

Hector Munro Chadwick (1870-1947) was Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge from 1912 to 1941. Through the immense range of his scholarly publications, and through the vigorous enthusiasm which he brought to all aspects of Anglo-Saxon studies — philological and literary, historical and archaeological — he helped to define the field and to give it the interdisciplinary orientation which characterises it still. The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, which owes its existence and its own interdisciplinary outlook to H.M. Chadwick, has wished to commemorate his enduring contribution to Anglo-Saxon studies by establishing an annual series of lectures in his name.

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ANDREW WAWN

‘Fast er drukkið og fátt lært’:
Eiríkur Magnússon, Old Northern Philology,
and Victorian Cambridge



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE, AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

‘Fast er drukkið og fátt lært’:¹
Eiríkur Magnússon, Old Northern
Philology, and Victorian Cambridge

ANDREW WAWN

There are at least two justifications for using the occasion of the 2000 H.M. Chadwick Memorial Lecture to reflect on the philological life of Eiríkur Magnússon (1833–1913). Firstly, Hector Chadwick certainly knew the expatriate Icelander: the year after Chadwick was born in 1870, in Thornhill Lees, near Wakefield, Eiríkur was appointed to a post in the university library in Cambridge. By the time Chadwick arrived in Cambridge as a student, Eiríkur was well established as the university’s unrivalled authority on old northern studies. Towards the end of the 1890s, the two men found themselves sharing the task of preparing students for the Medieval and Modern Languages Tripos examinations. By 1899 we find Chadwick citing (a touch warily) Eiríkur’s eddic theories in a published essay (his first) on Óðinn.² On more than one occasion the two men shared top billing at meetings of the Cambridge Philological Society. On 7 February 1901 they both read papers in Mr Nixon’s rooms in King’s College: Chadwick investigated a Saxo Grammaticus crux, and Eiríkur talked with evident enthusiasm about the native guardian

¹‘The drinking hard, the learning little’: Landsbókasafn Íslands (hereafter Lbs.) 2181 4to, Eiríkur Magnússon [hereafter EM] to Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal, 22 ix 1865.

² H.M. Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin: An Essay in the Ancient Religion of the North* (London, 1899), p. 75, n.1. This is the only Chadwick volume listed by Bertha Phillpotts in her catalogue of Eiríkur’s library: Lbs. 2182 4to.

spirits of Iceland known as *landvættir*.³ It was an appropriate choice of topic, for, as I hope to show, throughout his adult life Eiríkur relished his self-appointed role as nineteenth-century Iceland's doughtiest philological *landvættur*.

A second justification for re-examining Eiríkur's scholarly life in Cambridge is the opportunity it offers for testing Chadwick's intriguing observation, in the Preface to *The Growth of Literature* (1932), about the nature and extent of Victorian interest in Icelandic literature and culture: 'half a century ago early Norse literature ... was practically unknown in this country, except for a small number of private scholars'.⁴ In this paper I seek to examine the Icelandic documentary evidence for the state of 'early Norse literature' in late Victorian and Edwardian Cambridge. This investigation might offer us some transferable academic thoughts on the state of old northern studies 'in this country' at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

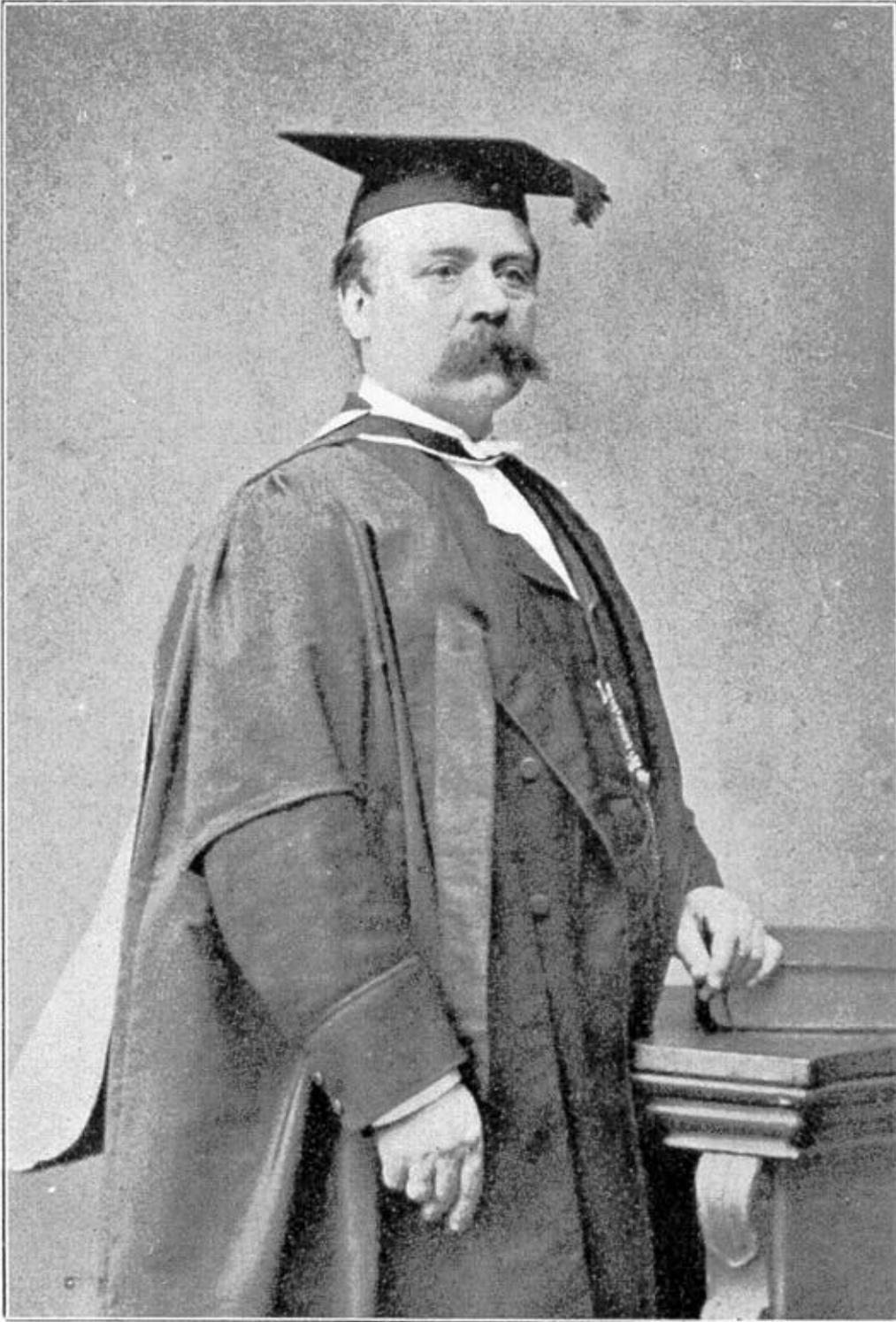
There is perhaps even a third justification for considering Eiríkur Magnússon's life in philology, for his achievements prompt us to recall and reflect on the 1959 *DNB* entry for Hector Chadwick. In it the Elrington and Bosworth Professor is praised for introducing curriculum reforms after the First World War which served to make philology in Cambridge 'serve the knowledge of history and civilization'.⁵ 'Modern linguists', we learn, felt that intellectual life in Britain needed to exhibit 'a living interest in other peoples rather than academic concentration on language'. I take the implication to be that philology in Victorian Cambridge had failed to achieve these challenging objectives. There may be echoes here of the suspicious atmosphere confronting J.R.R. Tolkien on his return to Oxford from the trenches.⁶ He became aware of rumblings to the effect that his beloved philology had

³ Both papers are summarised in *Cambridge Philological Society Proceedings* 58–60 (1901), 3–4. The two men also spoke at the 5 December 1901 meeting, *ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

⁴ H.M. Chadwick and Nora Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1932–40) I, xiv.

⁵ *DNB, Supplement 1941–50* (Oxford, 1959), p. 144.

⁶ T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (London, 1982), p. 7.



Eirik Magnússon

long been an essentially Prussian science which had contributed significantly to nineteenth-century German arrogance and adventurism, the tragic consequences of which had eventually overwhelmed the whole of Europe. In this paper, I want to suggest that if ever there was scholar in Victorian and Edwardian Cambridge whose pursuit of humane philology served ‘the knowledge of history and civilization’, and made nonsense of feeble-minded distinctions drawn between ‘a living interest in other peoples’ and ‘academic concentration on language’, that man was Eiríkur Magnússon.

