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## **BETWEEN APATHY AND ANTIPATHY THE VIKINGS IN HISTORY**

"Neither apathy nor antipathy can ever bring out the truth of history" (Eoin MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, Dublin, 1919, vi).

Around 1970 the subject of "the Vikings in Ireland" was seen, historiographically, as a non-problem. Scandinavian historians did not deal with Irish history, and except for the casual asides of four or five specialists, there was no particular interest in Ireland as an area in Viking studies. However, during the seventies there was a veritable boom in specialised studies of the Vikings in Ireland. A simple count reveals that during this decade sixty articles and some books of scholarly significance were published, whilst the average formerly never exceeded twenty publications a decade. This growth took place even before the fruits of the Viking excavations in Dublin had matured for publication, something that happened only in the eighties.

Of course, the validity of scholarly debate is not to be judged simply on the basis of a spate of small treatises. A specialised subject can only claim general interest if its historians – basing themselves on empirical knowledge – lead a debate on issues of central historical interest. Motives scholarly as well as institutional, political as well as cultural, lie behind the various interpretations which make every (or every second) generation write its history. In this article I aim to show how the subject of the Vikings in Ireland eminently displays these characteristics, and at the same time I hope to point to some historiographical reasons why the subject failed to inspire historians around the middle of the twentieth century.

There is no considered overview of the historical debate at hand, excepting a short and very negative review by the Norwegian Per Sveaas Andersen.<sup>1</sup> Several interesting comments were made in 1968 by Francis John Byrne in a review of thirty years' work in early medieval Irish history, and by Donnchadh Ó Corráin in his hand list of publications on early Irish history.<sup>2</sup> Michael Chesnutt and Bo Almqvist have written good presentations of the relations between Irish and Icelandic literature and folk-lore<sup>3</sup> but these matters will not be dealt with here. First, I want to investigate the early formulation of the basic questions regarding the Viking contribution to Irish history.

### **Finds, collections, and publications: early nineteenth century**

Before the nineteenth century there were very few works of any serious relevance for our subject. Keating's *Foras Feasa*<sup>4</sup> from the middle of the 17th century was founded in the Gaelic

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1 Per Sveaas Andersen, 'Vikingtid og rikssamling', *Norsk Lektorlags faglig-pedagogiske skrifter* nr. 9 (Nytt fra norsk middelalder I). Oslo, 1969.

2 Francis John Byrne, 'Thirty Years' work in Irish history II. Ireland before the Norman invasion', *Irish Historical Studies* 16, 1968, 1-14. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Handlist of publications on early Irish history', *Historical Studies* 10, 1976, 172-203.

3 Michael Chesnutt, 'An unsolved problem in Old-Norse-Icelandic literary history', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 1, 1968, 122-37. Bo Almqvist, 'Scandinavian and Celtic folklore contacts in the earldom of Orkney', *Saga-Book* 20, 1978-79, 80-105.

4 *Foras Feasa ar Eirinn* (The History of Ireland), ed David Comyn, Irish Texts Society, London 1902ff (particularly

tradition of historical narrative and can hardly be regarded as a piece of historical investigation. Others like Thorkelin in Sweden and Langebek in Denmark were outstanding examples of eighteenth-century classical antiquarianism. Thanks to their encyclopaedic knowledge of the Icelandic texts, they touched upon Irish subjects, even though they never devoted any larger work to them.<sup>5</sup> Probably inspired by Langebek, the English ambassador James Johnstone published in 1786, in Copenhagen, two compilations of sources as the *Annals of Ulster*, the *Chronicle of Man and the Isles* and excerpts from Icelandic works as *Njall's saga*, aiming specifically at elucidating the activities of the Norse in Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

The breakthrough came in the 1830's. In Denmark and Ireland, N. M. Petersen and John d'Alton prepared overviews, mainly based on gleanings from the sagas.<sup>7</sup> But from quite another field there were spectacular new results. In the wake of early nineteenth-century romanticism there was a wave of antiquarian interest in the material remains of the past – in the British Isles as well as in Scandinavia. However tentative, the important long-term result was that objects dug out of the earth and monuments in the landscape were accorded a value as sources for historical knowledge in their own right. In the eighteenth century even the best antiquarians looked to the texts to interpret the monuments, and failed to understand the objects fully as remains of a human process but interpreted stone axes as shapes of nature or the work of elves.<sup>8</sup>

In Ireland, the making of canals, the reclamation of waste land (both public works undertaken on a large scale) and digging for peat led to a remarkable increase in archaeological finds. A count of the finds of numismatic material reveals that the major body of the coins we know today were dug up during the years from 1830 to 1850. Of a total number of 3368 no less than 2410 were found during these twenty years, and of a total of 90 find-spots by 1975, 33 had been localised in this period. In comparison we may note that between 1850 and 1900 there were 20 finds of 637 coins, and in this century the decline has continued: a bare 13 finds with 180 coins in 75 years (not counting the Dublin excavations).<sup>9</sup> The finds were stored in private and public collections. The Museum of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society was opened in november 1831, and shortly before 1840 the Royal Irish Academy organised a national collection. The provenance of the finds was rarely noted, partly because of lack of awareness (most collectors were more interested in the curiosity and marketing value of the finds), partly because the typical finder – a cottier – feared that the landlord would confiscate his finder's award.<sup>10</sup>

The new situation is clearly mirrored in the *Proceedings* of the Royal Irish Academy where

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vol. III, 1908).

5 G. J. Thorkelin, 'Fragments of English and Irish history in the ninth and tenth centuries, *Bibliotheca Britannica* VI, ed. J. Nicholls. London, 1788.

6 J. Johnstone (ed), *Antiquitates Celto-Normannicæ*, containing the Chronicle of Man and the Isles, ... , to which are added Extracts from the Annals of Ulster, and Sir James Ware's antiquities of Ireland ... Copenhagen, 1786. Ibid., *Antiquitates Celto-Scandicæ*; ... ex Snorrone; Land-nama boc; Egilli Scallagrimi-saga; Niala-saga; O. Tryggvasonar-saga; Orkneyinga-saga; Hriggiar-stikki; Knytlinga-saga; Speculo regali &c. Havniæ, 1786

7 N. M. Petersen, 'Udsigt over de ældste Tog fra Norden til Irland', *Annaler for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, 1837-38, 1-17. John d'Alton, 'Essay on the ancient history, religion, learning, arts, and government of Ireland (Period third, from the Danish invasion to the battle of Clontarf in 1014)', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 16 (Antiq), 1830, 3-380.

8 Cf. generally about antiquarianism Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape*, Edinburgh, 1976.

9 Counted from Richard Hall, 'A check-list of Viking-age coin finds from Ireland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 36-37, 1973-74, 71-86. The contents of several finds before 1850 are not known, but merely stated in the literature as "a small parcel", "a large parcel", "a cup", or "almost two gallons"!

