The Cult of ‘Stalwart Frith-thjof’ in Victorian Britain

ANDREW WAWN

Though the mythology of the Edda, and the exploits of the Sagas, have been replaced in our nurseries, and our fancy, by the softer dreams of our Southern invaders, we may, nevertheless, hail an occasional interview with the grim heroes of Valhalla, with feelings not altogether alien to their grandeur and their gloom. ([Anon.], Edinburgh Review, February 1828, 137)

On the evening of 19 March 1894, the Reverend John Septon read portions of his new translation of Friðþjófs saga hins frækna to seventy-nine members of the Liverpool Philosophical and Literary Society. It was one of the society’s best attended meetings during the 1893–1894 winter season (Septon 1894, xix–xxi): papers on ‘Gypsies’ (28 members present), ‘Mushroom Beds of South American ants’ (50), ‘Recent Sociological and Labour Legislation in New Zealand’ (59), and ‘Astro-photography’ (75) had fared rather less well. Indeed only Charles Darwin attracted more listeners than the Icelandic saga: ninety-five members attended a paper by the Liverpool surgeon John Newton on ‘Recent Discoveries as to the Origin and Early History of the Human Race’.

Three related questions arise out of Septon’s successful March meeting in Liverpool’s Royal Institution. Why, when others had lectured on ants, astronomy and anthropology, did he choose to discuss an Icelandic saga; why did so many Merseyside intellectuals come to listen to him; and why of all possible Icelandic narratives did Septon choose Friðþjófs saga hins frækna, a work now washed over by the waves of scholarly neglect. In short, why medieval Iceland, why modern Liverpool, and (above all) why Friðþjófr?1 In addressing these questions, this essay

1 In this essay frequent reference will be made to the Icelandic Friðþjófs saga hins frækna and to translations of Bishop Esías Tegnér’s 1824 Friðþjófs saga. Whilst Victorians confused and conflated the two works, not least when spelling the names of the characters, the present essay discusses both versions of the story, and seeks wherever possible to use the appropriate Icelandic or Swedish name forms.
seeks to examine the remarkable cult of ‘stalwart Frith-thjof’ (Baring Gould 1863, 439) in nineteenth-century Britain; and to set that particular enthusiasm into the broader context of the Victorian discovery of and devotion to the Viking past.

AN AUDIENCE FOR ICELAND

The level of engagement with Northern antiquity reflected in John Sephton’s impressively large Liverpool audience was in fact a nationwide phenomenon in Victorian Britain. One has only to examine the correspondence of Eiríkur Magnússon, Sephton’s immediate predecessor as translator of Fríðþjófs saga hins frœknar, to sense how greatly the idea of Iceland had come to intrigue and inspire the nation’s antiquaries, littérateurs and travellers. Eiríkur had arrived in Britain in 1863, and worked as a librarian in Cambridge for forty years from 1871. It was in that same year that he and William Morris first published their joint translation of Fríðþjófs saga (Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon 1871, 1875, 1900). Eiríkur’s correspondents throughout this period may be taken as a representative cross section of the potential Victorian audience for Icelandic sagas in general, and for Fríðþjófs saga in particular. The letter writers were the saga readers.

The letters came thick and fast from all over the British Isles. There were invitations for Eiríkur to lecture far and wide, whether in the wilds of Wisbech (with Eiríkur’s wife instructed to turn up in national costume: Lbs. 2190a 4to, J.N. Brightman, 19 February 1876), or to the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne (three lectures in a week: Lbs. 2188a 4to, William Lyall, 21 September 1871), or within the hallowed portals of the Royal Institute in London (Lbs. 2187a 4to, 29 June [1872]). This latter meeting was organised by Queen Victoria’s physician, the Iceland explorer Sir Henry Holland, eighty-three years old in 1871, and newly returned from his first visit to Iceland since 1810, when he had been an influential member of Sir George Mackenzie’s celebrated expedition (Wawn 1887). Holland himself had been a protégé of his Merseyside neighbour John Thomas Stanley, whose 1789 Iceland expedition had helped to trigger young Henry’s lifelong fascination with the lava and yew-grass of 66° North (Wawn 1981). In turn, it had been Holland who had helped to secure a post for Eiríkur in Cambridge University library from which he eventually retired in 1911. So it is that these two friendships span a century and more of Icelandic enthusiasm in Britain. In his latter years, Sir Henry may indeed have deserved his reputation as a cavalierly ham-fisted high-society diagnostician, but Queen Victoria and his other well-connected patients kept taking the tablets, and Holland kept speaking up for Iceland at the highest levels of society until the last days of his very long life. As he wrote to Eiríkur shortly before his death, ‘I feel myself half an Islander if there can be such a condition of existence’ (Lbs. 2187a 4to, 27 October 1873).

For a whole Iceland such as EiríkurMagnússon, along with the requests for lectures came other saga-related offers and invitations: would he care to write a book on King Haraldr hárfagri Hálfdanarson in Blackwood’s ‘Men of Action’ series (Lbs. 2186a 4to, Walter Besant, 21 January 1878); or could he attend the première of Hall Caine’s play The Prodigal Son, at London’s Drury Lane Theatre on 2 September 1905 (Lbs. 2186a 4to, 28 August 1905). Hall Caine was a saga-reading Maxman who had visited Iceland, befriended the poet Matthias Jochumsson, and written several novels and plays with strong Icelandic links. The Prodigal Son, based on Caine’s 1904 novel of the same name, tells of Oscar Stephensson, a young and irresponsible native of Akureyri who returns home having chosen (for some reason) to be educated in Oxford. He soon leaves his wife (the most patient of Icelandic Griseldas) and baby daughter, and runs off to Monte Carlo with Helga, a ‘modern’ woman. He duly cheats his father-in-law by forging cheques in order to finance Helga’s lavish Riviera life-style; he watches in horror as a fellow native of Akureyri shoots himself following exposure as a card cheat; he then watches in despair as his modern woman runs off with an even more modern theatre director. Duly penitent, Oscar makes his way to London, where he becomes world famous as a composer of operas based on Icelandic themes: ‘I say Iceland is stark and wild [. . .] but if someone could set it to music, grim as its glaciers and fierce as its fires, it would take the world by storm’ (Caine 1905, 89). At the end of the play Oscar returns to Akureyri just in time to pay off his destitute father-in-law’s debts, and to be reconciled with his long-lost daughter who could whistle the tunes from all his operas without realising that they were the work of her father. Limp melodrama it may now seem, but at the time Hall Caine’s play was by no means just a provincial side-show: it was premiered in London and at the New Amsterdam Theatre in New York on the same day. By the end of the nineteenth century there were, assuredly, committed Islandophile audiences to be reached on both sides of the Atlantic.

Moreover, the adaptation of Icelandic sagas for stage and concert hall was no mere figment of Oscar Stephensson’s imagination: it was a fact of artistic life in the latter days of Queen Victoria. In 1888, just a year

2Several of Eiríkur’s lectures are extant in manuscript: Lbs. 406 fol., Lbs. 1860 4to (5), Lbs. 4555 4to.
before his death, Guðbrandur Vigfússson was asked to advise on a projected musical based on Jónsvíkinga saga (Bodleian MS Eng. Misc. d.131, George Silk, 24 November 1888); Beatrice Barmby's Gíslí Sársson, A Drama (1900) was read at the Viking Club in London, produced in Winnipeg, and (via Matthias Jochumsson's translation) used by W.P. Ker as an Icelandic text book at King's College (Lbs. 2808 4to, letters from Mabel Barmby to Matthias Jochumsson); whilst Sir Edward Elgar's now (sadly) neglected oratorio King Olaf, based on Longfellow's poem, was premiered in Hanley in 1896 (Wawn 1992b, 214). There was also, as we shall see, a play based on Fríðþjófs saga.

Inevitably, however, much of Eiríkur's mail from enthusiasts of the North took the form not of invitations to Icelandic plays, but of calls for help with more mundane matters Icelandic—anything from language learning to landscape gardening, from geology to game birds. The Welshman George Powell, with whom Eiríkur collaborated on translations of sagas and folk-tales shortly after his arrival in Britain (Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon 1864, 1866; Wawn 1992, 234–235), requests that ptarmigan be sent from Iceland to William Morris's friend Edward Burne-Jones (Lbs. 2190a 4to, 29 April 1869). Another of Eiríkur's correspondents wonders whether birch trees could be sent from Pingvellir for planting in a friend's garden (Lbs. MS 2186a 4to, Charles Babinbon, 4 August 1869); could a five-year-old chestnut horse from Iceland be shipped to the Lord Mayor of London's secretary (Lbs. 403 fol.), a request hard to refuse at a time (1875) when Morris had invoked the assistance of the Lord Mayor in establishing a famine relief fund for Iceland; could Eiríkur arrange for a supply of Iceland spar to be sent for the manufacture of spectacles in Britain (Lbs. 2186a 4to, Richard Baker, 18 February 1884); could he supply a list of Íslendingasögur horse references for Gilbert Goudie, the Edinburgh scholar, who was writing a book on Shetland ponies (Lbs. 2186b 4to, 28 November 1910); could he help finance a friend's son who was trying to start a bakery in London (Lbs. 2184 4to, John Thorkell Clements, undated); could he arrange for a native speaker to help Henry Sweet with his Norwegian pronunciation (Lbs. 2189a 4to, 15 July 1872); would he be available to escort the Prince of Wales on a trip to Iceland (Lbs. 2187 4to, Francis Holland, 18 March 1874); could he explain why there is a pig reference in Viga-Glúms saga when there are no pigs in Iceland (Lbs. 2187a 4to, J. Harold Herbert, 12 January 1901); and could he prepare a translation of the heroic poem Bjarkamál to be performed by a massed choir of (doubtless) horned-helmeted Vikings siting in long ships on the River Thames in front of thousands of people celebrating the Empire Festival (Lbs. 2188b 4to, Albany Major, 3 May 1910)? How fortunate for Eiríkur that he died before the invention of e-mail.

Throughout his life in England, Eiríkur Magnússon took particular pleasure in teaching Icelandic in person and by post. He translated Fríðþjófs saga hins frækna for those unable to read it in Old Icelandic, but he spared no effort in developing an Icelandic reading capability amongst interested Victorian scholars. Amongst Eiríkur's earliest pupils was Sir Edmund Head (Lbs. 2187 4to, 20 July 1863), whose translation of Viga-Glúms saga was published in 1866. Influential Cambridge figures such as J.R. Lumbly (Lbs. 2188a 4to, 25 November 1868) and the local member of parliament J. Beresford Hope (Lbs. 2187 4to, 13 July 1869) sought Eiríkur's assistance in learning to read Icelandic sagas, and subsequently were happy to pull the appropriate strings when Eiríkur applied for a post at the University library. Once settled in Cambridge, Eiríkur instructed small but keen groups of students, three of whom (Israel Gollancz, Bertha Phillpotts, and Henry Sweet) became celebrated scholars of Icelandic; whilst another, George Rowntree from Newcastle upon Tyne, won the Cambridge University poetry prize in 1875 with an earnest and (in all truth) arthritic poem on Iceland.

A single representative trail of Eiríkur Magnússon's influence, and of the Icelandic enthusiasm which he helped to generate in Victorian England, can be followed in the career of the politician and diplomat James Bryce. Eiríkur first assisted the young Irishman on his Icelandic travels in the early 1870s (Bryce 1923, 1–43); he later helped him to work up his 'rusty Icelandic' (Lbs. 2186 4to, undated). Bryce in turn lectured on Icelandic topics throughout Britain (Leeds in 1891, for instance). He proposed at one point to campaign for the award of an Oxford honorary degree to Jón forseti Sigurðsson, before conceding that no-one in Oxford would be in the least interested (Lbs. 2186 4to, 20 May [no year])—he might have stood a better chance promoting the claims of Hall Caine's Oscar Stephenson. Bryce was an energetic member of the Mansion House Fund Committee in 1882, helping to raise cash for what everyone except Guðbrandur Vigfússson (letter to The Times, 13 October

3The love triangle in the Morris household at this time (Jane Morris in love with Dante Gabriel Rossetti) was painfully similar to that in Kormaks saga, a work which Morris chose to translate shortly afterwards (Morris and Magnússon 1970, 10–11). Possibly intended for inclusion in the 1875 Three Northern Love Stories volume which contained the Morris-Eiríkur Magnússon Fríðþjófs saga translation, Morris's Kormaks saga version remained unprinted until 1970.

