

REVIEWS

Landnåmsboken

Translated into Norwegian by Liv Kjørsvik Schei; with introduction and notes by Hermann Pálsson.

Thorleif Dahls
Kulturbibliotek, Aschehoug,
Oslo, 1997.
283pp.
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Landnámabók, the most important source for Iceland's early days as a Norse frontier settlement, has now arrived in a translation into Norwegian.

Admittedly, there are long passages here that may not appeal to a modern reader looking for entertainment on every page. Lists of genealogy and locations will certainly find devoted readers, but most readers will be more excited to discover the many anecdotes and stories in among all the factual history. We learn a great deal about a society taking shape, about early Christians (with a background from the Northern or Western Isles) living among dedicated heathens, and about the

legal and sacral organisation of the land; but this is also the story of a frontier, a European Wild-West. In the laconic language we know so well from the sagas, we are e.g. told the story about the old man who was challenged to *holmgang* and lost his farm and his life to a professional viking, and about Illuge and Holm-Starre who decided to swap land and wives and all the animals on their farms. Illuge got Holm-Starre's wife, Jorunn, but Illuge's wife, Sigrid, refused to be part of the deal and went and hung herself in the temple.

The focus is clearly on the Norse settlers to Iceland, but now and again we see a glimpse of the Celtic contribution to the settlement of Iceland. The Celts are present as slaves, and when we hear about them in any detail it will be because they had worked their way out of slavery and become free men, or because they had opposed their situation and were punished severely.

Liv Kjørsvik Schei has produced a very capable and flowing translation. The translation has been made into a conservative

Norwegian *bokmål* with only two genders and without diphthongs etc., while the Icelandic names are changed as little as possible, which means that e.g. the original diphthongs are kept. This may give the impression of inconsistency but it is rather a reflection of the curious language situation in Norway, and it seems a wise decision. Hermann Pálsson has both helped with the translation and written a most instructive introduction and notes to each chapter, proving yet again his eminent ability to communicate his scholarship. The many maps at the back are very helpful, likewise the index of settlers and place-names mentioned in the book.

Considering its obvious importance as an historical source as well as its literary qualities, it is remarkable to think that this is the first modern translation of the complete work into any of the Scandinavian languages. The situation is not much brighter for English. Right enough, there exists an English translation by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, published by the University

of Manitoba Press in 1972, but this is now long out of print. Iceland's millennium as a Christian state in 2000 ought to be a proper occasion to publish a new English version of this extraordinary book.

Arne Kruse