

E. C. QUIGGIN MEMORIAL LECTURES 5

JOHN HINES

Old-Norse Sources for Gaelic History



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE, AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Edmund Crosby Quiggin (1875-1920) was the first teacher of Celtic in the University of Cambridge, as well as being a Germanist. His extraordinarily comprehensive vision of Celtic studies offered an integrated approach to the subject: his combination of philological, literary, and historical approaches paralleled those which his older contemporary, H.M. Chadwick, had already demonstrated in his studies of Anglo-Saxon England and which the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic continues to seek to emulate. The Department has wished to commemorate Dr Quiggin's contribution by establishing in his name, and with the support of his family, an annual lecture and a series of pamphlets. The focus initially was on the sources for Mediaeval Gaelic History. Since 2006 the Quiggin Memorial Lecture is on any aspect of Celtic and/or Germanic textual culture taught in the Department.

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In this study I shall be largely concerned with the formulae and conventions encountered in a variety of literary genres, and it may therefore seem appropriate that I should begin with a familiar mediaeval rhetorical ploy – the author's plea for his audience to excuse his inadequacies in relation to the matter in hand. In the present case, this is far from false modesty in at least one serious way, for I cannot possibly pretend to be a specialist in any field of Gaelic studies, historical, linguistic, or literary. The goal which I have set myself is to provide in this, the latest in a series of lectures and pamphlets on Gaelic history, is an account of the character, and an assessment of the historical value, of the Old-Norse sources which touch in some way on the history of the Gaelic-speaking peoples in the central Middle Ages, in other words the Viking-Age. A vital test of the value of a potential source must of course be what it contributes to the historical view of the area and period in question, but my particular focus in this discussion will be on the range of, and problems intrinsic to, this large body of sources, and I shall not be attempting to write, undo, or rewrite Gaelic history on this basis.

The *a priori* case for looking seriously at this body of texts is easy to make. Among the vernacular literatures of mediaeval Europe, the Old Norse is unusually copious, and the Scandinavian and Gaelic worlds were in very close association for much of the period in which these texts were being produced and transmitted. The persistence and extent of the Scandinavian forays into the Hebrides and into mainland Scotland – which was previously Gaelic, Pictish, Brittonic, and English in different quarters – and down into the Irish-Sea area, particularly to Ireland and Mann, are substantially, if not comprehensively or always accurately, recorded in native chronicles and other sources. The Viking-Age – broadly the ninth, tenth, and earlier eleventh centuries – saw raiding, colonisation, and political conquest, while in recent years archaeological arguments which are certainly worthy of serious attention have put the case for first contact – and even Scandinavian

settlement in an earlier phase – back into the eighth century.¹ From area to area the nature and degree of demographic relationships between Scandinavian and native, and the possible level of displacement of native populations, remain difficult to assess, but in general terms there is no doubt that there were Scandinavian and Gaelic communities in close proximity and contact over a wide area from the ninth century onwards. This is the context of various forms of mutual influence found in the culture-historical record: in material forms, like the great silver thistle-brooches; in loanwords in both Gaelic and Norse languages; and in literary influence, such as the Insular impressions on the Eddic poems *Vǫluspá*, *Vǫlundarkviða*, and *Rígsþula*, as is well charted in Ursula Dronke's newly published edition of mythological poems from the Old-Norse Poetic Edda.²

Yet, despite the profoundly historicising character of most Old-Norse literature, there are no Norse sources which seek to give a systematic account of any Scandinavian community in a Gaelic context. The nearest which we have to that is *Orkneyinga saga*, the saga of the Orkney-islanders, a substantial prose narrative seeking to glorify the Lilliputian posturings and antics of the earls of Orkney, all of which has to be done within a framework of the relationships between the Northern Isles and the kingdom of Scotland. I shall be returning to this text.³ For the historian, in fact,

¹ See B. Myhre, 'The beginning of the Viking Age – some current archaeological problems', in *Viking Revaluations*, edd. Anthony Faulkes & R. Perkins (London 1993), pp. 182-216; B. Weber, 'Handel mellom Norge og Orknøyene før norrøn bosetning?', in *Nordsjøen: Handel, Religion og Politikk*, edd. J. F. Krøger & H.-R. Naley (Stavanger 1996), pp. 31-40.

² For artefactual influence, see, for instance, J. Graham-Campbell, 'Western influences on penannular brooches and ringed pins', in *Birka, II.1: Systematische Analyse der Gräberfunde*, ed. G. Arwidsson (Stockholm 1984), pp. 31-8, and 'Western penannular brooches and their Viking Age copies in Norway: a new classification', in *Proceedings of the Tenth Viking Congress, Larkollen, Norway, 1985*, ed. James E. Knirk (Oslo 1987), pp. 231-46; on the limited linguistic interference, D. Greene, 'The influence of Scandinavian on Irish', in *Proceedings of the Seventh Viking Congress, Dublin, 15-21 August 1973*, edd. Bo Almqvist & D. Greene (Dublin 1976), pp. 75-82, and Einar Haugen, *The Scandinavian Languages. An Introduction to their History* (London 1976), p. 165; on the literary influence evident in the Poetic Edda, see *The Poetic Edda, II, Mythological Poems*, ed. & transl. Ursula Dronke (Oxford 1997).

³ See below, pp. 9, 14-15, 18-19.

this failure of Norse literature to engage directly with history within the Gaelic zone might seem rather promising. Rather than having superficially substantial, but actually massively shaped and distorted, accounts to deal with – such as our Norse sources for Viking-Age Norway and Iceland are – it could be that a more authentic history might be reassembled from the sporadic and oblique references and fragments which have incidentally been incorporated within texts with quite different focuses. But, alas, I think not; and I shall be arguing from here onwards that even in relation to the particular interests of Norse literature – which are not to recount the history of the Gaelic-speaking world – there is a consistent patterning at work which governs and reproduces a particular view of that linguistic zone as an element of a consistent and coherent perception of the British Isles as a whole. With this general concept in mind, the Gaelic historian may be – I hope – in a better position to judge the value of the Norse sources at the end of this pamphlet.

I propose now to plunge into the material: in fact very much *in medias res*, by discussing a familiar text, more or less from the middle of the period of close Norse-Gaelic relationships, and also one which at least touches on several of the aspects of the range of literary genres with which we need to come to terms. For most people with at least some prior knowledge of Scandinavian involvement in the Gaelic world and its reflection in vernacular sources, the battle of Clontarf (1014), and the accounts in, for instance, the Irish *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, or the Norse version of it towards the end of *Njáls saga*, will be the first thing to come to mind.⁴ §157 of *Njáls saga* is the only context in which *Darraðarljóð*, an eleven-stanza poem, is preserved (Appendix 1). The Clontarf-episode within *Njáls saga* is a largely digressive one, linked to the main storyline by the tale of how Kári Sólmundarson pursued the burners of Njáll and his family to Orkney and

⁴ On this evidence see most recently D. Ó Corráin, ‘Viking Ireland – afterthoughts’, in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, edd. Howard B. Clarke *et al.* (Dublin 1998), pp. 421-52, especially 439-52.

continued to take vengeance on them there, and how fifteen of the burners joined the ill-fated expedition of Sigurðr, earl of the Orkneys, to Ireland in alliance with Sigtryggr Silkiskegg, king of Dublin, and lost their lives there. That the coda to the saga should offer what is to modern readers at least an abrupt and disconcerting expansion of the geographical and spiritual perspective of the narrative is an effective literary device, and one with strong parallels elsewhere, for instance in *Grettis saga*.