4Head 1866, xvi mentions the help he has received from Guðbrandur Vigfússson and George Webbe Dasent, but strangely does not refer to Eiríkur.
1882) seemed to regard as a disastrous famine in Iceland (Harris 1978–1979; Ellison 1986–1989). As a parliamentarian, Bryce fought long and hard (and in vain) to prevent the passage of an 1896 bill which sought to abolish sheep imports from Iceland. It is small wonder that Eiríkur encouraged Bryce’s opposition to this measure: he had after all played a major part in establishing this trade (Lbs. 2186a 4to, James Bridges, 13 October 1876, 3 November 1877), which had been much to the benefit of the Eastern fjords of Iceland, where Eiríkur had family connections. Bryce eventually became a British diplomat in the United States, where we find him on one occasion seated in the Oval office of the White House sharing the delights of Icelandic sagas with a fascinated President Theodore Roosevelt (Fisher 1927, I 144). As his friendship with the well-connected Bryce shows clearly, Eiríkur Magnússon’s energy, his dedication as a teacher, his ability to combine a passion for serious philology with an active interest in politics and business, politicians and business men, ensured that neither he nor Iceland wanted for friends in high places in late Victorian Britain. And this was the man who helped William Morris to translate Fridþjófs saga.

THE LIVERPOOL CONNECTION

Eiríkur Magnússon’s correspondence helps to explain why John Sephton chose to share his own knowledge of and enthusiasm for medieval Iceland with a public audience in nineteenth-century Britain. Victorian levels of curiosity were high. It was the idea of Iceland that many people found so intriguing. Lectures were well attended, and translations of sagas such as Fridþjófs saga hins frakna clearly enjoyed an appreciative readership. But with two of its four nineteenth-century English translators (George Stephens and John Sephton) born and bred in Liverpool, and with a third (Eiríkur Magnússon) in frequent postal contact with friends there, the specifically Merseyside associations of Fridþjófs saga merit some attention. The question of ‘why Liverpool?’ needs addressing.

Liverpool was a port with a strong tradition of pre-Victorian Icelandic contacts, as well as a city which played its full part in the main Victorian wave of interest in the North. Pioneering British travellers to Iceland had strong Merseyside and Cestrian connections: John Thomas Stanley lived most of his life at Alderley Edge in Cheshire, enabling him to have close contact with his protégé Henry Holland, born and brought up in nearby Knutsford (Wawn 1981, 1987). It was the Liverpool merchants Horne and Stackhouse who traded with Iceland during the Napoleonic wars, and thus ensured that Icelandic woollens, skins, down, whale oil and dried fish were a familiar sight on the busy quayside at Pier Head; and it was James Robb, their Reykjavík agent, who settled in Iceland, married an Icelandic woman, and whose family business flourished in the Icelandic capital for several generations: the modern central Reykjavík store ‘Liverpool’ bears at least token witness to this link (Wawn 1985, 114–115, 130–131). It was to David Gladstone, whose family name lives on in one of the port’s most famous docks, that the influential Enlightenment intellectual Magnús Stephensen of Viðey turned to help when seeking an English publisher for his book on eighteenth-century Iceland. The first native Englishman to hold a major British university appointment in Iceland was John Sephton, born and bred in Liverpool; the appointment was at Liverpool University and partly funded by Alfred Holt, Iceland traveller (anonymus) 1881, Liverpooldalian shipping magnate, philanthropist, and friend of both Eiríkur Magnússon and the poet Matthias Jochumsson, who himself had strong links with both Liverpool (through Unitarian friends) and the story of Fridþjófri/Frithiof (through his 1864 Icelandic verse translation). Surely the finest paintings of Icelandic scenes by a nineteenth-century artist anywhere in Europe are the hundred and seventy and more watercolours produced from sketches made during his ‘Pilgrimage to the saga-stands of Iceland’ by W.G. Collingwood, born and bred in Liverpool (Haraldur Hannesson 1990). In another context, there was considerable late Victorian and Edwardian scholarly effort devoted to identifying Bromborough, on the Wirral side of the River Mersey, as the site of the battle of Víðaseyjar in Egils saga.

Eiríkur Magnússon had lent support to this theory (Lbs. 2190 4to, Francis Tudsbury, 4 May 1907; also Tudsbury 1907), a fact perhaps not unconnected with his own close ties with Merseyside. One of Eiríkur’s first Cambridge pupils, Edward Rae, worked in Liverpool and lived in Birkenhead, where Eiríkur and his wife visited him on several occasions. Rae had travelled to Iceland, where he had acquired some antique Icelandic silver, much to the disapproval of Eiríkur’s wife, who was less than impressed by Rae’s breezy assertion in one of his frequent letters (Lbs. 2190 4to, 10 June 1872) that he was ‘merely inspired with a sacred love of his country and a desire to restore to her bosom objects which had been looted by Mrs Magnússon’s ancestors in some warlike descent upon the English coast’. Eiríkur’s enthusiasm for the northern counties of his adopted homeland even extended to his colourful suggestion that Beowulf was a Northern-English poem which had been taken to Iceland by Æðunn skótt, the landnámóttir settler from England, a grandson of Ragnarr lóðrík, and the grandfather of Grettir Æmundarson whose saga duly borrows a number of motifs from the Old English epic (Lbs. 1860 4to).

It was perhaps inevitable that the extensive links between Iceland and the greatest port in the British Empire should even find expression in a
late Victorian novel, *The Dane’s Daughter, an Icelandic Story*, written by Walmer Downe, and dedicated to Lord Dufferin whose *Letters from High Latitudes* became one of Victorian England’s most widely read travel books about Iceland. In this flat-footed fable, Bartholomew Brattle-Browne, a dashing but dastardly gigolo from Liverpool travels to Iceland, where he meets and courts Helga, a steadfast young Icelandic maiden. Torn between marriage to her laconic peasant fiancé Kentil, and seduction by the brazen Brattle-Brown, helpless Helga duly follows the English Lothario back to Liverpool, only to discover that the unscrupulous cad is married, and had been interested only in Helga’s dowry. The dim-witted but loyal Kentil follows in their wake to Liverpool, seeks out Brattle-Brown at his gentleman’s club, and prevails in the ensuing fisticuffs. He and Helga then return to the honest agrarian simplicities of Iceland.

There is, as I have argued elsewhere (Wawn 1992b), a serious point behind all this Liverpudlian, and more generally Northern-English enthusiasm for Iceland. Nineteenth-century Britain did not revolve relentlessly around London; much of the industrial wealth of the country lay in the North, and there were many eager to establish and proud to celebrate links between the ancient presence of Viking settlers in the region and its modern industrial and commercial success. Viking blood—and values—had survived in the veins of Victorian Merseyside. The kind of triumphalism to which George Webbe Dasent gave expression at a national level:

They [the Vikings] were like England in the nineteenth century: fifty years before all the rest of the world with her manufactories and firms—and twenty years before them in railways. They were foremost in the race of civilization and progress; well started before all the rest had thought of running. No wonder therefore that both won. (Dasent 1873, I 247)

received an additional regional spin in the North of England. The Victorian descendants of Lake District Viking dalesmen were identified as:

the sturdy squires and canny statesmen of the North, dwelling in thrift and industry, and sending out their sons to roam the world, and to rise in it by sheer force of worth and wisdom. (Collingwood 1896, 101)

Sturdy local antiquarians and canny amateur philologists, with their dialect and place-name studies, uncovered an array of reassuring cultural continuities (Ferguson 1856; Fergusson Irvine 1893, 297–304). Many Merseyside place-names were seen to bear vivid witness to the presence of the Northmen a thousand years earlier: the present writer was born in

West Kirby [ON *kirkjubær*], brought up in Meols [ON *melr*, ‘sand-dune’], and used as a boy to climb the local Grettistak known as Thor’s Stone, at the top of Thurcastone [ON *Thorsteins tún*] hill—Viking names every one (Dodgson 1972, IV 280). Victorian archaeologists excavated feverishly in search of Norse antiquities, and reported their finds in the local antiquarian journals, as well as in the District Secretary reports to Saga-Book, the scholarly journal of the London-based Viking Club which had been founded in 1892 (Townsend 1992).

Among Viking enthusiasts on Merseyside we find not just the worthy ranks of doctors, teachers and ministers of the church, but also successful business men and entrepreneurs—men like Alfred Holt, who had read widely about and travelled to Iceland, befriended learned Icelanders, and sat on Eiríkur Magnússon’s Iceland famine committee in 1882. Here was an example of a man who had studied the Viking antiquities of his neighbourhood, and who, in the context of unprecedented commercial wealth, was ready to support professional and scholarly projects. Writing to John Septon in 1886 and 1887 about another Liverpudlian scholar, Guðbrandur talking (positively) about another Liverpudlian scholar, Vigfússon remarks that ‘[h]e is a fine man and deserving of respect for his work and achievements in the field of Norse studies’. (Sidney Jones Library, University of Liverpool, MS 3.33, GV to Septon, 29 October 1883).

It is a gormless trade, of gentlemen for players. The notion may never have occurred to Guðbrandur that it was precisely because of those bales of cotton and the wealth which they generated within the region that a university college such as Liverpool was thriving and expanding. This was an opportunity seized on by John Septon to relinquish his headmaster’s duties at Liverpool Institute in 1895, and to assume the responsibilities of University Reader in Icelandic, a post which his scholarly publications, most recently his 1894 translation of Fríðþjófs saga, had helped to secure for him.

So that is ‘why Liverpool’. There were people on Merseyside who regarded themselves as every bit as much descendants of the ancient Northmen as any Icelanders—or member of the Auden family (see Sveinn Haraldsson’s article, above)—could. Moreover, the energetic pursuit of trade with many lands (including Iceland) ensured that there was local wealth and leisure to underpin these antiquarian interests. Liverpool was a city with a spring in its cultural stride. It had a vigorous scholarly tradition, and an array of learned societies at which, as we have noted, research of every sort could be presented—on South American ants as well as North Atlantic sagas. It was thus an entirely appropriate region
to father two translators of Friðbjöfs saga.

THE RECEPTION OF FRIDBJÖFR/FRITHIOF

If Eiríkur Magnusson’s post-bag helps us to understand ‘why Iceland’, and if the attitudes and achievements of Merseysiders are diverse as Henry Holland and Alfred Holt, John Thomas Stanley and John Sephton help to explain ‘why Liverpool’, there remains the third and principal question: ‘Why Friðbjöfs saga?’ Any attempt to address this central issue must be prefaced with an outline of the saga story, and also with some indication of the extent of its popularity in Victorian Britain.

