

## REVIEW SECTION

Andrew Wawn

*The Victorians and the Vikings:  
Inventing the Old North in  
Nineteenth-century Britain*

Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000

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Readers with any reservations about the extent to which our Victorian ancestors went overboard on the Vikings will have lost them long before they reluctantly reach the last page of Andrew Wawn's superb *The Victorians and the Vikings*. Viewed from a general Scandinavian perspective, the British fixation on 'dead kings of Norrøway', noble Frithiof, Balder the Beautiful, Pálma-Tóki and the rest has not been entirely beneficial: the trickle-down effect may have done much to raise the cultural profile of Scandinavia in Britain but it has frequently distorted that profile to a degree that, depending on one's mood, is either laughable or infuriating. To surprisingly many critics and reviewers, even into the second half of the twentieth century, authors as various as Selma Lagerlöf and Knut Hamsun could only be discussed as latter day sagamen or scalds. And the Viking stereotype is still the first cliché popular journalists reach for when confronted by anything Scandinavian: with a wearisome inevitability, the recent entanglement of Sven-Göran Eriksson and Ulrika Jonsson was

headlined as a clash of the Vikings. Viewed, too, from a Celtic perspective, the admiration for the Viking among those who preferred to view the history of Britain as an all-Germanic business has been less than helpful.

Wawn's book tells us how all this came about. He begins quite properly centuries before the Victorian era and in the sphere of trade rather than that of literature. According to the *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye* of 1430, 'of Yseland to wryte is lytill nede,/Save of stokfische'. What was written of the north ('save of stokfische'), however, was largely superstition and prejudice: lands that were poisoned 'by sulphureous stinking smoak' and inhabited in the case of Iceland by 'beastly creatures, unmannered and untaught', given to the eating of 'candell's endes and olde grece', before indulging in which they would 'wash their handes and their faces in pisse'. Understandably then, Henry VIII turned down the Danes when they offered to cede Iceland to England. With the seventeenth century, though, the gathering of knowledge began to accelerate in Scandinavia itself (Ole Worm, Olaus Verelius, Thomas Bartholin etc.), and this in turn filtered through to Britain where it was gathered by George Hickes in his 'monumental project' *Linguarum vett. septentrionalium thesaurus* (1703-05). It was Hickes who laid much of the foundation for what came later but, interestingly, as Wawn observes, there was already a 'network of regionally based enthusiasts' in place even that early. The next leap forward in awareness of the north came riding to no small extent on the back of Macpherson's *Ossian* (1760): Thomas Percy's *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* appeared in 1763 and were followed by

Thomas Gray's Norse poems in 1768 and Percy's *Northern Antiquities* in 1770 – the latter heavily based on the works of Mallet some fifteen years before. So, by the end of the eighteenth century, in Wawn's words, 'a raft of old northern literary and philosophical issues had emerged which, subsequently reconstructed, would form an important part of the Victorian old northern agenda'.

It is that agenda that forms the meat of the book. In the longest section, 'Creating the Canon', Wawn homes in on Samuel Laing and his translation of *Heimskringla* (1844), the popularity of the saga of Frithiof in one form or another, George Dasent and his translation *Burnt Njal* (1861), and nineteenth century views of the eddas. It was the Orcadian Laing who politicised the Victorian view of the north. On his return from three years in Norway he published his *Journal of a Residence in Norway* (1837) in which he idealised the Norwegian 'bonders' and when, a few years later, he came to write the lengthy dissertation that prefaces his *Heimskringla*, it was the same characteristics of energy, drive, independence of mind and property-ownership that he focuses on as being the essence of the Viking spirit. Laing went on to argue that the existence of these same elements in the British character may be traced to Viking settlement here. As Wawn puts it: 'Laing had searched for the origins of the British national character and social institutions and found them in the timeless fjords of Norway'. He was followed in this by Sir George Dasent. Dasent, of course, produced a great deal more than *The Story of Burnt Njal*: he had already translated Snorri's *Edda*, Rask's grammar of Old Norse and a selection of Asbjørnsen and

Moe's folk tales, and later he went on to *The Story of Gisli the Outlaw*, *The Vikings of the Baltic* (his own version of *Jómsvíkinga saga*) and much more. Dasent, too, ultimately took the political view: the study of Norse – the language – would help save English from degeneracy, and the racial inheritance from the Viking incursions had brought 'an infusion of Northern blood into its sluggish veins'. Wawn points interestingly to a less obvious melancholy side to Dasent's ideology, a sense that Victorian Britain was already moving towards its *ragnarök*. But for all the popularity of the texts translated by Laing and Dasent, they were bowled clean by the popularity of Frithiof, which was translated three times from its original Icelandic saga and no fewer than an astonishing fifteen times from Esaias Tegnér's Swedish poetic epic: Wawn comments that Tegnér was to Frithiof what Tennyson was to King Arthur, and the derivatives in terms of poetry, story and even music are produced to justify the analogy. What made Frithiof such a long-term runaway success seems to have been that it/he could virtually be all things to all men: it shared some of the 'misty melancholy' of Ossian; it gave a 'moral dimension' to seafaring; it (almost unbelievably) provided Carlyle with fuel for his discussion of the high church/low church controversy; through the figure of Ingeborg/Victoria it could be read as a 'decorous tribute' to the sovereign; it offered 'a model of constitutional royal power'; it could be read as a hymn to individual prowess and the self-made man. If we ever need proof that meaning lies in the eye of the beholder, Frithiof surely provides it.

