

**HERITAGE
AND IDENTITY**
Shaping the Nations of the North

Edited by
J.M. Fladmark

Papers presented at
The 2001 Heritage Convention

DONHEAD

WILLIAM MORRIS

His Dream of 'The Northland'

John Purkis

Since neither this nor any other thing can be made to please everybody, no one need believe any more of it than he wants to believe; but it is always the best and most profitable thing to listen while a story is being told, and get pleasure from it, and not be gloomy.

Göngu-Hrólfs Saga

Who was William Morris? What was his dream? And why is it important to the themes of this volume?

William Morris is famous today, in Norway as elsewhere, principally because of his wallpapers and pattern designs. This is unfair. In his day (he lived from 1834 to 1896), William Morris was contributing to so many areas of work and learning that it is impossible to pin him down with any one description. He became famous as a poet in the 1860s, and this was for many years his principal achievement in the eyes of the general public. He later entered into such diverse activities as interior design in all its aspects, the Arts and Crafts movement, left-wing politics and the protection of ancient buildings from restoration. He spent his last years, in the 1890s, writing novels which are more accurately described as 'prose romances' and founding the Kelmscott Press, a publishing venture intended to revive medieval book design and printing types.

The clue to all these different activities lies in that word 'medieval'. Morris shared his interest in the Middle Ages with many other Victorians; their knowledge of the period was not of course as extensive as ours. Their view of the period was romanticized, and so it is quite fair to use the word 'dream' to describe Morris's vision of the past. From the beginning of his life Morris was fascinated by what was then called 'medieval archaeology'.

which meant the process of identifying and sorting out the styles of Gothic churches; during his adolescence he began to write poetry about King Arthur and his knights. In the early 1850s, he was an undergraduate at Oxford University, where he received a classical education and was expected to become a clergyman of the Church of England. In fact, he was more interested in the architecture of the town of Oxford, which seemed to him to have survived untouched from the Middle Ages, and so became a realization of his dream. At the age of 21 he abandoned his intended career in the Church and, in 1861, after trying his hand at architecture and painting, he founded his own company of artists and designers. At this time there was a boom in the building of new churches in the Gothic style, and Morris and his company were hired to provide stained glass windows and to paint and decorate the interiors.

In the late 1860s, Morris was spending all his free time composing a very long poem, which was called *The Earthly Paradise*. This collection of stories was modelled on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The main story, or overarching narrative, into which the lesser tales are fitted, is as follows. In the time of King Edward the Third (the fourteenth century), a group of travellers leave Norway. This is how the leader of the group introduces himself:

Now if ye ask me from what land I come
With all my folly, – Wick was once my home,
Where Tryggvi Olaf's son and Olaf's sire
Lit to the ancient gods the sacred fire,
Unto whose line am I myself akin,
Through him who Astrid in old time did win,
King Olaf's widow: let all that go by,
Since I was born at least to misery.

The Earthly Paradise, Prologue

At this time Norway appears to be going through a bad patch of famine and general hopelessness; the travellers are determined to sail into the unknown, and hope to find lands to the south of those discovered by Leif Eiriksson. One of those undiscovered countries is reputed to be the earthly paradise, the land of eternal youth.

After many adventures, our travellers find themselves in what we would call South America; they end their voyage in a city founded by the Ancient Greeks, where the descendants of the Greeks preserve their culture, cut off from the world from which they came. The two groups, the Northerners and the Southerners, decide to tell each other stories. While the Greeks have an infinite supply of classical mythology to draw upon, the

Northerners soon begin to run out of material. Morris therefore decided to include some stories from the Icelandic sagas.

Perhaps I should say a few general words about the sagas at this point. The sagas are part of a vast body of narrative which was written down in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. How has this survived? Medieval writings have come down to us because they were written down on animal skins, which were plentifully available when superfluous stock had to be killed off at the onset of winter. The subject matter of the stories is largely taken from the period which begins with the settlement of Iceland, shortly before the year 900; it ends shortly after the introduction of Christianity in the year 1000.

