

THE MUSICIAN'S TALE: ÓLAFS SAGA TRYGGVASONAR, DRONTHEIM
FIORD' AND SIR EDWARD ELGAR

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There was no musician of any nationality amongst Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, but it was a violinist from Norway who came to dominate the medieval-style tale telling in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863-73), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's act of poetic homage to the medieval English 'maister'. Along with his six companions (Landlord, Student, Spanish Jew, Sicilian, Theologian, Poet) the musician tells three tales at the hostel in Sudbury, Massachusetts, where the travellers meet. Each of his narratives has a Scandinavian flavour; there are two eery ballads in traditional Danish style, while his first day story, the longest and best in the collection, is called 'The Saga of King Olaf' (1863).

Drawing extensively on Samuel Laing's English translation of Snorri Sturluson's *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, it offers a colourful montage of scenes from the missionary king's life. As the narrator warms to his task, the inn's log fire lights up his Nordic features: 'Fair-haired, blue-eyed, his aspect blithe, / His figure tall and straight and lithe, / And every feature of his face / Revealing his Norwegian race' (Longfellow, 1904 347). With his Stradivarius violin, 'in Cremona's workshop's made', the musician conjures up vivid Norwegian images: 'The rumour of the forest trees, / The plunge of the implacable seas, / The tumult of the wind at night, / Voices of eld, like trumpets blowing, / Old ballads, and wild melodies / Through mist and darkness pouring forth, / Like Elivagar's river flowing / Out of the glaciers of the North' (Longfellow 1904 347).

This last old northern mythological reference may have been lost on Ann Greening, a Victorian farm-worker's daughter from Gloucestershire in England, but it will not have prevented her from relishing this Longfellow poem just as she relished all the others. Her enthusiasm for the learned Harvard scholar's lines was shared by one of her sons, Edward. He knew and was much influenced by many of the poems; he owned and annotated a Victorian edition of Longfellow; and in due course he wrote a ninety minute cantata entitled *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf* (1896), based on Longfellow's narrative. Its impact was immediate and remarkable. Almost overnight a forty year old musical jack-of-all-trades, who had been earning a modest living by teaching music in Worcester, and by arranging assorted bits of his beloved Wagner for school orchestras, suddenly found himself catapulted to musical celebrity in late Victorian Britain. An unassuming violinist of modest social origins, from unfashionable middle England, and brought up in the deeply politically incorrect Catholic faith of his mother, transformed his own life by serenading a medieval Norwegian king. Britain, for so long 'a land without music', had discovered a native-born composer lionised not only at home but, even more improbably, in the Germany of Brahms and Wagner and, not least, in Norway—a bound copy of the score of *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf* was presented to the Norwegian king (my discussion of Elgar's life and music draws on Moore 1984, Kennedy 1987, Anderson 1990, 1993).

The composer took his appropriately pre-Conquest sounding surname from his Kentish father—William *ælfgar* (OE: 'elf-spear'), or *difgeirr* (ON; Reaney 1991 6), or, in its Victorian form, Elgar. In the late twentieth century Sir Edward (as he later became) Elgar remains, within Britain at least, a much loved composer, whose choral and orchestral music, with its distinctive blend of nobility, melancholy and mysticism, can still fill concert halls throughout the British Isles. *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf* plays no part in this modern popularity; it is now an almost forgotten work, but a hundred years ago choral societies up and down Britain could be heard over the winter months re-oralising in song the deeds of Ólaf Tryggvason, with the composer in constant demand as guest conductor of such performances—from Norwich to New Brighton (no less), but particularly in the great industrial cities of northern England where the Victorian tradition of choral singing

was strongest (Leeds, Huddersfield, Bolton, Sheffield, Manchester). The first performance in October 1896 was held not in London, but in the great Victoria Hall in Hanley (Staffordshire), then a cultural centre for prosperous pottery manufacturers (and for ten years the local concert hall of the present writer). 1997 marks the centenary of the first London performance (at the Crystal Palace) of *King Olaf*, and a saga conference set, like much of the cantata, by 'Dronheim fiord' seems a suitable occasion to examine the process whereby Ólafur Tryggvason became a serenaded figure in Victorian concert halls, once Elgar (like Longfellow's musician before him) had finished 'entwining and encircling all / The strange and antiquated rhymes / With melodies of olden times' (1904, 364). I also draw attention to an additional appropriateness. The only available recorded performance (LPO, Handley 1987, 1994: I hope to use extracts in my presentation) of the cantata is conducted by the distinguished Elgarian Vernon Handley, who tells me that he studied Old Icelandic in Oxford forty years ago with the young Ursula Brown (now Mrs Dronke).

