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Saga as a Modern Medium:
Evolution of the Genre in Gregor Lamb's
Langskaill

Gregor Lamb is well known in his various capacities as folklorist, historian, lexicographer and authority on the place names of his native Orkney. His first novel, *Langskaill* (Byrgisey, Kirkwall, 1998), touches on all of these fields and seems to have grown from a lifetime's intimacy with the Orcadian West Mainland district of Marwick. The book is saturated with authentic historical and local detail. Lamb's method is strikingly similar to that of the author of *Orkneyinga Saga* in that he pieces together from a wide variety of sources – both written and oral – what remains a highly individual work of literary art. There is much more going on in *Langskaill* than a straightforward 'recreation' or 'evocation' of the Norse era. Lamb's interests lie also in the rehearsal or circular patterning of history (what Edwin Muir or George Mackay Brown would have called the 'Fable') and, particularly, in the revitalisation and adaptation of the ancient genre of saga.

Narrator Erlend Erlendsson is an Icelandic mercenary soldier who breaks his sea journey home from the Hundred Years' War in Norse Kirkwall in order to establish whether a former friend and comrade in arms, Harald Moar, has survived the war. He journeys westward overland to Marwick – becoming aware *en route* of growing political tensions in the islands – and finds his friend alive and well. But Erlend quickly discovers that Harald's family is threatened by destructive inter-sibling rivalry and difficult circumstances. Harald's sister Geira has been raped by pirates, who have also murdered her husband, and remains deeply traumatised. His younger identical twin brother, Thorolf, resents Harald's assumption of control of the farm on his return from the war.

Bad weather, poor yields and soaring taxes only exacerbate their problems. Erlend remains in Orkney to do what he can to help the family. *Langskaill* gathers momentum and sets off on a narrative-driven course reminiscent of the great Icelandic sagas. If anything, events in the novel are even more complex than those of many of the *Íslendingasögur* which, although highly intricate, often begin to exhibit something of a pendulum effect as killing after killing is carried out in an ever widening circle of revenge.

The story begins with a seemingly insignificant altercation between two of the guests at Harald's father's funeral – Skarth Sigurdsson, a family friend, and Rognvald Isbister, a neighbour and known troublemaker. Later, while some of the remaining guests are indoors drinking, Skarth's mare is mortally wounded and suspicion naturally falls on Rognvald. The distraught Skarth then takes his ruined horse to back her off a cliff, becomes entangled in the lead rope and is pulled to his death. Skarth has previously pledged to buy a horse from Thorolf and his death seems to spell the end of Thorolf's dreams of going to the war in France until Erlend agrees to buy a house from him, affording him the fare to the continent. Meanwhile, the animals at *Langskaill* are on the brink of starvation and so Harald persuades Erlend to buy some land from the farm. This deal goes ahead, Erlend is established in Orkney and *Langskaill*'s stock is saved.

This pattern of conflict, suspense and temporary resolution, which is so similar to patterning in the plots of the Icelandic sagas, continues throughout. The second major similarity in terms of plot between *Langskaill* and its predecessors is the way in which a small event (the brawl between Skarth and Rognvald) sparks off further events which eventually culminate in a highly dramatic conclusion. Magnus Magnusson has remarked that Hrut's visit to Norway at the outset of *Njal's Saga* is 'the spark that lights the powder-trail to the burning of Njal'.¹ Similarly, events in *Langskaill* lead on from the brawl and Erlend's purchases as follows. The extra capital allows Harald to buy winter fodder from Finna, a widow on a neighbouring farm. This marks the beginning of a clandestine sexual relationship which eventually results in Finna

arriving at Langskaill, revealing that she is pregnant and demanding that Harald should marry her. Harald, now unsure whether he is in fact the father and fearing for his position as community lawrikman, must comply. Eventually, Thorolf arrives home from France having made some money, but Langskaill is overcrowded and an uneasy atmosphere surrounds the abrasive and ill-tempered Finna. So Thorolf buys her farm, Skorn. When Finna and the child die in the late stages of her pregnancy it seems as if things are working – however tragically – towards a more harmonious solution for the family until Thorolf, finding it difficult to readjust to civilian life, commits a serious crime by assaulting a man in the kirkyard. Thorolf escapes to sea and it is at this point that the wider political situation begins to affect the family. In an utterly disproportionate punishment, the avaricious and southward-looking Earl confiscates Skorn from the absent Thorolf and installs a family of Scots incomers. Thorolf is enraged when he returns to discover what has happened and aggressively confronts the Scotsman living in his former home. In the culmination of events which began at the funeral, Harald takes the blame for his identical brother's second transgression, giving the Earl a convenient excuse to confiscate the lands and buildings of Langskaill, evicting Harald, his aged mother, both of his sisters and Erlend and forcing them into exile. Clearly, Lamb is working on a broad canvas. A fist fight sets off a trail of happenings which result ultimately in eviction and displacement. As well as following this extraordinarily complex course, the narrative contains the sub-plots of Geira's recovery from her ordeal, her son Suki's journey to adulthood, Geira and Erlend's marriage and the lives of other farmers in the district, particularly those next door at Netherskaill: the structure and the scale are worthy of any of the classical Icelandic sagas.

