

'BRASS-BRAINED RIVALRIES': THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF *STURLUNGA SAGA* IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

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In 1900 a modest looking octavo collection of Icelandic-related poems was published in London (Barmby 1900). Its front cover bore the title *Gísli Súrsson*, all accents carefully in place. The principal work was a full-length three-act drama based on the Icelandic saga of Gísli and written by a young English woman, a native of Yorkshire, called Beatrice Barmby, who died with tragic suddenness before she could see the text through the press. Her play nevertheless enjoyed some attention on its publication. It was translated into Icelandic by Matthías Jochumsson, a family friend; and this Icelandic version was almost published in Winnipeg, and finally printed in Seyðisfjörður with Barmby family funding. The English version was performed in London, and copies found their way as far afield as Australia and Buenos Aires (Lbs. MS 2808, Mabel Barmby letters to Matthías Jochumsson 1899-1911).

Late Victorian imaginative engagement with an Icelandic family saga which had been first translated into English 35 years earlier (Dasent 1866) need cause us no surprise (Wawn 1992a). But there were other sagas represented in the three dozen lyrics and ballads included in the 1900 *Gísli Súrsson* volume. It is clear that Beatrice Barmby, whose knowledge of the Icelandic language had developed under the guidance of her 'Uncle Eiríkur' (Magnússon) (Lbs. MS 2186a, letter to EM, [undated] 1897) was unusually well read in both Old and Modern Icelandic literature, not least in areas such as skaldic verse with which other Victorian enthusiasts were either unfamiliar or out of sympathy.¹ At the head of this verse collection is a set of six poems which may serve as a focus for this essay, which seeks to explore the otherwise cery silence about *Sturlunga saga* in Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

The Barmby poems highlight a scatter of individual *Sturlunga* scenes: the exiled Sturla winning over the Norwegian king by his narrative powers ('Sturla in Exile', 109-11); the end of Þórður Sturluson's exile, and the fateful burning at Flugumýri. These pieces, prefaced by two taut and striking sonnets 'On Sturla's Íslendinga saga', represent (albeit in distillate form) virtually the earliest identifiable responses to *Sturlunga saga* amongst Icelandophiles in nineteenth-century Britain. They are almost certainly the only English poems ever inspired by Sturla Þórðarson's work. The first Barmby sonnet reveals at once a response of unusual intensity:

Across the waste of barren centuries
A voice, a human cry, comes echoing still,

¹ There are translations of 'Sonatorrek', verses by Sighvatr Þórðarson, stanzas from *Kormáks saga*, along with more modern poems by Páll Víðalín and Jón Thoroddsen.

Clear toned, in that monotony of ill
 That ebb'd and flow'd set in the ice-bound seas.
 A pure, proud, weary heart; not passionate,
 Though wronged; with wordy transports little stirred,
 He knew too well the value of his word,
 And, grandly reticent, clasped hands with fate.

Yet through the years he sets my pulse to his,
 My brother dreamer in an iron race;
 In field or fight, had we been face to face,
 I could not feel him nearer than he is,
 Since still to all his silent pride there clings
 The inborn sense of tears in human things.

(Barnby 1900, 107)

If the poem signals an earnest engagement with the manner of Sturla's narratives—the reticence, the understatement and the pathos—in the companion sonnet we glimpse an imaginative response of almost embarrassing vividness, albeit held in check by the discipline of sonnet form, some incantatory syntactic patterning, and a dusting of alliterative doublets:

So side by side the frozen road we ride,
 While the round moon shines cold on march and moor,
 Dash up with clattering hoofs to the door,
 And hear the clamour and the cry inside:
 So side by side on Thverá's banks we fight,
 So watch the growing power we may not quell,
 So on the royal ship old stories tell,
 While overhead comes down the unfriendly night.

Thus in my heart, as his, there live again
 The hopes by weakness foiled or evil fate,
 The pangs to see his brass-brained rivals great,
 The slander, the dumb heart-break, and the pain:
 No longing that he felt, no joy he knew,
 No loss he suffered but I know it too.

(Barnby 1900, 108)

W. P. Ker, no man's critical fool, was one Victorian who admired Miss Barnby's poetry: 'she had a great heart, and a most original mind—more truly heroic I think than any of her contemporaries [...]. I find that the attraction of her poetry does not fail, but on the contrary rather increases' (Lbs 2808 4to, letter to Matthías Jochumsson, 5 March 1903).

In no *Sturlunga* scene were 'evil fate', 'slander', 'dumb heart-break', 'loss' and (appealing phrase) 'brass-brained rivals' more in evidence than the Flugumýrabrenna of 1253. It was the scene which could have been the making of *Sturlunga's* reputation with British readers, enjoying as it did a number of advantages over any other part of