Ólafur Tryggvason had appeared to Victorian Britain in many guises before any Elgarian 'entwining and encircling' began. Indeed if any old northern figure was likely to become the focus for Victorian musical representation, that figure was always more likely to be found in *Heimskringla* than in a family saga. Snorri's work attracted more attention from poets, paraphrastic novelists, and popularising historians than the sagas of Njáll, Víga Glúmr, or Gísli, even after these became available in English translation in the 1860s. There was certainly little likelihood of Eddic myth and legend being set to music in England after 1870. Love him (as Elgar did) or loathe him (as William Morris did), Wagner had already been there and done it; he could hardly be out-Wagnered from the British Isles. One possible alternative to a *Heimskringla* opera or cantata was to take the hint from the Bernard Crusell and George Stephens settings (Stephens 1839) of pieces from Tegnér's much translated and hugely popular *Frithiofs saga*, and develop them into a more substantial operatic format. Like the Ólafur Tryggvason story the tale of Frithiof and Ingeborg offered adolescent rite de passage, adventure on land and sea, love and romance, and concern for spirituality (Wawn 1994, 211-54). But the Elgars read Longfellow and not Tegnér—and thus the links between King Ólafur and Edward Elgar were established.

For all that an heroic *Heimskringla*-type libretto was the most likely musical response to the Victorian cult of the old north, such an enterprise offered no guarantee of musical success. This is all too clearly revealed in a letter sent by one George Silke to Guðbrandur Vigfússon in Oxford late in 1888. Enclosed was an extract from 'The Norsemen to the Sea', a dire libretto on viking themes. Did the great Icelandic philologist know of any composer in Denmark or Norway who could set it to music—'someone who has lived among the Fjords and to whom the Sea is something like what it was to our Northern Forefathers and Palnatoke, and the Jomsburg vikings, and King Hakon and countless others [Silke claimed ancient Danish lineage]?' By this time Guðbrandur was terminally ill and unable to help; and it is hard to believe that Edvard Grieg or Carl Nielsen—or Elgar himself—could have spun musical gold from Silke's wet straw: 'The Viking path to fame and right / We cleave thy crests mid laughter light / Whilst Thunder's crashes worlds affright / And lightning flashes day from night / Dark foaming Sea. || In years long past when time was young / Through Odin's halls the Fate-word rung / From Vala lips that Norse should be / Lords of Earth and Kings of thee, / Fierce surging Sea... || Through Winter darkness, Summer light / 'Neath Sun by day, 'neath Moon by night / Our blood should gild thy waves in fight / Our bones thy shores should silver white, / Deep rolling sea' (Bodl. MS Eng. misc. d.131, 24 xi 1888, f. 539). Grieg at least had a perfect alibi—he was already hard at work writing an orchestral piece (published in 1890) based on sketches for an Olav Tryggvason opera, in collaboration with the playwright Bjørnsterne Bjørnsen (1888 piano version, Op. 50; Steen-Nøkleberg 1995).

The key to the popularity of Ólafur Tryggvason in Victorian Britain during the pre-Longfellow period was literary rather than musical: Samuel Laing's pioneering 1844 *Heimskringla* translation. These three hefty volumes represented the first complete

translation (or set of translations) of Icelandic sagas ever published in Britain; they provided Victorian readers with the first clear opportunity to study a coherent sequence of primary texts in which the history of north Atlantic viking communities, not least those within the British Isles, could be followed; and, not least, Laing's cantankerous 'Preliminary Dissertation' represented the fullest and most exciting introductory essay yet published in English on northern history and the idea of the north. The translation itself fed into public consciousness through popular paraphrase, and the 'Dissertation' set the ideological agenda for reading and reacting to *Heimskringla* for the rest of the century.

I have sought elsewhere (Wawn, forthcoming 1997) to analyse that Laingean agenda, and a brief summary must serve here. Laing showed little or no interest in Iceland; he was a Norway man, having travelled widely there during 1834-6, and having published his *Journal of Residence in Norway* (1836) on his return to Britain. The attitudes exhibited in the *Journal*, widely disseminated through reviews in the periodical press, reappeared even more robustly in his 1844 'Dissertation'. All that was best in old northernness, as defined by Laing, was to be found in Snorri's construction of viking-age Norway. Firstly, by happy geological chance, the very bed-rock of Norway was anti-feudal: the granite was so hard that it could not be worked into building blocks for castles, and thus the very archaeological infrastructure of feudalism could not be created. Secondly, Laing (himself a failed and frustrated candidate for election to the Westminster parliament) admired the kind of participatory democracy depicted by Snorri—the local Things, and the arts of persuasive eloquence which they encouraged amongst thoughtful king and steadfast bonder alike. Thirdly, Laing approved of the Norwegian landholding system; the paucity of surplus land prevented the emergence of large estates and of the disproportionate power which inevitably accompanied them. Equally, though, some landholding was vital. Laing attributed much of Anglo-Saxon England's feeble resistance to viking invasion to the ubiquity of landless serfs who lacked any material stake in victory, and fought without fervour. Fourthly, Laing was virulently anti-Catholic. He attributed other elements of Anglo-Saxon pre-Conquest lassitude to 'monkish' emasculation. Viking invasions had exposed the 'slavish torpidity' of the Anglo-Saxons to the barbarous and beneficial vitality of the northmen. Fifthly, Laing (like his fellow philologist George Stephens: Wawn 1995, 86-90) was deeply unsympathetic to Germany and the Germans: far too much time, he fumed, had been wasted searching for the roots of Anglo-Saxon England in the ancient forests of Germany, and in the over-promoted pages of Tacitus's *Germania*. Modern Germany was undemocratic and anti-entrepreneurial, the arterial walls of its society calcified by legions of unproductive civil servants, and this malign influence had extended to Denmark and Sweden (Laing 1839, 1842, 1852). All that was best in Britain was to be traced back not to Germany but to the bonder culture of ancient Norway: representative government, a proud sense of nationhood, articulate public opinion, trial by jury, security of property, freedom of mind and person, and indomitable energy and courage. Lastly, Laing was anxious to enrol the United States in his idealising vision of Norwegian virtue. Americans should cross the Atlantic and rediscover their cultural roots amongst the fjords.