10 M. Herity, 'Irish antiquarian finds and collections of the early nineteenth century', *JRSAI* 99, 1969, 21-37.

articles by numismatists John Lindsay and Aquilla Smith and the philologist J. H. Todd, from the 1840's on, began to give antiquarian studies a critical emphasis. They defined two main tasks, namely the presentation of reliable editions of medieval manuscripts (to which I shall return below), and the definition of a reliable typology of objects (thus establishing a chronology). George Petrie presented his pioneering work in 1845;<sup>11</sup> contrary to public opinion which ascribed all earthworks to the Vikings or the 'Danes', he proved that the round towers were neither the work of the Danes nor built in their time. Petrie's corpus of round towers was not followed by similar work, however, even though effective effort was expended especially on numismatics.<sup>12</sup>

At this favourable moment, the Danish archaeologist J.J.A. Worsaae made his grand study tour of the British Isles. In Denmark, archaeology had already accomplished the creation of a National Museum and Thomsen had presented the objects according to the famous tripartition of stone, bronze and iron. On Worsaae's arrival to Dublin in 1846, he was asked to improvise a report to the Royal Irish Academy on the establishment of the National Museum in Copenhagen. His lecture was followed up two weeks later when he presented the preliminary results of his registration of 'Scandinavian antiquities in Ireland' (which was the purpose of his tour).<sup>13</sup> Worsaae restricted himself to presenting the results he had brought with him from the study of Icelandic saga. He stressed, however, that the battle of Clontarf had not fully wiped out the Vikings of Ireland, and that the survivors had eventually been christianised. His knowledge of the battle of Clontarf was not only based on *Njálls saga*, but also on rumours which had come to Copenhagen of an Irish saga of Clontarf. One of his tasks in Ireland was to investigate the possibility of having a transcript made of the manuscript and, perhaps, a translation.<sup>14</sup> Worsaae investigated the manuscript and assured his benefactors in Copenhagen that it was indeed ancient, 'but you should not expect it to contain decent stuff; it is more a sort of annals on raids, plunderings, etc'.<sup>15</sup>

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11 G. Petrie, The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland, anterior to the Norman Invasion; comprising an essay on the origin and uses of the round towers of Ireland ... Dublin, 2nd ed., 1845. Petrie was very conscious of his legacy from 17th century antiquarianism; in a lecture to the Academy in 1834 he denounced contemporary "learned" Irish romanticism, which would date antiquities to a time before Solomon's temple, and continued: "While our claims to early civilization have been supported only in this manner, it is not to be wondered at, that the opinions of those who repudiate such claims, should be considered as the most rational ..." However, he looked forward to the results of the investigations organized by the Academy: "The knowledge of antiquities is as much a science as mineralogy, geography, or any other dignified with the name; but is only so when acquired according to the inductive system of Bacon. In this as in every other science, facts must be accumulated before conclusions can be safely drawn. In the following enquiry the author will endeavour to shape his course according to the Baconian method of investigation. He will place before the reader a numerous collection of facts, the result of long and laborious research, and will venture on no conclusions excepting those which are authorised by satisfactory evidence." (Reprinted in 'Aspects of George Petrie. V. An essay on military architecture in Ireland previous to the English invasion'. PRIA 72 C, 1972, 220-22)

<sup>12</sup> Petrie's efforts to establish the principle of 'treasure trove' in numismatics is underlined by Michael Dolley, 'Aspects of George Petrie. III. George Petrie and a century of Irish numismatics'. Proc Roy Ir Acad (C) 72 (1972) 172. Petrie was, however, rather a descendant of antiquarianism than a 'father of archaeology'; he had the antiquarian's lack of understanding for problems of provenance and the value of less spectacular antiquities (cf J. Raftery, 'Aspects of George Petrie. I. A reassessment', Proc Roy Ir Acad (C) 72 (1972) 153-57, for a more positive evaluation).

<sup>13</sup> The lectures of 30 November and 14 December 1846 are published: J. J. A. Worsaae, 'An account of the formation of the Museum at Copenhagen, and general remarks on the classification of the antiquities found in the north and west of Europe', Proc Roy Ir Acad 3 (1846), 310-15, 327-44.

<sup>14</sup> J.J. A. Worsaae, *En Oldgranskere Erindringer* (published posthumously, Copenhagen 1934). Letters of 17 December 1846 and 8 January 1847.

<sup>15</sup> Worsaae, letter of 8 January 1847.

Worsaae succeeded in buying several artifacts, just as he made an exchange deal with the Academy so that the collections in Copenhagen and Dublin swapped duplicates.<sup>16</sup> The director of the National Museum, Thomsen, was especially interested in numismatic material, and Worsaae acquired both Kufic, Anglo-Saxon and 'Hiberno-Danish' coins (but he was in no doubt of the Norwegian ancestry of the Irish Vikings).<sup>17</sup>

The study tour provided Worsaae with an opportunity to make the first systematic survey of the ancient monuments of the Danes and Norwegians in England, Scotland, and Ireland. His book was published in 1851 and translated the next year into English. Its importance lay in its critical quality: he continued the work of Petrie and of his friend Todd and, basing himself on a sound knowledge of Scandinavian objects, he set a new scientific standard in dating of Viking artifacts. Only he pointed to the value of place-names and annals as source material.

It is difficult to assess the importance of Worsaae's travels; he was not himself in any doubt about it, and his opinion may be interesting enough to justify a lengthy quotation:

I had the good fortune to arrive in the British Isles at a time when the sense of national antiquities and monuments was beginning to awaken even there in earnest, but when, just as in Germany, no native or foreign researcher had by way of comparison investigated the ancient relics of the different regions of England, Scotland and Ireland. There was no talk at all of a generally accepted archaeological system ... as a rule, the antiquarians were mere dilettantes in the national field who had no concept of the chronological sequence of the monuments and the antiquities, and who lightheartedly associated all relics of unexplained origin with the 'Danes', of whom the most adventurous imaginations were held with both lay and learned.

I think I can therefore with no modesty claim that my journey was an archaeological Viking assault which was aimed not only at rooting the influence of the Scandinavian or more properly the Danish system [Thomsen's three period system] on the British Isles, but also at spreading sounder knowledge both of the real, existing Danish and Norwegian monuments and as well generally of the impact of the Dano-Norwegian settlements and conquests in their time on the different kingdoms which are now united under the British throne.<sup>18</sup>

Worsaae's work undoubtedly contributed fundamentally to the furthering of more rigorous methods in archaeology, especially in England where he did most of his research. His influence in Ireland must have been limited considering his short stay, even though we should not underestimate the propaganda effect of his visit on the antiquarians.<sup>19</sup>

On the whole, his visit had rather a spectacular effect which later archaeological efforts in Ireland and in Scandinavia failed to live up to. After a promising start in the 1840s, the enthusiasm for Viking studies died down. Finds were fewer. Sir William Wilde, who belonged to the generation of the 1840s did indeed publish finds from the Viking cemetery in Islandbridge in Dublin but, except these and a few spectacular grave finds, no material remains of importance

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<sup>16</sup> See letters of gratitude from the Royal Commission in Copenhagen and from Todd and Petrie, published *Proc Roy Jr Aca4 4 C* (1847-48), 4-5, 250-53.