Lamb has quite deliberately and self-consciously placed his novel firmly within the saga tradition. His preface refers to it as 'This Saga' and, in the epilogue, the Icelandic schoolmaster who first reads the re-discovered vellum informs its owner that it is a 'family saga' (LS, 319), a more explicit definition and indication of the sub-category to which the

book belongs: that of the Family Saga as opposed to the King's Saga. Here we have a family, not particularly belligerent by the standards of their time but essentially peace-loving and good, who, due to circumstances largely outwith their control, find themselves in a desperate and life-threatening situation – this will be a familiar scenario to readers of the Icelandic sagas. Further points of contact abound.

In the first instance, there are a number of scenes or anecdotes that are reminiscent of earlier sagas. These lend *Langskaill* the flavour of saga and also enhance its historical credibility, describing as they do contemporary customs. The emotionally charged description of stallion fighting and horse racing which spills over into violence among riders and onlookers at Voy has a likely precedent in *Njal's Saga*² where Gunnar and Skarp-Hedin brawl with Thorgeir and Kol, the owners of an opposing stallion. Both incidents verge on serious violence which does not quite erupt on the day in question but is sufficiently bitter to build up tension in the narrative. The underwater competition where Suki eventually outwits his friend Erik by swimming into the submerged entrance of a cave is not unlike a contest described in *Laxdæla Saga*³ between Kjartan Olafsson and King Olaf Tryggvason in the river Nid in Norway. This could have come to Lamb via Eric Linklater's *The Men of Ness*.⁴ The game of strength which the men of Marwick play with the hide of a horse on the last day of Yule is modelled on a game described in *Sturlunga Saga* – Lamb provides this information in a footnote. While the burning of an enemy in his own home was a Norse commonplace and can be found in more than one chapter of *Orkneyinga Saga*, the burning of Hucheon Louttit in *Langskaill* is particularly similar to the destruction of the protagonist of *Njal's Saga*. Like Njal and Bergthora, the essentially innocent Louttit and his family take refuge together in their dwelling while an angry crowd congregates outside and proceed to set fire to the roof.

As we might expect in any genuine saga, there are various supernatural portents. Like Njal, Earl Magnus or Svein Asleifarson before him, Rognvald Isbister has a reliable 'second sense' and is able to call off a fishing trip, averting

disaster while a freak wave destroys boats from a neighbouring district (LS, 113). When a beggar woman, Matti Blakk, tells Erlend that he will 'get what he came for' he is as yet unaware that she refers to Geira's hand in marriage (LS, 65). Having seen a raven, she also successfully predicts a death before Harald's father Augmund perishes (LS, 65). In her communicative role, Matti is similar to the beggar women of *Njal's Saga*, who accelerate action by spreading news from one farm to the next. Harald sees a horse's hoof-print in the ashes of the straw in which his father's body has lain overnight, correctly foretelling the imminent death of Skarh's mare (LS, 71). The use of the supernatural in *Langskaill* serves exactly the same purpose as it does in the sagas: a prediction gives the reader a suggestion of events to come and therefore enhances suspense. What is the purpose of Erlend's visit? Why did Matti see a raven on her way to Langskaill? Why a horse's hoof print, rather than a human footprint? As Magnusson writes of the author of *Njal's Saga*:

By means of prophesy and visions, he could adumbrate future events without compromising his suspense effect or the conventional chronological presentation of the narrative.⁵

The more significant female characters of *Langskaill* also bear some resemblance to their saga counterparts. Osla, the wise and dignified mother and grandmother of the family might remind us of the matriarch of *Laxdæla Saga*, Unn the Deep Minded. The fractious and ill-tempered Finna is not quite a full-blown *Hetzerin*, but her sexual confidence and capacity to create strife are reminiscent of the archetype, Hallgerd Long-Legs.