Sturlunga. Firstly, from 1897 onwards British readers could read the story in W. P. Ker's supple translation included in his classic study *Epic and Romance* (Ker 1897, 302). I know of only one other *Sturlunga* scene translated into English (Ker 1906, 12-15) until after the second world war. Secondly, Ker's translation was accompanied by a characteristically persuasive analysis of Sturla's narrative art in general, and the tragedy of Flugumýri in particular which, he claims, can stand any comparison with the infinitely more celebrated Njálsbrenna scene. It represents 'the last words of the great Icelandic school', offering as it does 'a more detailed and more rational account than is to be found elsewhere in the world of the heroic age going to the bad, without a hero' (Ker 1897, 297). Thirdly, portions of the scene were edited by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Frederick York Powell as the principal *Sturlunga* offering in their innovative and influential *An Icelandic Prose Reader* (1879, 221-4); as Victorian Icelandophiles systematically learnt Old Icelandic, the Flugumýrabrenna would be amongst the first texts they would read.² Fourthly, the Flugumýri site was not without British connections. It cannot, alas, boast of a Collingwood painting (Haraldur Hannesson 1988), a Baring-Gould paragraph,³ or a William Morris poem, for none of these famous Iceland travellers visited the location, for all that Collingwood and Baring-Gould, unusually for British travellers at this time, explored the Eyjafjörður and Skagafjörður regions. It is also true that Ebenezer Henderson, who did pass through Flugumýri in 1814-15, speaks only of 'the ancient residence of Gissor Jari, a name celebrated in Norwegian history' (Henderson 1818, 440), before describing with far greater animation the bizarre life-history of the ferryman from nearby Grund who had served in the Austrian and Danish armies and twice fought against Napoleon. True, too, that Jón Espóln, heroically translating the poems of Ossian whilst resident at Flugumýri, was a mute inglorious Milton to even the keenest Northern antiquarian in Victorian Britain (Wawn 1994 forthcoming). There was, however, Miss E. J. Seward,⁴ an unusually well-informed Iceland traveller who had learnt Icelandic from Jón Hjaltalín in Edinburgh (Bodl. MS Icel. d.1, JH letter to Guðbrandur Vigfússon, Easter 1879). She owned a text of *Sturlunga*, and in her knapsack was a copy of the 1879 *Reader* ('every tourist should possess' it: Seward 1882, 56), complete with its Flugumýri extract. Her admirable Iceland travel book enthuses periodically about *Sturlunga* in general, laments the 'terrible condition of public affairs' which it depicts (52), and conjures up a melancholy picture of the artistic and cultural wealth which

² This splendid collection (would that it could be reprinted) contains only one scene from *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Gunnar's aborted departure from Hlíðarendi); pride of place is given to extensive extracts from *Laxdæla saga*.

³ Baring-Gould's 1862 travels in Iceland took him to Miklibær and Viðimýri, but not to Flugumýri itself. He did see a manuscript of *Sturlunga*, owned by Sveinn Skúlason, the editor of *Nordri*. His travel account shows no interest in Sturla's work, whilst his saga bibliography lists *Sturlunga* (in its 1817-20 Copenhagen edition) as out of print.

⁴ Title-page reads simply 'E. J. Seward', the familiar strategem of nineteenth-century women writers for earning a serious readership.

perished in the Flugumýri flames:

All the house was much ornamented with carvings; the entrance hall was wainscoted, and the halls and inner rooms were all tapestried; and much plate and jewellery were there, some of which was saved by people who took refuge in the church, a sanctuary always respected. (Seward 1882, 200)

With such a write-up, Flugumýri could have become the Bergþórshvöll of the North, a saga-stead for moist-eyed pilgrimage, or a site for frenzied excavation in search of whey stains in the dairy (Wawn 1992, 239). Fifthly, the burning became the subject of what is arguably Beatrice Bamby's best *Sturlunga* poem, written in the style of a Sir Walter Scott border ballad, 'with wordy transports little stirred':

The eastern stars began to pale, the distant cock to crow,
A mist came up before the dawn, and the crackling flame burned low.

"Now ye, go seek about the house, that be in steel wrought gear!
If Gizur overlive the flames, we shall rue it many a year." [...]

They passed between what walls might stand by blackened bower and stall,
They thrust their spears 'twixt rafter and door, through smouldering heap and wall.

Here is no life that yet may live between the frost and the flame;
Mount, good fellows; our work is done for praise and eke for blame.'
(Bamby 1900, 123)

Sixthly, as the Bamby extract reminds us, the saga scene itself exhibits all the careful concern for three-dimensional material detail, all the understated but darting energy, and all the emotional reticence and range needed to capture the imagination of susceptible Victorian Icelandophiles: the tarred sheep-skins, the belt and gold-ringed purse of Sturla's hapless daughter, the blazing linen clothes of the young Þorlákr, the frost-bitten feet of the monk, the heat of the hall, the cool of the dairy, the curd-tub and the whey pit, the choking, the cursing, the cold-hearted resolution of Gissur's 'brass-brained rivals', the random throws of fortune's dice, the fear of future vengeance, the baleful contrast between wedding and wake.

Finally, and underpinning all other factors, Guðbrandur Vigfússon's major two-volume edition of *Sturlunga*, complete with magisterial Prolegomena in English, had been published by the Clarendon Press in Oxford in 1878.⁵ Here was an edition which could have set not just the Flugumýri conflagration but the whole Sturla Þórðarson corpus on the scholarly and imaginative map of Victorian Britain. Guðbrandur had examined the Copenhagen manuscripts of *Sturlunga* before moving to Britain in 1864, at the instigation

⁵ It would suit the argument of this paper to claim that Guðbrandur was particularly drawn to the Flugumýrabrenna scene. Alas, my recent examination of his own copy (now in the Turville-Petre room in the University of Oxford English Faculty library) of the 1817-20 *Sturlunga* saga edition revealed that the relevant pages were uncut, and the volume as a whole bears no marks of use.

of Sir George Dasent, to work on what would eventually become known as the Cleasby-Vigfússon *Icelandic-English Dictionary* (1874). Residence in England enabled him to identify the importance of two British-based post-medieval paper manuscripts: BM MS 11127 (c.1690), and Advocates' Library MS 21.3.17 in Edinburgh, both acquired through the operations of Finnur Magnússon around 1820. It was indeed on the British Museum manuscript, corrected against the Edinburgh text, that Guðbrandur's 1878 edition was based, whenever older vellums were unavailable.