Anyone seeking to understand Eiríkur’s career soon learns to be grateful for *Saga Eiríks Magnússonar* (1933), Stefán Einarsson’s painstaking biography of his late uncle.⁷ In preparing this paper, I have sought to retrace Stefán’s scholarly footsteps, examining afresh most of the Eiríkur Magnússon manuscripts in the National Library of Iceland, as well as his many published works. The oral evidence from Cambridge to which Stefán had access — including (no doubt) interviews with Bertha Phillpotts and Hector Chadwick — is, of course and alas, irrecoverable. I am conscious that the view of Eiríkur offered in this essay differs in emphasis from that of Stefán Einarsson almost 70 years ago — it would be surprising (and perhaps disturbing) if it did not. In particular *Saga Eiríks Magnússonar* seems to me too rigidly sectioned a book: its documentary mine-shafts are deep but under-connected. In searching for the sources of Eiríkur’s almost demonic philological energy, I want to suggest crucial links between the different parts of Eiríkur’s life and the different sections of Stefán’s book. I want to argue for the wholeness of Eiríkur’s old northern philological vision. Icelandic past and present were inextricably linked. Ancient resentments fuelled modern scholarly engagement; and the present made study of the past a political, moral and emotional imperative. These strongly sensed continuities were the burrs under what might otherwise have been a rather too comfortable Cambridge saddle.

⁷ Stefán Einarsson, *Saga Eiríks Magnússonar* (Reykjavík, 1933); see also his ‘Eiríkur Magnússon — The Forgotten Pioneer’, in B.S. Benedikz, ed., *Studia centennialia in honorem memoriae Benedikt S. Þórarinsson* (Reykjavík, 1961), pp. 33–50.

And, in case this all sounds rather too earnest a theme for a celebratory lecture delivered at the end of tiring term, we may note that among the other elements unifying Eiríkur's life and work in Cambridge were paranoid professional jealousy, an always sharp and sometimes forked tongue, and problems with what we are now obliged to call 'interpersonal skills' and 'anger management'. Mention his name in some parts of Victorian Cambridge and combination rooms would light up; mention it elsewhere and people would reach for the nearest piece of carpet to bite. Moreover, like Grettir, hero of the first Icelandic saga that he translated into English with his fiery friend and collaborator William Morris,⁸ not only could Eiríkur sometimes be 'difficult to have dealings with', but he was also an 'unlucky' man. Two examples make the point. Firstly, walking past Christ's College one day, Eiríkur found himself drenched in water — or worse — thrown by a student from a second floor window. A few days later a letter of explanation worthy of Gerard Hoffnung arrived from the student's tutor, Professor Cartmell, one of Eiríkur's Faculty Board colleagues: 'I have no doubt what he tells me is true — that he was trying to throw the water upon a man who was in a room on the first floor. I object most strongly to anything being thrown from windows onto the street, whatever the pretext may be'.⁹ Secondly, there was the great Cambridge occasion when General Kitchener came to receive an honorary degree for services to queen and country. The city was buzzing with excitement and the Senate House was packed. Eventually, at the end of an exciting day, Eiríkur in his prized M.A. gown¹⁰ arrived home to find that his Bateman Street house had been ransacked; assorted articles had

⁸ William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, trans., *The Story of Grettir the Strong* (London, 1869).

⁹ Lbs. 2186 4to, Cartmell to EM, 9 iii 1907.

¹⁰ He longed to be able to wear a Master of Arts gown 'eins og Gubbi' [like Guðbrandur Vigfússon (in Oxford)]: Lbs. 2179 4to, EM to his wife, 20 xi 1871. When this wish was granted, Eiríkur gleefully compared the full university privileges which accompanied his own M.A. with the more lowly nature of Guðbrandur's award in Oxford: Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Karólína Einarsdóttir Sæmundsen, 27 ii 1877. The same letter includes an Icelandic translation of the Latin commendatory address delivered at the degree ceremony.

been stolen (though happily not the signed photograph of Queen Victoria which adorned his study), and the manuscript of his *Heimskringla* translation had been left ‘splundrað yfir gólfið og upp í Chimney enda’ [strewn all over the floor and up the chimney ends].¹¹ The local constabulary were soon on the case, and two suspects were arrested at the station — ‘fannst þá allt þýfið á þeim og jemmy þeirra með’ [all the swag was then found on them, along with their jemmy]; but the violated manuscript took many hours to reassemble.

A politicised philological vision, an obsessive temperament, the intellectual constitution of an ox, and a mixed bag of attendant spirits — these were the qualities which the thirty-eight year old Eiríkur brought to Cambridge in 1871. He also came with many scholarly projects ‘on the needles’, and enough publications to gladden the heart of the most paranoid RAE coordinator. Eiríkur’s Anglophile literary and cultural sympathies which came to dominate his scholarly life were already well to the fore in his 1860s projects. Firstly, he arrived in Britain in 1862 at the invitation of Isaac Sharpe, on behalf of the British and Foreign Bible Society, for whom he was to work on a new Icelandic translation of the Bible;¹² it was this enterprise which soon opened up an intellectual *ginnungagap* between the modernising Eiríkur and the traditionalist Guðbrandur Vigfússon, fellow philologist and (all too soon) former friend. Secondly, at much the same time and again under Sharpe’s influence, Eiríkur worked on a translation of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.¹³ Thirdly, by 1866 he had collaborated on two pioneering volumes which made available in English a selection of stories from Jón Árnason’s newly published corpus of Icelandic folktales.¹⁴ These translations would ‘gjöra

¹¹ Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Magnús Magnússon, 2 Dec. [n.a.].

¹² Stefán Einarsson, *Saga Eiríks Magnússonar* (Reykjavík, 1933), p. 21.

¹³ *För pilgrimsins frá þessum heimi til hins ókomna* (London, 1876); the project is mentioned in letters to his wife from the time of his arrival in England — Lbs. 2179 4to, EM to Sigríður Einarsdóttir, 13 i 1863, 26 vi 1864.

¹⁴ G.E.J. Powell and Eiríkr Magnússon, *Icelandic Legends, Collected by Jón Arnason* [sic] (London, 1864), and *Icelandic Legends, Collected by Jón Arnason* [sic]: *Second Series* (London, 1866). The source of both volumes was Jón Árnason, ed., *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintyri*, 2 vols (Leipzig,

hugsunarháttar Íslendinga og nafn þjóðarinnar kunnara en það var áður' [make Icelanders' ways of thinking and the nation's name better known than before].¹⁵ The enterprise was lavishly bankrolled by George Powell, a rich young Etonian playboy from Aberystwyth, with the attention span of a gnat, a fondness for flagellant sex, and a love of all things Icelandic.¹⁶ Fourthly, Eiríkur had published his edition and translation of Eysteinn Arngrímsson's fourteenth-century Marian devotional poem *Lilja* [The Lily] just in time to impress Anglo-Catholic members of the Cambridge University Library Board of Electors as they considered his application for a post. This was the first English language edition of any medieval Icelandic literary work, offering British readers an edited text, painstaking translation, serviceable notes and reliable glossary.¹⁷ Its publication completed a virtuous Anglo-Icelandic cultural circle: Eiríkur had based his text on a manuscript given by Ólafur Stephensen to Sir Joseph Banks, during the Englishman's pioneering expedition to Iceland in 1772; it had been one of many medieval Icelandic manuscripts presented by Banks to the British Museum on his return to Britain.¹⁸ In Eiríkur's editorial hands, *Lilja* received a strongly defined and very characteristic editorial spin which linked medieval Icelandic and pre-Conquest English traditions of spirituality. Eiríkur believed that in terms of the poem's form, vocabulary and ideology, Eysteinn Arngrímsson

1862–4). It would have pleased Eiríkur that half a dozen of the translations were recirculated for English servicemen stationed in Iceland in 1940: see *The Iceland Christmas Book* (Reykjavík, 1940).

¹⁵ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 5 iv 1864. Edited texts of Eiríkur's correspondence with Jón Sigurðsson can be found in Lúðvík Kristjánsson, *Á slóðum Jóns Sigurðssonar* (Reykjavík, 1961).

¹⁶ See R.G. Thomas, 'George E.J. Powell, Eiríkr Magnússon and Jón Sigurðsson: A Chapter in Icelandic Literary History', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 14/1–2 (1953–7), 113–30; Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: the Invention of the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 361–2.

¹⁷ Eysteinn Arngrímsson, ed. and trans. Eiríkr Magnússon, *Lilja* (London, 1870). Eiríkur's name was always spelt 'Eiríkr' on title-pages of publications. Eiríkur's own copy of *Lilja*, now in Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, contains many of Eiríkur's post-publication emendations to his original translation.