Although Finnur Jónsson included *Darraðarljóð* in his comprehensive edition of Old-Norse skaldic verse, *Darraðarljóð* with its *fornyrðislag* metre and transparent language, free of the dense kennings and convoluted syntax characteristic of most skaldic poetry, in fact finds its closest counterpart by type (in my judgment) in a poem preserved in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* and usually classified as Eddic, *Gróttasöngur* (Appendix 2a). Both of these poems, distinctively, have a narrative which is mostly performed in a first-person present-tense monologue rather than declaimed. *Darraðarljóð* is a song of the norns, weaving a web of fate, and includes some account of a great and bloody battle fought against the Irish, which one king survives and in which another mighty king and an earl perish. *Njáls saga* identifies this as the battle of Clontarf, the great slaughter which is also attested in Irish sources, the *Cogadh* and 'The Annals of Ulster', and which indeed left a surviving king, Sigtryggr, and among the dead a great king, Brian Boru, and an earl, Sigurðr of the Orkneys.⁵

Darraðarljóð has recently been studied in detail by Russell Poole, in his book *Viking Poems on War and Peace*.⁶ Poole has doubted the historical authenticity of the poem as a response to Clontarf because of its exaggeratedly favourable portrayal of the surviving king – supposedly Sigtryggr Silkiskegg. Strangely, Poole

⁵ *The Annals of Ulster (to A. D. 1131)*, edd. & transl. Seán Mac Airt & G. Mac Niocaill (Dublin 1983), pp. 446-9 (1014.2); *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh. The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, ed. & transl. James Henthorn Todd (London 1867), pp. 148-213 (§§85-119). The classic study is by A. J. Goedheer, *Irish and Norse Traditions about the Battle of Clontarf* (Haarlem 1938).

⁶ *Viking Poems on War and Peace*, ed. & transl. R. G. Poole (Toronto 1991), pp. 116-56.

has given priority as an account of the battle to the prose version of the late thirteenth-century text *Njáls saga*, which he has regarded as incorrect only in assigning the poem to Clontarf. In the saga-account Sigtryggr leads the flight of Brian's enemies from the battlefield. Sigtryggr's flight is not the invention of the author of *Njáls saga* – it is briefly mentioned in §12 of *Orkneyinga saga*, written about 1200 – but has unquestionably been embroidered by him as part of a consistently favourable presentation of Brian's side and an unfavourable view of his opponents. Brian is described as devout, loving, and a forgiving though just king; Sigtryggr is not villainous, but pusillanimous, and is provoked into enmity with Brian by his mother, a woman bad in every way she could be. According to the *Cogadh*, Sigtryggr simply avoided the battle, remaining within Dublin.

If we accept the identification of both the event and the individual as recorded in *Njáls saga*, we can also see that the poem *Darraðarljóð* is very careful to apologise for Sigtryggr's surviving the battle. He is first referred to as a young king, *ungr konungr*, who is followed and protected in the battle by the valkyries Gunnr and Gøndul (stanzas 4-5). The two middle stanzas of the poem (5-6) insist that the norms will not allow his life to be lost: *látum eigi líf hans farask*. The image of his youth is then recalled in the final full stanza (10), *Vel kváðu vér um konung ungan*, 'We have spoken well of the young king', just as panegyric should. Historically, this concern to exonerate Sigtryggr for having survived Clontarf – however he achieved that – would appear to me to make a perfectly good case for attributing *Darraðarljóð* to a time and place close to Sigtryggr, perhaps specifically to his own later reign. The very inconsistencies between poem and saga which have troubled Poole point to the poem being a text delivered to the saga-author from antiquity and one which would not or could not be distorted to fit into its final known context.

There is not, as far as I am aware, any decisive linguistic or literary evidence for an early eleventh-century origin for this poem. But the performative character of *Darraðarljóð*, which I noted

previously,⁷ is a highly distinctive feature. Nor can its closest parallel, in *Gróttasǫngr*, be dated other than before Snorri's *Edda*, although in respect of provenance and the Insular interest it is intriguing that a form of the story preserved in a variant version of *Skáldskaparmál* locates the eventual sinking of the millstone Grótti in the Pentland Firth.⁸ There is, however, another poetic parallel in the skaldic *dróttkvætt* poem *Liðsmannaflokkr*,⁹ celebrating the capture of London by Knútr (Cnut, Canute) and Þórkell (Appendix 2b). This opens with the same grammatical feature of the first-person plural present indicative used imperatively which forms the refrain of *Darraðarljóð* (*vindum, vindum, vef darraðar*), *Gǫngum upp* ('let us go ashore'), and in stanza 2, *enn á enskra manna ǫlum gjóð Hnikers blóði* ('once more let us nourish the bird of Hnikarr'¹⁰ on the blood of English men'), and to conclude,

*kneigum vér, síz vígum varð nylokit hǫrðum,
fyllar dags, í fǫgrum, fit, Lundúnum sitja*

('Now that an end is newly come to these hard battles, we are able to dally, bright lady,¹¹ in fair London').

This panegyric also glosses over the difficulties which Knútr had in capturing London.¹² What interests me, however, is that it relates to events of the year 1016, just two years after the battle of Clontarf, and thus supports the case that features of *Darraðarljóð* may be quite at home in an earlier eleventh-century literary context.

What lessons can we learn from *Darraðarljóð*? As a potential

⁷ See above, p. 4

⁸ *Die Edda, mit historisch-kritischem Commentar*, ed. R. C. Boer (2 vols, Haarlem 1922), II.366-7; *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (2 vols, London 1998), I.xi-xii and xxxix-xlviii. It is possible that the variant material preserved in what Faulkes had called texts A and B of *Skáldskaparmál*, including this story, represents one of Snorri's own working drafts of the text and thus can be traced back to the earlier thirteenth century in Iceland.

⁹ *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson (4 vols, København 1908-15), A:I.422-3, B:I.391-3; *Viking Poems*, ed. & transl. Poole, pp. 86-115.

¹⁰ *bird of Hnikarr* = Óðinn's raven, a scavenger.

¹¹ 'bright lady': *fyllar dags ... fit* = meadowland of the fullness of the day; gold-adorned ground; (hence) bejewelled woman.

¹² See F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edn, Oxford 1971), pp. 388-93.

source for Gaelic history, it tells us nothing of any significance about the battle of Clontarf; indeed it is itself authenticated principally on the basis of giving a recognisable version of events better recorded in Gaelic sources themselves. As an example of an Old-Norse source, however, it illustrates very effectively how we have to take careful account of the distinctive form, or type, of text which we are considering, and how these texts may be transmitted, in that form, not only from one historical context to another but also from one literary context to another. Here, it particularly alerts us to the problems of interpreting poetic texts, which could in some cases originate as early as the later ninth century, but which are preserved only in prose compositions, few of which pre-date the thirteenth century. And above all, in its apologetic treatment of Sigtryggr (if he it is), it tells us that literary antiquity and authenticity may not have the direct historical source-value for which we might have hoped.

Let us move on now to consider skaldic poetry in general as a possible source for Gaelic history. Here again, there are some *a priori* reasons to be hopeful. First, even the most sceptical of scholars concede that the skaldic poetic corpus contains material dating back in origin to about 900, and perhaps a little earlier. The elaborateness of skaldic verse is likely to have hindered its re-composition and corruption.¹³ And, more mundanely, the very obscurity of skaldic poetry is likely to have left it underconsulted as a source of evidence; here, perhaps, one might find something new to say.

Until a relatively late date, which I shall be discussing in due course,¹⁴ skaldic poetry was fundamentally *occasional* poetry: a tradition of odes, elegies, or verses composed to mark some particular event. Much of it is panegyric, celebrating the

¹³ Famously, the first to make this optimistic claim was Snorri Sturluson, in his prologue to *Heimskringla*: *En kvæðin þykkja mér sízt ór stað færð, ef þau eru rétt kvæðin og skynnsamliga upp tekin*, ‘But the poems seem to me least misinterpreted if they are properly declaimed and intelligently understood’. It has been repeated countless times by modern scholars.

