

BISHOP CHARLES VENN PILCHER AND THE CHRISTIAN POETRY OF MEDIEVAL ICELAND

Graham Barwell (University of Wollongong) and John Kennedy (Charles Sturt University-Riverina)

1 INTRODUCTION

Charles Venn Pilcher (1879-1961) was a bishop in what is known officially today as the Anglican Church of Australia (though still quite commonly referred to as the Church of England). In his lifetime this Church could claim more adherents in Australia than any other religion, and though not formally the established church it in many ways functioned as such. Bishop Pilcher served from 1936 to 1956 as Bishop Coadjutor (or associate) in the Diocese of Sydney, responsible for the Anglican community in the city where European settlement of Australia had begun in 1788 and where a large proportion of the country's population lived.

Few modern churchmen can expect to be widely remembered thirty years or more after their deaths, but older residents of Sydney sometimes recall Bishop Pilcher as the bishop who gave them Confirmation in their youth or as a notably learned minister with a strong enthusiasm for books. Historians occasionally refer to his significant involvement in some of the social issues of 1940s Australia and especially to his strikingly vigorous championship of Jewish causes and the state of Israel. But there was another side to Charles Venn Pilcher, which makes him potentially of interest to participants in the Ninth International Saga Conference. The bishop had an involvement with Icelandic literature and civilisation—particularly the Christian poetry of the Middle Ages and the work of Hallgrímur Pétursson—which was both active and almost lifelong.

Though a significant part of his work in the Icelandic field remained unpublished at this death, Pilcher's Icelandic interests were known to interested contemporaries in Australia and elsewhere. He published several volumes of translations of Icelandic verse, including, in 1950, the first book on an Icelandic subject to appear in Australia, *Icelandic Christian Classics*, published in Melbourne by Oxford University Press and providing a selection of medieval and later Icelandic verse in English translation. He brought something of Iceland in a more limited way to what was probably a far wider audience through the inclusion of his translations of hymns by Páll Jónsson, Hallgrímur Pétursson, and Bishop Valdimar Briem, with music by Pilcher himself, in the 1947 Australian supplement to the Anglican hymn book, *The Book of Common Praise*. (Two of Pilcher's Icelandic translations, both from Hallgrímur Pétursson, are to be found in the 1992 edition of *The Australian Hymn Book*, widely used by the country's Christian congregations.) When Pilcher died in 1961 the obituary in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (6 July, 4), the city's most respected newspaper, described him as "expert on languages, music, and Icelandic affairs." Seven years earlier the Icelandic Government had recognised his role in disseminating awareness of Icelandic culture by conferring on him the honour of Knight Commander of the Order of the Falcon.

Pilcher's scholarly and cultural interests were by no means confined to Icelandic. He was a distinguished theologian, writing extensively on both the Old and New Testaments, and he combined this work with an active interest in comparative religion and in church history and music, publishing his research on these subjects. An accomplished musician, he played bass clarinet in the Toronto Symphony Orchestra for ten years, as well as composing hymn music. His publications reveal that he had at least a sound reading knowledge of Icelandic, Danish, Swedish, German, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and other Old Testament languages, and Russian.¹ But Icelandic literature, pre- and post-Reformation, clearly held a special place in his affection and amongst his more scholarly interests, judging from the number of publications he devoted to it. In this paper we shall concentrate on his work relating to Iceland before 1550, examining his achievements and exploring the factors which might have motivated them.

2 PILCHER'S LIFE²

Bishop Pilcher was not an Australian by birth: indeed, he was nearly fifty-seven when he first settled in Australia in 1936, and thus at an age when most professional men of his time were near the end of their careers, although in fact he had twenty very active years ahead of him. The Sydney press at the time described him as a Canadian churchman (Kraus 1984, 85) but this was not entirely accurate, though he had made his home in Canada throughout the previous thirty years. Charles Venn Pilcher was in fact born in Oxford, England, and lived in Britain until he was twenty-seven years old.