¹⁸ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 4 ii 1868.

must have ‘drukkið af brunni Cædmóns ... hin góða munk frá Whitby ... hið elsta skáld Englands’ [drunk at Cædmon’s well ... the good monk of Whitby ... England’s oldest poet].¹⁹ Fifthly, by 1870 Eiríkur had confirmed his determination to make the *Íslendingasögur* [Sagas of Icelanders] accessible to British readers in English translation. Many of these narratives had been available in Latin translation since the great Copenhagen 1775–1832 Arnamagnæan Commission text series, but, partly as a result of the publication of English translations such as George Dasent’s *The Story of Burnt Njal* (1861), *The Story of Gisli the Outlaw* (1866), and Sir Edmund Head’s *The Story of Viga-Glum* (1865), they steadily became fashionable among Victorian readers as mighty old northern novels — George Eliot with genealogies. Before his fruitful collaboration with William Morris,²⁰ Eiríkur had worked on saga translations with the frustratingly insouciant George Powell, who contrived not only to lose the manuscript of their version of *Egils saga*,²¹ but also to neglect the stylistic polishing of their version of *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, which still lies unpublished in the National Library of Wales.²² Sixthly and lastly, by 1870 Eiríkur had secured a commission from the government to edit and translate *Thómas saga Erkibyskups* for the Rolls Series, in spite of efforts by Norwegian scholars (egged on by the jealous George Dasent) to sabotage the whole project — an early and unhappy example of international peer group review in operation.²³ The two published volumes represented the first manuscript-based, English language edition of any saga text.²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid. Eiríkur was encouraged by Henry Bradshaw to study Anglo-Saxon, with the long-term aim of becoming Professor in that subject: Lbs. 2179 4to, EM to Sigríður Einarsdóttir (his wife), 28 xi 1871.

²⁰ Their translations included *Friðþjófs saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Víglundar saga* (collected in *Three Northern Love Stories*, 1875), and the contents of the six volume Saga Library (1891–1905).

²¹ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 26 vii 1868; the first published English translation was that of W.C. Green in 1893.

²² National Library of Wales MS 19763.

²³ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 9 i 1872; 3 iv 1873.

²⁴ Eiríkur Magnússon, ed. and trans., *Thómas saga Erkibyskups*, 2 vols (London, 1875–83).

To these Anglo-Icelandic projects which were either completed or well advanced by the time Eiríkur Magnússon settled in Cambridge, can be added others which withered on the vine. There was talk of compiling an English Dialect Dictionary,²⁵ and also an Icelandic-English Dictionary about which Eiríkur seems to have come close to reaching a deal with Cambridge University Press.²⁶ There were plans for an Iceland Travel Guide, with Eiríkur sensing (rightly) that by the early 1860s there was a much wider audience for ancient and modern Iceland in all its forms than Hector Chadwick's reference to a small group of 'private scholars' implied — Eiríkur planned to link up with an English physician (a Dr Leared),²⁷ who was convinced that Iceland had a great future as a health resort, even though, as many travellers had already discovered, its undeniably fresh air tended to be delivered in over-generous doses at rather too low a temperature.²⁸ Of greater long-term significance for Eiríkur's Cambridge friends, while still a high school student in Reykjavík he developed what proved to be a lasting affection for the (Swedish language) works of the Finnish poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-77). The Icelander's 1899 Presidential Address to the London-based Viking Club, and also his final paper to the same society (in 1910) banged the drum for Runeberg's Viking-Age narrative poem *Kung Fialar*, a (now) long-forgotten work to which Eiríkur had become passionately attached, touring the halls and high tables of Cambridge giving animated readings to enthusiastic audiences.²⁹ For Eiríkur Magnússon an interest in modern literary responses to medieval Icelandic texts

²⁵ Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Margrét Jónsdóttir, 4 xi 1888: the aim was to highlight the strong old northern element in English.

²⁶ Ibid., EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 19 xii 1863.

²⁷ Ibid., EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 13 i 1863. Dr Leared's own interest in Icelandic literature led him to apply for membership of the Icelandic Literary Society in Copenhagen (ibid., 22 iii 1862). Eiríkur worked for years as a summer guide in Iceland, encouraging the commercial exploitation of Iceland's natural and agrarian resources. He understood clearly that political sovereignty would be useless without financial independence.

²⁸ On Victorian travellers in Iceland, see Gary Aho, "Með Ísland á heilanum": Íslandsbækur breskra ferðalanga 1772 til 1897', *Skírnir* 167 (1993), 205–58; also Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, pp. 283–311.

²⁹ Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Magnús Gíslason, 28 vii 1907, 1 i 1908.

was an integral part of his — and any — coherent old northern philological vision.

Such interests assuredly helped to make Eiríkur a popular teacher and dinner guest in Cambridge, but they never held out the possibility of enabling him to give up the day job. In 1871 he had been elected to an assistant librarian's position in the university library: £250 a year, working hours 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with 90 minutes for lunch.³⁰ It had been 'a damned close run thing'. Twenty-seven applicants had been whittled down first to seven and then two. We might spare a thought for the runner up — the long-serving Dennis Hall,³¹ backed by the formidable Henry Bradshaw, and seemingly the strongest of favourites against an unknown foreigner whose Old Icelandic interests and expertise carried none of the unchallenged prestige of Graeco-Roman scholarship. Eiríkur, however, was not without his own friends in high Cambridge places who were lobbying like 'gráir kettir'³² [grey cats] on behalf of him and his subject. If Old Icelandic was not yet a blue-chip stock in Britain, it had long since shed its mid-eighteenth-century status as a penny share. Its influential supporters with Cambridge connections included the Queen's physician Sir Henry Holland, the university Member of Parliament A.J. Beresford Hope, and scholars such as W. Aldis Wright, E.B. Cowell, J.R. Lumby, and Walter Skeat, for several of whom Eiríkur had done Icelandic-related favours (private tuition, procuring books) in the preceding months. The grey cats duly secured an 11 votes to 6 triumph for Berufjörður's most famous son.

In his more conscientious moments we find the new assistant librarian full of plans and initiatives for his place of work: new cataloguing methods and equipment, daring (and clearly unwelcome) suggestions that booksellers' bills be settled on time,³³ and a proposed new library design resembling a coiled rattlesnake

³⁰ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 2 xi 1871.

³¹ David McKitterick, *Cambridge University Library: A History. The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 733–4.

³² Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Soffía Einarisdóttir [sister-in-law], 1 xi 1865.

³³ Bradshaw seems to have been notoriously slow in dealing with such matters: Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 13 xii 1872.

onto whose tail extra scales could be added as new books, more readers and additional resources materialised. Moreover, Eiríkur was no mere dreamer and doodler; his papers include a fat file of patents for the design successfully applied for in every European capital.³⁴

Eiríkur knew that his reforming broom might encounter resistance among his colleagues in the library: ‘Conservativ indolentarnir vilja láta allt dumma við hið gamla. Svo ég verð að hafa augun og hugann alls staðar til að reyna að brjóta upp klíkusamdrátt þessarra fossiliseraðu portvíns kúta’³⁵ [reactionary and lazy old farts want everything to stay as it is. So I must keep my wits about me in trying to break up this cliquish bunch of fossilised port-wine barrels]. The chief indolent was ‘Braddi’ — Henry Bradshaw. Disputes inevitably arose which were resolved by the library authorities in Eiríkur’s favour, a strategic success soon matched academically by the award of a Master of Arts degree, an honour about which he wrote home excitedly and at length.³⁶

Eiríkur regarded his appointment as a most encouraging token of the respect now enjoyed in Cambridge by Iceland and its ancient literature: he felt that ‘auga heimsins sé farin að opnast fyrir Íslandi og að bókmenntir vorar þyki þess verðar ... menn fari að gefa þeim alvarlegri gaum en áður’ [the world’s eye has begun to open up for Iceland ... our literature is now thought to be worthy of more serious attention than hitherto].³⁷ Certainly, Eiríkur’s extra-curricular activities represented a concerted attempt to promote ‘bókmenntir vorar’ by all available means in and beyond Cambridge. He travelled throughout the country, addressing local literary and philosophical societies on old and modern Icelandic philological and historical topics, not infrequently at the request of former pupils. He also planned new translations of both eddas,³⁸ as well as of the seventeenth-century devotional hymns and poems by Hallgrímur Pétursson. He eventually even lent a helping hand to

³⁴ Lbs. 403 fol.

³⁵ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal, 22 ix 1865.

³⁶ See above, note 10.

³⁷ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 2 xi 1871.

³⁸ Lbs. 407 fol.

