

## *Northern Antiquities* and Nationalism

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### **Abstract**

From the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century and beyond, northern Europe saw the blossoming of a far-reaching artistic and political movement: Romantic Nationalism. Combined with new concepts of Germanic identity this led to a fundamental re-consideration of northern Europe's settlement myths and cultural heritage. Meanwhile the ever-expanding field of Germanic philology, with its notion of language as the defining characteristic of race, promoted the appropriation of myths from Old Norse across Scandinavia, Germany, and Britain.

In England the general public's first introduction to these northern tales was in 1770 in the form of Bishop Percy's *Northern Antiquities*: a heavily-edited translation from the French of Paul Henri Mallet. Sharing an education with Danish royalty, Mallet was introduced to such works as Snorri Sturlusson's *Prose Edda*. Percy's highly-popular work was republished and re-edited by I. A. Blackwell in 1847, simultaneously whetting the public's appetite for more northern folklore and distancing them from the source material via editorial opinion.

Both Blackwell and Percy make it clear in their prefaces that the primary vision for their material is as nationalist history. 'Pure blood', the 'noble savage', and 'genetic reinvigoration': these are the concerns of the editors. This interaction with Snorri's *Edda* for nationalist purposes demonstrates the methods by which traditional oral myths and tales become part of a divisive national image. This article will explore how these initial translators used their phenomenally influential position as gatekeepers of a previously little-known body of literature and myth. At the same time, this article will identify some of the key ways in which these early appropriations have affected our interaction with Old Norse literature in its modern editions. Is the shadow of Romantic Nationalism still controlling our engagement with Old Norse myth?

**Keywords:** Blackwell, nationalism, Norse mythology, *Northern Antiquities*, Percy, *Prose Edda*, Snorri Sturlusson.

The English reader's first comprehensive introduction to the history and literature of the Scandinavian peoples, Bishop Thomas Percy's *Northern Antiquities* ran a fine line between

subjective scholarship and ideological nationalism. Percy's 1770 translation was taken from the French of Paul Henri Mallet, and was itself reissued in a new edition in 1847 by I. A. Blackwell. By this time Old Norse mythology was known to an eager public through northern-inspired poetry and tentative historical anthologies but most of the extracts used for these works derived from Latin, Danish, or German versions of the originals. *Northern Antiquities* had the distinct advantage of having English authors who knew their subject matter. Blackwell in particular, with his genuine expertise of the Old Norse language, was fervent in his editing of both Mallet and Percy's earlier translation attempts. In the 1847 edition Blackwell set out to right the wrongs of his academic predecessors.

This article will explore how these initial translators used their phenomenally influential position as gatekeepers of a previously little-known body of literature and myth. It will identify emerging themes which colour our interaction with Old Norse literature to this day and ask whether the shadow of Romantic Nationalism is still controlling our engagement with Old Norse mythology. Both Blackwell and Percy make it clear that the primary vision for their material was as nationalist history. Their interaction with Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* – a rich source of Norse mythology – for nationalist purposes demonstrates the methods by which traditional oral myths and tales become part of a divisive national image.

The nineteenth century was certainly an interesting period for Old Norse literature. While scholarly attitudes towards Norse mythology had been hostile throughout the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century, poetic realisations were in abundance. By the 1800s the idea that the mythic literature of the North could be 'debasing' or 'corrupting' the nation was still a common line of thought for many universities but alongside this an even more divisive voice was at play. The proponents of Romantic Nationalism seized on northern Europe's settlement myths and cultural heritage with increasing zeal. Meanwhile, the ever-expanding field of comparative philology, with its notion of language as the defining characteristic of race, promoted the appropriation of myths from Old Norse across Scandinavia, Germany, and Britain.