¹⁴ Cf. below, pp. 15-17.

achievements (factual or fictional) of great men. This alerts us to some of the pitfalls which may lurk in the skaldic poetic corpus. There are cases, for instance, in which it is clear that references to military adventures in the Gaelic West are included in skaldic poems primarily to add to the impressive range over which a warrior's activities have extended. An excellent example is Glúmr Geirason's *drápa* on Haraldr Gráfeldr, of the later tenth century: in one stanza he is praised for bloody victory over Irish troops; in the following stanzas he is conquering eastern lands, then slaughtering Gautar, then Lapps on the banks of the Dvina, before falling himself in Jutland (Appendix 2c).¹⁵ We can also occasionally find within skaldic verse stereotyped perceptions of the peoples and culture of the Gaelic lands: it is not just a place where heroic battles may be fought but also one where the origins of some Icelanders lie, and in particular a place where desirable women may be found, as may also sorcerers.¹⁶ Our evidence that these are conventional characteristics of the area comes, however, primarily from saga-prose, and there is no good reason to attribute these views to the influence on saga of skaldic tradition, where such expressions are few and far between.

The most interesting feature of the skaldic corpus in the present context is a series of accounts of apparently very similar military campaigns waged by kings of Norway to establish or assert their power from the Northern Isles through the Hebrides and down into the Irish-Sea zone. The stories concerned begin with Haraldr Hálfðanarson, usually known as Haraldr inn hárfagri, back in the late ninth century. There is then Óláfr Tryggvason, at the end of the tenth century, celebrated in Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld's *Óláfsdrápa*; Þórfinn Sigurðarson, the mid-eleventh-century earl of Orkney, in Arnórr jarlaskáld's *Þórfinnsdrápa*; Magnús berfœttr (about 1100) in Björn krepphendí's *Magnússdrápa* and Gísli Illugason's elegy; and finally King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway in Sturla Þórðarson's *Hrafnsmál* and *Hákonarflokkur* from as late as the 1260s. Doubts

¹⁵ *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson, A:I.75-8; B:I.66-8.

¹⁶ See a *lausavísa* attributed to Magnús berfœttr (*ibid.*, A:I.433, B:I.403 [no. 6]); Gopþormr sindr's *Hákonardrápa* (*ibid.*, A:I.62, B:I.55) and a *lausavísa* attributed to Grímr Hjaltason (*ibid.*, A:II.41, B:II.50 [no. 2]).

naturally arise in these circumstances as to how the similarities may be explained. Does the material simply represent the same realistic and recurrent concerns of Norwegian kings, and one earl of Orkney, in the Viking-Age and later? Are the exploits of one leader being transferred to one or more others, and, if so, where did they arise and in what direction have they been moved? And is it possible that life imitates art, so that a campaign might be mounted in conscious emulation of earlier exploits recorded – factually or not – in a literary tradition such as this?

Particular scepticism has been levelled at the earliest of these supposed forays, that of Haraldr inn hárfagri.¹⁷ The principal Norse sources for this tale are not in fact skaldic but thirteenth-century saga-prose, namely *Orkneyinga saga* and *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* (in *Heimskringla*). These state that Haraldr brought a fleet to the British Isles to deal with vikings who were harrying him from there, and that he conquered the Northern Isles, the Hebrides, and Mann, and campaigned within Scotland. Subsequently he established Earl Rognvaldr Eysteinsson (rapidly succeeded by his brother Sigurðr) and Ketill flatnefr as, in effect, his governors in the Northern Isles and the Hebrides respectively. There can be no doubt that, as the imputed first king of a united Norway, the figure of Haraldr inn hárfagri was mythicised in Old-Norse tradition in every conceivable way. The fullest expression of doubts of this kind in relation to Gaelic history is that of Alfred Smyth in his book *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles, 850-880*, published in 1977. Smyth, as others before him,¹⁸ was clearly especially influenced by the failure of native sources to give any notice of a campaign by Haraldr, whereas in the case of Óláfr inn hvíti (Olaf the White) and even Ketill flatnefr he did find it possible to make

¹⁷ *Orkneyinga saga*, §4; *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, §22.

¹⁸ Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles, 850-880* (Oxford 1977), p. 72; cf. *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. Haakon Shetelig (6 vols, Oslo 1940-54), I.24-5. See further P. H. Sawyer, 'Harald Fairhair and the British Isles', in *Les Vikings et leur civilisation: problèmes actuels*, ed. Régis Boyer (Paris 1976), pp. 105-9; C. Krag, 'Hvem var Harald Hårfagre?', in *Rikssamlingen og Harald Hårfagre* (Karmøy n.d.), pp. 32-40; J. Jesch, 'Norse historical traditions and the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*: Magnús berfœttr and Haraldr hárfagri', in *Gruffudd ap Cynan. A Collaborative Biography*, ed. K. L. Maund (Woodbridge 1996), pp. 117-47, especially 139-44.

some sort of reconciliation between the Gaelic and Old-Norse sources – generally, of course, prioritising the former. Basically, Smyth has proposed that the Old-Norse literary tradition had transferred to Haraldr the exploits of Óláfr inn hvíti, a figure otherwise recognised in Old-Norse sources.¹⁹

The most obvious gap in Smyth's argument is a failure to discuss separately a skaldic verse, from a poem by Þórbjörn hornklofi which Snorri Sturluson knew as *Glymdrápa* (see Appendix 3).²⁰ This verse is quite notorious within skaldic studies for the teasing problems of interpretation which it (perhaps deliberately) poses,²¹ but these do not annihilate its potential historical significance. Unambiguously, the first half of the stanza tells us that the skilful king brought his troop to a coastal settlement, though not necessarily on an island. Apparently, then, Snorri himself (dare we suggest it?) was sufficiently puzzled by the stanza to make a rather implausible interpretation: taking the *áðr* at the beginning of the second half as the adverb 'previously' (giving 'the whole army had fled before the king landed') rather than, as far as we now understand Old-Norse syntax, the more obvious conjunction 'before' (that is, 'the king landed before [viz, in consequence of which] the whole army fled'). The association of this event with a campaign in the Gaelic zone is made by the genitive plural *Skota* ('of the Scots') in line 6. It is not entirely certain whether this genitive is in apposition to the noun *herr* which precedes it ('all the army of the Scots took to flight') or the noun-phrase headed by the dative singular *þverri* which follows it ('all the army fled before the famed and courageous destroyer of the land of the sword [= shield] of the Scots'), although it seems to me easier to read 'the army of the Scots' and to take the other genitive noun-

¹⁹ Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, chapters VII-VIII.

²⁰ Preserved in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*. See *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson, A:I.22-4, B:I.20-1.

²¹ K. von See, 'Skaldenstrophe und Sagaprosa. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der mündlichen Überlieferung in der altnordischen Literatur', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 10 (1977) 58-82, especially pp. 68-70; D. Hofmann, 'Sagaprosa als Partner von Skaldenstrophem', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 11 (1978/9) 68-81, especially pp. 68-70; B. Fidjestøl, 'Skaldekvada og Harald Hårfagre', in *Rikssamlingen og Harald Hårfagre* (Karmøy n.d.), pp. 7-31, especially 18-19.

phrase, *lǫgðis eiðs*, the kenning meaning shield, with *þverrir*.²² It is not certain to me, indeed, that a choice needs to be made, for I should prefer to see this as a piece of deliberate polysemy in poetic word-play. Snorri identified the island as Mann, but this is not confirmed by the verse, and even Snorri seems to have been rather nonplussed by the possible presence of a Scottish army there. Possibly he could have seen covert hints in the choice of the kenning *menfergir* ('necklace-scatterer', 'treasure-distributor') to denote the king at the very beginning of the stanza, repeated in the genitive singular *-mens* ('the sand-ring's [i.e., sea's] settlement') in line 4, although the former is not an unfamiliar kenning.²³ Now one can say without fear of serious contradiction that the later, and the more fictitious, the attribution of this expedition to the Gaelic area, the more transparent and explicit one would expect the contrived source to be. We have, admittedly, no incontrovertible proof that this was a contemporary panegyric for Haraldr inn hárfagri from around 900. But the truly authoritative scholars who have discussed it – Klaus von See, Dietrich Hofmann, and above all Bjarne Fidjestøl – have treated it as authentic. Even Roberta Frank contented herself with a comment that the case for the authorship of Þórbjörn's apparent contemporary, Þjóðólfr of Hvini, was as strong as that for Þórbjörn.²⁴

It is irresistible at this point to take apart another element in Smyth's argument (I shall nonetheless add here that there is much else in Smyth's books which I find to be of great value and interest). Smyth has suggested that the career of Óláfr inn hvíti not only influenced but was indeed transformed into that of Haraldr inn

²² Hofmann, 'Sagaprosa', has drawn attention to the fact that the transmitted texts lend strong support to a reading *lǫgðis seið*, 'spell/incantation of the sword', in line 7, which he has interpreted as an accusative object of the verb *flæja*, therefore reading *Skota þverri* as 'destroyer of the Scots': 'before the whole army was compelled to flee the spell of the sword, in face of the war-proven [*eljanfróðum*] destroyer of the Scots, from the edge of the fish-road'.

