Nordic-Celtic links in folk literature

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1.

One of the best known monuments of Old Norse-Icelandic literature is the *Codex Regius* of the Poetic Edda, so called because it was formerly preserved in the royal collection of manuscripts in Copenhagen. This vellum codex dates from the thirteenth century and transmits nearly the whole extant corpus of Norse mythological and heroic poetry. It is a potent cultural symbol for Icelanders of today, and was accordingly one of the first treasures to be repatriated when it was decided to give back most of the manuscript books that had been brought to Denmark centuries ago while Iceland was still a Dano-Norwegian dependency (cf. the new and detailed account by Sigrún Davíðsdóttir 1999).

The commonly held view is that the poems of the Codex Regius enshrine the ancient myths of Norse paganism together with those no less ancient epic tales of heroes and heroines that the Vikings to a large extent shared with their Germanic cousins on the continent of Europe. The Danish medievalist and folklorist Svend Grundtvig, for example, writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, was firmly convinced that these myths and legends were part of the cultural baggage that accompanied the Viking colonists when they crossed the North Atlantic to establish settlements in the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and, ultimately, Greenland (see e.g. Grundtvig in Chesnutt and Larsen 1996, 12-13). A generation later the Icelander Finnur Jónsson, who was a professor at the University of Copenhagen, emphasized the Norwegian background of much of the oldest Icelandic literature (Finnur Jónsson 1907), and later still a Norwegian historical linguist, Didrik Arup Seip, argued that the Eddic poems of the Codex Regius had been copied in whole or in part from lost Norwegian originals (Seip 1951).

This culturally monolithic viewpoint has not, however, stood alone

over the years. It was challenged as early as 1878 by the Icelander Guðbrandur Vigfússon, who proposed to find the home of the majority of the Eddic poems in the British Isles. Guðbrandur Vigfússon was an emigré scholar working in Oxford, where he edited Norse texts for the Clarendon Press and the Rolls Series and compiled his famous Icelandic-English dictionary; it is perhaps not unlikely that he was influenced in his thinking by Matthew Arnold's lectures 'On the study of Celtic literature' from 1866, for he states himself that he had conceived his theory of the Eddic poems at the end of the 1860s. After their belated publication Guðbrandur Vigfússon's ideas were developed by the imaginative Norwegian philologist Sophus Bugge, who argued that the Norsemen in the British Isles had come into contact with elements of Christian and Classical literature that they imperfectly understood, and that they supplied raw material to a Norse-Icelandic oral tradition in which such elements were distorted and remodelled. Remarking that Irish literature offers the only European examples of vernacular prose epic antedating the Icelandic saga corpus from the High Middle Ages, Bugge also wrote a speculative study in which he proposed that the Norsemen had already practised the saga art in their period of political and military dominance in Ireland, a period that terminated with the famous battle of Clontarf in the early eleventh century (Bugge 1901-08; cf. Chesnutt 1989, 35-36 and notes).

Guðbrandur Vigfússon's and Bugge's challenges to the Germanic-Norse paternity of great monuments of Old Icelandic culture were not allowed to go unanswered. Their theories, and those of the following generation of scholars whom they inspired, were successively denied by patriotic Icelanders such as Benedikt Gröndal and Finnur Jónsson. Indeed, long after Bugge's death Finnur Jónsson devoted an entire volume of the communications of The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters to a wholesale refutation of the so-called 'Irish hypothesis' (Finnur Jónsson 1921; see also Gröndal 1880/1950). A principal target of Finnur Jónsson's criticism in this volume was the Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, who had made comparative studies of some supposedly mythological material in the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson and produced the provocative result that it was not really indigenous Northern myth but Celtic folklore that had reached Iceland from the West. It was emphasized by von Sydow that Gaelic analogues to the Norse myths are particularly concentrated in the Ossianic tales of Finn mac Cumaill and his Fiana, this being interpreted as a sign that Norse

mythology had assimilated elements from Irish folk tradition rather than from the more aristocratic literary repertoire represented by the Old Irish Ulster cycle (see *inter alia* von Sydow 1920).