In the midst of this political foray it is perhaps unsurprising that Blackwell's translation of the *Prose Edda* is framed by a confusing medley of conflicting nationalist ideals and faux-scientific reasoning. Editorial changes between issues are not always clearly marked and this is even more the case with the work's initial translation. Editorial bias is also particularly complicated in this instance as the Victorian reader had to navigate three layers of revisions and at least two of translation to reach their conclusions of the text. Each authorial voice comes complete with its own agenda. With the concurrent race to present

mythology as history and draw national characteristics from ancient texts, the much-rewritten *Northern Antiquities* became exemplary of the ongoing battle for the appropriation of European mythology. A concrete settlement myth proved a nation's origin; it made the nation 'ancient and legitimate' (Shippey 2005, p.4). Yet Old Norse mythology as presented in Blackwell's text was anything but concrete. The distant past of northern Europe blended fact and fiction as a matter of practice and the content of *Northern Antiquities* was no different.

### **Editorial intent**

*Northern Antiquities'* three writers had three very different agendas. Frequently, these are at odds and this can make for a confusing read. Even by the time Blackwell had come to the helm it was often a case of two steps forward one step back, as outdated notions regarding the north resisted reconstruction. Referring to Blackwell's attempt to correct Percy and Mallet on the confusion between the incorrect translation of 'curved drinking horns' as 'gold-inlaid skulls of enemies', Christine Fell notes that his interjection was not entirely effective (1993, p.93). We still find the poet Matthew Arnold referring to 'gold-rimm'd skulls' in his 1855 work 'Balder Dead' (1965, p.101, line 14). The correct translation was available to Arnold, but either he was unaware of it or he purposefully opted for the more dramatic version. The latter course was (and still is) a popular choice for writers. Fell is struck too by the one-sided nature of this picture of the north; the reader has very little to go on and what is there is highly problematic:

The image of the North is coming through a fairly slight range of skaldic and Eddic poetry, and of course through mixtures of fact and nonsense on runes, on mythology, on 'barbarian' customs from widely read secondary syntheses such as Mallet.  
(Fell 1993, p.93)

It was not just that Mallet had put together a riotous amalgamation of mythic imagery; his background and motives were also questionable. First and foremost was the fact that he was from royal circles. Mallet shared an education with Christian VII, king of Denmark and it was through this arrangement that he came to learn Scandinavian history and mythology. It should come as no surprise therefore that nationalist sentiments frequent his writings. In particular he subscribes to the noted 'us versus them' anti-Roman sentiment. For Mallet it is less of a case of 'what have the Romans done for us' than 'what have the Scandinavians *not* done'. The answer, according to him: very little.

One clear example is Mallet's periodical insistence that the North gave Europe the concept of liberty. Indeed, he takes this as a given:

Is it not well known that the most flourishing and celebrated states of Europe owe originally to the northern nations whatever liberty they now enjoy, either in their constitution, or in the spirit of their government?  
(Percy 1847, pp.57-8)

In this Mallet was echoing the sentiments of the philosopher and fellow Frenchman Montesquieu. Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois* (or *On the Spirit of the Laws*) – published in 1748, eight years before Mallet's work – demonstrated that present-day European liberty was a product of bygone Scandinavian values. Mallet agreed but went further still. He believed that the unchallenged Roman yoke would have destroyed and debased every last vestige of civilised community in Europe until all were returned to a barbaric state. It was the interference of the northern nations which prevented such a calamity and this intervention was not merely good luck. It was preordained fate, a Kantian model of history:

But nature had long prepared a remedy for such great evils, in that unsubmitting, unconquerable spirit, with which she had inspired the people of the north; and thus she made amends to the human race, for all the calamities which, in other respects, the inroads of these nations, and the overthrow of the Roman empire produced.  
(Percy 1847, p.58)

Thus even in the chaos left by the removal of Rome, the North persevered thanks to its peoples' inbuilt characteristics. Scandinavia gave to Europe (and thus to the world) the concept of liberty.