<sup>17</sup> Worsaae's letters, 12 December 1846, 24 December 1846, and 8 January 1847.

<sup>18</sup> Worsaae, *En Oldgranskers Erindring*, 137-38

<sup>19</sup> Worsaae's lecture on 30 November 1846 was overt propaganda to obtain funds from the British administration for the Museum of the Academy.

were uncovered.<sup>20</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, local history flourished and histories of all the bigger cities were written, but the section on the Vikings was, by and large, a few pages of indifferent introductory prose. One work deserves mention, however: Charles Haliday's specialised study of Dublin's medieval topography based on Anglo-Norman sources, a work still worth consulting.<sup>21</sup>

Now was also the time for large editions of manuscripts. Once more, it was on Petrie's initiative that the Academy's collection of manuscripts had been increased from 3 to 112 between 1831 and 1842.<sup>22</sup> The Annals of Ireland by the Four Masters were published in seven well-annotated large volumes in 1848-51.<sup>23</sup> This edition alone did not allow the establishment of results which could bear thorough historical criticism since the manuscript was a seventeenth-century compilation, the historical value of which could only be assessed in comparison with the yet unpublished medieval manuscripts.

When the great British Rolls Series began, it might have been thought natural to start with the annals. However, the English Master of the Rolls decided against the seemingly arid annals in favour of the much more literary saga *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* 'the War between the Irish and the Foreigners', precisely the text that Worsaae had taken an interest in and that so disappointed him. The editor of the text, I. H. Todd, concluded that the saga had been written around 1100, and it is interesting to note Todd's protestations in his edition in 1867:

the Editor cannot but regret that this tract, so full of the feelings of clanship, and of the consequent partisanship of the time, disfigured also by considerable interpolations, and by a bombastic style in the worst taste, should have been selected as the first specimen of an Irish chronicle presented to the public under the sanction of the Master of Rolls.<sup>24</sup>

The editor would have preferred to publish the Annals of Tigernach, the Annals of Ulster or the Annals of Loch Ce:

Until these and other original sources of history are made accessible, it is vain to expect any sober or trustworthy history of Ireland; the old romantic notions of a golden age, so attractive to some minds must continue to prevail; and there will still be firm believers in the 'glories of Brian the Brave'.<sup>25</sup>

Todd's words were fully justified, even though his polemic was not primarily one of source

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<sup>20</sup> W. Wilde, On the Scandinavian antiquities lately discovered at Islandbridge, near Dublin', *Proc Roy Ir Acad* (1866-69) 13-22; A. Wynne Foot opened a cave in Dunmore where he discovered 113 bones which he assumed to be corpses from a Viking assault in 928 (*J Roy Soc Antiq Ire ser5* 1 (1870-71) 65- 94), and W. Fraser published the mass grave at Donnybrook (*Proc Roy Ir Acad ser2* (1879) 29-55,

<sup>21</sup> Charles Haliday, *The Scandinavian kingdom of Dublin* (Dublin 1884, repr. Dublin 1969).

<sup>22</sup> David Greene, 'Aspects of George Petrie. II. George Petrie and the collecting of Irish manuscripts'. *Proc Roy Ir Acad* (C) 72(1972)160.

<sup>23</sup> John O'Donovan, *Annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters* (7 vols, Dublin 1848-51).

<sup>24</sup> J. H. Todd (ed), *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: the war of the Gaedhil with the Gaul*, RS (London 1867) p ccii. Todd hardly lived up to his words of warning: in his long introduction (200 pages) he accepted the saga as a supplement to the annals without any further reservations.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* cf. Worsaae's remarks on Todd, *Minder om de Danske og Nordmaendene i England, Skorland og Irland* (Copenhagan 1851) 383, and C. S. Briggs & J. Graham-Campbell, 'A lost hoard of Viking-age silver from Magheralagan, Co Down', *Ulster J Archaeol* 39 (1976) 20—25.

criticism, but was rather directed politically against the views of the late national leader, Daniel O'Connell. O'Connell, standing on the Hill of Tara, had eulogised the Irish struggle against the Vikings as a fitting example for the present generation in its struggle against the British. This nationalist interpretation was to be part of the mainstream in historical research over the next hundred years.<sup>26</sup> Todd and other antiquarian pioneers represented the Unionist historical and political view of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy.

This controversy was to be deepened in the generation that was shaped by the Irish struggle for independence. Historiographically, it is interesting that the conservative Anglo-Irish conception of history was the driving force behind the major editions of Irish manuscript material. One might seek an explanation for this fact in what is called the soft primitivism of the eighteenth century: inspired by the philosophers of enlightenment the 'natives' (whether Amer-Indians or Irish) were believed to have an original contact with nature and, therefore, a noble if naive character.<sup>27</sup> But if we look for representatives of this view, we are more likely to find it reflected in the writings of O'Connell and his followers than in the rather more terse style of the Anglo-Irish intellectuals. Perhaps a more likely explanation of the open-mindedness of the mid-century Anglo-Irish historians may be found in contemporary efforts across the national and religious barriers to unite the Dublin middle class and obtain more freedom from direct government by London. When Anglo-Irish historians were to lose influence over Irish pre-Norman history in the beginning of the twentieth century, it was perhaps a result of ever more intense political tensions that did not allow room for a non-political, or rather depoliticised, attitude to Irish pre-Conquest history. It is a parallel phenomenon that the Irish nationalist interpretation of history had no professional spokesman in the nineteenth century.

#### SCANDINAVIAN RESEARCH, 1870-1970

Between 1876 and 1882 Johannes Steenstrup published his major work, *Normannerne*,<sup>28</sup> which was based on an extensive reading of western European medieval sources. It still stands unsurpassed in scope and depth. Concerning Ireland, Steenstrup based himself upon all available manuscript translations, and he made an ambitious attempt at detailed narrative by bringing together the fragmentary information of the annals. Steenstrup's work, however, suffers from lack of insight into the relationship between the diverse sources and the backgrounds for which they originate. This is especially clear in his treatment of *Cogadh* which he accepts without reserve. His main idea is the contrast between the Norwegian model of plunder and later trade in Ireland and the Danish model of peasant colonisation in England. According to Steenstrup, this latter led to the establishment of a well-organised society in the Danelaw with positive consequences for English society, whereas the Norwegian activity did not have the same positive

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<sup>26</sup> The fathers of Marxism were likewise deeply marked by contemporary historical assessments. F. Engels's manuscript on Irish history from 1870 shows his support to Irish nationalism and his aversions to Denmark after the Schleswig-Holstein wars: 'Diese Raubzüge [the Viking raids], die den Hauptstapel des skandinavisehen, besonders dänischen Patriotismus bilden, kamen zu splt und gingen von zu kleinen Vdlkern aus, als daB sic in Eroberungen, Kolonisationen und Staatenbildungen auf groB MaBstab hätten ausmünden können, wie dies bei den früheren Einfillen der Germaner der Fall gewesen. Der Vorteil für die geschichtliche Entwicklungen, den sic hinterlassen haben, ist verschwindend klein gegen die ungeheuren und selbst für Skandinavien fruchtlosen Störungen, die sic angerichtet' (F. Engels, Die GesF chichie Irltjnds, in K. Marx & F. Engels, Werke 16 (Berlin 1973) 492—93).

