

John Kennedy

Scholarly book reviewing in the field of saga studies: Recent patterns and trends

Introduction

Participants in the International Saga Conference are not likely to need a detailed introduction to the concept of scholarly book reviewing. The practice of publishing book reviews dates back to at least the seventeenth century (Stueart 1978, p. 315), and it has been an established part of scholarship in humanities disciplines for at least as long as there have been scholarly journals presenting rigorous scholarship in those disciplines. The reviews appearing in scholarly journals have long been regarded as fulfilling a twofold role. Like reviews appearing in newspapers and popular magazines, and reviews designed to assist the library profession in its task of developing library collections, they have been seen as alerting those potentially interested to new publications and giving a concise indication of their contents and merits. But scholarly reviews have also been seen as a means by which the significance of a new publication is assessed by an informed member of the discipline, who attempts to indicate what it has contributed to the discipline's scholarly discourse, and to pass judgment on its achievement. They have functioned, or have been considered to function, as an important part of the mechanism by which the discipline has maintained its scholarly standards.

Book reviews continue to be a major element in scholarly journals at the beginning of the twenty-first century, though the Internet has become a significant source of somewhat more timely reviews. Writing book reviews is however in danger of becoming no more than a marginally respectable activity for academics. In Britain and Australia book reviews do not earn their authors any points in the important national research evaluation exercises, and the advice given to graduate students by Wendy Belcher would probably win the agreement of many dissertation supervisors and mentors of junior academic staff. Publish the occasional review by all means, she urges - it may improve your analytical and writing skills, and help you to become better known in the discipline. But '[I]f you are doing more than two book reviews a year, you may be spending too much time on book reviews and not enough on your other writing'.

The task

The purpose of this paper is to consider book reviewing in two journals whose areas of interest are very similar to those of the International Saga Conferences. *alvissmál*, published in Germany, is a relatively new journal, as the first of the ten numbers that have appeared at the time of writing is dated 1992. Its full title is *alvissmál: Forschungen zur mittelalterlichen Kultur Skandinaviens*, and each issue proclaims that it 'veröffentlicht Beiträge zur allen Aspekten des skandinavischen Mittelalters - Sprache, Literatur, Geschichte und Kultur'. *Saga-Book*, published in Britain by the Viking Society for Northern Research, is of considerably greater antiquity: it first appeared in 1895 with an issue for the years 1892-94 (Townsend 1992, p. 205). For the period to be considered here, that from 1992, the cover date for *alvissmál* 1, to 2001, the cover date for *alvissmál* 10, it produced nine issues which contained book reviews (vol. 23, part 5; vol. 23, part 7; vol. 24, parts 2-3; vol. 24, part 4; vol. 24, part 5; vol. 25, part 1; vol. 25, part 2; vol. 25, part 3; and vol. 25, part 4).⁹⁹¹ In its 'Information for contributors' it announces that 'Submissions are welcomed from scholars ... on topics related to the history, literature, language and archaeology

⁹⁹¹ Three other issues of the period did not carry reviews. For part of the period *Saga-Book* experimented with a division into issues containing 'Notes and Reviews' and issues devoted to full-length scholarly articles.

of Scandinavia in the Middle Ages'. This suggests a very similar scope to that of *alvissmál*, though it will be noted that archaeology has taken the place of *Kultur*.

Reviews and reviewers

In the relevant ten issues *alvissmál* published sixty-five reviews, varying between five and eight per issue. Four, however, were reviews of two works, so the total number of items reviewed was sixty-nine. All were books. In the nine relevant issues of *Saga-Book* ninety-one reviews appeared, with the number per issue varying between eight and twelve. Four reviews covering two books and one covering three boosted the total of items reviewed to ninety-seven. The total included two non-book items, the CD-ROM entitled *The world of the Vikings*, and the new journal *alvissmál*, which Fredrik Heinemann entertainingly considered in volume 24, part 4 (pp. 277-279)! Neither journal has yet ventured into reviewing a website.

Neither journal could be fairly accused of relying heavily on the services of a small clique of reviewers. *alvissmál* used the services of forty-two reviewers for the period in question, and of these thirty-one contributed only one review. The largest number of reviews contributed by one writer was seven. *Saga-Book* provides a similar picture: there were fifty-five reviewers, but thirty-five of these contributed only one review, and no one contributed more than six. Presumably editors wished to grant space to the views of a large number of scholars, but given the modest prestige of reviewing in modern universities they were probably not overwhelmed by requests to review large numbers of titles. Seven individuals, however, reviewed in the period both for *alvissmál* and for *Saga-Book*. *alvissmál* provides an address, frequently a university address, for reviewers, as for other contributors, but *Saga-Book* identifies its contributors by name only, perhaps not a major problem in a scholarly field hardly suffering from overcrowding.

