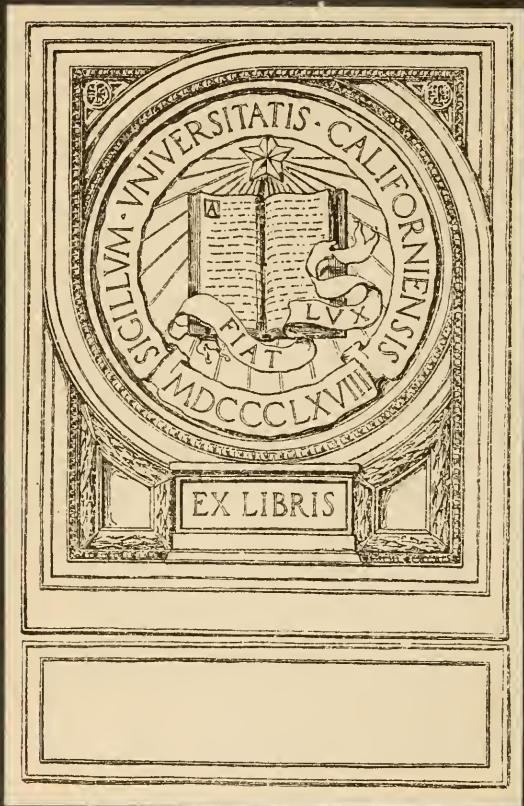


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THE ROMANES LECTURE

1906

*Sturla the Historian*

BY

WILLIAM PATON KER, M.A.

FELLOW OF ALL SOULS

DELIVERED

*IN THE SCHOOLS, OXFORD*

*NOVEMBER 24, 1906*

OXFORD

AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

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## STURLA THE HISTORIAN

IT is natural, when the task one has to perform carries along with it so much honour and so much responsibility, to begin with a sentence of apology and deprecation. Words of that sort are not always insincere, but there is seldom much good in them. I have been asked by the University of Oxford to give the Romanes Lecture, and in acknowledgement I will take and apply to my own case the words of Dr. Johnson: 'It was not for me to bandy civilities with my sovereign'.

You will allow me to speak of Lord Curzon, who had promised to give the Romanes Lecture for this year; and you will readily understand that I wish to say only what may be of good omen: to remember some of the associations of Balliol and All Souls, and to look forward to the time when Lord Curzon will come to Oxford and fulfil his undertaking. There is no place in the world, I believe, that sends him more sincere good wishes, or takes a deeper interest in his success and in his fame.

I have no need to defend my choice of a subject; it is already authorized; the University has published the *Sturlunga Saga*, edited by Gudbrand Vigfússon, with the help, as he tells us in his preface, of his friend York Powell of Christ Church. This book contains among other things the Icelandic memoirs of Sturla the historian; Sturla's Norwegian history, the life of King Hacon, with the same editor, has been printed by the Master of the Rolls. The study of Icelandic began long ago in Oxford; an Icelandic grammar was printed



here in 1689 for Dr. George Hickes, and afterwards included in his magnificent *Thesaurus*.

The history of Iceland often reads like a contradiction and refutation of a number of historical prejudices. It would require only a very slight touch of fancy or of travesty to make it into a kind of Utopian romance, with ideas something like those of William Godwin, or of Shelley. The Norwegian gentry who went out and settled in Iceland were driven there by their love of freedom, their objection to the new monarchy of Harald Fairhair. They did not want any government; they took an entirely new land and made their homes there, and a commonwealth of their own. No man had lived before in Iceland except the few Irish hermits who had wandered there after the fashion of St. Brandan; they soon disappeared, and their presence does nothing to impair the solitude, the utterly natural condition of Iceland when the Norwegians first took it. The colony of Iceland, further, was almost as free from institutions and constraint, in its early days, as any revolutionary philosopher could desire. The king had been left behind in the old country; there was no tribal system, no priestly order, nothing to complicate the business of life. No abstract thinking, no political platforms, no very troublesome religion interfered with the plain positive facts. The Icelanders at first had little to think about except their houses and families; they were not afraid of their gods, and had no exacting ceremonies. It is one kind of an ideal. It is true that this Godwinian republic began rather early to fall away from simplicity; perfect pure anarchy is too good for this world, and is soon corrupted. The Icelanders, before long, began to play the social contract, first of all by the voluntary agreement of neighbours under the presidency of the