Laing developed his very personal notions about ancient and modern Norway from travelling around the fjords during the summers, and spending the intervening winters learning to read sections of Snorri's *Heimskringla* in Peter Clausen's 1590 translation which enjoyed pride of place on the shelves of the bonder households in which he lived. However, Laing had no way of controlling the responses which his own *Heimskringla* translation would excite, or the uses to which it would be put. It was a question of releasing it with a fatalistic 'Go litel boke' and seeing what Victorian Britain and North America would make of it. In truth it would be difficult to exaggerate the influence which Laing's translation had on readers during the rest of the century. That influence is freely acknowledged in work after work: in poems written to celebrate its initial publication (*Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* 11 1844 369-71); in lengthy reviews of the translation in learned periodicals (*ibid* 281-94, 369-81; see also Charles Neaves in *Edinburgh Review* 166 1845 267-317); in seminal works of political theory such as John Stuart Mill's

Principles of Political Economy (1848; Ashley 1920 263-6); in colourful novelistic recreations of viking-age England such as Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Harold* (1848; Book XI ch 11) and Charles Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake* (1866; ch 41 and passim); in prefatory essays to more than one of the English translations of Tegnér's *Frithiofs saga* (Baker 1841 vii-viii); in northern travel books discussing Iceland and Norway (such as that of Lord Dufferin's 1857 *Letters from High Latitudes*); in rebukes to confederate state illiberalism during the American Civil War included in A.J. Symington's *Pen and Pencil Sketches of Faroe and Iceland* (1862 298); in Oxford University prize poems and essays about the old north (White 1861 8 and passim); in Thomas Carlyle's celebration of steely-willed Odinic conservatism in his *Early Kings of Norway* (1875) and, across the Atlantic, in texts as widely different as Emerson's shrewd and suave 'English Traits' essays (1856; Atkinson 1949-50 554-63), and Marie Browne's dyspeptic study of the Norse discovery of America in which Columbus (south European, Catholic, autocratic) is denigrated, and Leifr Eiríksson (Nordic, righteous pagan, democratic) is valorised (Browne 1887 11, 16-18).

It can further be said that in Victorian Britain the *Heimskringla* text which enjoyed more popularity and attention than any other was *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*. At a scholarly level, for those keen to develop reading skills in Old Icelandic, Henry Sweet's 1886 *Icelandic Primer* included as its longest extract the *Heimskringla*-derived 'Death of Olaf Tryggvason', albeit with the verses removed (Sweet 1886 60-69—ÍF xxvi 349-68). There were no Íslendingasögur passages on offer. The Íslendingasögur were more generously represented in the (still) admirable *Icelandic Prose Reader* (1879) of Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Frederick York Powell, yet *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* continues to hold its own: out of almost fifty extracts the third longest passage derives from the longer version of the saga. A fragment from the saga (the ever-popular account of the Jömsborg viking vows) survives in E.V. Gordon's *An Introduction to Old Norse* (Revised second edition; Oxford 1957 118-23); it may have reminded earlier generations of male readers of their days at public school. By the end of the century conscientious scholars were able to compare Snorri's version of the saga with John Sephton's 1895 translation of the longer version, *The Saga of King Olaf Tryggvason*; and J.F. Vicary's *Olav the King, and Olav, King and Martyr* (1886) offered a dogged comparative analysis of available knowledge about both kings. For the elderly Thomas Carlyle, painting at the end of his life in brushstrokes as broad as a barn door, Ólafr Tryggvason was an exemplary leader of men, full of the Odinic charisma and strength of purpose so much admired by the Scottish sage. The real enemy was not autocracy but anarchy, wearing the face of the wilful disbeliever. In Carlyle's reading of the saga such godlessness takes the form either of high-priestly zealots such as Hákon jarl, a kind of Puseyite pagan, or of bone-headed bonders. Carlyle purrs with approval at the brisk treatment meted out to stubborn opponents (eloquent Thing speakers struck dumb; temples flattened; banquet guests threatened with being sacrificed to their beloved gods). As for surly malcontents, 'Tryggveson, I fancy, did not much regard all that; a man of joyful, cheery temper, habitually contemptuous of danger' (Carlyle 1899 237). Carlyle's fullest tribute is quoted with approval in the preface to the explanatory notes for Elgar's cantata: 'a magnificent, far-shining man...essentially definable...as a wild bit of real heroism, in such rude guise and environment; a high, true and great human soul. A jovial burst of laughter in him, withal; a bright, airy wise way of speech; dressed beautifully, and with care; a man admired and loved exceedingly by those he liked; dreaded as death by those he did not like...[he] remains still a shining figure to us; the wildly beautifullest man, in body and soul, that one has ever heard of in the North' (Carlyle 1899 240-1, 247).

