

## Hermann Pálsson (1921-2002)

With the sudden death of Professor Hermann Pálsson Iceland and Scotland have lost an eminent scholar and the Scottish Society for Northern Studies has lost one of its founding fathers and a former President. He was a member of the Committee from 1968 to 1982 and a President of the Society from 1970 to 1971. Apart from his contribution to the administration of the Society Hermann has over the years given many talks to members of the Society as well as contributing frequently to *Northern Studies* with articles and reviews.

Hermann Pálsson was born as sixth of twelve children on a small landholding on the Hunafjörður in the north of Iceland and was soon set to work on the farm. His mind, however, was quite elsewhere. Since, at the age of three, he learned to read from his older siblings, books became his passion. With an obvious talent for and interest in language studies, the path was set for a career as a teacher or academic in Iceland. But, after his first degree in Icelandic Studies at Reykjavík in 1947, Hermann made the unusual step of seeking his second degree in Irish Studies in Dublin, where he graduated in 1950. With this move he followed in the footsteps of other important Scandinavian scholars with knowledge of both the Old Norse and Celtic languages and cultures, men like C.J. Borgström, and Hermann's good friend, Magne Oftedal. While a main interest of his predecessors was to investigate the Norse influence on Celtic, Hermann made the reverse movement of cultural influence one of his main interests. Throughout his life he was to pursue the influence of Celtic and the Celts on the Old Norse culture and on Iceland, as in two of his last books, *Keltar á Íslandi* (1997) and *Vínlandið góða* (2001), as well as in his last article to *Northern Studies*, the masterly critical 'Vínland Revisited' (2000).

Hermann was appointed Lecturer in Icelandic in the Department of English Language at the University of Edinburgh in 1950. In 1982 he was given a personal chair. He managed to put the University of Edinburgh on the map as a centre of excellence in his field of teaching and research. One of the peaks of his career was when he initiated and

organized the First International Saga Conference in Edinburgh in 1971, attended by more than 100 scholars from all over the world. From the very beginning this became *the* international meeting-place for saga scholars.

Hermann was himself the best proof that being Icelandic, be it today or in the Middle Ages, was not equivalent to being parochial or the representative of a cultural periphery. One of his contributions to scholarly research that will outlive Hermann himself will be his outstanding work on the cultural links that Iceland had with the rest of Europe during the explosively creative centuries when the seemingly isolated Icelanders produced the arguably greatest European literary monument of the Middle Ages. Hermann proved, e.g. in his study *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's saga* (1971), that, in spite of their geographic isolation, the literate farmers and clerics of Iceland stood deeply rooted in a Christian European literary tradition.

Not always popular among those who would like to idolize the Icelandic literature as a mysteriously home-grown achievement, Hermann was organically suspicious towards established 'truths' and made it his mission to challenge many of them. Not only did he unveil the continental and Celtic links to medieval Iceland; he also suggested, in his book *Úr landnorðri. Samar og ystu rætur íslenskrar menningar* (1999), that northern Norway and especially the Sami had contributed much more to Icelandic culture than previously believed.

A lasting impression after Hermann will be his mastery of the English language: the outstanding command of the vocabulary, the clarity of thought and the lucidity of expression are evident in all his writing in English. The accent of his spoken English, however, left you in no doubt of the owner's origins. Hermann was proud to be Icelandic, and, as long as he was understood, he saw no point in attempting to hide his homeland's distinct signature on the appearance of his spoken English. For, although he had in one sense left Iceland, Iceland never left Hermann. As with many other expatriates, his homeland came closer to him with the perspective that physical and cultural distance can give. He became totally devoted, academically and personally, to exploring and promoting Iceland's monumental medieval

canon. This resulted in a series of learned editions and commentaries on individual medieval texts as well as a staggering number of translations into English. On his own or with Magnus Magnusson or Paul Edwards he translated no fewer than twenty volumes of individual sagas and saga collections – in itself a more than respectable work of a lifetime.

It is undoubtedly the many saga-translations that have been published in the series Penguin Classics that have made his name widespread within the English-speaking reading audience outside of academia. With these admirably readable translations and accompanying introductions Hermann accomplished more than most to put the literary heritage of Iceland centre-stage in the arena of Medieval European literature.

Hermann was a philologist in the original sense of the term. He was interested in all aspects of a text and its surroundings, not only the literary and the linguistic, but also its historical, cultural and social setting. A conversation with Hermann was a conversation with Renaissance man writ large. All those who got behind his sometimes brusque façade were invited to witness his wisdom and humanity and the memorable humour in his stories. Hermann had met them all, all the great scholars within Nordic and Celtic studies, and he often used anecdotes from them or about them to illustrate points he was making. A sample of this side of Hermann is the story he told about the Norwegian pioneer Celticist Carl Marstrander, when he as an eager, young scholar in the beginning of last century landed on the Blasket Islands outside Kerry in Ireland in order to study the local dialect. Marstrander had come from Norway with a carefully prepared speech in Old Irish – the only form of Celtic that he knew – and with this he addressed the group of locals gathered to greet him welcome on the island. When Marstrander had finished, he looked in anticipation at the leader of the island, anxious to hear his reply. The leader, instead of delivering the expected speech, exclaimed in genuine admiration: 'Is she not a beautiful language, the Norwegian one!'

The story was Hermann's way to ridicule the insufficiency of book learning without a background of living languages –

one of quite a few things he could be uncompromisingly critical of.

Hardly ever has the term 'retirement' been more inappropriate than when Hermann ended his working days at the university in 1988. A lively stream of books and articles proved that he still had much on his mind. His untimely death tore him away from a productive and rich life as a scholar, friend and family man. There are many of us finding this difficult to accept.

*Arne Kruse*