Both journals record full bibliographical details of author(s), title, series, place and date of publication, publisher, and number of pages, but neither caters for the librarian's desire to know International Standard Book Number (ISBN) and price. No doubt librarians engaged in selection and acquisition activity are not expected to comprise a significant proportion of the readership of either journal. *alvissmál* prefers to leave the name of the publication city in the form used in the country in which it is located, presumably in most cases that found in the book itself, but the indication of the number of pages provides a reliable indication of the language in which the review is written, and readers encounter 'Seiten', 'pages', 'sider', and 'blaðsíður'. *Saga-Book* might be accused of some very minor inconsistencies: a Danish language book, and a bilingual Danish-English one are both said to emanate from 'Copenhagen' (vol. 24, part 2-3, p. 175; vol. 25, part 3, p. 334), and two English language books are said to be from 'Rome' (vol. 24, part 4, p. 262; vol. 24, part 5, p. 369), but another English language book is sourced to 'Bruxelles' (vol. 24, part 5, p. 371), and two German language ones to 'München' (vol. 25, part 1, pp. 95, 98).

Subjects covered

Considerations of the reviewing practices of journals often focus on the subjects they cover and do not cover, and often categorising the subjects is not particularly difficult. In the case of major reviewing sources directed at library selection staff the reviews may be helpfully arranged under subject headings. The books reviewed in *alvissmál* and *Saga-Book* often do not lend themselves to categorisation, however, and the reviews do not seem to be in any obvious overall logical order in the two journals, although *Saga-Book* sometimes appears to place works on similar subjects together. Categorisation is made difficult by the very nature of the subject matter. A work on Viking history will need to draw on archaeology as well as on written sources, for example, and a work considering a text from the Scandinavian Middle Ages may in varying degrees combine the approaches of the literary scholar, the historian, the anthropologist, and the student of linguistics.

Table 1 below represents a very tentative attempt at categorisation, with each item reviewed in the two journals being allocated to one category only. The process was a very

subjective one, and even seemingly well-defined categories like 'Editions' and 'Translations' are potentially somewhat misleading, since some works allocated to the 'Editions' category also contain translations, and some editions and translations include scholarly apparatuses which make them major contributions to literary studies, history, etc. But it is difficult to overlook one major difference between the two journals: *alvissmál* clearly focuses significantly in its choice of books for review on studies of literature. *Saga-Book* on the other hand devotes approximately equal attention to several subjects, and appears more receptive to history and archaeology than *alvissmál*.

Table 1 Subject matter of items reviewed

Subject	<i>alvissmál</i> (69)	<i>Saga-Book</i> (97)
Literary studies	20 (29%)	14 (14%)
History	5 (7%)	11 (11%)
Archaeology/Material culture	2 (3%)	7 (7%)
Editions	10 (14%)	8 (8%)
Translations	3 (4%)	10 (10%)
Encyclopaedias	1 (1%)	2 (2%)
Dictionaries	1 (1%)	4 (4%)
Bibliographies	1 (1%)	4 (4%)
Women's studies	5 (7%)	5 (5%)
Reception in later periods	2 (3%)	6 (6%)
Runes	3 (4%)	7 (7%)
Language	2 (3%)	4 (4%)
Religion	4 (6%)	4 (4%)
Essays on various subjects	7 (10%)	9 (9%)
Other	3 (4%)	2 (2%)

Twenty-two books were reviewed both in *alvissmál* and in *Saga-Book*.⁵⁹² It is of course not surprising that works should come to the attention of different teams of editors, and multiple reviewing of titles is generally regarded as providing a useful diversity of opinions on the achievements of the works concerned.

Countries of origin and languages of books reviewed

It is a source of satisfaction to many associated with the International Saga Conference that the word 'International' in its title is no idea boast. The study of medieval Scandinavia may seem an unaffordable luxury or an irrelevance in the countries of the Third World, but it has long extended well beyond the Scandinavian countries themselves.