chief man of their country-side, then by an assembly of the whole island and the introduction of law. The paradoxes of the Icelandic constitution have been explained by Mr. Bryce in one of his lectures; they might be summed up very roughly, as 'all law and no government.' *Apud illos non est rex nisi tantum lex.*<sup>1</sup> Their very careful law took them a long way from pure anarchy; but there never was any political power to enforce the law. The local courts and the national assembly determined what was right, but there was no compulsion in the country, except public opinion and private revenge.

This commonwealth, founded in the days of Harald Fairhair and of Alfred the Great, is a kind of embodiment of the *Germania* of Tacitus, with the Germanic essence, so to speak, still further refined; the independence, the spirit of honour, the positive, worldly, un-mystical character, which seems to be capable of all heroism, except that of the visionary martyr.

When the Cardinal William came to Norway in the reign of King Hacon and got to know about the Icelanders, he was scandalized at their freedom, and sent a message to them to ask why they could not come in and be governed by a king, like the rest of the world. It is true enough that their ideas and ways were not those of the thirteenth century, and that they have the example of all Christendom against them.

Nevertheless, the Icelandic State in its pride, its seclusion, its opposition to the common way of the world, is a creation as miraculous as the contemporary achievements of the Northern race at the other end of the scale—I mean the political work of the Normans in the new-fashioned kingdom of England.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Maurer, *Island*, from a gloss in Adam of Bremen.

The intellectual fortunes of Iceland are as strange as its social history. There is the same mixture of very old Teutonic ideas with others that seem to have escaped the Middle Ages altogether, or at any rate to be more at home in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Nowhere is this more manifest than in the histories of Iceland, the prose narrative literature of the republic, in which Sturla, son of Thord, is one of the last and one of the most eminent names. Icelandic prose of the great age is in contradiction to a number of things that are commonly believed and reported about medieval literature : such as, that it is quaint, absurd, superstitious, childish, without perspective. For example : the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson is a thirteenth-century prose book that has very little to learn from any renaissance or revival of learning. The tone of it, in its treatment of the stories of the gods, is not what is generally supposed to be medieval ; it is more like what one expects from the eighteenth century, amused, ironical, humorous. At the same time Snorri is generous to the old gods and thoroughly interested in their adventures. Peacock, in his dealing with Welsh antiquities, is the modern author who is most like Snorri in this respect, in this curious combination of levity and romance, so unlike the medieval earnestness on the one hand, the medieval farce on the other.

The great work of the Icelanders is to be found in their family histories ; those to which the name *Saga* is commonly given as if by some special right ; the stories of *Njal*, of *Egil Skallagrimsson* and other famous men of the early days. These books leave the ordinary critical formulas fluttering helplessly about them. They seem to accomplish what for several generations, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was one of the

ideals of literary men, the heroic narrative in prose, the prose epic. For this was once a favourite ambition, one of the abstract ideas that tempted many writers, along with the perfect form of Tragedy and the pattern of an Epic Poem. Cervantes in *Don Quixote* has given one of the best descriptions of this ideal by the mouth of the Canon of Toledo, explaining what might be made of prose romances if they were taken up by the right kind of author. The prose story, says the Canon, offers a large free field for all kinds of adventures, descriptions, and characters, for the craft of Ulysses, the valour of Achilles, the misfortunes of Hector, and so on. A web woven of many various strands—that shall be the new kind of romance ; a story written without exaggeration of style, and drawn truly ; using the freedom of prose narrative so as to include among other things both tragedy and comedy, ‘with all those parts that are included in the most delightful and pleasant sciences of poetry and oratory ; for the epic may be written not less in prose than in verse’. Something of what is here outlined had been accomplished long before in the Icelandic Sagas—the wisdom of Njal, the valour of Gunnar and Skarphedin, the misfortunes of Grettir the Strong. Those Northern books are written sometimes with a spirit like that of Cervantes himself, with dialogue unmatched except in the great novelists.