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Piggott, *Celts, Saxons, and the early antiquaries*, O'Donnell Lecture (Edinburgh 1966), repr. in *Ruins in a landscape* (Edinburgh 1976) 55-76.

<sup>28</sup> J. C. H. R. Steenstrup, *Normannerne* (4 vols, Copenhagen 1876-82).

effect in Irish society, which remained disorganised and lawless.

As one might expect, a more amiable view was presented by Norwegian historians. The foundation of Irish historical research in Norway was laid by P. A. Munch, who edited the *Chronica regum Manniae et insularum* (1860), by customs-officer Lorenz Vogt with *Dublin as a Norwegian city* (1896), and by Sophus Bugge. Bugge was the first to assert that there were several parallels between Irish and Icelandic saga tradition. However, his efforts were often spent on fantastic comparisons without any regard to time and place.<sup>29</sup> His hibernophile views were taken over by his son, offered Alexander Bugge, who wrote the best part of what has ever been written in any Scandinavian language about the Vikings in Ireland.

Alexander Bugge did not differ methodologically nor theoretically from his predecessors. He accepted Cogadh as a basically trustworthy tradition, and he even found historic truth in the late and clearly glorificatory *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil* (which he edited 1905)<sup>30</sup> and in the legendary tract on the Fomorians and the Norse.<sup>31</sup> Bugge was much better in his treatment of economic and social history where he broke new ground, for instance in his treatment of the trade between Dublin and Bristol<sup>32</sup> and in his investigation into the last period of Norse history in Ireland.<sup>33</sup> In this latter work he edited important documents the originals of which were later lost in the burning of the Public Record Office of Ireland in 1922. He stressed what had hitherto been ignored: that the Norse colonies remained land owning and mercantile centres long after the defeat at Clontarf in 1014. This was probably Bugge's most important single contribution. This he reached through his clear nationalist interest in proving that the Norwegians were integrated in, and contributed substantially to, Irish society, contrary to Steenstrup's negative estimate of the Norwegian impact.<sup>34</sup>

Bugge's historical studies were not continued in Norway, but he did have an eminent successor in Celtic studies, the linguist Carl J. S. Marstrander.<sup>35</sup> He was methodologically much more meticulous, and his dissertations founded the study of Norse linguistic remains in Irish. His results have not been faulted by later research, which still accepts Marstrander's contention that the direct influence of the Norse on Irish language was minimal. This negative conclusion did not, of course, give much incentive to further work. Good philologists, such as Sommerfelt and Oftedal, continued Marstrander's work in some fields, but the historical significance of their

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<sup>29</sup> Sophus Bugge's main work is *Norsk sagaskrivning og sagafortælling i Irland* (Kristiania [Oslo] 1901-08; see further Chesnutt's and Almqvist's discussion in works cited in n 3).

<sup>30</sup> A. Bugge (ed), *Caithreim Cellachain Caisel: the victorious career of Cellachan of Cashel* (Kristiania [Oslo] 1905; cf. D. Ó Corráin, 'Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil; history or propaganda?', *Eriu* 25 (1974) 1-69).

<sup>31</sup> A. Bugge (ed), *Duald MacFirbis: On the Fomorians and the Norsemen* (Kristiania [Oslo] 1905; cf. A.J. Goedheer, *Irish and Norse traditions about the battle of Clontarf* (Haarlem 1938) 71-73).

<sup>32</sup> A. Bugge, 'Contributions to the history of the Norsemen in Ireland III: Norse settlements round the Bristol Channel', *Videnskabselskabets Skrifter; Hist-Fil KI* (Kristiania [Oslo] 1900) 3-11.

<sup>33</sup> A. Bugge, 'Bidrag til det sidste afsnit af Nordboernes historie i Irland', *Aarbøger Nord Oldkyndighed Hist II Række* 19 (Copenhagen 1904) 288—315; 'Nordisk sprog og nordisk nationalitet i Irland. Ibid. 15 (Copenhagen 1900) 279-332.

<sup>34</sup> Later Bugge revised the kernel of his work: 'The influence of Western Europe on the Scandinavian countries during the Viking Age has probably been over-rated by my late father, Sophus Bugge, as well as by myself in earlier works. The Oseberg find and other recent discoveries show that the Norsemen long before that time already were as civilised as the Anglo-Saxons and the Franks' (A. Bugge, 'Costumes, jewels, and furniture in Viking times', *Saga-Book Viking Soc* 7(1911-12)175-76).

<sup>35</sup> C. J. S. Marstrander, *Bidrag til det norske sprogs historie i Irland* (Kristiania [Oslo] 1915), part- summary in Alf Sommerfelt, 'Carl Marstrander: Recherches sur l'histoire du vieux-norrois en Irlande', *Revue Celtique* 39 (1922) 175-98; cf. David Greene, 'The influence of Scandinavian on Irish', B. Almqvist & David Greene (ed), *Proc Seventh Viking Cong* (Dublin 1976) 75-82.

results has been marginal. We must hope that someday a philologist with a sufficient foundation in Old Norse and Old and Middle Irish will subject Marstrander's results to a thorough reconsideration. It is particularly unfortunate that Norse personal and place-names have as yet not been fully published and analysed.<sup>36</sup> This is one of the features that underlines the great divide between the research in the Viking history of England and Ireland.