²³ For example, Finnur Jónsson, *Lexikon Poeticum Antiquae Linguae Septentrionalis. Ordbog over det Norsk-Islandske Skjaldesprog* (2nd edn, København 1931), s.vv. *menbrjótandi*, *-brjótr*, *-broti*, *-gløtuðr*, *-myrðir*, *-rýrandi*, *-rýrir*, *-skerðir*, *-skyndir*, *-stikkir*, *-stríðir*, *-sveigjandi*, *-vǫrðir*, and *-þverrir*.

²⁴ R. Frank, 'Skaldic poetry', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide*, edd. Carol J. Clover & J. Lindow (Ithaca, NY 1985), pp. 157-96, at p. 164, n. 4.

hárfagri because they were both scions of the same dynasty of Vestfold in Norway, and that Óláfr inn hvíti could even be identified with the Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr who (*Ynglingatal* tells us) was *heygðr* ('buried in a mound') at Geirstaðir.²⁵ There is a good case for identifying the mound assigned to this latter Óláfr with Gokstad, one of the three famous Norwegian Viking-Age ship-burials. When Smyth wrote, it was thought that the date of this burial was about 890, and so Smyth had Óláfr inn hvíti retiring from Irish affairs in the 870s to return to live to a fairly ripe old age in Vestfold. With some playful romantic indulgence, Smyth also speculated on whether the ship could be that in which he returned from the British Isles to Norway.²⁶ We now, however, have dendrochronological dates to tell us that the Gokstad burial chamber was constructed in the period 900-5, and that the ship buried there was no more than a decade old.²⁷ It is therefore much harder to link this burial with the Óláfr who burst into Irish history very nearly fifty years earlier.²⁸ For anyone who is concerned with historical source-criticism, the problems of transmission, and the comparative evaluation of mediaeval and modern historiography, it is instructive to look at what has been done with the osteological report on the skeletal remains found in the Gokstad ship. In 1882, an Oslo doctor reported on them that they were those of a man who, I quote (translated), 'had passed 50; but could indeed have been older'.²⁹ From the start this seemed to make association with Óláfr

²⁵ Preserved in *Ynglinga saga*. See *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson, A:I.7-15, B:I.7-14; also Claus Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga. En Studie i Historiske Kilder* (Oslo 1991).

²⁶ Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 112. However, M. Miller, 'Amlaíb trahens centum', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 19 (1999) 241-5, showed that Óláfr was killed by the Picts; she suggested that this occurred in 872.

²⁷ N. Nicolaysen, *Langskibet fra Gokstad ved Sandefjord. The Viking-ship discovered at Gokstad in Norway* (Oslo 1882; rev. imp., Farnborough 1971); A. E. Christensen *et al.*, *Osebergdronningens Grav* (Oslo 1992), especially pp. 258-78; N. Bonde & A. E. Christensen, 'Dendrochronological dating of the Viking Age ship burials at Oseberg, Gokstad and Tune, Norway', *Antiquity* 67 (1993) 575-83.

²⁸ For his Irish career, see Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, chapter IX.

²⁹ J. Heiberg, *apud* Nicolaysen, *Langskibet*, pp. 73-6: 'han har passeret 50 årsalderen; men han kan også have været ældre'. An English version of this published alongside the Norwegian text in 1882 read: 'he has passed the age of 50 years, but ... he may have been older'. A fuller description of the bones was published by K. E. Schreiner,

Geirstaðaálfr difficult, and attention was naturally focussed on the imprecise throwaway clause ‘but could indeed have been older’. How old could he then have been? An older man was needed. One can trace in publications of the find the transformation of a report which clearly favoured an age in his fifties for the deceased man to an ageing ‘between 50 and 70’ and even to ‘between sixty and seventy years old’.³⁰

Returning to the skaldic sources which underlie later historical-saga narratives, namely *Orkneyinga saga* and various kings’ sagas in *Heimskringla*, we can gain a clear view, though not an easy solution, of the complex problem of trying to distinguish between the transferral of achievements from one character to another and the real emulation of one character by another. The first *Óláfsdrápa* of Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld follows its hero on a grand North European tour of violence, from the Baltic, through Jutland, to Frisia and Flanders, and so on to the British Isles, where England, Northumbria separately, Scotland, Mann, the Isles, some Britons (the Welsh), and the Strathclyders (*kumbrskar þjóðir*), are all encompassed in two name-dropping stanzas (see Appendix 2d).³¹ We may catch something of a Scandinavian perception of a certain unity of the British Isles in Hallfrøðr’s later elegy for Óláfr, where the sole reference is to call Óláfr *Breta stríðir*: ‘punisher of the British’, as I am tempted to translate it (Appendix 2e).³² Although it is much more detailed, Arnórr jarlaskáld’s *drápa* on Earl Þórfinn embodies essentially the same cosmopolitan

‘Menneskeknoklene fra Gokstadskibet’, in *Osebergfundet*, edd. A. W. Brøgger *et al.* (5 vols, Oslo 1917-28), V.110-19. He concluded that ‘høvdingen ved sin død neppe ha været under, men høist sandsynlig over 50 år’ (at his death, the chieftain can hardly have been under, but was probably over, 50 years of age).

³⁰ Compare the reports cited in n. 23 with Christensen *et al.*, *Osebergdronningens Grav*, pp. 274-6. The first instance of the age-range 60-70 which I have discovered is by A. E. Christensen, ‘Gokstad’, in *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, edd. Phillip Pulsiano *et al.* (New York 1993), p. 232; Christensen appears accidentally to have transferred the age of the elder woman buried in the Oseberg ship-burial (60-70) to the Gokstad man. The error has been repeated by Andy Orchard, *Cassell Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (London 1997), p. 59, s.v. Gokstad.

³¹ *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson, A:I.155-9, B:I.148-50.

³² *Ibid.*, A:I.159-66; B:I.150-7.

imperialism, portraying Þórfinn fighting the Scots and Irish – the latter, incidentally, while he was carrying a ‘British shield’ –, the British themselves, and, with great emphasis, the English south of Mann.³³ We do not have to disbelieve any of this, although – as far as I have been able to discover – Þórfinn’s expedition is entirely unrecorded in English sources. But even if there is an authentic factual basis to the reference, we cannot deny that there is intertextual influence shaping the presentation and interpretation of alleged events.

The active emulation of the real or fictitious achievements of the past requires a sense and knowledge of history. This sort of consciousness becomes manifest in the written Old-Norse sources from the middle of the twelfth century onwards. In *Orkneyinga saga*, written just after 1200, historical emulation is quite explicitly the motivation of the expedition by Magnús berfœttr a century earlier:³⁴

Hákon tók þær ræður fyrir konungi, at þat væri hǫfðingsbragð at hefa leiðangr úti og herja vestr um haf ok leggja undir sik Eyjar, sem gerði Haraldr inn hárfagri.

‘Hákon made suggestions to the king that it would be a noble feat to take an army abroad and campaign west over the sea and subjugate the Isles, just as Haraldr inn hárfagri did.’

I cannot, however, see any explicit hint of this perspective in the presumably contemporary (i.e., very late eleventh- / early twelfth-century) skaldic verse on Magnús. From a known context in the early 1150s in Trondheim, however, we have a deliberately historical skaldic poem, Einarr Skúlason’s *Geisli*,³⁵ a poem principally celebrating King Óláfr inn helgi (St Olaf), but also recalling Magnús’s exploits, with particular focus on the most

³³ *Ibid.*, A:I.343-8, B:I.316-21. See also *The Poetry of Arnórr Jarlaskáld*, ed. & transl. Diana Whaley (Turnhout 1998).