Aside from these direct influences, there are also a number of stylistic connections with the Icelandic sagas which are apparent on a more subtle, textural level. Firstly, a number of gnomic or proverbial sayings are uttered by characters over the course of the story. These are conspicuous for their rhymes and alliteration. Lars Lönnroth explains the function of such sayings in saga:

The wise community spokesmen within the narrative have a tendency to state their views in the form of brief but succinct speeches, where they can make use of legal quotations, proverbs and other kinds of generalised statements ... In a confrontation scene with his adversaries at the Althing, for example, Njáll makes effective use of a well-known Norse *sententia*: 'Our land must be built with law or laid waste with lawlessness' (Ch. 70). In this case, the reference to a generally acknowledged and respected principle lends credibility to the speaker's cause.⁶

Lamb's proverbs are also uttered by his wise characters and are pithy and poetic (Njal's statement above is alliterative in Old Norse as well as in translation). The priest, Sir Helgi, quotes the deceased Augmund and the wisdom of both men is clear in the warning to would-be seafarers: 'the King says "sail" but "wait" says the wind or widows may wail' (LS, 265). Harald, too, is a prudent and sensible character who advises, also in this alliterative vein, that his brother should 'Remember wrath will not help right a wrong' (LS, 273). This is very similar in essence to the saga truism 'the hand that struck is soon sorry'. Other stylistic threads connecting *Langskaill* to the Icelandic sagas include the representation of time, which in *Langskaill* tends to be measured in terms of natural rather than numerical increments. During the day, the time is told by the position of the sun on a hill: 'The sun had barely gone a cock-stride along the hill when Erik came running...'; 'Sometimes the sun would be over the Eversty before (Thorolf) got up' (LS, 242; 277). The time of night is measured by the position of the Pleiades: 'I knew by the star that the night was far spent' (LS, 173). Erlend measures his own life not in terms of years, but in terms of Yule nights: 'I have seen seventy Yule nights' (LS, 9). Similarly, the measurement of time in winters rather than years is commonplace in saga: numbers, dates or hours are less relevant than the simple fact that time is passing. The measurement of time in this way illustrates also the island writer's enhanced sensitivity – so apparent in writers like Edwin Muir or George Mackay Brown – to his outside environment. Imagery, too, is

drawn appropriately from these natural surrounds so that a body buried in the French forest is covered in a simply effective 'cold blanket of leaves' (LS, 62). Metaphor is not common, though, and it is worth remembering that the classical sagas also contain only a very limited amount of imagery. The language of the novel is very close to the simple saga style rendered so effectively in English in modern translations by scholars such as Edwards, Magnusson and Pálsson. Latinate diction is kept to a minimum, expression is direct and largely unadorned, with description generally giving way to action.

The pre-fifteenth century history of Orkney is also touched upon. Lamb's characters reveal their perceptions of themselves and their place in that history, as in the following speech which Harald delivers to two arrogant and heavy-handed Danish tax collectors:

Let me tell you that we are a proud people who fled here from tyranny. Our rights were respected under the King of Norway. Last year you needed an armed guard and I can understand why. If you talk to the lawrikmen like this how do you conduct your business with a poor bondi? Pay up? Of course I shall pay up. To do otherwise is against the law. (LS, 139-40)

Harald's folk memory of the original Norse settlers' flight from the tyranny of Harald Fairhair is the likely truth, albeit a significantly different story from that told in *Orkneyinga Saga*.⁷ This idea of island independence or of Orkney as a small nation or commonwealth (the locals are Orkneyingar, not Norwegians or Danes, and run their own law courts) is reminiscent of the political system of medieval Iceland, although what Harald is describing seems to have been more of an independent mindset or a situation where well-to-do *bonder* enjoyed a large measure of self-determination, as opposed to the complete independence of the Icelandic commonwealth. Yet, the flight from tyranny westward from mainland Scandinavia and the enjoyment of at least some measure of political autonomy as well as the

maintenance of a legal system worthy of Harald's respect (think again of Njal's comments, which are likely to be representative of the author's views, on the necessity of the law in Iceland) were common chapters in the history of both Iceland and Orkney. An attempt to describe a passing Golden Age before political encroachment from Norway and the resultant anarchic disruption is a driving force behind much of the saga writing of thirteenth century Iceland and extends here into *Langskaill* as Scotland begins to take interest in the Orkney earldom.