In 1870 any Briton wishing to learn the Old Icelandic language in order to read Old Icelandic literature had all too little help to hand; but the situation changed dramatically during the 1870s. 1874—a major new dictionary to help readers work through *Sturlunga*; 1878—an English language edition of the whole of *Sturlunga*, the first edition of any Icelandic saga published in Britain; 1879—the Vigfússon *Icelandic Prose Reader*. *Sturlunga* had arrived at the right moment, particularly when its witness was supplemented subsequently by Seward's 1882 traveller's tales of the *Sturlunga* regions, by the 1897 W. P. Ker Flugumýri translation, by Barmby's 1900 poems, and by the additional prestige lent to the whole text through Ker's 1906 published Oxford lecture 'Sturla the Historian', with its suggestive critical comment, and another passage of translation. In all these circumstances, how could the Flugumýrabrenna, and hence *Sturlunga* itself, have failed to capture the imagination of British readers in the years after 1878? In the history of saga reception in the English-speaking world, why did *Sturlunga* remain so long unreceived? There seems some justification for interrogating the silence over *Sturlunga*.

It soon becomes clear from the available evidence that, as so often in the affairs of men, we are facing neither conspiracy nor indolence, but rather accident and ideology. The forces of accident need addressing first. There is some reason to believe that Guðbrandur Vigfússon's edition of *Sturlunga* fell foul of factors as banal as excessive cost price, hopeless advertising and total absence of reviews. To begin with the question of cost. '*Sturlunga* volumes are not accessible to all [...]' wrote W. P. Ker in a review of the Vigfússon/York Powell *Origines Islandicae*. He could say that again, and many of Guðbrandur's friends did so in letters. The purchase price of *Sturlunga* in 1879 was 42 shillings, which represented (for example) 10% of Eiríkur Magnússon's monthly salary as Librarian in the University Library in Cambridge—perhaps £150 in modern terms. Accordingly, few people could afford to buy it when they saw it advertised and reviewed. Secondly, advertisements for Guðbrandur's *Sturlunga* were in fact as seldom seen as white ravens. Journals such as *The Athenaeum* were full of listings from the leading publishing houses, the Clarendon Press amongst them. In the 1879 issues, however, I have found only one reference to *Sturlunga* (as a forthcoming publication in Jan. 1879) in the frequently printed Clarendon lists.

Thirdly, and most bizarre of all, it is by no means clear that Guðbrandur's

Sturlunga, this massive contribution to Icelandic scholarship from a (then) prestigious publishing house, was ever reviewed in Britain. I have yet to find a single published notice.⁶ After examining a copy of *Sturlunga*, Willard Fiske told Guðbrandur that 'you deserve the thanks of the whole English speaking community of scholars' (Bodl. MS Eng. Misc. d. 131, letter to GV, 7 June 1879), and offered to review it for *The Nation*. But he seems never to have done so, and neither apparently did anyone else. There is reason to believe that this silence is by no means accidental.

In the Britain of 1879 there were perhaps three⁷ men of sufficient scholarly authority and prestige to do justice to *Sturlunga* in a scholarly review: Jón Hjaltalín in Edinburgh, Eiríkur Magnússon in Cambridge, and Sir George Dasent, by then retired from years of service as deputy Editor of *The Times*, but still active as a scholar and journalist (Dasent 1908). Jón's imminent departure (Aug. 1880) for Iceland, to take up a teaching post in Möðruvellir, effectively ruled him out. Indeed, notwithstanding his warm support offered to Guðbrandur in regular correspondence during the long gestation period of the *Sturlunga* edition in the 1870s, up to the time of his departure his only sighting of the two volumes was when casting a fleeting (and envious) eye over Miss Seward's own copy (Bodl. MS Icel. d.1, JH letter to GV, Easter 1879).

Eiríkur Magnússon and Sir George Dasent represented a different problem, which is soon stated. Guðbrandur, for some years a good friend of both men, was no longer on speaking terms with either of them at the time of *Sturlunga's* publication. Eiríkur Magnússon arrived in Britain in the same year (1864) as Guðbrandur, but within ten years the mists of permanent estrangement had rolled in, never again to lift. We find one significant cause hidden away in a brief but peppery sentence in Guðbrandur's otherwise uncontentious prefatory notes to the 1874 *Icelandic-English Dictionary*: 'Nýja Testamenti, the New Testament, cited from the text of 1644, in Edd. of 1807 and 1813 (in no case is the new edition, London 1866, cited, it being merely a paraphrase and inaccurate)' (p. xii). Guðbrandur's 1879 *Reader* turns up the heat of criticism under this ill-starred 'new edition', the work of the well-meaning British and Foreign Bible Society, who had been 'persuaded' (ibid) to use an earlier nineteenth-century paraphrastic New

⁶ In a letter to Guðbrandur, Willard Fiske appears to refer to a hostile review of *Sturlunga* by Rasmus Anderson: 'you are only suffering at his hands the fate which had already overtaken Mr. Longfellow, Mr. Marsh, myself and other Americans who have given some attention to Icelandic literature. An American westernism describes him exactly—he is too apt to slop over' (Bodl. MS Eng. Misc. d. 131, letter to GV, 7 June 1879). I have not yet located this review.

