

Julian Meldon D'Arcy. *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature*. East Linton, Scotland: The Tuckwell Press, 1996. 311 pp. ISBN 1 898410 25 9. £14.99.

To the reader who has a background in Norse, twentieth-century Scottish

literature gives much that is familiar. Authors retell, and reinterpret, historical narratives from Scotland's Viking Age; several fictional tales are set in that period, too, and are provided with appropriate, Norse-sounding place- and personal names, whether fictional or real in origin: Weddergarth, Muspel, Streamfirth/Straumfiord, Greenay, Birsay; Ragnar, Haakon, Thorstan, Sigurd, Harald Hardrada, Leif Ericson. The principal task Julian D'Arcy (JD'A) has set himself in this useful study has been to answer that reader's almost inevitable question: just how large is the debt that modern Scottish writers so obviously owe to Norse literature and history?

JD'A's work is in two parts: the core of the book, a series of case-studies of writers (chapters 4 - 12), is preceded by three chapters which set out the historical and cultural background to what he variously describes as: 'the post-1920 Scottish renaissance' (p. 48), 'the twentieth-century Scottish Renaissance' (p. 53), and 'the Scottish Renaissance' (p. 65). The first of these (with appropriate use of capitals) is the most accurate; the last will be unsatisfactory for anyone aware of the wonderful flowering of Scottish literature during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But this is a quibble: the ambitious scope of JD'A's study is evident in the fact that, to a large extent, his 'Scottish Renaissance' can be said to comprise the works of the writers discussed in his later chapters (here given in JD'A's, rather than chronological ordering): Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Neil M. Gunn, Hugh MacDiarmid, John Buchan, David Lindsay, Naomi Mitchison, Edwin Muir, Eric Linklater and George Mackay Brown. The question arises: why should so many important Scottish writers have been so fascinated by Norse culture?

It must be stated at the outset that this is no new phenomenon. In his review of Scotland's discovery and use of Norse literature during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries (chapter 2), JD'A reminds us that works by two Scots, Dr John Campbell's *A Polite Correspondence: Or Rational Amusement* (1741), and James Macpherson's 'The Highlander' and *Fingal* (1758 and 1762), precede Thomas Percy's *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763), the text which is often reckoned to mark the beginning of Norse influence on English literature. But the works of Campbell and Macpherson are not, in fact, the earliest Norse-influenced texts. JD'A supplies new and valuable information, when he draws attention to the publication in Edinburgh of

Hardykenute: A Fragment, apparently the work of Lady Elizabeth Wardlaw. This text appeared in 1719, that is to say, more than twenty years before the publication of *A Polite Correspondence*.

Two hundred and eighty years after Lady Wardlaw's *Hardykenute*, Norse literature continues to exercise its fascination for Scottish writers. On Sunday, 3rd January, 1999, BBC Radio 4 broadcast Kathleen Jamie's reworking of *Voluspá*, a narrative told by a female narrator in a shamanic trance, and performed by Jamie herself. On reflection, it is not surprising that artists working in Scotland should be so aware of Norse culture. The landscape and place-names provide permanent evidence of a Norse past, while *Orkneyinga saga*, widely read in translation, is one of the key written sources of our knowledge of medieval Scotland.

Evidence of just how powerful an influence the Norse background exerts may be found in the works of the English-born composer Peter Maxwell Davies, who has a house in Orkney, and who has recalled how, while he was conducting one of his own pieces in St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, he was constantly aware that the saint's mortal remains are interred only a few feet from where he was standing. Examples of Maxwell Davies's compositions since his move to Orkney include a chamber opera on the martyrdom of St Magnus (after George Mackay Brown's novel *Magnus*), a setting of five of the runes in Maeshowe, and a setting of a Norn *Pater Noster*. The mead of Norse inspiration remains a potent brew in Scotland!

JD'A argues that there is more behind the twentieth-century concern with the Norse past than mere tradition, however. He plausibly seeks to trace that concern to a very public, and at times heated debate, which formed a part of Scotland's search for an identity that should be clearly separate from that of England. This search was in turn part of a wider movement throughout the British Isles, which led to a renewal of interest in the Celtic past of Ireland, Wales, and the Isle of Man. In Scotland, the issues were not so simple, as is made evident in the title of JD'A's chapter 3: 'Norseman and Celt: The Racial Debate in Scotland 1880-1940'.

This was a debate in which the arguments focused about the use of racial stereotyping, and the modern reader will be surprised and shocked to read JD'A's clearly presented case for just how many of his 'Scottish Skalds

and Sagamen' were influenced by those arguments. Hugh MacDiarmid, for example, claimed that 'Scottish Scotland must be a Gaelic Scotland' (JD'A, p. 98), while Lewis Grassie Gibbon, equally naïvely, held the opposed view, that 'the Celts were only "a conquering military caste" who ... are only "a thin strand in the Scottish population"' (JD'A, p. 56). Racial characteristics are stereotyped, too, from Naomi Mitchison's portrayal of the Vikings' 'cold northern curiosity [concerning] women from a different race and culture' (JD'A, p. 160), to Neil M. Gunn's 'typical picture' of a Celtic tribesman as 'fashioning something by himself and whistling a low liquid tune he only half heard' (JD'A, p. 70).