This rich imaginative history had its source in real life. Njal and Egil and their adventures were kept in traditional memory, their stories were the property of no one in particular, handed down from one age to another till the time came for them to be put into shape and written out in their present form. Icelandic prose is very near to the spoken language ; it is rich in idiom and in conversation, and the artistic form given

to it by writing men seems to follow easily from the natural growth of the spoken traditional tale.

By the early part of the thirteenth century most of the old stories had been written; and not only the Icelandic Sagas of the heroic age, but also the lives of the kings of Norway, which are best known in the work of Snorri, commonly called *Heimskringla*. In these *Kings' Lives* the largest space had been given to the two Olafs, Tryggvason and Haraldsson (St. Olaf); so that both for Iceland and Norway the tenth and early eleventh century—two hundred years before the time of Snorri—were better represented in literature than the later periods. But something had been done to bring down the memoirs of Iceland and the history of Norway to living memory, and it is here that Sturla the historian comes in, to complete the task.

He belonged to one of the great families of Iceland in the thirteenth century, the house of the Sturlungs, named from his grandfather, Sturla, of Hvamm. This family was one of the most ambitious, and did as much as any to spoil the old balance of the Commonwealth by 'struggling for life' in a reckless, arrogant, lawless way. The strange thing about them is that, with all their dangerous, showy qualities, they produced some of the finest literature: 'out of the eater came forth meat'. Snorri, son of Sturla, was for a long time one of the most persevering and successful capitalists of that time, making his fortune, greedily, by all available means; he is also great in Icelandic prose literature on account of his *Edda* and his *Kings' Lives*. His brother, Thord, had two sons, who were distinguished literary men: our Sturla the historian, who was also a poet, and Olaf the poet, who was also a philologist. Even the fighting men of the family might be fond of books: Sturla notes a fact

of this sort about his cousin and namesake, Sturla Sighvatsson,<sup>1</sup> who was in practical life the perfection of that unscrupulous, light-hearted vanity which made all the sorrows of Iceland in those years.

'The Sturlung Age' is a name commonly given to the period described in the *Sturlunga Saga*—roughly, the first half of the thirteenth century, the time of the great faction fights in which the liberties of Iceland went under. The *Sturlunga Saga*, as we have it, is a composite work; only part of it (and scholars are not agreed how much of it) is the work of Sturla, son of Thord. But he, the grandson of the founder of the house, wrote at any rate a large part of the history; there is no doubt of that, so that for this time there exists not only a contemporary chronicle, but the memoirs of one who was most intimately concerned, himself one of the persons in the drama.

And his work is the completion of Icelandic prose. It is hardly a metaphor to say that it is the mind of Iceland, expressing itself in the best way at the end of the old Icelandic life. Sturla's work is the Icelandic habit of thought and vision applied to the writer's own experience, whereas in the heroic Sagas it had dealt with things of a former age.

The beauty of it in both cases is its impartiality. But this is naturally more remarkable and surprising in the later than the earlier history. Sturla had been in the thick of it all himself, in many moss-trooping raids and forays; he had seen his kinsmen cut down; he had been driven to make terms with their chief enemy; it was his own daughter who was snatched out of the fire of

<sup>1</sup> 'He (Sturla Sighvatsson) was much at Reykholt with Snorri, and made it his business to have copies written of the histories which Snorri composed' (*Sturlunga Saga*, vol. i, p. 299).

Flugumýri, where her young bridegroom lost his life. But there is nothing in his story to show that he takes a side. He follows the custom of the old Sagas, which is, to let the characters alone and never allow the showman to come forward with his explanations and opinions. This Icelandic habit is not dullness or want of sense. It is a kind of imagination, and it is shown in their way of narrating things so as to get the most vivid effect. You see a boat putting out from an island, or a party of men riding along the shore; you do not know whether they are friends or enemies until you go to find out. Two people of importance are talking business; a messenger comes to one of them and speaks with him apart; then he turns to his business again and you find that there is a change of some sort; the messenger has told him something of interest, and you see this in his face and his conduct before you get it explained. The vague fact growing clearer, that is the Icelandic rule of story-telling, the invariable plan; it would be a mannerism, if it were not so much alive. Mannerisms are lazy things, dodges for getting along easily without thought; but this Icelandic form is exacting and not easy; the right use of it means that the author is awake and interested.