⁷ At first sight there may have been other possible candidates: John Earle and Henry Forman. Earle wrote a lengthy review (Earle 1875) of fifteen nineteenth-century books on Icelandic, ranging from Rasmus Rask to Sophus Bugge, from Konrad Maurer to William Morris, from *Brennu-Njáls saga* to *Lilja*. A closer look at the review suggests that he wrote it before reading any of the books, presumably in order to avoid prejudice. Forman also wrote at length on nine published translations of Icelandic sagas, but the cat is soon out of the bag (Forman 1871: 36) when he announces breezily that he has no first-hand knowledge of Icelandic. Of the other more convincing reviewers of Icelandic books in the 1870s, none wrote on *Sturlunga*: see, for example, Lang 1874, Metcalfe 1877.

Testament version as a base text, before adding 'misprints and misspellings of every kind' to the earlier deficiencies of 'slipshod carelessness, foreign words, mistranslations, omissions, [...] defects [...] dulness and prosaism' (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and York Powell 1879, 441). Chief amongst the persuaders against whom Guðbrandur (and Jón Hjaltalín) had set his face like a flint was Eiríkur Magnússon. At exactly the time that he might have been working on a favourable review of *Sturlunga*, Eiríkur was completing a searing attack on Guðbrandur's bible proposals (Eiríkur Magnússon 1879). It was philological civil war worthy of the rawest *Sturlungaöld* conflict: the bachelor against the family man, Dalasýsla against Berufjörður, Oxford against Cambridge; the tetchy non-contributor against the organiser of the 1875 Mansion House Icelandic famine relief fund; the editor of *Sturlunga* against the man best able and least inclined to review his edition. The fires of Hekla could freeze over—though they showed all too few signs of doing so during that volcanic decade⁹—before Eiríkur and Guðbrandur would be reconciled.⁹

To fall out with one potential reviewer was unfortunate; to fall out with two really does look like carelessness, particularly when the other potential reviewer was a figure of the eminence and influence of Sir George Dasent, Guðbrandur's erstwhile mentor. All seemed to be well between the two men as late as 1874. In his *Times* review (2 March 1874, 4d) of Guðbrandur's *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, Dasent is lavish in his praise: 'no other man alive could have completed this Dictionary as it has been completed', it was a long-awaited boost for study of the philological, mythological, literary and legal links which bind Britain to Iceland, and, though 'fame is better than fee', it would be a disgrace to Britain as a whole, and richly endowed Oxford in particular, if Guðbrandur were allowed to depart the land unrewarded with a permanent post.

In the event Guðbrandur attempted to convert fame into fee through undertaking (jointly with Dasent) an edition and translation of *Orkneyinga saga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* for the government funded Rolls Series of historical documents relating to the British Isles. It was an ill-starred venture. Two inked exclamation marks in the margin of Frederick York Powell's copy¹⁰ of the *Dictionary* help to explain why. They draw attention to the paragraph in which Dasent admits to 'a glow of exultation' at the 'birth' of a work whose 'second father' he had been 'ever since the untimely death of its natural parent [the late Richard Cleasby]' (Cleasby 1874, cvii). Guðbrandur's sense of

⁹ *Times* articles on volcanic eruptions and famine relief: 1875—20 May 10f, 21 May 5c, 1 July 6c, 10 July 13c, 17 July 13f, 11 Aug. 10c, 11 Aug. 4f 11a, 10 Sept. 10c; 1877—5 Aug. 6d; 1878—4 July 4f.

¹⁰ William Morris wrote to *The Athenaeum* (Morris 1879) objecting to Guðbrandur's wilful omission of Eiríkur's name when referring, in his *Sturlunga Prolegomena* (1878 I 1), to the Morris/Eiríkur Magnússon translation of *Grettis saga*. We observe the same phenomenon when Guðbrandur refers to Eiríkur Magnússon's Rolls Series text of *Thomas saga Erkebiskups*, dismissed as merely a reproduction of C. R. Unger's 1869 edition; Eiríkur's name is not mentioned (1878 I cxxxv). Guðbrandur does mention (1878 I liii) Dasent's 'spirited version' of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*.

¹⁰ Now in the Turville-Petre Room in the University of Oxford English Faculty Library.

the lexicographic paternity was very different. Cleasby's work had been largely useless; Guðbrandur had effectively worked from scratch; and he had fought long with Dasent to have the title-page register the fact that the dictionary as published was largely his own work. Dasent's will prevailed. Cleasby's name appears first, in noticeably larger print, whilst Guðbrandur's contribution is identified as that of having 'Revised and Completed' Cleasby's work. York Powell was sufficiently indignant to have his own copy rebound with only Vigfússon's name on the spine. Jón Hjaltalín was also incensed at Dasent's insensitivity, assuring Guðbrandur that he would cross reference the dictionary in the Advocates' Library catalogue under 'Vigfússon'—'meira get eg ekki gjört eftir þeim reglum sem eg er bundinn við' (Bodl. MS Icel. d.1, JH to GV, 20 Dec. 1877); he then forgot to do so (JH to GV 29 April 1879). It will only seem a trivial point to those of us who have not spent ten years labouring on an eight-hundred page dictionary.