³⁴ *Orkneyinga saga*, §38.

³⁵ The story is told in *Inga saga og bræðra hans*, in *Morkinskinna*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (København 1928-32), pp. 444-8. See also Finnur Jónsson, *Den Oldnorske og Oldislandske Litteraturs Historie* (2nd edn, 3 vols, København 1920-4), II.62-72, and G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford 1953), pp. 156-8.

distinctive feature in his contemporary panegyrics, his victorious battle of Anglesey (Appendix 2f). Apparently from the same period come further historical poems: Hallar-Steinn's *Reksteffja* and the forged *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar* recounting Óláfr Tryggvason's feats, and *Nóregs konunga tal*, which recalls, *inter alia*, Magnús's fatal expedition to Ireland (Appendix 2g).³⁶

Recognition of this wave of retrospective historical poetic composition is of particular importance to us as it forms the context of *Krákumál*, a poem recounting the alleged career of Ragnarr loðbrók, and, as far as I have been able to discover, the only Old-Norse source associating Ragnarr or even his sons with activities in the Irish-Sea area.³⁷ Stanza 21 of *Krákumál* brags of how one will always be able to see how the champions had advanced in battle on Anglesey (Appendix 2h). The activities, not of Ragnarr but certainly of his alleged son, Ívarr, in this area from the 850s to the early 870s, are solidly recorded in Irish chronicles. It is naturally tempting here to wonder whether – or how far – Ragnarr's assault on Anglesey may have been influenced by the prominent detail in the records of Magnús berfœttr of his victory there. In this case, however, there is the important testimony of *Annales Cambriae* for the year 853: *Mon uastata <est> a Gentilibus Nigris*. The use of the term 'black gentiles', *kenedloedd duon* as it appears in *Brut y Tywysogion*, implies, I take it, that this is one of those elements of *Annales Cambriae* which betray Irish influence;³⁸ but that does not seriously undermine the apparent confirmation that there was a serious viking-raid on Anglesey in the mid-ninth century. Whether or not the Ragnarr of literature was present then, it is a salutary example of how reflexes of genuine historical fact may surface for the first time in what one must otherwise regard as unpromisingly late texts of completely inappropriate character.

The effective end of Scandinavian political and military

³⁶ *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson, A:I.543-52, B:I.525-34; A:I.573-8, B:I.567-74; and A:I.579-89, B:I.575-90.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, A:I.641-9, B:I.649-56.

³⁸ *Annales Cambriae*, s.a. 853; *Brut y Tywysogion*, s.a. 853=855. Cf. Kathryn Grabowski & D. Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals of Mediaeval Ireland and Wales. The Clonmacnoise-group Texts* (Woodbridge 1984), pp. 207-26.

involvement in the British Isles beyond the Shetlands and Orkneys came in the 1260s, with the Treaty of Perth (1266), transferring the Hebrides and Mann from Norway to Alexander III of Scotland, as the critical point.³⁹ It followed a final effort by the now old Norwegian king, Hákon Hákonarson, to assert his power there in what was in fact the year of his death, 1263. This was done in the now familiar manner of taking a fleet, first to the Northern Isles and then to the Hebrides, where he was in fact joined by the king of Mann. There are, of course, various Insular sources for these events, but our attention must be directed to the Old-Norse sources: the skaldic verses and prose of the Icelander, Sturla Þórðarson, in *Hákonar saga gamla* and the fragments of *Magnúss saga lagabætis*.⁴⁰ It is particularly interesting to see how this Icelander dealt with Hákon's overseas campaign in the light of the concurrent submission of Iceland to Hákon's rule in 1262. Without having distorted the historical record, Sturla used the same fully self-conscious invocation of legitimising historical precedent as we saw in the case of Magnús berfœttr. In this instance it is not explicitly linked to the account of Hákon's campaign in the Isles, but it still takes the form an explicit association with Óláfr Tryggvason – who had his own campaign in the British Isles – in §4 of *Hákonar saga* and the first verse of Sturla's *Hákonarkviða* which is cited there (Appendix 2i). The king who brought the order of monarchical rule to Iceland was the successor of the king who sent Christianity there.

At this point, we have not only reached the end of an historical sequence but also largely passed from the field of the genre to which this section has been devoted – skaldic verse – into the field to which I wish to devote a briefer final survey, Old-Norse prose sources. Before we do that, however, it is vital to move back in time some two and a half centuries, looking in a slightly different direction, and to note aspects of the portrayal in Old-Norse sources of the great King Knútr (Old English Cnut) in relation to Britain. An isolated verse attributed to Sigvatr Þórðarson, preserved in St

³⁹ R. Power, 'Scotland in the Norse sagas', in *Scotland and Scandinavia, 800-1800* ed. G. G. Simpson (Edinburgh 1990), pp. 13-24.

⁴⁰ *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson, A:II.119-24, B:II.126-31, and A:II.124-7, B:II.132-4.

Olaf's saga (*Óláfs saga helga*), claims the submission of Scottish kings 'from the heart of Fife' to Knútr (Appendix 2j).⁴¹ The same claim is recorded in 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', *sub anno* 1031 E (Appendix 4) but is not confirmed in Scottish sources: modern Scottish historians have tended to look upon the incident – whatever actually took place – rather superciliously, and Andrew Lang took pleasure in pointing out that those named besides Mael Colaim were not significant kings.⁴² That Knútr exploited skaldic poetry extensively as a medium of propaganda and legitimation is well known and receiving increasing scholarly attention.⁴³ It is particularly interesting for us that the impact is seen even in Old-Norse literature favouring his great rival, Óláfr Haraldsson or St Olaf of Norway. Knútr's power and legitimacy enhance Óláfr's status: indeed in the stanza cited here (Appendix 2j) the second half explicitly points out how Óláfr never submitted to him as the Scots did. The wider implications cannot, unfortunately, be pursued here and now, but I suggest that work on Knútr could profitably be developed in the future to consider more radically how his exploitation of skaldic literary tradition and practices may have shaped the whole character of the Icelandic view of Norwegian kingship, a theme central to much of Old-Norse prose historiography and the sagas.

Let us look, therefore, at those prose sources. The way in which kingship within the British Isles formed a model for Norwegian kingship in its literary portrayal, influencing and legitimising other forms of Scandinavian government, is well reflected here. An early and important text in Old-Norse literary history, and a useful source for the history of Scotland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, is

⁴¹ From *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla*, §131: *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson, A:I.269-70, B:I.249 (*lausavísa* 15).

⁴² Andrew Lang, *A History of Scotland from the Roman Occupation* (4 vols, Edinburgh 1900-7), I.53. That he was mistaken to do so has been shown by B. T. Hudson, 'Cnut and the Scottish kings', *English Historical Review* 107 (1992) 350-60.

⁴³ R. Poole, 'Skaldic verse and Anglo-Saxon history: some aspects of the period 1009-1016', *Speculum* 62 (1987) 265-98; R. Frank, 'King Cnut in the verse of his skalds', in *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. Alexander R. Rumble (London 1994), pp. 106-24.