For a man of British birth to come to Australia in order to assume a senior position in his profession was for a very long time quite common, linked as Australia was by very strong bonds of imperial loyalty to the distant "Mother Country." Pilcher's long sojourn in another part of the Empire perhaps made him a slightly unusual settler, and so did the fact that he had much earlier family connections with his new country. His father, Francis, had been born in the colony of New South Wales in 1840 and had attended the King's School, Parramatta, before winning a scholarship which enabled him to follow the path which quite often led well-to-do young Australian residents to Oxford. Francis Pilcher elected to remain in England as a curate to his father-in-law, but his brother Charles had a distinguished career as a barrister in Sydney and a member of the New South Wales parliament.

The immediate family into which Charles Venn Pilcher was born on 4 June 1879 was a strongly evangelical one, and it appears that throughout his life he remained firmly in this religious tradition. Through his mother, Mary Elliott, he could trace descent from Henry Venn, an outstanding figure in the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival, and Charles Elliott, one of the founders of the Church

¹For example, translations from Danish and Swedish are in Pilcher 1950, 59-60; from German and Russian in Pilcher 1929, 43 and 14; from Latin in *The Book of Common Praise* 1947, *Supplement*, 19 hymn 31; from Greek in Pilcher 1951; and from Hebrew and other Old Testament languages in Pilcher 1929 and 1931.

²Biographical information on Pilcher is largely drawn from Laserson 1949, supplemented by Alexander 1955 and 1959; *Year Book of the Diocese of Sydney* 1959, 73-74 and 1962, 340; Pike *et al.* 1966+, 11: 233; *Principal Women* 1940, 87-88; Kraus 1984; and Blakeney 1985, 200-01.

Missionary Society; Mary Elliott's aunt Emily and great aunt Charlotte Elliott were authors of well-known hymns (Stulken 1981, 529).

Thanks at least partly to his success in winning scholarships young Charles Venn Pilcher was educated at one of the great British public schools, Charterhouse, and at Hertford College, Oxford, where he studied Classics, Ancient History, Philosophy, and Theology. Even before leaving school he demonstrated literary and academic inclination, with two classmates editing for private publication a collection of poems by fellow pupils (Pilcher, Tritton, and Shephard-Walwyn 1897).

Ordained as an Anglican minister at Winchester Cathedral in 1903 Pilcher went first as a curate to the Parish of St Thomas, Birmingham, where, perhaps significantly for his later career as a champion of Jewish causes, he was in the midst of the city's Jewish community. Two years later he moved north to Durham where, as he stated many years later, he found himself "living in those northern counties which had witnessed the conversion of our Anglo-Saxon fore-fathers in the golden dawn of English Christianity" (Laserson 1949, 3). It was also, of course, a part of England strongly influenced by Scandinavian settlement during the Viking period.

Pilcher's duties at Durham included training of university graduates prior to their ordination for work in the Durham diocese, and the intellectual formation of theological students was to be one of his major concerns for almost all of the remainder of his working life. In 1906 he moved to Wycliffe College, University of Toronto, initially to teach Greek Testament. Most of the next thirty years saw him teaching various theological subjects at Wycliffe, where he became a close friend of his colleague Howard Mowll, later Archbishop of Sydney. His theological pursuits resulted in a number of publications and in 1921 an honorary doctorate in divinity from Oxford.

In 1908 Pilcher married a Canadian, Eva Alberta Jones. He also made contact about this time or soon afterwards with the Icelandic-Canadian community and in particular with two of its prominent members, the Winnipeg clergyman Dr Jón Bjarnason and his wife Frú Lára. Pilcher clearly came to value his friendship with these two people, both far older than he. In 1923, soon after Frú Lára's death, he wrote that to "have known her and her husband is an enrichment for life" (Pilcher 1923, viii). As an old man himself he told Maurice Laserson "I have never known any man or woman who more thoroughly incarnated the spirit of Christian love than Dr. Bjarnason and his wife Frú Lára" (Laserson 1949, 3), and an even later unpublished work, his translation of "Líknarbraut" and "Písílargrátr," has a dedication to the couple "Who encouraged my Early Steps in the Study of their own Beautiful Language."