Even so, all might have been well with Dasent, if the Englishman had kept up with Guðbrandur's schedule of work on the Rolls Series project. Guðbrandur had finished his own editorial work by 1875, and was assured that the translations 'would be proceeded with by Sir George with the utmost rapidity' (Bodl. MS Eng. Misc. c.112, T. Duffus Hardy letter to GV, 16 March 1873). By April 1879, with Dasent's translations still not to hand, we find the late Hardy's successor lamenting the 'somewhat hard case' which he had inherited, and assuring Guðbrandur that whilst he would 'put all possible pressure [on Dasent] [...] to bring his labours to a close without unnecessary delay [...] I am unable to lessen the interval that must elapse between the completion of your share in this valuable work and the time when you may hope to reap the credit and public appreciation of your labour [...] after the publication is effected' (Bodl. MS Eng. Misc. c.112, Wm. Hardy to GV, 15 May 1879). Relations between the collaborators deteriorated, with Dasent refusing to communicate directly with his colleague; the only response to 'all possible pressure' that year being an icily noncommittal note to Hardy, beginning 'I shall be obliged if you will inform Mr Vigfusson [...]' (Bodl. MS Eng. Misc. c.112, Wm. Hardy to GV, 5 May 1879). At the very moment that Dasent should have been writing his favourable review of *Sturlunga*, he had severed diplomatic relations with its editor. No wonder that Jón Hjaltalín wrote to say that 'Í því líta, sem eg þekki til Dasents, hefir hann not acted like a gentleman, og vildi eg því óska, að þér yrðið sem fyrst lausir við hann' (Bodl. MS Icel. d. 1, JH to GV, Easter 1879). Dasent's translation of *Orkneyinga saga* finally appeared in 1887.

Fame may be better than fee, but in 1879 with no reviews to promote the newly published *Sturlunga* edition, with no permanent post in Oxford, and with no imminent prospect of the Rolls Series volumes appearing, fee was in very short supply. Guðbrandur was as financially challenged as a church mouse. A vacancy in the British Museum arose, but Dasent withdrew his support and the opportunity was lost (Bodl. MS Eng. Misc. c.112, Henry Liddell to Max Müller, 23 June 1879). Prospects in Oxford

were bleak: 'in these times no college is in the least likely to do anything for him'—sufficiently bleak, in fact, for a hardship fund to be established within weeks of the publication of *Sturlunga* by benevolent friends in Oxford, many of them influential Icelandophile delegates of the Clarendon Press. Eminent local subscribers included Max Müller, G. W. Kitchin, and Henry Liddell, whilst, further afield, the list included Sir James Bryce, one of Icelandic culture's staunchest and most powerful friends in Victorian Britain. On one undated subscriber list there is an all too telling blank space opposite the name of Sir G. W. Dasent (Bodl. MS Icel. c.112).

Not all of the subscribers were wealthy, and their motives were good-hearted, but let not too favourable a picture emerge of the operation. Guðbrandur was paid £15 a month,¹¹ in weekly instalments—'as long as he has money, he does nothing and muddles it away' (Bodl. MS Icel. c.112, H. L. S. Smith to Max Müller, 23 June 1879). Another contributor judged Guðbrandur to be 'a person somewhat impracticable, with fixed ideas as to what the University ought to do for him, and without power to appreciate any other view of the subject than his own' (Bodl. MS Eng. Misc. c.112, F. McMillan to Price, 8 July 1879). Nevertheless 'one is sorry' for a foreign scholar 'in distress', and the money was paid; and the editor of *Sturlunga* would have been lost without it.

With emergency funding in place, Guðbrandur might at least have expected to bask in the warm glow of overseas critical acclaim for his *Sturlunga* edition. We have noted Willard Fiske's prompt and positive response, and continental scholars such as Hugo Gering in Halle wrote in similar vein (Bodl. MS Germ. d.2, HG to GV, 24 May 1879). Kristian Kálund reported from Copenhagen (Bodl. MS Scand. d.1, 16 April 1879, 24 May 1879) that the Scandinavian bush telegraph was buzzing and that lists of prospective purchasers were building up—Gustav Storm had rustled up thirty in Norway, Daniel Bruun thirty two in Copenhagen,¹² Gustav Cederschiöld fifteen in Lund and Uppsala. In Iceland *Sturlunga* was making its mark amongst those few who had acquired a (perhaps complimentary) copy from Guðbrandur—old friends such as Ásgeir Einarsson in Þingeyrar (Bodl. MS Icel. d.1, letter to GV, 26 Aug. 1879), and 'S. O. Thorlacius' in Stykkishólmur, who judged it to be the best edition in all respects (Bodl. MS. Icel. d.2, 18 Nov. 1879), though he contested the date¹³ assigned to the *Flugumýrabrenna*. The less fortunate wrote not to congratulate the editor but to importune. Halldór Briem at Möðruvellir writes to lament that the two *Sturlunga* volumes were 'fjarska dýr', that 'fjöldur [...] líftíð fyrir höndum hjer hjá okkur', and that a discount would be welcome (Bodl.

¹¹ One might compare this with the £40 fee paid to Guðbrandur's London physician in 1889 for a single visit to confirm that the Iclander's cancer was incurable (receipt in Bodl. MS Eng. Misc. c.112).

¹² Bruun clearly had more luck with the Danish scholarly community than Tryggvi Gunnarsson did amongst the politicians. He distributed leaflets in the Danish parliament, advertising the special financial terms under which *Sturlunga* could be obtained, and received only two enquiries. (Bodl. MS. Icel. d.1, letter to GV, 17 May 1879).

¹³ He felt it ought to be on Tuesday/Wednesday 13-14 Oct., not 22 Oct.