Table 2 records the countries of publication of the items reviewed in the issues of *alvissmál* and *Saga-Book* under consideration. Predictably it reveals a certain bias in each case towards items published in the country from which the journal emanates: about 25% of the books reviewed in *alvissmál* are from Germany, and about 44% percent of items reviewed in *Saga-Book* are from the United Kingdom. It might be argued that this is a positive feature, that one welcomes a German perspective on the field when one opens a journal published in Germany, and a British one from a United Kingdom journal. Neither journal, however, could be fairly accused of a narrow focus on its own backyard, with *alvissmál* reviewing publications from twelve countries, and *Saga-Book* from eleven. It must also be added that in following the librarians' convention of

⁵⁹² An examination of issues of *Saga-Book* before vol. 23, part 5 and after vol. 25, part 4 did not provide any additional reviews of titles reviewed in *alvissmál* 1 to 10.

regarding the first city listed in bibliographic details provided in the journal as the 'true' country of origin, the table may exaggerate the United Kingdom focus of *Saga-Book* and underestimate its coverage of United States literature: it is noteworthy that in *Saga-Book* the book *Medieval Scandinavia: An encyclopedia*, edited by Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, is listed as being published in 'London and New York' while *alvissmál* states that it is from New York and the publisher (Garland Publishing) is more usually associated with that city.

Table 2 Countries of origin of items reviewed

Country	<i>alvissmál</i> (69)	<i>Saga-Book</i> (97)
Australia	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Belgium	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
Canada	2 (3%)	3 (3%)
Denmark	6 (9%)	6 (6%)
Finland	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Germany	17 (25%)	11 (11%)
Iceland	13 (19%)	11 (11%)
Italy	2 (3%)	3 (3%)
Norway	1 (1%)	3 (3%)
Sweder	3 (4%)	8 (8%)
Switzerland	3 (4%)	0 (0%)
United Kingdom	11 (16%)	43 (44%)
United States of America	9 (13%)	7 (7%)

Countries of origin give only an imperfect idea of the languages in which the items are published, however. Table 3 below records these languages. In the case of editions of texts it indicates the language of the introduction, commentary, notes, etc., not that of the text edited. A few books contained essays in more than one language, and were placed in the 'Various' category.

Table 3 Languages of books reviewed

Language	<i>alvissmál</i> (69)	<i>Saga-Book</i> (97)
Danish	3 (4%)	1 (1%)
English	31 (45%)	69 (71%)
German	19 (28%)	9 (9%)
Icelandic	10 (14%)	6 (6%)
Italian	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Norwegian	1 (1%)	2 (2%)
Swedish	2 (3%)	6 (6%)
Various	3 (4%)	3 (3%)

It will be obvious that by no means all books appear in the principal language of the country in which they are published. The preponderance of English is more striking, however, with *alvissmál* reviewing significantly more books in that language than in German. Presumably a tendency for scholars in the field to publish in English, sometimes although it is not their mother tongue, is a significant factor.

It often seems to be taken for granted that a serious student of medieval Scandinavia possesses at least a fluent reading knowledge not only of Old Icelandic but also of the modern form of that language, the mainland Scandinavian languages (apart from Finnish), German, and English, and possibly also of Italian, French, and Russian. Reviewers of books of conference

proceedings and similar compilations do not always trouble to inform the reader of the languages in which the pieces they are discussing are written. The reality, especially in the English-speaking countries, is probably often that scholars can if necessary read many of those languages, but are by no means completely comfortable in all, or most. R. A. Hall's comment in a *Saga-Book* review (vol. 24, parts 2-3, p. 173) that 'Linguistically challenged readers [of the books being reviewed] on either side of the North Sea will benefit from summaries in Danish or English' is an acknowledgment of this reality, as is the very existence of such summaries in what seems to be a growing number of books. In these circumstances it might be argued that publishing reviews in one language of items written in another performs a useful service in letting readers know whether the items in question really are ones on which they need to exercise their linguistic skills, or are actually irrelevant or peripheral to their current concerns.

Language of the reviews

Saga-Book is an Anglophone publication and all its reviews are written in English. *alvissmál*, however, proclaimed in the 'Vorwort' to the first number that it 'wendet sich an ein internationales Publikum', and it is considerably more international in the languages it employs. Twenty-five of its sixty-five reviews are in German, but thirty-four are in English, with four in Danish and one each in Icelandic and Norwegian. (German is also a minority language in the section of the journal devoted to scholarly articles: in numbers 1 to 10 twenty-five in total are in English, eleven in German, four in Norwegian, and one each in Danish and Swedish.)

