fair hair, blue eyes and dolichocephalic skulls in Scandinavia. He also dedicates the book to "his Majesty King Oscar II, the ruler of the Aryan people of the Scandinavian peninsula". Here we see the manufacturing of a preferred physical appearance for the modern day Indo-European. Scandinavia, England and Germany had quite large populations answering to the description. Of the purity of the Germanic people, Rydberg says

the northern position of the ancient Teutons necessarily had the effect that they, better than all other Aryan people, preserved their original race-type, as they were less exposed to mixing with non-Aryan elements.<sup>156</sup>

Rydberg himself is an adherent of Latham's theory of a European origin for the Indo-Europeans. His own conclusion is thus phrased

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>155</sup> V. Rydberg, *Researches into Teutonic Mythology*, R. B. Anderson (trans.), London, 1891, p. 11.



if we now, following the strict rules of methodology with Latham exists on, bear in mind that the cradle of a race – or language – type should, if there are no historical facts to the contrary, especially be looked for where the type is most abundant and least changed, then there is no doubt that the part of Aryan Europe which the ancestors of the Teutons inhabited when they developed the Aryan tongue into the Teutonic must have included the coast of the Baltic and the North Sea.<sup>157</sup>

Whether or not Rydberg intended, his book is a justification and a legitimization of the imperial expansion in which Germany had been involved since the unification in 1871. The Aryans had conquered the indigenous inhabitants of the countries they migrated to, and it had all been to the good, because they were more fitted to rule. So the Germans (and also the English) sallied forth to improve the lot of the conquered peoples. Conquest was a good thing, since it facilitated the spread of the Indo-European culture.

The high (or possibly low) point of Aryan fever is generally accepted to be Nazi Germany. Hitler's Aryanism came to be identified with anti-Semitism. This had already developed, principally due to the ideas of Adolphe Pictet, whose essay "Indo-European origins, or the primitive Aryas" was one of the most influential Aryan documents. In this work

Pictet tended to confuse the Aryan race, in its capacity as an instrument of God's plan, with the Christian people...the Semitic race had proclaimed in its day that Jesus was the devil while the Aryan race continued to revere him as God.<sup>158</sup>

Pictet's theories were also intended to advance the programme of imperialism, for reasons already stated. Pictet claimed that

the Aryans had come from Europe and with characteristic expansive power had gone out to conquer India, then peopled by a dark race. The parallel with modern imperialism was neat and serviceable, for it justified ruthless colonisation.<sup>159</sup>

The theory of the European origin of the Aryans appealed to the English because they believed India to be an inferior country, and the Indians to be an inferior race.

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>158</sup> L. Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas*, E. Howard (trans.), New York, 1971, p. 261.

<sup>159</sup> J. Barzun, *Race: A Study in Modern Superstition*, London, 1938, p. 144.

There are reasons to be suspicious of the theory that the Aryans originated in Europe, especially in Northern Europe.

The Scandinavian theory has found a good deal of support in Germany, and one cannot help suspecting interested motives in this. In the past, the Germans have tended to adopt a slightly proprietary air towards the Indo-European languages; and a belief in a Scandinavian homeland for the Indo-Europeans often goes with a belief that the Indo-Europeans were of a certain racial type – that they belonged to the ‘Nordic race’, tall, fair, long-headed. The Germanic speaking peoples are seen as the ‘pure’ and ‘original’ Indo-Europeans, who have elsewhere been diluted by other races. At its crudest, this kind of view becomes the arrogant racialism of the Nazis, who saw themselves as the master-race of ‘pure Aryan stock’, destined to rule or destroy other (and of course inferior) races.<sup>160</sup>