Edwardian Britain's version of the Millennium Dome — the 1910 Festival of Empire's Pageant of London. In the event the reenactments (on barges on the Thames) of Viking attacks on London were a travesty, his *Bjarkamál* translation was mangled beyond recognition in a dramatised reading, and subsequent letters of thanks for help in explaining passages from Snorri Sturluson's 'Heimsdringla' [sic] will have done little to dull the pain.³⁹

Writing to his Icelandic friend Jón Sigurðsson, by the early 1870s based in Copenhagen and devoting all his energies to the political struggle for Icelandic independence, Eiríkur confided his real thoughts about his new position in Cambridge: he now had more time 'til að liðsinna agitation [sic] okkar, ok aðstoða þig, erkibuslara Íslands frama og frelsis' [to support our agitation, and help you, chief agent of Iceland's advancement and freedom].⁴⁰ This patriotic commitment was already deeply rooted. Early evidence of Eiríkur's nationalist sympathies can be found through his involvement in a late 1850s controversy in Dýrafjörður in North-West Iceland, where the French navy were keen to establish a base.⁴¹ In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* it was the worthy but doomed Vésteinn who noted fatalistically that all waters flow now into Dýrafjörður; but Eiríkur was made of sterner stuff. As a young schoolteacher in Ísafjörður he helped to organise a packed (and successful) protest meeting against the French plans. The same mind-set underpins so much of his later unpublished correspondence and published scholarship. The smallest detail could serve the cause. It is, for example, no surprise that Eiríkur saw fit to include a *fjallkona* [mountain woman] figure as the frontispiece for the 1866 *Icelandic Legends* volume.⁴² As he explained to a slightly baffled Jón Sigurðsson, she sits guarding her native shores, an allegorical distillation of all that was culturally

³⁹ Lbs. 2186 4to, Hon. Secretary to EM, 6 iv 1910.

⁴⁰ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 2 xi 1871.

⁴¹ Stefán Einarsson, *Saga Eiríks Magnússonar* (Reykjavík, 1933), p. 13. On French designs, see Kjartan Ólafsson, 'Áform Frakka um nýlendu við Dýrafjörð: Napóleon prins á Íslandi 1856', *Saga* 24 (1986), 147–203.

⁴² The artist was J.B. Zwecker. For discussion of the *fjallkona*, see Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir, 'Um gagnkvæma ást manna og meyjar (fjallkonunnar)', in Heimir Pálsson et al., eds, *Yrkja: Afmælisrit til Vigdísar Finnbogadóttur, 15 apríl 1990* (Reykjavík, 1990), pp. 288–94.

best in Iceland.⁴³ As I began this paper by suggesting, for most of his adult life Eiríkur conducted himself like Iceland's newest *landvættur*, whose patriotic mission involved devoting all his philological knowledge, ingenuity and chutzpah to the business of recovering and re-imagining long-forgotten and (he believed) mutually beneficial cultural links between Iceland and Britain. Every such link asserted with Britain meant a link denied with Denmark.

This was the philological agenda of Cambridge University Library's new appointee in 1871. How much better Eiríkur's colleagues and pupils might have understood him if they had been able to read some of his deeply Euro-sceptic letters written during continental travels in the mid 1860s. In this correspondence he compares Icelandic and English virtues with the faults of other nations and cultures: Prussian feudal servility in Leipzig;⁴⁴ the scheming popish culture of France and Italy;⁴⁵ Norwegian insensitivity to the long-lasting Icelandic resentment at the loss of independence after 1264; and Danish Germanism, which helped to explain the perpetual tension between the two countries, bloodily exposed in the latest Slesvig-Holsten conflict — 'frændr eru frændum verstir'⁴⁶ [kinsfolk are cruellest to kinsfolk]. Eiríkur's pre-Cambridge impressions of England were far more positive. He admired British willingness to grant a measure of parliamentary freedom to their colonies,⁴⁷ and looked forward to a time when

⁴³ For Eiríkur's explanation of the symbolism, see Lbs. JS 141 fol., EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 11 iv 1866: The woman is Iceland, with her ice crown, out of which fires flame. On her shoulder stands a raven, favourite of the god Óðinn and of poets old and new. The rune stave carried ashore by the waves represents Icelandic literature and history. Though not mentioned by Eiríkur, the protective role of the finely-crafted sword is obvious.

⁴⁴ 'Þjóðverjar, að minnsta kosti Prussar, [eru] ófrjálsari en Frakkar, en er það allmikið sagt' [the Germans, or at least the Prussians, are less free than the French, and that is saying something]: Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 21 ii 1865.

⁴⁵ Ibid., EM to Jón Sigurðsson [from Thiers: June, July 1864]; Ibid., EM to M. Poulet, 19 ix 1899 confirms that his opinions hardened as the years passed.

⁴⁶ Ibid., EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 9 iii 66. From Paris.

⁴⁷ Ibid., EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 11 vi 1872.

what he saw as their respect for good deeds, individual honour and collective decency could be transferred to Iceland — ‘við erum miklu líkari Englendingum og þeir okkur, heldr en Danir’ [we are much more like the English and they us, than are the Danes].⁴⁸ Accordingly, he wished to encourage them ‘til að interessera sig dálítið meira en nú gjöra þeir fyrir oss, sem málfrændum sínum, blóðfrændum, sagnameistarum’ [to interest themselves a little more in us than they do at present — in us as their linguistic kith and kin, blood-brothers, saga-masters]. Eiríkur campaigned for the establishment of formal diplomatic links, and offered to become the Honorary British Consul in Reykjavík,⁴⁹ though he had no wish to introduce British rule in Iceland — the question of annexation had raised its head in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁰ Those supping with the mighty British Empire should take a long spoon — ‘þess gull og afl kann að kæfa þjóðerni vort með tímanum, því einn efnaðr Englendingr getr keypt okkr alla ... í þjónustu sína’⁵¹ [its wealth and power is capable of suffocating our sense of nationhood over time, because a single wealthy Englishman can buy us all ... into his service].

Before settling in Cambridge, Eiríkur had sensed a widespread English curiosity about Iceland — ‘Englendingar taka opnum höndum við öllu frá Íslandi’ [the English receive everything from Iceland with open arms]; ‘Englendingar bera mikla virðingu fyrir máli voru og bókmenntum’ [the English have great respect for our language and literature]; and ‘í Englandi má bjóða mönnum allt um Ísland’ [in England one can offer people everything relating to Iceland].⁵² Eiríkur’s 1869 Christmas in Cambridge seemed to confirm this; he spent it helping his diligent pupil Professor J.R. Lumby to read ‘Háttalykill Snorra’.⁵³ Wassail, wassail! Yet, when

⁴⁸ Ibid., EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 21 ii 1865. From Paris.

⁴⁹ Lbs. 2182 4to: proposal for establishment of such a post (c. 1880).

⁵⁰ Anna Agnarsdóttir, ‘Ráðagerðir um innlimun Íslands í Bretaveldi á árunum 1785–1815’, *Saga* 17 (1979), 5–58.

⁵¹ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 26 i 1866.

⁵² Ibid., EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 22 iii 1862, 26 i 1866, 18 x 1864.

⁵³ Ibid., EM to Jón Sigurðsson, [4 ii 1870]. Eiríkur refers here to the section of Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* better known as *Háttatal*, a treatise on Old Norse prosody which incorporates material from the poetic *Háttalykill*, composed in the Orkneys in the 1140s.

the visitor became a resident, and reviewed pedagogical provision within the university, less favourable impressions formed: ‘það er ótrulegt hvað háskólinn er óinteressaðr í íslenskum bókmenntum. Með tímanum vona ég samt að vinnast á’⁵⁴ [it is unbelievable how uninterested the university is in Icelandic literature; in time, however, I hope to do something about this]. Another of his local Icelandophile supporters, Walter Skeat, would have appreciated the Langlandian spirit of Eiríkur’s overall mission statement: during his time in Cambridge, he intended ‘[að] cultivera akrinu hvað eg get’ [to plough the acre as best I can].⁵⁵

Eiríkur’s influence was soon apparent. The year after Iceland’s 1874 millennial celebration of Ingólfr Árnarson’s first settlement — Eiríkur had attended as special correspondent of *The Times* — Cambridge University’s Chancellor’s Medal for poetry was awarded to George Rowntree of Clare College for his poem *Iceland*.⁵⁶ Rowntree was a Tynesider, a region with a worthy nineteenth-century tradition of old northern scholarly interest that Eiríkur had already encouraged by visits and lectures.⁵⁷ From Eiríkur’s point of view the sentiments of Rowntree’s poem were impeccably ‘on message’: a land of breathtaking beauty, settled by freedom-loving Norwegian noblemen who were ‘the sons of England’s younger self’ (p. 6, l. 99), and whose values contrasted tellingly with those of slavish southern Europe. As for the poem’s style, it certainly stands comparison with that of T.F.S. Rawlins’ prize-winning old northern poem from Oxford some years earlier. First Rowntree, on the settlement of Iceland in the days of King Haraldr the Fine-Haired, a passage heavily influenced by Samuel Laing’s biliously politicised Introduction to his English translation of Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*:⁵⁸

A thousand years ago,

⁵⁴ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 12 iii 1872.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 28 viii 1874.