At this stage of his life, Morris knew little about the sagas, and thought he could easily incorporate the stories into his highly romantic and rather dreamy poem. For example, Morris read the *Laxdaele Saga* as a tragic love story, because the heroine, Gudrun, married Bodli, the best friend of the man she really wanted to marry, Kjartan, and the two friends are set against one another. (For those who know Morris's biography, it is all rather like Morris, his wife Janey, and her lover, his best friend Rossetti.) Morris rhymed all this up, with many omissions of course, thought up a new title, and placed 'The Lovers of Gudrun' in *The Earthly Paradise*. The problem is the complete change of tone from the original.

For example, the saga says that when Kjartan heard of Gudrun's marriage to Bodli 'he showed no sign of emotion at the news.' Morris's Kjartan screams out:

O blind, O blind, O blind!
Where is the love I used to deem so kind,
So loving to me? O Gudrun, Gudrun,
Here I come back with all the honour won
We talked of, that thou said thou knewest well
Was but for thee – to whom then shall I tell
The tale of that well-doing? And thou, friend,
How might I deem that aught but death should end
Our love together?

Most scholars would see this as a false romanticizing of the saga; in modern times it would be very difficult to describe it as a translation.

TRANSLATING THE SAGAS IN A NEW WAY

In 1868 Morris was introduced to Eiríkr Magnússon, an Icelander who was working in Cambridge on Bible translation, and they began to read some of the Icelandic sagas with a view to putting them across into English. Magnússon was quite a character in his own right, as May Morris (William's daughter) pointed out in a letter of 1925:

I remember him well at Cambridge, a short stocky man with a full face, light hair and a bushy moustache... He used to sing Northern folk-songs with a big voice that nearly blew the roof off their little sittingroom in Cambridge. I remember he walked up and down the room, Icelandic fashion, as he sang.

As quoted in Swannell, J.N., *William Morris and Old Norse Literature*, William Morris Society, Hammersmith, 1961, p. 9

The process of translation was as follows. Morris refused to study the grammar so Magnússon produced a simple version of the text in normal nineteenth-century English. This Morris proceeded to change back into something midway between the two languages, frequently tracing English words back to their Icelandic originals, or using obsolete English words as the nearest equivalent. I remember when I first came upon the phrase 'They tilted over a wain in a most seemly wise' in a Morris translation and thought that they had tipped over a wagon. What is meant here is 'They put a canopy over a splendid carriage.' Another example is the literal translation by Magnússon: 'It happened King Ethelred was sorely bewildered in his mind.' Morris changes this to 'It betid King Ethelred was mickle mind-sick.'

What Morris was trying to do has often been misunderstood. He realized that he was not translating in the sense of finding the exact meaning in contemporary English. He was trying to give his readers the effect of reading the sagas in the original. He therefore tried to expel all Latin-derived words and phrases from the special diction or language he was inventing, and concentrated on what Magnússon called 'the Teutonic element in English'. We shall return to this idea of language later.

One of the first sagas that Morris translated was a family saga. (A number of the shorter sagas which interested Morris and which he translated are known as 'family sagas'. We have the same term and it could be used about *Wuthering Heights*.) To illustrate Morris's translation style I am going to quote from the saga called *Hen Thorir*; this man's name was just Thorir at first but later he started a poultry business. The saga begins as follows:

Of the men of Burgfirth

There was a man hight Odd, the son of Onund Broad-beard, the son of Wolf of Fitia, the son of Thorir Clatter; he dwelt at Broadbolstead in Reekdale of Burgfirth; his wife was Jorun, a wise woman and well skilled; four children had they, two sons of good conditions, and two daughters: one of their sons hight Thorod and the other Thorwald; Thurid was one daughter of Odd, and Jofrid the other. Odd was bynamed Odd of the Tongue; he was not held for a just man.

Here is another passage in Morris's translation describing the burning of Blundketil:

So it is said that at nightfall Thorwald and his company ride to the house at Ornlfsdale, where all folk were now asleep; there they drag a stack of brushwood to the house, and set fire thereto; and Blundketil and his folk awoke not before the house was ablaze over them.

Blundketil asked who had lighted that hot fire, and Thorir told who they were. Blundketil asked if aught might get him peace; but Thorir said: 'There is naught for it but to burn.' And they departed not before every man's child therein was burnt up.