Carlylean fantasies apart, Ólafr Tryggvason permeated the Victorian literary consciousness at many other levels. To some extent this interest related to his British connections: notably the belief that he fought at the Battle of Maldon, and that he first received baptism in the Scilly Isles. His mysterious Arthur-like disappearance at the end of the saga also rang familiar bells for Victorian lovers of Tennyson. And it was his central and (as viewed by many) heroic role in the conversion of Scandinavia and Iceland 995-1000 which attracted the attention of writers and publishers engaged in the lucrative

business of producing pious books for impious children.

Three instances point the way. Mary Howarth's *Stories of Norway in the Saga Days* (1895), a collection of four cautionary tales for young readers, includes (as its longest and most ambitious narrative) 'The White Prince and King Olaf'. The youthful exploits of Ólafur Tryggvason are elaborated in ways unattested by any literary source known to me. We hear the dying mother of the Russian King Valdemar prophesying that young Olaf (as the name is spelt in the story; in this paper I use Victorian spellings when discussing Victorian texts), already by this time a member of the royal household after his Estonian adventures, will become a great Christian and bring light into the life of her sickly grandson Jarisleif. Valdemar is tempted to swap his own sickly son for the robust and healthy Olaf; but his wife Queen Allogia, licked by a magic Lappish dog, learns that Jarisleif has been bewitched by a malevolent Finnish magician. Snaefrid, a shrewish young Lappish woman, arrives in court; Jarisleif falls in love with her; the pair set sail for Norway, Olaf having meanwhile set off on his own adventures in (first) Britain and then Norway where he was to become king. The shrewish Snaefrid is eventually won over by Jarisleif's ardent love; King Olaf is reunited with his childhood companion and converts him, thereby fulfilling the grandmother's prophecy. Jarisleif, restored to robust health, becomes a great law-giver back in Russia. A prophecy is fulfilled, a shrew is tamed, Christianity triumphs over Finnish magic, and a sickly child is restored—and young Victorian readers learn some truths and several fantasies about King Olaf.

Young Edwardian readers were also catered for. The Boy's Own Series, published by the Religious Tract Society, included M.F. Outram's *In the Van of the Vikings, or How Olaf Tryggvason Lost and Won* (1909). This proves to be a spirited paraphrastic version of Snorri's saga glossed with some well-meaning Sunday School comment along the way. In the 'Moses in the bulrushes' section at the outset, Queen Gunnhild, cackling and cursing like a old crone from Victorian melodrama, does her best to 'out Herod Herod' in her pursuit of the baby Olaf and his devoted mother; Valdimar and Allogia appear in much less romantic guise than in the Howarth story; and Olaf makes his choice between 'the gods of Valhalla and the God of Heaven' long before his Scilly Isles epiphany. After a fearful vision of Valdimar and Allogia enduring hellish torments Olaf persuades them to accept Christ. Whilst in Britain, he is baptised and learns about the fate of the Jomsborg vikings from Bjorn the Briton, newly returned from the fray. In his subsequent evangelical activity Olaf always claims that he fights not for himself but for Christ. *Laxdæla saga's* Kjartan Olafsson adds that King Olaf is basically mild and good and, like Dr Arnold of Rugby, is only roused to violence by stubborn paganism. Thangbrand's robust brand of muscular Christianity plays less well. The author inserts a lengthy (pp. 241-2), heavily post-Reformation rationalisation of his ill-starred expedition to Iceland—Thangbrand was a product of Dark-Age Christianity, dominated by popish ignorance and illiteracy. He knew no better and there was no-one in the official 'Romish' church able to show him the way.