The longer of its two Icelandic versions tells of the aged King Beli of Sogn and a noble freeborn man Porsteinn Vikingsson, lifelong friends who are eventually buried in mounds on opposite sides of the fjord. The royal princess, Ingibjörg, is fostered after Beli’s death by a worthy yeoman Hildingr; so too is Friðbjöfr after his father’s death. The two foster-children fall in love, but Ingibjörg’s brothers Hálfdan and Helgi refuse to allow their sister to marry the wealthy but lower-born Friðbjöfr. Threatened with invasion by the neighbouring King Hringr, the brothers shamelessly ask the rejected Friðbjöfr for assistance. This he understandably withholds. To prevent secret assignments between the lovers, the brothers conceal Ingibjörg in the temple of Baldr, but the young couple nevertheless contrive to meet at this location. King Hringr agrees peace terms with the brothers in return for his taking Ingibjörg in marriage. Learning of Friðbjöfr’s liaisons with Ingibjörg, the brothers are outraged at this blatant desecration of temple and sister. Accordingly, Friðbjöfr is sent on a penitential voyage to the Orkneys to collect tribute money, ostensibly so that the brothers can pay Ingibjörg’s dowry to King Hringr—in reality so that they can have him killed. They burn down Friðbjöfr’s homestead in his absence. Friðbjöfr endures a perilous journey, harassed by sea-witches who (at the brothers’ command) conjure up storms which are expected to engulf the hero. Friðbjöfr and his companions survive, emboldened by a fine sequence of heroic songs, and with the aid of his magic ship Ellíði. Arriving in Orkney, Friðbjöfr fights berserks, wins fame, and is warmly welcomed; the Orcadian udallers deny any obligation to pay tribute to King Helgi but offer a large free-will sum for Friðbjöfr to use as he sees fit. Returning to Norway, Friðbjöfr confronts Ingibjörg’s brothers in their hall, and strikes the particularly unpleasant Helgi in the face with the money bag. He sees the statue of Baldr being warmed over the fire by Helgi’s wife, on whose arm Friðbjöfr notices the ring which he had once given as a love-token to Ingibjörg. When Friðbjöfr grabs at the ring, the image of Baldr falls into the fire, and the whole temple burns down. Friðbjöfr escapes, and embarks on a three-year Viking expedition. He receives a warm welcome from King Hringr whom he visits in disguise. He subsequently rescues Hringr and Ingibjörg from broken ice on an otherwise frozen lake, and then, out hunting, rejects the temptation to kill King Hringr as he sleeps in the wood, his sword at his side. Friðbjöfr loyally guards his royal host and casts the weapon away. The aged Hringr finally unmask his mystery guest and tells him that after his death Friðbjöfr may marry Ingibjörg, but must rule Hringr’s kingdom responsibly until the dying King’s own children reach maturity. This pledge duly honoured, Friðbjöfr marries Ingibjörg, returns to Sognefjord, kills Helgi, receives a pledge of loyalty from Hálfdan, and accepts the title of king.

This, in outline, is the story which enjoyed such widespread exposure and esteem in Victorian Britain. Yet, in its original Icelandic form, we may now wonder why it enjoyed any sort of cult status. During most of the twentieth century Friðbjöfs saga hins frækna has been an almost wholly neglected work in the English-speaking world; and the current scholarly silence on the saga is well-nigh deafening. In 1921 Henry Goddard Leach could still speak of Friðbjöfs saga as amongst the Icelandic sagas ‘most familiar to us’ (Leach 1921, 162), but we can see now—as Leach could not then—that his words reflect more the residual enthusiasm of previous generations than the condition of long-term decline into which the story’s fortunes had already entered. The last English translation of the saga known to the present writer is that of Margaret Schlauch in 1928. By 1931, Bertha Phillpotts uses the past tense when speaking of the saga’s popularity (Phillpotts 1931, 18), and the choice of tense seems justified if one reads between the lines of W. A. Craigie’s cool judgement, dating from just before the First World War: ‘[Friðbjöfs saga] is attractively written, but has not the slightest historical value [...] It would be tedious to enumerate and describe all the other sagas of this type’ (1913, 95). Stefán Einarsson (1957, 160) finds room for only seven bland lines about the saga in his History of Icelandic Literature. Richard Beck’s view (1993 XII 101) that Friðbjöfs saga is ‘amongst the finest’ medieval prose works of Icelandic tradition represents a rare modern tribute—and that in the form of an unrevised encyclopedia entry of mature vintage, the youthful judgement of a now deceased senior scholar. Now, in the final decade of the twentieth century, the decline in the saga’s fortunes could hardly be more complete, notwithstanding enterprise of the efforts of the inhabitants of Balestrand and Vangsnes in western Norway to awaken the interest of tourists in the local Viking hero: the giant statue of Friðbjöfr has dwarfed all visitors to the area since its erection, a gift of the Kaiser, in 1913 (Marschall 1991, 80f.). In Iceland there is no edition (scholarly or popular) of the saga
readily available—the last one was first published in 1944. Indeed, there has been no edition with full scholarly apparatus in any language since the efforts of Ludvig Larsen (1893) and Gustav Wenz (1914). Twentieth-century critical interest in the saga has also been limited (Gould 1921–1923; Schlauch 1934; Power 1984; Kalinke 1950, 110–129), even in the current period of sympathetic scholarly revaluation of other fornaldrarsögur (Tulinus 1992). The circle of neglect was recently completed when, in an otherwise illuminating study of fornaldrarsögur transmission (Mitchell 1991, 29–31), the author contrives a definition of the genre which ensures that Friðþjófs saga is excluded from his discussion, in spite of the vivid witness which that work could have brought to bear on the broader processes of post-medieval literary dissemination and ‘revitalisation’ of ancient Scandinavian narrative material which the book seeks to trace.

Such neglect of the story of Friðþjófr would have seemed incomprehensible in Victorian Britain—and in the Victorian United States, for that matter. For the saga’s first English translator, George Stephens, it represents ‘one of the most beautiful [sagas] in the whole Cycle of Icelandic literature’ (Stephens 1839, vi); Samuel Laing (1844, 17–23) sees ‘this beautiful story’ as among the high points of the ‘wonderfully extensive’ Old Icelandic corpus of sagas; writing to friends in advance of the first publication of his translation, William Morris spoke of it as ‘lovely’ and ‘very complete and beautiful’ (Kelvin 1984, 126, 132); Captain H. Spalding, of the 104th Fusiliers (no less) claims that the Icelandic story is of ‘surpassing beauty’ (Spalding 1872, [v]); for Olivia Stone the story is ‘one of the finest [...] the world possesses’ (Stone 1882, 27); and for W.P. Ker, a powerful and characteristic voice of late-Victorian enthusiasm for things Icelandic, it is ‘one of the best, and one of the most famous’ (Ker 1896, 277) of the romantic sagas of Iceland, to be distinguished from the later romances, which he dismisses as ‘among the dreariest things ever made by human fancy’ (ibid., 281). Parts of the story found their way into a volume of the ‘Library of the World’s Best Literature’ series in 1897 (Benson 1926, 150); and in introductory remarks to his translation (from German) for the Chicago-based series ‘Life Stories for Young People’ in 1907, George Upton renew the claim that the tale of Friðþjófr is ‘one of the most beautiful’ of sagas.

It was well thought of by those who knew it; and it was widely known. Indeed, a plausible case can be made for the proposition that in nineteenth-century Britain—indeed throughout nineteenth-century Europe—the story of Friðþjófr/Fríðþjófs, in either its original or one of its refracted forms, was better known than any other medieval Icelandic narrative except the poetic Edda. The original Friðþjófs saga hins frækna, in one or other of its two extant versions, certainly enjoys a unique position in

the history of Icelandic saga reception in the English-speaking world. It was the first complete Icelandic saga ever to be published in an English translation (Stephens 1839); earlier than Samuel Laing’s Heimskringla (1844), and much earlier than George Webbe Dasent’s celebrated versions of Brennu-Njáls saga (1861) and Gísla saga Súrssonar (1866). Moreover, as we have noted, during the nineteenth century the saga appeared in three separate English translations—more than any other Icelandic saga. Public performances by both William Morris (Kelvin 1984, 130) and John Septon ahead of the publication of their Friðþjófs saga translations ensured that saga-reading appetites were appropriately whetted. Subsequently, re-publication, re-packaging and the preparation of breezy summary versions ensured that various forms of the saga story retained their place in the public domain on both sides of the Atlantic. We thus find a version of the saga in Cox and Jones’s Tales of Teutonic Lands (1872, 210–246); there was the 1877 Chicago reprint by Rasmus Anderson and Jón Bjarnarson of Stephens’ 1839 translation, enterprisingly supplemented by a translation of the later and lamer Þórsteins saga Vikingssonar, with its breezy tales of Friðþjófr’s troll-slaying father.

Behind the high Victorian profile enjoyed by the Icelandic Friðþjófs saga hins frækna through printed translation and summary, moreover, there was the silent witness of several paper manuscripts of the saga awaiting discovery and attention in the libraries of Britain. One such (MS BL Add. 4860), brought back by Sir Joseph Banks at the end of his 1772 visit to Iceland and deposited in the British Museum, offered eighteenth-century texts of fourteen fornaldrarsögur including Friðþjófs Þórsteinsnsonar saga (BL Cat. 1977, 242). It was joined some years later by MS BL Add. 24972, a manuscript which Sabine Baring-Gould had acquired under the most poignant circumstances during his visit to Akureyri in 1862: ‘a native reduced to great poverty’ sold it to the British traveller with tearful reluctance: ‘These sagas [...] are our joy; without them our long winters would be blanks. You may have these books, but, believe me, it is prava necessitas alone which forces me to part with them’ (Baring-Gould 1863, 225). Baring-Gould, a far more animated and

'Dasent was translating directly from the Icelandic: Laing from Danish.

'Stephens (1839), Septon (1894), and William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon (initially published in 1871; reissued as part of their 1875 Three Northern Love Stories which was reprinted in London in 1901, and again in 1911 as volume 10 of Morris’s Collected Works). The Friðþjófs saga translation was reprinted separately in Boston, Mass. in 1900. Morris regarded Stephens’ translation as ‘vile and not always correct’ (Kelvin 1984, 126).
romantically committed enthusiast of Icelandic sagas than the austerely enlightened Sir Joseph Banks ever was, lists ‘the story of stalwart Frith-thjóf’ amongst the ‘Histories of Ancient Heroes’ in the Bibliography to his 1863 travel book (1863, 439), but remains otherwise silent about the worthy son of Porsteinn. Baring-Gould had eyes only for the saga-steads of Iceland—and Fríðþýrjósfjörðr never went to Iceland.

The British-based manuscripts from Iceland did not even have to be texts of Fríðþýrjósfjörðr saga to be texts, in a sense, about Fríðþýrjósfjörðr saga. A Fríðþýrjósfjörðr-related manuscript in the Advocates’ Library in Edinburgh makes the point. Scotland had been fertile ground for Icelandic enthusiasts since the end of the eighteenth century: Grímur Thorkelín’s honorary degree in St. Andrews in 1787 (Benedikz 1970); John Thomas Stanley’s party of Edinburgh students exploring Iceland in 1789 (Wawn 1981); Sir George Mackenzie’s version of Gunnlaugs saga ormnstungu on the stage of the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh in 1812 (Wawn 1982); Sir Walter Scott’s The Pirate (1822) (Wawn 1994a forthcoming); and the appointment in 1826 of a learned Icelander, Þóraður Repp, to the position of Assistant Keeper of Books at the Advocates’ Library, where his duties included the cataloguing and supervision of the collection of Icelandic manuscripts recently purchased from Grímur Thorkelín and Finnur Magnússon (Wawn 1991, 60). These manuscripts included texts of two late eighteenth-/early nineteenth-century sagas attributed (by Repp and others) to the Icelandic lawyer and antiquarian Jón Espólín (Müller 1817–1820, II 672–675; Wawn 1994b forthcoming), Huldar saga and Sagaan af Hálfdani gamla og sonum hans. The latter work (Adv. MS 21. 2. 7) contains a remarkably large number of references to and summaries of events in Fríðþýrjósfjörðr saga; Espólín clearly knew the saga well enough, and regarded it highly enough to use events in the life of its hero as major chronological reference points in his own latter-day saga writing.

Fríðþýrjósfjörðr saga, or at least its hero, found its way before the eyes of the British public in other improbable ways in the years before its first published appearance in an English translation. A case in point is Ove Malling’s Store og Gode Handlinger af Danske, Norske og Holsterne (1777), which was translated into English by Andreas Feldborg (Nielsen 1986) and published in 1807 as Great and Good Deeds of Danes, Norwegians and Holsteinians. It is not clear how widespread or well-disposed a British readership this (or indeed any) book on Danish virtues could hope to enjoy in the year of the spectacular bombardment of Copenhagen by the British navy: Danish support for Napoleon had not played well in the corridors of Whitehall. Nevertheless, those with sufficient generosity of spirit (eleven of the sixteen virtues illustrated in Malling’s work) to wade through the tales of exemplary Scandinavian heroes, ancient and modern, would learn that what Kjartan Ólafsson was to Integrity, Bartholomus to Learning, and the villagers of Hornbek to Humanity, so Fríðþýrjósfjörðr was to Firmness, defined as that quality of steady glowing courage whose nature surpasses the fleeting flames of instinctive boldness (Malling 1807, 119).

