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THE SPIRIT OF 1892: SAGAS, SAGA-STEADS AND VICTORIAN PHILOLOGY

By ANDREW WAWN

The foundation of the Viking Club and its Saga-Book in 1892 provided a timely national focus and forum for the scholarly energies of many late Victorian enthusiasts of (in Bishop Thomas Percy’s phrase) ‘Northern antiquities’. It never seemed likely that the gloomy prophecy of one new but apparently soon disillusioned member (Mabel Barnby) in a letter to the Cambridge librarian Eiríkr Magnússon would be fulfilled:

We are very sorry, though not at all surprised, that you don’t feel equal to the Viking Club—it is a moribund sort of affair, I fear—and would only be a constant worry to you—So long as the Saga Book only appears once a year, and is so deadly dull, there is not much hope for the Club, I should imagine.

(Lbs 2186 4to, 12 February 1899)

There was in fact every hope for the club and its ‘deadly dull’ journal in a land where and at a time when the ancient North and Old Norse had come to exercise so powerful an imaginative hold on so many intelligent minds: through travel to Iceland, from developments in philological understanding, from the interpretability of literary, place-name and archaeological studies, through intricate codicological and editorial work, through translation, adaptation and fictional re-creation for adults (and no less a priority) for children, and through the vivid witness of pencil, paintbrush and (latterly) camera. From the permanence of print to the passing stimulus of the public lecture, from private library to prestigious learned society, eager devotees of Viking culture sought to deepen their understanding of the Norse origins of their local communities and their nation. These Scandinavian roots were felt by most people to be culturally precious and judged by some to be politically potent.

Such labours served to link through correspondence the great Icelandic philologists based in Britain, notably Eiríkr Magnússon and Gudbrandur Vígússon, with those tireless and no doubt occasionally tiresome Norse enthusiasts—every one a Minna Troil—whose letters arrived daily from all over the British Isles. They wrote from the Shetlands, from the Channel Islands and from the Isle of Man; from London, Liverpool and Lampeter. There was Arthur Laurenson from Lerwick, the organiser of a weekly group reading Hávamál, with the new, long awaited, and acrimoniously produced Vígússon-Dasent edition of Orkneyinga saga.
next on their list; he writes to lament that the one group member with a
copy of the 1874 Cleasby-Vigfússon Icelandic-English Dictionary has
just emigrated to New Zealand (Bodleian MS Eng. Misc. d.131, letter to
Guðbrandur Vigfússon [hereafter GV in citations], 1888). There was
Ernest Savage from Douglas, an eager runologist reporting and seeking
guidance about local inscriptions, and enlisting support against planned
changes in the ancient format of the Tynwald (Bodleian MS Eng. Misc.
d.131, 14 extant letters to GV, 1886-9). A Mr Slater wrote from Plymouth,
praising the Dictionary and enthusing over his recent purchase of the
three-volume Vigfússon and Unger edition of Flateyjarbók (Bodleian
from Barrow in Furness, seeking information about the possible Norse
derivation of the name of his home town (Lbs 2189 a 4to, letter to Eiríkr
Magnússon [hereafter EM in citations], 10 November 1892). Not that
the intellectual traffic was all one way: the learned Icelanders gained almost
as much as they gave through the tireless burrowing and local lore of their
widely scattered, but often well-informed amateur colleagues. Such help
may to an extent have compensated Guðbrandur and Eiríkr for their
daily dealings with a lunatic (or at best wearisome) fringe of
 correspondents, of whom George Silk was typical. He sought Vigfússon's
advice about writing an opera on Viking themes (Bodleian MS Eng.
Misc. d.131, letter to GV, 24 November 1888). The Icelander was invited
to suggest a composer 'fond of the sea' who might be willing to set Silk's
embarrassing libretto on 'the spirit of Palmatoki and the Jomsborg Vikings'.
Bayreuth had its Wagner, and Britain was to have its Silk. Happily it was
soon also to have its Elgar, whose Viking oratorio King Olaf (based on
verses by Longfellow) received its first performance in Hanley in 1896
(Blackwood 1892, 14-18). When not pestered about music, Vigfússon
could fend himself pestered about rocks; he was asked to organise regular
supplies of both Icelandic lava and Iceland spar for British customers—
the lava was proving efficacious for horses' teeth (Bodleian MS Eng.
Misc. d.131, letter from Garth Wilkinson, [n.d.] 1885), and the Iceland
spar was good for making spectacle lenses (Lbs 2189 a 4to, letter from S.
G. Stokes, 22 September 1886).

At no time during the nineteenth century were these Norse enthusiasms
more vigorously pursued than in the last two decades. The articles in the
early issues of Saga-Book—'I want our first Saga Book to contain really
first class papers by eminent scholars' (Lbs 2186 4to, Amy Johnstone to
EM, 8 December 1893)—are merely the tip of a philological and
antiquarian iceberg in late-Victorian Britain which can be glimpsed as
revealingly in the private correspondence of the leading practitioners as
in their formal publications, as we learn of the projects which faltered,
and we glimpse well-intentioned reach frequently exceeding the grasp of
philology or finance. A glance at volumes in one of the Old Norse text
translation series of the time, the Northern Library, provides a convenient
initial toehold on this iceberg of activity. Four widely differing volumes
of translated texts appeared in the 1890s: Ambúlas Saga (1898; edited
and translated by Israel Gollancz), The Tale of Thord of Gate, commonly
called Fáreyinga saga (1896; translated by Frederick York Powell),
The Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason (1895) and Sverrissaga: The Saga of
King Sverri (1899). The two last-named translations were the work of a
Cambridge-educated Lancastrian, Rev. John Septon, who from 1866
until 1889 was Headmaster of Liverpool Collegiate School, and from
1896 to 1910 Reader in Icelandic at the University College of Liverpool;
in 1895 he had enrolled as a member of the Viking Club. At a time when
the social and economic geography of Britain had not yet completed its
lamentable lurch to London and the South, provincial scholars and anti-
quarans were in many ways the backbone of Victorian philology and
hence of the Viking Club, with Liverpool a strikingly active centre,
particularly in relation to Old Norse.

The Merseyside region could already boast of a noble and wide-
ranging tradition of Icelandic contacts long before Septon's influential
contribution in the 1890s. Both John Thomas Stanley and Henry Holland,
prominent Enlightenment travellers to Iceland, were natives of Cheshire
(Wawn 1981; 1987; 1989), and knew well that in the early nineteenth
century (Napoleonic disruptions apart) cargoes from Iceland—whale oil,
cider down, fox and swan skins, woollen mittens and stockings, dried cod
and salmon—were a familiar sight on the crowded quays of Liverpool
and in the shipping columns of the local Mercury (Wawn 1985, 130-1).
Such trade was itself in no small measure due to the efforts of a Liver-
pool-born commercial agent, James Robb, known personally to both
Stanley and Holland, who settled, married and traded successfully in
Reykjavík. The site of the Robb family business in the Icelandic capital
is to this day occupied by a store called 'Liverpool'.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century another Liverpoolian Icel-
dophile, John Septon, was exhibiting many of the scholarly requirements
for successful work in Icelandic studies: single-minded enthusiasm,
ownership of rare and valuable Icelandic books, and keen participation
in what was a thriving local antiquarian tradition befitting an area
rich in Viking-Age place-names and material remains—anything from
Viking Age silver (the Cuerdale hoard) to cross-fragments. Septon also enjoyed the material help and encouragement of well placed political and philological friends (politics and philology so often went together in Victorian Britain), and the scholarly support of a learned Icelandic. Septon’s Icelandic library, part of which is now preserved in the Sidney Jones Library, University of Liverpool, includes precious early editions: the Hauksbók and Skarðsárboð versions of Landnámabók and Einar Eyjólfsson’s translation of Arngrímur Jónsson’s Gronlandia, all printed in Skálholt in 1688; at least one of the celebrated Icelandic Enlightenment works issued by Hlío Islenska bókmennatflæg in Copenhagen, Oddur Jónsson Hjaltafn’s Islensk grasafræði (1830), and examples of the latest Copenhagen scholarship, notably the 1869 Werlauff, Westergaard, Konráð Gíslason edition of the AM 674A 4to text of the Eucidarior. We find Septon’s clerical eye drawn towards the prayerful and the meditative: fine copies of the 1584 and 1644 Hólar Guðbrandssbiblia and and Þórtakbiblia, and of Bishop Guðbrandur’s Húggunar bæklingur (1600), early Skálholt texts (1692, 1693) of Hallgrímur Pétursson’s Sin Gudrækekelegar vnapheinKIngar and Dagleg idkun af allum drottsnam dagssverkum [i.e. Diantum Christianum], and a fine copy, stamped and with brass clasps and bosses, of the 1716 Hólar edition of seven sermons by Bishop Jón Þorlaksson Vídalín of Skálholt. But we also find the Liverpool clergyman not averse to the more secular exotics of Verelius’s 1666 Upsala edition of Herraud’s och Bossa saga. Possession of another early Skálholt text, Saga þess haloflega hera Ólafs Tryggvasonar Norðs kongs (1689), no doubt influenced Septon’s choice of this saga for the first of his two Northern Library translations.

Clearly, then, a provincially-based prospective translator could accumulate a valuable collection of Icelandic primary texts; but from whom could such translators seek much-needed authoritative help and encouragement with the ancient Icelandic language in which those texts were written? The answer for most readers after 1874 was the Cleasby–Vígúfsson Dictionary. In Septon’s case, an additional answer was Guðbrandur Vígúfsson himself, via frequent correspondence and occasional visits in the decade up to the Icelanders’ death in 1889. The two men, with Septon (born in the year of Queen Victoria’s accession) the younger by ten years, became firm friends and collaborators. Thus on 25 August 1880 Vígúfsson writes to congratulate the Liverpoolian scholar on his translation of Eiríks saga rauda (Septon 1880; he had used the Icelandic text in Guðbrandur Vígúfsson and Powell 1879); it had been delivered earlier in the year (12 January) as a paper at a meeting of the Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society, sharing the evening with a presentation on ‘Incandescent Carbon Electric Lamps’. Vígúfsson was very encouraging:

[I am] much pleased with the freshness (and also the accuracy but that is a matter of course) of your rendering. Former translations are apt to be too stiff and wooden. (Sidney Jones Library, University of Liverpool [hereafter SJL], Septon MS 3.33)

By Boxing Day of the same year exciting plans were afoot. A former pupil of Guðbrandur’s, almost certainly Charles Sprague Smith (see Bodleian Eng. Misc. d.131, Smith to GV, 20 June 1880), was now teaching at Columbia College, New York, and was keen to ‘get up a class’ in Old Norse; and Guðbrandur had suggested that Septon’s translation would be an ideal text for the group. Several copies were duly dispatched to New York with the Icelanders’ blessing: ‘I have no doubt they will one day bear fruit’ (SJL, Septon MS 3.33, GV to Septon, 20 April 1882).² Guðbrandur visited Liverpool periodically, sometimes en route to and from the Carlyles in Dumfries (Cowan 1979), or Captain F. W. L. Thomas in Edinburgh, or, in the autumn of 1883, as one stop on a Northern tour which included visits to the Isle of Man and to West Hartlepool to see ‘my friend Mr Bligh Peacock, a merchant and scholar, who knows the Northern Languages, Icelandic inclusive’ (SJL, Septon MS 3.33, GV to Septon, 29 October 1883), and who had been the Icelanders’ first English acquaintance on his arrival from Copenhagen in 1864.