Pilcher travelled to many countries in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1921 he made what appears to have been his only visit to Iceland (Vilbergur Júlíusson 1955, 199). It was clearly no idle pleasure trip: on the day of his arrival in Reykjavík he journeyed to Saurbær on Hvalfjarðarströnd, where the great seventeenth-century clergyman poet Hallgrímur Pétursson had ministered and written his *Passíusálmur* (Pilcher 1936, 9-10; Beck 1972, 145), and he also reached the *Njálá* district east of the capital. He preached in the cathedral in Reykjavík, presumably in English, for

Sister Olafía Jóhannsdóttir acted as his interpreter. It was perhaps this association which led in 1924 to Pilcher's only translation of a non-literary Icelandic text. Sister Olafía had in 1916 published a Norwegian language work on the dangers of venereal disease, and Pilcher rendered into English (Pilcher 1924a) the 1923 Icelandic version of this, *Aumastar allra: Myndir frá skuggahlíðum Kristianíu*. Originally appearing in Canada it was to be reprinted there, in the U.S.A., and in Australia, the 1927 U.S. version bearing the startlingly lurid title, *The Waiting Shadow: The Romantic and Tragic Story of a Lovely Norwegian Girl whose Life was Darkened by the Consequences of One Unguarded Hour*.

Pilcher's consecration as Bishop Coadjutor of Sydney, the result of an invitation from his former Wycliffe colleague, by now Archbishop Howard Mowll of Sydney, came shortly after the National Icelandic League of America had elected him an honorary fellow in 1935. In the late 1940s he provide his friend Maurice Laserson with a succinct account of the duties associated with the episcopal role:

My work in the diocese has consisted mainly of preaching in the Cathedral Church of St. Andrew, in teaching on the staff of Moore College, the Theological College of the Diocese, and in taking my part in the University of Sydney as a member of the Board of Studies for Divinity degrees. I also spend a considerable time travelling over the diocese in order to take Confirmations. (Laserson 1949, 5)

The sexagenarian bishop had, however, a more interesting career in the 1940s than this might imply. A press interview in 1940, in which he argued that certain practices considered acceptable in the Old Testament were inappropriate for modern Christians and singled out the "appalling views expressed about women" provoked an outcry (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1940; Pilcher 1940a). Pilcher championed the interests of Jewish refugees from Europe against Australian officialdom obsessed with the notion that they might include Nazi sympathisers, and he became an enthusiastic supporter of the state of Israel. Ironically, he himself fell under suspicion for pro-German sympathies in 1940, when Australia was at war with the Third Reich. The evidence was mainly public and private statements in which he expressed his regard and affection for the German people and their culture and his conviction that Germany had been unjustly treated at the Versailles Conference in 1919. In 1938 he had delivered a speech in which he urged that the former German New Guinea be returned to the control of the Germans, "a people kindred in blood, language, art, and ideals" who might then be Australia's friends in the face of the "real danger to a white Australia" which "comes not from a European nation but from the Asiatic peoples" (*Launceston Examiner* 1938, 6; Goultman 1990, 80).

The officials of the Australian Commonwealth Investigation Bureau eventually concluded that Pilcher's pro-German sympathies co-existed with hatred of the Hitlerian regime and posed no security threat. The last dozen years before the bishop's death were quieter, and he seems to have devoted a good deal of time to his Icelandic interests. He retired from the active episcopacy in 1956 and died in Sydney on 4 July 1961 after a period of ill health.

3 PILCHER'S TRANSLATIONS OF MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC POETRY

Charles Venn Pilcher's interest in Icelandic literature was not confined to the medieval period. The Icelandic writer whom he most esteemed was clearly Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674). Pilcher gave Hallgrímur's *Passfusálmur* more attention than any other Icelandic work. No less than four of his monographs—*The Passion-Hymns of Iceland* (1913), *Meditations on the Cross from Iceland's Poet of the Passion* (1921), *Icelandic Meditations on the Passion* (1923), and *Icelandic Christian Classics* (1950)—are devoted largely or entirely to selections from them in English translation. These are all verse translations; a complete prose version of the *Passfusálmur* appears among his unpublished papers.³ He felt an empathy with Hallgrímur not possible, for example, in the case of Brother Eysteinn Ásgrímsson, traditionally considered the author of the fourteenth-century poem "Litja":

