story, but people say that apart from those of higher rank than himself, he was the greatest man the western world has ever seen in ancient and modern times'. The last quoted have a habit, throught the language they employ, of making us aware that the men of the sagas were not so very different from ourselves – and that is exactly as it should be.

Ted Cowan.

Criminal Records: Ragnarr Hairy Breeches and Sons.

Alfred P. Smyth, **Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles 850–880** (xii + 307pp. £10.00. Oxford University Press, 1977).

Reviewed by John Simpson.

This is a very impressive book. Some of its arguments were sketched out in the first volume of Dr. Smyth's **Scandinavian York and Dublin** (Dublin, 1975), but his new book concentrates on a narrower period to splendid effect. The main text consists of 266 pages of scholarly, ingenious and relentless argument, based on a wide range of English, Irish, Scandinavian and other sources. Since it seeks genealogical, geographical and chronological precision from a welter of conflicting testimony, it is not exactly easy reading. (But it should be said that it is written in a pleasant style, and the excellent cross-references do help the reader to keep his bearings.) Judgement on the book will be the work of the next generation or two of scholars, rather than of the first few reviewers. But it can be said at once that this is a very exciting detective-story, with highly colourful (albeit thoroughly disagreeable) leading characters.

Dr. Smyth is one of those scholars who like to draw threads together, to make sense of things. He constructs a very clear picture of Viking activities in the British Isles, some of the main features of which are as follows: Ragnarr Hairy Breeches and his sons came from a dynasty of sea-kings operating in the Vík area of Norway and Danish Sjaelland. Ragnarr himself may well have sacked Paris in 845. Soon afterwards he led a Danish fleet against Norwegian settlers in the Scottish islands and eastern Ireland. He sacked Dublin, (re)instated his son Ívarr the Boneless as king

there, smashed the Norwegians at the battle of Carlingford Lough in 852 and was killed, possibly in Angelsey in the mid 850s, but certainly not in a Northumbrian snake-pit in the mid 860s. His son Ívarr in Dublin then made common cause with the Norwegian Ólafr the White, who was the same man as the Amlaibh mentioned in Irish sources. After some years of unpleasantness directed towards native Irish rulers and other Scandinavians such as Ketill Flatnose, Ólafr came to Scotland in the 860s to fight the Picts, while Ívarr led the Danish Great Army which destroyed Northumbria, East Anglia and their respective kings. Ólafr and Ívar then joined up again to sack Dumbarton in 870. Ólafr subsequently returned to Norway, to end up probably as the king in the Gokstad ship-burial, while Ívarr returned to Dublin. After Ívarr's death his brother Hálfdan was killed off the Irish coast while seeking to retain control of both Northumbria and Dublin. Nevertheless Ívarr's dynasty continued to supply leaders for both the Norwegians of Dublin and the Danes of York for much of the next century.

Ívarr the Boneless is at the centre of this marvellous composite picture, and having put him there Dr. Smyth allows himself a burst of hyperbole, describing Ívarr as the 'greatest war-leader that the British Isles had seen before the coming of the Normans.' On the other hand, since the careful Professor Turville-Petre is cautious about even one of the less complex pieces of the above picture, namely the identification of Ólafr the White with Amblaibh it can be seen how far Dr. Smyth's desire to draw threads together has led him.

Not that Dr. Smyth is always the iconoclast. His account of the exploits of the Danish Great Army in England (or rather, as he convincingly argues for the period from 871, two Great Armies) will hardly square with Peter Sawyer's revisionist view of the Army as 'Great' in impart rather than in numbers. His account of Ólafr and Ívarr as slave-traders on the grand scale appears to back up the powerful arguments of Kathleen Hughes that the Vikings were indeed the destructive force in Irish society that historians had always supposed. And when Dr. Smyth talks cheerfully of high-kings of ninth-century Ireland, rather than seeing the high-king, as Donncha Ó Corráin has done, as a concept evolved by eleventh-century poets and scholars for later kings to aim at, he manages to sound almost old-fashioned.

But the main points made by this book are novel and important. It is relatively easy to pick little holes in Dr. Smyth's grand picture. Firstly, he covers so much ground that he is bound to slip up occasionally. Since he salutes E.W. Robertson for his identification over a century ago of Ketill Flatnose as the same as one Caittil Find in the **Annals of Ulster**, it is regrettable that he calls him 'E.W. Robinson'. He also, occasionally and understandably, is tempted to have his cake and eat it. On pp. 171–84, for instance, since he is keen on insisting on his Irish context for Ívarr, he rejects the Scandinavian traditions about Ívarr's activities in Northumbria before the arrival of the Great Army, except for the fact of his being there, which suits his argument. He then sneaks some of them back again. Further, he suspends his cusomary scepticism about literary sources if they happen to mention the blood-eagle and ritual human sacrifice.

Putting such carping on one side, it must be said that Dr. Smyth casts new light on aspects of the Viking world from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. In particular, it does seem as if the ninth-century British Isles will never look quite the same again as they did before he wrote. The range and depth of his arguments should see to that. For instance, his interesting but somewhat heavy-handed tracing of literary parallels between **Völsunga saga** and **Ragnars saga** does not for me disprove the contention that Ragnarr died in a Northumbrian snake-pit. But his provision of an alternative Irish scenario for Ragnarr's later career does force me in that direction. Perhaps few people will accept all of Dr. Smyth's conclusions: it seems likely that most people will be stimulated by them: and certainly no one will be able to ignore them.