There were merchants and scholars aplenty in late-Victorian Liverpool, too; a visit to Merseyside at the end of the nineteenth century was a visit to one of the great ports of the British Empire, where the magnificent architecture of the waterfront told its own tale of civic self-confidence founded on buoyant commercial success. Vígúfsson recalls dining at Septon’s Huskisson Street house with Sir James Picton, parliamentarian, philologist (Picton 1864; 1865; 1868; 1869) and a powerful supporter of Septon and of Icelandic studies on Merseyside:

[Picton is] a fine man, and deserving of respect for having literary interests at all in Liverpool, where all the world rotates around bales of Cotton. (SJL, Septon MS 3.33, GV to Septon, 8 January 1886)

This seems, momentarily, an unfortunate echo of the kind of distaste for ‘trade’ that Vígúfsson may have encountered amongst the scholars and gentlemen ‘út í Öxnaverð, í Engílsaka hlöðskjálf’, to borrow Matthias Jochumsson’s overgenerous description (quoted Benediktz, in McTurk...
and Wawn 1989, 11) of the institution around (rather than in) which Guðbrandur scratched the most meagre of livings, supplemented by the private charity of G. W. Kitchin, Bartholomew Price, Max Müller and the occasionally rather grudging Dean Liddell of Christ Church (‘as long as he has money, he does nothing and muddles it away’, Bodleian MS Eng. Misc. c.112, letter to Müller, 23 June 1879). Yet it was precisely that trade, those same ‘bales of cotton’ and the prosperity they produced, which had helped to secure the establishment of the new University College of Liverpool in 1882, and which in turn was to fund the Faculty of Arts which was formally opened in 1896, complete with its newly appointed Reader in Icelandic. It was probably the first occasion in Britain (and certainly not the last) when commercial funding and a Readership in Icelandic were to be linked.

In more sensible vein, Vigfússon’s 13 October 1887 letter to Sephton (SIL, Sephton MS 3.33) anticipates eagerly another visit to Merseyside: he wants again to visit the Isle of Man, there to examine the site of the ancient Tynwald; he also looks forward to visiting the Tynwald ‘near you’ (Thingwall in Cheshire), and even to examining the giant Wirral sandstone slab, too large even to be a Grettistaf, on and over which generations of children (including the present writer in his youth) have clambered and carved their names, viz. Thors Stone on Caldy Hill near Thurstaston. This huge boulder was eventually to be the object of an article in Saga-Book (2, Part 2, 1898, 141–7) by W. G. Collingwood, the Viking Club’s ‘Heraths-Umboths-man’ for Cumberland and Westmorland but still with fond and clear memories of his native Merseyside.

Small wonder, with a profusion of such Norse-sounding names all along the shores of the Dee and Mersey rivers, that Sephton himself should have written extensively (Sephton 1903; 1904; 1913) on local place-names and dialect, as his mentor Sir James Picton had done before him. In such learned philological company, Vigfússon’s northern visits inevitably enabled him to learn as well as teach and encourage—and visit his Rodney Street eye specialist. For Sephton, in between his mentor’s visits, there was fresh reading to be done:

> When I get ten minutes to spare, which is not often enough, I fly to the Flatey book: I am just beginning the Jömsvíkinga þáttr, so I shall probably finish the work when I hear Sir James [Picton’s] age. (Letter to GV, Christmas Eve 1887)

Or again:

> I am still working very slowly through the first vol. of the Flatey bok., amusing myself with the Wickings of Jom. (Bodleian MS Eng. Misc. d.131, letter to GV, 22 March 1883)

Even when personal tragedy (the death of a son in 1882) led to desolating depression, Sephton’s spirits were lifted by thoughts of the forthcoming Corpus Poeticum Boreale which would, he hoped, ‘bring me new life’ (Bodleian MS Eng. Misc. d.131, letter to GV, 21 April 1882). It was no idle wish. Vigfússon had sought to console Sephton by recalling the experience of his friend Sir Henry Eiworth of Manchester, lawyer, MP and philologist, who ‘took to the Norse [as] a labour of love in spare hours’ (SIL, Sephton MS 3.33, GV to Sephton, 20 April 1882). Travelling in Ireland, Howorth had seen his own young son fall to his death from a train; he had later told York Powell that ‘it would have killed me but for my having Norse studies to resort to’ (ibid.).

Sephton’s dealings with Vigfússon thus secured for the Merseyside scholar a powerful backer for as long as Guðbrandur lived—‘surely the Icelandic is not without a representative in Liverpool as long as you live and breathe’ (SIL, Sephton MS 3.33, 8 January 1886)—and also provided powerful intellectual impetus after the Icelandic lexicographer died (Frederick York Powell’s biographer Oliver Elton, himself a University of Liverpool academic, notes (1906, I, vi) that it was Sephton who painstakingly ‘put in order’ the Vigfússon papers now on deposit in the Bodleian Library, notably those used in this present essay, Bodleian MS Eng. Misc. c.112, d.131; in the early 1890s Sephton also painstakingly copied out a selection of Guðbrandur’s Icelandic letters (SIL, Sephton MS 3.33; originals in Bodleian MS Icel. d.1), partly no doubt out of affectionate piety but also perhaps as a good way of improving his Icelandic). Sephton also gained influential contacts amongst Vigfússon’s Oxford friends; the Islander once brought the embryonic Origines Islandicae to Liverpool to show the eager Sephton (SIL, Sephton MS 3.33, GV to Sephton, 13 October 1887), and it was Vigfússon’s collaborator, Frederick York Powell, who was partly instrumental in promoting the Northern Library series in the 1890s. It was, in turn, Sephton’s successful first volume in the series which, along with a well-timed series of lectures and published papers in Liverpool (Sephton 1887, 1892, 1894), certainly helped to pave the way for his appointment to the Icelandic Readership the following year, with York Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon amongst his referees (Lbs 2187b 4to, letter to EM from E. Jenks of Liverpool, 13 June 1895).

Sephton’s assiduity as a lecturer highlights a further admirable characteristic which the Liverpudlian scholar shared with many another Victorian enthusiast of ancient Viking culture. There are examples aplenty, throughout the country, of learned men eagerly seeking to share their learning...
with fellow scholars and wherever possible with the broader community, through lectures and (when appropriate) lantern slides. In this work Icelanders were well to the fore: Jón Hjaltalin in Edinburgh (with his lectures reviewed in journals in Berlin, Leipzig and Vienna; Bodleian MS Icel. d.1, EM to GV, 25 May 1871), in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (three lectures at the Literary and Philosophical Society in 1870: Watson 1897), and in Birmingham and Manchester during 1871 (Bodleian MS Icel. d.1, EM to GV, letters dated 23 September 1870, 23 May 1871, 23 October 1871); Eiríkur Magnússon at the same Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society during the winter after Jón’s visit, and also at the working men’s club in Wisbech (Lbs 2189a 4to, 19 February 1876: a lecture on Iceland, with Mrs Magnússon requested to appear in national costume). The admirable example set by the Icelanders was followed by the British Icelandophiles such as York Powell and Sephton. What Francis Bacon had once said of muck, ‘no good unless it be spread’, was certainly held to apply to knowledge of Scandinavian antiquity. Thus, York Powell lectured at Heanor in August 1889, despite the dispiriting tone of the invitation from J. H. Broooksbank:

The apostles of sweetness and light forget that there is probably more rude ignorance and darkness in these country places than in the towns they spend so much time on—have pity—we really are benighted. (Bodleian MS. Eng. Misc. d.131)

Sephton developed a formidable reputation as a proselytiser. By the time he became a member of the Viking Club in 1895, he was already long established as a leading figure in the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool. Amongst his papers to that society, subsequently published in their Proceedings, were readings from his translations of Eiriks saga rauda (1880), and of Fröðþjófs saga hins frækna (1894), the latter immensely popular in the nineteenth century in the wake of Tegnér’s poem, along with discussions of ‘The religion of the Eddas and Sagas’ (1892), ‘Runic remains’ (1896; discussion of Ruthwell Cross and Manx runes), and ‘What the Sagas say of Greenland’ (1898; including extensive translations from Fíladæmanns saga). Sephton’s written style is scholarly yet not without colour, particularly when he seeks to align his Norse enthusiasm either with his clergyman’s faith:

It [Norse paganism] . . . served its day and generation, and when its work was done, it died away in the presence of a purer faith and gentler influence of Christianity, as the light of a twinkling star fades away in the blaze of the rising sun. (1892, 126)

or with the history of Liverpool:

He [Earl Hakon the Bad] certainly upheld the social institution of slavery, and was not averse to the slave-trade any more than were his descendants in Wirral and West Derby down to the present century. (1892, 125)

Moreover, the Scandinavian grapevine on Merseyside sometimes spread the word about Sephton’s successes as a lecturer well beyond the packed halls of Liverpool, as Vigfusson’s 29 March 1887 letter to Sephton reveals:

I have to congratulate you on the lecture on Thor. I have a report from one of your hearers, a Norwegian Mr Sundt, who called on me last month, and now wrote me a letter from Liverpool, where he is staying at the great Chemical Laboratory [in Brownlow Street]. (S.J.), Sephton MS 3.33

Vigfusson readily appreciated the benefit of not spending all his time in the claustrophobic company of fellow philologists; Sundt had proved to be an intelligent and charming fellow . . . I was much struck with his intelligent converse and manners, a relief and even contrast after the Philologists I am getting tired of—they are such dry sticks. (Ibid.)

Sephton (S.J., Sephton MS, letter to GV, 30 March 1887) confirms the success of the lecture: ‘a great success . . . overwhelmingly well received . . . as fine an audience as Liverpool could furnish’, and notes that the text, based ‘from beginning to end’ on ‘nothing but the Corpus [Poeticum Boreale]’ is now with the printer, complete with his metrical paraphrase of Drýmsvíða, eventually judged by Vigfusson to ‘read . . . very well’.