Orkneyinga saga, written at the very beginning of the thirteenth century. The work falls early in the tradition of Old-Norse historical prose writing, which began in the twelfth century with, most famously, Ari Þórgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, early versions of *Landnámabók*, an early version of *Óláfs saga helga*, and the semi-autobiographical *Sverris saga*; it precedes the classic Icelandic family-sagas and Snorri's *Heimskringla*.⁴⁴ The saga is cursory in its account of the period up to and including the death of Earl Sigurðr at the battle of Clontarf, although it is consistent with other sources, such as those which we have already discussed,⁴⁵ on the expeditions of Haraldr inn hárfagri and Óláfr Tryggvason, and indeed on another character whom I have had to omit from special discussion, Eiríkr Blóðøx.⁴⁶

All the way through the saga, however, the Scottish king is regarded as a powerful factor in the affairs of the earldom of Orkney. We find the king of Scots attempting (at least) to grant the title of earl, for instance to Skuli Þórfinnson (§10), and backing the claim of Þórfinn Sigurðarson (§17). After Þórfinn's death, his widow, Ingibjörg, marries Mael Colaim, king of Scots.⁴⁷ The Scottish court is a regular refuge for rival claimants or turbulent big men who cannot for the time being be in the Isles themselves.⁴⁸ All the way through the saga too, it is made clear that Caithness on the mainland is regarded by the Scottish kings as legitimately within their own domain, eventually it being stated that Earl Haraldr Hákonarson, in the first half of the twelfth century, held Caithness of the king of Scots.⁴⁹ The recognised system is that the king of Norway was liege-lord of the Northern Isles, the king of Scots that

⁴⁴ For an introductory survey, see Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York 1957), pp. 96-121.

⁴⁵ See above, pp. 8-13.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, §§59-60; *Orkneyinga saga*, §8; *Hákonar saga góða* (in *Heimskringla*), §§2-5, including a verse by Glúmr Geirason which Finnur Jónsson assigned to a poem on Eiríkr Blóðøx – *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson, A:I.75, B:I.65-6. On Eiríkr Blóðøx and Eiríkr of York, see now C. Downham, 'Eric Bloodaxe axed? The mystery of the last Scandinavian king of York', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 14 (2003).

⁴⁷ *Orkneyinga saga*, §33.

⁴⁸ *Orkneyinga saga*, §§10, 40-1, 54, 74, 83, 93, and 100.

⁴⁹ *Orkneyinga saga*, §54.

of Caithness. The Hebrides, where we have seen Magnús berfœttr and Hákon Hákonarson asserting their lordship into the thirteenth century, are less certain; clearly suzerainty there had to be intermittently re-asserted and reclaimed.⁵⁰

The intertwining of Norwegian and Scottish elements in the politics and intrigues of twelfth-century Scotland are particularly well represented by the role played in *Orkneyinga saga* by Margrét Hákonardóttir and her husband, Maddaðr, earl of Atholl, and by their son Haraldr Maddaðarson. They support the rebel Sveinn Ásleifarson against Earl Pál Hákonarson (Margrét's brother), who is eventually imprisoned and comes to a dark end in Atholl. John, bishop of Atholl, is then involved in claiming a share of the earldom of Orkney for Haraldr Maddaðarson, still then a child.⁵¹ The later chapters of *Orkneyinga saga* deal with Haraldr's earlship, comprising incidents such as Sveinn Ásleifarson's further adventures in the Hebrides, Mann, Wales, and even Lundy, his sojourn with King David in Edinburgh, and, late on, Haraldr Maddaðarson's own attempt to seize Caithness. Politics is the stuff of the military adventures of *Orkneyinga saga*. Unspecific raiding expeditions from the Orkneys occur throughout the saga's historical range, but they play no prominent historical role.

The Icelandic sagas and other historical writings, in particular the compendious *Landnámabók* or 'Book of Settlements', composed of sources datable to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, offer a version of the history of a much earlier period than *Orkneyinga saga*, way back in the Viking-Age and around the traditional period of the settlement of Iceland in the second half of the ninth and earlier tenth centuries. As we have seen,⁵² the Gaelic sources themselves are dominated from the 850s to the 870s by the activities of forces led by Amlaíb (Óláfr) and Ímar (Ívarr). Both these characters appear in the essentially common history of the family-sagas and *Landnámabók*, although, as I have already noted, only Óláfr is associated with Ireland, being recorded, for instance in

⁵⁰ *Orkneyinga saga*, §§22-32, 38-41, 78-82, and 110.

⁵¹ *Orkneyinga saga*, §§74-8.

⁵² See above, pp. 9-13.

Landnámabók, as a *herkonungr* ('army-king') who won Dublin.⁵³ Haraldr inn hárfagri's disputed intervention in the British Isles is also widely noted, though primarily as the context within which Ketill flatnefr is introduced as Haraldr's governor in the Hebrides.⁵⁴ Ketill is given mythical ancestral status as the progenitor of several of the earliest and most powerful settlers of Iceland. *Landnámabók* asserts that Óláfr inn hvíti married Ketill's daughter Auðr in djúpauðga.⁵⁵ It has been suggested that this character can be identified with the Caittil Find (Ketill the White) whose defeat at the hands of Ívarr and Óláfr in Munster is recorded by 'The Annals of Ulster' for 857.⁵⁶ If so, his association with Haraldr inn hárfagri certainly looks like a fictitious product of the later Icelandic historiographical tradition that the settlement of Iceland was fundamentally a reaction to the expansion of Haraldr's monarchical power.

Ketill is not the only rather shadowy figure of ninth-century Gaelic history given this mythical ancestral status as the father of sons, and particularly daughters, who led the settlement of Iceland. Alongside him stands Cerball, king of Ossory, who was at one stage, according to 'The Annals of Ulster' (for 859), an ally of Óláfr and Ívarr. Three daughters and two sons of Kjarvalr (as he was called in Old Norse) are identified as ancestors of Icelandic families.⁵⁷ One of them, Rafarta, married Eyvindr Bjarnason while he was campaigning in Ireland. Their son, Helgi inn magri, was born in Ireland, fostered in the Hebrides, married Þórunn, daughter of Ketill flatnefr, and migrated to Iceland.⁵⁸ Another settler was Þórðr Bjarnason, a great-great-grandson of Ragnarr loðbrók through a fully male line, who married a grand-daughter of Kjarvalr through a female line.⁵⁹ Daughters of other Gaelic kings were

⁵³ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §95.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, *Laxdæla saga*, §§1-7; *Eyrbyggja saga*, §1.

⁵⁵ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §95; *Hauksbók*, §82. See also *Eiríks saga rauða*, §1.

⁵⁶ Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 301 and references given there.

⁵⁷ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §§2, 208, 217, 348, 366, and 392. Cf. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 295 and references given there under 'Cerball (*Kjarvalr*)', and D. Ó Corráin, 'High-kings, vikings, and other kings', *Irish Historical Studies* 21 (1978/9) 283-323.

⁵⁸ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §217.

⁵⁹ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §208.

allegedly married directly to eventual Icelandic settlers: Mýrún (Muirenn), daughter of an Irish king called Maddaðr in one source, Bjaðmakr (presumably Bláthmac) in another;⁶⁰ Niðbjörg, a daughter of one Bjólan, king of Scotland, ‘taken’ by Helgi Óttason;⁶¹ and the story, famous from *Laxdæla saga*, of Melkorka (Mael Cuircach) the enslaved daughter of a King Mýrkjartan (Muirchertach), for the original of whom there is more than one possible candidate.⁶² Other noble captives of Gaelic extraction are Erpr, the freedman, son of a Scottish earl, Maldún (Mael Dúin), and Mýrgjol (Muirgel) daughter of an alleged Irish King Gljómall.⁶³ Especially interesting are the implications of Ketill Þórisson’s purchase of Arneiðr, daughter of Ásbjörn, earl of the Hebrides, whose wife Álǫf was also taken prisoner and married to Grímr Þórðarson.⁶⁴ The names here are entirely Norse, implying that it was the area, not solely their ethno-linguistic background, which was seen as the typical source of these displaced nobles. It is indeed quite clear that the adjective *írskr* (‘Irish’) itself could apply in the Old-Norse sources to Scandinavians from Ireland as well as to the native Irish.⁶⁵

There are several more individual settlers of Iceland recorded from Ireland and the Hebrides – I count eight major characters from Ireland and thirteen from the Hebrides. Certain motifs become familiar in their usually brief stories. There is more than one story of early settlers bringing a number of Irish slaves with them, who escape and cause some mayhem in the early settlements before (usually) being caught and slain. From their practice of making *manadach* from flour and butter, the spit of land called *Minnþakseyrr* takes its name, and the *Vestmannaeyjar* (‘Westmen’s Islands’) were allegedly named after the same escaped thralls.⁶⁶ Some Hebridean settlers are identified as the earliest Scandinavian

⁶⁰ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §83; *Hauksbók*, §71.