Furthermore, Mallet posited that this northern liberty was a natural development from the defining features of the Northmen's religious practices, law codes, and climate – principally the latter. He asks how they developed this concept to such an extent:

This was owing to their climate and manner of life, which gave them such strength of body and mind as rendered them capable of long and painful labours, of great and daring exploits.  
(Percy 1847, p.125)

This is a concrete example of physical qualities being held up as the foundation for modern ideals, in this case democratic. Percy and Blackwell both expand this notion. Montesquieu used a similar explanation to justify the north-south divide: '[A]ccordingly we have since found liberty to prevail in North America, but not in the south' (Montesquieu 1748, cited in

Percy 1847, p.125). The response from *Northern Antiquity* showcases the excellent qualities of the northerners:

The bodily strength of the northern warriors kept up in them that courage, that opinion of their own valour, that impatience of affronts and injuries, which makes men hate all arbitrary government and despise those who submit to it.  
(Percy 1847, p.125)

It is fair to say that Mallet had romantic notions of what the North deserved. His work, in the words of Martin Arnold is ‘imbued with ideas of the sonorous and disturbing northern sublime’ and fixated on the figure of Rousseau’s ‘noble savage’ (2007, p.30). In Mallet’s preface – which Percy’s mirrors in many ways – he remarks on the state of northern studies at home and abroad. He is dismayed at the lack of involvement with a North that has so clearly defined modern Europe, saying:

History has not recorded the annals of a people who have occasioned greater, more sudden, or more numerous revolutions in Europe than the Scandinavians, or whose antiquities, at the same time, are so little known.  
(Percy 1847, p.55)

By Percy’s time the phrase was no longer ‘little known’ but rather ‘wrongly applied’. As such, Percy takes it on himself to re-write the contemporary historians of his day, specifically regarding the old division of races (on linguistic grounds) between the banners of Celtic and Teutonic. He discusses the difficulties and the reasons why others have gone wrong. On the earlier historical theories of the likes of Keysler and Pelloutier (two of several contemporary historians to whose work he takes great exception), Percy remarks:

So much learning and ingenuity have scarcely ever been more perversely and erroneously applied, or brought to adorn and support a more groundless hypothesis.  
(Percy 1847, p.2)

This is naturally something which Percy attempts to rectify within his own work. He starts by clearing up the matter of national claims to Old Norse literature. Clearly not *everyone* can say this is the work of their ancestors. His new order groups the Anglo-Saxons firmly over with the Germans, Belgians, and Scandinavians. The Britons meanwhile are grouped with the Gauls and the Irish. As far as he sees it, everyone else is of little consequence. With these two families Percy details two highly separate proto-national groups. According to him, these and their emergent nations differ in almost every aspect, being ‘*ab origine* two distinct people, very unlike in their manners, customs, religion, and laws’ (Percy 1847, p.3). As one can clearly see, Percy’s motives concentrate on resolving what he fears are terrible academic

flaws with the present national division of historical peoples. He is primarily concerned with race.

In combination with Mallet this creates a volume very critical of older views of Scandinavian history; Percy finds that people have been too keen to accept the word of early historians such as the Danish Saxo Grammaticus (Percy 1847, pp.74-5). Thus despite its ideological motives *Northern Antiquities* often comes across as highly sceptical and reserved, making the occasional exclamations of national pride even more conspicuous. Percy frequently warns against taking the Old Norse texts at their word, concerned by the mythological flights of fancy, the marvellous, the allegorical, and the fabulous. There is, Percy remarks, 'a great danger of being sometimes misled' (Percy 1847, p.76). This danger obviously worries Mallet to a far greater degree, since he is the foremost sceptic of the pack, asking if *any* historical credit can be given to literature preserved by such an ignorant people, gathered through overseas rumours and hearsay (Percy 1847, pp.76-7). His argument goes that almost all knowledge deriving from Old Norse texts (with the obvious exception of the Icelandic episodes in the *Íslendingarsögur*) originally came to Iceland in the form of foreign gossip. Percy puts an editorial caution on this notion: the sagas are now understood to a greater extent, he suggests, and are at least as useful as other medieval texts for the purpose of building a coherent picture of the Viking Age.