Eysteinn seems never entirely able to roll the burden of his sin upon Christ and leave it at the foot of the Cross. So he places some of his confidence elsewhere. ... He hoped for salvation if the words of the Ave Maria were framed by his dying lips. Thus he lacks the triumphant and scriptural confidence of Hallgrím, whose utter trust is laid on Jesus only. (Pilcher 1950, 48)

Nor did Pilcher wholly ignore Icelandic Christian poetry from his own lifetime or just before: his first monograph on an Icelandic subject, *The Passion-Hymns of Iceland* (1913), contains twelve works by Bishop Valdimar Briem (1848-1930) and six poems from five other writers then "modern." There is no evidence that Pilcher concerned himself with poetic developments in the twentieth century, but revised versions of two of the 1913 translations (including "The Icelandic Millennial Hymn") appeared much later (*Book of Common Praise* 1947, *Supplement*, 17 hymn 25; Pilcher 1950, 57-58).

People from English-speaking countries who are attracted to medieval Icelandic literature usually concentrate their attention on the sagas, the Eddic poetry of the *Codex Regius*, or both, while some develop an interest in skaldic verse, generally concentrating on older poems apparently influenced by heathen Norse beliefs. Pilcher devoted little attention to any of these, and it is difficult to assess his familiarity with them. The only medieval Icelandic poems he mentions which are not explicitly Christian are "Völuspá" and "Hávamál," discussed briefly on two occasions with a few lines of translation (Pilcher 1936, 11; 1950, 3-4). He refers by name to four sagas, all *Íslendingasögur*—*Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*—which are discussed in a revealing 1936 essay, "The Norse Heroic Ideal in Icelandic Literature," published in the Year Book of the Jón Bjarnason Academy in Winnipeg. Essentially this is a celebration of the "Norse heroic ideal," an ethos exemplified for Pilcher in the poetry of "The Battle of Maldon," shared by the English at Hastings in 1066 and by some German soldiers in World War 1, but different from that which motivated heroic deeds in ancient Greece and Rome. Those who met its demands "were assuredly, in one aspect of their character at

³Beck (1972, 162-63) writes of seeing a translation of the *Passfusálmur* by Pilcher in which his earlier verse translations are interspersed among prose versions of the sections he had not previously translated, but the complete translation of *Passfusálmur* held at Moore Theological College in two holograph copies is entirely in prose.

least, not far from that kingdom which those alone can enter who obey the stern and challenging condition which makes victory the [guerdon] of suffering, life the issue of death, the crown the fulfillment of the cross" (Pilcher 1936, 17).

Pilcher translated four major Icelandic poems from before 1550, though only two of these translations achieved normal publication in his lifetime. In 1924 *The Canadian Journal of Religious Thought* published "An Icelandic Divine Comedy," his version of "Sólarljóð." Somewhat surprisingly, this was reprinted in 1940 as an appendix to *The Hereafter in Jewish and Christian Thought*, the published version of a series of lectures which he delivered in Melbourne in 1938 and which otherwise have no readily apparent link to medieval Scandinavia. The work again achieved publication ten years later, essentially unaltered, in *Icelandic Christian Classics*.

"Sólarljóð" is a poem in the *ljóðaháttir* metre which predominates in "Hávamál." It is very difficult to date, but modern opinion appears to favour the thirteenth century—possibly its second half (Amory 1993, 607; Chase 1993, 75). Pilcher, like other commentators, saw "Sólarljóð" as a deliberate attempt to Christianise ("[baptize] ... into Christ," Pilcher 1950, 4) the old Eddic poetry:

We could ill have afforded to have lost our poem, for it marks an epoch in the history of Icelandic literature—the moment when the old Teutonic verse-form, just before its death, uttered its swan-song in the precenting of Christian truth. The Eddic poetry of the heathen days was to yield to a new culture of thought and of expression. The battle between Thor and Christ had been fought, and Christ remained victor. The music which had sounded the strength of Thor was to utter its homage to the Conqueror, and then to cease from the earth. (Pilcher 1950, 2)

Pilcher begins translating the original eighty-two stanza poem at stanza thirty-three, dividing his version into sections which he heads "Death," "Hell," "Paradise" and "Prayer." Thus he omits a good deal of rather gnomic and sometimes obscure material. He observes "I have translated only the part of the poem which describes the Vision, and in that I have omitted two short sections which our English taste would find it difficult to appreciate" (p. 6). He was probably deterred by the rather obscure and allusive quality of these passages, stanzas 54-56 and 76-80 of the original, and perhaps also by the sexual references in stanzas 76-80.

