

Chapter 9 The Vikings and Victorian Merseyside

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Dry are the turfy downs, diffusive spread
O'er the light surface of the sandy mound,
When e'en the languid form may safely tread,
Drink the pure gale, and eye the blue profound.
Dear scene! that stretch'd between the silver arms
Of Deva and of Mersey, meets the main,
And when the sun-gilt day illumines its charms,
Boasts of peculiar grace, nor boasts in vain.¹

These limpid late eighteenth-century lines from 'Hoyle Lake, A Poem written on that Coast and addressed to its Proprietor, Sir John Stanley', are the work of Anna Seward (fig. 9.1), the now forgotten but once renowned 'Swan of Lichfield', who counted Sir Walter Scott amongst her greatest admirers. It was her friendship with the Stanley family of Alderley Edge in Cheshire that had drawn the Staffordshire poetess to Hoylake in 1792 for the opening of the Stanley Hotel, whose construction underpinned the conversion of (in Scott's words) 'these Pleasant Downs into a commodious sea-bathing place',² much favoured by the sun- and sea-seeking gentry of eastern Cheshire and beyond. John Thomas Stanley (1766–1850) was amongst the family members who were to enjoy the 'light surface of the sandy mound' and the 'silver arms / Of Deva and of Mersey' for many years afterwards. The family name just about survives in Hoylake today. A wayward iron to the seventeenth hole at the Royal Liverpool Golf Club will always find its way onto Stanley Road, whilst, until recently, a later and slightly relocated incarnation of the Stanley Hotel offered nineteenth hole solace for the weary competitor.

Pórr, Óðinn and their frost-giant foes were already casting seductive shadows over the lives of the Seward and Stanley families by the time the original Stanley Hotel opened for business. John Thomas Stanley and Walter Scott, fellow Edinburgh students in the late 1780s, developed their interest in Norse mythology as fellow members of various literary societies.³ Both men owned the latest Copenhagen editions (with text and Latin translation) of Old Icelandic

¹ Sir Walter Scott, ed., *The Collected Poems of Anna Seward*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1810), III, 86.

² *Ibid.*

³ J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*, 4 vols (Paris, 1838), I, 91, 105, 118–19; on Stanley and Iceland, see Andrew Wawn, 'John Thomas Stanley and Iceland: the sense and sensibility of an eighteenth-century explorer', *Scandinavian Studies* 53 (1981), 52–76.



Fig. 10.1: Anna Seward.

sagas and mythological poems;⁴ and both visited and wrote about north Atlantic islands with Viking Age links. Scott's brief excursion to the Orkney and Shetland islands in 1814 helped to inform his underrated old northern novel *The Pirate* (1821).⁵ Stanley's 1789 expedition to Iceland enabled him to undertake cutting-edge geological research on site, and (for years afterwards in his private notebooks) to brood on the lost world of Scandinavian gods and heroes, while his family contented themselves with keeping Icelandic dogs, using Icelandic dresses in home dramatics, and even employing an Icelandic au pair girl for a spell.⁶ While Stanley was exploring Iceland, Anna Seward paid her own homage to the old northern world by producing draft verse paraphrases of two Viking Age poems. These are no works of drawing-room decorum or parlour primness. In 'Herva, at the Tomb of Argantyr [sic]. A Runic Dialogue', the stout-hearted daughter of a slain Norse chieftain demands that her father, lying in his flame-encircled grave, yield up the sword Tirfing, so that she might avenge his death, for all that this same weapon, her father predicts, will also be the death of her sons.⁷ 'Harold's Complaint. A Scandinavian Ode' recalls the buccaneering Viking life of King Haraldr inn harðráði Sigurðarson, for whom success in battle was clouded by frustration in love:

But ah! though courage speed my prow,
And subject seas have borne me
A frozen heart impels, I know,
The Russian maid to scorn me.⁸

By the end of the eighteenth century the taste for such bracing images of northern antiquity extended far beyond Alderley Edge and Lichfield.

John Thomas Stanley's lifelong cultivation of northern antiquity was emblematic of a more broadly based Merseyside engagement with ancient and modern Iceland in the nineteenth century. During the Napoleonic wars Icelandic woollens, skins, eider down, whale oil and dried fish were familiar sights and smells on the quayside at Pier Head, while Icelanders stranded by the Napoleonic wars would head for home up the Mersey on the brig 'John Thomas Stanley'. At the beginning of the century few native Merseysiders or embarking Icelanders would have realised that some of those distant homes among the lava and lyme grass of sixty-six degrees north were closely linked by name with equivalent locations on the Wirral — as with West Kirby and Vestri-Kirkjubær, Meols and Melar. Such links were to become the philological stock-in-trade of those sons

⁴ The present writer owns John Thomas Stanley's copy of the 1786 Copenhagen edition of *Víga-Glúms saga*; the Icelandic holdings in Scott's Abbotsford library are listed in John Cochrane, *Catalogue of the Library of Abbotsford* (Edinburgh, 1838), pp. 63–4, 98–9 *et passim*.