The briefest glance at letters written to Guðbrandur Vigfusson, Eiríkur Magnússon and Matthías Jochumsson at this time reveals indeed that there were others in or around Sephton’s Merseyside with whom the University’s new Reader in Icelandic could usefully have been in touch. There was L. B. Haddock who had sent a £25 donation to Matthías for Akureyri famine relief in 1882 (Lbs 2808 4to). There was Alfred Holt, the shipping magnate and Liverpool University benefactor, who had written to Matthías in the wake of what had clearly been an exhilarating visit to Iceland in 1880 (Lbs 2808 4to, letter dated 13 June 1881). There was Gladys Alexander of Birkenhead who, mentioning a mutual friend ‘Mr. E[dward] Rae of Liverpool [in fact Birkenhead]’, writes to Eiríkur asking whether as ‘an average girl of nineteen’ she could ‘teach herself’ Icelandic, and if so, what Grammar and books to begin with’ (Lbs 2186 4to)—in this respect, with the availability of Vigfusson and Powell’s admirably versatile Icelandic Prose Reader (1879), and Henry Sweet’s
more basic Old Icelandic Primer (1886; see Wawn 1990), late nineteenth-century learners were at least as well catered for as their late twentieth-century successors. There was also, as we have noted, Sir Henry Howorth of Manchester; and there was Beatrice Clay, a Chester schoolmistress, with W. W. Skeat’s daughter Ethel as a colleague. In the fashion of the times created by Beatrice Bamby (1900), Beatrice Clay had written a play based on a saga, inevitably Friðþjófs saga (Lbs 2186 4to, 27 April 1911), and published (1907) an adaptation for schoolgirls of extracts from Ínungs saga, shorn of some violence but with the homemaking role of the saga women greatly enhanced.3

It may seem to you profane to tamper with sagas, but it seems to me such a pity that children should grow up knowing nothing of this wonderful literature. (Lbs 2186 4to, 3 October 1904)

Sagas were ‘fascinating’, texts were unobtainable in Chester, and were ‘England . . . as enlightened as Finland in its treatment of my profession, I would take a year’s holiday for study’ of Old Norse literature (ibid., 3 April 1909).

Such a ‘year’s holiday for study’ could usefully have been spent at the University in Liverpool after Sephton’s 1896 appointment to the Icelandic Readership. Prior to that, if there was ‘no-one to represent Icelandic’ (Bodleian MS Eng. Misc. d.131, Sephton to GV, 6 January 1886) in Merseyside’s new University College, there was certainly a representative at the neighbouring Victoria University of Manchester, as Eirkur Magnússon was to learn in detail when asked for a reference by young Manchester graduate Fred Harley. Having worked in Berlin under Zupitza and also at Göttingen, Harley was now applying for a post in a Canadian University. Harley revealingly outlines the Manchester syllabus as organised by the formidable Professor Toller: Anglo-Saxon, Early English, Gothic, Old and Modern Icelandic, Old and Modern German, Old French, Teutonic Philology, Old Saxon:

in addition we are forced to go through a three year course of Literature . . . though the literature does not find place in the examination which is purely linguistic and philological. (Lbs 2187a 4to, 25 April 1888)

Such a syllabus, and its underpinning philosophy, the fruits of Grimm’s Law in action, is (claims Harley) unknown in Canada; he therefore requests from Eirkur an authoritative statement ‘pointing out how indispensable a scientific training in the English language and cognate dialects is in a Professor of English’. One wonders how Beatrice Clay’s enthusiasm would have survived this philological bombardment.

Another native of Merseyside, though by 1892 a resident of the Lake District, was more fortunate than the dedicated Chester schoolmistress in the amount of leisure time which he was able to devote during the 1890s to imaginative engagement with Iceland and its sagas. The way in which W. G. Collingwood developed his close links with Icelandic literature is paradigmatic of much late Victorian enthusiasm for the ancient North. He first read those sagas then available in published translation; he then sought through place-name scholarship and through his own fictions to trace and to recreate the Viking roots of his own Northern England. This led inevitably to Collingwood’s ‘pilgrimage’ (his carefully chosen term) to Iceland, in the company of the learned Jón Stefánsson, which was followed swiftly by his lavish published account of the journey, complete with reproductions of some of his magnificent water colour paintings of the ‘saga-steads’ (Collingwood and Stefánsson 1899, Haraldur Hannesson 1988). Finally in 1902, by this time a major figure in the Viking Club (he had joined in 1894), and having developed a serviceable competence in Old Norse, Collingwood arranged for the publication of his translation, the first volume of a projected Viking Club saga translation series (an occasional series if ever there was one), of the saga associated with one recently visited ‘stead’, the home of Kormak the skald at Melur overlooking Mýrfjörður, ‘on the Meols, as the gravelly shore banks would be called on the coast of Lancashire’ (Collingwood and Stefánsson 1899, 152). Collingwood clearly relished the place-name link between the Wirral hamlet of Meols, close to his own birthplace, and its Icelandic equivalent.

At all times, in all its variety, Collingwood’s published work, like that of Sabine Baring-Gould also in the 1890s (and discussed below), is informed by a sense of Viking person and place sufficiently vivid and unapologetic to bewilder those scholars of a later age who have been seduced by the self-indulgent aridity of ‘modern literary theory’. For Victorian philologists of the 1890s love of Iceland was never a substitute for scholarship; rather was it a spur:

We went out to see the very places where events so familiar in books occurred in reality; and we found that the belief was true. For every touch of human interest in the sagas—pastoral, romantic or sublime—there was, and still remains, a landscape setting no less sweet, or strange, or stern. (Collingwood and Stefánsson 1899, ν)

Though W. G. Lock’s spirit remained resolutely earthbound (‘The Saga-student . . . had better content himself with reading . . . the phenomenon of the Thingfield [Pingvellir] . . . has not an interesting feature’, Lock
1882, 70), for Iceland travellers of the decade such as Rider Haggard, Mrs Disney Leith, W. P. Ker (Tilden 1918, 229–38) and Collingwood (and not forgetting the rambling Dr Phéné), sumptuous scenery was no mere seductive background to the noble sentiments of saga; the one grew essentially out of the other:

Tenderness and passion of a sort may be found wherever human life can be lived; but the intense tenderness and the intense passion of the sagas could only be developed among scenery which, whether the actors felt it or not, reacted upon their sentiment. (Collingwood and Stefánsson 1899, v)

Or again:

The modern reader, out of Iceland, is left wholly at a loss when he tries to stage these dramas, to visualise the actions and events. (Ibid.)

Pondering the place-names of his Lake District home with a novelist’s imagination, Collingwood could discern echoes of a vivid Viking past, and thus contrive to be not wholly ‘out of Iceland’. Though his 1895 tale Thorstein of the Mere is the more substantial work, with its rite of passage celebration of the giant-fostered, sea-roving hero, it is in his briefer 1896 novel that Collingwood’s atavistic, Viking-centred values can be more readily glimpsed. At one level, The Bondwoman is a slight tale built on the domestic tensions between Oddi, a Viking settler in North West England, and his wife Groa, following the introduction into the household by Oddi of a newly-purchased Saxon bondwoman Deorwyn. Eyebrows are raised in the community (the story is surprisingly daring for Coniston in the 1890s, at a time when Ibsen was still raising many an eyebrow in London) as Oddi is soon torn between the civilities of family loyalty and the instincts of a free-roving Viking. The domestic conflicts are set against broader questions of national identity, as the community is attacked by an army of harrying Scots. Oddi perishes in the fight, but young Rolf, son of the slave-wife Finna, survives to rescue the steadfast Deorwyn and eventually to win over her previously withheld affection. Despite their Viking origins, Oddi and his people are very much settlers not raiders, heimafolk not heimolf. Collingwood’s version of an omniscient and reliable narrator, in prose heightened by markedly biblical echoes, is at pains to explain the attitudes of the community as worn by the young hero Rolf. In so doing the author gives unmistakable expression to the politicised nature of much late Victorian identification with Viking antiquity:

The dalesmen, in the time of our story, were Vikings no longer. They had settled down to the land. By it they meant to live, and on it they looked to die; not in battle or in raid, by far-away shores or in unknown cities, but here at home in the pleasant north country.

And in this mind they were at once better men, and worse, than their fathers before them. Better for the reign of Thor was over, the berserk [sic] days of rapine and massacre. Better, for there should be none happier nor cleaner souled than he who ploughs his own acres, or feeds his own sheep, in the midst of a peaceful land of hills and dales, among green pastures and beside still waters. But worse they were, because they had lost old virtues, and had not yet put on the new. They were no longer riders of the foam, the free-handed ring scatters, reckless of life and fearless of death. Nor were they yet what their children came to be—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, 100–1)

Such passages serve to legitimise and celebrate Victorian certainties and (almost) to mask Victorian doubts. The real hero of the story is arguably neither the stalwart Rolf nor the stumbling Oddi. Rather it is the industrious and thrifty 1890s Dalesman of Northern England in general and the Lake District in particular; the hero is the implied local reader, in whom deep-seated but now metamorphosed Viking virtues—boldness, enterprise, hard work and thrift—find telling modern expression. It had been just such transformed Viking qualities which had shaped and secured the British Empire for over a hundred years. How familiar such thoughts would have seemed to Victorian England’s greatest Icelandicist Sir George Webbe Dasent whose death in 1896 coincided with the first publication of The Bondwoman. His view of the ancient Vikings is bracingly uncomplicated:

[They possessed] an element of progress, a dash and energy wedded to an endurance and perseverance which no other European race possessed . . . Everywhere . . . in western and central Europe, where there was traffic to be driven or plunder to be got, where a keel would float or an anchor hold, where winds blew and billows rolled, these countless rovers showed their fair, but terrible features. (Dasent 1838, 166, 176)

Such a perception dissolved easily into Dasent’s triumphalist Darwinian view of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British colonists:

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 with her railways. They [the Vikings] were foremost in the race of civilisation and progress; well started before all the rest had thought of running. No wonder therefore that both won. (Dasent 1873, 1 247)

These are bold claims yet they are made to seem coyly understated when set beside the ‘pardonable vanity’ of I. A. Blackwell:
And when we turn our attention to a small island on the north western coast of Europe, we behold a nation, formed by the genial blending of Saxon and Scandinavian tribes, arrived at a height of commercial prosperity and maritime greatness hitherto unparalleled. Ay, 'tis a ponderable vanity to record the fact; England, matchless in the mechanical arts, irresistible in arms, sweeping from the surface of the ocean the flees of every rival nation that dares dispute her maritime supremacy, is now in possession of that heritage, whose succession we have traced through cognate races, and will, we trust, long retain it by virtue of the law which appears to have regulated its transmission: that it should be held for the time being, by the most energetic tribe of the race to which it had devolved, by the tribe that physiological and psychological qualities rendered the most adapted to make use of it for the development of humanity. (Percy 1859, 44–5)

The confident identification of continuities across the millennium between the 'genial tribes' of Vikings and Saxons and the loyal subjects of Queen Victoria was as much a feature of Collingwood's literary analysis of sagas as of his own fictional narratives. Thus in his introduction to The Life and Death of Cormac the Skald (1902), Collingwood claims that Kormakr's verses resemble the lausavisur of 'Lakeland dalesfolk . . . before the school board and cheap magazines came in' (7), or again that in their 'corrupt and puzzling form' the verses are 'not at all unlike' those made by 'an old English country man—say one of the eighteenth century sea-captains, who farmed at home and fought abroad' (5). As for the English of his translation, it may be 'neither that of the journalist nor the historical novelist' but it remains

to many of us familiar . . . it perfectly matches this old Norse, being indeed its direct descendant, and surviving among the children of the Vikings in northern England. If the saga could be turned into the talk of an old-fashioned peasant of Yorkshire or Cumberland, it would be precisely represented, even to tricks of phrase and manner, with many an ancient word retained and reproduced. (22)

It is no coincidence that Cormac was published at Ulverston in the Lake District; and it is noteworthy also that Titus Wilson, the Kendal printer of Collingwood's two novels, was later to become the printer of Saga-Book: in the early days Wilson may not have been 'an accurate printer . . . needs careful proof reading' (Lbs 2886 4to, Collingwood to EM, 5 October 1897), but he was properly based in what was for Collingwood the ancestral Viking heartland of Northern England.