When I. A. Blackwell took up the task of editing in 1847 he had philological grounds for revision. He urged his readers to familiarise themselves with the works of Rask, Schlegel, Grimm, Arndt, Klaproth, and Bopp. In his notes and essays Blackwell is chiefly concerned with matters of ethnicity (or ethnology as he prefers) and the hereditary transition of biological attributes. In his preface he asserts that Percy's edition appeared at a time when the subject matter was still imperfectly known and gives this as one of the main reasons for undertaking a new edition. Blackwell claims that he at first wished merely to revise Percy's work, but on many matters he felt the need to step in and put things right. In particular, Percy's translation of the *Prose Edda* suffered from being taken from Mallet's French with dubious assistance from a Latin copy. Mallet himself had used a Latin text from 1665. Neither one worked from an Old Norse version.

Blackwell therefore comes to the table offering actual knowledge of the original language and new scientific theories on the division of nations. He is frequently frustrated with the theories proposed by Mallet and Percy. He questions Percy's grouping of nations and his idea of Britain being twice invaded by the Danes; instead, he is adamant that the Angles were a Germanic people and not a Scandinavian one (his own terminology for

dividing the Western and Northern Germanic tribes). As Blackwell says himself, all this demonstrates the leaps that philology had taken in Britain since the start of the century:

The fact is, ethnology as a science was too little known in the last century for a writer to make a proper distinction even between races, much less between the different branches of the same race. [...] it is no longer disputed that the Saxon invaders of England belonged to the Lower Germanic, and the Jutes to the Scandinavian branch of the great Teutonic family.  
(Percy 1847, p.182)

The Angles, meanwhile ‘were a Germanic tribe speaking a language very similar to Old Saxon and Frisic’ (Percy 1847, p.132). Blackwell dismissed the Scandinavian Jutes as a negligible influence. While many of *Northern Antiquities*’ claims go uncontested by Blackwell he does take particular exception with these twice-erroneous divisions of race. This is because he takes the matter of improving the nation very seriously. Commenting on Percy’s preface, Blackwell ponders the future of the mantle of superior racial development which has come to rest momentarily on the two giants of northern Europe: the intellectual node that is Germany and the physical peak of England. Here he allows himself a rare moment of self-congratulatory revelry:

When we turn our attention to a small island on the north western coast of Europe, we behold a nation, formed by the genial blending of Saxon and Scandinavian tribes, arrived at a height of cosmic prosperity and maritime greatness hitherto unparalleled. Ay ‘tis a pardonable vanity to record the fact; England, matchless in the mechanical arts, irresistible in arms, sweeping from the surface of the ocean the fleets of every rival nation that dares dispute her maritime supremacy, is now in possession of that heritage, whose succession we have traced through cognate races, and will, we trust, long retain it by virtue of the law which appears to have regulated its transmission; that it should be held for the time being, by the most energetic tribe of the race to which it had devolved, by the tribe that physiological and psychological qualities rendered the most adapted to make use of it for the development of humanity.  
(Percy 1847, pp.44-5)

What is clear from the above examples is that English readers seeking out a knowledge of Old Norse mythology and culture had to first negotiate numerous layers of editorial opinion. With *Northern Antiquity* they had the challenging task of navigating three separate lines of nationalist thought along the way.