It is clear, then, that the Icelandic saga of Fríðþýrjósfjördr was known in Victorian England, and that summary accounts of its hero had been available for pre-Victorian readers to reflect on. Yet, even if all the unread manuscripts of the saga had been edited, and each of the three translations poured over, even if British readers had been tireless in their study of works by Malling, or Jón Espólín, or Þóraður Torfason (Torfaðs), a devoted believer in the saga’s historicity (Pope 1866; Andersson 1964, 8), it is unlikely that any Victorian cult of Fríðþýrjósfjördr would have developed without one crucial additional impulse. That came in the form of successive English translations of Bishop Esaias Tegnér’s 1824 Swedish narrative poem based on the Icelandic saga. Whilst Tegnér’s paraphrastic version follows the contours of the saga faithfully enough, there is much importation and amplification of incident, leading to an important new ending in which Frithiof the headstrong destroyer of Baldur’s temple undertakes its complete restoration as an act of spiritual atonement. The temple priest looks forward to the coming of Christ, the ‘new Baldur’ (Stephens 1839, Bk. 24, stanza xviii); in the meantime, the poem ends with Frithiof and Ingeborg prostrate in front of the pagan god’s restored image. Underpinning such individual narrative modifications, much of work is marked by a striking new lyricism, as signalled in lines from Longfellow’s ‘Tegnér’s Drapa’, written to mark the Swedish poet’s death in 1847:

The law of force is dead!
The law of love prevails!
Thor, the thunderer,
Shall rule the earth no more,
No more, with threats,
Challenge the meek Christ.
(Longfellow 1886, III 285)

It was, if the truth be told, largely because of Tegnér that H.L.D. Ward’s 1864 British Museum catalogue of Icelandic manuscripts could refer to the Icelandic saga of ‘famous Frithiof’ (f. 129). Previously ‘locked up […] in its soft yet sonorous dialect’ (anon. 1828, 137), the story suddenly became widely accessible: in the period 1833–1914 at least fifteen independent (to a greater or lesser extent) English versions of Tegnér’s poem were published (Benson 1926, 146–160). Moreover, the work enjoyed an additional life through the publication of summary
versions: in two translations (Henderson 1872; Upton 1907) of Ferdinand Schmidt's German version of the story; in Emily Cappel's 1882 selection of saga re-tellings, published in the 'Illustrated Library of Fairy-Tales' series; in Lady Clara Paget's privately printed King Bele of the Sogn District and Jarl Angantyr of the Orkney Islands (1894); in Zenaide Ragozin's Frithiof—Viking of Norway (1899); in Margaret Watson's 1897 Dublin Review article in Olive Beaupré Miller's 'Bookhouse for Children' series (Miller 1920); in Helen Adeline Guerber's Legends of the Middle Ages (1896), and Myths of the Norsemen from the Eddas and Sagas (1909), this latter work making use of extracts from three of the available Tegnér translations (those of Stephens, Longfellow, and Spalding).

In lending this wholly new glamour to a faded medieval figure, Tegnér was to Frithiof what Tennison was to King Arthur—and over much the same period. Henry Sweet may have regarded Tegnér's poem as 'rubbish' (Wawn 1990, 7), but few Victorians agreed with him. In nineteenth-century Britain there was at least as much a cult of Tegnér's Frithiof as there was of the Icelandic Friðþjófr. The two figures and the very different literary works which gave them life were cheerfully intermingled by most Victorian readers untroubled by questions of primary authenticity: their reception theory and practice was blessedly uncomplicated.

The Victorian cult of Friðþjófr/Frithiof extended beyond words to pictures and music. It is to mainland Scandinavia that one has to look for a richness and diversity of pictorial responses to the story comparable with the Arthurian paintings of Victorian England (Mjöberg 1967). Nevertheless, the tradition of illustrated versions of the story established by George Stephens' Stockholm translations in 1839 was maintained subsequently in Britain, as with the gently pre-Raphaelite drawings which enliven the re-tellings by Cappel (1882) and Guerber (1909). In Allen's 1912 version, the pictures were in creditably good colour. As for music, George Stephens' Tegnér translation offered enough accompanying songs to fill (if not enliven) many a Victorian musical evening; whilst, years later, the coronation entertainment for George V at the Drury Lane Theatre in London featured Frithiof references via a performance of the German Kaiser's 'Song of Aegir' (Allen 1912, Preface).

The cult of Friðþjófr/Frithiof also extended to travel. Detailed attention has been drawn in recent years (Wawn 1987, 1992b; Aho 1993) to the growth in popularity of Iceland as a visiting place for Victorians weary of Alpine sublimity and Grecian grandeur. From the 1860s, indeed, there were complaints that it had become impossible to move in Iceland without running into parties of up-market British tourists: 'a rush of vulgar Englishmen, alike ignorant of the language and the manners of the race' ([anon.] 1876, 223). Similar grumbles can now be heard about the lower slopes of the Himalayas. But the British7 also journeyed to Norway, a number of them clearly aware of the Friðþjófr/Frithiof legends, and on the lookout for material remains or at least spiritual resonances (for example Forester 1853, 395; Anderson 1853, 16, 77); there were even guidebooks to point the way to the sagasteads (Bennett 1882, 92). One such traveller, R.G. Latham, was more than just aware of the story: he first translated Tegnér's poem as Frithiof, A Norwegian Story (1838), then he visited Norway, and finally published his account of Norway and the Norwegians (1840).8 British travellers visiting the Sogn district could sometimes encounter breathless local enthusiasm about Friðþjófr/Frithiof:

My next adventure was a journey from Balholm [Balestrand] to Sogndal over the mountains, with an old fisherman as porter. On the ascent, we had a glorious view of the scene of 'The Frithiof Saga.' My companion was enchanted, and recited the whole saga most dramatically, going up hill all the time! He lost his wind, and eventually I was obliged to carry both knapsacks again.9

By the end of the century, indeed, the knapsacks could have been further weighed down by copies of Edna Lyall’s popular (eleventh edition 1893) Victorian novel The Hardy Norseman,10 in which Frithiof, the sturdy young Norwegian hero, successfully woos the impressionable daughter of a visiting English merchant by rowing her up and down Sognefjord reciting the events of the ancient saga in generous detail. How much excitement could a Victorian girl take? Blanche Morgan could not resist the tale, and neither could Victorian Britain.

7In the case of Sir Charles Anderson, at least, the same British who had also travelled to Iceland; Anderson 1884.

8Latham even quotes extensively from his version of Tegnér's poem in his massive handbook The English Language (Fifth edition 1862), pp. 183–186.

9Most scholars can recall an occasional instance of noting down an interesting quotation, and subsequently being unable to locate its source. The quotation must therefore either be omitted, or, as here, accompanied by an apologetic footnote. It derives from an elusive Victorian travel book about Norway.

10I am grateful to Dr Carolyne Larrington for drawing my attention to this non-canonical classic.
WHY FRÍÐJÓFR/FRÍTHIÖF?

The widespread Victorian fascination with "stalwart Frith-thjóf" is more easily demonstrated than accounted for, however. That the saga was popular is clear; why it was popular is a more complicated question. Fríðjófs saga hins frækna, with its resolutely Norwegian (and Orcadian) setting, could never hope to win a place in the honoured canon of sagas narrating heroic events from the settlement period in Iceland; consequently, its characters, events and spirit were never invoked by nineteenth-century Icelanders in connection with their struggle for independence. At least one prominent nineteenth-century Icelander, Guðbrandur Vigfússon, was quite baffled by the phenomenon of the saga's popularity. Asked what he thought of the 1875 Morris/Eiríkur Magnússon Three Northern Love Stories volume containing translations of Fríðjófs saga, Viglundar saga (heavily influenced by Fríðjófs saga) and Gunnlaugs saga ormtunga, the curmudgeonly Guðbrandur replied, 'I am sick of love stories,' regarding their 'sentimental moonshine' as an unseemly aspect of Iceland's literary past, and quite unsuitable for importation to Britain (Bredsdorff 1960, 305). Guðbrandur's dismissive judgement, rather different from the sympathetic engagement with the saga which he had exhibited when visiting Sogn in 1854 (Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1990, 51, 53), was no doubt generated in part by Eiríkur Magnússon's involvement with the Three Northern Love Stories volume: by 1875 the two distinguished philologists had become bitter opponents on both a personal and professional level.

As its translator, Eiríkur himself was naturally more benevolently inclined towards the saga. Quite apart from his published translation, his library (as catalogued after his death by Bertha Phillpotts: Lbs. 405 fol.) contained English translations of Tegnér's poem by Latham (1838), Spalding (1872), and Hamel (1874), with his copy of the Spalding version heavily annotated and corrected. He was also in possession of a French translation of the Icelandic text, a complimentary copy from the editor Félix Wagner in 1904;11 and of the first published Icelandic translation of Tegnér's poem, the work of Matthías Jochumsson in 1864.12 When Messrs Marcus Ward contemplated the publication of yet another Tegnér translation, Eiríkur was invited to write the introduction: 'you are the man to do it' (Lbs. 2189a 4to, Robert Pritchett, undated). Eiríkur was also consulted by Beatrice Clay, an enthusiastic former pupil and subsequently a Chester school-teacher, who had written a play based on the Icelandic saga version: could Eiríkur advise her as to the date of the saga, on appropriate vestments for the pagan priests, on Old Icelandic forms of divination and casting of spells, on whether Norwegian and Icelandic customs were identical, on whether Ingibjörg would look better in blue or scarlet, and on his view of Miss Skeat's alternative ending to the saga, written in order 'to bring the conclusion into accord with modern feeling' (Lbs. 2186b 4to, 27 September 1911)?

Yet, for all his many-faceted engagement with the Fríðjófr and Frithiöf works, Eiríkur's explanation for the saga's popularity (in a draft review of Goddard 1871: Lbs. 405 fol.) seems defiantly simplistic. In his view Fríðjófs saga was written 'for the evident purpose of a merry evening [...] of making the listeners merely merry'. He speculates that it may be a 'determined chaff on the gods who in this story are kept alive by being baked and greased by women before the fire, which is evidently meant as a burlesque presentation of the old custom in the north for old decrepit men to have their backs rubbed by the fire in winter' (Lbs. 405 fol.). Eiríkur had little sympathy for readings of this saga (or of any other tale in the Julia Goddard Wonderful Stories from Northern Lands collection which he was reviewing) which sought relentlessly to identify some displaced solar myth behind the narrative; as with 'Gods and men all mourn the absence of the bright being without whom life and gladness seem alike to belong' (G.W. Cox, Introduction to Goddard 1871, xiv). Ingibjörg's marriage to Hringr is likened by Cox to Baldr's death, Þunn's abduction, and Rapunzel's clausuration—all are assigned to an infinitely flexible 'absences of the bright' category. Small wonder Eiríkur felt that Cox had been wounded by the 'mistletoe of one-sidedness'.13


12There is a little-known Icelandic version of Tegnér's Frithiöf which predates that of Matthías Jochumsson. The author is Særa Guðmundur Torsfason (1798–1879), who had never read a word of Swedish when he began, and enjoyed no help from any dictionary or translation. There are three texts of this version: Lbs. 480 4to, Lbs. 2399 4to, IB 10 8vo. The preface to this latter text is dated 12 February 1846. Særa Guðmundur says that the original is rightly regarded as smyli verk [a work of genius].