VISIT TO ICELAND

These family sagas, which Morris began to translate in 1869, deal with the history of one or two families and often refer to the background of the well-known farm where the people lived or scenery against which the events are staged. In his preface to the first volume of the *Saga Library*, Morris writes:

In Iceland every homestead, one may almost say every field, has its well-remembered history, while the earlier folk-lore is embedded in that history ... the first settlers there were of the best families of Norway, men of bold and independent spirit ... The race of which these warlike exiles formed a specially noble part had an inborn genius for poetry and the dramatic presentation of events.

So Morris's reading of the sagas made him wish to visit Iceland, and he went there for the first time in 1871. He hoped that he would be able to see a realization of what was becoming his dream of the Northland. This phrase, by the way, is a shortened version of some words from the poem 'Iceland First Seen' which was written at this time. I shall quote from the

second verse, where the phrase occurs. Morris describes the desolate landscape of Iceland, but insists that it contains hidden treasures:

Is it enough for our rest,
the sight of this desolate strand,
And the mountain-waste voiceless as death
but for winds that may sleep not nor tire?
Why do we long to wend forth
through the length and breadth of a land,
Dreadful with grinding of ice,
and record of scarce hidden fire,
But that there 'mid the grey grassy dales
sore scarred by the ruining streams
Lives the tale of the Northland of old
and the undying glory of dreams?

In Morris's day it was generally assumed that the sagas were historical documents and their realism and detail were the result of the incorporation of what seemed to be eye-witness accounts that had come down in the oral tradition; nowadays we are more conscious of the gap of time between the supposed events and the date of the manuscripts, so that we see the creation of the sagas as more like the writing of fiction. (For a English comparison think about that crafty book *Wuthering Heights* which I have already referred to; in this book the events are dated and we seem to be getting eyewitness accounts, but we know the story is all a fiction.)

In the nineteenth century, it was generally accepted that the characters in the sagas really had lived in the places mentioned in the sagas. So Morris spent a lot of time in Iceland visiting these sites. He kept a detailed journal of his visit. His most famous reflections occur when he visits the site of the farm of Olaf Peacock:

Just think, though, what a mournful place this is – Iceland I mean – setting aside the pleasure of one's animal life there: the fresh air, the riding and rough life, and feeling of adventure – how every place and name marks the death of its short-lived eagerness and glory; and withal so little is the life changed in some ways: Olaf Peacock went about summer and winter after his live-stock, and saw to his hay-making and fishing just as this little peak-nosed parson does; setting aside the coffee and brandy, his victuals under his hall, 'marked with famous stories', were just the same as the little parson in his ten-foot square parlour eats: I don't doubt the house stands on the old ground. But Lord! what littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once –

and all is unforgotten; so that one has no power to pass it by unnoticed: yet that must be something of a reward for the old life of the land, and I don't think their life now is more unworthy than most people's elsewhere, and they are happy enough by seeming. Yet it is an awful place: set aside the hope that the unseen sea gives you here, and the strange threatening change of the blue spiky mountains beyond the firth, and the rest seems emptiness and nothing else: a piece of turf under your feet, and the sky over head, that's all; whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves.

Icelandic Journals p. 108

So he did not find the romantic dream he had gone out to see. Iceland is not the kind of place which you can change to fit a theory. In fact the real Iceland changed him, both in his character and in the values that he subsequently lived by. Iceland and the sagas best illustrate how Morris was able to progress beyond his teacher, John Ruskin, both in his view of the Middle Ages and in the kinds of activity which the new vision led to. His views changed from Romantic medievalism to a realization that for most people life is a struggle, and that the real enemy was the class system. In a letter of 1883 he says that Iceland was the place where he learned 'that the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared to the inequality of classes'.