### **Presentation: emerging themes**

*Northern Antiquities* is noteworthy for its confirmation of certain assumed stereotypes: namely the brutish and unsophisticated nature of the northern mindset. This sentiment is also

found in the descriptions of the mythological texts and their contextual homeland. On the nature of Old Norse literature, Blackwell cites Danish theologian Peter Erasmus Müller from the introduction of his *Sagabibliothek* published from 1810-18:

The island itself [Iceland], that has little else to offer than fire and ice, would appear to other nations to be of importance only as a place of banishment. But this island possessed in the ninth and tenth centuries two inestimable treasures – civil liberty and security. The boldest Northmen were thus induced to seek refuge there, and for four hundred years it flourished as a free state.  
(Müller, cited in Percy 1847, p.387)

Müller goes on to describe Iceland in this period as the ‘perfect commonwealth’ (p. 387). We are told that the nation-state led to an interest in autonomous rights, particularly individual freedom. This meant in turn that the Icelanders were fascinated by all independent agents, whatever their nationality: ‘The Sagaman was in this manner the narrator of everything that happened in the north’, the ‘foster-mother of northern history’ (Müller, cited in Percy 1847, pp.387-8). The idea is that these fantastic ancestors wrote out of a necessity of their genetic composition. They held a position of great literary esteem and it was therefore the essence of writing which defined their mythology. The ancient northerners after all had claims on being the most literate barbarians around. Their dramatic shift from peasantry to mastery was down to the focus on literary interaction and public involvement. Conversely, Percy argues, the druids of the Celtic peoples treated their faith with a secrecy which shrouded its tenets from the common people. Secrecy and obscurity led to weakness. The mythology of Óðinn, Bragi, and dedicatory lays was the polar opposite of this:

No barbarous people were so addicted to writing, as appears from the innumerable quantity of Runic inscriptions scattered all over the north; no barbarous people ever held letters in higher reverence, ascribing the invention of them to their chief deity, and attributing to the letters themselves supernatural virtues.  
(Percy 1847, p.14)

Percy clearly considers the range of Old Norse literary material to be an advantageous factor – but what of the qualities of the writing itself? The early mythological poems are described as stylistically ‘very enigmatical and figurative, very remote from the common language, and for that reason, grand, but tumid; sublime but obscure’ with everything expressed by ‘imagery, figures, hyperboles, and allegories’ (Percy 1847, p.237). It is all very well having dramatic mythology but if your population cannot understand it, its purpose is a little unclear. Percy is reluctant to be too admiring – some modern scholars of kennings may sympathise – but Blackwell finds his remarks to be quite inappropriate, not least because they overlook the



dramatic distinction between eddaic and skaldic poetry. We might also add a further criticism of our own: that the unlikely transformation from illiterate barbarians to cultured historians seems far less unlikely when one considers the North's long engagement with oral narratives – a subject overlooked by Percy and Blackwell.

Blackwell, defining eddaic poetry, divides it into six separate categories of which one is 'The Mythic-Ethnologic'. This category, he explains, contains but one poem: 'the *Rígs-mál*'. This in turn details as allegory 'the origin of the different races, or, more properly speaking, castes, located in Scandinavia at the period it was composed' (Percy 1847, p.365). *Rígs-mál* spells out a rendition of early Scandinavian social structure. Blackwell recommends this for those interested in the study of the development of northern political ideas as applied to society:

The *Rígs-mál* furnishes a striking proof of the aristocratic spirit that prevailed in Scandinavia at a very early period of its history, and we should recommend its attentive perusal to those writers who, allowing a tolerable free scope to their imaginative faculties, expatiate on the marvels which, according to their notions, have been wrought by the influence of a Scandinavian democratic element, transfused in the veins of the phlegmatic Saxon.  
(Percy 1847, p.367)

There are two points of interest here. Firstly, Blackwell is assigning an unusual amount of ethnological credit to a mythological poem, an allegory. Secondly, he certainly misses the definition of 'democratic' that most Icelanders would hold. His version includes both aristocracy and a caste system. The former he actually lists as an inherent trait of the Teutonic race – specific to the nations of the Scandinavian branch (Percy 1847, p.367). This is characteristic of the approach of *Northern Antiquities*: over-dramatic presentation of religious or mythological notions leading to gross generalisations of northern character. These generalisations are then categorised via nineteenth-century science and social constructions in order to promote nationalist claims.