A decade ago I discussed the polemic between Finnur Jónsson and von Sydow in some detail (Chesnutt 1989), and there is no need to repeat that discussion. What should, however, be highlighted at this point is that the possibility of a Gaelic impact on Norse-Icelandic tradition, having been sympathetically considered by Germanists and Celticists alike around the turn of the century, was increasingly discounted in Germanist circles after Finnur Jónsson's book of 1921. I can see several factors at work here. One is the emphasis of Icelandic scholars after the foundation of the University of Iceland on the learned European prerequisites of medieval Icelandic written culture, an emphasis that was clearly intended as the contribution of the national philology to preparing Iceland for independent statehood, and to which foreign students of the Eddas and sagas for a long time uncritically deferred (cf. Robinson 1992, 132). Another factor is the estrangement of folkloristics and philology provoked by the insistence of some folklorists, not least von Sydow himself, that oral tradition lives according to laws quite independent of written literature. To the extent that such folklorists convinced themselves and their philological colleagues of the legitimacy of this position, they diminished the scope of active collaboration on problems of source analysis.

It is therefore not altogether surprising that the 'Irish hypothesis' has survived as a concern of folklorists and Celticists rather than philologists and Germanists. In Iceland its only proponent of note in the mid-twentieth century was the literary historian Einar Ól. Sveinsson, who significantly had studied the Icelandic folktale early in his career (cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1929, 1940). In Scandinavia the topic was sporadically treated by folklorists who had been influenced by von Sydow, particularly by Inger M. Boberg of Denmark and Anna Birgitta Rooth of Sweden (cf. Boberg 1934; Rooth 1961). It was only in Norway, however, that any systematic work was done in the period after World War I, and this was due to a special combination of circumstances. One was the emergence in Oslo of a small but highly respected group of Celtic linguists led by Carl J. S. Marstrander: this constituted an academic resource that made it possible for the folklorist Reidar Th. Christiansen to learn Scottish Gaelic and Irish well enough to carry out large-scale studies of Ossianic balladry and the Irish folktale (Christiansen 1931, 1959; *Lochlann* 1958-65). Another circumstance was the intellectual

symbiosis into which these Celticists entered with the Nordic philologists Magnus Olsen and Anne Holtsmark, resulting in outstanding contributions to the interpretation of Old Norse poetry in its Western context. It does not detract from the importance of its achievements that a patriotic driving force can be discerned behind the efforts of this Oslo school, which in that regard was not unlike the Icelandic philologists of the same period. The Norwegian researchers certainly wanted to elucidate both written and oral sources in the context of a former Norwegian cultural presence in the British Isles and North Atlantic, and their programmatic aim is implicit in the name of the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture (*Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning*), an umbrella organization created in Norway in the 1920s. Here linguistics, folklore, and philology were all to be harnessed to the task of historical explanation, an admirable purpose that regrettably seems to have been abandoned as Norwegian humanities (and folkloristics in particular; cf. Chesnutt 1993, 245-46) succumbed to postwar paradigmatic temptations emanating from North America.

In the British Isles itself there has been a relative dearth of independent contributions to the Norse-Celtic discussion in the present century, but the positions adopted by Celticists have their own patriotic overtones. Irish scholars are inclined to sympathize with the line laid down by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Bugge, making little secret of their assumption that the superiority of Celtic over Nordic civilization in the Viking Age would make it more likely for the latter to borrow from the former than vice versa. Scotsmen, on the other hand, are disposed to see significant cultural influences accompanying the Norse settlement of the Highlands and islands, grasping whether consciously or otherwise at the opportunity to differentiate the Scottish Gaelic from the dominant Anglo-Saxon inheritance. The validity of this emphasis on the Viking substratum in Gaelic culture ultimately derives from the authority and opinions of the nineteenth-century German Celticist Heinrich Zimmer; it is a viewpoint that surfaces as early as the work of the Rev. Neil Mackay in the 1890s to continue through George Henderson's book on *The Norse Influence on Celtic Scotland* from 1910, and indeed, wherever Hebridean lore and literature are discussed, the Norse settlement and the independent status of the Kingdom of the Isles until the end of the Middle Ages is liable to be adduced as a contextual factor (see e.g. Zimmer 1888; Mackay 1897; Henderson 1910; Matheson 1938, xlii). The Oslo Celticists have provided additional ammunition over the years

with their studies of the Norse impact on Hebridean toponymy and phonology (e.g. Oftedal 1964, a modest article with particularly far-reaching historical implications).

2.