Indeed in the wake of his visit to Iceland in 1897, there was a sense in which Collingwood felt that the Lake District was now more Icelandic in spirit if not in scenery than Iceland itself. He was not the first eager British Icelandophile for whom travelling hopefully to Iceland was better than the shock and partial disappointment of arriving (Wawn 1989). After visiting Iceland in 1890 and 1891, Frederick Howell saw much amongst the feckless and lethargic natives which he deemed 'dreadful' (Howell 1893, 108), but in his Icelandic Pictures the suggested remedies are briskly in accord with what might be expected from a work published by the Religious Tract Society: better drains, cleaner dairies, 'application of the principles of cooperation to the conduct of trade', 'the extinction of the liquor traffic' and, above all, 'a genuine national turning unto Him from whom all blessings flow' (108). Variations on these themes go back via Sir Richard Burton (1875) and Eiríkur Magnússon's Quaker mentor Isaac Sharpe to the peppery Ebenezer Henderson (1818). Collingwood was not so sure about the combined efficacy of free trade and the temperance tambourine. Aware of a Cumbrian dialect version—gleg is a guest's eye—of the Icelandic proverb (Lbs 2186 4to, letter to EM, [n.d.] October 1897), Collingwood wrote two letters to Eiríkur in which he gives scowling expression to much that his own clear eye had observed during his Iceland travels, albeit that such irritations were to go unmentioned in the 1899 published account:

If you had been with me for 3 months among the Icelanders as they are today: listening and looking on: endeavouring to sympathise with the difficulties and to enter into the ideals—and yet knowing what a peasant people have done . . . in Switzerland, and fully aware of the conditions under which similar life is lived in the north of England:—If you had lately, and with a fresh eye, seen for yourself town and country . . . you would feel that the land is indeed a land of Gotham, and wholly irreclaimable by any preaching or teaching. (Lbs 2186 4to, 5 September 1897)

The blunter disillusion of the foreign armchair romantic could scarcely be more bleakly expressed. Scouring their great literary past, Icelanders read only 'tidbits', and write verses about Vikings 'with whom they have less in common than we with Red Indians', and about 'beauties of nature which not a soul in the island perceives enough to sketch or photograph'. Collingwood hates the passivity, the 'concealed ignorance at every criticism or suggestion' which he had too often encountered:

I come away with such a feeling of disheartenment that I can only hold my peace. It isn't only vermin and Dames and such like: it's everybody and everything. Of course I know the historical reasons of this degeneracy: but apology for it doesn't cure it. And I don't think any writing will cure it . . . I hope my pictures will not be without use to Iceland in their little way; greater things being left to stronger people. (Lbs 2186 4to, 8 September 1897)

Post-Darwinian England had long had to cope with the spectre of its own potential degeneracy, even as it celebrated its imperial power. Such fear
helps perhaps to explain the violence of Collingwood’s reaction when confronting degeneracy in his previously idealised Iceland. It may also explain why the same Victorians who delighted in saga images of Viking glory, were also drawn to the gloom (as many regarded it) of Old Norse religion as exhibited in the Eddas; the myths, in Dasent’s words, ‘carried with [them] that melancholy presentiment of dissolution which has come to be so characteristic of modern life’ (Dasent 1903, lxix). In Matthew Arnold’s Balder Dead, with the sentiments of his Dover Beach now set to Eddic music, we find in effect a prototypical Tennysonian ‘idylls of the Gods’, full of unease and melancholy as, behind the ‘land of dreams’, we glimpse the ‘darkling plain’ which ‘hath really neither joy, nor love nor light’ nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain’. The spectre of Iceland’s ‘darkling plain’ clearly haunted Collingwood in the 1890s. In an interview with Einar Kvaran before returning from Iceland, Collingwood laments the neglect of the historical remains at Skálholt, the fatalistic indifference with which the loss of medieval manuscripts and artefacts is accepted, and the failure to exploit the ferðamannastraumar by building better hotels in Reykjavík, or even by simply providing a boat at Pingvallir (Haraldur Hannesson 1988, 136). The subtext of his remarks was that the Lord only helps those who help themselves. Others, whilst accepting the substance of Collingwood’s first-hand verdict on the condition of Iceland, were made of sterner stuff when it came to remedies; this was certainly true of the spirited Beatrice Barnby, author of the remarkable three-act saga-based drama Glæsi Sýrsson.4 Commenting spiritedly on Collingwood’s dispiriting pessimism, she refuses to accept the proposition that ‘no writing’ will ‘cure’ the observed degeneracy:

All nations have passed through such times of degradation—and no revolution has ever come about without having its way prepared by writing or preaching . . . What wouldn’t I give to be a strong man and able to do something for Iceland! (Lbs 2186 4to, undated letter to EM)

If ‘degenerate’ late nineteenth-century Iceland itself could fail ígleymsku og dó, it comes as no surprise that Collingwood and others were anxious to preserve the essential Viking spirit in and around his Lake District home. If ‘writing and preaching’ could not ‘cure’ modern Iceland, they could help to protect the cultural roots of modern Cumberland. One way of doing so was by supporting through subscription the publications of Rev. Thomas Ellwood, Vicar of Torver. These included his two translations The Landnamabók of Iceland as it illustrates the Dialect, Place Names, Folk Lore and Antiquities of Cumberland, Westmoreland and North Lancashire (1894), and The Book of the Settlement of Iceland (1898), and his glossary Lákeand and Iceland: being a Glossary of Words in the Dialect of Cumbria, Westmoreland and North Lancashire which seem allied to or identical with the Icelandic or Norse (1895). The genesis of all these works is revealing. G. W. Kitchin, by 1894 Dean of Durham but earlier one of Guðbrandur Vigfússon’s more loyal supporters in Oxford, had been parish priest at Brantwood near Coniston in the early 1870s, and had there spent much time correcting the proofs of the 1874 Cleasby–Vigfússon Dictionary. He had shown Ellwood a number of strange words and suggested that his colleague might investigate the links between the Old Norse language and contemporary Cumberland dialect; for such work it was, he suggested, a case of now or never, with so many ‘customs and vocables’ dying out, and with Ellwood, a native who had never lived outside the area, an unusually authoritative witness (Ellwood 1894, ii and iv).

Earlier in the century the translations of J. G. Lockhart, Sir Walter Scott’s son-in-law, had introduced the linguistic ideas of Friedrich Schlegel to Enlightenment Britain. In one memorable passage, the dedicated cultivation of native philology is singled out for special emphasis:

‘Care of the national language’ for George Dasent in the middle of the century certainly no longer meant subservience to ‘the twin tyrants [Latin and Greek] who ruled all the dialects of the world with a pedant’s rod’ (Dasent 1903, xviii). It rather involved close attention to languages newly legitimised by Rask and the Grimms. Learning Old Norse, for instance, was held to be

of immense advantage not only in tracing the rise of words and idioms, but still more in clearing up many dark points in our early history. (Dasent 1843, vii)

It also involved the systematic recording and etymological examination of native dialect and place-names, work which often led straight back to Old Norse. So it was with Ellwood’s publications. There were more than 130 subscribers for both the 1894 and 1898 works, over ninety per cent of whom were Lake District locals, including John Ruskin, for whom Collingwood acted as secretary and biographer. More distant subscribers
included Collingwood’s Icelandic travelling companion Jón Stefánsson, G. W. Kitchin, and Eiríkur Magnússon who had helped with and de-
spared of Ellwood’s hopelessly insecure command of the ancient lan-
guage. None of this loyal group of Ellwood’s supporters wished to see
either the ‘vocables’ or the values of the Viking North-West of England
‘cease to exist’, whilst Ellwood himself took up the challenge with the
relish of an avid philologist and in the tone of a proud Victorian. His
Preface to the 1898 Landnámabók translation speaks of an
attempt to render, however imperfectly, that work from Icelandic, a language
spoken by only about 60,000 or 70,000 people, all told, into English, spoken
as it is by a kindred people, a race numbering over one hundred millions,
whose maritime enterprise followed by settlement and colonization derived
apparently from the Norsemen, have given them the dominion of a great part
of the earth.

‘Dominion of a great part of the earth’, ‘customs and vocables’ dying out,
triumphalism and dissolution; in the 1890s the pursuit of Old Norse in
England was ever driven by pride in the one and fear of the other. It is
not clear that Norse studies are driven by an equivalent earnestness a
hundred years later.

If motives for study have changed over a century, so too has the canon
of Old Norse texts studied. Indeed comparing the sagas read, translated,
and enjoyed by the Victorians with an equivalent late twentieth-century
list would surely confirm that the modern canon has shrivelled strikingly.
Amongst the works to which Collingwood makes breezy reference in his
Pilgrimage to the Saga-steads are not just Brennu-Njáls saga, Eyrbyggja
saga, Kormaks saga, Viga Glum’s saga and Hrafnkel’s saga Freysgoða
(‘the charm of the saga is in its prettily told descriptions of pastoral life
in those heathen days, realizing every detail as brightly as any modern
novel’: Collingwood and Stefánsson 1899, 176), but also Heiðarvíga
saga, Harðar saga ok Hölmverja, Vatnsdæla saga (‘one of the Icelandic
stories which still wait for a translation into English’, ibid., 159; the wait
continued until 1944), and Finnboga saga rumna (we still await the
publication of an English translation). Some fifteen years earlier it had
seemed perfectly natural for John Coles to include in his Summer Travelling in Iceland: being the Narrative of Two Journeys across the
Island (1882) literal (after a fashion) translations of three sagas including
Dóðar saga hréðu: this remains the only English translation of this
intriguing work. W. P. Ker, recalling his journey to Iceland in 1895,
writes knowingly (Tilden 1918, 233) of Skorradalur; he had visited it,
and read about it not just in Collingwood’s Pilgrimage to the Saga-steads,
but also in Harðar saga ok Hölmverja. Early in the new century
E. E. Speight (writing from his improbable home address, Nidaros, Upper
Norwood—his colleague Albany Major’s Croydon house was called
Bifröst) could tell Eiríkur Magnússon that he had finished preparing a
translation of Flóamanna saga:

I have simply worked with the Dicry and found that my speed increased
rapidly as I went on. I have not made use of Sephton’s [1898] translation of
the Greenland portion of the saga—but on looking at it I find that I have made
some mistakes. (Lbs 2189a 4to, 13 November 1903)

Undeterred, fresh plans are afoot: Eiríks saga rauða, Fóstbræðra saga (he
debates whether it would be better to do all or part of the saga); he is
thinking of translating ‘all the matter relating to Greenland and Vin-
land—Flateyarbök and Konungs Skuggsjá—and issue it in one volume’;
and then ‘Bjarnar Húna Kappa Saga sounds tempting, and I have
Vatsdala in view too’. Nor are these projects mere armchair whims; a
missionary zeal and hard-headed commercial sense are clearly discern-
ible:

I am determined to do my share in the future in bringing Northern matters
before the British public, and I am hopeful of spending a good part of my life
in the north, where I can learn . . . [Icelandic and Faroese] at first hand. I wish
we could induce someone to lay down sufficient funds for us to produce a
cheap uniform edition of popular translations of the Sagas . . . as cheap as
Sigurður Kristjánsson’s editions (in Reykjavík). I suppose there are quite 50
volumes which might be counted worthy of inclusion. If we did say 50 copies
of each—160pp each, I could produce the lot for £1000 if there were not
many notes in small print. It is almost worth asking Sir Henry Tate and the
government also for a grant. Many men have got Civil List pensions for so
less important work.