It would seem that Scandinavian research in Irish medieval history, which once played a leading role, has today almost dried up. In 1969, Per Sveaas Andersen offered a general characterization of the state of research into Viking Ireland, which was rather unfair to Irish historians, but still holds good if it is restricted to Scandinavian efforts: 'There has not been any new research since Alexander Bugge's days of new source material on the question of the role of the Norse population in the Viking centuries'.<sup>37</sup>

### NATIONALIST HISTORY 1900-1930

In England and Ireland, the two nationalist tendencies which had already been discernible in the past century came to a full bloom after 1900. One of the themes of strife was the Janus-like character of the Vikings, now destructive pillagers, now peaceful traders. The combination of these two facets depended upon the general historical thinking of the writer. Eleanor Hull made one of the better contributions in which she defined the theme very precisely: 'There has been a tendency to confuse the period of raiding with the period of settlement and mercantile energy'.<sup>38</sup> Hull probably had no nationalistic preference, but tried to give a balanced picture. Nevertheless, her analysis placed her in line with the historians of the nineteenth century who had emphasised the 'uncivilised' conditions of early Irish society. Her critical efforts were directed against the traditional Irish nationalist attitude which condemned the Vikings as harmful foreign elements. She argued that, basically, their arrival was positive because it necessitated a strengthening of royal power at the expense of tribal divisions. She thought that the *Gall-Goídil* 'foreign Irish', who are mentioned in the annals between 850 and 860, should be seen as native Irishmen with good contacts with the Vikings and thus evidence for peaceful coexistence between at least some parts of the two population groups. Finally, she pointed out that the Vikings were only following Irish custom when they pillaged the rich monasteries. Hull believed that the Vikings had been a progressive social force, especially by the development of towns and trade, even though she had to concede that they had acted as robbers and plunderers in the first period. Annie Walsh followed the same line of thought in 1922 as did Jean I. Young even as late as 1950.<sup>39</sup>

All levels of Irish society were politicised and polarised by the struggle for independence and the subsequent civil war. As O'Connell had already seen, the Vikings provided excellent material for nationalistic propaganda. Professor Eoin Mac Neill, who is today praised as the 'founder' of early Irish historical studies, gave a series of lectures in 1919 which stood out for a critical revision of problems in the early medieval period. But his lectures were held in a politically stormy year, only shortly after his release from prison, and they are just as much evidence of his involvement in the Irish struggle for independence as in critical historiography. His polemic was directed against the Unionist historian G. H. Orpen who had defended the Norman conquest of

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<sup>36</sup> See, however, Magne Oftedal, 'Scandinavian placenames in Ireland', Almquist & Greene (ed), *Proc Seventh Viking Cong*, 125—54.

<sup>37</sup> Sveaas Andersen, 'Vikingtid og rikssamling', 29.

<sup>38</sup> E. Hull, 'The Gael and the Gall: notes on the social condition of Ireland during the Norse period', *Saga-Book Viking Soc* 5 (1907—08) 364.

<sup>39</sup> A. . Walshe, *Scandinavian relations with Ireland* (Dublin 1922); Jean I. Young, 'A note on the Norse occupation of Ireland', *History ns* 30 (1950) 11-33.



Ireland in 1169:

Mr. Orpen ascribes their [the Vikings'] failure to the fact that the Irish were not politically centralised and were therefore harder to break down; yet he goes on to censure this defect in the Irish polity. Are we to conclude that it was a misfortune for Ireland and other countries that Ireland was not subjugated by the Scandinavian Heathens?<sup>40</sup>

Mac Neill regarded the battle of Clontarf as the decisive test of strength between the Irish nation and the foreign conquerors, and his hero was Brian Bóroime. After their defeat the Vikings were integrated, and Mac Neill conceded that their trading cities were a valuable addition to the Irish society. His exposition was, of course, to be understood as a parallel tale to the conquest of the Normans, and his allusions probably heartened those who saw themselves as freedom-fighters – but at the same time Mac Neill had presented a picture which was in the main taken from the medieval propaganda text, *Cogadh*.

Mac Neill, who otherwise introduced more thorough methods of source criticism in the study of Irish medieval history, thus failed to bring novelty to the analysis of the Vikings, and indeed sharpened the edge of nationalist historical thinking. To some degree, this failure was probably related to the fact that he dealt with Viking centuries only during the war years when he was entrenched in political confrontation.<sup>41</sup>

However, it was not Mac Neill, but his enthusiastic admirer, Alice Stopford Green, who was to become the archetypal nationalistic historian with the publication of her book *A history of the Irish state to 1014* in 1925. Later historiographers have preferred to view it as an unfortunate parenthesis,<sup>42</sup> but Green's book was reviewed very favourably, even by Mac Neill. He lauded her for imbuing 'the people of Ireland with the spirit and hope of a sound future development'.<sup>43</sup> The following quotation from Green may show the changed perception of the Vikings and the weakening of methodological rigour since Todd's days:

The most exact account of the Norse wars in Ireland is in the contemporary meagre record of the Ulster Annals. Caution is needed in the reading of later sagas and histories, which, however, add all that lacks in the Annals of warmth and vivid emotion. The story of Ireland lies not in the detailed study of attacks and wars, but rather in the way that the Irish under their old constitution met the violence of the impact, what force of recovery was in them, and what were the permanent results.<sup>44</sup>

During the first decades of the twentieth century nationalist history rose to institutional acceptance alongside the Anglo-Irish conception, and indeed was to occupy a monopoly in the field of the early medieval period thanks to the energetic contribution of Mac Neill. In his works the 'popular' view of history proved to be a real improvement by doing away with prejudices against the early medieval Irish society, which had been viewed by the Anglo-Irish as a

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<sup>40</sup> Eoin Mac Neill, *Phases of Irish history* (Dublin 1919, repr. Dallas TX 1970) 255; cf. F. X. Martin & F. J. Byrne (ed), *The scholar revolutionary: Loin Mac Neill (1867–1945) and the making of the ne...* Ireland (Shannon 1973).

<sup>41</sup> cf. R. Dudley Edwards on MacNeill, Martin & Byrne (ed), *The scholar revolutionary*, 291.

<sup>42</sup> F. J. Byrne, 'Ireland before the Norman invasions', *Jr Hist Stud* 16 (1968) 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Irish Statesman* iv 175.

<sup>44</sup> Alice Stopford Green, *A history of the Irish state to 1014* (Dublin 1925) 313–4; on Green see R. B. McDowell, *Alice Stopford Green: a passionate historian* (Dublin 1967).

primitive, uncivilised nomadic anarchy. This new discovery of the qualities of older Irish society was made at the expense of a sober view of the Viking raids. Norwegian robbers were put side by side with Norman lords, and some defeats of the Vikings were considered the result of growing Irish patriotism. The study of history was to awaken once again this patriotic feeling of unity. From the historiographical point of view, Mac Neill and his movement did not make a significant contribution to the study of the Vikings. Indeed, that was never his aim. He was the learned sponsor for the elevation of popular opinion to the level of scholarly acceptance.

During the 1930s nationalist historical writing ran out of energy. Part of the reason for that was a rising professional criticism of romanticising tendencies, but the main influence was probably the disillusionment that spread in political thinking after the establishment of the Irish Free State and the deep divide between Free State nationalists and De Valera 'republicans'. The supporters of the Free State had learned to have mixed emotions about radical nationalism, and the change was felt not least by their leader in historical studies, Mac Neill. The time for great works of synthesis was over, and Mac Neill plunged into the more peaceful world of the Irish Manuscripts Commission.<sup>45</sup>

New opinions were not voiced, and the old nationalistic 'paradigm' seemed to weigh as a heavy burden on the shoulders of the historians who touched upon the significance of the Vikings.