Two stanzas from the best known part of "Sólarljóð," a seven stanza passage where each stanza begins with the line "Sól ek sá" and where the father vividly describes his passage from this world to the next, may serve as an example of Pilcher's approach to translating this poem. The Icelandic text is quoted from Finnur Jónsson's normalised edition (1912-15, B 1: 642):

41. Sól ek sá,
svá þótti mér,
sem sæjak goðgan goð;
henni ek laut
hinzta sinni
alda-heimi í.

42. Sólf ek sá,
svá hon geislaði,
at þóttumk vætki vita;
en Gílfar straumar
grenjuðu annan veg
blandnir mjök við blóð.

Pilcher's version is quoted here from *Icelandic Christian Classics* (1950, 8-9), but the text, as indicated earlier, is essentially identical to the one which appeared in 1924:

The sun I saw—
Methought I beheld
Great God Himself.
To the sun I bowed
For the last time
In the world of men.

The sun I saw—
So he shone
That I swooned away.
Behind me sounded
The ocean-stream
Mingled with blood.

Pilcher could fairly claim here to have carried out the policy he proclaimed in his introduction: "The rendering is tolerably literal, and I have endeavoured to give it some similarity to the original through an alliterative flavouring" (1950, 6). Some of the literal meaning and some of the alliteration are clearly lost, but Pilcher does seem to convey a significant part of the original's poetic power to the Norse-less reader, even if "Methought," one of the numerous archaisms he permitted himself throughout his translating career, will probably jar for many today. (In 1924, however, such archaism in the translation of medieval texts was still widely accepted). His friend Richard Beck does not seem unduly extravagant when, writing for an Icelandic-speaking audience, he praises the accuracy and skill of Pilcher's "Lay of the Sun," even if his further claim that the version could not easily be improved is open to challenge (Beck 1972, 154-58).

"Lilja," Pilcher's version of which first appeared in 1950, a quarter century after the first publication of "Lay of the Sun," is a less obscure and more unequivocally Christian work. Pilcher provided a complete English version of the one hundred *hrynhent* stanzas. In translating this work, of course, he undertook a formidable task. Like any translator he invited comparison with the original, in this case probably the most admired Christian poem produced in medieval Iceland. The mid-fourteenth-century original, moreover, whilst not the strictest exponent of all the rules in the surviving skaldic corpus, and devoid of the characteristic skaldic kennings, is nevertheless a work of considerable metrical complexity and occasional verbal pyrotechnics.

Pilcher did much or all of his work on "Lilja" in Australia. Even today lack of ready access to older standard editions and critical works often impedes the work of Australian based students of Icelandic literature, and Pilcher was working

before postwar prosperity and changing social attitudes had begun to revolutionise the nation's libraries:

I could wish that I had been able to consult a wider bibliography, but unfortunately many of the Icelandic books dealing with the subject are out of print, while libraries do not like to risk the loss of precious volumes by sending them to a writer who happens to be living at the Antipodes. I particularly regret that I was unable to consult the works on *Lilja* by Dr. Gudbrand Jonsson of Reykjavik. ... Twice, with great kindness, he posted to me typed copies of his later researches, and twice this invaluable material was lost in the mails. (Pilcher 1950, x)

As an example of Pilcher's "*Lilja*" we may take stanza 10. The text is quoted from Eiríkr Magnússon's 1870 London edition (p. 10), which Pilcher "followed" (1950, x):

Dœgrin sex at vísu vuxu
Veltílig um upp-hafs belt,
Aðr en fengi alla þrýði
Jörð ok loft, þat er Drottinn gjörði:
Pressat vatn í himininn hvassa,
Hjörn ok eld, sem merki-stjörnur,
Haglig dýr, sem fugla ok fiska,
Fagran plóg, sem aldin skóga.