⁶¹ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §84.

⁶² *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §105; *Laxdæla saga*, §§12-13.

⁶³ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §96 and 103.

⁶⁴ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §240 (cf. *Sturlubók*, §388; *Hauksbók*, §342).

⁶⁵ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §20; *Hauksbók*, §21.

⁶⁶ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §§6, 18, and 125.

Christians in Iceland.⁶⁷ But it is, I suggest, above all as an area in which family-relationships are rooted that the Hebrides and Ireland are characterised in Old-Norse literature. There are records of individuals being sent to the Hebrides for fosterage: Ørlygr, the son of Hrappr Bjarnarson and nephew of Ketill flatnefr, apparently sent from Norway to be fostered by the otherwise unknown Bishop Patrek in the Hebrides; and Helgi inn magri, grandson of Kjarvalr.⁶⁸ Only one settler from Caithness is recorded in *Landnámabók*, by contrast, and Scotland appears rather more as a stage for political escapades and military adventures such as slave-raiding.⁶⁹ The Old-Norse prose tradition treats Scotland and England similarly. Once one has recognised the existence of such patterning, it is remarkable in what remote contexts consistent reflexes of it may be encountered. In two sixteenth-century manuscripts, we have a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century religious poem, *Heilagra meyja drápa* ('The poem of holy maidens'), cataloguing a series of female saints, including the Irish Brigit and the Sunnefa who fled from Ireland to Norway – an ecclesiastical metamorphosis of the mothering function of Ireland. In the corresponding *Heilagra manna drápa* ('The poem of holy men'), the British Isles are represented by the political heavyweights, Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, and Edmund, king of East Anglia.⁷⁰

One way of approaching the question of what Old-Norse sources can tell us about Gaelic history is to focus on crucial problems implicit therein. What is Gaelic history? How can there logically be any Old-Norse sources for it? At the beginning of this discussion, I deliberately eschewed any attempt to prefabricate an

⁶⁷ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §§15, 320, and 323.

⁶⁸ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §§15 and 217.

⁶⁹ *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §16. Compare the uncertainty over Kalman's origins in *Hauksbók*, §21, and *Sturlubók*, §42. For other adventures in Scotland, see *Landnámabók: Sturlubók*, §§95 and 123. Cf. also *Droplaugarsona saga*, §1.

⁷⁰ *Heilagra manna drápa*, stanzas 2-8; *Heilagra meyja drápa*, stanzas 50 and 53. *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. & transl. Finnur Jónsson, A:II.511-16 and 526-39, B:II.562-9 and 582-97.

answer by theorising before engaging with the empirical evidence. I preferred to approach the topic inductively. As should now be abundantly clear, I think, what this shows us is that Old-Norse sources tell Scandinavian history; and much of this they do by allowing us to see the active role of tradition within history – how a particular understanding of the past shapes a later present, and how the present’s image of itself may be projected, historiographically, into the past. Taken as a whole, those Old-Norse sources relating directly to the mediaeval Gaelic world which I have been discussing here give us a substantial insight into the ideological and cultural history of the Scandinavians in their close relations with the Gaelic world. I have shown, I hope, that this mind-set was patterned: in other words the Scandinavian mind habitually assigned certain roles and characters to Insular peoples and places. All the same, this patterning includes some measure of reality worthy of the historian’s attention. I put it to Gaelic historians, then, that the general significance of Old-Norse sources to them is that these sources provide a direct context for Gaelic history – and that this context is itself structured in such a way as to force one to recognise the complementary functions of different parts of the whole of the British Isles within the Scandinavian circle of interest in North-Atlantic Europe. What a survey of Old-Norse sources from an Insular perspective therefore teaches us, I think, is that neither Gaelic history nor Anglo-Saxon history nor Scandinavian history should ever be allowed to become an insulated specialism.⁷¹

⁷¹ This is the text of the Fifth Quiggin Lecture, delivered in The Fitzpatrick Hall, Queens’ College, Cambridge, on Thursday, 19 November, 1998. I wish particularly to thank Dr Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (Palo Alto) for her thorough critical reading of and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this pamphlet.

APPENDIX 1

Darraðarljóð

Vítt er orpit fyrir valfalli
rifs reiðiský: rignir blóði.
Nú er fyrir geirum grár upp kominn
vefr verþjóðar er vinur fylla
rauðum veptri Randvés bana.

Stretched out wide for the fall of the slain is the
menacing cloud of the warp: it rains blood. Now,
woven with spears, the grey cloth of a warrior troop
has appeared, which friendly women fill with the
red weft of Randvér's slayer.

Sjá er orpinn vefr ýta þormum
ok harðkláðr hofðum manna;
eru dreyrrekin dorr at skoptum,
járnvarðr yllir en orum hælaðr.
Skulum slá sverðum sigrvef þenna.

The cloth is warped with men's guts and weighted
hard with human heads; bloodstained spears are the
shafts; ironclad the beam and pegged with arrows.
We must beat with our swords this victory cloth.

Gengr Hildr vefa ok Hjörþrimul,
Sanngríðr, Svipul sverðum tognum:
skapt mun gnesta, skjöldr mun bresta,
mun hjalmgagarr í hlíf koma.

Hildr goes to weave and Hjörþrimul, Sanngríðr,
Svipul, with drawn swords: the shaft will crack, the
shield burst; the helmet-dog [*sword*] will pierce the
armour.

Vindum vindum vef darraðar
þann er ungr konungr átti fyrri:
fram skulum ganga ok í folk vaða
þar er vinir várir vápnnum skipta.

Let us weave, let us weave the cloth of the banner
which the young king previously had. We must go
forward and wade into the troop where our friends
are dealing with weapons.

Vindum vindum vef darraðar
ok siklingi síðan fyljum:
þar sá bragna blóðgar randir
Gunnr ok Gøndul þær er grami hlífðu.

Let us weave, let us weave the cloth of the banner
and then follow the prince: there Gunnr and Gøndul
saw the bloodied shields of men, the women who
guarded the king.

Vindum vindum vef darraðar
þar er vé vaða vígra manna:
látum eigi líf hans farask;
eiga valkyrjur vals um kosti.

Let us weave, let us weave the cloth of the banner,
where the standards of warriors press forward: we
may not allow his life to be lost; the valkyries have
their choice of the slain.

Þeir munu lýðir lönðum ráða
er útskaga áðr um byggðu:
kveð ek ríkum gram ráðinn dauða;
nú er fyrir oddum jarlmaðr hniginn.

Those who previously dwelt on an exposed cape
will rule the lands; I declare death ordained for a
mighty king; now an earl has sunk before the
spears.

Ok munu Írar angr um bíða
þat er aldri mun ýtum fynnask:
Nú er vefr ofinn en vøllr roðinn;
mun um land fara læspjöll gota.

And Irishmen will experience grief which will never
depart from men: now the cloth is woven and the
field dyed red; the death-tales of men will fare
through the land.

Nú er ógurligt um at litask
er dreyrug ský dregr með himni:
mun lopt litat lýða blóði
er spár vórar springa kunnu.

Vel kváðu vér um konung ungan;
sigrljóða fjöld syngjum heilar:
en hinn nemi, er heyri á,
geirljóða fjöld ok gumum skemti.

Ríðum hestum hart út berum
brugðnum sverðum á braut heðan.

Now it is monstrous to look around oneself where
bloody clouds cover the heavens. The sky will be
painted with men's blood when our foretellings are
able to abound.

We have spoken well about the young king; let us,
unscathed, sing a multitude of victory-songs; and let
him who listens learn a host of spear-songs and
entertain men.

Let us ride out hard on bare-backed steeds, with
swords drawn, away from here.

APPENDIX 2

(a) From *Gróttasöngur*: stanzas 21-2

“Mól míns föður mærlíga,
þvíat hon feigð fíra fíðmargra sá;
stucco stórar stöðr frá lúðri,
iárni varðar, mólom enn framarr!