⁵⁶ George Rowntree, *Iceland. A Poem which obtained the Chancellor’s Medal at the Cambridge Commencement, M.DCCC LXXV* (Cambridge, 1875).

⁵⁷ Lbs. 2188 4to, William Lyall to EM, 21 ix 1872.

⁵⁸ Snorri Sturluson, trans. Samuel Laing, *The Heimskringla; or, Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*. 3 vols (London, 1844).

What time the ruddy Viking swept the main,
 And stemmed the rivers in his puny craft,
 And sacked the shorelands with the ruthless sword,
 And fired the waving corn — bold Naddodd's crew
 Stressed by the storms of those inclement seas
 Hailed it, an isle unknown, that in the lap
 Lay of its parent Ocean, like a babe.
 Then, too, the Fair-haired despot of the North,
 Proud, fierce and faithless, reared aloft his head
 And made it sovereign. Whom the fiery chiefs,
 Not brooking, spurned, an upstart, and colleagued
 Left their sweet homes, and busked them for the deep
 To banishment self-doomed. A lordly train,
 Kings of the earth and sons of kings were they,
 The flower of all the Volsungs whose great deeds
 Clashed through the Northland in the days of old
 When every son was braver than his sire.
 Their fathers never to the yoke of Rome
 Bent an obsequious neck, nor ever owned
 That wide-compelling power, a Caesar's sway ...

(pp. 4–5, ll. 38–58)

And now Rawlins, responding to the stipulated theme 'The Hall of Odin':

But hark! what cry of anguish from afar,
 What shrieks unearthly rend the midnight air? ...
 Deep in the cave, unblest by heavenly beam,
 Laved by oblivion's mute untroubled stream,
 Girt in by beetling rocks, more horrid made
 By the dark yew, and funeral cypress shade,
 Dread Odin dwells, on airy throne reclined,
 In unsubstantial majesty enshrined.
 A thousand lamps gleam through the festive hall,
 A thousand banners deck the caverned wall;
 A thousand spectre chiefs, whose feet hath trod
 The battle field, surround the warrior god.
 The charnel-house their hellish feast supplies;
 Their bowls, the reeking skulls of enemies;
 The viands stand, with mead and nectar crowned,
 The tethered war-horse paws the flinty ground;
 The grisly heroes, in that dreamy cell,

Quaff potent draughts of luscious hydromel.⁵⁹

Such ghoulish Gothicism had passed its sell-by date in about 1780,⁶⁰ as had the poet's cited sources, Edward Gibbon⁶¹ and Pindar (!). The module reading-lists were clearly in need of some attention.

Rowntree's poem was but the first fruit of Eiríkur's influence in Cambridge. In the years that followed, he showed himself eager to assume Þorleifur Repp's mantle as an 'Anglo Man',⁶² with his Anglo-Icelandic philological projects securely based on his remarkable command of English. This facility had been developed at school (where his teachers were Björn Jónsson and Halldór Friðriksson) and, just as important, down by the harbour in Reykjavík in conversation with visiting British seamen (opportunities which he seized 'eins og dauðþyrstr hvolpr á tikarspena' [like a very thirsty puppy at a bitch's teat]);⁶³ and it was

⁵⁹ T.F.S. Rawlins, *The Hall of Odin* ([?Oxford, ?1850], p. 3.

⁶⁰ See discussion in Margaret Omberg, *Scandinavian Themes in English Poetry, 1760–1800*, *Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 29 (Uppsala, 1976); Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Norse Muse in Britain, 1750–1820* (Trieste, 1998); and Tom Shippey, "'The Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrog": A Study in Sensibilities', in Richard Utz and Tom Shippey, eds, *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Lesley Workman* (Turnhout, 1998), pp. 155–72.

⁶¹ Eiríkur would have winced especially at the Gibbon reference. He used to compare medieval English writers (Chaucer, Mandeville) favourably with their more classically educated successors (Gibbon and Macaulay): 'hinir eldri eru norrænni í stíl og hugsunarhætti, þeir hafa vakandi auga og lifandi tilfinninga fyrir íroniskum rithætti öldungis eins og sögurnar okkar, og svo er þeirra humor rétt að kalla sá sami' [those other earlier writers [i.e. the English ones] are more northern in style and mindset; they have exactly the same alert eye and sensitivity for ironic style as our sagas, and thus it is right to speak of their humour as the same]: Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 10 i 1869 .

⁶² 'En Angloman þykir mér mjög líklegt að ég kunni að verða' [but it seems to me very likely that I could become an Anglo Man], Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, 15 March 1866. On the term and its significance, see Andrew Wawn, *The Anglo Man: Þorleifur Repp, Philology and Nineteenth-Century Britain*, *Studia Islandica* 49 (Reykjavík, 1991).

⁶³ Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Magnús Magnússon, 23 xi 1900.

exercised regularly in early letters to Icelandic friends, sections of which are full of effortful purple prose.

Eiríkur's fascination with the English language, not least his delight in dialect and specialist idioms, buttressed his belief in the importance of Anglo-Icelandic cultural links. His editorial treatment of texts reflected that preoccupation, as the following two brief examples confirm. Firstly, Eiríkur had puzzled over the following *Hávamál* lines:

opt er gott, þat er gamlir qveða;
 opt ór scorpom belg scilin orð koma,
 þeim er hangir með hám
 oc scollir með scrám
 oc váfir með vílmogom.⁶⁴

and produced the following draft translation:

A hoary sage
 deride thou never,
 'tis often good that old men utter;
 oft wise words issue
 from a withered skin,
 such as hangs among hides
 and swings among pelts
 and waves among wretches.⁶⁵

He remained uncomfortable, however, with the apparently disrupted symmetry in the 'hides', 'pelts', 'wretches' sequence, and suggested an emendation — *vílmogum*, 'wretches', should read *vilmogum* (from **vilmaga*), meaning 'calves' stomachs cured by smoking, used for making rennet'.⁶⁶ He claimed that such items could still be found hanging in rural kitchens all over Iceland and England, not least in the West Country regions (he cites the

⁶⁴ As in Hans Kuhn, ed., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius* (Heidelberg, 1962), p. 39.

⁶⁵ Eiríkur Magnússon, 'Vilmogum or vílmogum?', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 15 (1899), 319–20; an expanded version of this paper was delivered at a meeting of the Cambridge Philological Society on 6 ii 1908; see *Proceedings* 79–81 (1908), 3.

⁶⁶ Eiríkur's suggestion is treated sceptically by the poem's most recent editor: D.A.H. Evans, ed., *Hávamál* (London, 1986), pp. 67, 129.

Devonshire form *vell*) familiar to him from his late 1890s visits to the bedridden but astonishingly gifted young Icelandic scholar Beatrice Barmby.⁶⁷ Secondly, like Rasmus Rask and George Stephens before him, Eiríkur was anxious to challenge the new philological orthodoxy promoted by Jacob Grimm to the effect that Old English, Old Icelandic, and other Scandinavian languages should be classified as ‘germanische (or deutsche) Sprachen’.⁶⁸ Stephens, a splenetic Copenhagen-based professor of English who became more Danish than the Danes in the wake of successive Slesvig-Holsten conflicts, resented what he saw as the relentless march of German military and philological imperialism. He was determined to promote his own vision of a common pre-Conquest — indeed pre-Hengest and Horsa — Anglo-Scandic culture.⁶⁹ The new philology appeared to have undermined such notions by identifying three diagnostic Old Icelandic morphological features (–*a* infinitives, middle voice forms, suffixed definite articles) which distinguished it fundamentally from Old English. Stephens rejected these tests, claiming that they were based on late, bookish, and standardised constructions of both languages. He drew attention to earlier, orally-derived, dialectally diverse linguistic forms which challenged the suffocating paradigms of ‘mandarin’ grammars. Eiríkur was familiar with academic life in Copenhagen, where Stephens lived for over forty years until his death in 1895, and the two men almost certainly knew each other. Eiríkur’s assertions of Anglo-Icelandic morphological continuities have a strikingly Stephensian feel to them, for all the differences of cultural emphasis — Stephens, for instance, was no great

⁶⁷ The philological relationship between Beatrice and ‘Uncle Eiríkur’ seemed to embody the Anglo-Icelandic links that Eiríkur so cherished: despite not owning a dictionary until near the end of her life, Beatrice Barmby read and pronounced Icelandic with near native fluency, while Eiríkur’s dress and demeanour led her to mistake him for an Englishman on their first meeting: Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Soffía Einarisdóttir, 27 ii 1897; more generally Lbs. 2186 4to, Beatrice Barmby to EM, *passim*.