As a large-scale mapping of the invention of the Old North

(Wawn's favoured term), Wawn is not to be faulted. In a review there is not the space to sketch more than a small picture of the richness of his volume: he has chapters on those two very different figures, George Stephens and William Morris, on travellers – pilgrims almost – to the north, on the endless retellings or native spin-offs such as Rider Haggard's *Eric Brighteyes*, and on the academic and antiquarian network this enthusiasm engendered. He gives us all the fascinating 'whens', 'whos', 'hows', 'whats' and 'wheres' of the process in enormous detail – the 'wheres' providing a particularly interesting sidelight, with Orkney and Shetland, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Newcastle and the rest all being given their due, demonstrating that the enthusiasm was anything but confined to the Oxford-Cambridge-London axes. The 'whys' are rather more elusive. Wawn, to use the kind of metaphor he is given to, prefers not to bat on a theoretical wicket and most readers, this one included, are likely to be with him on that: who would forego a page of this sparkling tapestry of fact and anecdote for some here-today-gone-tomorrow theory? But, unfortunately, without it we are left wondering, for instance, what it was about Victorian society (or, perhaps, societies, since he is covering a century of dynamic change) that felt the need to project itself into Norseness and Norseness into itself. And why and how did the British perception of the north differ from, say, the French or the German or Scandinavian perceptions? Or why did the Old North so effectively out-gun Celticism in its Ossianic and Arthurian guises? In fact, Wawn does make reference to all of these matters intermittently throughout the course of his narrative, and he brings them

together in summary form in his section 'Setting the Victorian Agenda', but I would have been grateful for a concluding chapter that gathered them together and subjected them to the blood-eagle of theory. (The bibliography, which in most respects is a forty-page gold mine, is revealing in this respect: it includes, for instance, Hobsbawm and Brantlinger but one might also have expected to see, say, Benedict Anderson, Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said, even if only to disagree. On the other hand, one admires Wawn's courage in omitting them, possibly because they are guilty of showing 'the austere impenetrability of much academic discourse'.)

Which is not a crime Wawn can be convicted of. Those who have heard Andrew Wawn lecture will come to *The Vikings and the Victorians* expecting entertainment as well as erudition and they won't be disappointed. He tells his tale with panache and a raven's eye for the quirky (and, for the most part, illuminating) detail and anecdote. He delights in rhetorical language and has a particular penchant for the suitably Victorian sporting metaphor, as when he refers to early scholars 'rolling the pitch' for their successors. Indeed, Wawn's description of Sir George Dasent's *The Norseman in Iceland* provides an apt summary of his own writing: 'Dasent communicates the excitement of the old north stylistically, through cascading metaphor, sensuous adjectives, doublet phrases, parallelism, alliteration, all held in place by a richly oratorical syntax'. Wawn, one suspects after reading *The Vikings and the Victorians*, has a split personality: one half of him is standing back viewing Laing, Stephens, Dasent, Morris and the rest quizzically and with tongue in cheek; the other and perhaps stronger half

stands four-square with his Victorians, whether lecturing to the Liverpool Philosophical and Literary Society or among the pilgrims inhaling the 'power and poignancy' of Hlíðarendi and reflecting on Gunnar's words 'the corn fields are white to harvest, and the home mead is mown; and now I will ride back home, and not fare abroad at all'. Of all the academic books I've read in the last few years, *The Vikings and the Victorians* is the one I'd like most to have written.

Steve Murdoch (ed.)

*Scotland and the Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648*

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Peter Graves This splendid volume has been published as volume 6 of the series *History of Warfare* under the general editorship of Kelly Devries and represents a further instalment of the developing comparative dimension of Scottish history. The Scotland and Europe theme has been strong in recent years, with such volumes as T.C. Smout (ed.), *Scotland and Europe* (1986); three volumes edited by Grant Simpson on *Scotland and Scandinavia* (1990), *The Scottish Soldier Abroad* (1992) and *Scotland and the Low Countries* (1996) contributing to the field. This volume, edited by Steve Murdoch, of the University of Aberdeen, provides impressive empirical data on a wide variety of aspects of Scotland's relationship with the Thirty Years' War. Scotland was initially drawn into the conflict by dynastic links through the marriage of Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of James VI, to Frederick V, the Elector of the Palatinate; as Murdoch notes this meant that Scotland had 'formed a very strong connection with Protestant Germany' (p. 2). However, not all Scottish links were in this direction; one could note the activities of the seventh earl of Argyll a Roman Catholic and Hispanophile and contrast them