Pilcher provided the following translation:

Six days passed, with eve and morning,
Circling through the zone of heaven,
Ere the earth and air, created,
Gained from hand divine their beauty;
Water forced through cold sky-regions;
Ice and fire and heavenly planets;
Beauteous beasts and fowl and fishes;
Earth's fair produce, fruitful forests. (1950, 23)

In his introduction Pilcher briefly outlined his approach in translating "*Lilja*":

The fascination of the poem to Icelandic ears is found in the richness of the vocabulary and the sonority of the language; in the internal assonances within the line, in the regular alliteration. It is impossible to introduce these into a translation. All that can be done is to retain the octosyllabic trochaic metre—that of Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, called in Icelandic, *Hrynhent*—and endeavour to preserve something of the Icelandic manner and atmosphere by as literal a translation as possible. (1950, 17-18)

Pilcher does seem to convey much of the prose sense of the stanza, and much of its formal dignity. Quoting this stanza, Richard Beck claims that he has "í ríkkum mæli tekizt að ná hrynjandi og hreim kvæðisins, tign þess og andríki" (1972, 160). Questionable, however, is the decision to reproduce the octosyllabic trochaic metre, which has an insistent, incantatory quality in English it obviously does not have in Icelandic, and which becomes rather tedious over one hundred stanzas.

Amongst Bishop Pilcher's papers at Moore Theological College in Sydney is an undated mimeographed translation of "*Píslargrátr*," the title page of which reads: "*The Passion-Lament of Bishop Jon Arason/ Translated from the Icelandic/*

together with an Introduction/ by/ Charles Venn Pilcher." Presumably this the version of "Písargrátr" which, according to Beck, Pilcher had completed by the end of 1953 and distributed shortly afterwards "í fjölrítuðu formi, ásamt með markvissri inngangsrítgerð" (1972, 162).

In his foreword to the mimeographed version Pilcher notes that he omitted Bishop Jón Arason's poetry from the volume he published in 1950, the four hundredth anniversary of the bishop's death in the course of his struggle "for the freedom of his country, fighting against the encroachments of the Danish king" (1953, i). In now seeking to make good the omission he has chosen "Písargrátr," "a poem in which the Bishop anticipates Hallgrím Petursson by dealing solely with the story of the Passion as recorded in the Gospels" (1953, i).⁴

Like the much earlier "Lilja," "Písargrátr" employs *hrynhent* metre and Pilcher notes that he "made the translation in the metre of the original, basing it on the Text printed by Professor Finnur Jónsson in his edition 'Jon Arasons Religiose Digte' (Copenhagen, 1918)" (1953, i-ii).⁵

It seems appropriate to represent Pilcher's version of "Písargrátr" by one of the six stanzas in which the refrain appears. In Pilcher's view: "The Poem is perhaps most remarkable for the solemn statement of the Refrain. ... These majestic words seem to concentrate and sum up in themselves the central purpose and message of the Passion-Lament" (1953, 5). In Finnur Jónsson's edition (1918, 35) stanza 41 reads as follows:

Hold og líf með himna valdi
hann hefur nú fyrir dýrðir sannar,
sonarins þrenning svó má inna
samblandað með feður og anda.
Ifirvöldugri allri mildi
er skínanði Jesús þína,
hún gefr best þeim henni treysta
himneskt ráð til guðdóms náða.

This Pilcher translates:

Body, spirit, with Heaven's power,
Now he holds as truest glory,
The Son again his work resuming
With the Father and the Spirit.
"Mighty in abundant mercy
Is the shining Passion of Jesus.
He who on that death relieeth
Finds Heaven's way to God's forgiveness."
(Pilcher 1953, 14)

⁴In fact, though "Písargrátr" is usually attributed by modern scholars to Jón Arason, it is "eignaður Jóni biskupi Arasyni í Vísabók 1612 og ýmsum yngri handritum, en ekki í elsta handriti sem skrifað er fyrir dauða hans" (Bóðvar Guðmundsson *et. al.* 1993, 305).

⁵We are grateful to Hildur Eyyórsdóttir of the Landsbókasafn in Reykjavík for supplying photocopies of extracts from this edition and other relevant material to two researchers "who happen to be living at the Antipodes."