### **Criticism and acceptance of *Cogadh* 1930-1960**

In Scandinavia the breakthrough for modern critical principles was the attack in 1915 of the Swedish historian Lauritz Weibull on the authority of Saxo Grammaticus for the early medieval period. A similar breakthrough for *Quellenkritik* might have come in Ireland in 1938, when the main source for nationalist history, the *Cogadh*, was the object of two independent analyses of its source value.

One study was made by the Dutch historian A. J. Goedheer. He thought that *Cogadh* was composed shortly before or around 1100 to glorify Brian Bóroime. The technique of the saga was to depict an intolerable Norse tyranny of Ireland for 150 years, and this Brian alone managed to break at the battle of Clontarf in 1014. Goedheer demonstrated that this picture of a century and a half of tyranny was based on fantastic elaborations of scraps of annalistic evidence. One may instance the case of the notorious Viking leader Turges. According to *Cogadh*, Turges ravaged the country from a base on the river Shannon between 840 and 845. Most historians have accepted *Cogadh* and paraphrased the best parts, including the famous scene in which Turges is said to have had his wife prophesy from the altar at Clonmacnoise. Contemporary annals lend no support to these stories. The *Annals of Ulster* only mention the killing of one Turges, and already the editor of the annals, Hennessy, remarked that an entry sub anno 844 is a later interpolation. Goedheer noted that the author of *Cogadh* had access only to very few annalistic sources other than those that are still known today.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, he concluded that the figure of Turges was a comparatively minor leader who had been given an incommensurate importance as a foil to Brian's success. Turges was an example of a tyrant, not an actual historical person.

On the battle of Clontarf, which allegedly put an end to Viking rule, Goedheer concluded: "... the tradition about the battle of Clontarf, both in Irish and Norse sources, is for a great part legendary rather than historical."<sup>47</sup> Goedheer supported this conclusion by demonstrating that the

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45 Cf. Brian Farrell in *The Scholar Revolutionary*, 195.

46 A. J. Goedheer, *Irish and Norse Traditions about the Battle of Clontarf*, Haarlem 1938, 29ff.

47 Goedheer, 103.

"supplementary" list of names in *Cogadh* of Viking who participated in the battle consists of Norman names and are only known only from a seventeenth-century manuscript. Otherwise *Cogadh* is completely based on the Annals of Ulster for its names. The passage on king Brian's prayer is based on a popular English motif which was probably known in Ireland.<sup>48</sup> The supplementary information of *Cogadh* has thus no independent source value.

Contrary to the overwhelming importance that had normally been attributed to Clontarf, Goedheer stated that the reason for the battle was a strife between the Irish king of Leinster and the over-king Brian Bóroime. Leinster merely counted on assistance from Dublin which again secured the participation of jarl Sigurd from Orkney. Shortly before the battle the Dublin Vikings betrayed Leinster and remained neutral while Sigurd and his men were slaughtered.<sup>49</sup> Clontarf was therefore merely a defeat of some Vikings outside Ireland.

Unfortunately, Goedheer was not consistent. In the following quotation it seems as if veneration for the saga led him to contradict himself:

Still, his work [Cogadh], if used with caution, forms the most valuable source of information, apart from the Book of Rights, for Brian's reign, the importance of which for Irish history we should not realise if we only had the scanty notes in the annals to depend on for our knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

It seems as if Goedheer held back from his own results. The logical consequence of his statement that the depiction of Clontarf merely rests on known literary sources would be to deny any independent value as a source to *Cogadh*. Instead Goedheer prefers to accept *Cogadh*'s general interpretation of the battle. He does not consider at all the interests of the author around 1100 in constructing a eulogy of king Brian. In this very vital point Goedheer still left open the door for the traditional nationalist historical interpretation.

Goedheer's work was to have little impact in Ireland. The same year, 1938, John Ryan published his interpretation of the battle of Clontarf, in which to all practical intents he accepted *Cogadh* as the most 'full' description and simply used the terse notes of the annals to verify the trustworthiness of the saga.<sup>51</sup> When the annals are silent about most things – and therefore at least do not falsify *Cogadh* – there was ample room for Ryan's acceptance, and in fact he accepted most of it. An evident anecdote about the machinations of Gormflaith, sister of the king of Leinster, is accepted because "... the whole narrative in this section of the story holds so well together that I think it unwise to reject any portion of it."<sup>52</sup> Ryan even goes so far as saying: "... the account of the actual battle given in "Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh" is incomparably the most reliable..."<sup>53</sup>

It is true that Ryan enters some general reservations about the enumeration in *Cogadh* of names of participating Vikings. But it is obvious that these reservations are allowed to play no part in his analysis. Ryan describes the slaying of Brian Bóroime basing himself on the account

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48 Goedheer, 29ff.

49 Goedheer, 117ff.

50 \_\_\_\_\_ Goedheer, 104. The Book of Rights (*Lebor na Cert*) is a list of tributes to the kings, allegedly compiled during Brian's reign, but existing only in a schematized and phantastic twelfth century manuscript. Since Myles Dillon's critical edition (*Lebor na Cert*, Irish Texts Society, Dublin 1958), historians have regarded it as having no source value for Brian's time.

51 John Ryan, 4.

52 Ryan, 10f.

53 Ryan, 39.

in the Icelandic *Njáll's saga*, which concludes with the grisly death of Broðir who, shortly before his death, is reputed to have killed Brian. Ryan prefers the account in the Icelandic saga to the Irish because:

I take it that the Irish account which pictures Brian as attended by a gilla [sentry] only, is an exaggeration, intended to exalt the High-King's merits by showing how he met his end virtually alone. At this point, therefore, the Norse account may confidently be followed, though the Irish source may be used in parts to elucidate obscurities in the sequence of events.<sup>54</sup>

This kind of pseudo-criticism which replaces Irish panegyrics with Icelandic is typical of Ryan. Not even the decisive question of the real identity of the participants in the battle is consistently solved. He notes that all sources have the Vikings of Dublin act as neutrals during the battle and that only the men of the Orkney jarl took an active part. In conclusion, he states that Clontarf did not decide the main question of subjugation of Leinster, but then he continues: "This again proves that the Battle of Clontarf was decisive on the secondary issue only. It scotched once for all the ambitions of the Dublin Norse, but it did not bring final defeat to the Leinstermen." How the Dublin Vikings were defeated without participating is not explained by Ryan. His statement can only make sense in the traditional nationalist conception of the battle as a fight between the Irish and the foreigners.