A third text reflecting the responses of popular piety (albeit in this instance of a more adult variety) to Ólafur Tryggvason is *Torquil, or the Days of Olaf Tryggvason*, a lengthy and bizarre narrative poem by an (as yet, to me) unknown poet, published in Edinburgh in 1870. Torquil is a Norseman living on a Scottish coastal isle. He is the unrequited lover of Maida, a young woman whose father he had killed as revenge for the death of his own father. Thora, Torquil's resolutely pagan mother, is deeply suspicious of the contacts he is making with Guthlac and Anselm, Christians newly arrived in the isles; and she also disapproves of Maida, preferring her son to marry Thora's niece Katla. Katla decides to involve the fearsome pagan priest Cormac, who lives in an exotic temple, in her plans for wooing Torquil. The onset of a plague affecting all the local cattle is further grist to Cormac's malign mill; the angry gods must be appeased by a sacrifice—either the newly arrived monks, or perhaps the Christian-inclined Maida must die. As Cormac raises his knife to Maida's breast, Olaf Tryggvason appears on the scene, a miraculously well-timed intervention during one of his tours of the northern isles. In the ensuing fight Maida and

Cormac both die, Torquil is recruited to Olaf's troop, flourishes as a berserker-style warrior immune to the charms and wiles of women. He is joined by a young page boy, Nigel, who proves to be Katla in improbable disguise, bearing a letter from Conan, a Christian hermit, which confirms that she had accepted the true faith. For all that she and Torquil fall in love, the young hero had previously sworn to marry no woman except the long dead Maida. Olaf Tryggvason tells him to loosen up and to marry his new love. Now, in turn, Katla hesitates; she is unable to forgive herself for plotting against Maida, and seeks out the minster of Kildare where she commits herself to a life of penitence and prayer. Torquil fights alongside Olaf to the end; he is captured as his leader dies; as he watches Long Serpent burning to ashes, Maida appears in a vision, indicating that her death can best be avenged by bringing pagan Norwegian souls to Christ. Earl Erik permits him to preach in Norway, and he dies a holy death as an elderly and pious abbot in a minster church.

Popular piety for adult and child was not the only appeal of Ólafr Tryggvason in nineteenth-century Britain. Much was made of his turbulent and exciting youth. This was certainly the case with Robert Leighton's novel *Olaf the Glorious* (1895). For this prolific late Victorian writer of books for school children (boys much more than girls, one feels), Olaf was 'glorious' not only as a missionary king, not only for explicitly Laingean reasons (his kingship had a legitimate basis in popular support and assent), but also as a Nordic David Copperfield, triumphing over a rash of family drama challenges: the murder of his grandfather and father; his perilous path to survival in the face of the predatory Queen Gunnhild's dynastic ambitions; and his life of slavery in Estonia. There was no silver spoon tinkling in the vulnerable Olaf's young mouth; we are conscious rather of someone pulling himself up by his own bootstraps. How suitable, in Leighton's eyes, that the youngsters receiving his book as school prize or Christmas present would be helped to understand that initial survival and subsequent upward mobility could be achieved by the sweat of an individual's own brow and brain. Leighton's Olaf was an *arriviste* hero, and so potentially were many of his young Victorian admirers. We follow the young man's training for life amongst the slaves—apparently the old Baltic equivalent of Victorian public school fagging or West Point hazing (the book was also published in the United States). Olaf learns skills of hand and mind—rune carving, saga telling, harp playing, wood carving, bow bending, arrow shafting, along with the old northern religion. The passing of the baton from generation to generation is signalled here, as in many another old northern novel, by an elaborate ship burial scene as his worthy foster-father Guthorm is honoured; and by an equally elaborate ship construction scene as the mighty Long Serpent is crafted for the young leader. Thus equipped, Olaf travels widely on his adolescent *útanferð*, to his friends a generous gift-giver, and to his foes a relentless pursuer. His experiences in the British Isles are naturally singled out for particular attention—the Orkneys, the Isle of Man, the Scillies, London where he was baptised, and Ireland where he married. The novel offers an unfamiliar perspective on the Battle of Maldon, familiar by then as a poem to serious students of Old English through Henry Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader* (1876). King Olaf and Byrhtnoth are presented as equally worthy in terms of bravery and chivalry; there is no talk of the East Anglian leader's *ofermode*—the Vikings cross the river at low tide without the possibility of let or hindrance; and there is poignancy in the meeting on the battlefield between Olaf and the Northumbrian Egbert, once a friend and fellow slave in Estonia, now a stout foe fighting for a different king and country. One adventure concerns Olaf's (wholly unattested) time with the Jómsborg vikings. In Outram's tale Olaf hears about the Jómsborg heroes from Bjorn on his return from the Baltic (a scene from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ch 91); in Leighton's version Olaf finds himself in the thick of the action as Earl Sigvaldi's captain. Facing certain death as Earl Hakon's captive, it is Olaf along with Vagn Akason who trips up the executioner and secures their escape.

In Leighton's tale, when Olaf returns to Norway the slave boy from Estonia was the overwhelmingly popular choice at the Trondheim Storting to become king of Norway. In the five year period between 995-1000 Olaf sweeps all that is pagan before him in his missionary progress. The fearsome but ultimately wretched Rand [sic] is paraded before

Victorian readers, breathing fire against Christ, but unable to resist the deadly serpent who gnaws its way through his defiant entrails. A cruel fate, but Leighton does his best for King Olaf's reputation as a merciful Christian—Rand had been a blasphemer and a criminal, and the king had, in effect, been functioning as an arm of justice. Whatever cruelty in the service of a loving Christ, whatever indifference to the preponderance of popular wish amongst the borders of Norway, and whatever fleetness of amorous foot Leighton's Olaf may have shown, no young Victorian reader, brought up on a daily diet of nautical adventure, could fail to respond to the excitement of the king's final sea-battle. In having his hero flee to Rome, Leighton opts for the less mysterious of the two traditional options: 'Does Olaf live? or is he dead? / Has he the hungry ravens fed? / I scarcely know what I should say, / For many tell the tale each way.'