THE CHANGE IN HIS CHARACTER

Morris realized that his personal troubles, e.g. the problems of his marriage, were of no importance in comparison with the difficulties of ordinary living which the Icelanders had to overcome. He learnt too to admire the courage and toughness of the people described in the sagas. They are expected to fight or be shamed and to take part in the blood feuds which characterized pre-Christian society. The plot often turns upon the obligation of a man to carry out a killing which has passed down to him. In some of the more famous incidents whole families are burned in their houses. Here are two examples of what I mean; I shall quote from modern translations in these cases. In *Njal's Saga* the great hero Gunnar is fighting for his life. His house is being pulled down around him. The string of his bow is cut through; he turns to his wife Hallgerd, and says:

'Let me have two locks of your hair, and help my mother plait them into a bowstring for me.'

'Does anything depend on it?' asked Hallgerd.

'My life depends upon it,' replied Gunnar, 'for they will never overcome me as long as I can use my bow.'

'In that case,' said Hallgerd, 'I shall now remind you of the slap you once gave me. I do not care in the least whether you hold out a long time or not.'

'To each his own way of earning fame,' said Gunnar. 'You shall not be asked again.'

Magnusson, M. and Palsson, H. (trans.), *Njal's Saga*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1960. Ch.77

The men are expected to be tough, as you can see, particularly in the face of death; in the saga of Eirik the Red this little episode takes place right at the end of the story:

But Bjarni Grimolfsson drifted into the Ireland Sea and came into wormy waters, and the ship sank quickly under them. They had a boat which was coated with seal-tar, because the sea-worm does not attack such. They got into this boat, but then discovered that it would not be sufficient for them all. 'Because the boat will not take more than half our men,' announced Bjarni, 'my proposal is that we draw lots for the boat, for this ought not to go by rank.' This struck them all as so gallant an offer that no one would speak against it. So that was what they did: the men drew lots, and it fell to Bjarni and a half of them with him to go into the boat, for the boat would hold no more.

When they had got into the boat, an Icelander who was still on the ship and who had followed Bjarni from Iceland, cried, 'Do you mean to leave me here, Bjarni?'

'That is how it must be now,' replied Bjarni.

'Very different were your oaths to my father,' he replied, 'when I left Iceland with you, than that you would desert me like this. You reckoned then that you and I should share the one fate.'

'That cannot be,' Bjarni told him. 'But get down here into the boat, and I will get back on board ship, since I find you so concerned to live.'

Jones, G (trans), *Eirik the Red and other Icelandic Sagas*, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 157

These examples show the characteristics of these people and indicate what Morris admired and resolved to imitate in his own life. The narrative method and the working out of the story are used to inculcate a tough morality. The sagas are sometimes compared to Greek tragedies because actions, however trivial, sometimes come back into the story years later. The effect of the passage of several generations is to show the working out

of a kind of destiny, though this word is alien to the sagas. (Again this is all rather like *Wuthering Heights*.) This fierce moral universe is pre-Christian and underlies the system of values by which the characters live. The heroes' code of life was therefore equivalent to Stoicism, which appealed to Morris as a grown-up creed. He never forgot Iceland. As he said much later in one of his mature writings, *A Dream of John Ball*, speaking of Iceland:

Yea, in that land was the summer short and the winter long; but men lived both summer and winter; and if the trees grew ill and the corn throve not, yet did the plant called man thrive and do well. God send us such men even here.

A NEW WAY OF WRITING

When Morris had a fuller acquaintance with the saga writers he embarked upon the study of the *Volsunga Saga*, which he actually translated twice. The first effort was a prose version with Magnússon; then in 1876 he turned the saga into the long epic poem, *Sigurd the Volsung*. Speaking of this saga he said that:

There is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained; all tenderness is shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament... in short it is to the full meaning of the word inspired.

Letter to Charles Eliot Norton, 21 December 1869

These remarks have a general application. In the sagas it is the avoidance of adjectives indicating emotion or feeling generally which is quite unlike Romantic story of the nineteenth century. Nor do we find long atmospheric passages describing the weather. Note as well that there are no detailed descriptions of the scenery as in a modern novel, and you will often find that the modern editor of a saga has had to include laboriously drawn maps to help you locate the events.

Was Morris able to achieve these effects in his own work? This was not easy at first. Morris knew what the saga virtues were, but in the 1870s he still felt the need to produce the Romantic stories which were the staple of his success with the reading public.