Length of reviews

Published book reviews are generally brief, and the noted authority on book reviewing A. J. Walford suggested that 'There are arguments in favour of imposing on a potential reviewer the discipline of writing a review within the parameters of, say, 500 words for a short review, 1,000 words for a longer and more critical review, and perhaps 1,500 words for a wide-ranging or in-depth review (1986, p. 22). The reviewers in *alvissmál* and *Saga-Book* were clearly not constrained strictly by such guidelines, as the estimates of review lengths tabulated below indicate:

Table 4 Lengths of reviews

Length	<i>alvissmál</i> (65)	<i>Saga-Book</i> (91)
< 1000 words	2 (3%)	15 (16%)
1000-2000	22 (34%)	55 (60%)
2000-3000	16 (25%)	13 (14%)
3000-4000	14 (22%)	2 (2%)
4000-5000	6 (9%)	3 (3%)
> 5000 words	5 (8%)	3 (3%)

Clearly both journals are prepared to publish reviews of article length, but *alvissmál* is particularly willing to allow reviewers opportunity for very extended treatment.

Time Lag

Promptness is often seen as one of the essential virtues both of journals that publish reviews and reviewers who write for them. The reason is very obvious in the case of review sources aimed at the general public and librarians: if the review is not prompt the item being considered will not be available in the bookstores for anyone wishing to purchase it. It has been estimated that in Australia a new general book has about ten weeks to prove itself on the shelves before it is removed to make way for new stock (Halligan 1993), and the situation is unlikely to be significantly better in most other places.

Reviewers of academic publications for scholarly journals fortunately do not face such tight deadlines, but it is worth noting that today even such publications may not remain very long in print, especially if they emanate from publishing houses that are subsidiaries of large corporations with a vigorous and unsentimental dedication to competitive business practices. A reader of a review inspired to purchase the book or to recommend that his or her university library do so may well find either that the small print run has sold out or that the unsold copies have been pulped.

Table 5 records the time lag between publication of the item reviewed and publication of the review in *alvissmál* and *Saga-Book*. It can give only an indication of the delay, since to be accurate one would need to know both the month in which a book appeared and the month in which the review was published. The table is based simply on comparing the dates of publication given in the journals for items reviewed with the cover date of the issues of the journals.

Table 5 Time lag in reviewing

Time lag	<i>alvissmál</i> (69)	<i>Saga-Book</i> (96) ⁵⁹³
Review in year of publication	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
1 st year after publication	16 (23%)	16 (17%)
2 nd year after publication	27 (39%)	35 (36%)
3 rd year after publication	19 (27%)	31 (32%)
4 th year after publication	3 (4%)	7 (8%)
5 th year after publication	3 (4%)	4 (4%)
6 th year after publication		2 (2%)

Saga-Book would appear to take slightly longer to publish reviews than *alvissmál*, but both appear to publish the majority of their reviews in the first and second years after the appearance of the item under review.

Favourable, unfavourable, and neutral reviews

For the academic author awaiting a review of his or her work, the length of the review, the language in which it is written, and even the time it has taken to appear, are likely to be matters of very secondary importance compared to the verdict that the reviewer passes on the publication. There has been much debate as to whether an unfavourable review is better than no review at all (Stueart 1978, p. 318), but while a book for the general market may achieve large sales and generate worthwhile royalties by reason of a notoriety earned from trenchant reviews, most academics publishing research-based works are seeking an enhanced scholarly reputation rather than significant royalties, and would probably prefer no review to one which proclaimed their book a slipshod piece of defective scholarship.

In the majority of cases authors have in the event little to fear. Studies indicate that most reviews of all kinds are favourable (Stueart 1978, p. 318; Fisher 1981, pp. 90-91). There seem to be a number of reasons for this, including the reluctance of some journals to publish any negative reviews. The publishing industry has mechanisms in place to help ensure that really poor books are weeded out before they appear in print, though the alleged inadequacy of these at Oxford's Clarendon Press is the subject of a fierce attack by D. A. H. Evans in a review in *Saga-Book* (vol. 24, parts 2-3, pp. 185-186), and no doubt they are everywhere imperfect. A more cynical reason

⁵⁹³ Heinemann's review of the first four issues of *alvissmál* is excluded.

for the preponderance of favourable reviews points out that it is the most prudent course, particularly in a field with relatively few participants:

The safest strategy calls, of course, for the generous dispensation of undeserved praise in your reviews of colleagues' books. Generally your colleagues will reciprocate. It is difficult not to think highly of somebody who thinks highly of you. At the very least, his judgement must be sound. (Van den Bergh, quoted Fisher 1981, p. 90)

Table 6 presents an attempt to assess whether the reviews in the relevant issues of *alvissmál* and *Saga-Book* were favourable, unfavourable, or neutral. It must be admitted that while making such judgments is usually straightforward when considering brief reviews written for library selection staff or the general public, it was often quite difficult with the lengthy and considered analyses provided in the two journal. The present writer did not always agree entirely with Heinemann's consideration of many *alvissmál* reviews in his review of the journal for *Saga-Book*, though in all cases the disagreement stemmed for this writer's inclination to class as 'neutral' reviews Heinemann indicated to be positive or negative.