The majority of writers who have dealt with the similarities between early Gaelic and Norse tradition treat the Viking Age as the period of productive interaction *par excellence*. On this view, all intercultural exchanges of significance would have taken place by the beginning of the eleventh century at the latest. In Iceland, where genetic studies have estimated the Celtic element in the early population at anything between about 15 and 40 per cent (cf. Gísli Sigurðsson 1988, 40), the preferred interpretation is that a significant proportion of settlers in the new country made their way there via the Celtic West, intermarrying en route and taking their (bilingual) offspring and slaves with them when they eventually remigrated. Inspired by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and the Cambridge Celticist Nora K. Chadwick (see e.g. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1959, 1975a; Chadwick 1953-57), the Icelander Gísli Sigurðsson and the Englishman Peter Robinson have both used the Gaelic substratum in the settler population to explain the survival of great numbers of typically Celtic motifs in the mythical-heroic sagas. This is a genre that they envisage as emerging in writing from a long period of oral gestation among Icelanders of partly Gaelic descent (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988, 48-51; Robinson 1992, 130-31). The construction circumvents at least one of the obvious objections to the 'Irish hypothesis' in its older form, for it has always seemed doubtful how much peaceful intercourse could be assumed between Celt and Viking in the British Isles during the turbulent ninth and tenth centuries. Nor does the paucity of Norse loanwords in Old Irish and of Old Irish loanwords in Norse-Icelandic do anything to encourage a picture of intense contact – a fact that was stressed by the Scottish philologist William A. Craigie at an early stage in the debate (Craigie 1894, 1897), and again seized upon by Finnur Jónsson in the polemic volume of 1921 already referred to.

Faced with these last-mentioned difficulties, some commentators have reverted to a variant of the theory that the Brothers Grimm formulated long ago in order to account for parallels of motif and plot in the internationally distributed genre of the folktale. Where the Grimms explained such parallels as the common Indo-European inheritance of the

various peoples among whom the tales were found, correspondences between Celtic and Norse tradition have sometimes been understood as survivals from a time prior to the expansion of the Celtic and Germanic peoples beyond the limits of the European continent. This model – adumbrated already in a paper by von Sydow from the 1930s, when the Swedish folklorist had abandoned diffusionism in favour of his personal theory of folktale ecotypes – was canvassed after World War II by the Dutchman Jan de Vries, who specifically identified the La Tène culture as a point of common origin (de Vries 1953; cf. von Sydow 1934, 382-84). It remains not unpopular today and has been invoked very recently by the Canadian William Sayers in a comparative study of the Norse god Heimdallr (Sayers 1993).

In my opinion all these studies approach the problem from the wrong historical perspective. As I pointed out many years ago, the assimilation of the Norse colonists to the Gaelic population in Ireland and the Western Isles is a process that accelerated after, not before, the battle of Clontarf. That battle signalled the collapse of Norse imperialism in the West and the beginning of a period of more peaceful coexistence. The first known occurrence of a Norse name in an Irish family is in an entry in the Irish annals for 1031. The Killaloe Cross in the west of Ireland, with its eloquent testimony to bilingualism in the form of a double inscription in ogham and runes, is an eleventh-century monument. And the onomastic evidence as interpreted by Magne Oftedal (in the article from 1964 referred to above) would seem to show that the major influx of Norse loanwords into the Scottish Gaelic dialects of the Hebrides began in the eleventh century. This brings us, not by coincidence as I see it, into the period to which many of the Eddic poems must be assigned, to the oldest extant records of early Irish literature and the growth of the Ossianic cycle, and to the late flowering of skaldic art in what archaeologists now call the Late Norse period in Northern Scotland, a period symbolized by the promulgation of the cult of St Magnus in Orkney and the building of Kirkwall Cathedral (for my earlier exposition and detailed documentation see Chesnutt 1968).