From the late 1880s, he began to publish his prose romances; these strange tales happen in an imaginary world. Yet the simplified medieval setting is in some ways a revised version of his dream of the Northland.

A version of the prose style which he had worked out for the saga translations is used to tell these original stories. Once again, the language is largely purged of words derived from Latin. These romances were for a long time unfashionable, but were behind the new fantasy genre of the twentieth century. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and the Earthsea novels of Ursula Le Guin are ultimately derived from Morris's pioneering stories.

Towards the end of his life, from 1891, Morris issued the full set of his translations in the *Saga Library* as part of the educational programme which I shall come to next. I should point out that some of the material which the sagas deal with is not about Iceland at all, or only in part; for example the *Heimskringla* which Morris included in the *Saga Library* is a very long history of the Kings of Norway.

THE CULT OF GERMANIA AND THE NEW DIRECTION

When you look at Morris's whole career as a writer, the comparison with Chaucer comes first to mind. Like Chaucer, he spent a great deal of his time translating old stories. In the case of both authors 'translating' means something more like 'retelling', which involves quite drastic re-shaping, not literal translation. In this more generous sense of the word 'translating', Morris brought over into English a whole corpus of medieval literature. The poet is seen as a transmitter, not an originator. Morris also tried, less successfully than Chaucer, to introduce new words into the language.

Into this context, we must place the effort he put into translating the Sagas and, of course, *Beowulf*. Here the point of the comparison with Chaucer is also a point of difference. Chaucer, we say, was able to alter the course of the English language as well as that of English literature by adopting French words and French forms of verse – so much so that Morris in an angry spat once called Chaucer 'the greatest corrupter of the English language'. Morris, on the other hand, wanted to swing English in the opposite direction, back towards its Germanic origins, by adopting the words, usages and values of the old Norse literature of Iceland and Scandinavia.

Whatever the reasons for Morris's personal interest in this area, the important thing to realize is that he was able to find an answering reading public. For this was the time when many European countries were trying to discover and reinterpret their national origins, trying to do for themselves what Sir Walter Scott had done for Scotland.

We can observe this best in countries which were trying to achieve political independence, like Finland, where the early legends were collected and co-ordinated into *Kalevala*, and a successful attempt was made to revive the national language. A similar process took place, I understand, in Norway. In England the motivation behind William Barnes's poems in the Dorset dialect is too frequently understood; for example the famous song which has as its refrain:

An' there vor me the apple tree
Do leån down low in Linden Lea...

William Barnes thought he was writing pure West Saxon, the language of the court of King Alfred. Morris's Icelandic translations and books, like *The House of the Wolfings*, were similarly intended to refresh the collective memory of the English, to remind them of what they once were and how they once spoke. The fact that his attempt to turn the English into latterday Vikings did not succeed should not deter us from considering how nearly it might have come to success. For a similar literary programme worked when applied by Yeats and Lady Gregory to the national cause of Ireland.

Morris's ideas of 'Germania' were taken up by the new schools of English studies in the Universities, where the compulsory study of Anglo-Saxon or 'Old English' was introduced. The change from Old to Middle English, i.e. the language after 1066, could not be understood without considering the influence of Old Norse. While such projects as *The Saga Library* had an influence on the growth of Icelandic studies in Britain, Morris's real aim was to change the education of the English people, so that the Volsunga saga should form their character. He wrote in the Preface to his translation:

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 it should be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.

In 1886 a journalistic venture led to an explicit statement of Morris's preferences. The *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote to a number of famous authors asking them to name the *Best Hundred Books*.

Morris thought about this and eventually came up with a list of 54. This is not quite as much of a short measure as it might seem, as the titles included the whole works of such authors as Homer and Herodotus, for example. He must have surprized the editor because he soon departed from the

for a start. Instead he put in:

The Edda

Beowulf

Kalevala

Collections of folk tales including Grimm and the Norse ones

Heimskringla (the tales of the Norse Kings)

Some half-dozen of the best Icelandic sagas

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

Anglo-Saxon lyrical pieces (like the *Ruin* and the *Exile*)

