

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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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.

As a pioneer leading to the ancient Northern lands, as one who has travelled so far, and gathered up so much, and recorded his observations so well, Mr. Wheaton is highly praiseworthy. It is to be hoped, as what he tells us is told so agreeably, that it will excite a strong desire to hear more. We are glad of an opportunity of pointing out some of the topics on which the North is capable of affording instruction to the literary inquirer; and in doing so, we shall make frequent reference to Mr. Wheaton's book, remarking on what appear to us some of its defects and errors—not in a temper of reprehension certainly—but in friendly suggestion.

The ancient literature of the North may be grouped under three distinct heads, mythological, poetical, and historical. Every one of these deserves special notice; and it might be shown in vast detail what a rich harvest each would afford, even to the gleaner. Under each particular head, however, we shall make a few observations, both for the purpose of communicating a somewhat more comprehensive idea of the whole subject than is current among our writers; and of correcting misconceptions into which Mr. Wheaton has sometimes fallen, though, be it said, almost always in company with some authority or other. The principal source of the imperfections of Mr. Wheaton's volume is the want of a correct estimate of the comparative value of different authorities; his affections not unfrequently betray his judgment—that which interests him—that which decorates his story—he receives on slight and insufficient evidence. There is an intimate alliance between benevolence and credulity. Credulous, Mr. Wheaton cannot be called, but he is too willing to be satisfied with imperfect testimony.

For instance, he should have swept away, as unworthy of credence—or at all events he should have spoken more doubtfully on the subject, unless far better support could be found for the theory than any hitherto given—all those tales of the expeditions of the ancient Northmen to America, which are very current indeed among Icelandic historians, but which, if traced to their sources, will be discovered to be without authority. But does not Snorro Sturleson, the father of northern history, does he not record these American expeditions? Not he; though Mr. Wheaton quotes him; the fact being, that the passage which is printed in the Copenhagen edition, from the very faulty and almost worthless Swedish edition, and which records the visits of the Northmen to America (Vinland), is not, we believe, to be found in any existing ancient MS. And the accounts given of the natural productions, natural appearances, and aboriginal inhabitants of the discovered land, prove that they