

Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney. Translated with an introduction by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards. The Hogarth Press. £7.50.

Sir George Dasent first conceived of translating *Orkneyinga Saga* in 1859. His own dilatoriness, the discovery of new manuscripts, and his protracted feud with Guðbrandur Vigfússon among others, ensured that the Rolls translation did not appear until 1894. Meanwhile, in a rather curious enterprise, Joseph Anderson, published in 1873, his edition of a translation by Gilbert Goudie and Jón Hjaltaín. Anderson's main contribution was a long, but not always relevant, introduction. His text was, in the main, quite readable. Another nineteenth century translation survives in an anonymous manuscript in the Scottish Record Office. In 1938 the late Dr. A.B. Taylor published his scholarly English version of the saga with full critical apparatus. His substantial introduction was not as helpful as it might have been but his voluminous notes were indispensable. The Hogarth Press, in what must be just about the first book published in 1978 (on 5 January), now give us the fourth printed translation of *Orkneyinga* in just over a century, this time from the highly experienced team of Pálsson and Edwards.

Their volume is to be welcomed. Taylor is now virtually unobtainable except for oil-rich Shetlanders and Orcadians who can afford the inflated second-hand price. Anderson (reprinted by the Mercat Press in 1975) is difficult to use because of defects in the original edition upon which the translation was based. This new version is elegant and readable, and nicely illustrated with plates and maps. Its main defects are an inadequate introduction and the almost total absence of any critical apparatus. While the translators' approach to the saga is literary, this reviewer's bias is admittedly historical, but some judicious balance of the two attitudes seems called for. Hermann and Paul refer to the saga having 'a certain artless quality', as indeed it has, but it might be argued that most readers will be interested in the historicity of the saga, rather than the literary qualities of which the translators themselves seem to be in some doubt.

If Dr. Taylor occasionally appended notes where none were required, Pálsson and Edwards could be accused of going to the opposite extreme. The only notes that are given concern the Icelandic calendar (p. 27), Göngu-Hrólfr (p. 29), the date of the

battle of Svoldur (p. 39) and an allusion to the Book of Isaiah (p. 46). Why these and not others? — particularly when the last three do not greatly contribute to the understanding of the saga. In places the absence of notes seems in danger of distorting the translation itself. For example in Chapter 8 the technical and difficult word, *odul*, cries out for explanation or comment. Here the word is translated 'estates', yet in Chapter 11 it is rendered 'land rights'. In Chapter 76 Earl Rognvald allows the farmers to buy back the odal rights (once again translated 'estates') when he is trying to raise money to build Kirkwall cathedral. In none of these passages is the reader informed of the underlying, emotive, legalistic and near mystical term, *odul*. This is a comparatively short book; a few pages of notes would have greatly enhanced its value.

Still the translation is the thing and this is undoubtedly the best and most accurate yet. When this pedantic reviewer was trying to check it against the Old Norse text he was continually led on by the pace and readability of this new version. If the poems are no longer poetic they are helpfully and intelligently rendered which is more than can be said for previous versions where some stanzas would have made more sense if left in the original than they do in English. The prose is always clear and judicious. An illustration may be of some interest. Chapter 108 of the saga recounts the last words and the death of the dreadful or magnificent (depending on your point of view) Svein Asleifsson. Compare — Anderson: "Know all men, whether I die to-day or not, that I am the holy Earl Rognvald's henchman and my confidence is where he is with God". Here is the end of Swein's history; and it has been said that he was the greatest man in the Western lands, either in old times or at the present day, of those who had not a higher title than he did'. Taylor: "Be it known to all men, whether or no I die this day, that I belong to the bodyguard of Saint Rognvald the Earl, and now I mean to put my trust in that place where he is with God. Now is Sweyn's story ended. And it is the judgement of men that he has been the biggest man in every way in the lands in the west, both in days present and days past, among men who were not of higher rank than he'. Pálsson and Edwards: "Whether or not I'm to fall to-day I want everyone to know that I'm the retainer of the holy Earl Rognvald, and now he's with God, it's in him I'll put my trust". That, then, is the end of Svein's

story, but people say that apart from those of higher rank than himself, he was the greatest man the western world has ever seen in ancient and modern times'. The last quoted have a habit, through the language they employ, of making us aware that the men of the sagas were not so very different from ourselves — and that is exactly as it should be.

Ted Cowan.

Criminal Records: Ragnarr Hairy Breeches and Sons.

Alfred P. Smyth, **Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles 850–880** (xii + 307pp. £10.00. Oxford University Press, 1977).

Reviewed by John Simpson.

This is a very impressive book. Some of its arguments were sketched out in the first volume of Dr. Smyth's **Scandinavian York and Dublin** (Dublin, 1975), but his new book concentrates on a narrower period to splendid effect. The main text consists of 266 pages of scholarly, ingenious and relentless argument, based on a wide range of English, Irish, Scandinavian and other sources. Since it seeks genealogical, geographical and chronological precision from a welter of conflicting testimony, it is not exactly easy reading. (But it should be said that it is written in a pleasant style, and the excellent cross-references do help the reader to keep his bearings.) Judgement on the book will be the work of the next generation or two of scholars, rather than of the first few reviewers. But it can be said at once that this is a very exciting detective-story, with highly colourful (albeit thoroughly disagreeable) leading characters.

Dr. Smyth is one of those scholars who like to draw threads together, to make sense of things. He constructs a very clear picture of Viking activities in the British Isles, some of the main features of which are as follows: Ragnarr Hairy Breeches and his sons came from a dynasty of sea-kings operating in the Vík area of Norway and Danish Sjaelland. Ragnarr himself may well have sacked Paris in 845. Soon afterwards he led a Danish fleet against Norwegian settlers in the Scottish islands and eastern Ireland. He sacked Dublin, (re)instated his son Ívarr the Boneless as king