13Cox was not alone, however, in his mythic readings. The Norwegian Rudolf Keyser, who was lecturing on Fríðjófs saga at Christiania University as early as 1830 (Wiesener 1913, 62), also argued that the story was fundamentally
The question of Friðþjófr’s Frithiof’s popularity in Victorian Britain can certainly be addressed more searchingly than either Guðbrandur or Eiríkur managed to do. Some straightforward explanations suggest themselves immediately. Firstly, there was the lingering popularity of Ossian. The Reverend William Strong, first English translator of the Bishop Tegnér version, includes on the title-page of his 1833 volume a quotation from Tegnér which confirms the link. Those who had responded to the misty melancholy of the Ossianic œuvre, as millions of readers all over Europe certainly had, would also relish the Frithiof romance:

If you prefer the significant and profound, what ministers to seriousness and contemplation; if you delight in the gigantic, but pale forms which float on the mist, and darkly whisper of the world of the spirits, and of the vanity of all things save true honour—then I must refer you to the hoary—to the saga-storied world of the North, where Vala chanted the key tone of creation, whilst the moon shone upon the cliffs, the brook trilled its monotonous lay, and seated on the summit of a gilded birch, the night-bird sang an elegy upon the brief summer—a dirge over expiring nature.

The mist, the moonlight, the night-bird, the spirits, the whispers, the gloom, the pathos: admirers of Keats as well as of Ossian would have been alerted instantly, and Ossian was to remain a constant reference point in commentary notes provided by British translators throughout the nineteenth century. Secondly, the story of Friðþjófr/Frithiof is a bridal-quest medieval romance, and as such was likely to find a receptive readership amongst British antiquaries rediscovering their own native traditions of medieval chivalry and romance. The saga, notably the hero’s remarkably patient wait to recover his bride, was seen as a significant text for understanding the origins of medieval chivalry (Muckleston 1862, v). Thirdly, the story of Friðþjófr/Frithiof earned its popularity through its memorable poetic sequence of poems which accompanied the prose narrative of the hero’s hazardous voyage to the Orkney Isles. In the words of the Oxonian Icelandophile Frederick Metcalfe, it is a scene “so vivid and lifelike that our breath bates and our limbs move in unison as we read of his hair-breadth escapes and deeds of daring” (Metcalfe 1880, 287). Nineteenth-century Britain saw itself as the greatest sea-power on earth, and many British readers exhibited a powerful appetite for nautical adventure stories—anything from Captain Marryat to Conrad. Nor was this simply the taste of Boys’ Own magazine. In his 1877 Oxford prize-winning essay *The Place of Iceland in the History of European Institutions*, C.A. Vansittart Conybeare voices the widespread feeling that “it is to the seafaring instincts of the [Viking] race that England owes that naval supremacy which has long been her glory, and is still her strength” (Conybeare 1877, 4).

Such feelings were clearly still alive half a century later, when the perilous voyage sections of the Morris/Eiríkur Magnússon Fríðþjófs saga translation were included in a published collection of *Great Sea Stories of All Nations* (Tomlinson 1930, 993–999).

A fourth and related point is that the Friðþjófr/Frithiof story benefited from its local (for British readers) Orkadian links. Two of the Icelandic saga fragments first translated into English were published principally because of their local interest to readers in the British Isles: James Johnstone’s 1782 version of the final part of Hákónar saga gamla Hákonarson (which tells of the Norwegian king’s final and fatal expedition to Scotland), and Grímur Thorkelin’s 1788 extract from Laxdæla saga, which concentrates on Melkorka’s Irish ancestry. There is a draft translation of parts of Orkneyinga saga dating from c. 1830 (Scottish Registry Office, Heddle MS 263/124, unidentifiable translator ‘Mr W.W.’), a decade before the first published saga translations of George Stephens or Samuel Laing. The Orkney and Shetland Isles, still in the early nineteenth century remote destinations for all except travellers to Iceland, had also found their way into the drawing rooms of Victorian Britain through Sir Walter Scott’s richly evocative 1822 novel *The Pirate*, whose eery events take place in both locations, and whose characters are frequently cited in Victorian travel books about Norway and Iceland. In fact the post-Victorian reception of Scott’s novel resembles all too closely that of Fríðþjófs saga—there is as yet no really modern edition, and hardly anyone now reads it; but the many Victorian enthusiasts of the novel, whether sympathetic to the romantic Viking vision of Minna Trol, or the sturdy uldaller values of her father Magnus, would have followed the progress of Friðþjófr/Frithiof to and through Orkney with particular interest.

Merry evenings at home, a taste for salty sea-stories, the romance of the misty and saga-storied North, Orkadian localism: all these factors may well have helped to win an audience for the story of Friðþjófr/Frithiof in Victorian Britain. Arguably, though, there were other broader intellectual currents playing around its reception. Firstly, there was the question of...
language. It was important that the language of the George Stephens' pioneering translation of *Fristhörfs saga hins frækna* was English and not Latin. Latin had served medieval Icelandic literature nobly throughout the period of the European Enlightenment. The dual-language editions of Eddie poems and sagas published in Copenhagen under the auspices of the Arnamagnæan commission had won many new readers and much prestige for these previously little-known works. By 1839 the linguistic theories of Rasmus Rask and the Grimm brothers began to be absorbed in Britain (Aarsleff 1983, 162–210) with the result that previously acknowledged hierarchies of language were now unsustainable—Latin and Greek could no longer enjoy an unchallenged rule of the cultural roost. The serious study of Old English and Old Icelandic texts (not least *Fristörfs saga*) flourished in the new atmosphere. Ideally this and every other saga deserved to be read in its original language, but in the years prior to the publication of the 1874 Cleasby-Vigfusson *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, this was very much a counsel of perfection. People relied on translations, with Latin now to be superseded by English. For George Stephens this was not before time. He regarded Latin as the language of corrupt and despotic Rome (Stephens 1883, 413–414). Written originally in one Northern vernacular, sagas ought always to be translated into another. Stephens' particular problem as *Fristörfs saga* first English translator was to find an appropriate voice for Icelandic narrative prose in a nineteenth-century English language much of whose educated vocabulary and syntax remained heavily Latinate. First in the field, Stephens had no stylistic models to work from, but he did have an ideology, albeit an eccentric one, to refer to.

Stephens believed that there had originally been a single common Scandinavian language, out of which had developed local variants such as middle voice verbs and suffixed definite articles after the arrival of the Vikings in England. That original common language was, he claimed, the language of Old Northern England—the language of the Danelaw and, even, the language of his native Old Northern Merseyside (Stephens 1883, 320–322). Throughout his life Stephens strongly resisted claims that English was a fundamentally German language, despising ‘den modern trafik at germanisere England og Englænderne’ (Stephens 1890, 27). When searching for the origins of early English society, scholars and true Englishmen should look to, learn about, and celebrate the Norse inheritance, and pay less—a lot less—attention to Germany. Moreover, Stephens argues, the much-bruited German mythology was not German at all, but rather a modern German misappropriation of older Scandinavian and English sources (Stephens 1883, 306). So when considering the first appearance of the Icelandic *Fristörfs saga* in English, we need to be sensitive to the political implications of Stephens’ chosen language and style. The opening paragraph reads thus:

This Saga begins as follows.—King Bele governed Sygna-fylke, in Norway; he had three children; Heige was his first son, Halfdan his second, and his third child was Ingeborg, a daughter. Ingeborg was fair to look upon, and of great understanding, and was reared first and best among the royal offspring. There, west of the frith, stretched the strand, and thereupon stood a considerable village called Balder’s Hage, where was a Sanctuary and a great Temple, hedged round about with a lofty plank-work. Here were many Gods, but Balder was the most honoured among them all; and so zealous were those heathen men, that they had forbidden any harm being done there to either man or beast, nor could a male have any converse with a woman. At Svystrand was the dwelling of the King, but on the other side the frith was a village called Framniss, where lived that man hight Thorsen the son of Viking, and his village lay opposite the residence of the King. Thorsen’s spouse bore him a son called Frithiof, who was the tallest and strongest of men, and, from his very youth, was versed in all manner of exploits; hereby got he the name Frithiof the Bold, and was so happy in his friends that all men wished him well. (Stephens 1839, 3–4)

We observe the translator’s apparently determined attempt at linguistic archaism, reinforced in the original text by a Gothic typeface. Noteworthy features include a fondness for coordinate syntax throughout the opening section, inversions, alliterative clusters, vocabulary of Northern origin, phrasal contractions, and compound nouns. Overall, Stephens’s translation is uncertain in its register, with determined austerity subverted by occasional glimpses of regency grandure. Yet, whilst saga translation searches here for its own stylistic decorum, an ideological subtext is discernible. I believe that Stephens sought to develop a method of translation which had its verbal roots in ‘that mighty and noble and thorny Scandinavian (Old Scandinavian) NORTH ENGLISH which is now the birth-tung of England and her colonies’ (Stephens 1884, xv),
and, by extension, in the Norse culture which he idolised all his life, and whose imprint could still proudly be identified both in the legislative and legal procedures at home, and in the imperial strength and influence which Britain wielded abroad.

If the style of Stephens’ saga translation may have had cultural and political implications which flicker around the Gothic print on the page, similar resonances were identified in the story itself. The preface to Oscar Baker’s 1841 English version of the Tegnér poem claims: ‘It is in these sagas [...] that we have to look for the origin of the political institutions of England’. The institutions which the translator had in mind were trial by jury, representative legislature, freedom of speech, the right to own property, the security of that property, and the ability of the individual to influence public affairs. In making these claims, Baker was already firmly under the influence of the Orcadian scholar Samuel Laing, whose Journal of a Residence in Norway during the Years 1834, 1835, 1836 is as eloquent a record of Laing’s admiration for Norwegian culture as his parallel volume on Sweden (Laing 1838) is a stern indictment of the haughty feudalism of the Swedes. In Laing’s Norway Journal are to be found in distillate form the political attitudes which were to dominate the hugely influential preface to his 1844 translation of Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla. Twelve years earlier the British government had commissioned an Islander to write a book on the origins of the jury system in Britain; his name was Porleifur Repp, and he argued with abundant illustration from Edda, saga, and chronicle that the British system was indeed securely based on Scandinavian models (Wawn 1991, 95–101). Repp himself soon vanished from Britain, and his book was little cited subsequently; but it would be difficult to exaggerate the influence throughout nineteenth-century Britain of Laing’s Heimskringla preface and its claims about the essentially Norse nature of such British institutions as trial by jury. They are repeated everywhere: in school books, travel accounts, academic treatises, prize essays, poems, and prefaces to translations of Friðþjófs saga/Frithiofs saga. A single further instance must serve for many. In the opening section of William and Mary Howitt’s The Literature and Romance of North Europe (1852), there is an unblushing celebration of Britain’s imperial prowess—the power and prestige, the political stability, the enterprise, the commerce, the territorial conquests, the diffusion of the language, the ubiquity of the British fleet. None of these triumphs could have happened if the English race really had been of Anglo-Saxon origin. The modern Saxon Germans are seen as a passive and slavish race, with no tradition of representative government or justice (Howitt 1852, 3–4). Never mind searching for the forefathers of England in the pages of Tacitus’s over-promoted Germany; much better to examine the myths and sagas of Scandinavia.

Several pages of Laing’s Heimskringla preface are then quoted with ringing approval.

QUEEN VICTORIA’S SAGA

Filtered through Laing’s construction of ancient Scandinavia, the Friðþjófs/Frithiof story can be made to sound very democratic, very un-German, very Northern, and for that matter very male (an issue to be addressed later in the essay). None of these characteristics will have commended the saga to the very undemocratic, rather German, and very female Queen Victoria, whose attitude to Northern England is best (if no doubt apocryphally) expressed in her habit of drawing the curtains on the royal train when passing through the region so as not to be distressed by the satanic grime. How, then, did Queen Victoria and the household at Windsor cope with the saga of Friðþjófs/Frithiof?

