

Forfatter: Grundtvig, N. F. S.

Titel: Udrag fra History of the Northmen, or Danes and Normans, from the Earliest Times to the Conquest of England by William of Normandy

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surrounded it ere they burst out upon the fairer and richer lands of the South. Formerly, indeed, the remoter Northern world, was a world given up to the imagination of dreamers, who peopled it with prodigies and all mysterious things;—in later times, when men have learnt that man every where is man—with common hopes and fears—modified somewhat by climate, and much by civilization; even in later times, a cold and frozen barrier seems to have girdled the ancient Scandinavia—a barrier which few have been willing to burst, lest nothing should be found to repay the labour of the adventurers.

Yet it is most true, as Mr. Wheaton says in his preface, that the written monuments of the North “throw a strong and clear light upon the affairs of Europe during the middle ages, and illustrate the formation of the great monarchies now constituting some of its leading states;” and strange would it be, if such records, while they instruct and guide the inquirer who follows a brave and hardy people in their migrations and settlements in other lands—should not, at the same time, have a charm when they tell the domestic story of those who remained at home. If energy of thought and will distinguished those who went forth to encounter the perils of the stormy deep—scarcely less are the same qualities discernible in those who lingered in their native abodes. Mr. Wheaton's eye of observation is occupied with the whole field; and in every part of it he has done for our instruction, far more than any English writer that has preceded him. May he find all encouragement to proceed with his labours! It will be most gratifying to find that the topic so interesting in itself, is felt generally to be interesting; but it is easier to nourish a curiosity that does exist, than to call that curiosity into existence. On England the subject has a very especial claim—for in England, these men, whom the father of northern history calls “the Kingly Scythians,” not only pitched their camps, but raised their castles, and built their palaces—not only looked in as visitors, but fixed themselves as inhabitants;—where they introduced a new language, literature, and social existence, creating one of the great epochs in the history of the human race. To claim thus much for the Northern men, may seem presumption. Let those who would gainsay the statement, assist the inquiry; there is much to be done; the subject has the freshness, the bloom of novelty upon it; and if able pens will give it the literary charm, no doubt an interest will be awakened, whose long long slumbers it is not very easy to excuse or to explain.

It may, indeed, be said, that those who have hitherto wandered into the septentrional regions of literature, have been wanting in

qualities which would have enabled them to bring to us materials likely to attract attention, and invite examination. They have written of an age long vanished, coldly and drily; and have brought from their researches only a few dull fragments, the mere bricks of an ancient temple, of whose pristine form they themselves have had a most dull conception. Among them has been no restorer of the Northern Parthenon. They have talked to us of the dead; and have presented to us their ragged garments, a shield and a sword, a broken lyre, perhaps some mouldering bones; and, above all, the lapidary inscriptions upon the antique tombs. But in their hands, the soul that animated the living men has wholly evaporated; the sparks that sprung up from those "hearts of fire," they have not known how to preserve. A time may yet arrive when, invoked by some master spirit, the ancient Northmen will come forth from their graves, and speak in words of life to us, their children. Our sympathies, hitherto almost barren as respects the past, might then become fruitful both for the past and for the future. There are within us, strings that would respond with exquisite vibration to the touch of a hand nerved with the power of ancient lore. Sir Walter made an experiment in his *Ivanhoe*. That was an appeal to what remains in us of Saxon feelings; and the appeal has been strongly felt—more strongly, perhaps, than any other he has made. Yet even that appeal was wanting in the great essential: *Ivanhoe* is an admirable picture of external manners—a happy, and for the most part, a judicious contrast between Saxon and Norman; but how little does the author portray of the inner man—of the characteristic of thought and expression which naturally grew out of the traditional history of these different races. True, this may not have been his object, nor, where so much has been done is it quite fair to complain that all has not been done. He has enticed, as it were, the reading world, not only of England, but of Europe—aye, and of the other hemisphere, into the domain of popular history. Into the portals that he has unlocked, the kempions of the North will one day enter. The vast theatre over which the ancient Goths walked, will again be opened; and their noble race will, in recreated living semblances, re-appear. Their old saying about "immortality on earth" is not yet proved to be a delusion. The privilege which mythology conferred upon poets alone, of plucking out of Hades that which they love, may be hereafter shared by historians. And for the true poet, a yet higher destiny may be reserved: he will still create, where the historian only records. He, as of old, will divide his soul with the dead; and vibrate from time that was, to time that is to be, careering in light and eloquence.