The Victorian reconstruction and reverbalising of King Ólafr Tryggvason in a variety of popular formats was sufficiently widespread for members of Edward Elgar's choirs and orchestras to have encountered the old northern hero in one of these novelistic or poetic formats. But just as it had been Longfellow who brought the Elgar family into contact with the old north, so it was Longfellow as well as Laing who had haselled the Ólafr Tryggvason ground for these Victorian popularisers. Longfellow's version of *Ólaf's saga Tryggvasonar* inevitably leaves much of Snorri's work untouched. Only twenty seven of the 123 saga chapters feature in the poem, several of these only fleetingly. The majority of chapters are taken from the second half of the saga; the Estonian, Jömsborgian and Orcadian adventures of Ólafr were of no interest to the American poet. Longfellow's old north was essentially that of Tegnér; news of the 'White Christ' from the south of Europe transcends the violent spirit of paganism. Frithiof the sea-going hero, faithful lover, popularly acclaimed leader, and upwardly mobile son of a loyal franklin—he it is who spends the last canto of Tegnér's poem in an act of penance for his previous destruction of Balder's temple. That edifice must be reconstructed as a token of a righteous pagan's respect for spirituality. In Longfellow's 'Tegnér's Drapa', written in memory of the Swedish poet, Longfellow makes his position clear, in lines which anticipate 'King Olaf' strikingly: 'The law of force is dead! / The law of love prevails! / Thor the thunderer, / Shall rule the earth no more, / No more, with threats, / Challenge the meek Christ. || Sing no more, / O ye bards of the North, / Of Vikings and Jarls! / Of the days of Eld / Preserve the freedom only, / Not the deeds of blood' (Longfellow 1904 191).

For a long time Longfellow took his own advice. His attempts to write an old northern epic constantly foundered on his reluctance to surrender fully to the robust spirit of pagan violence and mysticism (Hilen 1947 94-7). Yet, eventually, as he became familiar with the Laing translation (ibid 98-9), he encountered the saga of King Ólafr, and he began to consider the possibility of composing if not a full-length epic then at least a poetic sequence along the lines of *Frithiof's saga*. Ólafr's Christianity projected the 'law of love' (just about), and any unavoidable 'deeds of blood' and tales of 'Vikings and Jarls' could be justified as part of the necessarily turbulent process which brought about the elimination of 'the law of force'. Certainly Longfellow emulates Tegnér in the sheer prosodic bravura which his twenty two scenes exhibit.

Longfellow's excisions from and realignments of Laing's translated text seem driven both by the poet's ideological agenda and essential gentleness of spirit. After an 'Interlude' in which we meet again the musician, and hear of the 'wondrous book...Heimskringla is the volume called', the poem's sections are as follows: I 'The Challenge of Thor' (a triumphalist statement of defiance by Olaf's ultimate adversary; composed in 1849, originally intended first for his unwritten epic *Christus*, and then for a narrative verse life of Earl Hakon); II 'King Olaf's return' (Olaf returns to Norway to accept Thor's challenge: Laing ch. 52, retrospective fragments of chs 6-7; ÍF xxvi chs 47, 6-7); III 'Thora of Rimol' (Earl Hakon is murdered by Kark: Laing chs 53, 55; ÍF xxvi chs 48, 50); IV 'Queen Sigrid the Haughty'(Olaf woos and then slaps Sigrid the pagan queen: Laing ch. 68; ÍF xxvi ch. 61); V 'The Sherry of Shrieks' (Olaf destroys Eyvind Kellða's