An example is the consideration of the Old Norse creation myth. On this, Percy remarks that within the northern version of the creation narrative one discovers striking similarities with those of other early societies:

One may discover also in the very nature of these alterations the same spirit of allegory, the same desire of accounting for all the phenomena of nature by fictions, which has suggested to other nations the greatest part of the fables with which their theology is infected.  
(Percy 1847, p.99)

One can draw from this the idea that the theology is wholly fictitious and a little over the top but nevertheless artistic in its own way. Old Norse mythology emerges with positives and negatives. Blackwell suggests that the coarse nature of the entire system was a ploy to craft a hardened society fit to take the reins of history and to invigorate the lesser races neighbouring them. He employs faux-scientific terminology such as ‘invigorate’, ‘blending’, and ‘cognate’ to back up his convictions. Percy, however, is still not done. His explanation of Old Norse mythology rests not merely on the spirit of the literature but on the very nature of the people themselves. This is characterised by a ‘mode of thinking and writing peculiar to a simple and gross people, who were unacquainted with any rules of composition’ but who nevertheless possess a vivid imagination, ‘despising or not knowing the rules of art’ (Percy 1847, p.99). This is all a precursor to proclaiming that the mythology demonstrates a clear expression of affinity with nature and a deep-seated understanding of liberty.

The impression of the behavioural tropes of the northerners is very much created from such hyper-dramatic renditions of their religious practices and beliefs. As time progressed – so the theory of *Northern Antiquities* goes – the same narratives impress their artistic and libertarian values onto the already physically strong people. An example is the evaluation of the early Scandinavian law codes, which we are told have to reflect the ‘genius of a nation’ and which along with religion are considered ‘another faithful mirror’ in which one can observe the defining spirit of the people of the north (Percy 1847, p.122).

### **The Application of Idea(I)s**

To take the example of a later publication with similar ideas, in the third volume of James S. Stallybrass’s *Teutonic Mythology* (from the German of Jacob Grimm) we are informed of two essential points to keep in mind when considering Old Norse and German mythological texts: ‘First, that the Norse mythology is genuine, and so must the German be; then, that the German is old, and so must the Norse be’ (1882, p.ix). Similarly to the arguments espoused by Mallet, Percy, and Blackwell there is a nationalist incentive here to find cultural depth in what is Scandinavian. The science of the day suggested that this was intricately interlinked with the Germanic and, more importantly, the English. One would therefore expect at least Percy and Blackwell to demonstrate an enthusiastic acceptance of the Old Norse mythology. What one actually finds are frequently exclamations of frustration and scepticism.

For Percy the mythic material too often presents a terrible confusion of ideas representing a backward people buried in ignorance, statements with which Blackwell takes issue (Percy 1847, p.182). That said, Blackwell too cannot help but despair at the evidence of

superstition in the northern peoples. On the use of runes and runic magic Blackwell and Percy can only blame the Old Norse literature for putting nonsensical ideas into their ancestors' heads. This behaviour is characteristic, they hasten to explain, of all nations in their early stages of 'simplicity and ignorance', that period in a nation which 'prejudice makes us regret, and wish that the arts had never corrupted their primeval innocence' (Percy 1847, p.227). Percy is happy to let it rest there. The expansion of science to the northern lands has put paid to such ludicrous beliefs; 'superstition' he remarks, 'has faded and vanished before its growing light' (Percy 1847, p.227). Meanwhile Blackwell is not entirely convinced, having reservations about the totality of this change. He worries this may be indicative of an ignorance still extant in the far reaches of the North, one which might undermine all the positive national derivations from Old Norse literature.