Publication of the developing canon of saga texts in translation could
oustably be a problem. Local subscription and enterprising local printers
had served Collingwood and Ellwood well (‘I found various publishers
shy of Iceland . . . so I got a local man to venture part of the risk’, Lbs
2186 4to, Collingwood to EM, 24 October 1898), but London publishers
sometimes confronted the provincial supplicant with greater scepticism,
as in G. A. Hight’s battle with the fundamentally supportive but invari-
bly crotchety J. M. Dent (‘notorious as a grumbler . . . a cunning old
sinner’, Lbs 2189a 4to, Hight to EM, 21 February 1911, 17 October
1911) to secure publication of his translation of Grettis saga Ásmundar-
sonar. Old Icelandic texts, for one thing, had to compete with Old English
ones. Hight may have been convinced that ‘the Volunga [saga is] one
of the noblest stories ever told, and incomparably superior to Beowulf',
but Dent, who in 1899 had published Muriel Press’s translation of Laxdæla saga, was ten years later momentarily at least placing a higher priority on publishing Beowulf together with The Wanderer and some Anglo-Saxon Riddles. In the event Hight gave his Grettir to Dent for the trifling sum of £20 in gratitude for the publisher’s willingness to publish Eiríkr Magnússon’s translation of Runeberg’s Ossianic drama King Fialar after the turn of the century. Commercial caution notwithstanding, no publisher could doubt that significant sections of the ‘British public’ were ready to welcome any and all publications of Icelandic material. Charles Sayce’s enthusiasm, as expressed to Eiríkr in a letter on 30 January 1887, is representative of much late Victorian opinion:

“I casually took up Morris’s ‘Sigurd the Volsung’ the other night about 8 o’clock just after dinner, not having read it but always having meant to. It so ‘got possession of’ me in the reading that I did not stop from my labours until 7 o’clock next morning when I finished the whole epic from beginning to end in one sitting of eleven hours! It is the grandest book—as new books go nowadays—that I have read for many many months. As a work of art it is one of the most perfect that I have ever read. (Lbs 2189a 4to)

Whilst Speight manipulated Dent as best he could, William Morris certainly had little difficulty in attracting publishers, and his six-volume Saga Library series, produced in collaboration with Eiríkr Magnússon between 1891 and 1905, was immensely influential in establishing the saga canon in authoritative translations which served to supplement the limited range of published translations made available earlier in the century, notably by Samuel Laing (Heimskringla, or, Chronicle of the Kings of Norway, 1844; revised edition, 1889), Edmund Head (The Story of Viga Glum, 1866), and George Dasent (The Story of Burnt Njal, 1861, see Wawn 1991; The Story of Gisl the Outlaw, 1866). The contents of the first two Saga Library volumes alone challenge the relative narrowness of late twentieth century tastes in family saga: Volume I Bandamanna saga, Hánsa-Dóris saga, Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings; Volume II Eybyggja saga, Heiðrørviga saga. So do the contents of the earlier Magnússon-Morris volume Three Northern Love Stories (1875): Gunnlaugs saga omsætungu, Viglundar saga and Fríðþjófs saga hins frækna. It is true that this latter volume did not meet with universally favourable reviews initially. Edmund Gosse, generally an influential proselytiser of Icelandic as well as Scandinavian literature in the late nineteenth-century British periodical press, displayed some coolness towards the efforts of Morris and Magnússon in The Academy, with his judgement vigorously supported by the ascetic Guðbrandur Vigfússon in a letter to his young English lærisveinn:

I am glad that you think not high of the sentimental moonshine love of Viglundar saga. I am sick of love stories, and think it to carry owls to Athens to translate foreign love stories into English. They ought to be—in fact are—an English export, not an import article. But Viglund is besides a poor affair.

(Bredsdorff 1960, 305)

There seems discernible here more than a hint of the burgeoning personal and professional antagonism between Victorian Britain’s two pivotally influential Icelandic scholars which dogged their dealings for nearly a generation: Guðbrandur the Western Icelander against Eiríkr the Austfirðingur; Oxford against Cambridge; the crusty bachelor against the expansive family man; conservative against radical in disputes over the style of translation of the Bible into Icelandic; and eventually cyncic against believer in disputes over the true extent of the ‘Iceland famine’ of 1882 (Stefán Einarsson 1933, passim; also Harris 1978–81, Ellison 1986–9). Yet Gosse’s cool reception of Three Northern Love Stories was certainly a minority view. A volume could scarcely fail which included a translation of nineteenth-century Europe’s favourite Old Norse tale Fríðþjófs saga, everywhere popular whether in pure saga form, or in rænt; or in any one of a dozen and more other English translations of Esaias Tegnér’s 1825 paraphrastic verse epic Fríðþjófs saga published during the nineteenth century. Amongst those appearing in the final decade were the reprint of the seminal 1839 George Stephens version in the third edition of Rasmus Anderson’s Viking Tales of the North (1889), ; the 1892 third edition of the version by T. A. E. and Martha A. Lyon Holcomb, and Sephton’s 1894 ‘Frischio the Fearless’. If ever there was a saga and a story which has suffered grievous neglect in the last hundred years it is this poignant, powerful, and (as understood in the nineteenth century) subtly politicalised tale of life and love in Norway’s Sognefjord.

Comparable neglect had been the fate of Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings until the appearance of Alan Boucher’s 1986 translation in the enterprising Iceland Review saga translation series. The genesis and fate of the Morris–Magnússon 1891 translation of the saga illuminates much about the world of Scandinavian letters in Britain at that time: the length of the gestation period, the scholars involved, the series in which it was first published, and the use to which it was put in subsequent popularising publications. To begin with, Morris himself thought very highly of the saga of Howard the Halt (as he called it) and seems to have relished assembling a group of defiantly anti-heroic texts for the first volume of the Saga Library, focussing predominantly on the canniness of age rather than the glamour of youth:
[Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings] is worthy to be put by the side of the inimitable Gunnlaug story for its dramatic force and directness of narration; in consequence, probably, of its having been re-made in later times, it is more of a story and less of a chronicle than many of the sagas; and the subject-matter of it, the triumph of an old and seemingly worn out man over his powerful enemies, has something peculiarly interesting in it, and is fresh in these days, when the fortune of a young couple in love with each other is, in spite of all disguises, almost the invariable theme of a tale. (Morris and Magnússon 1891–1903, I, xxiii)

Secondly, it should be noted that though this translated version of the saga appeared in 1891, Eiríkur had worked on another version twenty-five years earlier in the company of the splendidly splenetic George Powell, his mentor from the time of Magnússon’s earliest days in Britain from 1862 onwards. Eiríkur became Powell’s scholarly guide in the Icelandic language, and Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings became the focus of their first scholarly collaboration. There were reading classes: an undated letter (apparently from c.1865) announces that the Welshman has a bad foot and cannot come to town, and requests that Eiríkur join him at his home ‘bringing Hávarðr’s saga with you’ (Lbs 2188a 4to). Powell attempts to limit the inconvenience for Eiríkur; himself a vegetarian, a century before this became de rigueur for the politically correct academic. Powell makes in the circumstances a nobly self-sacrificial offer: ‘I could give you a chop at 1 o’clock’. The rest of the schedule is indicative of real dedication: ‘a cup of tea at 5 or 6 . . . we might then spend the day in going through part of the saga together . . . The time saved by this way of going through the saga will be immense’.

Progress was encouraging. Powell took steps to ensure that Eiríkur was kept afloat financially in the days before he was appointed to the University library in Cambridge, a position he was to owe to the heavy support of, amongst others, the Iceland explorer and later Physician to Queen Victoria Sir Henry Holland, and Alexander Beresford-Hope, MP for Cambridge, who was yet another of Westminster’s enthusiastic saga readers. Enclosing a cheque, Powell could scarcely have been more encouraging:

If it will not suffice . . . to keep the wolf from the door, let me know, and the sponge shall have another squeeze. (Lbs 2188a 4to, letter to EM, 1 January 1869)

By July in the same year Powell’s letters discuss forthcoming publication, and he forwards a final draft version of the saga verses, which, as ever, had proved a sore trial to a Victorian translator out of sympathy (as most of them were) with the spiky complexities of skaldic poetry:

Here are the verses, clad in such garb as my poor wardrobe affords. They are not, it must be confessed, of an improving character, and I could wish—with all due respect to Havard, for whom I have an almost filial affection—that, when that ancient warrior lifted up his voice and sang, he had chosen duties a little further removed from absolute twaddle . . . I have kept up as closely as possible the metaphorical style—and what metaphor! I have by me, for comparison, the greater portion of the manuscript, and have found it of no little use, in wading through this bog of despond. (Lbs 2188a 4to, letter to EM, [n.d.] July 1869)

By 12 April 1870 a note of urgency has crept into the brisk pragmatism of Powell’s instructions:

We must, by all means—and that right speedily—get Havard off our hands and consciences, and with this in view, I enclose a cheque for twenty pounds, of which please acknowledge receipt. Set to work, I beg of you, on the introduction, which need, I should think, in a work intended for general perusal, scarcely be developed to any great length. An elaborate spray as to chronology would add to the value and interest of so touching and beautiful a story in the eyes of but few of its readers. It is however for you to judge on this point. (Lbs 2188a 4to, letter to EM)

There is talk of illustrations being prepared (Dasent’s lavish volumes, the proud work of supportive publishers Edmonston and Douglas, had set a very high standard in this respect) and of a projected print run of five hundred copies. Yet, for whatever reason, the Powell–Magnússon translation appears never to have been published under their joint names (Thomas 1953–7, 118, 129). Eiríkur could well, however, have retained the manuscript and he certainly retained the ambition to publish this or at least some English version of the saga. Thus it seems likely that, in 1891 when casting around with William Morris for material for their Saga Library, the idea (if not the Powell version) of Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings was resurrected. The Powell–Magnússon translation of Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings was certainly not the only late-Victorian saga translation to remain unpublished; the same fate was shared by York Powell’s versions of Hervarar saga ok Helítreks and Gull-Pórs saga (Elton 1906, I 31: the latter saga still awaits its first published English translation) and Thomas Carlyle’s translation of Færeyinga saga (Cowan 1979, 174–5). Both the York Powell translations may derive from the period around 1868, when he was eighteen and heavily under the influence of Dasent’s version of Njáls saga (Elton 1906, I 11); at this time he prepared his Færeyinga saga version, even though it remained unpublished until the 1896 Northern Library volume, complete with dedication to an old Sandgate fisherman friend of his youth.
Parts of the 1891 Saga of Howard the Halt enjoyed a further life at the
turn of the century. From a 14 August 1899 letter written to Eiríkur by
E. E. Speight (Lbs 2190 4to), it is clear that there were plans afoot for a
selection of saga stories in translation specially designed for schools:

Our book is simply a venture: we [Speight and Albany Major] wish to get the
Saga Stories into English Schools, to bring down a little of the Northern atmosphere
to the children—and it is almost sure to be at the expense of our pockets.