It is impossible here to give any proper account of Sturla's Icelandic memoirs, and I shall not quote from his chronicle of slaughter and house-burnings. But there are other passages in his work besides those 'high facinorous things', as the Elizabethan poet might have called them; there are intervals of comedy.

There is a scene between Sighvat and his son, Sturla, which is very pleasant to think about; the father reading the son's character, playing on his vanity, and drawing him on gradually to a comic trap. The young man had



just come back in high spirits from a successful expedition, where he had beaten the other side. His father says to him: 'You have had a fight, I hear'. 'So we made out', says the son. 'It was a short squall', says Sighvat. 'Not so short, either'. 'You will be wanting to set up a new house somewhere', says Sighvat, 'and I have been thinking what will be good enough for you'. And then he goes on scheming great things for his son, who doesn't see the danger, but takes it all as his due, as if his father were showing a very proper appreciation of his merits. Sighvat plans out the household for him: 'You will want a bailiff and a housekeeper; a shepherd; a man to attend to the horses; another for the boats and for trading'. In each case he makes suggestions of the proper people to take office; the mischief being that he names people rather too good for the situation, beginning fairly low down and gradually rising to more and more dignified names, till it dawns upon his son that he is being chaffed. At last Sighvat proposes for his son's servants two of the greatest personages in the island; and the glorious young man flings out of the room in a passion. His father stays behind, well content.

All this was repeated and gave great amusement. The story was told to Loft, the Bishop's son, who was immensely pleased with Sighvat's wit, and particularly with the way in which he had allotted the parts in his imaginary housekeeping; till he found that he himself had been put down for the charge of the horses. Then his language was strong: 'Devil take their fleering and jeering! They will find soon that people have other things to do besides currying their favour!'

It is in this sort of domestic comedy that the Icelandic stories are most different from other medieval books.

In the year 1262 came the submission of Iceland to



Norway, 'the end of an auld sang'. In 1263 Sturla was ruined, to all appearances. He had been dragged into trouble by an ill-conditioned son of his, and was beaten by his adversary, Hrafn Oddsson, and had to leave Iceland. He resolved to go to Norway to try for the favour of the king. Hacon by this time had set out on his great expedition to Scotland, but the young King Magnus, who had been already crowned, was at home with his queen, the Danish lady Ingiborg. This was the beginning of Sturla's Norwegian historical work, and this is the story of his visit to King Magnus:—

#### STURLA AND KING MAGNUS.

Sturla sailed for Norway from Eyre [in the South of Iceland]; he had scarcely any supplies with him. They had a good voyage and took the land at Bergen; Magnus the king was there; as also was Gaut of Mel. Sturla went at once to find Gaut. Gaut was pleased and said: 'Art thou Sturla the Icelander?' 'That is so', said Sturla. Gaut said, 'You are welcome at my table like the other Sturlungs'. 'No house would be better for me, as far as I can see', said Sturla. So he went to stay with Gaut and told him clearly the whole story of his coming to Norway; and Gaut, on the other hand, told him how he had been evil spoken of with Magnus the king, and still more with Hacon. A little after Gaut and Sturla went to King Magnus. Gaut paid his respects to the king, and he took it well; Sturla did the same, but he made no answer. He said: 'Tell me, Gaut, who is this man that goes along with you?' Gaut said: 'This man is Sturla, Thord's son, the poet, and he is come to throw himself on your grace; and I think him, Sir, to be a wise man'. The king said: 'We think of him that he would not have come here of his own accord;

he must put it to the proof when he meets my father'. Gaut said: 'Even so, for I think he has poems to offer to you and your father'. 'It is not likely that I will have him put to death', said King Magnus, 'but he shall not come into my service'. Then they went away, and when they came to their lodging Gaut said to Sturla: 'The king seemed very slow to take you up, but he has put you out of danger; there must have been much evil-speaking against you'. Sturla says: 'I have no doubt of that, nay, I seem to make out clearly that Hrafn has been spreading slanders; all kinds of things were mixed up together in Iceland, small and great, truth and lies'.

The next day Gaut went down to the king's house. When he came back and met Sturla he said: 'Now you are provided for, since the king wishes you to come with him when he sails for the South'. Sturla answered: 'Shall not the king decide? But I have no great mind to go from here'.