Despite these fairly conspicuous and frequent parallels with the Icelandic sagas, direct connections between *Langskaill* and *Orkneyinga Saga* are curiously scant. *Orkneyinga Saga* is nebulous anyhow and cannot be confined to one or other strand of saga writing: similarities to the Icelandic sagas are in many respects similarities to *Orkneyinga Saga*, particularly in the stylistic terms outlined above. But we might expect this Orkney novel to draw more heavily on the saga which takes place in the same islands: Linklater and Brown both make extensive use of *Orkneyinga Saga*. Lamb, however, seems to be aware of the pitfalls of recycling material and while he acknowledges the influence of the Icelandic sagas, he points out that he consciously avoided *Orkneyinga Saga* while writing *Langskaill*.⁸ There are really only a few tentative links. The character of Sir Helgi, the priest, might seem reminiscent of Bishop William the Old, an influential historical figure who features in *Orkneyinga Saga*. Even by medieval standards, Bishop William is a remarkably worldly character for a spiritual man. He intervenes and offers counsel in political situations; harbours Svein Asleifarson, successfully pleading his case to Earl Paul after the killing of Svein Breast-Rope; and he accompanies Earl Rognvald, advising on the best way to attack an enemy ship during the pilgrimage-cum-viking cruise in the Mediterranean. In his advice to Harald following the burning of Hucheon Louttit, Sir Helgi's superior grasp of the legal and political situation and his similarity to his influential and astute predecessor come to the fore:

... it is my Christian duty to defend the rights and liberties of every man, for we are all the same under the eyes of God. To that end I urged you to pursue with all vigour the death of Hucheon Louttit and to bring the perpetrators to justice. At the same time it behoves me to alert you and others like you to a clever conspiracy to drive us further and further into the Scotch domain. (LS, 224)

Sir Helgi has an intelligence of matters in the world of men and an understanding of politics denied to many around him; he differs from William the Old only in the respect that his Christianity – more than any political affiliation – is the predominant influence behind his counsel. The similarity between these two might, of course, stem simply from the central role of the church in mediaeval politics and may not be a true intertextual link. Further echoes of *Orkneyinga Saga* certainly include Skarth's promise to hang Rognvald Isbister's head from his stirrup (LS, 82), which can only remind us of the vivid image of Earl Sigurd the Powerful riding north for Orkney with the head of the Scots chieftain Mælbrigte Tusk swinging from his saddle.⁹ Like Skarth, Sigurd is fast approaching his own death at this point. Also, the Cult of St. Magnus is shown to be alive and well in fifteenth century Orkney. Although Lamb deliberately avoids using Magnus' name for any of his central characters, some of them make a pilgrimage to Kirkwall to visit his shrine and pray that the saint will restore a neighbour's power of speech (LS, 247). This duly happens, and we might also suspect that Suki's private prayer to Magnus is what returns his uncle Thorolf home safely from sea after the family hear his ship has gone down. The madman seen by the pilgrims in the cathedral may have been suggested by Thorbjorn, son of Gyrd, 'who was insane, but when he was taken to (the shrine of) Earl Magnus he was cured immediately'.¹⁰ Thorbjorn is one of three cured of insanity at the saint's shrine in *Orkneyinga Saga*. The reputed efficacy of St. Magnus spans centuries, seas and the Norse world. He is central to the writing of George Mackay Brown, whose novel *Magnus* culminates in a similar pilgrimage to the shrine. But of course Magnus' story in extant written form

begins with *Orkneyinga Saga* and these references to his cult can be considered a further tentative connection between *Langskaill* and that saga.

This method of drawing together material from diverse sources and shaping it into an effective aesthetic form is, as mentioned earlier, similar to that used by the author of *Orkneyinga Saga*. Another source which was used by the saga authors was Scandinavian folklore. As well as its saga influences, *Langskaill* draws heavily on traditional Orkney folk tales and superstitions. The Christian/pagan dichotomy of the medieval Norse colonies and the Orkney folk tale looms large, with pagan practices very much in evidence, albeit on an underground level. Thorolf bleeds his pony on St. Stephen's day and while he is being chastised by the priest he thinks of the irony in the fact that pagan games are being played by children all over Orkney at that same time of year (LS, 264-5). Characters refer to Ran, the sea God (LS, 127), and Odin worship (LS, 95) as well as Thor and his eight footed steed, Sleipnir (LS, 123), but live their lives within an essentially Christian framework. It is when they put their lives at the mercy of the elements and go to sea that their faith in the Christian God is tested to its limits: Rognvald takes the snagging of his fishing hook on the door jamb to be an omen of bad luck and stays ashore (LS, 115), other boats are lost on the day. When his superstition, or fear of the old sea Goddess, is proven correct, he thanks the Holy Virgin for his second sight! As well as references to the Norse Gods, specific Orkney folk tales or customs are incorporated. Harald is able to transfer Margrit's multiple sclerosis to another person by means of an intricate spell involving a cog full of her urine which is emptied at a boundary gate. Rognvald Isbister is the first to pass over the ground and dies shortly afterwards; Margrit recovers from the incurable illness. A strikingly similar motif is recorded by Ernest Marwick:

... water in which an invalid had been washed would be poured on the ground at one of the slaps or gateways of the toonship: the next person who passed through would become ill and the sick one well.¹¹

Likewise, Suki's distress, while ploughing, at the loss of the *dian stane* (LS, 205) can also be traced when we look to Marwick:

No one is sure whether the *dian stane*, a piece of stone, frequently dark red or brown in colour, which was hung on the beam of the old Orkney plough and spoken of as a luck stone, ought to be regarded as a sun symbol ... the Norwegian *dynestein* was regarded as a missile thrown by Thor, the thunder-God, at the trolls.¹²

The loss of the stone results, or seems to result, in the beginning of the ebb of the family's run of good luck and coincides with the first disagreement with their new neighbour, Hucheon Louttit. Like the aforementioned portents, these folk charms or spells are shown to be highly effective. What is predicted always turns out in some shape or form. Although the inclusion of these Orkney myths certainly gives them a renewed currency and the characters of the novel undoubtedly believe in them, this cannot really be considered magic realism. In *Langskaill*, the results of portents or spells can always be ascribed to coincidence: ultimately, interpretation is open to the reader and remains ambiguous. We might feel that, because events so consistently work out as predicted, the magic is there, but a scientific explanation (i.e. coincidence) always remains possible. A closer definition of magic might be that which cannot be explained by science as coincidence. Lamb cites Norwegian Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter* as the major influence behind *Langskaill*.¹³ Undset's 1927 novel tells the story a girl growing up in medieval Norway and draws on similar saga and folk tale roots. As a child, Kristin encounters the fairy queen in the forest and narrowly escapes being drawn into the eldritch realm. This early encounter reverberates through the novel. *Kristin Lavransdatter* provides an interesting contrast to the use of the supernatural in *Langskaill*, however, where no eldritch characters actually appear, let alone interact with the 'real characters. This apparition and interaction might be one measure of the extent of magic realism within a literary text. *Langskaill* remains

somewhere between realism and magic. It does seem uncanny that every prediction should come true and every spell should work. Erlend is a convincing 15th century sceptic, rather than a post-enlightenment anachronism, when he tells:

I had often been told of spirits haunting boundaries in the grimlings but I had scoffed at such tales. The narrow track offered no escape for us; we had to approach this ghoulis monster and pass if we dared ... (LS, 29)

On this occasion, his scepticism serves him correctly, but later he is deeply unsettled by Rognvald's death after he has passed through the enchanted gate: 'But what I now have to say is like a real fairy story' (LS, 160). The narrative voice carries authority and we are inclined to believe the supernatural *is* at work.

A number of more current, modern anecdotes, which I would term 'twentieth century lore', are also incorporated into the narrative. The stories are characteristically short and humorous and provide comic relief in what is sometimes a dark novel. For instance, two rabbits are placed by an uncle in a boy's snare: the boy then places three in his uncle's snare to show he has not been fooled (LS, 276). A cow coughs, spraying an immaculately dressed bystander with excrement (LS, 140). A boy's grandmother tells him they will have spiced cakes on Christmas day 'if (they) are spared'; the boy asks if they will have plain bannocks as usual 'If (they are) not spared' (LS, 256). All of these anecdotes are based on true stories and I would suggest they are significant on a level deeper than straightforward humour. Lamb's method here would have appealed to Muir or Brown, for it demonstrates that human nature remains essentially the same from century to century. Brown's poem 'To A Hamnavoe Poet of 2093' expresses this idea clearly:

Do your folk laugh and cry
With gentle ups-and-downs

Not so different, I think
From talk in Skarabrae doors¹⁴

These events are just as likely to have happened five hundred or five thousand years ago as today. What appeals to 'us' naturally appealed to 'them' and the enjoyment of humour is integral to the Fable.

