

The complete sagas of Icelanders including 49 tales. Vidar Hreinsson (General Editor). 1997-2019. 5 Vols. Vol. 1: Vinland: warriors and poets, 402 p, Vol. 2: Outlaws: warriors and poets, 466 p, Vol. 3: Epic: champions and rogues, 472 p, Vol. 4: Regional feuds, 472 p, Vol. 5, Epic: wealth and power. 448 p. Illustrated. Reykjavik: Leifur Eiriksson publishing. Hardcover. ISBN 9979-9293-0-8. US\$ 299 (website) otherwise US\$498.

Note. This book first appeared some time ago but it is still available and is considered to be of such importance that a late review will remain of interest to the readership of this journal.

The normal procedure adopted by this reviewer when he is presented with a book for review is to study the work in detail and then to set out for readers the main points relating to the text, its readability, comments on its accuracy and so forth, with the aim of assisting the reader in the decision concerning whether to invest the time in reading the work itself and, frequently more to the point, in determining whether it is worthwhile buying the book or to encourage those librarians with whom he or she is associated that it would be worth adding it to their collections. These reviews often end with some fairly random observations concerning the format of the book itself, such as the solidity and durability of its binding, the usefulness, or otherwise, of the illustrations, comments on the critical apparatus, the dust cover, if there is one etc.

But in this case it is believed that this scheme would not be efficacious simply because of the nature of the book in question and that one should start with the description of the work itself. Once one has removed the substantial and serious packaging in which it arrives from the publisher, it becomes immediately apparent that this is a magnificent, and large, work of scholarship, a handsome boxed set weighing in at 6.12 kg, and including no fewer than 2260 pages in its five volumes. A formidable proposition for any reviewer. And what volumes! Elegantly and substantially bound, with gold lettering, in attractive blue cloth, the text in a clear, rather large font (ideal for those whose eyesight might not be all it once was), these are volumes that would grace the shelves of any library, official or private.

And what do we have in these five volumes? Nothing less than the “first complete, coordinated English translation of the *Sagas of Icelanders*, forty in all, together with forty-nine of the shorter *Tales of Icelanders*” (p. xiii). On the face of it, this seems worthy of comment. This reviewer, along with, one suspects, many readers of *Polar Record*, would have thought that such a publication had been prepared long ago . . . but, no, and this alone, were it for no other reason, renders the compilation worthy of admiration and respect. The preface supplies full details of the publication project as a whole, which was started in 1993 with more than 30 translators engaged, with associated editorial input ensuring that the “conventions” adopted for the scheme were adhered to. A long section sets out “editorial coordination” including “the presentation of the texts”, “spelling conventions and proper nouns”, “place names” (always tricky in such contexts as these), “vocabulary consistency and the glossary”, “poetry” and a note on the various previous editions of the Icelandic originals. Then is tackled the difficult problem of how best to group the sagas and tales within the volumes. This was obviously not easy and inevitably required some degree of compromise since no possible scheme would be of universal acceptance . . . suffice it to say that the final ordering seems coherent and acceptable.

We then proceed to an introduction by Robert Kellogg. This covers no fewer than 26 pages and is a masterpiece of its type. One would learn a huge amount from the perusal of this alone without actually reading any of the original material at all, but few would simply do this since the introduction most efficiently whets the reader’s appetite for what is to come.

Readers of *Polar Record* will be particularly interested to note that the first two of the sagas printed in volume 1 relate to the voyages to the new world. These are “Eirik the Red’s Saga” and the “Saga of the Greenlanders”. While most would be broadly familiar with the material set out, from their knowledge of secondary sources, many might be somewhat surprised concerning the style adopted by the original writers which can be categorised as “challenging”. In other words, one has to do some serious thinking, while perusing the texts of these and the other sagas. It is necessary in many cases to grapple with an array of names many of which will be unfamiliar. For example, the first paragraph of “Eirik the Red’s Saga” is:

There was a warrior king named Olaf who was called Olaf the White. He was the son of King Ingjald, the son of Helgi, son of Olaf, son of Gudrod, son of Halfdan White-leg, king of the people of Oppland. (I: p. 1)

No indication is given, as a footnote, for example, of where and what Oppland was, but see below. But then in these first sagas, one soon reaches the real story and one has to agree that the writers certainly knew how to spin a yarn. Indeed these first sagas are rather difficult to put down once one has become clear concerning which Thorstein is which and has made the acquaintance of the interesting and formidable lady Freydis, to whom taking an active part in execution seemed quite natural! The actual material presented concerning where these voyages went, and what was found when the vessels got there, is clearly set forth but will cause those whose familiarity with these efforts only arises from secondary sources to rethink and, for example, to assess the likelihoods of these voyages being as successful as it appears.

After these two sagas the next in the *corpus* is the famous “Egil’s Saga”, which is the only saga ascribed to a named author, Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). This is very long covering 144 pages of text and is persuasively written presenting some powerful and unscrupulous characters (I: p. 33–177).

The following four volumes set out the rest of the sagas and tales and some of these are rather obscure and seldom referred to except by specialists. More general readers, including most of the *Polar Record* readership, might well omit many of them but it is certainly worthwhile reading the introduction of each as these set out the background to the story, and introduce the main personalities. For example, “Gisli Surrson’s Saga” in volume 2 is a powerful statement of the role of tragic hero, possibly the best expression of this in the whole saga *corpus*, but in many ways it is his wife Aud who is the more attractive character. One is also introduced to another element of the sagas the “good and bad dream-women who beckon him to his fate.” As commented these “add psychological depth to his predicament” (II: p. 1–48).

This reviewer searched attentively for actual humour in the sagas but it has to be admitted that this is not a prominent element in many of them. However, “The Saga of Gunnar, the fool of Keldugnup”, in volume 3 and apparently one of the most recently written in the *corpus* does at least have gestures in that direction including as it does sorcerers, and twin giantesses who enliven the story (III: p. 421–436).

At the end of volume 5, one arrives at the reference material and this is as comprehensive as one might expect. The maps, of the Vinland explorations, and six setting forth the saga sites in

Iceland with one showing the saga scenarios in northern Europe and assembly sites in Iceland are clear. There is a most useful listing of the kings of Norway, Denmark, and England, and the law-speakers in Iceland, with a chronology of relevant historical events. Then one proceeds to sections on ships, the farm, the Althing and the social positions named in the sagas. There is a comprehensive glossary and a note on poetic imagery with an old Icelandic calendar and a select bibliography. Then we come to a cross reference index of characters. This is probably the most useful section in the reference material especially for those who are not specialists. It lists all the characters and the sagas or tales in which they appear. For example, we learn that there are no fewer than 17 Thorsteins, and one of them, Thorstein Hallsson, appears in eight of the sagas or tales.

The duty of a reviewer is to read the whole book with which he or she is charged and this one can claim, with a clear conscience, that he has done this faithfully. The prevailing impression he derived from this is in strict accord with that of the many other far more distinguished persons who have commented on this compilation. This is simply that this publication is an awesome achievement of which everyone associated with it has an excellent reason to feel proud. It would have been understandable if the work had been allowed to become very “heavyweight” throughout. But it isn’t . . . many of the English texts preserve a rather unexpected lightness of touch that make them easy to read and the editorial team has achieved the seemingly impossible task of presenting a thorough, academically satisfying, text while at the same time rendering the sagas and tales accessible to the more general reader. Few would peruse them without gaining interest or satisfaction.

This book should be on the shelves of any library with any Arctic or Scandinavian pretensions. Furthermore, it is excellent in terms of value for money. Any qualms on that score can easily be alleviated by glancing at the relevant web site: www.sagas.is. However, one suggestion arises: if a version was prepared on CDs, this would surely increase sales and render these wonderful stories available to the more general public.

(Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Rd, Cambridge CB2 1ER (irs30@cam.ac.uk)).

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