Despite their different evaluations, Ryan and Goedheer agreed in seeing *Cogadh* as the most important source for the Viking age, and neither of them had a clear vision of the process of integration of the Vikings into Irish society.<sup>55</sup>

The scholarly literature walked the well-trodden path of *Cogadh* and Clontarf in the next decades. Linklater retold the battle of Clontarf in his 1951 article, basing himself on *Njáll's saga*.<sup>56</sup> Máire and Liam de Paor stated their view thus:

Brian in winning his way to power had on occasion availed himself of alliances with Norsemen, but the basis of his whole career was opposition to the foreigners and his life ended in 1014 on the field of the battle in which, as High King of Ireland, he faced a last rally of the Vikings, of Dublin, of Man and the Isles, and of Scandinavia itself, together with their Irish allies, outside the walls of Dublin. This was the battle of Clontarf, celebrated in Scandinavian and Irish literature for the breaking of the power of the Vikings in Ireland.<sup>57</sup>

At the International Congress of Celtic Studies on the 'Impact of the Scandinavian Invasions on the Celtic-speaking Peoples' in 1959, Nora K. Chadwick who delivered the 'historical' lecture to

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54 Ryan, 42.

55 Ryan restated his opinions in the article 'Brian Boruma, King of Ireland', *North Munster Studies*, ed. E. Rynne, Limerick 1967. This was an extreme piece of anti-Viking nationalism. He went so far as to reject on the basis of the portrait gallery at the manor of the O'Brians that Brian Borumha should have any semblance with a Viking chief(!)

56 Linklater (*Viking*, Oslo 1951) thought the reason for the fame of the battle of Clontarf was that Jarl Sigtrygg of Orkney, inspired by Svein Forkbeard, had intentions of conquering the whole of Ireland. He does not mention that Sigtrygg was an auxiliary in the army of the king of Leinster. But he might have referred to Goedheer as he deliberated the same idea.

57 M. & L. de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, London 1958, 160.

this congress of linguists recommended the de Paor quotation as the definitive summing-up of the critical work undertaken by Ryan. Goedheer's work was quietly forgotten.<sup>58</sup> Alf Sommerfelt reiterated the general consensus on Clontarf in passing in 1957: "After the great battle of Clontarf at Dublin on Good Friday April 23 1914, heathendom was finally broken, and the Norwegian realms had to accept Irish kings as over-kings."<sup>59</sup> It would seem that the consensus on Clontarf had become increasingly simplified and wrong as Goedheer's work was forgotten.

## THE THEORY OF CATASTROPHE

From another angle, the method of historical criticism, however, was being felt in Irish Viking studies. Irish law texts from the seventh and eighth centuries were being subjected to the scrutiny of Daniel A. Binchy. He formed the impression that these law texts had not the slightest relevance to Irish societal reality by the year 800 at the latest. Previous scholars had assumed a continuity of familial and social institutions as regulated in the laws through the Viking age. Binchy came to believe that the ancient tribal divisions had been replaced by a markedly class segregated society, and that the lesser kingdoms had submerged in four or five strong provincial kingdoms. What was the cause of this transformation of Irish society?

Binchy found the answer in the Viking attacks which in his view had led the way to a money economy, new technology and a new form of 'total' warfare, which did not accept old conventions such as the sanctity of monasteries. The result was a concentration of land ownership and power in the hands of a propertied class and the demise of traditional Irish culture and art:<sup>60</sup> "I am convinced that the coming of the Norsemen had a profound - one might even say a shattering - effect upon native Irish institutions."<sup>61</sup> Thus Binchy had reversed the perspective of the nationalist historical orthodoxy which had stressed that Irish society survived the attacks of the Vikings but succumbed to the Normans. Hull and Walsh had anticipated this idea, but only now was it fully developed as an alternative theory.

Binchy's view had considerable impact in the next ten or fifteen years, but it did not win unanimous consent. The primary asset of the theory was that it stressed the social and cultural consequences of the Viking experience which had hitherto been neglected in favour of political history. But oddly enough, Binchy's theory did not break decisively with main-stream *Cogadh* narratives. Binchy was mainly dealing with the effects of the early Viking raids, and the *Cogadh* historians had all the way presumed that it took a strong king (Brian Bóroime) to expel the Vikings. In his own field, early Irish laws and society, Binchy had rejected the received view of the laws as adequate expressions of Irish social structure until the advent of the Normans. But in the Viking field he had rather given new strength to *Cogadh* propaganda of the devastating and murderous Viking onslaught on peaceful Ireland.

## REVISIONISM AFTER 1965

During the last two decades a radical transformation has taken place both in the amount of sources at the disposal of Viking historians and in the methods and techniques used in handling

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58 N. K. Chadwick, 'The Vikings and the Western World', The Impact of the Scandinavian Invasions on the Celtic-speaking Peoples, ed. Brian Ó Cuív, Dublin 1962, 137f.

59 Alf Sommerfelt: 'De Norsk-Irske bystaters undergang 1169-1171', Avhandlingar, Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, II, 1957, no 4, 6

60 Binchy developed his thought in two articles 'Secular Institutions', Early Irish Society, ed M. Dillon, Dublin 1954, and 'The Passing of the Old Order', The Impact of the Scandinavian Invasions on the Celtic-speaking Peoples, Dublin 1962.

61 Binchy, 'The Passing of the Old Order', 119.

the sources. The Dublin excavations have been a major inspiration since 1962. Around 1980 the intense work, spectacular results and the struggle with authorities to continue the excavations gave Viking studies a momentary element of political and public relevance that compares with the awareness that accompanied Worsaae's and MacNeill's lectures. Besides, numismatic and artifact research made major strides during the sixties and seventies. During the seventies, Irish Viking archaeology attracted a handful of scholars who made major discoveries and introduced new methods.

But before the impact of the archaeologists was being felt, historians had already subjected the old theories to a scrutiny based on well-known texts that were for the first time analysed not by way of their narrative content but by means of an assessment of their value as sources. Now finally was the time for a breakthrough of critical historical method. Binchy's "theory of catastrophe" was the first to be scrutinized. In two articles in 1966 and 1967, A. T. Lucas demonstrated that Binchy's chronology could not stand.<sup>62</sup> Changes in Irish society had set in before 800, and the Irish had disregarded the sanctity of monasteries before the time when the Vikings allegedly taught them to sack them. Lucas seemed to indicate that the Vikings had merely fitted into Irish society as yet another petty kingdom without grave consequences. And yet he demonstrated that they had introduced entirely new elements of naval warfare to the Irish.

In 1978, James Graham-Campbell followed up on Lucas' work in an article on the initial impact of the Vikings on Irish art.<sup>63</sup> Basing himself on revised inventories of Irish and Viking silver finds which he had compiled during the seventies, Graham Campbell concluded that art of metalwork had declined before the advent of the Vikings. Yet again his criticism demonstrated how important a precise chronology is for the assessment of the sweeping theories of Viking history.