⁵ Republished in 1996 by the Shetland Times Press, with an introductory essay by the present writer.

⁶ Andrew Wawn, 'Hundadagadrottningin: Guðrún Johnsen og Stanleyfjölskyldan frá Cheshire, 1814–16', *Saga* 23 (1985), 99–133.

⁷ Scott, ed., *The Collected Poems of Anna Seward*, III, 90–103. This poem was certainly in draft by 1789 — see Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Norse Muse in England 1750–1820* (Trieste, 1998), p. 250; 'Harold' may well have been composed at much the same time.

⁸ Scott, ed., *The Collected Poems of Anna Seward*, III, 29–33, at p. 33.

of Merseyside who emerged as Victorian Britain's foremost scholars of the old north. There was Stanley's Cestrian protégé Henry Holland (1788–1873), who travelled widely in and wrote influentially about Iceland before assuming his twin roles as Queen Victoria's favourite physician and mid-Victorian Britain's best connected supporter of Icelandic causes and culture;⁹ there was George Stephens (1813–95), for over half a century a fiery Copenhagen-based professorial champion of all things Anglo-Scandic, not least as pioneering translator of the hugely popular (among Victorians) Old Icelandic *Friðþjófs saga*;¹⁰ and there was W. G. Collingwood (1854–1932), who pilgrimaged (his own carefully chosen term) to the saga-steads of Iceland in 1897, distilling his experiences in lyric poetry, narrative prose and, most memorably, in a sequence of some 150 water colour paintings which are now amongst the most prized possessions of the Icelandic National Museum.¹¹ Several pictures serve to illustrate *Kormáks saga*, a poignant tale of love and loss set in Miðfjörðr. Only a philologically alert Icelandophile from Liverpool could have written, 'Kormak's own home had been founded by his father on the Meols, as the gravelly shore-banks would be called on the coast of Lancashire, and was thence called Mel, now Melstad'.¹² After the turn of the century Collingwood's eminence secured his election as President of the Viking Society for Northern Research, whose foundation in 1892 offered a national forum and focus for the steadily developing regional British interest in the old north — the Wirral was one of a dozen or so areas sufficiently rich in Viking Age history to merit special representation by a Honorary District Secretary on the society's Council.¹³

To those Icelandophile Merseysiders whose scholarly fame was earned in distant cities or on foreign shores can be added the names of others whose enthusiasms found fullest expression in the vigorous intellectual life in and around Victorian Liverpool. Nineteenth-century Britain had no finer native-born scholar of Old Icelandic than the Reverend John Sephton, respected headmaster of Liverpool College, and eventually Reader in Icelandic at the city's new University College, the latter post partly funded by Alfred Holt, a local shipping magnate who himself had travelled in Iceland, and was well connected with major figures in Icelandic literary and scholarly life.¹⁴ Sephton owned a fine collection of rare early Icelandic printed books; his book-length publications

⁹ See Andrew Wawn, ed., *The Iceland Journal of Henry Holland 1810*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd Series 168 (London, 1987).

¹⁰ Andrew Wawn, 'George Stephens, Cheapinghaven and Old Northern antiquity', *Studies in Medievalism* 7 (1995), 1–42; Stephens' 1839 translations of the Icelandic *Friðþjófs saga* and of Bishop Tegnér's early nineteenth-century Swedish verse adaptation of the saga were republished in 1994 by Llanerch Press.

¹¹ Haraldur Hannesson *et al.*, eds, W. G. Collingwood, *Fegurð Íslands og fornir sögustaðir* (Reykjavík, 1991).

¹² W. G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson, *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-steads of Iceland* (Ulverston, 1899), p. 152.

¹³ J. A. B. Townsend, 'The Viking Society: a centenary history', *Saga-Book* 23/4 (1992), 180–212. The District Secretary originally rejoiced in the philologically hard-line title of Heraths Umbothsman.

¹⁴ See Landsbókasafn Íslands 2808 4to, Holt's letters to the poet and Unitarian minister Matthías Jochumsson.

included translations of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Sverris saga* which have stood the test of time;¹⁵ and his house became a focal point for local cultivation of Viking-related enthusiasms. Regular visitors included Sir James Picton (fig. 9.2), a pillar of the Liverpool community and (less well known nowadays) an energetic philological scholar and antiquarian,¹⁶ and the formidable Oxford-based Icelandic scholar Guðbrandur Vigfússon, en route either to the Isle of Man (to study the Old Norse runes), or to Scotland (to visit the Carlyle family). Guðbrandur encouraged Sephton's efforts to promote knowledge of the Viking



Fig. 9.2: Sir James Picton.