The most significant piece of 'lore' in *Langskaill*, however, belongs firmly in the category of folklore. Erlend passes on to Suki an Icelandic folk tale which was told to him by his grandmother. The story occupies a framed and central position within the narrative, taking up three pages at precisely the mid-point of the novel. It runs along the following lines: A stranger arrives in the district and sets up a simple dwelling in the mountains above the valley farms. The locals do not trust him, suspecting him of stealing their sheep. One day a group of farmers go into the mountains to investigate and find his home empty but for a solitary raven. They discover the man outside, leaning over a crag, trying to rescue one of their sheep from a ledge below. He becomes their friend. At this point in the telling of the tale Suki falls asleep, but Erlend tells the remainder of the story to Geira. The man is a hunter who nevertheless treats animals well, looking after creatures in danger. He has saved the raven, which had caught its leg in a crevice. He releases the raven and time passes. One day he is out hunting when a raven passes overhead and begins to harass him, stealing his cap and dropping it further along the hillside. As he retrieves the cap, there is a violent rockfall on the part of the mountainside where he had been standing: the raven has saved his life. He notices the bird is dangling one leg. It is, of course, the raven he rescued. Geira then remarks that the tale is similar to one told about a quarry in Orkney. Marwick records the quarry tale as follows:

The quarrymen observed that a crow had built her nest close to where they were working. It seemed to some of them that it would be an excellent joke to boil the crow's eggs and subsequently replace them, in order to see how long the crow would sit on them in an attempt to hatch them. Although one man objected strongly, the scheme was carried out. The eggs were taken when the crow was absent and were back on the nest when she returned.

Events took a different course from what the quarrymen had anticipated. The crow appeared to realise that something had happened to her eggs. She even seemed to know who had been responsible for the trick. She was restless and acted strangely. One day, when the men were working in the quarry, she swooped down and snatched away the cap of the workman who had tried to befriend her. She did not go far, and the man, hoping to retrieve his cap, pursued her. She led him a tantalising chase, dropping his cap and picking it up again, until he was a considerable distance from the cliffs. At last she let it go and flew off. When the man returned to the quarry, he found that part of the cliff had fallen in, killing all his workmates.¹⁵

As well as illustrating the shared cultural heritage of the Orkneyingars and the Icelanders, the tale as told in *Langskaill* includes a significant differential in that the man whom the raven saves is a stranger who has fallen under suspicion but is eventually proven to be moral and upright. This is also the part of the tale which is told to Suki, in order, it seems, to teach him to reserve judgement and to accept incomers – something which becomes a central concern of the novel. Placing it in the very middle of his story, Lamb invests a parable-like teaching in the depths of this ancient folk-tale. The lesson survives through the medieval genre of saga in order to make a simple and directly relevant point to modern readers: strangers can integrate.

Because *Langskaill* describes the twilight years of politically Norse Orkney before the islands changed hands from Denmark to Scotland, the strangers here are of course the Scots, who are present in the consciousness of the Orkneyingars from the outset and who begin to appear physically in the second half of the book, following the tale of the stranger and the raven. J. Storer Clouston, author of *A History of Orkney* (1932), embodied the once popular view that the Norse era was a Golden Age of self-determination and political autonomy in Orkney and that the islands later slid into a permanent decline stemming from the beginning of Scots rule.

More recently, William Thomson has shown that the situation was in fact much more complex than this and that the Scots earls were not always the villains of popular belief. However, Thomson remains in no doubt about the turbulence and difficulties surrounding the changeover, as well as the incompetence and unfortunate circumstances behind the shift of power:

The pawning of the islands in 1468 by a Danish king short of ready cash to provide an adequate dowry for his daughter on the occasion of her marriage to James III of Scotland marks a decisive point in the history of Orkney. But, however important, this sordid transaction was only a step in the very lengthy process of Scottish penetration, beginning long before 1468 ...¹⁶

This Scottish penetration, or connection, goes back as far as the reigns of rulers such as Thorfinn the Mighty or St. Magnus, both of whom had extensive connections in Scotland; but it is true to say that the handing over of the islands to Scotland opened a watershed of incomers. The beginnings of this process are described in *Langskaill*, but before this there is a good deal of discussion of the previous overlords, the Danes. The effects of Denmark's shortage of 'ready cash' are manifest in Orkney, as the locals Erlend meets are quick to point out. The people he encounters in Kirkwall will not entertain him until they discover he is not Danish, but Icelandic, telling him:

'You know we don't like the Danes. What have the Danes ever done for us but collect taxes? Higher taxes year after year after year. We think the Danes are bad but wait till the Scots really come in they say.' (LS, 13)

Not only are levels of taxation crippling, but the methods of collection are antagonistic and overbearing. The Danish taxmen are archetypal bureaucrats, rude and arrogant, with 'fine clothes and haughty airs', who talk down to the locals and commandeer horses already hired to Erlend and Skarh (LS, 26). Thorolf's decision to leave *Langskaill* for the war in

France stems partly from his desire for adventure but is ultimately forced by the burden of taxation on the farm (LS, 43). Worst of all, the islanders live in fear of pirates such as those who have terrorised Geira, and receive little or no protection from the government to whom they pay skat (LS, 39). Bureaucracy and the rulings, impositions or taxes of centralised government are concerns of many peripheral European communities today, and this is another level on which *Langskaill* begins to take on a contemporary resonance.