This difference in approach is particularly notable in the presentation of Snorri's *Prose Edda*. In the notes to Percy's 1813 version he points out by way of an excuse that early nations share a widespread level of fancy in their historical and religious literature. It is not just the Norsemen who blend history and myth in order to create the perfect origin story. In fact, 'all the ancient nations of Europe describe their origin with the same circumstances' (Percy 1847, p.509). While this may be enough for Percy, Blackwell finds the unscholarly mixture of fact and obvious fiction to be quite frankly embarrassing. He turns his nose up at Mallet and Percy's notes and relegates them to the back of the book.

In all three editions of *Northern Antiquities* the translation of the *Edda* itself is presented minus the Prologue and Epilogue. Of this, Blackwell says:

We have not disfigured our pages by reproducing these absurd productions, which, it is needless to say, throw not the least light on the subject they were intended to elucidate.  
(Percy 1847, p.397)

Harsh words from Blackwell but he is not alone. Percy too calls them 'utterly worthless' dissertations tacked on to a genuine work of literature – meritless fancies where the pagan gods of Rome, Greece, and the North are muddled together with elements of Christianity in a misguided attempt at assimilation (Percy 1847, p.378). Clearly something about Snorri's style was not to their liking. Modern editions include the preface by default. The choice not to demonstrate that these writers saw the *Prose Edda* not as a piece of literature to be considered by the reader but as evidence of ancient cultural worth. That considered, they wanted to present it in the best possible light for an avid nationalist audience.

In the 1847 edition one can note the appearance of the terms ‘race’ and ‘nation’ in the translation, as in the passage concerning the Frost-Giants: “Tell me,” said Gangler, “what was the state of things ere the races mingled, and nations came into being” (Percy 1847, p.402). Here one sees an example of how the vocabulary of Romantic Nationalism works its way into mythological texts. It is said that every translation tells us something of the translator’s age, and passages such as the above serve to confirm this. Combined with features such as tracing royal northern lineage back to a historical Óðinn figure, this method of translation created an ideal body for national claims to legitimacy. In his overarching account of saga translation into English, the scholar John Kennedy makes a good point; translations unintentionally capture something of the age in which they are produced, holding up a mirror with which one can observe the translator’s society:

Translations, and whatever editorial apparatus is associated with them, reveal how individual translators regarded the texts they translated, and what they expected their audience to gain from reading their handiwork. In a real sense, each and every translation is an interpretation of the Icelandic text on which it is based.

(Kennedy 2007, pp.4-5)

In this sense the real value of Blackwell’s 1847 translation of the *Prose Edda* is to be found in the small comments, the notes, and the peculiarities of the framing text. Here one can see the true momentum of nineteenth-century Romantic Nationalism.

## **Conclusion**

*Northern Antiquities* can at times seem little more than a ‘gross medley, in which we can at present distinguish nothing very certain’, although the phrase is in fact used by Percy to describe the mythological literature of the Norse (Percy 1847, p.83). The problem, as the philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss would have put it, is that one cannot tell where the mythology ends and the history starts. In his essay on *Myth and Meaning* Lévi-Strauss imagines a previously-unseen scenario of a ‘history without archives, there being of course no written documents, [...] only a verbal tradition, which is claimed to be history at the same time’ (2001, p.32). Scholars of Old Norse mythology from both the nineteenth century and today might recognise that very scenario as their own: a body of history and mythology passed down for hundreds of years as spoken word.

Percy comments in his preface that just as ‘truth is uniform and simple, so error is most irregular and various’ (Percy 1847). With its threefold intentions and confused ideologies *Northern Antiquities* is undoubtedly a showcase of irregular and various opinions.

Nevertheless, one should not develop the impression that Mallet, Blackwell, and Percy fail in their editorial duties. *Northern Antiquities* was and still is an impressive achievement of academic worth, some five-hundred and seventy-eight pages of early multi-disciplinary Old Norse scholarship. It contains both mythological material in the form of Snorri's *Edda* and numerous saga extracts including Walter Scott's appended passages from *Eyrbyggja saga*. Its authors each contribute something of their own time to the work. Each possesses his own doubts of his subject material, each has his own sceptical thoughts, each his own flights of fancy. Just as in modern-day scholarship, the value of the Old Norse texts as source material is variably questioned. There is often a definite sense of the texts as authoritative to some degree – note Blackwell's mention on the opening page of Mallet's honoured position with regards to education. If you really wanted to make a claim for the factual validity of your work then this is a clear example of how you would go about it.