⁶⁸ See Hans Frede Nielsen, ‘Jacob Grimm and the German dialects’, in Elmer Antonsen, ed., *The Brothers Grimm and the Germanic Past* (Amsterdam, 1990), pp. 25–32.

⁶⁹ I discuss Stephens at greater length in *The Vikings and the Victorians* (see above, note 16), pp. 215–44.

Icelandophile. Eiríkur dismissed the Grimm diagnostic tests: he suggested, for example, that English *-sk* and *-sh* final elements represented residual Anglo-Scandic middle voice verb forms — ‘bask’ (*baðask*), ‘risk’ (*raðask/raðisk*), ‘busk’ (*búask*), ‘brisk’ (*bregðask*, in the sense of moving or reacting quickly), ‘frisk’ (*farask*); ‘gush’ (*gjósa, geysk*), ‘flush’ (*flóask*), and ‘smash’ (from *smá*, to render small). With Eiríkur (as with George Stephens) the political wish underpinned the philological thought.

Eiríkur’s pupils, past and present, could hardly expect to escape the influence of such insistently urged politicised philology. One of his graduate students, Arnold Wall, was working on — what else? — the Scandinavian element in English dialects.⁷⁰ Another, Bertha Phillpotts, was assigned as first year graduate reading the account of the fall of the Icelandic commonwealth in *Sturlunga saga*, events which Eiríkur always found so painful to recall.⁷¹ He was preparing two lengthy papers for *Saga-Book of the Viking Club* at the same time, and doubtless fed off conversations with his gifted student.⁷²

Several of the *Íslendingasögur* texts which Eiríkur had first translated with William Morris and then read in Icelandic with his Cambridge students seem to have been selected in part because of their British Isles associations: both *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* and *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna* have important scenes set in London and Orkney respectively. As for *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* the Anglo-Icelandic links took a little more teasing out. Eiríkur argued that *Grettis saga* could be linked directly with *Beowulf* via Auðunn skökull.⁷³ Auðunn was the great grandson of

⁷⁰ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM’s undated draft letter of recommendation about Wall. The student published his research findings in *Anglia* 20 (1898), 45–135.

⁷¹ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Bertha Phillpotts, 23 iii 1904. Her second year reading was to be Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* and its sources.

⁷² Eiríkur Magnússon, ‘The Last of the Icelandic Commonwealth’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Club*, 5/2 (1906–7), 308–40; 6/1 (1908–9), 90–122; drafts in Lbs. 2195 4to. His influence can also be seen in Beatrice Barmby’s fondness for *Sturlunga saga*: see Andrew Wawn, “‘Brass-brained rivalries’: *Sturlunga saga* in Victorian Britain”, in Kurt Gustav Goblirsch et al., eds, *Germanic Studies in Honor of Anatoly Liberman* (Odense, 1997), pp. 463–81, at 463–4.

⁷³ Lbs. 406 fol., pp. 16–17.

Ragnarr loðbrók of Northumberland, a region where (Eiríkur claimed) the story of Beowulf was well known; Auðunn's grandson was Ásmundr, the father of Grettir. Eiríkur believed that Auðunn had brought the tales about Beowulf and Grendel to Iceland; and that when Grettir's story came to be written up as a saga, old family-favourite legends about Beowulf and Grendel were used as models for crucial scenes. Magnús Fjalldal's entertainingly peppery recent study of links between *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* fails to appreciate how seductive such a theory could seem to Victorian Britain's many old northernists, particularly those under the spell of Eiríkur Magnússon.⁷⁴ Eiríkur made full use of the Beowulf/Grettir theory in his richly atmospheric, reminiscence-laden guest lectures in and beyond Cambridge, in which he often discussed Anglo-Icelandic medieval cultural links. His haunting accounts, based on childhood memories, of the sights, sounds and smells of interactive saga-readings and terrifying volcanic eruptions carried spine-tingling authority.⁷⁵ Such lectures served admirably to warm up his audiences before the collecting boxes were passed round during the famine relief campaigns of 1875 and 1882, or the subsequent campaign, strongly supported by Eiríkur's wife, for establishing a *kvennaskóli* [women's grammar school] in Reykjavík.⁷⁶

The intensity of Eiríkur's philological passions inevitably washed over into meetings of the Faculty Board. For instance, in 1891 Dr Karl Breul asks for some examination questions on 'Old Danish' influence on English. Posed in innocence, the request is nevertheless judged to be ignorantly provocative. Eiríkur's tetchy reply states that there were no Old Danish texts until the thirteenth century, and even those few fragments are written in different dialects; moreover, no such language had any organic connection

⁷⁴ Magnús Fjalldal, *The Long Arm of Coincidence: The Frustrated Connection between Beowulf and Grettis saga* (Toronto, 1998).

⁷⁵ Several texts survive in Lbs. 406 fol., 1860 4to, 2807 4to.

⁷⁶ Lbs. 2179–2188 4to: several bundles of papers are wrapped in folio papers detailing contributions for the school. Many were from Cambridge people, whether anonymous ('an English lady, £200', 'a boy, 2/-'), or named: Miss Clough (Newnham), Miss Jones (Girton), Miss Welsh (Girton), one guinea each; the Masters of Trinity, Jesus, and Pembroke, one guinea each; Professor Aldis Wright, Vice-Master of Trinity, 5 guineas.

with English; and, finally, the phrase ‘Dönsk tunga’ refers exclusively to ‘the Old Northern tongue as ... preserved in Icelandic literature’.⁷⁷ Such a response recalls a favourite aphorism of American lawyers — ‘You ask a guy the time, and he tells you how to make a watch!’ Faculty Board discussion of curriculum reform also had the potential to tread on Eiríkur’s sensitive philological toes. In his correspondence we can follow attempts to establish Icelandic as a fully-fledged Tripos subject,⁷⁸ after its failure to secure that status in 1884. The 1890 case made by Eiríkur in Cambridge bears an eerie resemblance to the one we continue to make a century later: intellectual centrality (essential for ‘Teutonic studies’; Old Norse once spoken in many parts of England, and ‘still lives on in the spoken idiom of the people to a far greater extent than is generally known’), rising student enrollment (1 pupil in 1884; 8 in 1890!), positive questionnaire returns (“fascinating” is the verdict given by all the best pupils who have taken it up’), and no negative resource implications (he is prepared to teach it for nothing)!⁷⁹

Teaching for Eiríkur Magnússon meant giving lectures and tutorials within Cambridge, to a select group of students, many of whom remained loyal correspondents for years afterwards.⁸⁰ He

⁷⁷ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Karl Bruel, [n.d.] 1891.

⁷⁸ Ibid., EM to Þorsteinn Erlingsson, 10 iii 1884.

⁷⁹ Ibid., EM to Dr Jackson, 4 v 1890.

⁸⁰As with George Ebory (from South Africa: recalls Eiríkur’s accuracy in spitting into the fire from a distance of several yards — Lbs. 2186 4to, GE to EM, 31 iii 1892); Miss Reynolds (a schoolmistress: EM reports that his current *Njáls saga* reading class of four Newnham students is as enthusiastic as that in which she had once participated; asks if her own pupils ‘show genuine interest in the products of Icelandic literature which you bring to their notice’ — Lbs. 2189 4to, to EM, 23 iii 1893); Lizzie Marshall (read *Grettis saga* with EM; her happiest memories are of Eiríkur, Grettir and the library — Lbs. 2188 4to, to EM, 25 i 1895); Bertha Skeat, niece of Walter (a schoolmistress in Chester: staged versions of *Friðþjófs saga* and *Njáls saga* — see Lbs. 2186 4to, 27 ix 1911 and *passim*). A letter to his niece (Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Margrét Jónsdóttir, 22 ix 1895) reveals that Eiríkur taught the son of Thomas Ellwood, the Icelandophile vicar of Torver in the Lake District, author of *Lakeland and Iceland, Being a Glossary of Words in the Dialect of Cumberland, Westmorland, and North Lancashire, which seem*

also taught Icelandic by correspondence course to pupils prevented by health or financial circumstance from studying in Cambridge.⁸¹ Eiríkur was similarly innovative in the texts which he chose to teach and promote. In addition to a wide range of Old Icelandic texts, sacred as well as secular, he was keen to investigate modern literary responses to the old north. Two examples from his Cambridge years make the point. Firstly, Eiríkur produced ‘A Story based on the celebrated Icelandic Saga “Laxdæla” from the 9th century by Mrs Torfhildur Þorsteinsdóttir Holm [sic], the Icelandic authoress’.⁸² His translation of this 1886 short story (fifteen octavo pages) seems never to have been published, but survives in a carefully written manuscript including some British-related annotation. It seems to me likely that Eiríkur may have used this work with his Cambridge pupils; if so, it represents an intriguing initiative from a lively pedagogical mind. *Laxdæla saga* had been available in Þorleifur Repp’s Latin translation since 1826; and, while awaiting Muriel Press’s pioneering English translation in 1899,⁸³ it had achieved widespread popularity in Victorian Britain and North America through William Morris’s lengthy and atmospheric verse paraphrase ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, the best tale (in the poet’s view) in *The Earthly Paradise: A Poem* (1868–70).