The problem was not so much one of money, however, but of copyright
permissions. Eiríkur had evidently agreed to the recycling of material
from the 1891 Howard the Halt text, as had John Septon in respect of a
section from his Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason translation, but the
Saga Library publisher, Bernard Quaritch, had not been so forthcoming,
offering a maximum of a single three-page extract from each of the
volumes in the series. Nor had the executors of the newly deceased
George Dasent proved any more accommodating; John Dasent had in-
formed the editor that a reissue of The Story of Burnt Njal was in the
offing (it was eventually republished by Dent in his Everyman Library
series in 1911); he would not allow any quotations, thus involving the
hard-pressed Speight and Major in the additional labour of translating
afresh thirty pages of the saga. Their book was in type save for these
extracts when Eiríkur was asked ‘whether you think it would be safe to
go on printing in the believe [sic] that the Morris executors will agree’.
Happily publication of Stories from the Northern Sagas did go ahead
speedily the same year, building on the generally favourable reception of
Major’s earlier Sagas and Songs of the Norsemen (1894), albeit this
volume was judged ‘a mass of ineptitude’ by the Manchester Guardian
(advertisement inside front cover, Saga Book 3, Part 3, 1904). The
enterprising Stories from the Northern Sagas offers extracts from sixteen
sagas (reflecting the breadth of the 1879 Vígþösson and Powell Reader),
with illustrations by Collingwood and a preface by York Powell (the
‘Christchurch humbug’, as Henry Sweet had uncharitably called him
years before, Lbs 2189a 4to, letter to EM, 11 July 1881). The book
proved sufficiently successful to justify a second and enlarged edition six
years later. It seems a pity that something similar is not available today.
The evident success of the volume certainly paved the way for Rev. W.
C. Green, in 1893 the translator of Egils saga Skallagrímssonar, to
produce his more cavalier Translations from the Icelandic (1908), with
the large-scale ‘simplifications and amplifications’ justified (he claims)
by perceived inadequacies of saga style:

[Its] frugality frezes the soul... their starkness shocks me... Terseness may
be dramatic... but in narrative it may check instead of provoke the imagi-
nation. (x-xi)

He is unworried by accusations of vulgarisation. Saga narrative, like all
great art,

makes demands upon its reader. It hangs over the key, but if the lock is stiff,
it will not give you oil for the words... Oil for the words is all I pretend to
here. (xii)

Two further works with ‘well-oiled locks’ appeared during the early
1890s and represent important alternative late-Victorian responses to the
lure of saga narrative. Firstly there was Grettir the Outlaw: a Story of
Iceland (1890; all page references below are to this edition), a cheerful
paraphrastic reworking by the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould of the stirring
events of his own favourite saga. The work had evolved in a suitably
‘Freeprose’ manner: oral tale-telling on Sunday afternoon rambles with his
Hurstpierpoint School charges during the 1850s, followed by a visit to
Iceland whose principal object appears to have been the dedicated
retracting of every step of Grettir’s outlaw years. The inevitable travel
book Iceland: its Scenes and Sagas (1863), unusually elaborate in form
and full of always sharp and sometimes dewy-eyed observation, was
published on his return, at the same time as the Sunday tale-telling was
resumed. When spellbound pupils became housebound parents, they
urged Baring-Gould (1890, vi) to, as it were, convert ‘Freeprose’ into
‘Bookprose’, by publishing his Grettir tale for their own children. In
doing so, the West country clergyman provided a heady brew of colourful
personal observation and conscientious historical explanation, of richly
evacutative landscape description and lively dialogue, with the author ever
mindful of the need deftly to reconcile soaring ancient fancy with sober
modern fact, as with his explanations of Óldrýr (a predatory madman who
haunted the region, 148) or of Grettir’s legendary casting of the giant
stone at Bjarg:

Nowadays folk in Iceland do not understand these odd stones perched in
quiet places, which were deposited by the ancient glaciers, and they call them
Grettir-aks or Grettir’s-heaves. So the farmer at Bjarg told me that the
curious stone at the end of the furrow in the bed of rock on the top of the hill
was a Grettir-tak; it had been rubbed along the rock and left where it stands
by Grettir. But I knew better. I knew that it was put there by an ancient glacier
ages before Grettir was born, and before Iceland was discovered by the
Norsemen. I have no doubt that in Grettir’s time this stone was said to have
been put there by some troll. Afterwards, when people ceased to believe in
trolls, they said it was put there by Grettir. (121)
It was only by seeking to rationalise the grosser improbabilities of saga narrative that the faith which most late Victorians sought to place in its underlying historicity could be protected. Elsewhere, in the undertow of robust sententiousness, there is as much of Baden-Powell as there is of Baring-Gould. Victorian public schoolboy readers are offered role models for the endurance of pain: Onund ‘never blinked nor uttered a cry’ (22) whilst becoming Treefoot. They were doubtless happy to be reassured that suffering brought out the ‘higher and nobler’ elements in them (‘it is so with all who have any good in them . . . if by early discipline it is not manifested, then it is brought out by the rough usage of misfortune in after life’), 24). Let the wreckage of Grettir’s life, Auden’s ‘doomed tough kept witty by disaster’, be a seamark to them all:

a headstrong, wilful fellow and bitterly had he to pay in after life for this youthful wilfulness and obstinacy. It was these qualities, united in him, that wrecked his whole life, and it may be said brought ruin and extinction on his family. (24)

As with Thomas Ellwood (above) care is taken to place the violence of saga life in an appropriately modern and imperial cultural context:

It seems to us in these civilized times very horrible this continual slaying that took place in Iceland; but we must remember that, as already seen, there were in those days not a single policeman, soldier, or officer of justice in the island . . . colonists lived much as do the first settlers now in a new colony which is not under the crown. (194–5)

At a more doggedly domestic level, the importance of personal hygiene is stressed (‘In former times the Icelanders were very particular about bathing and were a clean people. At present they never bathe at all’, 228). It need hardly be added that for schoolboys of the 1890s the role of the farmer’s daughter (F F 7, ch. 75) in Grettir’s sexual development, gallantly if euphemistically retained by Magnússon and Morris in their 1869 version, is chastely modified beyond recognition. In its colourful presentation of a land and literature which its author idolised, Baring-Gould’s Grettir the Outlaw is seductive yet (perhaps surprisingly) sensible; it rarely condescends and never cheapens; its liveliness is controlled by its learning. No wonder that it enjoyed great popularity and exerted significant influence: one of its ardent youthful readers became Britain’s most celebrated twentieth-century Icelandicist.

Eric Brighteyes, H. Rider Haggard’s 1891 novel of Iceland, did not lack for admiring readers either; adults (the Prince of Wales, Empress Frederick of Germany, Rudyard Kipling, and Andrew Lang amongst them: see Haggard 1926, II 4–6; also 1974, iii–iv) as well as children, both at the turn of the century and for a generation and more afterwards. To many it must have seemed a great improvement on Dasent’s laborious 1875 Vikings of the Baltic version of Jónsvíkinga saga, and it ought to have seemed preferable to the pedestrian didacticism of R. M. Ballantyne’s Erling the Bold: a Tale of the Norse Sea-Kings (1869), albeit eight editions up to 1880 tell their own tale of that novel’s popularity. If Baring-Gould’s Grettir was based on a saga, Rider Haggard’s eponymous hero is the purest fiction. Like Baring-Gould, Haggard had travelled in Iceland (during June 1888) complete with letters of introduction from Eiríkr Magnússon (Lbs 2187 b 4to, Haggard to EM, 12 June 1888). At Hlíðarendi his diary records the excitement of ‘writing this on the site of Gunnar’s hall, which I can distinctly trace’. So, too, ‘saga in hand’ at Berghórhvöll:

He who digs beneath the surface of the lonely mound that looks across plain and sea to Westman Isles may still find traces of the burning, and see what appears to be the black sand with which the hands of Berghora and her women strewed the earthen floor some nine hundred years ago, and even the greasy and clothed remains of the wench that they threw upon the flame to quench it. (Haggard 1974, viii)

At Thingvellir it did not take him long to sound the note which Icelandic readers might have associated with Jónas Hallgrimsson, and English readers with the elegiac awe of Tennyson’s Idylls:

Every sod, every rock, every square foot of Axe River, is eloquent of the deeds and deaths of great men. Where are they all now? The raven crows over where they were, the whimbrel’s wild note echoes against the mountains, and that is the only answer given. (Haggard 1926, I 285)

Midnight salmon fishing was (and is still) an integral part of the experience and Haggard’s response passes the test of sensibility:

Never shall I forget the impression it produced on me. The mighty black mountains, the solitude, the song of the river, and the whistling flight of the wild duck—by which the silence alone was broken—and, over all, that low unearthly light just strong enough to show my fly upon the water and the boiling rises of the salmon. (I 287)

Before, during and after his trip, Haggard read the sagas avidly: ‘outside of the Bible and Homer there exists . . . no literature more truly interesting’, not the least of their merits being (as the Victorians longed to believe) that ‘they are records of actual facts’ (I 288), and on his return home, indeed just three days after almost drowning in a catastrophic storm in the Pentland Firth, he was at work on the opening pages of Eric Brighteyes. It was not long before Haggard found himself drawing creatively on another vivid Iceland memory, his visit to Gullfoss:
A most splendid sight. The yellow river, after tumbling down a cliff, bends a little to the right and leaps in two mighty waterfalls, across which a rainbow streams, into a chasm a hundred feet deep, leaving a bare space of cliff between. From the deep of this chasm the spray boils up like steam, a glorious thing to see. (Haggard 1926, I 286)

The Golden Falls, strangely ignored by the stream of nineteenth-century painters attracted to nearby Geysir, certainly makes its literary mark by representing a crucial stage in the turbulent rite of passage endured by the novel’s youthful hero, as he strives by his actions to answer what was, for Collingwood’s master Ruskin, the crucial and cruel heroic question. His words are quoted admiringly by Carlyle:

‘Who is best man? . . . the Fates forgive much,—forgive the wildest, fiercest, cruellest experiments,—if fairly made for the determination of that.’ (Carlyle 1875, 201)

In its ‘spherical benevolence’ and ‘universal indulgence’, Liberalism (urged Ruskin) had lost sight of basic distinction between ‘worth and unworth’ (Carlyle 1875, 201), eager to find the ‘best man’ for his beautiful daughter Gudroda, and suspicious of the socially inferior Eric, the formidable chieftain Asmund devises the ultimate ‘impossible task’ as a test: Eric is to make his way to the Christmas feast at Middalhof by a seemingly impossible descent through the thunderous waters of the falls; no other route is permitted. Eric achieves this feat; reaching the Sheep-saddle rock (the ‘bare space of cliff’) at the top which creates two ‘mighty waterfalls’ out of one, he struggles down below the torrent to Wolf’s Fang crag, jutting out half way down, and then takes his chance of plunging into the ‘hundred feet deep’ boiling chasm below whilst Asmund watches in benign disbelief, attributing the ‘rainbow’ to the gods’ efforts to unite the young lovers.