sorcerer crew: Laing ch. 70; ÍF xxvi ch. 63); VI 'The Wraith of Odin' (A one-eyed Odinic spirit visits King Olaf's feast and entertains the guests with heroic legends and *Hávamál* wisdom: Laing ch. 71; ÍF xxvi ch. 74); VII 'Iron-Beard' (Olaf confronts Iron-Beard, pagan leader of the bonders summoned to a Thing; Iron-Beard is killed and the bonders accept Christianity: Laing chs 72-74, 76; ÍF xxvi chs 65, 67-69); VIII 'Gudrun' (Iron-Beard's daughter marries Olaf, and then attempts to kill him on the wedding night: Laing ch. 78; ÍF xxvi 71); IX 'Thangbrand the Priest' (Thangbrand's unsuccessful mission to Iceland: Laing ch. 65; ÍF xxvi ch. 73); X 'Raud the Strong', XI 'Bishop Sigurd at Salten Fiord' (The torture of Raud, the pagan sorcerer: Laing chs 86-87; ÍF xxvi chs 79-80); XII 'King Olaf's Christmas' (Baptism of Hallfred the skald: Laing ch. 90; ÍF xxvi ch. 83); XIII 'The Building of the Long Serpent' (Laing ch. 95; ÍF xxvi ch. 88); XIV 'The Crew of the Long Serpent' (Laing ch. 102; ÍF xxvi ch. 94); XV 'A Little Bird in the Air' (Olaf weds Thyri) and XVI 'Queen Thyri and the Angelica Stalks' (Thyri incites Olaf to recover her Wendish domains from King Burislaf: Laing ch. 100; ÍF xxvi ch. 92); XVII 'King Svend of the Forked Beard' (Sigrid, recalling the slap on her face, incites King Svend against Olaf: Laing ch. 108; ÍF xxvi ch. 98); XVIII 'King Olaf and Earl Sigvald' (Olaf is led by Earl Sigvaldi to the waiting enemy fleet: Laing ch. 110; ÍF xxvi ch. 100); XIX 'King Olaf's War-Horns' (Battle is engaged: Laing ch. 113; ÍF xxvi ch. 103); XX 'Einar Tamberskelver' (Einar fights valiantly for King Olaf: Laing ch. 118; ÍF xxvi ch. 108); XXI 'King Olaf's Death Drink' (Olaf falls in battle: Laing chs 120-122; ÍF xxvi 110-112); XXII 'The Nun of Nidaros' (Olaf's mother Astrid, an aged abbess in Trondheim, hears the voice of St John proclaiming the eternal power of Christ: no parallel in Laing or ÍF).

Laing's 123 chapters became twenty two Longfellow sections, and just nine of these scenes find a place in Elgar's cantata, supplemented by additional sections provided by the composer's Malvern friend H.A. Acworth. The cut up and pasted sections of Elgar's dismembered edition of Longfellow are still extant. The cantata sections are: I Introduction (Longfellow); Recitative (Acworth); II 'The Challenge of Thor' (Longfellow I); III 'King Olaf's Return' (Longfellow II); Recitative (Acworth); IV The Conversion (Acworth); Recitative (Acworth); V 'Gudrun' (Longfellow VIII); Recitative (Acworth); VI 'The Wraith of Odin' (Longfellow VI); Recitative (Acworth); VII Sigrid (Longfellow IV); Recitative (Acworth); VIII 'Thyri' (Longfellow XV); IX Thyri and Olaf Angelica duet (Longfellow XVI); Recitative (Acworth); X 'The Death of Olaf' (Acworth); XI 'Epilogue' (Longfellow XXII). Acworth's overall libretto recasts Longfellow's interlaced narrative into, effectively, three discrete blocks: conversion; Olaf's women; sea-battle and death of the king. For Snorri, and hence for Laing and even Longfellow, the spiritual, the emotional, and the military were interlaced for tragic effect—Sigrid's paganism led to the exasperated slap on the cheek, which in turn led to her scheming revenge, which in turn led to Olaf's death. For Acworth, the structure needed simplification. Norway needed converting and pagans villains needed eliminating before Olaf could look for a wife.

In assessing the nature of Elgar's musical response to the 'King Olaf' story, we may say that if Longfellow's temperament and ideology were essentially Tegnérían, Elgar approached his assignment with his ears full of Wagner, and with his spirit tempered by all the inevitable trials confronting a provincial lower-middle class Catholic seeking musical fame in the metropolitan, upper-middle class, Anglican world of the Victorian musical establishment. After an unprivileged youth spent avoiding Queen Gunnhildr, the crusading Ólafr conquered the land of his birth with his Catholic faith; perhaps the modestly born son of middle England also saw himself as a kind of crusader, for his music if not his church—and he, too, won over his country after a struggle (Moore 1984 183-4).

This paper affords opportunity for examination of just three short scenes from the complete score, and we may reflect that even in Elgar's lifetime it was not long before the work became fragmented, as brass bands, lady's choirs, and competition performers requested and received special arrangements of particular sections. Longfellow's blue-eyed Norwegian narrator provides the words for Elgar's opening bars: 'There is,' he said, 'a