Nibelungennot

The Danish and Scotch-English Border Ballads

Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology*

None of these books is written for the individual reader to study in silence and alone, one feels, but each is more suitable for a public reading or story-telling session, and therefore for the education of the people; if the young read books like these they would partake of a group wisdom. Into this scheme the sagas fit so well. The total effect is to point out a programme, a planned course of reading which would lead the young towards a different kind of life, and which would show the values of the new society which Morris hoped would come about. It is the educational intention of this list which is the key-stone of my argument and which makes the case complete. One is made to feel that all Morris's effort of writing the poems and romances, all the translations, all the publishing venture of the Kelmscott Press and this list of great books for the *Pall Mall Gazette* – all this effort is for the people who would come after him, the people, if you like, of *News from Nowhere*, his famous novel about the future.

And so Morris's literary career is, in the final analysis, consistent and whole. He freed himself from the preoccupations of the nineteenth century by escaping to the past, and then choosing a time within it when people lived in a different way. The dream of the Northland has led to a vision of a new society, based to some extent upon the principles that the sagas had taught him; in this society people are speaking a new and simpler language.

And did Morris ever visit Norway, as a result of these enthusiasms? Yes, he did. But this was in 1896, in the last months of this life. For his health's sake he was recommended to undertake a sea-voyage. With a friend he embarked at Tilbury on the SS *Garonne*, which was what we would call a cruise ship. They sailed up the coast of Norway to the North Cape. At Bergen, after 'a dramatic entry' to the port, Morris saw 'the old hills which the eyes of the old men looked on when they did their best against the Wends' (Letter to Philip Webb, 27 July 1896). Morris was left on shore at Vadsö while the ship went on to Spitzbergen, so that the astronomically inclined passengers could see the solar eclipse.

The voyage took four weeks including occasional visits ashore when the ship was in port. On one of these trips he saw the cathedral at Trondheim:

I saw Thronhjelm [sic] – big church, terribly restored, but well worth seeing; in fact, as beautiful as can be. It quite touched my hard heart.

Letter to Philip Webb, 18 August 1896

The phrase 'terribly restored' echoes his long fight against the restoration of medieval buildings.

Morris died on the third of October that year. His first biographer, Mackail, remembering Morris's lifelong interests, quoted from the *Volsunga Saga*:

It came to pass that he fell sick and got his death, being minded to go home to Odin, a thing much desired of many folk in those days.

Morris had called himself 'a man of the North' and one of friends called him: 'a sort of Viking, set down here, and making art because there is nothing else to do.' Because the things that interest you were his interests, I think he would have enjoyed reading this volume.

The Author

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Northern countries and once lived for a year in Finland. He is a General Editor for Pearson Education, for whom he has published studies of Wordsworth and Yeats. His most recent book is *A Preface to Wilfred Owen*.

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MUSIC OF THE NORTH

Echoes of Tunes Once Shared

John Purser

In Scotland we have an annual Gaelic music festival, and it is called 'Mod'. The word 'mod' is derived from the Norse word *mot*, the English equivalent derivation being the word *moot*. It meant a court or a trial meeting. Nowadays in Scotland, the word means a trial of artistic strength and is applied to the arts which have been derived from the world of bards. So right from the start, our annual celebration of bardic tradition described by a Norse word.

I am using Norse loosely. The differences between Old and New Icelandic and Old and New Norwegian are beyond me. However, the fact is, that Old Icelandic offers us the earliest surviving version of the Nordic languages, because the Icelanders were the first of the Nordic people to become literate. This they probably owe to the Western Celts.

Iceland was settled from 874 AD and into the ensuing decades, partly directly from Norway, partly from northern and western Scotland and eastern Ireland. To this day the blood groups, stature, eye and hair-color of the Icelandic people demonstrates a 50-50 Nordic-Celtic balance, the breeding pool having remained uniquely static by comparison with other countries.

The early accounts of the settlement of Iceland mention the presence of *papa* (priests) with their bells and their books. These undoubtedly either survived the settlement in isolated pockets or were re-introduced not long afterwards, for it is in Iceland that the Norse people first started to write down their stories and verse, often in styles resembling those used by the Gaels. These skills they almost certainly acquired and developed from their shared bloodline with the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland and, in particu-