Clearly Pilcher has allowed himself more freedom here in rendering the meaning of the original, and the *hrynhent* metre survives only in the form of a somewhat irregular octosyllabic trochaic pattern. Back is perhaps excessively generous when he comments: "Er þýðing þessi mjög nákvæm að efni og hljómblae, reism og anda frumkvæðisins merkilega vel haldið" (1972, 162), though it does have the virtue of providing readers of English with a sample of Icelandic verse from the very end of the medieval period and seems to be the only English version of a poem attributed to Jón Arason.

In the entry for Pilcher which appeared in the *Year Book of the Diocese of Sydney* for 1959 reference is made to "Unpublished Translations from the Passion Literature of Iceland: Mercy's Way, The Passion Lament of Bishop Jon Arason, The Fifty Passion Hymns of Hallgrim Petursson, 1954" (p. 74). In his otherwise quite comprehensive article Beck makes no mention of "Mercy's Way," but a work by that name, a translation of "Líknarbraut," an Icelandic *drottkvætt drápa* probably dating from the late thirteenth century (Chase 1993, 75), is to be found in manuscript form in an exercise book among Pilcher's papers at Moore Theological College. This is very much a working draft, with numerous corrections and alterations. It is accompanied by a handwritten version of "The Passion-Lament of Bishop Jón Arason" and a foreword indicating that Pilcher proposed to publish both poems together.⁶

In the foreword Pilcher explains that the Icelandic poem dates from a time when Sacred poetry was still in bondage to the manner of the old Skaldic Verse ... Thus Líknarbraut is written with a free use of the old poetic vocabulary, in a most unnatural word order, and with a free use of "kennings" ... All these characteristics of the skaldic verse make translation difficult. In fact this was only made possible for me by a gift, sent by the National Icelandic Library, of a photostat copy of that part of Professor Finnur Jónsson's work on the Old Norse Poetry which deals with Líknarbraut. He prints first the actual words of the poem, then these words in the natural word order, and finally a Danish translation. He does not however translate the "kennings" but gives the simple names. I have generally translated the "kennings" in order to preserve the Old Icelandic flavour of the poem.

In discussing "Líknarbraut" in the introduction to his mimeographed version of "Píslargrátr" Pilcher refers to the use of kennings as "unnecessary" (1953, 3): such an unsympathetic view was of course quite common among English translators from the Old Norse during much of Pilcher's lifetime.

The opening stanza of "Líknarbraut" runs as follows in Finnur Jónsson's normalised edition (1912-15, B 2: 160):

1. Einn, lúkt upp sem ek bænt
óðrann ok gef sanna
mér, þú er alls átt ært,
orðgnótt, himins dróttinn;
þinn vilk kross sem kunnum,

⁶This foreword with texts of Pilcher's translations of "Líknarbraut" and "Píslargrátr," edited by the present writers, will appear in a forthcoming volume to be published by the University of Sydney, *Old Norse Studies in the New World*.

Kristr styrki mik, dyrka,
orr, sás ýta firrir
allri nauð ok dauða.

On the same page Finnur provides a Danish translation:

Luk digtningens hjem op, som jeg beder, og giv mig sand ordrigdom,
himlens herre, du som ene besidder alt i overflod; jeg agter at hœdres
dit kors så godt jeg kan; den gavmilde Krist, som frelser menneskene
fra al nød og død, styrke mig.

Stanza 1 is one of a handful from "Líknarbraut" quoted by Pilcher in his mimeographed "Písliargrátr" introduction, but we quote here the manuscript version, which appears to incorporate later changes:

Open up Song's Palace,
Grant me true word-riches,
Lord of Heav'n, possessing
All things in abundance:
I thy Cross would honour
To my utmost power;
Kindly Christ who savest
Men from death, me strengthen.

No doubt these trochaic trimeter lines give the Norse-less reader little feel for the character of the skaldic original, but the verse has an appropriate dignity, unlike the rhyming jingles which too often replaced skaldic strophes in older English saga translations.

4 PILCHER'S ICELANDIC INTERESTS

At least two fundamental questions suggest themselves when one surveys Pilcher's Icelandic work: what motivated him to such an active involvement with the literature of a society so remote from his principal professional concerns; and what led so staunchly Protestant a clergyman to translate four works from the medieval Catholic Church?