Then he got ready to sail away with the king, and his name was put on the list. He went on board before many men had come; he had a sleeping bag and a travelling chest, and took his place on the fore-deck. A little later the king came on to the quay, and a company of men with him. Sturla rose and bowed, and bade the king 'hail', but the king answered nothing, and went aft along the ship to the quarter-deck. They sailed that day to go south along the coast. But in the evening when men unpacked their provisions Sturla sat still, and no one invited him to mess. Then a servant of the king's came and asked Sturla if he had any meat and drink. Sturla said 'No'. Then the king's servant went to the king and spoke with him, out of hearing: and then went forward to Sturla and said: 'You shall go to

mess with Thorir Mouth and Erlend Maw'. They took him into their mess, but rather stiffly. When men were turning in to sleep, a sailor of the king's asked who should tell them stories. There was little answer. Then said he: 'Sturla the Icelander, will you tell stories?' 'As you will', said Sturla. So he told them the story of Huld, better and fuller than any one there had ever heard it told before. Then many men pushed forward to the fore-deck, wanting to hear as clearly as might be, and there was a great crowd. The queen asked: 'What is that crowd on deck there?' A man answered: 'The men are listening to the story that the Icelander tells'. 'What story is that?' said she. He answers: 'It is about a great troll-wife, and it is a good story and well told'. The king bade her pay no heed to that, and go to sleep. She says, 'I think this Icelander must be a good fellow, and less to blame than he is reported'. The king was silent.

So the night passed, and the next morning there was no wind for them, and the king's ship lay in the same place. Later in the day, when men sat at their drink, the king sent dishes from his table to Sturla. Sturla's messmates were pleased with this: 'You bring better luck than we thought, if this sort of thing goes on'. After dinner the queen sent for Sturla and asked him to come to her and bring the troll-wife story along with him. So Sturla went aft to the quarter-deck, and greeted the king and queen. The king answered little, the queen well and cheerfully. She asked him to tell the same story he had told overnight. He did so, for a great part of the day. When he had finished the queen thanked him, and many others besides, and made him out in their minds to be a learned man and sensible. But the king said nothing; only he smiled a little.

Sturla thought he saw that the king's whole frame of mind was brighter than the day before. So he said to the king that he had made a poem about him, and another about his father: 'I would gladly get a hearing for them'. The queen said: 'Let him recite his poem; I am told that he is the best of poets, and his poem will be excellent'. The king bade him say on, if he would, and repeat the poem he professed to have made about him. Sturla chanted it to the end. The queen said: 'To my mind that is a good poem'. The king said to her: 'Can you follow the poem clearly?' 'I would be fain to have you think so, Sir', said the queen. The king said: 'I have learned that Sturla is good at verses'. Sturla took his leave of the king and queen and went to his place. There was no sailing for the king all that day. In the evening before he went to bed he sent for Sturla. And when he came he greeted the king and said: 'What will you have me to do, Sir?' The king called for a silver goblet full of wine, and drank some and gave it to Sturla and said: 'A health to a friend in wine!' (*Vin skal til vinar drekka*). Sturla said: 'God be praised for it!' 'Even so', says the king; 'and now I wish you to say the poem you have made about my father'. Sturla repeated it: and when it was finished men praised it much, and most of all the queen. The king said: 'To my thinking, you are a better reciter than the Pope'.—*Sturlunga Saga*, vol. ii, p. 269 sqq.

King Hacon never came back from his Scottish voyage; Sturla the Icelander wrote his life. The history of the former kings of Norway had by this time come into shape; they were read to King Hacon as he lay on his sick bed in the Orkneys, when he was too

tired to follow the Latin Bible. Sturla had many good models before him, and he was already practised in historical writing. The task, however, was a new one, and *Hákonar Saga* is in many respects very different from *Sturlunga*; chiefly owing to difference in the subject.