Table 6 Favourable, unfavourable, and neutral reviews

	<i>alvissmál</i> (69)	<i>Saga-Book</i> (97)
Favourable	35 (51%)	70 (72%)
Neutral	19 (28%)	17 (18%)
Unfavourable	15 (22%)	10 (10%)

The figures here for *Saga-Book* are in accordance with the findings of other studies of reviewing patterns, but the judgments of the *alvissmál* reviewers, viewed collectively, seem somewhat sterner than is usual. It might be more accurate to say they were reluctant to deliver a generally favourable verdict; for the proportion of reviews allocated to the 'neutral' category is unusually high.

It is of course necessary to keep in mind that the judgments of the reviews here are subjective, and others assessors might reach quite different conclusions. But in many of the *alvissmál* reviews the reader might detect an approach to reviewing somewhat different to that common in much British, American, and Australian reviewing. While reviewers in those countries often see it as their role to acknowledge both the strengths and the shortcomings of a work under consideration, it would of course be possible to take the view that the merits of the work can largely be taken for granted, and that it is the reviewer's duty to engage with the arguments of the book, outlining what in its arguments he or she is unable to accept, and drawing the attention of author and readers to errors of fact, inaccuracies, typographical flaws, etc. In this rather stern view the very fact that the book is being considered in a scholarly journal by a reviewer in good standing in the academic community can normally be regarded as a sign that it is a reputable and well-presented work of scholarship, and it would be superfluous to spend time on praising the thoroughness of its research or the quality of the presentation.

As was mentioned earlier, twenty-two books are reviewed both in the relevant issues of *alvissmál* and those of *Saga-Book*. Table 7 indicates how the judgments of the two sources compare in regard to these books. It will be noticed that in thirteen cases out of twenty-two the verdicts were the same, and only in two cases did one journal provide a favourable review, and the other an unfavourable. Stuart remarks that "there is some evidence to suggest that reviews vary so greatly that one can always find a positive review to counterbalance a negative one" (1978, p. 318), and Heinemann comparison of *alvissmál* reviews with those of the same books in various other journal (1996, pp. 278-279) illustrates how judgments can differ markedly.

Table 7 Verdicts on books reviewed by both journals

Both favourable	12
<i>alvissmál</i> favourable, <i>Saga Book</i> neutral	1
<i>alvissmál</i> favourable, <i>Saga-Book</i> unfavourable	1
Both neutral	1
<i>alvissmál</i> neutral, <i>Saga-Book</i> favourable	3
<i>alvissmál</i> neutral, <i>Saga-Book</i> unfavourable	1
Both unfavourable	0
<i>alvissmál</i> unfavourable, <i>Saga-Book</i> favourable	1
<i>alvissmál</i> unfavourable, <i>Saga-Book</i> neutral	2

Conclusion

In the concluding paragraph of his review of *alvissmál* Fredrik Heinemann makes some comments that succeed in being perceptive, witty, and a little enigmatic:

What does this review of reviews show? Unsurprisingly, that fish swim in schools, that language is not always a tie that binds and that even when never is heard a discouraging word, there are still plenty to be read. A great-aunt of mine used to say that if you don't have something nice to say about people, then become a reviewer, but her cynicism does not apply much to the contributors to *alvissmál*, by and large a civil bunch. They are not people living in grass houses throwing stones. It is heartening to have so many books that many of us may never have time to read treated with genuine respect. (1996, p. 279)

It is not easy to know what to add to this. Both *alvissmál* and *Saga-Book* contain some reviews which seem unduly harsh, or which at least should certainly not count as the definitive final word on the books they concern. Each has its own emphasis and its own preferences in its reviewing pages, and neither, inevitably, can offer anything resembling a comprehensive, balanced survey of all the new publications that might be of interest to those studying the legacy of medieval Scandinavia. But each regularly pays the authors of the items reviewed the compliment of seriously addressing the issues they raise, and the present writer is probably not the only subscriber to both journals who turns first to the review pages when a new issue arrives in the letterbox.

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