¹⁵ *The Saga of King Olaf Tryggvason who reigned over Norway A.D. 995 to 1000* (London, 1895), *Sverrisaga. The Saga of King Sverri of Norway* (London, 1899).

¹⁶ Among his publications were 'On Sanskrit roots and English derivatives', *Proceedings of the Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society* [hereafter PLLPS] 18 (1864), 31–64; *Notes on the South Lancashire Dialect* (Liverpool, 1865); 'On social life among the Teutonic races in early times', PLLPS 22 (1868), 68–98; 'Our mother tongue and its congeners', PLLPS 23 (1869), 52–84. See also below, n. 29.

Age on the public platform — whether entertaining audiences in St George's Hall with tales of Þórr and the frost giants, or introducing Viking Age Greenland, Leifr Eiríksson's Vinland, and 'Frithiof the Bold' to members of the Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society.¹⁷ Sephton was not afraid to identify unhappy old northern continuities on early nineteenth-century Merseyside. Of the fearsome Norse pagan leader Earl Hákon he remarks: 'He certainly upheld the social institution of slavery, and was not averse to the slave-trade any more than his descendants in Wirral and West Derby down to the present century'.¹⁸ Yet we also find Sephton proudly determined to derive Litherland in Liverpool from the Icelandic Hlíðarendi,¹⁹ revered site of 'Gunnar's famous home' in *The Story of Burnt Njal*, as the mighty *Brennu-Njáls saga* was known to most Victorian readers from George Dasent's 1861 translation.

While respected Victorian antiquarians exercised widespread influence through their published work, private correspondence from the late nineteenth century confirms that such publications were just the tip of a Viking Age iceberg on Merseyside. Edward Rae of Devonshire Road, Birkenhead, is a representative figure in this respect. We find him as a young man in the early 1870s, newly returned from Iceland, working in Liverpool as an insurance broker, and corresponding wittily and frequently with one of his travelling companions, Eiríkur Magnússon. The most celebrated Iceland traveller in that same summer of 1871 had been William Morris, with whom Eiríkur collaborated on a pioneering series of saga translations.²⁰ Like Guðbrandur Vigfússon, Eiríkur soon won a reputation among British Icelandophiles as an indispensable native Icelandic scholar-in-residence — he worked for over 40 years as a librarian in the Cambridge University Library, a post secured for him by the venerable Sir Henry Holland's energetic lobbying.²¹ Rae's letters reveal a keen engagement with Iceland old and new:²² amidst idle chatter about boxes of ptarmigan (some of them well past their sell-by date) arriving from friends in Iceland (22 xii 1871), we find him enthusing about Eiríkur's new edition of the medieval Icelandic devotional poem *Lilja* (10 viii 1872), and about the 'pure vigorous Saxon' language of the Morris-Magnússon translations of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and

¹⁷ See John Sephton, 'Translation of Eirik the Red's saga', *PLLPS* 34 (1880), 183–212; *Thor and His Sway* (Liverpool, 1887); 'The religion of the eddas and sagas', *PLLPS* 46 (1892), 107–26; 'A translation of the saga of Frithiof the Fearless', *PLLPS* 48 (1894), 69–97; 'On some runic remains', *PLLPS* 50 (1896) 183–209; 'What the sagas say of Greenland', *PLLPS* 52 (1898), 119–54; 'Notes on a Lancashire dialect', *Otia Merseiana* 3 (1903), 4–22; 'Notes on south Lancashire place-names in Doomsday Book', *Otia Merseiana* 4 (1904), 65–74; 'On the study of Icelandic', *The Library* 3rd Series 12/3 (1912), 385–411.

¹⁸ Sephton, 'The religion of the eddas and sagas', 125.

¹⁹ Sephton, 'Notes on south Lancashire place-names in Doomsday Book', 68.

²⁰ These included *The Story of Grettir the Strong* (1869), *Völsunga saga* (1870), *Three Northern Love Stories* [*Gunnlaugs saga*, *Fríðþjófs saga*, *Víglundar saga*] (1875), and *The Stories of the Kings of Norway* [*Heimskringla*] (1893–1905). 'The lovers of Gudrun', Morris's verse rhapsody on themes from *Laxdæla saga*, was a favourite source of Victorian parlour and picnic readings.

²¹ For a brief account of Eiríkur's scholarly life in England, see the present writer's *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Victorian Britain* (Woodbridge, 2000), chapter 12. The fullest biography is Stefán Einarsson, *Saga Eiríks Magnússonar* (Reykjavík, 1933).