The earldom of Orkney – embracing not only Orkney itself but also Shetland and the adjacent, predominantly Gaelic-speaking, areas of the Scottish mainland – in fact occupies a pivotal position when we try to elucidate the exchanges of narrative lore between Norseman and Gael in historical times. A short presentation of the most important textual evidence may be appropriate at this point:

1. The account of the battle of Clontarf in *Brennu-Njáls saga* mentions a rain of blood and other extraordinary portents that are acknowledged to be typically Celtic motifs. It also reports the supernatural phenomena experienced on the day of the battle by men all over the Viking world, from Iceland and the Hebrides to Orkney, Caithness, and the Faroe Islands. In the two last-mentioned places women had been sighted weaving on a ghastly loom of fate and chanting a poem, the so-called *Darraðarljóð*, that the saga purports to be directly quoting. As Anne Holtsmark has shown, the grotesque overall conception of this poem is essentially Celtic though it is clad in Norse linguistic dress, and she unequivocally locates it in the hybrid cultural environment of the Orkney earldom (Holtsmark 1939; cf. Goedheer 1938, 74-87). That may not in fact be the poem's original home, for internal evidence indicates that it treats of a quite different battle, but it remains overwhelmingly probable that the text reached Iceland from Orkney. It may be added as a curiosity that there is a report in Sir Walter Scott's *The Pirate* from which it might be inferred that a form of the *Darraðarljóð* was being recited in Orkney as late as the end of the eighteenth century (cf. Poole 1993; Helgi Guðmundsson 1997, 250-51).
2. According to Magnus Olsen, the *Darraðarljóð* exerted influence on *Krákumál*, a heroic skaldic poem cast in the form of a death-lay for the legendary hero Ragnarr loðbrók (whose wife Áslaug was also known as Kráka, i.e. 'scald-crow', whence the title). Since the poem is in reality a list of battles, Olsen interpreted its title as a translation loan from Irish *badb-scél*, 'a scald-crow story'; its creator would have been a bilingual Norseman from the West (Olsen 1935). The general thrust of this interpretation has been accepted by all subsequent authorities of note, including Jan de Vries and Roberta Frank (cf. Heinrichs 1993).
3. It is impossible to date *Darraðarljóð* by reference to the battle with which it is ostensibly connected, but Olsen assigned its derivative, *Krákumál*, to the second half of the twelfth century. A little older, because reliably attributed to Earl Rögnvaldr Kali of Orkney and the Icelandic collaborator with whom he composed it at some time in the early 1140s, is the metrical tour de force *Háttalykill* ('key of metres'), containing in one of its strophes an allusion to the legendary battle of the Hjaðningar, the so-called *Everlasting Fight* that Snorri Sturluson subsequently localized at Hoy in Orkney. As I demonstrated in 1968, the version of this story in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* reproduces a whole cluster of motifs already present in *Cath Maige*

Turedh ('The Second Battle of Moytura'), a medieval Irish text that is our earliest witness to the motif of the *Everlasting Fight* – or, as Bo Almqvist prefers to call it, the *Resuscitating Hag* – in Gaelic tradition, where the motif in question has remained hugely productive until modern times (Chesnutt 1968, 129-32; Almqvist 1978-81/1991, 13-17). In Iceland the motif recurs outside *Háttalykill* and *Skáldskaparmál* and it also turns up, doubtless under Icelandic literary influence, in the Faroese *Høgna táttur* (cf. Djurhuus and Matras 1951-63, nos. 1A III st. 135, 1Ba III st. 59, etc.); but it is not, I think, known in the Scandinavian homelands except from Saxo Grammaticus, who in this case as so often elsewhere must have been quoting an Icelandic informant. It had been forgotten in the Northern Isles by the time that the ballad of *Hildina*, a contaminated remnant of the Hjaðningar tradition, was recorded in Shetland in the eighteenth century (cf. Hægstad 1900).

4. Finally, from the early thirteenth century we have the ironic proverb-poem *Málsháttakvæði*, often attributed to the Orcadian bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson. This text alludes to the unhappy fate of a certain love-sick Sörli who pitted himself futilely against the sea and burst. The traditional background of the reference was elucidated in 1924 by Reidar Th. Christiansen, pursuing an astute observation made as early as 1889 by Joseph Anderson and connecting the Norse text with the Scottish Gaelic ballad of *Seurlus an Dobhair*, a young prince of Lochlann (or 'modest Bergen', as the ballad specifies) who was enchanted while trespassing on Fenian territory. Pursuing the supernatural young woman who was the object of his desire, the Gaelic Seurlus, like his Norse namesake, rushed into the water from which he was thrown back on shore and burst. The outline if not the details of the story must therefore have been fixed by about the year 1200, in spite of the fact that the Gaelic ballad only survives in manuscripts from the second half of the eighteenth century (Anderson 1889-90; Christiansen 1924, 52-55; Christiansen 1931, 413-16; a different interpretation of the evidence is offered by Sjœstedt 1931, 376).