MS Icel. d.1, letter to GV, 24 April 1879). An answer 'sem fyrst' is requested, as is also the case with Guðbrandur's old Copenhagen friend séra Þorvaldur Bjarmarson of Mel (Miðfirði, who wants to know whether, as was the case with the 1874 *Dictionary*, orders of five copies or more of *Sturlunga* and the *Icelandic Prose Reader* can be obtained 'fyrir hálfvörð'.

One might at least have expected that Sigurður Vigfússon, Guðbrandur's brother, would have been favoured with a complimentary copy of the new *Sturlunga*, having encouraged the editor by letter throughout the 1870s, and offered from an early stage to read all the proofs (Bodl. MS. Icel. d.1, letter to GV, 17 Oct. 1876). Sigurður did indeed receive a free copy of the *Reader* but continued to wait in mounting impatience for *Sturlunga* to arrive (ibid, 27 July 1879): 'eg veit af mörgum sem vilja kaupa' not only *Sturlunga* but the *Reader* and *Dictionary* also, at a discount, amongst them Reykjavík worthies such as Jón rektor Þorkelsson, Halldór Friðriksson, Halldór Guðmundsson, Guðmundr Pálsson, and the postmaster and bookseller Ólafur Finsen (ibid, 3 Sept. 1879). Sigurður's next letter (15 Oct. 1879) ensured that none of these folk would receive their copy of *Sturlunga* for some considerable time. Sigurður mentions that he has examined what Guðbrandur says in an appendix to his edition (Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1878, II 505-13) about the site of the ancient Lögberg at Þingvellir, and is sure that his brother is wholly mistaken. Sigurður claims to have examined all the possible sites in the company of Fiske and local antiquarians who, whilst on that very trip, formed themselves into an Antiquarian Society. Their unanimous conclusion was that Guðbrandur's proposed location was an 'óhentugur staður'. Six thousand people assembled in such a place would have found the *lögsgumnaðr* inaudible. Sigurður's explanation of Guðbrandur's error will merely have added the fuel of nostalgia to the flame of indignation: 'það er ekki mögulegt að þú sérð Þingvelli nógu kunnugr þegar þessi spurning kemr fyrir, þar sem þú ekki hefr komið á þann stað til rannsóknar enda langt yfir 20 ár, hversu skír og glögg'. In his 29 Nov. 1879 letter, Sigurður states that he has not heard from his brother; a 22 March 1880 letter makes it clear that the offended silence has been total; and nothing had changed by Sigurður's 8 May 1881 letter, which confronts the problem directly, and offers something approaching an apology for having pursued the question 'með mikilli frekju'. In the meantime, copies of *Sturlunga* remained unsent, eager subscribers still waited, innocent victims of the 'brass-brained' rivalry of siblings.

The problem in Iceland was lack of copies rather than lack of interest in what séra Þorvaldur of Melur called 'sú mesta Íslands þjóðsaga'. Back in Britain the eerie silence over *Sturlunga* was deafening. Guðbrandur had many loyal British correspondents, yet I have found only one reference to the new edition in any of their letters. This was from Arthur Laurenson in Lerwick in the Shetland Isles (Bodl. MS. Eng. Misc. d.131, 22 Dec. 1879), whose local Icelandic saga reading group could not lay hands on a copy; but

could they have read it anyway in the wake of the grievous blow recently dealt to them all when the one member who owned a copy of the 1874 *Dictionary* has just emigrated to New Zealand. Why was there this apparent British indifference to *Sturlunga*? Were there other factors involved than expense and absence of reviews?

All the evidence suggests that by 1878 the ground had been prepared for *Sturlunga* and its wide-ranging Prolegomena. One has only to observe the number and range of articles on Icelandic literature published in Victorian periodicals during the 1870s,¹⁴ the number of travel books (Aho 1993, 242-7), the range of saga translations which appeared, the prize poems and essays on Iceland appearing in the universities (Rowntree 1875, Vansittart Conybeare 1877), and the enthusiastic reception of Guðbrandur's 1874 *Dictionary*.¹⁵ If, in 1877, Britain was ready for 'Jón Jónsson's saga: the Genuine Autobiography of a Modern Icelander',¹⁶ it was surely ready for *Sturlunga*. The Prolegomena, prepared by York Powell from Guðbrandur's oral contributions, was (or were!)¹⁷ intended to stand as an introduction to a complete text series of all medieval Icelandic sagas and poems.¹⁸ The essay itself teems reassuringly with references to British life and letters, ancient and modern, as if conscious of the need to locate these unfamiliar sagas in recognisable cultural contexts. Thus, the reader is informed that Icelandic literature bears the marks of Celtic influence (p. xxvi); that early Icelandic land settlement was based on the noble udal ideals of Norway and Orkney rather than divisive feudalism—this notion would be very familiar to all Victorian readers of Samuel Laing's hugely influential Introduction to his pioneering 1844 translation of *Heimskringla*. The reader also learns that Icelandic sagas are like Elizabethan drama—'[the] outward expression of the innermost heart of a great Age' (xxvi); that *Laxdæla saga*, though lacking the vigour of *Heimskringla* and the detail and precision of *Sturlunga*, demonstrates a creative flair with narrative materials worthy of an Elizabethan dramatist; that *Beowulf* was an English offshoot of a Scandinavian tradition which in Iceland

