

Julian Meldon D'Arcy

*Scottish Skalds and Sagamen
Old Norse Influence on
Modern Scottish Literature*

Tuckwell Press, East Linton,
Scotland, 1996.
311pp., £14.99.
ISBN 1-898410-25-9.

This is an amazing book which sweeps across Scottish history and literature in panoramic fashion and impresses by the sheer amount of reading which must have gone into its preparation. It seems churlish, therefore, to say that it is also a disappointing book because one is left with a negative impression of the literature chosen and a sense of irritation because of the heavy-handed way in which points are made, even to the extent that individual words begin to annoy because they appear so often in the text: 'atavism' comes to mind.

When I first picked up *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen* and read the 'Contents' pages, it seemed that a treat was in store. Who, in this reviewer's prejudiced

opinion, could go far wrong with a group of writers such as Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Neil M. Gunn, Hugh MacDiarmid, John Buchan, David Lindsay, Naomi Mitchison, Edwin Muir, Erik Linklater and George Mackay Brown? In fact, only David Lindsay was not already a personal favourite and I was ready to be persuaded in his case as well. That, however, was not to be, because, as I soon became aware, it was no part of the purpose of the book to persuade the reader that there is a close relationship between Old Norse influence on modern Scottish literature and any kind of literary merit in the texts influenced. Perhaps that was not the intention and, therefore, one ought not to be too critical of D'Arcy, one of whose chief aims seems to be to focus on Norse and Celtic racial identity as portrayed in the works of these various writers. Even if that is accepted, however, it still niggles that the balance of focus is tilted away from the ways in which writers use Norse material creatively to enrich their texts, towards the supposed ways in which they use it to convey a

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political message.

There are good points to D'Arcy's book, once one adjusts to his socio-historical approach. He begins with a very useful chapter entitled 'Scotland and the Vikings: The Historical and Linguistic Background' and it is pleasing to see place and personal names featuring as scene setters. Thereafter, he covers the writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, by drawing the material together in this way, provides many insights into the developing awareness of Old Norse literature and history among writers and scholars of the time, with Sir Walter Scott being particularly notable. It is with Chapter 3, entitled 'Norseman and Celt: The Racial Debate in Scotland 1880-1940', that my own problems with the book begin and, unfortunately, continue, although some of the comments on the individual writers in later chapters do strike a chord. The chapter on George Mackay Brown, for instance, is interesting and it does communicate something of the imaginative power of his writing. D'Arcy's final conclusion is that:

Mackay Brown did not see the Vikings as creators of a particular ethos (cf. Linklater and Gunn), or as archetypal heroes (cf. Buchan and Linklater), or as bearers of an influential mythology (cf. Lindsay), but simply, and essentially, as ordinary, fallible, medieval Orcadians. In this respect it is probably fair to say that Mackay Brown's attempts to 'see the Vikings plain' (OT, 20) must be considered as having provided modern Scottish literature with its most convincing and effective realisation and interpretation of Scotland's Old Norse heritage.
[*Scottish Skalds and Sagamen*: 280]

It is, perhaps, because D'Arcy permits Mackay Brown to be a 'simple' storyteller that his comments on Mackay Brown are all the more convincing.

The overall impression left by this book is that its author is a scholar who has attempted to cover too much and, as a result, has skimmed over points which would have benefited from being much more fully developed

and has struggled to impose unity on diversity. Nevertheless, as indicated at the start, the sheer scope of coverage in the book is impressive. D'Arcy has drawn together, into one volume, many different literary works and the links between and among these, which he has suggested, will be debated at length and other fresh links will be perceived and, in turn, debated. D'Arcy has done a substantial service to the cause of promoting discussion of 'Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature.' His efforts deserve recognition and praise.

Doreen J. Waugh

David Stevenson

Scotland's Last Royal Wedding. The Marriage of James VI and Anne of Denmark

John Donald Publishers Ltd.,
Edinburgh, 1997.
158pp., £14.95.
ISBN 0-85976-451-6.

The marriage of King James VI of Scotland and Anne of Denmark in 1589 is probably best remembered for the notorious witch-trials which followed in its wake. But as David Stevenson points out in his lively new book, James's biographers have shown surprisingly little interest in the detail of the marriage itself: an omission for which he takes them to task:

James's marriage and its context are particularly interesting and even entertaining in a number of respects. It was Scotland's last royal marriage, coronation and ceremonial entry into Edinburgh before the union of the crowns of 1603 led to the removal of the Stuart dynasty to London. The marriage was