Exactly this sort of racialism was expounded by Axel Olrik, in his book *Viking Civilisation* (1930). It seems, that to Olrik, people are predestined to rule or be ruled because of their physiological attributes. The dolichocephalic type he describes is the Aryan *par excellence*, and the brachycephalic is the lower class member of Northern society, the *thræll* as described in the *Rígsþula*. Olrik claims

it would appear that certain qualities of mind have from the earliest ages been connected with these racial types. The dolichocephalic is intelligent and strong-willed. He cannot be easily discomposed. His enjoyments are simple and sensuous. Though he can exert himself intensely at times, he also enjoys the relaxation of the long winter rest with its liberal indulgence of food and drink. The brachycephalic is more of a drudge, persevering in work but petty in his way of thinking, easily breaking down in the face of an unforeseen situation, but firmly attached to hereditary customs. He therefore finds it difficult to rally round the larger issues of the community as a whole, or to lay far-reaching plans, although he is often quick to see and understand. He is predisposed to envy, to melancholy brooding, and to religious emotion, and he has often a gift for poetry and music. In short, he is a man of moods, and the basic colour of his temperament is sometimes darker, sometimes lighter, varying in the different regions of the North.<sup>161</sup>

Although Olrik allows the brachycephalic type some attractive qualities, they are the qualities that are unreliable, and not the trademarks of a people suited to rule. They can be artistic, religious and temperamental; all worthless in the business of government and

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<sup>160</sup> C. L. Barber, *The Story of Language*, London, 1969, p. 95.

<sup>161</sup> A. Olrik, *Viking Civilisation*, London, 1930, p. 14.

political and cultural imperialism. Later authors were to allow the lower peoples no redeeming features, and to write them off as cannon fodder, or gas-chamber candidates.

One Person who made a particular study of the political manipulation of Aryan theory during the Hitler years is Jacques Barzun. In his book *Darwin Marx Wagner* (1941), Barzun discusses major trends in nineteenth century thinking which have furthered the belief in Aryan superiority. Of the three men discussed, Wagner is the most important in relation to Northern studies. Barzun stresses the materialism of the Victorian Era; materialism in religion which led to the only acceptable image of God being that of a scientific engineer, the growth of the middle class which meant everyday life revolved around material acquisition rather more than previously, and the dialectical materialism of Marx.

It is suggested that the decline in belief in God was a result of this more materialistic view of the universe. He also believes that the true father of German fascism was Richard Wagner. He says

it is not merely that Hitler has annexed him for his kultur kampf, but that Wagner's pretensions as a thinker and dramatist, his friendship with Nietzsche and Gobinau, place him at the heart of the biological and sociological theorizing which sprang from the idea of evolution.<sup>162</sup>

Evolutionary thinking was an ambiguous tool. This was principally because it worked on the notion that some things were survivals from previous eras. Therefore as they were not so developed as others, they were clearly inferior. To name many of the "primitive" races of the world "inferior" suited many of the Aryan supporters. Hitler had believed Negroes to be closer to apes than to men.

Wagner's operas were at the time an entirely new form of music; a music drama with the rigorous use of a pattern of leitmotifs. Moreover, they had a philosophical purpose:

the truth is that he very faithfully rendered the Darwinian paradox of evolution and extinction – the mechanist's feeling that everything endlessly repeats and that progress is nonetheless possible. Wagner accepted praise for having made the gods and heroes live again, yet he kills them all off. He made, as others said, Schopenhauer's pessimism into music, but he overlooked the philosopher's Christian ethics.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> J. Barzun, *Darwin Marx Wagner: Critique of a Heritage*, Boston, 1941, p. 11.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

The rise to popularity of Wagner coincided with the unification and expansion of Germany. His massive composition, *The Ring* was a setting to music of the great epic story of the Gothic race. Consequently the cultured Germans had particular reason to favour Wagner, and indeed

the nation at large enjoyed moreover a proprietary interest in the artist's nationalism. His rise to fame coincided with that of the nation to the rank of a great power, and his victory was that of the German culture over its old enemy, the French.<sup>164</sup>

Barzun has also authored a study of race-thinking in general, entitled *Race: A Study in Modern Superstition* (1938). This covers some of the same material as *Darwin Marx Wagner*, but approaches the question historically, tracing the development of race thinking.