Pilcher dedicated his first book of Icelandic translations, published in 1913, to his "mother, who first taught me the story of the cross, and interested me in the people of Iceland," while in a letter to Richard Beck in 1941 he noted that his mother's instruction on Iceland came in the form of geography lessons, and that he began to teach himself Icelandic when he was fifteen (cited in Beck 1972, 144). There seems no obvious reason, such as a family connection with the country, why Pilcher's mother should wish to interest her son in Iceland. Later, when he was settled in Canada, Pilcher's involvement with the strong Icelandic-Canadian community undoubtedly strengthened his Icelandic interests, and in the foreword to his 1923 selection of translations from Hallgrímur Pétursson he acknowledges in particular the contribution of "the late Frú Lara Bjarnason of Winnipeg" whose gift of a copy of Hallgrímur's poems "moved the writer to further work on the hymns she loved." But the question remains as to why Pilcher established a warm relationship with members of the Icelandic-Canadian community.

Like many other late nineteenth and early twentieth-century enthusiasts for Norse Pilcher appears to have felt a romantic attachment to northern Europe (as well as Germany). Vague racial concepts like the "Northern Race" or "Teutonic race"

(Pilcher 1936, 11-12) which were part of the ideology of the British Empire in his time, allowed the appropriation of Iceland into the cultural heritage of educated middle class English people, while Iceland itself was given a kind of quasi-British status. As late as 1950 the dust-jacket of *Icelandic Christian Classics* speaks of Iceland as "originally colonized partly from the British Isles," while the preface calls Icelanders "our brethren of the North" (p. xi). Ultimately, however, as no doubt with many of British and American background who have contributed to the study of Icelandic literature, the underlying motivation for his interest remains at least partly obscure.

Theologically Pilcher's whole career, and not least his involvement with the staunchly evangelical Archdiocese of Sydney, reveals that he was no Anglo-Catholic enamoured with the Catholic Church of the centuries leading up to the Reformation. His distaste for some of the practices of that Church is strikingly demonstrated by a rather gratuitous note appended to his introduction to his "Lilja" translation:

With regard to the Cult of the Virgin, Mr. Raby has some interesting words in his *Christian Latin Poetry* (Oxford University Press) pages 363-375. He points out its essentially unchristian character, since it tends to obscure the Divine Redeemer behind the person of His human mother. (1950, 20)

A comment such as this makes Jón Arason in particular an unexpected choice of author: the Catholic Church after all claims him as a "martyr" in the struggle with the religious reformers (Delaney and Tobin 1962, 58; Jakobsson 1967, 322). One suspects that Pilcher was aware that his choice could be considered strange: in his introduction to the "Píslargrátr" translation (1953, 1) he quotes approvingly Magnús Jónsson's observation that "No one can doubt that had Jon Arason lived a generation or two later he would have championed the New Teaching with the same heroism with which he opposed it," and he comments: "It is remarkable that the very man who gave his life while opposing the Reformation could write a poem on the Passion almost every sentence of which could have been signed by Martin Luther himself" (1953, 5). On the other hand he feels obliged to admit that the medieval vision of heaven in "Sólarljóð" is "scarcely satisfying to us who demand life, and life more abundant" (1950, 5), and that "Lilja" gives the Virgin Mary "a far higher and more prominent place than is justified by the teaching of the New Testament" (1950, 19). It seems that while glad to detect attitudes similar to his own Pilcher often took a lively if somewhat disapproving interest in medieval Catholic religious expression. He shows himself capable of a spirit of tolerance somewhat grudging by today's standards but in advance of what many displayed in mid-twentieth century Australia, where ill-feeling between Catholics and Protestants was often bitter.

Few translators achieve lasting fame, and no doubt Pilcher's archaic grammatical forms and vocabulary and his rather unadventurous approach to reproducing the important technical complexities of his originals will disappoint some modern readers. But his versions of the four poems have a generally good claim to accuracy and are occasionally very felicitous. They provide readable English versions of works which were unduly neglected in the English speaking world in

Pilcher's time, and which are likely to repay far more attention than they have yet received.⁷

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⁷More recent, but not always more felicitous verse translations of "Sólarljóð" and "Lilja" are provided by Boucher (1985). A prose translation forms part of the critical apparatus to Tate's critical edition of "Lifknarbraut" in his 1974 doctoral thesis.

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