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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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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

cannot refer to the American continent. The length of the days would, as Mr. Wheaton says, give the latitude of Boston, in the United States; yet the Icelandic chronicles tell us, the land was occupied by a race of squalid and diminutive dwarfs, and produced a quantity of grapes, and that the language of the natives was "something like the Irish tongue." The internal evidence of the story, is enough to show that it is wholly unworthy of credit, and it should have been mentioned to be refuted. The same tale is told in the life of Rollo (Rolf Rögnvaldsen) the progenitor of William the Conqueror; but the Norman historians seem, in his case, to have been especially busy in inventing all sorts of spurious adventures to give *éclat* to the ancestral history of the man who founded in England a dynasty of kings. It is not from any disposition to lessen the interest of the past, that we desire to sweep away the rubbish and the weeds that have gathered round its authentic records. On the contrary, the true chronicles of the Northern-men are pregnant with all the charms of heroic adventure; and rise up in the midst of a mythology, bold, characteristic, and poetical. The eye of inquiry turns with eagerness proportioned to its knowledge, on the literary Aurora Borealis of the middle ages; those northern lights that throw so wondrous an illumination on the night of the past.

A very faint and feeble notion of the Scandinavian mythology can, however, be gathered out of a mere catalogue of names, or out of the Table of Contents of the Edda: even were those contents rightly and minutely described, they would only serve to distract the attention of the inquirer, until he had obtained, by previous study, a tolerably accurate notion of the persons and character of the Scandinavian divinities. To illustrate our knowledge of the mythology of the north, the Edda is highly valuable; but it is not alone sufficient to communicate that knowledge. The list of its contents, given in considerable detail by Mr. Wheaton, is not however correct; it occupies sixteen pages of his volume, and is, for the most part, a translation of lists frequently published. The particulars of some of the chapters, those of the *Hyndlu-Liöd*, and the *Hymisquida*, for example, are incorrectly given. The *Hyndlu-Liöd* does contain some heroic genealogies, but for the most part, only *Völu-Spá*, or mythological illustration, and the *Hymisquida* is no description of a banquet at Ager, but of Thor's visit to Jotun Hymer, and his fishing for Midgaard's serpents, which is a remarkable scene in the Asa-drama.

There are, however, many passages in which Mr. Wheaton has seized the true character of the Scandinavian poetry, and writes as if he were imbued with its spirit.