Norway and Iceland, in the thirteenth century, are in contrast almost as if they had been intended for a logical example, to illustrate the method of Agreement and Difference; or for an historical demonstration, to explain the nature and functions of monarchy in the Middle Ages. The original emigration to Iceland did not drain away all the freedom out of Norway; the Norwegians who stayed behind were not slavish and obedient people; it was a long time before the ideas of Harald Fairhair got the better of the old modes of life. The original *Germania* still thrived in Norway in spite of the great kings, and anarchy kept returning, in ways that were quite well understood by the Norwegians themselves. Their name for it was *nes-konungar*—‘ness-kings’—as we speak of the Heptarchy; in Norway in the old days there had been a number of little independent kings each on his own headland, ruling his own stretch of a fiord. By the year 1200 a new monarchical experiment had succeeded under Sverre, one of the most remarkable adventurers who have ever come forward as Saviours of Society. He had a ragged regiment, the *Birkibeinar*, or Birchlegs, as they were nicknamed from their birch-bark gaiters—a company like that of David—every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented. These Birkibeinar for a long time were a terror to the country; a bad report of them was brought to England in the reign of Henry II by the Norwegian Archbishop Eystein, and their nickname is

found in English history and even in English popular poetry (*Havelok the Dane*). But their leader Sverre was not merely a captain of bandits. He had ideas and he carried them out. He was one of Carlyle's heroes, though unfortunately Carlyle was old and tired before he came to him in his notes on the kings of Norway, and could not tell the history of Sverre in full. He was a good talker, and used to speak straight to his *Birkibeinar* about their faults, and give them the whole duty of man in simple moral tales. He drilled his own army, and with them he drilled the country, 'making the peace' there effectively, so that a time came when the *Birkibeinar* were received as benefactors, and the power of King Sverre was established and made legitimate.

The difficulty about Carlyle's heroes is to know what is going to happen when the hero dies. After Sverre's death in 1202 the old games began again—faction fights as ruinous as those of Iceland. The difference between the two countries was that in Norway there was always a semblance of a principle to fight about; which did not make things any more comfortable for Norway.

As a specimen, there is the fight in Trondhjem, at the end of April, 1206.

Ingi, the Birkibein king (Sverre's nephew), was in Trondhjem at his sister's wedding. The other faction, the Crosiers (*Baglar*)—'bloated Aristocracy', as Carlyle called them—had been sailing for three weeks from Tunsberg in the south, round the Ness and up the west coast, meaning to attack; news of this was sent to the king from Bergen, but it did not interrupt the feast. Orders were given to the king's guard to set a proper watch round the hall at night, but when the time came the bridegroom said it would be a pity to spoil the



entertainment for the king's men. He, the bridegroom, would send some of his own people to the shore, at the mouth of the river, to keep a look out; and that would do well enough. The king assented, and the drinking went on far into the night. The bridegroom kept his promise and sent out his men, but they talked it over among themselves and said they would not keep watch for the king's men and the country squires; they would go to bed.

It was a dark sleety morning when the enemy came to Trondhjem; they rowed up to the land and held their oars and listened, and found everything quiet in the town: they put some men ashore to go scouting up to the king's house, who came back and reported that no one was stirring anywhere. Then they blew their trumpets and fell on the town.

The king slept hard, and was very slow to waken when the alarm came, and asked what the matter was. However, he got up and climbed from the balcony to the roof and lay there till the Crosiers had gone past along the street. Then he went down Chapman Street to the river, and jumped in and swam to a merchant ship that was lying moored there, and caught hold of the cable and tried to climb on board. A man came to the bow and told him to let go the rope and remove himself. The king hung on and said nothing. Then the man took a boat-hook and pushed him off, and the king had to swim across the river, and a number of his men also. On the other side he fell down numb with cold; it was sleeting hard. One of his men, Ivar, came out of the river, and the king called on him to help him; but he said, 'I must help myself first'. Shortly after another came, Reidulf, and said: 'Are you here, my lord?' (*eru þér hér, herra*). The king said: 'So you



called me yesterday'. Reidulf said: 'So art thou still, and so shalt thou be, while we are alive, the two of us'. Then he took off his mantle and packed the king in it on his back, and brought him safe away.

A story is told here in one of the versions of this which is significant, whether it is true or not.

A 'Bagling'—one of the Crosier party—chased a Birkibein along the street; the Birkibein tried to get to the church for safety. At the church corner he was cut down, and then the pursuer saw that he had killed his brother.