“Mólom enn framarr! mun Yrsa sonr
við Hálfðana hefna Fróða;
sá mun hennar heitinn verða
burr oc bróðir; vitom báðar þat.”

“My father’s daughter ground mightily, because she
saw the doom of a great multitude of men; the great
beams broke away from the frame, encased in iron;
let us grind on!

“Let us grind on! Yrsa’s son will avenge Fróði upon
the Half-Danes; he will be known as both her son
and her brother; we both know that.”

(b) From *Liðsmannaflokkur*: stanzas 1, 2, and 10

Göngum upp, áðr Engla
ættlönd farin röndu
morðs og miklar ferðir
malmregns stafar fregni:
verum hugrakkir Hlakkar
hrístum spjót ok skjótum,
leggr fyr órum eggjum
Engla gnótt á flóttu.

Margr ferr Ullr í illan
oddsennu dag þenna
frár, ar’s fœddir órum,
fornan serk, ok bornir:
enn á enskra manna
öllum gjóð Hnikars blóði;
vart mun skáld í skyrtu
skreiðask hamri samða.

* * * * *

Dag vas hvern þat’s Högna
hurð rjóðask nam blóði,
ár þar’s úti vörum,
Ilmr, í fôr með hilmí:
kneigum vér, síz vígum
varð nýlokít hórðum,
fyllar dags, í fögurum
fit, Lundúnum síþja.

Let us go ashore before the staffs of the metal-storm
[warriors] and great troops of slaughter should hear
that English homelands are being traversed with
shields: let us be stout-hearted men of Hlökk [*a*
valkyrie]; let us brandish spears and launch them; a
multitude of Englishmen take to flight before our
swords.

Many a god of spearplay [*warrior*] pulls on the foul
old shirt this day, where we were born and raised;
once more let us nourish the bird of Hnikarr on the
blood of English men; carefully, the poet will
wriggle into a shirt seamed by the hammer.

* * * * *

Every day, the door of Högna [*shield*] became
reddened with blood, Ilmr, when we were out on
campaign with the king: now that an end is newly
come to these hard battles, we are able to dally,
meadowland-of-the-fullness-of-the-day, in fair
London.

(c) From Glúmr Geirason's *Gráfeldardrápa*: stanza 2

Dolgeisu rak dísar,
drótt kom mǫrg á flótta,
gumna vinr at gamni
gjóðum írskar þjóðir;
foldar rauð ok feldi
Freyr í manna dreyra
sverð, vas sigr of ordinn,
seggi mækis eggjar.

The friend of men pursued Irish troops to the delight of the birds of the lady of the flame of hostility [*lady of the sword, valkyrie*] (a great troop took to flight); the Freyr of the sword's ground [*man of the shield, warrior*] reddened the edges of the sword in human blood and felled men; victory was won.

(d) From Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld's *Óláfsdrápa*: stanzas 8-9

Gerðisk ungr við Englum
ofvægr konungr bægja,
naddskúrar réð nærir
Norðimbra sá morði;
eyddi ulfa greddir
ógnblíðr Skotum víða,
gerði seims, með sverði,
sverðleik í Mǫn skerðir.

The young irresistible king made himself push against the English; this nourisher of the spear-shower decreed death to the Northumbrians; the terror-favouring feeder of wolves destroyed the Scots far and wide with the sword; the diminisher of riches created sword-play in Mann.

Ydrógar lét ægir
eyverskan her deyja,
Týr vas tjörva dýrra
tírar gjarn, ok Íra;
barði brezkrrar jarðar
byggvendr, en hjó tyggi,
grøðr þvarr geira hríðar
gjóði, kumbrskar þjóðir.

The terroriser with the strung bow put the islanders' army and the Irish to death; the god of precious spears was eager for glory; the king assaulted the dwellers of British land and cut down the Cumbrian troops; hunger subsided in the bird of the spear-storm [*carrion bird*].

(e) From Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld's *Óláfsdrápa* [the elegy]: stanza 11

Firðisk vætr, sás varði
við lǫnd, Breta stríðir
bleyði firðr við bráðan
bekkdóm Heðins rekka.

The punisher of the British, who guarded his lands, shrank like a coward from no part of the violent bench-judgment of the men of Heðinn [*battle*].

(f) From Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli*: stanza 31

Dag lét sinn með sigri
sóknþýðr jǫfurr prýðask,
þás í Ǫngulseyjar
undreyr bitu sundi.

The battle-cherishing king caused his day to be adorned with victory when wound-reeds [*swords*] bit in Anglesey's sound.

(g) From *Noregs konunga tal*: stanza 49

Fór málsnjallr
Magnús konungr
til Írlands
ungr at herja;
varð ágætr
Eysteins faðir
fleina flaug
feldr í þeiri.

The eloquent King Magnús went to harry Ireland as a young man. The famous father of Eysteinn was felled in that hail of arrows.

(h) From *Krákumál*: stanza 21

Hjögum vér með hjörvi.
Hö sverð bitu skjöldu,
þás gollhroðinn glumði
geirr við Hildar næfri;
sjá mun í Önguls-eyju
of aldr mega síðan,
hversu at lögðis leiki
lofðungar framm gingu;
roðinn vas út fyr eyri
ár flugdreki sára.

We struck with swords. Long swords bit shields when the gold-adorned spear resounded upon Hild's bark [*armour*]; in Anglesey, one will be able to see ever afterwards how the princes advanced to the swordplay; the flying wound-dragon [*arrow or spear*] was reddened early off the island.

(i) From Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonarkviða*: stanza 1

Þá hefr i ætt
öðlingr drepit
Tryggva niðs
tírar höfði,
er framraðs
flýja þurfti
ynglings barn
fyr ófriði.

Then the prince stuck his head into the family of the glorious son of Tryggvi, and the son of the excellent prince had to flee from the strife.

(j) Sigvatr Þórðarson, *lausavísa*

Hafa allframir jofrar
út sín höfuð Knúti
færð ór Fífi norðan,
friðkaup vas þat, miðju;
seldi Aleifr aldri,
opt vá sigr, enn digri
haus í heimi þvísa,
hann, engum svá manni.

Northern kings of great renown have brought their heads to Knútr from the heart of Fife; that was a buying of peace. Oláfr the Stout never yielded his skull to any man in the world in this way; often he fought to victory.

APPENDIX 3

From Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla: Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, §22, including Þórbjörn hornklofi's *Glymdrápa*, stanza 8

En er hann kom vestr í Mön, þá höfðu þeir áðr spurt, hvern hernað hann hafði gort þar í landi, þá flýði allt fólk inn á Skotland, ok var þar aleyða af mönnum, braut var ok flutt allt fe, þat er mátti. En er þeir Haraldr konungr gengu á landi, þá fengu þeir ekki herfang. Svá segir Hornklofi:

Menfergir bar margar
 margspakr, Niðar varga
 lundr vann sókn á sandi,
 sandmens í bý randir,
 áðr fyr eljunprúðum
 allr herr Skota þverri
 loðdis eiðs af láði
 læbrautar varð flœja.

But when he came west to the Isle of Mann, they had already heard what harrying he had done there [in Scotland], and all the people fled into Scotland, and it was completely devoid of people there, and all the goods had been moved which could be. And when Haraldr and his men landed, they got no booty. Thus says Hornklofi:

The highly cunning scatterer of necklaces
 bore many shields into the sand-ring's [*the sea's*]
 settlement (the copse of the wolves of Nið [*the men*
of the ships] made an attack on the sand),
 before all the army {of the Scots} took to flight
 in face of the courage-famous destroyer
 of the land-of-the-sword [*shield*] {of the Scots}
 from the edge of the fish-road [*the sea*].

APPENDIX 4

From 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', E

1031. Hēr fōr Cnūt cyng tō Rōme. And þy ilcan gēare hē fōr tō Scotlande, and Scotta cyng him tōbeah Mælcom, and twēgen oðre cyningas, Mælbæpe and Iehmarc.

In this year King Cnut went to Rome. And in the same year he went to Scotland, and the king of Scots, Mael Colaim, submitted to him, and two other kings, Mælbæpe and Iehmarc.

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