Eiríkur’s translation of *Kjartan og Guðrún* offers his students an unusual perspective from which to consider the complex relationship between Kjartan Ólafsson and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir. The work takes key moments from the saga and creates an allegorical commentary to accompany them. As such it can be regarded as a pioneering work of *Laxdæla saga* literary criticism. The twin deities Ást [Love] and Heipt [Fury] debate the saga events which they observe, and, through the qualities which they embody, have helped to provoke. Below I cite a characteristic

allied to or identical with the Icelandic or Norse (London, 1895), and related studies.

⁸¹ For example, Gladys Alexander (asks EM for reading guidance: Lbs. 2186 4to, 1 i [?1875]); Maria Barlow (pays EM a monthly fee for postal tuition: *Ibid.*, to EM, 9 xi 1885).

⁸² Torfhildur Hólm, *Kjartan og Guðrún. Skáldsaga* (Reykjavík, 1886); Eiríkur’s translation is in Lbs. 2182 4to.

⁸³ Muriel Press, trans., *The Laxdale Saga* (London, 1899).

section (in Eiríkur's translation), as the two personified figures ponder a scene which had prompted one of Morris's most memorably 'glooming' responses: in it Guðrún welcomes home the traumatised Bolli, who, at her bidding, has killed the same Kjartan whom she had loved, to whom she had been betrothed, and for whose return to Iceland she waited in vain:

'Here we meet once again,' said Fury to Love a little later when they side by side roved over the slain south of Hafragil, — and she looked scornfully to Bolli, where he sat with Kjartan's head in his lap, whilst he (Kjartan) was bleeding to death. 'Here thou seest the fruits of thy labour'. Guðrún egged Bolli on to the fight.

Love answered not — she turned away shedding tears over the stone-heart of this fair and miswise woman ['steinhjarta þessarar fögru en misvitru konu'], who sat raging at her spinning-wheel, while her husband smote Kjartan. But for all that the tears did not thaw the ice of her heart. When Bolli entered, her face was as pale as the countenance of the slain man, but, nevertheless, she rose smiling and said:

'Profitable are the morning works, both of us have done so much, although it be early yet.'

'May my tears burn in thy heart, Guðrún,' said Love, and went away.

(p. 10)

In the story's final section, the reader is told unambiguously that Guðrún's 'strong soul' had not yet 'bent itself under the mightiness of Christian humility'. At this point, notwithstanding Eiríkur's otherwise sound feminist credentials, he sees fit to omit Torfhildur Hólm's tart observation that 'hjarta Guðrúnar Ósvífursdóttur er enn þá karlmannlegt, þó hún að öðru leyti sje orðin hrum' [Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir's heart is still that of a strong man at this point, though in other respects she has become decrepit].⁸⁴ The elderly Guðrún's recollection of the fateful moments of her eventful life finally awakens a penitential spirit, and the reader's attention is directed towards more eternal perspectives:

⁸⁴ Torfhildur Hólm, *Kjartan og Guðrún. Skáldsaga*, p. 12.

Now she wiped ... tears — the first born of her eyes — which she sacrificed on the altar of youth-love for the remission of sins committed during her long life-time; dawn and new spiritual life ... the first beam of a fine day ... the ice of her heart melted away and a fair light of faith, hope and love lit up the eve of her life ... Love and Fury never met again in her heart ... Wherever Good and Evil fight against each other, Good is sure to conquer, if not in this world, then in the next.⁸⁵

It is as if the bleak nobility of *Laxdæla saga* is finally invaded by the redemptive world of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*.

The second example of Cambridge's exposure to Eiríkur Magnússon's enthusiastic promotion of modern Icelandic or Scandinavian responses to old northern culture takes us well beyond the confines of the tutorials in which he may have made use of *Kjartan og Guðrún*. Eiríkur's final years in Cambridge were dominated by his efforts to translate into English⁸⁶ and then (despite furtive opposition from Edmund Gosse)⁸⁷ to find a publisher for Runeberg's verse narrative *Kung Fialar*, a tragic verse romance set in a mistily indistinct Viking Age. Eiríkur's identification with this work and its tortured hero is signalled by the political journalism which he published back in Iceland under the pseudonym 'Fialar'.⁸⁸ Runeberg's poem dramatises the fall from 'prosperitee to wretchednesse' of a famous Viking chieftain, brought low by momentary arrogance and malign fate. Announcing (at the Yule-tide feast) his intention to withdraw from the roving life, Fialar commits himself to home-based peace-making, but, as his anxious soothsayer reminds him, his formal pledge failed to acknowledge the role of the old northern deities in his future. Dargar warns that the price to be paid for this hubristic moment will be dire indeed — Fialar's son and daughter will bring shame on father and family by becoming man and wife. Appalled by such an unthinkable prospect, Fialar arranges for his daughter to be destroyed, but, as any experienced Victorian reader of medieval

⁸⁵ Manuscript version, Lbs. 2182 4to, p. 10.

⁸⁶ As yet unpublished: see Lbs. 411 fol.

⁸⁷ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Magnús Gíslason, 1 i 1908.

⁸⁸ In the journal *Ingólfur*; see Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Jón Jensen, 4 iii 1907.

‘family drama’ romances would have expected, his plan is thwarted. Rescued from the waves, the daughter finds a happy home in a distant land. Fialar’s son Hjalmar takes up the very Viking life now rejected by his father. He harries widely, woos and wins the beautiful but haughty Oihonna, and returns to Fialar’s court with his new bride, there to learn that she is none other than his unrecognised sister of long ago. The distraught young couple sink to their deaths, and the contrite Fialar dies of a broken heart.

Eiríkur’s translation was published in the final months of his life,⁸⁹ the text having previously enjoyed widespread oral exposure in Cambridge and further afield over the preceding decade. Eiríkur read extracts from the draft version to packed college audiences;⁹⁰ he made it the subject of his final address to the Viking Club in the autumn of 1910, when his last illness was already well advanced,⁹¹ while for his Presidential Address to the Viking Club on 17 November 1899, Eiríkur saw fit to recite all five sections, 381 verses, and 1524 lines of Runeberg’s poem. This meeting provides us with one very contemporary Victorian context within which (some of) the sentiments of (parts of) *King Fialar* were received with relish. The mood of the gathering had been sombre. The Boer War was in full swing; a military disaster just days before involving Sir Redvers Buller had led to many casualties; and the nation, with the fate of its Empire apparently at stake, was momentarily in shock. Eiríkur’s account of the meeting indicates that the Runeberg reading served to boost the morale of those present, with storming applause at the conclusion. The passages relating to the buccaneering Hjalmar and his adventures on the high seas had reminded listeners of the bracing essence of the Viking character, so admired by Victorian devotees of the old north: ‘the moral constitution which endures hardships with cheerful buoyancy, meets dangers with unflattering presence of mind, and

⁸⁹ *King Fialar: A Poem in Five Songs* (London, 1912).

⁹⁰ Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Magnús Gíslason, 1 i 1908; performance on 19 xii 1908.

⁹¹ Eiríkur Magnússon, ‘King Fialar’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Club*, 7/1 (1911–12), 65–84.

faces death with a jubilant dash'.⁹² One Viking Club official, whose published work revealed his own identification with the noble Viking spirit,⁹³ certainly needed his morale raising on that November evening. He had come to the meeting straight from a stressful day at the office: his name was Albany Major, Under-Secretary of State at the War Office,⁹⁴ deeply engaged in the prosecution of the war.