This is no idle question. The very first of the Victorian translations of Tegnér’s Frithiof poem was dedicated to the youthful Princess Alexandrina Victoria, just four years before she was crowned queen. The translator was the Reverend William Strong, King George IV’s Chaplain in Ordinary at Windsor. Frithiof’s saga was thus not just a Victorian story: it was, from its earliest exposure in nineteenth-century Britain, Victoria’s story. Its title-page identifies the work as ‘a Scandinavian Legend of Royal Love’, whilst the preface assures us that Princess Victoria represents ‘a living impersonation of the graces and attractions, of the inflexible rectitude and fine sensibility, of the conscious dignity and patriotic devotion, of all the native attributes ascribed by the fiction of the poet to the Royal Maiden of Norway’. Here was just the Scandinavian tale to encourage Victorian matrons, shocked by Sarah Bernhardt’s Cleopatra, to cry ‘how very like the home life of our own dear Queen’ (ODQ 1880, 5/20). Tegnér’s Ingeborg is physically beautiful but demure and sexually unthreatening; she is self-effacingly obedient to her brothers; in her refusal to elope with Frithiof, and in her willingness to marry the affable but wrinkled King Ring, she places familial duty before private love: ‘the glorious conquest of the sense of female dignity and patriotic duty, over fervent and deep-rooted affection’ (Strong 1833, xii). In this early Anglican version of the ‘male gaze’, passive female stoicism is made to seem an active virtue. Throughout Strong’s version of Tegnér, the presentation of the two lovers is a great deal more lyrical than in the Icelandic saga, where Ingibjorg in particular seems more moody and taciturn. The courage and camaraderie of Frithiof and his crew during their tumultuous sea-voyage is properly celebrated but, unlike the ending of the Icelandic saga where Friðþjófs kills Helgi before receiving
Hálfdan’s submission, Tegnér’s hero slays no-one: Helgi dies in an ignominious accident, crushed by a falling idol in a pagan temple in Finland (Stephens 1839, Bk. 24, stanza xxx). Indeed, despite the wit of Tegnér’s Frithiof, his mental retreat during the storm, and his consummate skill as a poet, it is the Ingeborg/Victoria figure who is the focus of all the hero’s actions and most of the reader’s thoughts. Strong’s edition thus becomes a sonorous tribute to the future head of Britain’s beloved royal family.

Yet in Britain in the 1830s Britain’s royal family was not especially beloved. By no means everyone shared the royal chaplain’s trembling obsequiousness. This was, after all, the age of revolution in Europe; the age of the reform bills in Britain. There were those for whom the monarchy had become a circus, full of foreigners, mostly German. The majesty of monarchy, fast fading in late twentieth-century Britain, has been seen as a creation of the late nineteenth-century royal spin-doctors, nurtured subsequently by an alliance of canny newspaper editors and craven Reithian broadcasters. David Cannadine reminds us of the seediness of royal ceremony in the early nineteenth century (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 118): that at the funeral of Princess Charlotte the pall-bearers had been drunk; that at the coronation of George IV prize-fighters had to be employed to control the guests; that at the funeral of that same unlaunched monarch the service was frequently disturbed by the embarrassingly loud voice of the as yet uncrowned King William IV; at the Windsor wedding of Princess Alexandra, the travel arrangements were so chaotic that the Prime Minister had to return to London in a third-class railway coach, accompanied by Disraeli sitting on his wife’s knee; whilst at the coronation of Victoria herself, the wrong-sized rings were produced for her finger. Knowledge of this comedy of errors may have been confined to the high-born few: but the Times obituary for George IV was available to the lower-born many. It was a merciless indictment: ‘most reckless, unceasing and unbounded prodigality […] tardy childishness […] indiffERENCE to the feelings of others’, and, even worse, ‘the late King had many generations of intimates with whom he led a course of life, the character of which rose little higher than that of animal indulgence’ (Hibbert 1976, 782–783). From the time of George III onwards monarchy had too often meant madness or mistresses, or both. Victoria’s immediate predecessor as monarch, the bluff King William IV, was a more popular figure than George IV (he hardly had been less popular), but at the time of the young Princess of Kent’s accession to the throne in 1837, the monarchy could not assume the unquestioning loyalty and esteem of its subjects. In an age of revolution, there was no guarantee that the monarchy would last the century—or even the decade. Viewed in this light, whilst the Royal Chaplain’s version of Tegnér’s

Frithiof’s saga remains primarily a work of literary obeisance, it is possible also to identify a monitory element in it. Ingeborg represents what any Queen of England ought to be like, with the story as a whole assuming the role of a contemporary Mirror for Princes(ses)—a cautionary tale, as much anxiously prescriptive as securely descriptive.

If for William Strong Frithiof’s saga was firstly a story about monarchical duty and morality, it was also a story about religious faith. The Icelandic Fríðþjófs saga offers the potentially disturbing (to Victorian ears) vision that temples of religion were places where courting couples could engage in illicit love-making, and places which could be burnt down without remorse. In the saga Fríðþjófr ultimately trusts himself rather than the pagan gods; no Christian god is mentioned. Tegnér’s poem will have seemed altogether more congenial to Princess Victoria’s chaplain. The God Balder is treated far more respectfully than in the saga. Indeed, the love of Frithiof and Ingeborg is spoken of as an earthly reflection of Balder’s love for his wife Nanna in Norse myth; the burning down of Balder’s temple is seen as an act of desecration; and Frithiof’s final action in the poem is to rebuild the temple as an act of atonement. The poem’s paganism is presented as the natural religion of the righteous heathen awaiting fulfilment in Christianity, and commanded respect as such. Victoria’s chaplain, one of Tegnér’s first literary critics in Britain, interprets the restoration of Balder’s temple as ‘a victory of the religious principle over youthful arrogance’. George Stephens was amongst those to claim that for Victorian England, any ‘religious principle’ (even paganism—even Catholicism) was preferable to materialistic nihilism.

This was indeed the view of other mid-century Victorians as, like John Newton in his Liverpool lecture, they tried to accommodate new Darwinian theories on the origin of species. The publication in English translation of J.J.A. Worsaae’s The Primaeval Antiquities of Denmark, a study of stone-age and iron-age Denmark, had played an important part in challenging the idea of literal biblical time, and the notion of original Edenic and subsequent degeneration. History should rather be seen as progress: but what sort of progress? For some it was a random as progress: but what sort of progress? For some it was a random evolutionary process governed solely by the laws of physics and chemistry rather than by any divine providence. Skulls grew larger, and brains expanded to fill the space. The Iceland explorers Sir George Mackenzie and Robert Chambers were amongst those who lent their support to such theories (Bowler 1989, 88–89). Progress of this sort could hardly be depicted in terms of a ladder with steps leading up to some single divine purpose; evolution was more like a tree with roots and branches leading everywhere or nowhere, but with no central bough. This was potentially all very disturbing. Where in this model, for instance,
could a place be found for divine authority?

There are some striking parallels here with what the new philologists were saying about language. Traditionally, languages had been perceived in terms of a hierarchy, headed by Greek and Latin, and with all the other tongues representing subsequent stages of development and (in the eyes of many) degeneration. In George Webbe Dasent’s somewhat tendentious formulation, ‘Greek and Latin [had] lorded it over the other languages of the earth [...] twin tyrants [...] with a pedant’s rod’ (Dasent 1903, xviii). The new philology had demonstrated that all ancient and modern European languages were siblings descended from some more remote Indo-European parent language, whose very existence had been revealed by scholars such as Sir William Jones who had been able to study Sanskrit whilst residing in India serving the needs of an expanding empire. For some the link between ancient philology and modern imperial power was a source of triumphalist confidence: ‘The Saxon now rule[s] with uncontrolled sway over that antique land, whence the heritage he so gloriously holds was originally transmitted to him’ (Blackwell 1873, 45). The study of Old Icelandic in Britain had certainly benefited from challenges to the enshrined prestige of Graeco-Roman antiquity. Yet, ultimately, in dethroning Greek and Latin, the New Philology was not about to enthrone Anglo-Saxon and Old Icelandic in their place as some alternative cultural and linguistic gold standard. This was a source of disillusion for the zealous supporters of both languages. When the effects of the New Philology, and of Darwin’s theories were reflected upon, there was much unease at the erosion of linguistic, moral and spiritual authority which many people attributed to them (Dowling 1986).

It is smaller wonder, then, that even as early as 1833 a British Royal Chaplain in Ordinary had seized on Tegnér’s version of the Frithiof tale as a source of spiritual solace. It is even less surprising that, as the century progressed, many other readers empathised with the poem’s lyrical piety: ‘its story is that of a fine nature, driven, half-unwittingly into wrong-doing; of his repentance, atonement, and final forgiveness’ (Watson 1897, 30). Here was the kind of Old Northern story which the New Philology may have helped to highlight, but which in Bishop Tegnér’s version could be reconciled securely with the central importance of the ‘religious principle’.

THE VICTORIAN POLITICS OF FRÍÐÞJÓFS/FRÍÐÞIOFS SAGA

We have seen, then, that within the walls of Windsor castle the story of Frithiof was read as a tale about duty and loyalty; and also as a paean of praise for worthy paganism, highlighting the importance of retaining and revitalising one’s religious faith. Outside the royal circle, a range of more robust and less deferential readings emerged. Firstly, the story’s treatment of the Fríðþjófs/Frithiof figure drew attention to the theme of ‘manliness’, to employ (with appropriate diffidence) a much-used word in Victorian writings about the North. By it was signified the vigorous, buccaneering spirit which had once helped to create and must now sustain the modern British Empire. That spirit was even associated with the sound of the old Northern language: in Sir George Dasent’s view the Viking forefathers of the English ‘spoke with a manly mouth’, whilst the diphthongs of the decadent, house-bound West Saxons sounded ‘mincing’ (Dasent 1873 I 14). The problem was, how to instil Viking virtues in Victorian manhood, and one answer lay in the public schools of Britain, such as that in which the Iceland explorer Sabine Baring-Gould taught; cold showers in the morning, Viking stories on Sunday afternoon walks, and bracing floggings in the evening. The first ever Victorian Viking novel, The Iceander’s Sword, or The Sword of Oraefadal, was the work of Baring-Gould in the years immediately preceding his 1862 journey to Iceland; he published it in twenty short episodes in the magazine of Hurstpierpoint School. On his return from Iceland (with his manuscript of Fríðþjófs saga), and under pressure from former pupils who were themselves now parents, Baring-Gould was prevailed upon to publish his re-telling (for schoolboys) of Grettis saga, complete with pictures marking the stages in Grettir’s awkward progress from gilded youth to gallant old age. Tegnér’s Frithiof story also appeared in illustrated versions for children.

In 1833 the Windsor chaplain may have seen the story as focusing primarily on the Ingeborg/Victoria figure; but for the illustrator of G.C. Allen’s 1912 version, it was the glamorous hero who took centre stage. We see him (in colour) in various guises: on a snow-covered hillside brandishing his gleaming Excalibur-like sword; attempting to persuade a demurely Pre-Raphaelite Ingeborg to elope; and fearlessly piloting the magic ship through the devilish storm, with the vessel’s dragon head exhibiting considerably more fear than the defiant features of stalwart Frithiof. In the illustration which shows the firing of Balder’s temple, the hero is depicted as the soul of stern righteousness towering over Jezebel-like female figures—clearly the artist (T.H. Robinson) understood this scene somewhat differently from William Strong. Far from troubling Victorian readers, Frithiof’s sexual patience—not to say reticence—may have proved a positive recommendation.

Outside Windsor, too, as I have already suggested briefly, the Fríðþjófs/Frithiof story was read as a challenging account of ancient democratic processes. This theme is worth developing here in greater detail. The tale offers several archetypal images of the process whereby...
power ought to pass from older generation to younger. It can certainly be read as a rite of passage narrative about an individual—a kind of family drama sequence—but it was also read at a more social level as a story about legitimising authority within a community. The two brothers offer a negative model of this process: inheriting their father’s royal power by hereditary succession, they abuse it, and are unable to defend it convincingly against a threat from outside the kingdom. Their authority is unconvincing because it is, in a sense, immature—the young men demand or assume by virtue of their inherited titles a deference which they have yet to earn, and which has not been popularly bestowed. They huddle regressively on their dead father’s mound; they are defenceless against and capitulate to the elderly King Hringer/Ring, himself an urbane father figure. The brothers are unable to raise a popular force to fight him, because their power has no popular mandate. They then seek to employ the supernatural power of the witches (aficionados of Bruno Bettelheim might be tempted to designate these as displaced mother figures) to sustain their authority.