*Northern Antiquities* is surprisingly cautious regarding its view of the past – more so than one might expect. It does not just go for the first source and take that as a given. One does note a preference for geographical proximity (northern historical sources being considered more favourably than their southern commentaries) but nevertheless this does not automatically promote writers such as the Danish Saxo Grammaticus to a state of unassailable credibility. Instead, the pros and cons of the literature of Old Norse as critical sources are considered in detail. On the one hand they are seen as genuine medieval texts. On the other hand the author considers just how this information comes from the far reaches of the northern seas and what transformations it may have undergone. Ultimately the writers use this material for the same goal: linking English history and culture with an exciting and newly-appreciated body of literature.

The work is perhaps indicative of the modern phenomenon that is multi-disciplinary studies. In university departments up and down Britain, Anglo-Saxon studies and Scandinavian studies have frequently shared the same workplace. Fell comments on this trend in her evaluation of the last 250 years of Old Norse scholarship. Indeed, she goes as far as to suggest:

In this country much fruitful scholarship has come out of the fact that Old Norse language and literature is read in departments of English and read alongside the language of the Anglo-Saxons.  
(Fell 1993, p.96)

Useful certainly, but it is still an odd bit of organisation. Surely Old Norse should sit alongside Icelandic in the Modern Languages department, as with other Germanic languages

or with Latin and ancient Greek in Classics, along with the other ‘dead’ languages? Old Norse’s unusual placement alongside present day and Old English should cause one to stop for a moment and consider what claim we are making even in the early stages of academia about this language. Multi-disciplinary work is all very well, but Old Norse is considered part of the discipline of English Studies. Fell further remarks that the totality of English education should be (and is) set up in this way:

[...] there is much to be said for an educational tradition which encourages students and scholars to investigate Anglo-Saxon and Viking links and parallels. It is not only the way of approaching Vikings or Norse Studies but it is a way practised seriously only in this country and worth preserving.  
(Fell 1993, p.96)

It should be noted that not all universities follow this trend. Old Norse is often taught in the department of Scandinavian Studies, a distinction that would have divided nineteenth-century nationalist scholars.

The link between Old Norse and nationalism is an easy one to spot. We know that the British are actively engaged in and committed to a history that values Scandinavian interaction; consider The British Museum’s engagement alongside Berlin and Copenhagen in the 2014-15 ‘Vikings: Life and Legend’ exhibit. We know there is still such a phenomenon as northern pride. Considering the survival of ‘Germanic’ concepts in modern-day political thought, Maike Oergel suggests that nineteenth-century ideas of separation from the south are still very much present in English society, as exhibited in parliamentary and public relations with mainland – and particularly southern – Europe (1998, p.88). The same patterns of behaviour are at play and as with all ingrained ideologies they endeavour to present themselves as the normal way of life.

Clearly there is more than a shadow of nationalism in our modern approach to the history of northern Europe – a feature we can trace to, if not blame on, the early translators of northern literature and mythology. For Percy and Blackwell, England’s greatest possession was the momentary heritage of greatness (Percy 1847, 44-5). We have charted their obsessions with racial characteristics drawn from this newly-translated mythological material through their arguments on the classification and sub-division of peoples. Furthermore, we have identified recognisable stereotypes promoted by Mallet, Percy and Blackwell, such as the harsh, crude character of the North and its people which was remarkably the origin of unparalleled literary engagement and social liberties. As an introduction to Old Norse

mythology it was invaluable; as nationalist history it set the tone for a troubling engagement with the North.

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