²² The discussion and dated letters in this paragraph relate to Rae's letters to Eiríkur, in *Landsbókasafn Íslands* 2188b 4to.

Völsunga saga (26 vii 1875); impatiently comparing Tennyson's 'laboured' and 'exhausted' *Idylls* with Morris's crisper 'Saxon' poetic style (31 x 1872); eagerly awaiting the arrival of Eiríkur's draft translation of the Old Icelandic apocalyptic poem *Völuspá* (10 viii 1872); proudly boasting that he knew all the extant Viking Age Manx runes 'by heart' (10 xi 1877); and mischievously teasing Eiríkur's wife about his successful relocation (back in England) of English ecclesiastical silverware acquired in Iceland — he claims to have been inspired by a sacred love of his country and a desire to restore to her bosom objects which had been looted by Mrs Magnússon's ancestors in some warlike descent upon the English coast (22 xii 1871). Like many another antiquarian of Victorian middle England, Rae had taught himself to read Old Icelandic — 'what an advantage to a young man to have made himself familiar with the pure Old Icelandic' (19 v 1874); and during his travels in Iceland he had acquired some knowledge of the modern spoken language. His letters reveal a taste for speculative etymology, and he at least would have understood and relished the Old Norse provenance of many a Wirral place-name. Moreover, Rae's enthusiasm was infectious. We find Miss Gladys Alexander, also of Birkenhead, writing to Eiríkur Magnússon to ask whether 'as an average girl of nineteen' and a friend of 'Mr Rae of Liverpool', she too could 'teach [herself] Icelandic, and if so, what Grammar and books to begin with'.²³

Edward Rae and his 'average' friend would certainly have been interested in Eiríkur's subsequent correspondence with Francis Tudsbury, an Oxford undergraduate who was possibly a native of Merseyside, and was certainly fascinated by ancient Wirral lore.²⁴ Tudsbury was preparing a paper in which he argues that the location of the Battle of Brunanburh must have been Bromborough.²⁵ Alternative locations had their local supporters. Collingwood's Lake District novel *Thorstein of the Mere* (1895) locates the battle in the Lake District, while T. T. Wilkinson of Burnley locates it in — where else? — Burnley!²⁶ Eiríkur had encouraged Tudsbury in his Wirral theory. The Iclander's improbable reconstruction of oral tradition involved Egill Skallagrímsson, having survived the 937 AD battle, returning to Iceland and reporting the events to his daughter. Eventually a twelfth-century Iclander, perhaps a descendant of Egill and certainly familiar with such oral sources, sought to compose a saga about the great Viking poet; he visited Britain in search of supplementary sources, which he allegedly found in some early medieval Merseyside chronicle.

We may conclude from this brief survey of Victorian Merseyside antiquarians that the region contributed vigorously at all levels to the 'invisible college'²⁷ of old northernism which developed vigorously all over the British Isles during the nineteenth century. The region could not boast of a famous poet with old northern interests like William Morris; nor did it produce a major old northern

²³ Landsbókasafn Íslands 2186 4to.

²⁴ Landsbókasafn Íslands 2189a 4to, FT to EM 4 May 1907.

²⁵ Francis W. T. Tudsbury, *Brunanburh A.D. 937* (London and Chester, 1907).

²⁶ T. T. Wilkinson, 'On the battle of Brunanburh, and the probable location of the conflict', *Proceedings of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 9 (1856–7), 21–42.

²⁷ Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838–1886* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 36.

novel such as Charles Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake* (1866) — for all its Liverpudlian setting the less said about Walmer Downe's *The Dane's Daughter, An Icelandic Story* (1902) the better.²⁸ But its local scholars, place-names, runic remains, and hidden band of armchair devotees all suggest that as the new century dawned Merseyside had more than paid its dues to the subject area. And in Thor's Stone²⁹ on Caldly Hill the Wirral retains to this day a geological feature which would have tested the legendary boulder-casting strength of the outlaw hero Grettir the Strong. Clambering up its slippery sandstone sides certainly seemed challenge enough to the present writer in the days, more than forty years ago, when, selective memory insists, there was always summer sun for cricket on Paton Field, and always winter snow for sledging near Porsteinn's farmstead.

²⁸ More successful were the two melodramatic tales of Iceland, *The Bondman, A New Saga* (1890) and *The Prodigal Son* (1904) by the Runcorn-born, Liverpool College-educated Manxman Thomas Hall Caine.

²⁹ J. A. [Sir James] Picton, 'The great stone of Thor', *Notes and Queries* 5th Series 8 (1877), 364-5 was the first local scholar to draw attention to the location. He mused on its possible role as a Viking sacrificial altar site, and welcomes the news that the site is to be preserved permanently from the depredations of developers (*Notes and Queries* 6th Series 3 (1881), 30-1).