Then the Scots begin to arrive. Inter-racial tension is the central concern of *Langskaill* and one aspect of the book which is particularly relevant to the present. Demographic change is, paradoxically, one of the few constants in Orkney history. From Pictish times there have been successive influxes of people: Norse, Scots and, particularly within the last century, English. Although no official figures are available which can reveal the extent of this population shift, there is no question that a significant number of people have moved into the islands – particularly from urban areas of England – since World War Two. The process of integration between the indigenous and migrant populations is generally relaxed and largely without animosity. An element of siege mentality does exist, however, with occasional rows breaking out in the letter pages of the local press regarding, for instance, the appointment of individuals 'from south' to highly paid positions, particularly within the local authority. So Lamb's fifteenth century Scots incomers and his indigenous Norse population have their modern counterparts.

In the first half of the story, the Scots have a benign or benevolent influence and are represented only as neighbours from whom Larens Myreman has learned the skills of surgery and medicine (LS, 167). Occasional Gaelic beggars or peddlers appear and Erlend makes the derogatory remark at one stage that Harald looks like a 'Scotch tramp' (LS, 179). Because the Scots, or the Gaels, are represented only by those on the margins of society they seem like second class citizens to the Orkneyingar who refer to 'Scotch lice' brought by the peddlers (LS, 168). There is a sinister hint, however, at the reason behind the vagrancy: 'many ... were fleeing Scotland after

harsh laws had been brought in against them' (LS, 168); the Orkneyingar are soon to discover the force of these 'harsh laws' for themselves.

Huceon Louttit is the first of two Scots characters to appear in the community. In a further demonstration of the increasing centralisation of power, the earl circumvents Harald's authority as lawrikman by moving Louttit – under cover of darkness – into a vacant property. Louttit quickly proves himself to be an abrasive character who will not respect Norse law, who lacks interest in essential communal maintenance work and goads Erlend into assaulting him by criticising Suki and making remarks about his illegitimate parentage (LS, 206, 209). These unpleasant aspects of his character might seem all the less excusable when we consider that he has a keen intelligence, quickly picking up Norn and developing new farming methods. Locals suspect him of spying for the Scots. Resentment towards him grows when he is suspected of the arson of Langskaill's barn. Eventually he is burned under his own roof. However, in the cold light of dawn, when Erlend assesses the punishment alongside Louttit's crimes, he can only conclude that he had done nothing worse than Rognvald Isbister, the local troublemaker who was patiently tolerated. He asks himself 'had Louttit been treated like that merely because he spoke a different language?' (LS, 213). The ugliness of the racist crime is apparent to Erlend, the thoughtful and morally just narrator. It is noteworthy that Louttit's abrasive character is carefully tempered by the good nature and popularity of his wife and children, the deadly animosity towards him is shown to be mindless racism which follows no logic.

The second individual representative of Scotland to appear is Gawain Spence who, with his family, moves into Skorn, formerly Thorolf's farm. In an echo of Erlend's folk tale, Spence is referred to on his arrival as 'the stranger' (LS, 243). In another similarity to the tale, the locals are initially suspicious of him, but eventually agree that his woven cloth and cash purchases of wool can only be beneficial to the community. Suki seems not to remember the teachings of the folk tale and is openly resentful towards Spence: 'tell him to

go back where he came from!' (LS, 244). The Scotsman does not have his troubles to seek and when Thorolf returns, enraged at the appropriation of Skorn in his absence, he takes the first opportunity to question Spence's honesty in dealings over cloth, resulting in the assault which leads to the loss of Langskaill. Thorolf's grudge, fuelled by feelings of racial resentment, results in disaster. It is never clear whether Spence has indeed been dishonest or whether the language barrier or cultural differences are to blame for a simple misunderstanding. Like Louttit's wife and children, Spence seems to integrate well and there is definite courtesy between him and the *bonder* of the district, he shows his willingness to assimilate by greeting them warmly in Norn: 'Góðan dag, bóendr' (LS, 279). Harald and Erlend sensibly accept him with goodwilled amusement, but Thorolf's rash judgement and actions have dire consequences for everyone.

