

John Donald for publishing yet another most serviceable addition to its library of monographs on Scottish history.

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**Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, The Boydell Press, 1991 239pp., 35 ill., £19.95.**

A book on women in the Viking Age *has* to be different from all other books on the Vikings for so much of the usual evidence for the Vikings is entirely to do with the world of the male – the fighting, raiding, trading heroic ethos. Yet such a book has nonetheless to cope with the daunting problem of all studies of the Viking Age, which is the breadth and variety of the source material, ranging from archaeological evidence to runic inscriptions, to historical sources from Russia, the Arabic world and Western Europe (with last but not least, the Icelandic sagas and skaldic poetry). How does Judith Jesch tackle such a daunting problem?

Admirably, it must be said. Her organisation of the material is well-ordered and coherent, her treatment of the sources such that no scholar can possibly quarrel with her interpretations, and her English is impeccable. The reader is led through the whole range of evidence, starting with the dry bones of archaeology, which one feels she starts with in order to clear the ground (ha ha) so that she can get on with the really interesting linguistic and literary evidence. Then comes the runic material, laconic, terse, difficult to interpret, ambiguous in meaning, but contemporary and about real people, their names, family relationships, personal tragedies and religious beliefs. These monuments are also a record of *purpose*, raised to commemorate sons, daughters, husbands, mothers; also raised to record inheritance and possession of landed rights as well as good works like the building of bridges in memory of the dead. A lot of women are remembered in many ways in these runic inscriptions and most of them will throw a totally new light on the Viking Age for a majority of readers. This chapter opens up a very little known source of evidence and expounds it with a deftness of touch and with a command of the evidence and an understanding of the social world lying behind the words which is the mark of a good teacher. My only criticism is the lack of an adequate map to show the reader where all these strange places are. There is only one map in the whole book and it is quite inadequate for the needs of a readership which is unlikely to be as familiar with Scandinavia as the author. Nor indeed is there any referencing system for the illustrations so that one has to find out for oneself whether a runestone is depicted or not.

Next we are given a little taste of place-names when trying to track down the female colonist – I felt that there was more that could be said on this aspect. Then we were plunged into the foreign sources – first those that refer to women at home in Scandinavia, then to the Scandinavian women in England, France, Ireland, Russia and the Arab world. Every source is carefully assessed and analysed and the author's skill in interpreting them is again very impressive – this section will prove most useful for many other reasons than merely the information about women that has been extracted from the sources. Inevitably, it is impossible to get any flowing narrative out of such disparate material, and one is left with a series of impressions of women's role in a man's world (mostly noble ones, of course) from Emma in England to Olga in Russia and the inevitable slave girl on the Volga (it would be nice if she had been called Olga too!). What a good thing that the author did not shirk this last famous and fearful description of the funeral of the Rus trader which never fails to set the reader's hair on end. It had to be gone through

even though we are warned that 'it would be dangerous to generalise from it about practices elsewhere in the viking world'. I'm sure it would! especially for scholars! We have been deprived of so much Viking depravity by modern scholarship that it is good to know that we can still believe in the awful goings-on on the banks of the Volga if nowhere else!

The author finally takes us into the world of literature – and one feels that it is very much her own world. The mythology of Snorri Sturlason's Edda, the skaldic poetry and the Icelandic sagas are life and breath to Judith Jesch, and she makes them live and breathe for the reader. She interprets these sources and the role of women in Icelandic society which she reveals with a touch of genius. I have never been entirely caught up in the world of Icelandic sagas, but with her to guide me I think I could be. She makes that world believable and the women who inhabited it become real people. It is not until the reader reaches this section that the Viking woman becomes alive, instead of being a skeleton, a commemorating patron of a runic stone or an ominous valkyrie flying above the field of battle. It is a pity in a way that one has to wade through all the other evidence before reaching this, but perhaps it is just as well; if it had come first the rest would have been something of an anti-climax!

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**Helena Forsas-Scott (ed.), *Textual Liberation: European Feminist Writing in the Twentieth Century*, Routledge, London, 1991, 342pp.**

At a time of great change in European history, attempting to provide an international survey of recent feminist writing is an ambitious project indeed. The editor and her contributors have done an excellent job in producing a scholarly survey to, as she says, 'provide a set of initial maps for the English-speaking reader'. There are nine chapters, surveying Britain, Scandinavia, Germany (East and West), Eastern Europe, Russia, France, Spain, Italy and Turkey. In a very readable introduction, Helena Forsas-Scott succeeds in drawing together the many threads from these different countries and indicating the parallels between them, the common patterns which are emerging despite the radically different circumstances in which women writers have been able to work. It is interesting to note that the pace of feminist advances in northern Europe, dominated by liberalism, Protestantism and a middle class providing intellectual leadership, has been faster than in southern Europe, where Roman Catholicism (and in Turkey Islam) has been more hostile to feminist ideas.

Many genres are covered, from novels, diaries, poetry and drama to essays, documentaries and journalism. But as Helena Forsas-Scott points out, the emphasis in all the chapters turns out to be on the novel, that genre which Virginia Woolf, discussing the woman writer in *A Room of One's Own* called 'young enough to be soft in her hands'. Another pattern which emerges in this book is the way in which women's writing from the early part of the century is being rediscovered and reinterpreted in the light of knowledge about the situation of oppression or censorship in which it was produced.

From the contributors to this volume, re-ordering the past is in many ways the easiest part of their task. Far more difficult is to fix, even in a snapshot, the rapidly changing pattern of women's life in today's Europe, especially where recent revolutionary events have toppled regimes and radically altered boundaries. It always becomes harder to select and evaluate