¹⁴ Edmund Gosse on *Egils saga* in *Cornhill Magazine* (1879), and on *Eyrbyggja saga* (1880); Sir James Bryce on Iceland, *CM* 1874; Frederick Metcalfe on 'Old Norse Mirror, Men, Manners', *Quarterly Review* Jan. 1877; Trollope on Iceland in *Fortnightly Review* Aug. 1878; Karl Blind on 'Edda and ethics', *Dublin University Magazine* 1878, 'Teutonic Tree of existence', *Fraser's Magazine* 1877; Sir George Dasent on Iceland and Exploration, *Edinburgh Review* Jan. 1876; John Earle, 'Icelandic illustrations of English', *QR* Oct. 1875; Henry Forman, 'Icelandic sagas', *London Quarterly Review* April 1871; Patrick Kennedy, 'Lilja', *DUM* March 1871, 'ON Mythology', *DUM* May-June 1872; Richard John King, 'Runes and runestones' *FM* June 1876; William Ralston Sheddin, 'New tales from the Norse', *FM* Nov. 1872; Thomas Carlyle's *Early Kings of Norway* 1875 appears first in *FM* Jan.-Mar., 1875.

¹⁵ See articles in *Notes and Queries* by Skeat 1882 and Palmer 1883 for instance.

¹⁶ *Fraser's Magazine*, Jan. 1877, 1-33.

¹⁷ Would that Guðbrandur had used 'formole', the rich Germanic coinage of his 'Cheapinghaven' colleague George Stephens!

¹⁸ It is as constituent members of this text series that the Vigfússon/York Powell *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* and *Origines Islandicae* volumes should be viewed. Other projected volumes which never materialised included *Brennu-Njáls saga* and the complete *Konungasögur*.

produced *Grettissaga* (I xlix-l);¹⁹ that Sturla is 'the "last minstrel" of the Saga time, his birth and early youth falling within it, while his old age is outside it, and he is left alone, like Ossian, with the dead'—a seductive notion for an age which still had a taste for the misty melancholy of Ossian, not to mention Sir Walter Scott's 'Lay of the Last Minstrel' (I lxix). The Prolegomena also praise(s) Jón Hjaltalín's 'excellent' 1873 translation of *Orkneyinga saga* (I xcvi); it refers (albeit somewhat dismissively) to *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, the end of which was by some way the best known *samtíðarsaga* in Britain until the end of the nineteenth century,²⁰ its Scottish connections (notably the Battle of Largs) having encouraged the preparation of a translation by James Johnstone in 1782 (I cvi). Even when addressing the narrative art of *Sturlunga* itself, British comparisons are invoked: 'you can feel the choking smoke and heat, and hear the roar of the flame in the hall and the clash of the spears in the porches.' Only Defoe and Carlyle are as 'pitiless i[n] [their] faithfulness to fact' (I cvii). As a parting shot, a case is made for the Eddic lays having originated in the British Isles (I clxxxiii-vi).

With Guðbrandur's Prolegomena directing such a persistently Anglocentric spray over Icelandic culture, small wonder that the canny Jón Hjaltalín wondered why the essay was not published separately²¹ in Britain under a title such as 'A History of Old Icelandic Literature', for the benefit of those who might well not want to buy *Sturlunga* itself (Bodl. MS Icelandic d.1, letter to GV, Easter 1879). We have noted who such people might have been: those unable to afford the hefty two-guinea price, those who wanted to read some reviews first, and those who could only read the saga in an English translation. To these we might add the people who, like Guðbrandur himself, missed in *Sturlunga* 'the bright side of the Icelandic life, of which we see too little in the midst of slaughter and discord' such as the Flugumýri burning (I clxviii). I want to suggest, in the final part of this essay, that, had they been able to read it as a whole, Victorian enthusiasts of the North might well have found *Sturlunga* a disturbing text whose truths touched sensitive nerves. If, as I have tried to suggest thus far, a chapter of accidents helped to create the silence about *Sturlunga* in Victorian Britain, ideology may have also cast its shadow over the reception of Sturla's work.

The Prolegomena offer(s) some guidance for readers in search of an overall meaning for *Sturlunga*. It was a work about the 'fall of the Commonwealth and the destruction of the old Houses', culminating in the old common law being swept away in

¹⁹ How typical of Eiríkur Magnússon to produce a wholly different explanation: Auðunn Sköskull took the story of *Beowulf* with him to Iceland, Grettir was Auðunn's great-grandson, and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* fed off this imported English narrative (Lbs. MS 1860 4to, lecture 'On early points of contact, chiefly literary, between Britain and Iceland', pp. 16-17).

²⁰ It was overtaken by *Sverris saga* towards the end of the nineteenth century, the result first of the prestigious support of Thomas Carlyle (1875), and later of John Septon's translation (1899).

²¹ Sigurður Vigfússon suggested that the Prolegomena should be translated into Icelandic (Bodl. MS Icelandic d.2, letter to GV, 8 May 1881).

1271, and an alien foreign code being introduced (I clxix). For the enlightened Henry Holland in 1811 submission to this 'alien code' made a good deal of sense: 'the Icelanders, wearied of feuds and contests, consented at last to resign their independence', an act not of 'blind submission to arbitrary power', nor a 'timid surrender of rights', but rather a thoroughly sensible 'alliance' (Holland in Mackenzie 1812, 48-9). Late Victorian Britain, however, had invested a good deal more romantic nationalism into images of their North Atlantic blood brothers, and the notion of any rational surrender of an ancient and precious Viking birthright was unthinkable:

dreadful as were the disorders, unsettled as was the condition of the country, the sacrifice of the public life of the old days, with all the ennobling influences, was a high price, too high surely to pay even for peace [...]. Peace was secured, but the island sunk into torpor and inaction which it has never since completely shaken off. (Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1878, I clxix).