Triumphant in this feat, many more trials and ‘cruellest experiments’ lie ahead for the dauntless but ultimately doomed Eric: a wrestling match with a rival suitor who is no believer in Queensberry rules; the unwelcome attentions of the seductive Swanhild, half-sister to Gudroda, and malign daughter of a malevolent Finnish witch, who in her jealousy seeks by mischief, magic, and murderous assault to separate the two lovers and poison their love (Andrew Lang told the author ‘I don’t think much of the boy who can lay it [the novel] down till it is finished; women of course can’t be expected to care for it’, Tilden 1918, II 4); the hostility of Gudroda’s jealous brother Bjorn; a three-year exile from Iceland; treacherous Viking companions. Accompanied through most of his travails by Skallagrim, a berserk with a heart of gold and a drinking problem, Eric’s happiness seems assured when he arrives back in Iceland just in time to prevent Gudroda’s unhappy marriage to an unloved rival. The hero marries Gudroda only to find the court overrun by enemies on his wedding night, whilst Skallagrim, supposedly on guard but learning again that ‘ale is another man’ (particularly in massive overdoses), falls in his stupor to sound the alarm. Amongst the victims of the ensuing massacre is the new bride. Eric takes to the hills in grief with the insatiable Swanhild still in vain but determined pursuit. He is hunted relentlessly, and defends himself vel ok drengilega before his unflinching final confrontation with death.

There may be some characteristic saga motifs which Haggard does not employ in the novel, but it is difficult to think which they are. The novel is a remarkable illustration of just how inward a knowledge of Icelandic sagas could be developed in 1890 by an alert and perceptive Victorian reader who was in no real sense a professional philologist. No attention is drawn by footnotes to the weight of reading which clearly lies behind the novel, but few members of the Viking Club in 1892 would have needed to be told. All would have recognised the overall shape of the novel as another ‘Northern love story’, with all that that could imply: interlacements of predicative dreams and curses and their fulfilment, the interplay of the wholly natural and the elaborately supernatural, the stream of fatalism, the feuding and vengeance, the wondrous sword Whitefire (a combination of Greyflank and Excalibur; again the shadow of Tennison colours much of the mood of the novel’s final pages*), the portentous verses, the bloodcurdling oaths, the lovers’ vows and recognition tokens (split coins, locks of hair), the love potions, Eric’s fear of the dark, Skarpedín’s axe (from Njál’s) and his comic misogyny (from Beorn the Welshman in Dasent’s The Vikings of the Baltic (1875), a pallid but interesting novelistic recreation of Jómsvíkinga saga), the chattering beggarwomen, the shapeshifting Swanhild, the demonic witch Groa, the Viking sea-battle, final defeat in a lonely lava defile following a view of the Fatal Sisters in that region of death (straight from the ‘Darradjahó’ in Brennu-Njáls saga) whence no traveller save Öðinn returns. The motif of foreign travel (in this instance to the British Isles) offered Haggard the opportunity to write about Viking-Age Orkney, a subject of great interest to many Victorians: witness the immense popularity of Sir Walter Scott’s Orcadian novel The Pirate (1821; this splendid work is now bafflingly neglected), and the publication of two translations of Orkneyinga saga—from Jón Hjaltalín and Gilbert Goudie (1873), and by Sir George (as he became in 1876) Webbe Dasent (Vigfússon and Dasent
1887–94), this latter version long delayed by the Englishman’s tiresome prevarication (Knowles 1963, 119–23). Moreover, Haggard succeeded in matching the manner of his novel to its matter. His novel is written in a remarkably convincing modern version of saga prose, whose taut and nervous syntax swims artfully against the tide of colloquial expectation, and employs diction which fully exploits the Norse element in the English language without becoming its slave. The narrative is deftly dusted over with alliteration, not least in the flying, exchanges, and it carries a heavy freight of unusually well-crafted proverbiousness.

Yet, for all its apparently instinctive feel for the authenticity of ancient style and substance, it is not difficult to see Rider Haggard’s novel as very distinctly a late Victorian work. For all the dash and daring of its golden-haired exemplary hero, Eric Brighteyes is a romance in a tragic mode, ultimately governed by a pervasive Tennysonian melancholy. There emerges during the novel a sense of potential splendour unachieved and actual splendour undermined by ultimately unappeasable forces of destruction—fate, Finnish magic, and female wiles. I believe it is reasonable to suggest that in Eric’s staunchness in life and stoicism in death the reader is confronted with an unsignalled but discernible icon for an age in which buccaneering empire building would have to give way (might even already be giving way) to the gentlemanly management of imperial decline. The shape and substance of the novel as a whole seems to mimic the unease and insecurity of the age.

This insecurity was nowhere better mirrored than in the shifting tides of nineteenth-century philology, particularly as it impacted on questions of national and racial identity. The cult of Old Norse found itself at the heart of these deliberations. In his own ‘Introduction’ to the novel’s first edition, Haggard’s own priorities are clearly stated:

The author will be gratified should he succeed in exciting interest in the troubled lives of our Norse forefathers, and still more so if his difficult experiment brings readers to the Sagas—to the prose epics of our own race [my italics]. (1891, x)

Haggard’s association of Old Icelandic culture with ‘our forefathers’ and ‘our own race’ (with his possibly Danish surname these links were doubtless personal as well as national: Hanks and Hodges 1988, 233) is of crucial importance for understanding that Victorian cultivation of Viking culture in the 1890s and earlier could often reflect so much more than mere genteel armchair antiquarianism.

Old Norse studies in Britain had been intellectually legitimised in the early nineteenth century when the implications of the comparative philological work of Rasmus Rask and the Grimms were absorbed, and Germanic languages (ancient and modern, dialectal as well as standard, spoken as well as written) felt able to hold their heads up in the now fraternal and no longer magisterial presence of Latin and Greek. Such matters were a prominent feature of local Literary and Philosophical Society papers throughout the nineteenth century (see, for example, Picton 1864; Geldart 1875). The Anglo-Saxon and Norse origins of the English language became the subject of detailed investigation. By the middle of the century English was fulfilling Jakob Grimm’s prophecy and becoming a world language, in the same way as Britain had become a world power. Indeed the revelations of the New Philology appeared to underpin the basis of that power. As understood and politicised by mid-century writers, the revelations of the Grimms about Sanskrit had shown that whatever common Asiatic origin the tribes of the world (and their mythologies) might have shared, the crucial division must be made between those who had migrated West and those who had trekked East. In Dasent’s bluff construction (1903, xxx–xxvii), the Western branch had been tough, enduring and energetic people who ‘went out and did’, whilst the Easterners, careless of the practical life and immersed in speculation, ‘sat down . . . and thought’. By the mid-nineteenth century in India, when the two branches of that common tribe were judged to have come together again, it was no longer as equals but as colonial master and submissive but defeated servant:

The Highlander, who drives his bayonet through the heart of a high-caste Sepoy mutineer (in the 1856 Indian Mutiny), little knows that his pale features and sandy hair, and that dusty face with its raven locks both come from a common ancestor in Central Asia many, many centuries ago. (xxviii)

It seemed a Darwinian triumph, both political and linguistic, of the racially fitter—of ‘our own race’, in Haggard’s words. Mid-century enthusiasts of Old Norse were in the vanguard of those celebrating with I. A. Blackwell that

the Saxon . . . now rule[s] with uncontrolled sway over that antique land, whence the heritage he so gloriously holds was originally transmitted to him, and should there impart to his Hindustani brethren a civilization whose germs had been planted by their common ancestors. (Percy 1859, 45)

Victorian philology had revealed as never before the extent of Saxon and Viking influence on the English language, and the triumphalist strain in Victorian philologists such as Blackwell, Dasent and Frederick Metcalfe had unhesitatingly attributed current imperial grandeur to the emboldening effects of Viking blood still coursing through British veins; England
owed ‘her pluck, her dash and her freedom’ to Scandinavia (Metcalf 1861, 70). The clarification of linguistic roots offered reassurance of cultural roots, both in Britain and, it may be noted in passing, in the United States at exactly the same time.

But there was also a negative side. As English became an imperial world language, it started, in the eyes of purists, to suffer the fate of an earlier imperial language, Latin; the more widely it was used, the more it became corrupted. The imperial was ever the enemy of the national. The most telling measure of that ‘corruption’, and the shock with which it was greeted, was the first volume (1888) of the Oxford English Dictionary compiled on descriptive rather than prescriptive grounds, as modern scientific philology required. One reviewer in 1889 dismissed the contents as a ‘mass of sewerage’ (Dowling 1886, 96). The new unpolticised scientific philologists were unconcerned; they had never wished to assert any Darwinian triumph of the linguistically fittest, but were content rather to record the evolution of the linguistically latest. Others were less sanguine, and the flurry of renewed interest in Old Norse in the 1880s and 1890s may reflect an instinctive wish to re-emphasise, sometimes slightly frantically, the linguistic roots of ‘our own race’. And in times of political and social tension, many will have responded to Dasent’s vigorous reassertion of robust Viking cultural values, agrarian or nautical rather than urban, active rather than reflective, meritocratic rather than aristocratic. The degenerate landed aristocratic enfeeblement of the present offered little comfort:

We do not, now-a-days, stop to inquire if the infant be deformed or a cripple. With us an old house will stand as well upon a crooked as upon a straight support. But in Iceland, in the tenth century, as in all the 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 . . . for incapacity that age had no mercy. No ‘tenth transmitter of a foolish face’ would then have been tolerated merely because one of his ancestors, generations back, had been a man of merit. (Dasent 1858, 211–12)

Set in this context, Eric Brighteyes becomes an exemplary late-Victorian hero. Placed in a world remote from town and trade, not favoured by birth and ancestral inheritance, his achievements and high repute are his alone. The familiar motif of the hero’s famous sword helps to establish this; the noblest conflict had always involved hand-held weapons, with the hand an extension and emanation of the heart, a measure of the individual’s ‘brain, will and feeling’ (Dasent 1873, 13). A famous sword could be inherited, but it imposed burdensome obligations on each new owner. As

the Tennysonian cult of Excalibur had reminded Victorian England, the question was not so much whether the sword was good enough for the hero, but whether the hero was good enough for the sword. The ‘cunning invention’ (Dasent 1858, 174) of Victorian military technology could convert cowardice into courage; no such deception was possible for a Viking. It was only by the act of lifting, holding and wielding a weapon like Eric Brighteyes’ Whitefire (or Ondr’s Fireheart, or Gisli’s Greyflank: Baring-Gould 1894, Barmby 1900), not by the throwing of spears or stones, that new and deserved fame could be won.