Scotland as an encroaching medieval political superpower might seem a particularly novel concept for modern readers. Here, a nation which would usually rather dissociate itself from unjust or belligerent aspects of the British Empire is shown – more than a century before even the union of the crowns – to have its own imperialist hunger:

For long the Scots had cast their covetous eyes on the thriving stockfish trade with Norway and Iceland and buying land was a simple way in which to get round the monopoly ... Some land, it was said, had been gained by dubious means, the lawrikmen conniving at the entry of the Scots and feathering their own nests. (LS, 224-225)

The blame is balanced though, and there are corrupt Orkneyingar as well as avaricious Scots. Tempting as it may be to draw comparisons with the advent of the new parliament in Edinburgh and Orkney's modern oil wealth (especially when Orkney was the only area to cast a cautious yes/no vote in the referendum), Lamb insists this connection is not intended.¹⁷ He goes on to show how, gradually, Scotland assumes control of Kirk and Law and the Norse way of life begins to change forever. Thomson describes the process which

followed in outlying districts such as Marwick in the following terms:

The word 'scottification' has been invented to describe the process of Scottish penetration, but there was at work an equally powerful process of 'orknification' by which incomers not only conformed in an outward way, but were completely assimilated to Orkney society. ... Those who adopt a racial view of Orkney history and endeavour to measure the extent of Scottish blood in the veins of the earls are likely to over-simplify the highly complex interaction between Norse and Scottish culture ... The Norseness of Orkney survived, not in its earls and clergy, but in its peasant culture.¹⁸

This is hardly the cultural annihilation we might expect. The eventual handing over of Orkney to Scotland marked a change in the cultural and demographic make-up of Orkney which has never resulted in complete 'scottification', as Lamb's choice of saga as a medium would seem to demonstrate.

Why then, to conclude, does Lamb return to this genre and place his work directly within this deepest of northern European traditions? I would suggest that because Orkney is once again experiencing a large-scale demographic change he feels a compulsion to return to the islands' literary roots and to stamp an Orcadian identity on his writing, perpetuating tradition while at the same time embracing change and advocating the peaceful integration of incomers. Diana Whaley has postulated that the narratives of saga 'were often shaped by ... ideological templates derived from more recent Norwegian history'¹⁹ as much as by any compulsion to accurately detail the earlier historical happenings they ostensibly record. She is describing the 'real' sagas of the high middle ages, but *Langskaill* fits the criterion very neatly in making its point about present day demographic change within the context of historical fiction. Like Earl Rognvald Kolson or Eric Linklater²⁰ before him, Lamb values tradition and seeks at once to celebrate and remould it. Where he

surpasses his predecessors, though, is in making a directly relevant statement about the present.

Notes

1. M. Magnusson, *Introduction to Njal's Saga*, tr. M. Magnusson and H. Pálsson, (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 12.
2. *Njal's Saga*, pp. 142-44.
3. *Laxdale Saga*, tr. M. Magnusson and H. Pálsson, (Harmondsworth, 1969), pp. 144-45.
4. See J. D'Arcy, *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen* (East Linton, 1996), pp. 205-14, for a comprehensive description of the influences of saga on *The Men of Ness*.
5. M. Magnusson, *Introduction to Njal's Saga*, p. 17.
6. Lars Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas', in John Tucker (ed.), *Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York, 1989), p. 85.
7. The saga postulates that the islands were held in fief from the kings of Norway, who were their original conquerors.
8. Interview with Gregor Lamb, Waird, Marwick, October 3rd, 1999.
9. *Orkneyinga Saga*, tr. H. Pálsson and P. Edwards, (Harmondsworth, 1978), Ch. 5, p. 27.
10. *Orkneyinga Saga*, p. 105.
11. E. Marwick, *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland* (London, 1975), p. 136.
12. E. Marwick, p. 65.
13. Interview with Gregor Lamb.
14. G. M. Brown, *Following a Lark* (London, 1996), p. 13.
15. E. Marwick, p. 147.
16. W. P. L. Thomson, *History of Orkney* (Edinburgh, 1987), p. 107.
17. Interview with Gregor Lamb.
18. W. P. L. Thomson, p. 108.
19. D. Whaley, 'The Kings Sagas', in *Viking Revaluations* (London, 1993), pp. 55-56.
20. Earl Rognvald revitalised already ancient skaldic verse forms in the twelfth century (see Ole Bruhn, 'Earl Rognvald and the Rise of Saga Literature', in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch and Christopher D. Morris (eds.), *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 240-47), while Linklater returned to saga during the Scottish Renaissance in the 1930s with *The Men of Ness*.