Friðþjófr/Frithiof, by contrast, is of honourable but not royal birth, and has thus to earn and then to have granted by consent of the community any authority which he is to exercise. He has to win by nature what nurture has not provided. When the brothers burn down his home village, it is as if in the underlying symbolic logic of the story the hero is being forced to become his own man, to leave home, to quest, to place himself in jeopardy, and eventually to wait like the most patient of Prince Charmings until his Sleeping Beauty wakes up. King Hringer’s/Ring’s children by Ingebjörg/Ingeborg will rule their kingdom, while Friðþjófr/ Frithiof and his new wife defeat the discredited brothers and establish a new dynasty based, especially in Tegnér’s poem, not on automatic hereditary succession but on popular consent formally expressed. There were plenty of opportunities for Friðþjófr/Frithiof to seize power by stealth. He could have allowed the elderly King Hringer/Ring to drown in the ice during a sledding accident, but he rescues him; he could have murdered the old king whilst he lay, sword at his side, sleeping in the woods during a hunting trip, but Friðþjófr/Frithiof, having drawn the weapon, throws it away. After the old king’s death, he could have usurped the throne from Hringer’s/Ring’s children, but instead (like Beowulf’s treatment of Hrothgar’s heirs) he guards it selflessly until they themselves are old enough to exercise the power which is popularly bestowed on them at a great thing meeting near the end of Tegnér’s poem.

That is the model of constitutional royal power on offer, certainly in Tegnér’s work: an elective monarchy, legitimised by popular vote. Such a system is commended in the dying King Beli’s speech to Halfdan his son. George Stephens’ 1839 accompanying commentary leaves no doubt as to the intensity of his own views on this issue:

The Kingship of the old North was originally, as it should be—an Elective Presidency; though the history of the Scandinavian kingdoms affords melancholy proof enough, how respect for the ‘divine races’ (as the families said to be descended from Oden were called) overwhelmed the land with destructive minorities, or imbecile manhood. With the ‘hereditary principle’, whether monarchical or aristocratic, equally cementing Dynasties formed in Kingdoms gained by the sword, came in also ‘hereditary degradation’. (Stephens 1839, 226)

The detectable undertow of asperity becomes a flood tide in the lines from Alexander Pope to which the conscientious reader is then directed. First on monarchical authority:

Who first taught souls enslav’d, and realms undone,
Th’ enormous faith of many made for one;
That proud exception to all Nature’s laws,
T’invert the world, and counter-work its Cause?
Force first made Conquest, and that conquest, Law;
’Till Superstition taught the tyrant awe;
Then shar’d the Tyranny, then lent it aid;
And Gods of Conquer’ts, Slaves of Subjects made:

(Essay on Man, III 241–248)

Then attention is drawn to Pope’s withering scorn at the expense of the hereditary principle:

Stuck o’er with titles and hung round with strings,
That thou mays’t be by kings, or whores of kings.
Boast the pure blood of an illustrious race,
In quiet flow from Lucrece to Lucrece:
But by your father’s worth if your’s you rate,
Count me those only who were good and great.
Go! if your ancient but ignoble blood
Has crept thro’ scoundrels ever since the flood,
Go! and pretend your family is young;
Nor own, your fathers have been fools so long.
What can ennoble sots, or slaves, or cowards?
Alas! not all the blood of all the HOWARDS.

(Essay on Man, IV 205–216)

There can thus be no doubt as to the sharply politised nature of George Stephens’ attachment to the Friðþjófr/Frithiof story. Belief in power legitimised by popular acclaim; rejection of the hereditary principle with its long lines of in-bred lunatics: these were
positions unlikely to promote the cause of George Stephens’ Friðþjófr/Frithiof volume with the British royal family. The supine obsequiousness of William Strong’s 1833 preface was much more in line with their house style. King William IV’s brief reign had certainly not been marked by any monarchical inclination to submit meekly to the will of the people, however expressed: the king dismissed the government three times in seven years, he twice dissolved parliament ahead of time, and interfered in the formation of coalition administrations (Gash 1965, 5).

Stephens was not alone amongst Victorian saga translators in his aversion to such abuses of hereditary power. In an essay on Viking virtues written immediately before beginning work on his famous translation of Njáls saga, George Webbe Dasent strikes a similarly uncompromising note:

We do not, now-a-days stop to inquire if the infant be deformed or a cripple. With us the old house will stand as well upon a crooked as upon a straight support. But in Iceland, in the tenth century, as in all branches of that great family, it was only healthy children that were allowed to live. The deformed, as a burden to themselves, their friends and to society, were consigned to destruction by exposure to the mercy of the elements […] In this old age of the world the law holds us in her leading-strings, as though we had fallen into a second childhood […] for incapacity that [Viking] age had no mercy. No 'tenth transmitter of a foolish face' would have been tolerated merely because one of his ancestors, generations back, had been a man of merit. (Dasent 1858, 211–212)

The virtues of a vigorous representative democracy were also extolled by Samuel Laing. In his travels through Norway he had warmed to the culture of the small farmer (Laing 1844 I 99–100; 1854, 258). It was indeed on the farm of one such ‘bonder’ during his winter stay in Norway that Laing had first read Heimskringla in a Danish translation (Laing 1844 I 202). And what did an Orcadian liberal such as Laing find so sympathetic in Snorri’s great work? The answer appears to be: all those meetings, all those speeches, all that acrimony, all that artful persuasion which participatory democracy encourages (Laing 1844, I 114–117). Such a system was infinitely preferable to the ‘slavish torpidity and superstitious lethargy’ (ibid, 15) of priest-ridden Southern Europe, with the peoples enslaved precisely because they had no property to protect, and hence no inclination or reason to assert themselves politically. In Britain Laing mocked the monarchy for its abuses of power and feckless triviality: life at Holyrood House was dismissed as a ‘puppet show’ (Laing 1854, 247). In Norway it had never been possible to build such castles on the ground—never mind in the air: the rock was too hard, as if even geology had conspired to frown on feudalism (Laing 1844, I 120). Nor, in the absence of any system of primogeniture, was it possible to accumulate large holdings of land. Accordingly, Laing has much to say about the virtues of the small and independent landholder, the udaller. The accession of any new monarch had to be proposed and agreed by the ‘bonder’ class at district and national thing meetings. A royal daughter could contemplate marriage to a bonder without hesitation: ‘there was no idea of disparagement, or inferiority, in such alliance’ (Laing 1844, I 104–105). Indeed, though perhaps more frank than farmer, Friðþjófr’s/ Frithiof’s suit for Ingibjörg/Ingeborg needs to be seen in this positive light. Udaliers held their land in free: subject to no-one, taxed by no-one, forfeitable to no-one. Much better forty small independent farms run this way, than thirty-nine small farms subject to the arbitrary control of a single overbearing feudal lord, some latter-day Helgi or Hálfdan figure.

Friðþjófr’s/Frithiof’s Orcadian adventures may also have had a political dimension for Victorian readers. Samuel Laing was an Orcadian who had relished finding the values of his native islands alive in Norway and dead in Sweden. Another Orcadian, Alfred Johnstone, was Secretary of the Viking Club many of whose founding members had strong Orcadian and Shetlandic links (Townsend 1992); he was also the driving force behind the so-called Udal League in the 1880s. According to its Constitution, the League sought to ‘promote and encourage a general revival and assertion of the Teutonic or Norse characteristics of the British nation—straightforwardness, and obedience to Constitutional law and government’. Nowhere were these characteristics more richly expressed than in Viking Orkney and Shetland. The Udal League Constitution lists amongst its aims the ‘upholding and revival of peasant proprietorship in Orkney and Shetland; the redress of grievances relating to double taxation and alienation of lands; and, in the event of any move towards devolved government in Britain, the advocacy of islanders’ wishes to be allowed to form a division by themselves’ (all quotations from Lbs. 2186b 4to, Alfred Johnstone to Eiríkr Magnússon, 25 March 1887; see also Alfred Thomson 1985). This late Victorian recognition of residual Norse qualities of life in Orkney and Shetland echoes closely the claims made in Norway and Shetland by the advocates of islanders’ wishes to be allowed to form a division by themselves (Laing 1844, I 120). Nor, in the absence of any system of primogeniture, was it possible to accumulate large holdings of land. Accordingly, Laing has much to say about the virtues of the small and independent landholder, the udaller. The accession of any new monarch had to be proposed and agreed by the ‘bonder’ class at district and national thing meetings. A royal daughter could contemplate marriage to a bonder without hesitation: ‘there was no idea of disparagement, or inferiority, in such alliance’ (Laing 1844, I 104–105). Indeed, though perhaps more frank than farmer, Friðþjófr/Frithiof’s suit for Ingibjörg/Ingeborg needs to be seen in this positive light. Udaliers held their land in free: subject to no-one, taxed by no-one, forfeitable to no-one. Much better forty small independent farms run this way, than thirty-nine small farms subject to the arbitrary control of a single overbearing feudal lord, some latter-day Helgi or Hálfdan figure.

Friðþjófr’s/Frithiof’s Orcadian adventures may also have had a political dimension for Victorian readers. Samuel Laing was an Orcadian who had relished finding the values of his native islands alive in Norway and dead in Sweden. Another Orcadian, Alfred Johnstone, was Secretary of the Viking Club many of whose founding members had strong Orcadian and Shetlandic links (Townsend 1992); he was also the driving force behind the so-called Udal League in the 1880s. According to its Constitution, the League sought to ‘promote and encourage a general revival and assertion of the Teutonic or Norse characteristics of the British nation—straightforwardness, and obedience to Constitutional law and government’. Nowhere were these characteristics more richly expressed than in Viking Orkney and Shetland. The Udal League Constitution lists amongst its aims the ‘upholding and revival of peasant proprietorship in Orkney and Shetland; the redress of grievances relating to double taxation and alienation of lands; and, in the event of any move towards devolved government in Britain, the advocacy of islanders’ wishes to be allowed to form a division by themselves’ (all quotations from Lbs. 2186b 4to, Alfred Johnstone to Eiríkr Magnússon, 25 March 1887; see also Alfred Thomson 1985). This late Victorian recognition of residual Norse characteristics of life in Orkney and Shetland echoes closely the claims made in Norway and Shetland by the advocates of islanders’ wishes to be allowed to form a division by themselves (Laing 1844, I 120). Nor, in the absence of any system of primogeniture, was it possible to accumulate large holdings of land. Accordingly, Laing has much to say about the virtues of the small and independent landholder, the udaller. The accession of any new monarch had to be proposed and agreed by the ‘bonder’ class at district and national thing meetings. A royal daughter could contemplate marriage to a bonder without hesitation: ‘there was no idea of disparagement, or inferiority, in such alliance’ (Laing 1844, I 104–105). Indeed, though perhaps more frank than farmer, Friðþjófr/Frithiof’s suit for Ingibjörg/Ingeborg needs to be seen in this positive light. Udaliers held their land in free: subject to no-one, taxed by no-one, forfeitable to no-one. Much better forty small independent farms run this way, than thirty-nine small farms subject to the arbitrary control of a single overbearing feudal lord, some latter-day Helgi or Hálfdan figure.
prized most in the northern Isles of Britain. Another embodiment of those same principles is surely Angantyr, the spirited Orkadian chief who dealt so nobly with Friðþjófr/Frithiof in the saga. It is, accordingly, not difficult to identify the Victorian politics of Orkney in the story of Friðþjófr/Frithiof.

Confronted by the disturbing political implications of such rediscovered udaller radicalism, not every Victorian enthusiast of northern antiquity shared the eagerness for fundamental constitutional change exhibited by Laing, Johnstone and others. Writing in the wake of the 1848 European convulsions, Thomas Forester felt that any attempt to transfer the Norwegian pattern of constitutional monarchy and social equality to Britain would lead to revolution. He favoured instead a judicious process of 'timely and voluntary concessions' such as the elimination of 'exuberance of luxury' amongst the ruling classes (Forester 1850, 457-459). Yet Laing's radicalism was far more influential than Forester's nervous gradualism. It was Laing who set the agenda for the ways in which Icelandic sagas were read during the reign of Queen Victoria. Both Friðþjófr saga and Tegnér's poem lie comfortably along the grain of such attitudes.