wondrous book / Of Legends in the old Norse tongue, / Of the dead kings of Norrway,— / Legends that once were told or sung / In many a smoky fireside nook / Of Iceland, in the ancient day, / By wandering Saga-man or Scald; / *Heimskringla* is the volume called; / And he who looks may find therein / The story that I now begin' (Longfellow 1904 364). An unmistakably Elgarian atmosphere, plaintive, noble, mysterious, is established from the first bars. In his explanatory note to the score, the composer notes that 'In the following Scenes it is intended that the performers should be looked upon as a gathering of skalds (bards); all, in turn, take part in the narration of the Saga and occasionally, at the more dramatic points, personify for the moment some important character' (Elgar 1896 [xii]). Elgar sees fit to set his skaldic gathering in the misty and remote key of G minor. The rich initial wash of string sound is made up of contrasting figures—a falling figure in fourths on violins and cellos, and an opposing rising figure in sixths on violas (Anderson 1993 183, excerpt 3). This prepares the way for the whole work's examination of the conflict between 'gauntlet and gospel'—falling figures for paganism, rising figures for Olaf's Christianity. Elgar's fascination with Wagnerian motif construction is discernible from the outset. An eery medieval plain chant follows, the mixed chorus set against polyphonic orchestration, before the skaldic soloists (tenor and bass) emerge to hint at the grandeur as well as the solemnity of the issues at stake; and in the third and final segment, the opening material is restated, with its conflicting string figures reestablished, and tonality oscillating hauntingly between major and minor. For many Elgarians, these three minutes alone could represent a Desert Island Disc choice. The old north can rarely have been more seductively voiced.

The two scenes which follow introduce us to the dominant figures of 'gauntlet' (Thor) and 'gospel' (Olaf). Of 'The Challenge of Thor' a leading Elgarian scholar has recently written, 'Nothing like [it] had ever appeared in English choral music, and it made an instant sensation' (Moore in Handley 1987, 1994 9). It is not hard to understand why. The backbone of the scene is an ostinato spread over the same falling fourth figure of paganism established in the opening scene. This is now clearly the signature figure of Thor and his hammer. It begins as a male *pianissimo*, and grows ever stronger, encompassing women's voices; paganism embraces both genders and shouts its defiance. As the scene develops, we hear the northern lights (which Thor claims to be his red beard blowing in the night wind) in a scurrying violin figure; and as pagan power reaches its climax ('Strength is triumphant / Over the whole earth') the music reaches *fortissimo*, the tonality modulates widely, and male and female voices unite, separate, and then reunite, as if to emphasise pagan dominance over 'the whole earth' where 'still it is Thor's Day!' At that very moment of supreme hubris, the relentless Thor's hammer ostinato is stilled for the very first time in the scene, as the name of Christ is mentioned—'Thou art a God, too, / O Galilean'. Eventually pagan resolve winches itself up for a final defiant explosion.

The scene which follows, 'King Olaf's return', serves as an answer, both theological and musical, to 'The Challenge of Thor'. The violins scurry again, but this time the light symbolised is that shining from Olaf's armour. The heroic Christian energy of Olaf, bound up with the natural energy of the sea over which he is sailing 'northward into Drontheim fiord', is signalled by darting and rising figures. The humanity of the hero is realised in Elgar's most lyrical vein as first Olaf's mother and then her son's baptism in the Scilly isles are recalled. The threatening falling motif of Thor is answered by a heroic brass figure for Olaf, as he states his acceptance of the pagan challenge. The conflicts of religious faith and musical expression established in the first ten minutes are more than sufficient to fuel the remainder of this remarkable work.

A last thought on the influence of the Elgar cantata. Beatrice Clay, a former Cambridge pupil of Eirikur Magnússon, prepared an edition of sections from Longfellow's 'The Saga of King Olaf' to be used as an examination text for schoolchildren; after 1900 she herself was the Headmistress of Queen's School, Chester. Longfellow's twenty two sections are reduced to thirteen, and it is not difficult to imagine why particular material may have been omitted: 'The Skerry of Shrieks' and 'The Wraith of Odin' (too macabre),

'Gudrun' (unseemly for well-bred young ladies), 'Thangbrand' (insufficiently pious), 'Raud the Strong' and 'Bishop Sigurd at Salten Fiord' (too bloodthirsty), 'King Olaf's Christmas' (the berserker material too robust), 'The Crew of the Long Serpent' (insufficiently dramatic), 'The Nun of Nidaros' (muddies the heroic ending). The Clay edition, making good use of her former teacher's notes in the final 1905 volume of the William Morris-Eiríkur Magnússon idiosyncratic translation of *Heimskringla*, was one of a series of ultimately unavailing attempts during this pre-First World War period to promote old northern texts and traditions within the starchily traditional world of secondary school examination syllabuses. It was one thing for the young Victorian schoolchild to receive Leighton's *Olaf the Glorious* as a school prize; but the texts studied at school in order to win that prize were invariably those of classical Greece and Rome. We may thus reflect on those late Victorian and Edwardian winter evenings when middle-class parents set off for weekly choral society practice to prepare for a performance of Elgar's *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf*, leaving their children toiling with school homework assignments from the Beatrice Clay edition of Longfellow's poem. It is not clear what steps could be taken to ensure that Ólaf Tryggvason, or Elgar's cantata, or Longfellow's poem, or Laing's translation enjoy an equivalent popular exposure a century later. Perhaps our hero needs to be translated onto the wide screen and 'reinscribed within a modern discursive framework' (as critical robospeak requires us now to express it)—Ólaf as insensate imperialist tyrant, Guðrún as old northern patriarchy's latest victim, and Rauðr as an heroic icon of oppressed multicultural alterity. With any luck funding might be a problem.

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