It reminds one of the formal scene in Henry VI—'enter, a Son who has killed his Father', 'enter, a Father who has killed his Son'—where the moral of the faction fights is expounded by King Henry as a sort of chorus.

Reading this story and others like it from the early part of the thirteenth century, one thinks of the country as fallen back into helpless misgovernment—gluttony, sloth, and selfishness, with flashes of energy through it, but all too undisciplined to do any good. What actually happened was better than expectation, to use an Icelandic way of speaking. The ideas of King Sverre and the results of his drill lived on, and that is what the life of Hacon has to show. The child Hacon was taken up by the Birkibeinar, the Old Guard of King Sverre, men with one idea, who would do anything for their cause, i. e. the right line of the kings of Norway, which Sverre had taught them to recognize as being the same thing as the Law of St. Olaf. In Sverre's contest with the Bishops and their allies he had made the Law of St. Olaf into a sort of watchword and emblem for his men, and Hacon, Sverre's grandson, was the king for them, the king whom the Law of St. Olaf required.

Sverre had taken much trouble over the rights of the question. Against the new law which the Bishops had tried to establish in 1164, which would have made the king vassal of the Church, Sverre had drawn up a full statement, one of the clearest and most interesting of political arguments, which asserts the Divine Right of Kings apart from any ecclesiastical interference, and proves it against the Churchmen by citations from the Canon Law. The old Birkibeins did not trouble themselves much about the science of politics, but their watchword, the Law of St. Olaf, meant in practice what Sverre had meant both in practice and in theory. The good fortune of the young Hacon was that he grew up among the veterans into a full comprehension of the ideas of Sverre. So that in this case, at any rate, the Carlylean ideal is not refuted by the death of the champion, or by the collapse of all his work under some foolish Ishbosheth of a successor. It looked like that, it is true, for some years after the death of Sverre—it looked as if the deluge had come back. But this was prevented by the fixed idea of the old partisans, and by the education of Hacon; all which is clearly brought out in Sturla's biography.

There are two Norwegian essays on Monarchy which may very fairly be contrasted with Sturla's Icelandic portrait of a king of Norway. They are both didactic: one is Sverre's treatise, already mentioned; the other is the *Speculum Regale*, or King's Mirror (*Konungs Skuggsjá*), written in the ordinary conventional form of a dialogue between a father and son, but very original and lively in its matter. The father is a king's man, as he calls himself, and among many other things he tells his views about the nature of a king and the manners of a Court: how one should demean himself in the

presence of the king. For instance, if the king is sitting at table when you are admitted, you must stand at the proper distance and leave room for the waiters. You should hold your left wrist in your right hand, and be careful to listen to what the king says. If it happens that you don't catch his words exactly, you must not say 'Ha!' or 'What!' but 'Sir!' or, if you wish to put it more fully: 'Let it not be displeasing, Sir, if I ask what you spoke to me, for I understood not clearly'.

The difference between the Icelandic biography and the more abstract Norwegian works is, in a way, characteristic of the two countries, though we need not make too much of it.

Sturla's *Life of Hacon* will bear comparison with other historians of the time—with Matthew Paris, for example, who was a friend of King Hacon. It has been blamed as too courtly, but other witnesses (Matthew Paris among them) take a similar view of the king; Hacon's energy and success can be proved independently of the Icelandic historian. Naturally, the book is not as lively as the family memoirs of Sturla; he had not lived through it in the same way. But he had plenty of information from old Birkibein traditions, and he was a practised sifter of evidence. There is not the same room for comedy as in the Icelandic books, but there are 'humours and observations'—e. g. in the account of the coronation ceremony and the emotion of the Scottish knight, Mitchell, who was so overcome by the splendour that he sobbed aloud—or, again, in the notes of Cardinal William's journey in 1247, and his uncertainty whether there would be anything in Norway fit for a gentleman to drink. It is pleasant to compare this with Matthew Paris on the same subject. He had made a special study of Papal legates and their ways, and describes

with gusto the expensive fitting-out of the Cardinal's ship, with all its store-rooms and cabins, richly furnished, 'like another Ark of Noah'.