He believes that race theories generally have a practical political purpose, and notes wisely that

race thinking does not consist merely in believing a particular theory about human races, and to refute the Nazi believer in Nordic or Aryan supremacy would not suffice to show up the basic error involved in the notion of a Nordic or Aryan race.<sup>165</sup>

Barzun (naturally) is not entirely unbiassed in his appraisal of race thinking. He is an opponent of the Nazis, at a time when Hitler was a world leader. However, there is much sense in his analysis. He is also aware of the close relationship between race thinking and the Darwinian evolutionary scale. Of this he remarks

but it may also be that the agent in this evolution is the adaptation of certain hereditary forms to environment, therefore certain groups (races) would be especially favoured and perpetuated. From this to the assertion that the white race or Homo Europaeus is the finest racial product of evolution is but a step.<sup>166</sup>

In considering support for Aryanism in England, he is especially conscious that the impetus came, not from within Britain itself, but from the continent. He is also aware of the significance of anti-Catholic feeling, and how convenient it was for race-theorists.

associating Rome with Popery made it easy for Patriots to find the roots of modern England exclusively in her Germanic past. For one thing, had not

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>165</sup> J. Barzun, *Race...*, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

French and German scholars told her that English freedom, English power, and English gift of self-government were all a racial heritage from the Nordic tribes that repeatedly conquered Britain until 1066?<sup>167</sup>

Wagner's contribution to the politicisation of Northern studies is difficult to assess, mainly because he wrote music, not books. That Wagner wrote music on Northern subjects (as well as the *Ring Cycle*, there is *Tristan* to consider) for political purposes appears to be indisputable. That race theory of any sort always appears to clash with both democracy and socialism emerges also. Both of these political systems rely on the equality of all men (and women). Race thinking postulates quite arbitrarily that some people are inferior and others are born to rule these; even to dispose of them if necessary. Wagner cultivated an image of himself as a revolutionary, and

again, Wagner's personal preoccupation with revolution remains a criterion with which we judge his contemporaries or prod our own. It does not seem to matter that his was a pitiful example of incoherence and self-seeking, nor that after having been touted as a revolutionist, he should now appear as a dangerous forerunner of Fascism.<sup>168</sup>

Wagner in Germany was doing the same thing as William Morris in England; using the pre-Christian past of the Teutons and the Vikings as a data bank upon which to build theories. May Morris says that her father found Wagner interesting, but does not specify whether his attitude was favourable or not. Critics have tended to believe that Morris disliked Wagner, and Barzun claims that this was because Wagner was vulgar. He says

it was the smelling out of this vulgarity that made William Morris turn against Wagner so early. As a Socialist and a man who was trying to reintroduce art into a mechanical society, Morris might have been expected to sympathise with the innovator whom Francis Hueffer depicted in such attractive terms. But the reading of the *Ring* was conclusive. Morris knew the original legend just as he knew the Venusberg story, and he felt that Wagner's handling was not only an alteration but a perversion of these ancient poems. The poet may always take liberties, since recapturing in modern speech the simple realism of the early versions is impossible, but to transform the human drama into a farrago of wandering discussions, the characters into wooden symbols of doubtful integrity – that was to be an anti-artist.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>168</sup> J. Barzun, *Darwin...*, op. cit., p. 345.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp. 338-339.

Hitler's Germany presented a platform which subscribed to a race theory that the Germans were the purest of the Aryans remaining, and were therefore superior to other less fortunate people. Hitler also believed that the superior race could do what it liked with inferior peoples. It is also true that Hitler admired Wagner, and pronounced him to be one of the acceptable composers for Germans to like. And certainly the manipulation of the Viking Age for political purposes reached its nadir in Nazi Germany.

But, as this thesis has demonstrated, this was not the first time that such manipulation had occurred. From the mid-eighteenth century onward, there has been a steady stream of works which harness Viking or Germanic material to the plough of some ideological purpose or another. The rampant Aryanism of Nazi Germany was merely the most noticeable instance, as no other country took Aryanism to its logical conclusion, genocide. England and other nations had colonised other parts of the world and subjected their inhabitants on the basis that Western European culture and political institutions were superior, but they stopped short of killing the inferior races because of their inferiority. England very successfully taught the people of conquered lands to be very useful to England.

It is fascinating that the same material, the culture of the pre-Christian Scandinavians and Germans, has been used as evidence for so many different propositions. It has encouraged nations to be more prominent in world affairs, it has justified anti-Semitism and other forms of race hate, legitimised imperialism and the oppression of colonial people. It has also been used to delineate political differences (for example, the British dislike of France and French religious and political stances).

It is vital that all this be recognised and accepted. No mistake of some other scholar or nation should be used as an excuse to neglect or cease to study the heritage of the North. In itself, it is as worthy of study as any other subject, and to people who feel an affinity for the North, possibly more so.