3.

The role of Orkney as mediator of such cultural hybrids has been elaborated upon by the Swedish folklorist Almqvist, who however makes the reservation that traditions such as that of the *Everlasting Fight/Re-*

suscitating Hag might well be considerably older than the Middle Irish saga redaction on which I based the reasoning in my article of 1968 (cf. Almqvist 1978-81/1991, 17). While not denying this possibility in theory, I find it more satisfactory in practice to attempt a chronological stratification proceeding from the literary witnesses of more or less fixed date. The four key examples presented above all belong to the Late Norse period, and so do several of the Eddic poems whose Western provenance can scarcely be doubted, even if an explicitly Orcadian connection cannot be proved. These poems include *Rígsþula*, *Hymiskviða*, *Lokasenna*, and the very late *Svipdagsmál* (see Young 1933, Chesnutt 1989, Hemmingsen 1999, and Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1975b respectively). In Snorri's *Prose Edda* we find, in addition to the Orcadian legend of the *Everlasting Fight*, the tale of the god Þórr and his expedition to the dwelling of the giant Útgarða-Loki. Studies initiated by von Sydow (1910) and continued by Rosemary Power (1985) and myself (Chesnutt 1989, where additional references are provided) have led me to the conclusion that Snorri had access to a body of Western tradition from the late Viking Age where Celtic elements were infused into the mythology of this favourite god. The fact that an Ossianic story-pattern attested in the late medieval Irish *Feis tíghe Chonáin* occupied a central place in this syncretistic process speaks strongly in favour of locating it in the Late Norse period, for this (as already mentioned) is the time at which the Ossianic repertory began to occupy a significant place in Irish storytelling (cf. Murphy 1961).

Space does not permit an exhaustive survey of the traces of Celtic influence on Snorri Sturluson's mythography, but attention may be drawn to some new work done by the Danish scholar Morten Warmind, briefly reported in print in a resumé of his Copenhagen dissertation entitled 'From Severed Heads to Valkyries' (Warmind 1999). Turning to other Old Icelandic texts traditionally attributed to Snorri, we find several popular anecdotes for which analogues in Gaelic folklore have been produced by Bo Almqvist in a series of articles, beginning in the 1960s with a treatment of the story of *The Uglier Foot* and continuing in the 1990s with the tales about *The Hero's Youthful Wish* and *The Unfair Race* (Almqvist 1966/1991, 1994a, and 1997, 241-46 respectively). Almqvist has also discussed Gaelic analogues to sagas not associated with Snorri and to various Norse-Icelandic migratory legends and belief stories (see Almqvist 1991, 1994b, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). Other recently published contributions in this area are the presentations by John Shaw and myself at a symposium held in Dublin in 1996 (Shaw 1999, 312-15;

Chesnutt 1999, supplemented by Chesnutt 2000). My contribution dealt with the ancient and widely diffused tale of *The Three Laughs*, and I shall briefly recapitulate the argument here as it highlights some important methodological issues.

The tale of *The Three Laughs* is of ultimately Oriental origin and appears in Western Europe in the twelfth century, when it is attached by Geoffrey of Monmouth to the figure of the prophet Merlin. The tale resurfaces in Iceland in the late medieval *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, in a seventeenth-century florilegium, and in several later variants of which two were printed in Jón Árnason's nineteenth-century collection of folklore. Here Merlin's role is assumed by a merman caught in a mortal's fishing nets. In modern Irish folklore the story is typically fused with that of the mermaid bride; that its presence in Iceland is due to the mediation of Gaelic tradition is suggested by the common transformation of the prophet into a creature of the sea, and confirmed by a medieval Irish saga and by Scottish Gaelic oral variants from the islands of Barra and Tiree in which the motif configuration of the twelfth-century Welsh text is remarkably preserved. The configuration in question is unknown on the Scandinavian mainland.