JD'A is properly aware of the potential dangers inherent in racially-based stereotyping, and his comments on the use made of them by individual authors can be perceptive. When one of John Buchan's characters attributes the inevitable defeat of the Jacobite cause to the Highlander's 'own shifting nature',¹ he is merely echoing his creator's prejudices, as JD'A makes clear. He quotes Buchan's view that, for the Irish, 'reality could not be kept separate from dreams' (p. 115). On the other hand, JD'A can surrender to banality when making the general point: 'racial views are notoriously illogical and emotional ... many of them are clearly based on debatable and prejudiced evidence and are highly personal and subjective opinions rather than realistic or verifiable facts' (p. 48).

JD'A can be censorious, and at times his criticisms encourage reductive readings of the works under scrutiny. Examples are: '[Buchan's] interpretation of the saga ethics may be considered fanciful and possibly even anachronistic in twentieth-century espionage novels' (p. 130); 'there is one drawback to the book, however, and that is the inconsistency in the spelling of Old Norse names' (p. 164); '[Linklater's] admiration for Viking daring and fighting skills reflected the fact that, despite his abhorrence of the pointlessness and destructiveness of war, he always remained fascinated by military combat and army life' (p. 238). JD'A is not alone among those who work in the fields of literary sources and the background of ideas in needing an occasional reminder that there is more to a work of literature than the use made by its author of his/her reading, and that 'author' and

¹ Daniell, in *A Lost Lady of Old Years* (JD'A p. 115).

'narrative voice' are not the same thing.

Despite JD'A's evident concern to educate his own reader, it is not easy to identify just who that reader might be. His technique includes providing a brief *résumé* of the plot of each work to be discussed - surely unnecessary for readers who are familiar with the Scots material. Similarly, his summaries of Norse narratives - for example, the events surrounding the martyrdom of St Magnus, as these are recounted in *Orkenyinga saga* (JD'A pp. 262-3) - are not needed by anyone who has a background in Norse.

Presumably, therefore, the book is aimed at the general reader, but if this is so, the intended audience is likely to be pulled up short by such bombshells as: 'the chapter also contains ... the startling introduction of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte*' (p. 266). Startling indeed! And JD'A's first mention of kennings as 'the difficult and obscure metaphors of skaldic poetry' (p. 102) is likely only to tantalise and confuse the general reader, who must wait until p. 243 for a fuller discussion of the term. When it comes, the description is intelligently condensed: 'skaldic metaphors ... a form of imagery whereby two unrelated words are juxtaposed to create a more poetic name for the more common and elemental facts of Viking life and culture'.

Kennings, as JD'A reminds us (p. 243) 'were a vital feature of Old Norse skaldic poetry', a genre which the reader might expect to have proved a fertile source for JD'A's Scottish Renaissance - after all, the pleasingly alliterating title of his book refers to 'Scottish skalds and sagamen'. But the fact that he can postpone for so long his definition of the kenning is an indicator that there have been fewer modern Scottish 'skalds' than 'sagamen'. Their retelling and reinterpreting of older prose narratives, whether fictional or historical, may place several of JD'A's authors firmly in the tradition of saga-writing, but only the Orcadian poet and fiction-writer George Mackay Brown can be said to have written 'concise, compressed and effective' (JD'A's words, p. 258) verse in the skaldic tradition. Certainly, Hugh MacDiarmid's poetry has little of the skaldic about it, despite his knowledge of Yggdrasil's mythological role.

JD'A's study is dedicated to the memory of Mackay Brown, who died in 1996. In his autobiography, published posthumously, and after the appearance of the book here reviewed, Mackay Brown wrote:

I think that, in the writing of narrative, I learned a great deal from *Burnt Njal, Grettir, Orkneyinga Saga*. It is good, for certain kinds of writing, to use as few words as possible. The structure and form of the saga stories are magnificent. I think I have learned from them the importance of pure shape. But from my mother's side, the Celtic, I delight too in decoration. Look at the intricacies of early Gaelic art. Whether it is desirable to marry 'pure narrative'² with elaborate decoration is not for me to say. I write as I must.³

Mackay Brown's first published work, 'Prayer to Magnus', appeared in the year 1947⁴. It will be apparent, therefore, that his writing career began shortly after the finish of the Norse-Celtic debate to which JD'A has so effectively drawn our attention. For Mackay Brown, that debate was a thing of the past. No longer defining 'Norse' and 'Celtic' in terms of stereotyped racial character-traits, but in terms of the artefacts bequeathed to us by two cultures, he sought to synthesise in his own work two different modes of artistic creation. After Mackay Brown, there can be no return to the terms of a dead debate; it remains to be seen whether his energetic fusion of Norse and Celtic style and subject-matter will provide a model for future Scottish writers.

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² Elsewhere, Mackay Brown writes of his admiration of 'the "pure" art of the sagamen; everything extraneous ... is ruthlessly excluded'; these words are quoted by JD'A, p. 245.

³ George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I sing: An Autobiography* (John Murray, London, 1997), p. 65.

⁴ It was printed in *New Shetlander* 6 (JD'A. 287).