## Conclusion

Conclusions have been drawn (to some extent) in each separate chapter. This is an attempt to reclarify the intentions of this thesis, explain how they have been carried out, and proffer what conclusions present themselves for scrutiny.

Deliberate efforts to provoke interest in Northern studies date from the mid-seventeenth century (in Scandinavia itself, with the work of Olaus Magnus and others) and from the mid-eighteenth century elsewhere. Each nation which adopted the Vikings or the ancient Teutons appears to have done so primarily for reasons of nationalism. In the case of the Scandinavian countries, this was without remarkable consequences. England and Germany used the example of the Vikings, and of the German tribes which had eventually overrun the Roman Empire, to justify taking a more prominent role in world affairs. The Vikings had established an empire around the North Sea, and their nineteenth century descendants made use of their “inherited” qualities to do the same.

Despite the impression given by World Wars I and II, during the Victorian Era England and Germany were allies, with France as their traditional enemy. Racially, England and Germany were Teutonic (or considered themselves so), spoke Germanic languages and were united by related ruling families. They were also Protestant. France, on the other hand, was Latin and Catholic, with a Romance language. France had, at various times in recent history, been Revolutionary, Imperial and Napoleonic, the last two having brought her into war against England.

The desire to disassociate herself from France led England to hearken back to her Germanic past, and to minimise the role played in her development by the Roman Empire. It is important to clarify exactly what this image change involved. The movement to reinstate England’s Viking ancestors was not “popular”, in the sense that the great majority of English people were more or less unaware of it. The ordinary literate person would probably have encountered the North only in occasional magazine articles and reviews (*Fraser’s Magazine*, the *North British Review*, the *Quarterly Review*, the *Westminster Review*, the *Edinburgh Review*, and a multitude of other periodicals gave at least some space to the North), or in travel books and journals of residence in the Northern countries.

The subtleties of the rehabilitation of the image of the Vikings were the possession of a small group of highly educated enthusiasts, who exchanged theories amongst themselves. Although they believed firmly in their efforts, it must be concluded that the popular image of the Vikings was little changed, because the populace never really came into contact with this ideological shift. People were aware of England's enmity with France, and kinship with Germany, but they simply did not encounter the elaborate justifications of this position produced by the scholarly community.

The situation is little improved in the 1980's. Northern culture is available for study in very few of the tertiary institutions in the English-speaking world, and where it is offered, it is not a separate field of inquiry. Snippets of Northern culture are subsumed under the headings of Archaeology, Religious Studies and Early English Literature and Language. One cannot attempt to build up a unified picture of the North. That the popular image of the pillaging and plundering Viking is alive and well, found still in popular fiction and in film and television.

Naturally there has been some progress, especially in the archaeological field. Many important discoveries have added to the body of knowledge available about the pre-Christian Scandinavians, and books detailing these discoveries are readily available. It has been suggested that the study of the North could be particularly germane to many young Australians. Despite immigration, a substantial percentage of Australian youth have Anglo-Saxon forebears. The Classical traditions are still taught to students in high school, through the subjects of Latin, Greek and Ancient History, yet Northern studies, which covers a far more recent period of history, and a people who had such an influence on the development of England, is entirely neglected in the school system.

England is a country of vital importance for Australia, and even for those members of the Australian population who are from other ethnic backgrounds, because the government and legal institutions of Australia are based on English models. Therefore the running of Australia is inextricably bound up with that of England. And the English legal and governmental system is one which has been influenced by the contribution of the Anglo-Saxons, the Viking settlers, and the Normans who made the final conquest of England in 1066.



All of the above reasons point to the value of the study of Northern culture for Australians. An appreciation of the efforts of all the nineteenth century scholars who, working from different countries and in different languages, strove to draw their countrymen's attention to the culture of the Teutonic people, is a fine way to start. That the intentions of these scholars were not always without ulterior motives does not mean that their work can be easily discarded. It is also important to realise that just because previous people have studied the North in order to justify their own ideology, it does not follow that to study the North in the 1980's will necessarily taint one with those ideologies. To study the North, as far as is possible, for its own sake, is a challenge for all students.

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