Dasent’s The Vikings of the Baltic (1873), following the narrative line of Jömsvikinga saga, ends on a schizophrenic note. The degenerate Jòmsborg vikings are destroyed, but the young hero Vagn wields his sword boldly and survives his life-threatening adventures, in the company of the crotchety but steadfast Beorn. In Vagn’s survival and subsequent marriage lies the hope and expectation of future renown. He would become no ‘tenth transmitter of a foolish face’. Neither, though more tragically, would Eric Brighteyes. If in the upward curve of Eric’s early fortunes can be glimpsed Victorian optimism, there is no mistaking the equally powerful pessimism in the ‘new wed, new dead’ (Haggard 1891, 171) tragedy of Eric’s wedding night, and in his own subsequent demise: there would be no face, foolish or otherwise, transmitted by the dead hero, there were sadly to be no ‘branches’ of his own potentially ‘great family’. In this stunted growth, and in the ambivalence and duality of the novel as a whole can be discerned the anxiety of the age. Newman Howard, defending the form of his statuesque melodrama Kiartan the Icelander (1902), laments that ‘nowadays’ pseudo-realism is in demand which consists not in vital and universal truth, but in the use of idioms, episodes and issues of the passing hour’ (Howard 1913, viii). In its unportentous way Eric Brighteyes addresses universal questions, but it also gives expression to concerns which are neither ‘for all time’ nor mere ‘issues of the passing hour’; they are however very much issues of an age—the Victorian age of the 1890s.

A last word on the last Victorian decade. In his Preface to the revised Speight–Major Stories from the Northern Sagas, York Powell declared that ‘beyond the sagas and the Eddic poems, there is nothing of first importance in Icelandic, and little really worth spending time over’ (xv). Happily the writings of Frederick Howell (1893) and Mrs Disney Leith (1897) amongst others show that not all Victorians closed their eyes so tightly to the efforts of modern Icelandic poets to respond tellingly to Iceland’s exemplary past and dispirited present. Howell seasons his
narrative with quotations from Grímur Thomsen, Matthías Jochumsson, Bjarni Thorarensen and Hannes Hafstein. Similarly in Mrs Leith’s translation (1897, 172) of unacknowledged lines from Jónas Hallgrímsson’s Gunnarshólm, where the Icelandic poet paraphrases and ponders Gunnarr’s famous frígr er hliðin speech, the Viking and Victorian ages stand face to face:

But Gunnarr turns his face towards the land:
No fear the righteous hero’s soul dismay,
Though fierce the threats of the hostile band.

‘Ne’er saw I yet the earth’s increase so fair!
The cattle spread them o’er the field to graze,
Against pale cornfields roses redden there.

Here will I spend the number of my days,
Yea, all that God shall send me. Fare thou well,
Brother and friend!’ Thus Gunnarr says.

It is a proper tribute to the spirit of the 1890s that an eager British traveller to Iceland not only knew the most famous saga’s most famous scene, but knew also the most famous Icelandic romantic poet’s memorable response to it. It is just as characteristic of the decade that the traveller then becomes the translator anxious to share her excitement with fellow enthusiasts. In going that extra philological mile in pursuit of their own and their nation’s Viking past, the Victorians set an admirable example for later times. It was they who had the will and showed the way.

Notes
1 A spot check of the Proceedings of the Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society 1880–1900 with comparable published papers from the Literary and Philosophical Societies of Leeds, Leicester, and Glasgow, the Manchester Literary Club, the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and the Royal Society of Literature shows a widespread interest in philological questions, and in Iceland and its literature in particular (Laurensen 1882; Embleton 1887; Simpson 1891; Mavor 1891; Bryce 1891); it is clear, however, that such interest was unusually prominent in Liverpool (see below, papers by Picton and Sephton).
2 See Smith 1889; 1890; 1891; 1892 for such Icelandic ‘fruits’ as there were.
3 I am very grateful to Jón Karl Heigenson for drawing this adaptation to my attention.
4 Published posthumously in 1900, translated into Icelandic by Matthías Jochumsson the following year. This latter version was used as a teaching text by W. P. Ker (Lbs 2808 4to, Mabel Barmby to Matthías Jochumsson, 17 May 1907), whilst the original text was performed by the Viking Club in January 1903 (Lbs 2808 4to, 13 January 1903), lavishly praised in an article in the University of Liverpool Magazine (Lbs 2808 4to, 16 November 1903), and became the forerunner of several dramatised saga adaptations by Hall Caine and Newman Howard which sought to reassert ‘those old chivalries, pieties, and magnanimities wherein rest the sweetness and stability of life’ (Howard 1913, viii).
5 ‘I do not wonder I could never translate the Skaldic verses—it seems as if the words had been shaken up in a bag and then picked out and arranged accordingly—not to their sense—but to their sound. It puzzles me to guess how you could make sense out of them. I should have supposed that the verses had been polished up by some interloper until all the precious metal had been rubbed off and small thanks will Finar Skulason—if it were him—get for his trouble—your detection of the cheat, and attempted restoration deserve all praise’, Bodleian MS Eng. Misc. d.131, F. W. L. Thomas (an old sea-captain from the Shetlands who had helped GV with sea-faring terms in the Dictionary) to GV, 20 April 1882, a letter of thanks for the gift of a copy of Corpus Poeticum Boreale. Thomas’s antiquarian enthusiasm also found expression in his Account of some of the Celtic Antiquities of Orkney, including the Stones of Stenness, Tomuli, Picts-Houses, etc (London, 1851).
6 I am very grateful to Dr B. S. Benedikz for drawing my attention to Baring-Gould’s novel The Icelander’s Sword, or The Story of Orafædal, a bridal-quest romance full of boisterous muscular Christianity. Though not published until 1894, the Preface indicates that much of its material was developed in the late 1850s as an adventure tale for boys. A lengthy passage in the middle of the novel (probably added during the author’s pre-publication revisions) gives forthright expression to Baring-Gould’s impatience with late Victorian decadence. He fears that novels themselves may be part of the problem:

Every nation in its childhood began to play with edged tools, but none with greater boldness than the Scandinavians. Whether these somnolent passions have wholly spent themselves or are brooding still over our horizon, it is not for the author to say; whether the ferocity in our nature has at all showed itself of late among our countrymen—whether, for instance, our gilded leopards have contented themselves with catching mice, or, again, whether the love of excitement, which nowadays quenches itself in a novel, instead of driving men to deeds of heroism, be more wholesome than its first development—are points which must be left for the reader to determine. (Baring-Gould 1894, 106)

The wintry violence and vernal freshness of medieval society are contrasted with the autumnal rankness and decay of late nineteenth-century values:

If the features of mediaeval society be looked at with naked eye, and not through nineteenth-century spectacles, marvellous reality and truth will be seen, such as is not common in these times. The Middle Ages were times presenting violent contrasts. With blood-smirched hands, in the place of blazing homesteads, notable deeds of mercy, self-devotion, or valour were performed. Then brightness was dashed into darkness. If there were keen winds and chill showers, the buds of many flowers burst open in the May of Civilisation; and those leaflets which appeared were full of the life of warm gales and soft dews. Now we have lost the frost and winds, and rejoice in our autumn, with its smell of corruption, and its leaves pulled from the branches and strewn for us to trample on, or to scrape together or analyze. (107)
Baring-Gould is indignant that the native hue of British resolution has allowed itself to be sickled o’er with the pale cast of modern indifference:

The Middle Ages were times of honesty and earnestness. What was to be done, good or evil, was done with all men’s might; and from the actions, even though of blood, bright sparks of courage and true-heartedness were elicited. Perhaps we may have gained prudence and justice, but we may have lost the equally cardinal virtues, temperance and fortitude. The present age is one of indifference, and the men of this generation lie under an evenly-graduated sky of grey, wrap in themselves alone. There was great freshness and reality in the old days, with their long stalking shadows and bright kindling gleams of sun. (108)

A new Icelandic translation by Guðni Kolbeinsson has been published to mark the centenary of the novel’s first appearance: Eiríkur frá Íslandi (Reykjavík, 1991).

Two brief instances indicate something of the Victorian fondness for using Tennyson as a reference point for relating their Norse enthusiasms. Firstly, Dasset (1873, II 247) writes about the retinue of King Magnus the Good of Norway: ‘in Sighvat Skald he had his Merlin, in Swenyn he found the traitor Mordred. Harold was his Lancelot, but the Guinevere whom the great warrior sought to win was none other than that fair land of Norway; though unlike the guilty queen she was true to her liege lord, and only gave herself up with a sigh to her woer when death had cut asunder the tie which bound her to her first love’, Secondly, and a significant coincidence at least, in 1888 H. Halliday Sparkling edited a collection of extracts from Morris’s translation of Volsunga saga; the publisher was Walter Scott [sic] of London, and the volume appeared in the Camelot Series.

Howard’s play clearly drew on Muriel Press’s 1899 translation of Laxdæla saga. Robert Proctor’s 1903 version of the same saga soon followed. Proctor’s Norse enthusiasms were entirely typical of the time: based at the British Museum, he became a friend of William Morris, and later a trustee of his will; before the Laxdæla translation Proctor presented a copy of his privately published 1902 translation ‘A Tale of the Weapon Firbers’ as a wedding present to the Cambridge University Librarian Francis Jenkinson, a colleague of Eiríkur Magnússon (see DNB, second supplement, III 140-1). Proctor died in 1903, whilst on a walking tour in Austria.

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A RAMBLE IN ICELAND.

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A series of delightful journeys which it had been my pleasant experience to make with some old and valued friends, for many consecutive years, to various parts of the Old and New World, led to the events related in the following account.

A friendship of now nearly fifty years, from its initiation at Alma Mater, was no slight bond in uniting tastes, interests, pursuits, and higher feelings than those resulting from any ordinary matters of interest. My friends had not then travelled much, and as Europe was well known to me, I was able, when certain localities were reached, to plan excursions, and to seize opportunities which a favourable moment, or our presence in this or that vicinity, permitted. Our journeys had an appetizing effect, and instead of satisfying produced a desire for longer wanderings, and a more extended insight into the wonders and beauties of nature. With sufficient difference of pursuit to avoid sameness, there were many points in common in our tastes, so that we easily adapted ourselves to each other's plans. To me this had a doubly agreeable effect, as for many years it enabled me to re-inspect places and matters of interest with which previous acquaintance had left a desire for further knowledge, and as my earlier visits had been often made alone, the addition of agreeable companions, and the pleasure of being able to act cicerone, now made the whole more enjoyable.

But I was startled out of all this self-complacency one day by a proposition to visit a place I had never had within the range of my even intended expeditions. My old Cambridge friend was a professor of geology, and the wider the field of his research became, the wider he wanted to extend it. So a journey to the North Cape was determined on. As our other companion was his wife, whose health was much

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