Sturla luckily came to Norway in time to collect the reminiscences of the veterans. He does not tell us what Froissart would have told about the people and the places where he got his information; by the rules of Icelandic history the author is not allowed to talk about himself except where he comes definitely into the action. But Sturla makes as good use as Froissart could have made of the memories of older men, and the *Life of Hacon* contains a number of good stories. The childhood and the youth of Hacon are well told, from the time when the Birkibeinar took the infant and carried him across Norway over the snow. They were very fond of him and remembered his wise sayings: as when once, in winter time, the butter was frozen so hard that it could not be spread; the bread, on the other hand, was elastic, so the little Hacon (four years old) folded it round the butter, saying, 'Let us bind the butter, Birkibeinar'. At which they laughed enormously and went about repeating it. It is not quite as good as some of the early wisdom of King James VI ('There is a hole in this Parliament'), but the history is all the better for this and other like things. The Icelandic author himself does not care too precisely for the dignity of history, and the oral tradition preserved some things that a mere Court-historian might have left out: a rude speech of King Hacon to his trumpeter was remembered. The trumpeter's blowing was feeble, and the King spoke to him like one of Marryat's boatswains, and said: 'Why can't you blow? You blew better when you were playing for money on the quay at Bergen'.

Again, the critical talent of the Icelanders did not

prevent them from putting miraculous things into their histories ; the Sturlung memoirs are full of dreams and portents, including a dream of Sturla himself, about a mighty stone shoot, a rushing 'scree', in the valley of Hvamm, just before the great defeat of the Sturlungs. There are some stories of that sort also in the Life of Hacon—best of all, the vision that appeared to King Alexander of Scotland as he lay at anchor in the Sound of Kerrera, when St. Olaf, St. Magnus, and St. Columba appeared and warned him. This, again, is told in the Icelandic way ; the three men are described first, before their names are given, and their names are given as conjectures. A thick-set figure wearing the dress of a king—who could this be but St. Olaf ? The third figure, who was much the tallest of the three, is described as 'bald on the forehead' (*mjök framsnoðinn*), which must mean the Irish tonsure of St. Columba—the frontal tonsure—a curiously accurate piece of detail. The Icelandic method is like that of a novelist : their best books are the history of families and neighbourhoods, 'annals of the parish'. The interests are those of private life. Hence Sturla had to change his manner somewhat in dealing with the larger political affairs of Norway. There is a different scale and other motives. Sturla does something to bring out his conception of the kingly office ; as in the chapter which he gives to a well-filled day of King Hacon's life, in the Christmas time of his most anxious year, when the king had to attend the funeral of one of his lords, and also to look after the launch of a warship, besides hearing cases and holding a court. No time was lost ; the mast of the warship was stepped while the funeral service was being sung ; 'the king was busy that day'.

And further, while he thus exhibits the practical genius



of the king, Sturla does not neglect the more showy part of his government—as in the coronation that so impressed the Scottish knight. The correspondence with the Emperor Frederick and King Lewis of France, with King James of Aragon, the Conqueror, and King Alfonso of Castile, the Wise, not to speak of the Sultan of Tunis—all this takes one far from the dales of Iceland. The King of Norway belonged to the great world, and to the new fashions. There was some vanity in his ambition;—in his Icelandic policy, in his annexation of all Greenland, ‘North to the loadstar’, and in his last enterprise, the voyage to Scotland. But we may still believe that Sturla was right in his view of the king, as a hard-working man and a successful peace-maker.

Far beyond all the separate notable things in the book is the conduct of that story which Ibsen has taken for his drama *Kongsemnerne*. It is in the relation of Hacon to his father-in-law Duke Skuli that the two different principles—the monarchy and the oligarchy—are dramatized; and Sturla fully understands this, the tragic opposition of two sorts of good intentions; with the pathos, also, brought out in one memorable chapter, of the queen Margaret in her choice between her father, Skuli, and her husband the king. But it is impossible to say more of this here, except that the grace and dignity of it, in Sturla’s history, the honours paid to the beaten side, make us understand the character of Sturla himself, better than anything else in his writings. He is described by the anonymous first editor of *Sturlunga* (about the year 1300, probably) as ‘a man to our knowledge most wise and fair-minded’. His writings are proof that this friendly opinion is to be trusted; and with that we may leave him.





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