A genuine anxiety is discernible here. Victorian enthusiasts of Iceland were fond of seeing Viking life as driven by the same forces of enterprise and daring which drove the British Empire so triumphantly in the nineteenth century. The Vikings themselves were 'sons of England's younger self', in the words of George Rowntree's Cambridge University Chancellor's Medal prize-winning poem on Iceland (Rowntree 1875, l. 99). Viking blood, it was claimed, still ran in Victorian veins:

They [the Vikings] were like England in the nineteenth century: fifty years before all the rest of the world with her manufactories, and firms—and twenty years before them with her railways. They were foremost in the race of civilisation and progress; well started before all the rest had thought of running. No wonder therefore that both won. (Dasent 1873, I 247)

For nineteenth-century Britons, to read *Landnamabók*, and the *Íslendingasögur*, as they could²² and did, was to observe the emergence of a Viking commonwealth, with its bold and buccaneering colonisers. Moreover, even as Guðbrandur worked on the *Sturlunga* edition, modern Icelandic colonisers were still making the news, almost exactly a thousand years after Ingólfur Arnarson's arrival in Iceland. Britons could read in the *Times*, and Guðbrandur certainly did read in letters from his brother,²³ of major emigration from Iceland to Manitoba and even to Alaska, the latter settlement under the flamboyant guidance of the quixotic Jón Ólafsson. His master plan for the new colony involved promoting a high birth-rate so that, four centuries later, a hundred million Icelandic-Americans could sweep down into the United States in an all-conquering wave,

²² There were rather more family sagas readily available in English translation by the end of the nineteenth century than there were in 1980: Fry 1980, Acker 1993.

²³ *Times*, 1875—28 June 13c, 14 Aug. 11c, 11 Sept. 6b, 20 Oct. 4b, 8 Nov. 8b, 7 Oct. 7d, 20 Oct. 4b; 1877—10 July 5c; 1878—18 Sept. 5c; Bodl. MS Icel. d.1, Jón Hjaltálm to GV, 16 Jan. 1875; Bodl. MS Icel. d.2., SV letter to GV, 17 June 1878.

cleansing the 'afskræmdu ensku tungu' (Jón Ólafsson 1875, 41) as they went.

If 1870s Britain was intrigued by a new Icelandic colony, it followed with far greater attention the thousandth anniversary in 1874 of an ancient one, Iceland itself. The *Times* was full of it²⁴ and successive issues of the *Illustrated London News* bombarded its readers with full page illustrations and eye-witness reports of the Danish King's visit.²⁵ Stirred by anniversary accounts (in old saga and modern newspaper) of the Icelandic commonwealth's birth, Victorian Icelandophiles might have found it a dispiriting experience to read in *Sturlunga* of its decline and fall. George Dasent (Wawn 1992b), reflecting on the Victorian fascination with Old Norse religion, noted that 'it carried about with it that melancholy presentiment of dissolution which has come to be so characteristic of modern life' (Dasent 1903, lxxi). *Sturlunga*, however, offered more than mere 'melancholy presentiments of dissolution'; it dramatised the real thing in blood-soaked detail—Seamus Heaney's 'hatreds and behindbacks' in the raw. If Victorian empire reflected the triumphs of Viking expansion, when was Victorian empire to experience the trauma of Viking collapse? When and how would the British *Sturlungaöld* reveal itself? I suggest that in this unease may lie the ideological secret of the Victorian silence about *Sturlunga*.

I end with two ironic glimpses of the fate of Guðbrandur's *Sturlunga* edition in Victorian England. Firstly, during his final months Guðbrandur received the cheering intelligence that not all the English speaking world had ignored his efforts. Charles Sprague Smith, a young American academic²⁶ who had known Guðbrandur since the 1870s, wrote to the dying Iclander on 20 Sept. 1888 whilst en route home to the United States from Iceland. Whilst in Akureyri, he had been 'examined' in Icelandic by Matthías Jochumsson, by reading and translating sections of *Sturlunga* in Guðbrandur's edition. He claims proudly that Matthías had announced approvingly to him, 'you have entered into the sanctuary of the language' (Bodl. MS. Eng. Misc. d.131).

Secondly, when Guðbrandur died, his will (Bodl. MS. Eng. Misc. c.112) had three codicils. He left a legacy of £25 to the church at Þingeyrar, whilst another £45 paid for a box of Clarendon Press books (at 50% discount) each to Þorkell Eyjólfsson and the Governor of Iceland in Reykjavík. Editions of *Piers Plowman*, Milton, Dryden, Johnson, Goldsmith were thus duly dispatched. So, too, were Greek, Anglo-Saxon, and Middle English Dictionaries. Copies were also sent of Guðbrandur's own Clarendon Press works over which he had toiled so mightily in his years at Oxford. Thus the *Sturlunga* edition had finally reached Iceland—ten years late but at half price.

²⁴ *Times*, 1874—7 July 4f, 23 July 5a, 5 Aug. 8a, 6 Aug. 11c, 8 Aug. 5a, 17 Aug. 8a, 19 Aug. 6a.

²⁵ *Illustrated London News*, 1874—29 Aug., front page and 206; 5 Sept., 216; 12 Sept., 253, 256, 257, 274; 19 Sept., 271.

²⁶ His daughter was the Medieval English scholar Lucy Toulmin Smith.

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