We are confronted here with a situation similar to that obtaining in the case of Snorri's story of Útgarða-Loki, where the Gaelic comparative material ranges in date from the Late Middle Ages to the nineteenth or even the twentieth century. The source chronology is in other words comparable to that described earlier for the story of the lovesick Sörli, with an interval of half a millennium separating our folklore texts from their medieval literary analogues. Understandable scepticism has been expressed about the ability of folk narratives to survive for such a protracted period in oral tradition, and the reconstructions practised by folklorists such as Christiansen, Almqvist, and myself have been criticized for accepting too many blank patches, as it were, on the spatial and temporal distribution map (see e.g. Kellogg 1990-93, 524). These doubts have to a large extent been provoked by folklorists themselves, in so far as the theoretical work of the twentieth century has emphasized the instability rather than the stability of oral tradition. For example, my late colleague Bengt Holbek of the University of Copenhagen expressed strong reservations about the objective validity of the international folktale typology of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, stating that the Danish records of oral prose tradition rather gave the impression of kaleidoscopic variation of motifs and episodes (Holbek 1965). He also went on record as saying that a folktale pro-

bably could not be remembered over long periods of time (Holbek 1987, 256). In the field of folksong research a rather similar trend has been visible, especially since the publication of the Scotsman David Buchan's influential book on *The Ballad and the Folk*; inspired by Parry and Lord's studies of the Homeric formula, Buchan and like-minded folklorists have played down the stability of the song text in tradition in favour of spontaneous re-creation in performance (see especially Buchan 1972).

I shall not attempt to camouflage the fact that I too thought very much in these terms until confronted with the statements of East European folklorists like Walter Anderson and Isidor Levin, who insist that the oral transmission process is understood by tradition bearers themselves as essentially reproductive (see for example Levin's description of conditions in Tadzhikistan as reported in Beyer and Chesnutt 1997, 2-3). Nor should we by any means underestimate the capacity of illiterate tradition bearers for verbatim memorization. Elsewhere I have illustrated this capacity with the example of the famous monoglot Irish storyteller Seán Ó Conaill, whose repertoire was collected and published by Séamus Ó Duilearga, founder of the Irish Folklore Commission. Ó Duilearga testified that Séan Ó Conaill was able to repeat the text of the Irish romance of *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* almost word for word after having had it read to him from a published edition nearly sixty years previously (cf. Chesnutt 1997). The phenomenon was typical in Ireland: in the introduction to the very same edition as was read aloud to Seán Ó Conaill, Standish Hayes O'Grady reported that he had heard a man, who for his own part knew neither manuscript nor printed versions, 'relate at the fireside the death of the sons of Uisneach without omitting one adventure, and in great part retaining the very words of the written versions'. The explanation is to be found in the prevalence of reading aloud by hedge schoolmasters to groups assembled for collective tasks or, especially, for wakes (Murphy 1961, 60; cf. Bruford 1969, 55-61). A comparable practice is well attested for Iceland in the same period; the evidence was collected many years ago by the Icelander Hermann Pálsson of the University of Edinburgh (Hermann Pálsson 1962).

The notion of a hermetically sealed oral culture is a relic of Romanticism that has persisted embarrassingly in folkloristics. We can now see that, as far as Western Europe is concerned, the fate of oral literature has been interwoven with that of written literature at least since the introduction of printing, or in the Gaelic and Icelandic contexts at least

since paper manufacturing made it possible to multiply manuscript books at relatively low cost. As a reassurance to those who doubt the viability of complex narrative folklore surviving over many centuries 'on the lips of the people' we can point to the parallel manuscript tradition that both reflected and supported the art of oral recitation. As far as the Ossianic lore of Ireland and Gaelic Scotland is concerned, we know that the popular ballads were being anthologized by the beginning of the sixteenth century when Sir James MacGregor, Dean of Lismore in Argyllshire, and his brother Duncan put together the famous manuscript bearing the Dean's name. The related prose tales were also being written down by this time and manuscripts of them proliferate up to the nineteenth century. The late Alan Bruford of the School of Scottish Studies greatly advanced the state of our knowledge about the prose tales with his book *Gaelic Folk-Tales and Mediæval Romances* (Bruford 1969), in which he demonstrated that the oral versions collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to a large extent could be treated as derivatives of the manuscript tradition. The majority of Celtic and folklore scholars of the time were not ready to reap the full benefit of Bruford's insights; we should note, however, that his study was unhesitatingly included in the journal *Béaloideas* by the editor, Séamus Ó Duilearga, who practised a very special kind of national-romantic rhetoric when describing his informants, but was fully aware of the relevance, whether direct or indirect, of written literature to the folk narrative tradition, as the annotations to his many publications of Irish folklore amply show (see the bibliography in Wall 1975).