Yet if Viking Club members were drawn more to the poem's heroic bravado than its tragic resolution, it was Runeberg's total vision with which Eiríkur identified — that sense of spiritual contingency to which all human life is subject. Eiríkur's fondness for the Old Icelandic *Friðþjófs saga* and Esaias Tegnér's paraphrastic verse rewrite *Frithiofs saga* (1825) points the way here.⁹⁵ As we have noted, Eiríkur (with William Morris) had translated the Icelandic saga in 1871; he owned three of the sixteen English language translations of Tegnér's hugely influential (and now largely forgotten) masterpiece published during the nineteenth century,⁹⁶ and rejected a request to write the introduction to yet another one;⁹⁷ and he corresponded with Felix Wagner, who produced a French translation of the Icelandic version in 1904, about the verses embedded in the work.⁹⁸

In several respects *King Fialar* represents a tragic version of Tegnér's *Frithiofs saga*, its spiritual severity softened by Ossianic mood music. We may note, firstly, that both the young heroes,

⁹² 'His poem offered 'lof Víkings skaparins ... bezt allra skalda er um það líf hefðu ort' [praise of the Viking spirit ... [he was] the best of all poets who have written about the (Viking) life]: Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Magnús Magnússon, 14 xii 1899.

⁹³ Albany Major, trans., *Sagas and Songs of the Northmen* (London, 1894); trans. (with E.E. Speight), *Stories from the Northern Sagas* (London, 1899).

⁹⁴ As noted Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Magnús Magnússon, 23 xi 1899.

⁹⁵ William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, trans., 'The Story of Frithiof the Bold', *The Dark Blue* 1 (1871), 176–82.

⁹⁶ A.B. Benson, 'A List of the English Translations of the Frithjofs Saga', *Germanic Review* 1 (1926), 142–67.

⁹⁷ Lbs. 2189 4to, Robert Pritchett (on behalf of Messrs Marcus Ward) to EM, [n.d.].

⁹⁸ Lbs. 2184 4to, EM to Felix Wagner, 14 ix 1904. Eiríkur regarded the verses as older than was generally thought.

Frithiof and the more abrasive Hialmar, undertake heroic sea-voyages. Secondly, in the pursuit of their brides-to-be both heroes have to overcome (by violence) the regressive hostility of their brides' respective brothers, whether natural or surrogate — the eventual union proves to be star-crossed for Frithiof and Ingeborg, and catastrophic for Hialmar and Oihonna. Thirdly, Frithiof's father dies at the beginning of the story, allowing the hero the emotional space within which he can learn to assume and exercise responsibility, whereas Hialmar, ever anxious to escape by Viking-style adventurism the oblivion which he sees as his lot by submitting to his living father's suffocating pacifism, seems superficially heroic but fundamentally immature. Lastly, the spiritual heedlessness signalled by Frithiof's destruction of Baldr's temple is atoned for by his restoration of the building at the end of the poem, as the reader registers Bishop Tegnér's references to the imminent arrival of richer truths about 'the White Christ'; no such opportunity for atonement is granted to Fialar or his children for their fateful errors. The entire family is destroyed. The stoic spirituality which Fialar expresses at the end of Runeberg's work has been dearly bought:

Oh, what is man that he should storm against you?
Like stars in space unreachable you smile
Through clouds of earthly fate which, like a plaything,
One breath of your own will controls at once.

He vaunts: and mighty, proved in many trials,
And wont to triumph, hard as any rock,
He seeks to bend all things as bids his spirit,
And crush whate'er defies his stern behests.⁹⁹

What are we to make of Eiríkur's devotion to this work? At the simplest level it is tempting to see the *Fialar* translation as the valedictory work of an increasingly frail scholar who faced his last illness with the same wry clear-sightedness that he projects onto the figure of Death in a letter to a friend:

⁹⁹ Johan Ludvig Runeberg, trans. Eiríkr Magnússon, *King Fialar: A Poem in Five Songs* (London, 1912), p. 97.

[I am] on my knees behind the wretched old shield of life, all tattered and torn; I am conducting single handed the feeble fight for existence, and his dusky ambassadorial excellence stands calm and dignified with something of a sardonic smile over my helpless form, taking stock of my progressive feebleness.¹⁰⁰

We may also acknowledge that the translator of the Bible, Bunyan, and Hallgrímur Pétursson, not to mention the editor of *Lilja* and *Thómas saga Erkibyskups*, was certain to empathise with a poem which, while recognising the seductive call of the Viking life, ultimately questions its earthbound values.

King Fialar certainly fed Eiríkur's long-established curiosity about the old northern interface between the secular and the divine, and between paganism and Christianity. His favourite medieval Icelandic period of 'literary' creativity was that which he defined as the 'early oral', from the late ninth-century settlement of Iceland up to c. 1050; he found the later period up to the mid-thirteenth-century collapse of the Commonwealth simply too painful. His public lectures often investigate secular/religious, pagan/Christian links, and his correspondents frequently question him about them.¹⁰¹ It is no surprise, therefore, that the two nineteenth-century medievalist poems which most attracted Eiríkur investigate similar issues. While Tegnér's hero can look forward to a bright future in which sacred and secular values are in harmony, Runeberg offers a barer, bleaker vision, in which each generation must learn to exchange sword for ploughshare, with hubris and mischance ever ready to subvert the plans of all but the wariest. It is not difficult to believe that Eiríkur and his more perceptive listeners sensed in the poem some of the tensions which the Great War was soon to expose and explore. Amidst the passages of Ossianic romanticism and military bravura *King Fialar* can be read as a cautionary tale about the destruction of a generation and a way of life. As a European traveller in the early 1860s Eiríkur had found the servile

¹⁰⁰ Lbs. 2186 4to, EM to Frau Brücker, 4 ix 1910.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Rev. J.T. Brown of South Shields, who asks about links between Christian baptism and the pagan practice of sprinkling water on newly born infants as described in *Laxdæla saga*: Ibid., J.T. Brown to EM, 14 xi 1902.

Prussian spirit intolerable,¹⁰² but he never underestimated their military ambition. By March 1912 he was writing to friends in Iceland that a European war was inevitable.¹⁰³ As Eiríkur saw it, the British Empire would soon have to defend those values and customs which he had spent the last half century identifying as corner-stones of ancient and modern Icelandic culture.

Within a year or so members of Eiríkur's youthful Cambridge audiences were indeed to find themselves engaged in deadly conflict against their own Hunnish frost-giants, with too many of them doomed to visit the region of death from which only Óðinn and Christ could ever return. Honorary degrees for triumphant generals were not to be a feature of university life for several years. The old northern revels of Eiríkur and his disciples were ending, like those of Prospero in his favourite English language play, but unlike Shakespearean romance the Great War offered no consolation or prospect of renewal. In 1918, W.P. Ker writes bleakly to an Icelandic friend: 'we hope for a return to the good days, but nothing can make up for the waste'.¹⁰⁴ Eiríkur Magnússon, who had died on 24 January 1913, seems in *King Fialar* to have anticipated the moment, and would have understood the sentiment.

A last observation. What are those transferable thoughts, half promised at the beginning of this lecture, which might strike an early twenty-first-century British university old northernist in observing the philological and pedagogical life and work of Eiríkur Magnússon? There are, we may suppose, few person-management lessons to be derived from the volatile approach which Eiríkur tended to adopt as an assistant librarian. Moreover, few modern scholars could (or would wish to) match the intense cultural nationalism that animated Eiríkur's philology. But other aspects of his long career as Cambridge's leading Icelandic scholar suggest that, in all but one respect, his efforts could score highly in the brave new world of Teaching Quality Assessment. In the scholarly life of this humane philologist, we recognise his eagerness to extend the subject area's client base by initiating viable forms of

¹⁰² Lbs. 2181 4to, EM to Jón Sigurðsson, [n.d.] i 1865.

¹⁰³ Lbs. 2180 4to, EM to Jón Jensen, [8 iii 1912].

¹⁰⁴ Lbs. 4430 4to, W.P. Ker to Guðmundur Magnússon, [29 July] 1918.

distance learning; his willingness to extend the canon of available texts by producing new translations and user-friendly editions; his concern for effective lecturing in a variety of styles when addressing the very different audiences to be found within and beyond the confines of the University lecture room — always supported by the latest technology (he loved lantern slides!); his awareness of the need to encourage Anglo-Icelandic student exchange; his fleetness of foot in fund-raising and lobbying at the national level; the attention he paid to media manipulation; his eagerness to exploit the links between old and modern northern literature; and his awareness of the motivational role of provincial consciousness in old northern scholarship. And yet, for all that Eiríkur was a compulsive hoarder of documents, in the twenty and more packed files and folders of his manuscripts in the National Library of Iceland I cannot recall seeing a single official document relating to university, faculty, or library administration. The thought is almost too awful to contemplate, but could it be that Eiríkur's success as a philologist and teacher was based on an ability to tell academic hawks from hand-saws, and effective pedagogy from ritual paper trails?