The Gill History of Ireland, published in 1972, marked a radical break with established opinions on Irish history. The volume on Ireland before the Normans by Donnchadh Ó Corráin was based on a rejection of *Cogadh* and in its stead was put an analysis on contemporary annals.<sup>64</sup> Ó Corráin's revisionism was directed primarily on Irish social history, but the Vikings were duly treated. He developed Lucas' view to a consistent synthesis: Ireland was a class society already by 700, and the Vikings were a threat only in short intervals (820-860 and around 920). In the main they were merely mercenaries used as pawns in the power struggle of the Irish kings. The Vikings might have had some significance in the destruction of the literary and artistic production of a few monasteries and by founding trading cities along the coast after 950. But by and large Irish history was explicable by purely Irish factors. Nevertheless, Ó Corráin stressed the necessity of working through the entire source material for Viking history anew.

Outside Ireland, Irish history was only discussed in passing. In 1969, the Danish journal *Mediaeval Scandinavia* organized a discussion of the thesis by the revisionist English Viking scholar Peter H. Sawyer of "the two Viking ages of the British Isles". His idea was that the ninth century attacks were caused by a hunger of land which sent off fleets of ships to the west away from an overpopulated Scandinavia; in the tenth and eleventh centuries, however, the attacks were the results of a small Scandinavian elite which tried to secure new sources of revenue for themselves. Sawyer himself had difficulties in applying the theory to Ireland where he did not think there was any agricultural settlement and that the Vikings had contented themselves with

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62 A. T. Lucas, 'Irish-Norse Relations: Time for a Reappraisal?', *JCHAS* 1966, 62-75, and 'The Plundering and Burning of Churches in Ireland, 7th to 16th Century', *North Munster Studies*, ed. E. Rynne, Limerick 1967.

63 J. Graham-Campbell, 'The Initial Impact of the Vikings on Irish Art', *Saga-Book* XX (1978-79), 42-48.

64 D. Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, Dublin 1972.

plundering.<sup>65</sup> The Irish numismatist Michael Dolley thought that a distinction between the ninth and tenth centuries could indeed be signalled in Ireland by the concepts 'hunger for land' and 'hunger for silver', and that there was a development from attacks by fleets based in Norway to attacks from Vikings based in the British Isles. This debate has not continued. Sawyer's and Dolley's views were to some extent anticipated by Hull in the beginning of this century as she, too, tried to establish her historical narrative on a distinction between the two centuries. P. H. Sawyer's works have stimulated Scandinavian and British Viking studies beyond comparison since 1960. But his discussion of the two Viking ages was abortive because his distinctions were too narrowly based on Anglo-Saxon developments. In recent works, Professor Sawyer, who is an outstanding international expert on the Vikings, has contented himself with making only tangential references to Irish Viking affairs.

However, Sawyer's discussion did raise a problem which has become more and more acute in the past twenty years. It is obvious that Viking activity was not one but many things, and had different consequences both for the victims and for the Vikings themselves over time and in different places. "Viking" is merely a temporal marker for Scandinavian/indigenous settlement, plunder, trade, mercenary activity, city life, aristocratic and royal institutions and developments. It is easy to simplify events in time and space that are only haphazardly documented. This has been the valid argument for specialization.

Not least the growth of specialized disciplines such as philology, numismatics, art history, archaeology etc. has made it imperative for the historian to maintain his role as an expert not on a specific source material, but as a generator and evaluator of historical theory. Only by confronting a heuristic theory and all sources and methods available can we advance our understanding of the past. In this age of specialization, the generalist historian should be well equipped for precisely this task.

## THE VIKING MIND

Ó Corráin's 'minimalist' theory of the Vikings may be said to be typical of trends in historical writing around 1970 when historians focussed on social history and would tend to explain developments by economic rather than extraneous factors such as robbers and traders. Ó Corráin cleared the ground so to speak for future Viking studies in asking the basic question: did they have any impact at all? And he introduced the essential historical methodology of source criticism in this and later valuable revisionist work.

But his view was challenged by what may be labelled the new school of *Cogadh* history. From 1975 to 1979, Alfred P. Smyth published a three-volume account in defence of the received opinion on the Viking marauders.<sup>66</sup> Here was the full scale history of the Vikings in Ireland which Ó Corráin had called for. Indeed, Smyth combined a wide reading of Irish, Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic texts with a knowledge of archaeology and numismatics and thus seemed well qualified to write precisely that integrated study which was needed. Unfortunately, Smyth produced a narrative which is marred by circular arguments and a poor evaluation of the sources. Even worse, his account reproduces the biases and misjudgements of his predecessors in Viking studies from Steenstrup to Binchy, whereas the results of the work done in the last twenty years

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65 'The Two Viking Ages', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 2, (1969), 174: "... the Vikings never settled widely in Ireland as farmers; they were content to establish themselves in strong-holds from which they could launch plundering raids on the Irish countryside."

66 A. P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin. The History and Archaeology of Two Related Kingdoms*, I-II, Dublin 1975, 1979; *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles 850-880*, Oxford 1977.

are all but absent. His books were immediately met by severe criticism,<sup>67</sup> and yet his basic ideas seem to have spread to some scholars not working in the field.

The attraction of Smyth's writings is the vivid style and flights of imagination which make us believe in the rite of the blood-eagle<sup>68</sup> and the aggressive heathenism of the Ívarr dynasty which set out to destroy Western Christendom. Even Smyth's perceptive biographies of the Viking kings may have a ring of truth in them if you read his books without knowing that they are made up from terse annals and a good fistful of late sagas.

There is no denying that studies of the Viking mind(s) are very much needed. They should, however, be firmly based on contemporary sources, such as the grave slabs studied by Lang and others in Northumbria, inscriptions and annals, however meagre their information may seem. Icelandic sagas are extremely good sources for the twelfth century Icelandic mind only.

### THE FUTURE

In the 1980's, funds have been dwindling for medieval history in general. One severe result has been the lack of recruitment of young students to the field of Viking studies. The scholars that entered the scene in the 1970's have thus become the authorities of today and will probably remain so unchallenged for the next decade. It is hardly likely that we shall see such a spate of articles in the future as was published during the past twenty years. On the other hand, we may hope for fewer but lengthier works that have digested recent results and methods and matured into historical synthesis. One may hope for new work that integrates the study of Viking age Irish society and polity. When such work is published, the challenge first posed by Binchy to Viking historians will have been met.

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67 D. Ó Corráin, 'High-kings, Vikings and other kings', *IHS* XXI, 1979, 283-323< see also my #The slave trade of Dublin, ninth to twelfth centuries#, *Peritia* 5 (1986) 317-45.

68 Roberta Frank, 'Viking atrocity and skaldic verse: the rite of the blood-eagle', *Engl Hist Rev* 99 (1984) 332-43.