4.

It is accordingly not so speculative as some philologists think, nor as disrespectful of the creativity of the people as some folklorists think, to analyse medieval written and modern oral versions of related stories in stemmatic terms. To be sure, the oral variants in our archives exhibit many instances of arbitrary addition and subtraction, motif substitution, and contamination of redactions or even types; but where stable secondary representations of an older pattern appear in the material, as in the case of the substitution of a maritime creature for the prophet in the story of *The Three Laughs*, and where the observed geographical distribution stands in a coherent relationship to known historical facts, it is perfectly legitimate to conclude that we are in the presence of a region-

ally distinctive redaction – in this case a Gaelic-Norse subtype of the story dating from the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the absolute inalterability of the written tradition should not be taken for granted either. Anyone who has worked with Gaelic or Icelandic manuscripts of romantic tales will testify that the scribes are wont to depart from their copy text at any time, introducing changes due to their recollection of other versions they have heard or seen. There is not such a great difference between literary and oral stemmatics as is believed by those who have practised only one of them (or neither).

Folkloristics, uncertain of its position in the middle ground between anthropology and literature (see e.g. Zumwalt 1988), has been subject throughout its history to abrupt shifts of paradigm. In the last couple of decades there have been tendencies on the one hand simply to abandon the study of oral literature in its historical perspective, and on the other hand to adopt the reductionist view that all oral tradition is derived from written models. The second trend is well represented in an entertaining, erudite, but capricious book from 1993 by the German scholar Rudolf Schenda, reviving a point of view that had been urged as early as the beginning of the 1930s by the Austrian-born journalist and literary historian Albert Wesselski (cf. Schenda 1993; Wesselski 1931). It is a predictable and necessary reaction to the romantic picture of the bookless folk to which I have alluded, but it presses the subjugation of oral to written tradition too hard. We can be quite certain that the tales of the Brothers Grimm in Germany or of Asbjørnsen and Moe in Norway have exerted normative influence on the oral storytelling of the nineteenth century, and that the manuscripts of Ossianic lore in Ireland and Scotland contributed to the retention in oral contexts of the ancient stories that are the focus of this article; it is not, however, reasonable wholly to deny the existence of an autonomous oral tradition, and the apparent incompatibility of Schenda's position with that of folklorists such as Holbek is perhaps due to their generalizing from bodies of material that are not really fully comparable. The wonder tales or *Märchen* studied by Holbek in fact constitute a discrete category within oral prose narrative; there is a certain tendency for them to mutate into regional subtypes (ecotypes), but we may allow that their transmission is generally not so stable as that of the romantic tales and anecdotes that dominate the horizon in discussions of Norse-Celtic folklore contacts. This explains, I think, the rather inconclusive results of a synthesis published at the end of his career by Reidar Th. Christiansen, who had indeed identified a few North Atlantic *Märchen* ecotypes in the course of his com-

parative studies, but not sufficient to postulate a distinctive Norse-Celtic input to this segment of the folktale repertoire. It may be mentioned for the record that the *Märchen* in question include not only well-known tales of magic such as AT 313 *The Girl as Helper in the Hero's Flight* (cf. Jason and Medea) and AT 327 *The Children and the Ogre* (cf. Hansel and Gretel), but also tales of more limited distribution such as AT 471 *The Bridge to the Other World* (The Seven Foals) and AT 726 *The Oldest on the Farm* (see Christiansen 1924, 50 and 1927-28; Christiansen 1959; Almqvist 1961).

What I have argued here is the case for a not insubstantial reception in medieval Iceland of narrative materials deriving from the hybrid cultural environment of the Celtic West in the Late Norse period. The principal vehicle of this reception would appear to have been Eddic and skaldic poetry in recited or written form, and to the extent that twelfth-century Orkney acted as a bridgehead the role of written documents should not be underestimated (cf. Helgi Guðmundsson 1997, ch. VIII). Cultural interaction with the West declined progressively in the later Middle Ages as the Norwegian and Dano-Norwegian monarchies ceded more and more of their territory and political authority to Scotland. It is therefore only to be expected that these originally Norse-Celtic materials have lived on in Iceland, Scotland, and Ireland in forms determined by the respective national traditions.

References

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