Along with the promotion of manliness and representative democracy there was a third and final implication of the Friðþjófr/Frithiof story for Victorian readers outside the walls of Windsor. We recall that Darwin and Friðþjófr had proved the 1893-1894 season's most popular lecture topics at the Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society. As I hinted earlier in this paper, the two subjects have a number of elements in common, not least via periodic references to Darwin in nineteenth-century travel books about Iceland (for example Paijkull 1868, 43, 180-181). Darwin's description of man's ascent, from ape to conquest of savagery to multiplication round the globe, was an image of upward human mobility which must have sounded well in the ears of the upwardly mobile ranks of Victorian society. As an excellent recent biography puts it, what Darwin offered to Britain's *nouveau riche* was 'a romantic pedigree, an epic genealogy. Disregarding the apes, as many did, they found the *Descent of Man* a tremendous family saga' (Desmond and Moore 1992, 580). It is a striking image to use about a mid-century period which was enjoying for the first time the real Icelandic families sagas in newly available English translations. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for instance, available from 1861 in George Webbe Dasent's lavishly produced version, dramatises memorably the ancestry and heroic evolution of great Icelandic families and the Icelandic state. Though it seems almost too convenient to be true, Dasent's nickname amongst his travelling companions in Iceland during their 1861-1862 travels was in fact Darwin ([Clifford] 1865), and it is not hard to see why when we recall Dasent's scornful hostility to the unnatural protection by law of hereditary succession. It was John Ruskin who had posed what for Dasent was the crucial question: "Who is best man?" [...] the Fates forgive much,—forgive the wildest, fiercest, cruelest experiments—if fairly made for the determination of that! (quoted in Carlyle 1875, 309). Read in this context, the story of Friðþjófr/Frithiof could be seen to encode a powerful set of *arriviste* middle-class values. Ruskin's 'best men' would emerge as clearly in Victorian Liverpool's Cotton Exchange, as on a storm-tossed Viking long ship en route to Orkney. The saga community of Sogn ended up with the best leader, precisely because the succession of King Belli's sons was unsatisfactory—they were 'best men' through birth alone, and they were compelled to yield to Friðþjófr/Frithiof, a 'best man' in deed. To ambitious Victorian ears, both the Icelandic saga and the Tegnér poem must have seemed thoroughly reassuring texts.

**ENVOI**

The uncomfortable realities of Iceland and Victorian Britain did not allow such radiant optimism to stand unchallenged, however. Charles Darwin had written about survival of the fittest, whilst bearing the burden of knowing that his children were subject to an hereditary lung disease. The lucky one survives—but it was hardly a survival of the fittest. They were the (just about) living proof of the bleak human truths behind the bookish abstractions.

W.C. Collingwood, Ruskin's secretary, was another victim of the cruel tensions which could develop between theory and reality. One of the finest pictures (now in the British Museum; reproduced Karlsson 1992, 55) from his 1897 Iceland visit is not a landscape, but an imaginary historical scene at the Alþingi. It is a sunny day at Pingvellir; we see the brightly-coloured tent tops; the place is full of brightly-dressed *alþingismenn* and their followers debating, plotting, cutting deals and making decisions. It is a picture full of saga-age energy; it is a society being social, a community communing. I count 131 people in the picture, only one of whom is a woman—a young couple stand arm in arm in the foreground, separated from the main throng, more intent on love- than law-making. Above and to the right of Almannagjá, on a rocky outcrop, stand the indistinct figures of what look like three guards: an alert

---

16I know of no evidence to support the statements made by Sir David Wilson and Else Roesdahl (Karlsson 1992, 54) that (i) the picture dates from c. 1875, and (ii) Collingwood had accompanied William Morris on his 1873 Iceland visit.
community needs external defence as well as internal coherence.

It is hard to imagine a more positive image of the Viking age in Iceland. It looks like the work of a man whose ‘pilgrimage to the sagasteals’ has been fully rewarded. Collingwood’s published account of his 1897 journey certainly suggests this, yet the reality was painfully different. Collingwood left Iceland deeply depressed about all that he had seen. He had set out with such a vivid sense of what ancient Viking values had been, and of what modern Iceland should be like, with Laing and Stephens amongst the writers responsible for creating that image. Not surprisingly, Collingwood had found his confrontation with lethargic and down-trodden Icelandic reality deeply disillusioning. This was degeneration on a grand scale. In Darwinian evolutionary terms, it all fitted the theory perfectly—the descendants of the Vikings had simply adapted to their bleak contemporary environment. But Collingwood did not like the implications of what he had witnessed: if Iceland today, why not Britain tomorrow—that British empire built on Viking values, buttressed by residual Viking blood. His September 1897 letters to Eirikur Magnússon (Lbs. 2186 4to) show all too painfully the gloom just beneath the surface of Victorian glory. Collingwood had tried to explore Iceland, but Iceland had succeeded in exploring him and his dreams.

Collingwood’s visit to Iceland had, thus, in its own way been as disturbing as the Friðþjófs/Frithiof voyage to Orkney. Both journeys had involved their heroes in uncomfortable confrontations with the worrisome margins of life. To travel to Iceland was to travel to the margins of European civilisation; indeed to the margins of creation itself. Wherever else on earth terra was firma, it was not Iceland. As periodic nineteenth-century volcanic eruptions reminded the tented Northern traveller, the island of Iceland was not securely in being—it was still in the process of becoming. It was much safer to stay at home and satisfy a fascination with the marginal from the leather-bound volumes of a well-stocked library. There is no primitive like an armchair primitive. Such readers could (and did) devour the many tales of outlaws and giants for whom the popular Icelandic imagination had constructed an existence in the rock-marked surface of the Icelandic interior (Powell and Eirikur Magnússon 1864, 1866); they represented phenomena at the psychological margins of a marginal civilisation. These same readers could follow the fortunes of the eponymous hero in Victor Hugo’s folkloristic novel Han d’Islande (1823), which in its six nineteenth-century English translations depicts the margins of Norwegian society being terrorised by Hans, a cannibalistic wildman imported from Iceland.

The literary marginal with its murky supernatural forces could be explored safely within the covers of a book, particularly in a saga much of whose murk had been rationalised away—in other fornaldarsögur of similar pattern the Friðþjófs/Frithiof journey motif involves a visitation to underworlds far spookier than Orkney (Power 1984). The romance shape of the Friðþjófs/Frithiof story generates successive images of danger (reluctant brothers-in-law, predatory sea-witches, hostile berserks) which are triumphantly overcome through individual prowess and social cohesion. The grim realities of a degenerate saga-isle civilisation which devastated Collingwood will have troubled few of the Victorian followers of Friðþjófs/Frithiof. As the saga ends, the fearsome margins of existence have been confronted and contained, the old has given way to the new with a minimum of disruption, worthy rulers are in legitimate charge, and the long-delayed but star-crossed marriage of the stalwart hero has finally taken place. It is an optimistic and humane vision reminiscent of Shakespearean romance. If the evidence of the story’s widespread diffusion is any guide, many Victorian readers of Friðþjófs saga hins frækna and its Swedish offshoot responded eagerly to the mood.17

BIBLIOGRAPHY

MANUSCRIPTS

Lbs. [Landsbókasafn Islands] Bréfason Stefn Einarsson; letters from William Morris.
Lbs. 405 fol. Eiríkur Magnusson’s library holdings, list prepared by Bertha Phillipotts; Eiríkur Magnusson’s comments on Friðþjófs saga hins frækna.
Lbs. 406 fol. Eiríkur Magnusson lectures.
Lbs. 480 4to. Guðmundur Torfason’s translation of Tegnér’s Frithiofs saga.
Lbs. 1860 4to (5). Eiríkur Magnusson lecture.
Lbs. 2181a 4to. Eiríkur Magnusson letters.
Lbs. 2186–90 4to. Eiríkur Magnusson letters.
Lbs. 2399 4to. Guðmundur Torfason’s translation of Tegnér’s Frithiofs saga.
Lbs. 2399 4to. Letters to Matthíás Jochumsson.
Lbs. 4555 4to. Eiríkur Magnusson lecture.
Lbs. Íð 10 8vo. Guðmundur Torfason’s translation of Tegnér’s Frithiofs saga.

17I am grateful to Professor Jan Ragnar Hagland and Dr Terry Gunnell for sharing their first-hand knowledge of the Sogn region with me, and for several valuable references. Dr Gunnell, Dr Fritz Heinemann and Dr Jim Binns have commented helpfully on earlier drafts of this paper.
Sidney Jones Library, University of Liverpool, Sephton MS 3.33.

PRINTED SOURCES

[1881. A Narrative of the Voyage of the Argonauts in 1880; Compiled by the Bard from the most Authentic Records. [?Liverpool].
———. 1894. The Icelanders’ Sword, or the Story of Oraefadal. London.

Caine, Hall. 1905. The Prodigal Son. London.
Cappel, Emily S. [1882]. Old Norse Saga. London.
Andrew Wawn

1875. The Vikings of the Baltic. 3 vols. London.
Falk, Hjalmar. 1890. 'Om Friðþjófs saga', Arkiv för nordisk filologi 6, 60–88.
Fergusson Irvine, W. 1893. 'Place Names in the Hundred of Wirral', Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire: Transactions, n.s. 7–8, 279–304.

'Stalmart Frithjof in Victorian Britain' 251

Hugo, Victor. [1845]. [anon., trans.], Hans of Iceland; or, the Demon Dwarf. London.
Johnstone, James. 1782. The Norwegian Account of Haco's Expedition against Scotland, A.D. 1263. [Copenhagen].
———. trans. 1844. The Heimskringla; or, Chronicle of the Kings of Norway. 3 vols. London.


Morris, William, [and Eiríkur Magnusson], trans. 1871. 'The Story of Frithiof the Bold', *The Dark Blue* 1, 42–58, 176–182.


Powell, George E., and Eiríkur Magnússon, trans. 1864. *Icelandic Legends, Collected by Jón Árnason*. [A second series of legends was published under the same title in 1866]. London.


[Review of Dasent 1858].


‘The North begins inside’: Auden, Ancestry and Iceland

SVEINN HARALDSSON

In my childhood dreams Iceland was holy ground; when, at the age of twenty-nine, I saw it for the first time, the reality verified my dream; at fifty-seven it was holy ground still, with the most magical light of anywhere on earth. (Auden 1967, 10)

This quotation from W.H. Auden’s foreword to Letters from Iceland shows what a central role Iceland played in Auden’s imagination all through his life. As Valentine Cunningham puts it:

A mythic north compelled the grown-up Auden as it had Auden the little boy, both conscious of their Icelandic past. (Cunningham 1989, 166)

In this article I intend to shed some light on Auden’s ‘Icelandic roots’, the background to his interest in Iceland and things Icelandic, and show how they formed a part of his identity.

I

Strangely enough, apart from occasional references to Old Norse literature and a few metrical experiments, there are few direct references to Iceland in Auden’s poetry. There is, it is true, a discernible influence from Germanic poetic metres, but this can be attributed more to Anglo-Saxon than Old Norse literary models. Auden’s earliest poetry has a Norse flavour to it and is set in an imagined world which is recognisably Northern, but the general lack of references to Iceland in Auden’s favourite literary medium is puzzling. There is nothing comparable to the other great icon of Anglo-Old Norse literary relations, the Victorian poet William Morris, half of whose Collected Works are translations of sagas, poems based on Old Norse literature, romances derived from Icelandic sources or travel literature about Iceland. Auden was a very different kind of poet who ‘restored to poetry an encyclopedic fullness of subject matter and style’ (Mendelson 1981, xxii). Such a poet could not be fettered by the literary forms and themes of a long gone age. Instead he mined